9 Public Participation Networks in Ireland – Re-engaging People and the State

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Introduction

Involving people in making the decisions that affect them and their lives is a core principle of democracy. Real participation goes beyond voting (representative democracy) to a situation where people and government work in partnership to co-create infrastructure and services, solve problems and work towards the well-being of all in this generation and the generations to come (deliberative democracy). By definition, such an approach requires a leaving aside of power differentials, and making a specific effort to ensure that the voices and views of people who are not traditionally influential are heard and taken into account (Elster, 1998[74]; Coote, 2011[75]; Healy and Reynolds, 2000[76] and 2011[77]).

This participatory principle is strongly upheld in Goal 16 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015[78] and 2016[79]) in which countries commit to "Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies …. ensur[ing] responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels." The need to involve people in environmental decision

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[74] Elster, J. (1998), "Deliberative Democracy". Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[75] Coote, A. (2011), Equal participation: making shared social responsibility work for everyone in Trends in Social Cohesion No. 23, (provisional version), pp. 199 -200, Strasbourg: Council of Europe

[76] Healy, S. and Reynolds, B. (2000), 'Developing Participation in a Changing Context' in Reynolds, B. and Healy S. (eds.), Participation and Democracy: Opportunities and Challenges, Dublin: CORI Justice Commission.

[77] Healy, S. and Reynolds, B. (2000), "Sharing Responsibility for Shaping the Future - Why and How?" in Reynolds, B. and Healy S. (eds.), Sharing Responsibility in Shaping the Future, Dublin: Social Justice Ireland. Viewed at https://www.socialjustice.ie/content/publications/social-policy-book-2011

[78] UN (2015) "Transforming our world – The 2030 agenda for sustainable development" viewed at https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld

[79] UN (2016) "Sustainable Development Goals" viewed at http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/

making is enshrined in the Aarhus Convention (UNECE, 1998)[80] which was ratified by Ireland in 2012. It is also promoted in the EU Maastricht and Lisbon treaties (reviewed in EU Parliament, 2017[81]), which enshrine the principle of subsidiarity, whereby decisions should be made at the most local level that is consistent with their resolution. In an Irish context, that is Local Government i.e. the 31 City and County Councils.

The Council of Europe's *Charter on Shared Social Responsibilities[82]* states that shared social responsibility in terms of local government requires that local government 'frame local policies which acknowledge and take into account the contribution made by everyone to strengthening social protection and social cohesion, the fair allocation of common goods, the formation of the principles of social, environmental and intergenerational justice and which also ensure that all stakeholders have a negotiation and decision-making power' (Council of Europe, 2011).

Within Ireland public policy asserts the importance of citizen engagement and the need for more open and transparent government. In the introduction to Ireland's Action Plan for Open Government 2016-2018[83], Minister Paschal Donohoe says "When citizens are engaged in public policy making it leads to more informed decisions. Policies and services can then better respond to people's needs..... Citizens and service users can better understand the reasons behind some decisions and have more confidence that things are moving in the right direction."

The Framework for Local and Community Development in Ireland[84] published in 2015 commits to "a strong local government system securing and supporting individual and community engagement and participation in policy development, planning and delivery, and decision-making processes in respect of local and community interventions and supports at a local level."

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[80]   The UNECE "Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters" was adopted on 25th June 1998 in the Danish city of Aarhus at the Fourth Ministerial Conference in the 'Environment for Europe' process. Viewed at http://live.unece.org/env/pp/welcome.html

[81]   European Parliament (2017) "Fact sheets on the European Union – Principle of Subsidiarity" Viewed at http://www.europarl.europa.eu/atyourservice/en/displayFtu.html?ftuId=FTU_1.2.2.html

[82]   Council of Europe (2011) "Charter on Shared Social responsibilities" Brussels: Council of Europe

[83]   Department of Public Enterprise and Reform (2016) "Ireland's Open Government Partnership National Action Plan 2016-2018." Page 3 Viewed at http://www.ogpireland.ie/national-action-plan-2/

[84]   Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (2015). "A Framework Policy for Local and Community Development in Ireland" Viewed at http://drcd.gov.ie/community/framework-policy-for-local-and-community-development-in-ireland-2015/

Thus, there is no shortage of high level policies supporting participation. This paper will look at a practical application of this principle – the development of Public Participation Networks (PPNs) in Ireland, and their role to promote participation in Local Government. It will assess their progress to date in the context of the Council of Europe's Code of Good Practice for Citizen Engagement in the Decision-Making Process (CoE, 2009)[85] and make some recommendation for their future development as a way to reconnect people and the State.

Council of Europe Framework for Civic Participation

In 2007, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe recognised the essential contribution of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in promoting and developing active citizenship and participation. They mandated the Conference of NGOs to prepare a Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation who would cover mechanisms for participation in decision making processes and civil society involvement in public policy. This Code (CoE, 2009[11]) offers useful principles and a framework for evaluating the extent and efficacy of civic engagement. The principles are

Participation
NGOs[86] collect and channel views of their members, user groups and concerned citizens, and feed that into the policy making arena. This input provides crucial value to the political decision-making process, enhancing the quality, understanding and longer-term applicability of the policy initiative. A pre-condition for this principle is that the processes for participation are open and accessible, based on agreed parameters for participation.

Trust
An open and democratic society is based on honest interaction between actors and sectors. Although organisations and public authorities have different roles to play, the shared goal of improving the lives of people can only be satisfactorily reached if based on trust, implying transparency, respect and mutual reliability.

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[85]   Council of Europe (2009) "Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-making process" CoE: Brussels

[86]   Note: The code uses the term NGOs which can be interchanged for "volunteer-led organisations" or "community organisations" in an Irish context.

Accountability and transparency
Acting in the public interest requires openness, responsibility, clarity and accountability from both the organisations and public authorities, with transparency at all stages.

Independence
Organisations must be recognised as free and independent bodies in respect to their aims, decisions and activities. They have the right to act independently and advocate positions different from the authorities with whom they may otherwise cooperate."

<div align="right">(Council of Europe, 2009, Section V)</div>

Levels and stages of Participation

"Participation in policy and decision making" is an all-encompassing term, and it is useful to look at different levels of participation. In general, the level of participation achieved is set by the structures, systems and ethos of the ultimate decision-making body. Thus, if policy and decision making happens behind closed doors, then those doors must be opened from the inside to create a climate which appreciates and is open to public participation in its deliberations.

**Figure 1 Levels of Public Participation in Policy and Decision Making (CoE, 2009)**
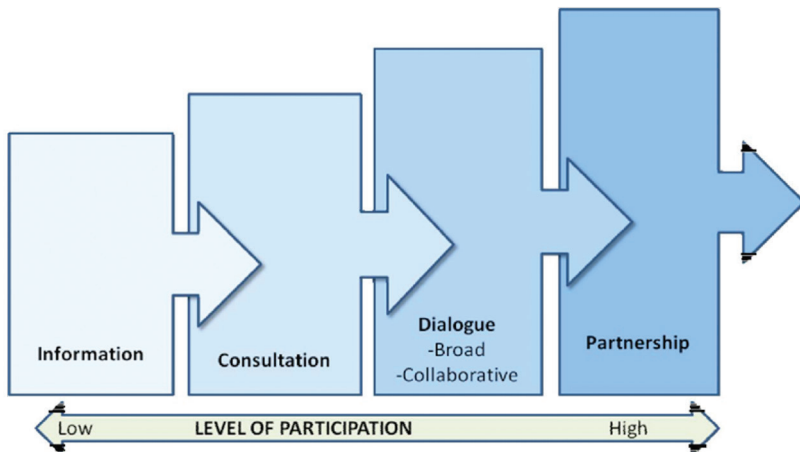
The Council of Europe Code offers a model for levels of participation (Figure 1). The levels of participation move from the mere provision of information by policy makers to the public to a partnership approach which allows for the co-creation of policy with communities. This final approach signals a high level of participation and engagement, and is a manifestation of deliberative democracy. At this level the principle of subsidiarity is also achieved, as decisions are being made with the involvement of the people who will be affected by those decisions. Here the social contract between people and the State is at its strongest, with a sharing of rights and responsibilities between the parties. However, at all stages beyond information provision, achieving that goal requires a set of conditions to be met. Ideally, Public Participation[87]

- is based on the belief by all stakeholders that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process;

- includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision;

- promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers;

- seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision;

- seeks input from participants in designing how they participate;

- allows adequate time for input to the participation process and is respectful of the time contributed by everyone, including volunteers;

- provides people with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way, and makes that information accessible to diverse stakeholders;

- communicates to participants how their input affected the decision, and where it did not, why not.

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[87] Adapted from International Association for Public Participation (2017) https://www.iap2.org/?page=corevalues

Developing Policy is an iterative process, with a number of different stages which facilitate the input of civil society (Figure 2). Ideally civil society should be involved at all stages of the process, from initially identifying the issue to be addressed (agenda setting) to monitoring and review. However, all too frequently, participation is only invited following the drafting stage, where comments are invited on a policy which has already been framed. This leads to a reactive response, which is often characterised by objections to elements of the draft, with little truly constructive feedback. This can lead to frustration and mistrust both from policy makers and communities. For better outcomes, open engagement at the agenda setting stage of the process is required.

Figure 2 Stages of the Policy Process (CoE, 2009)
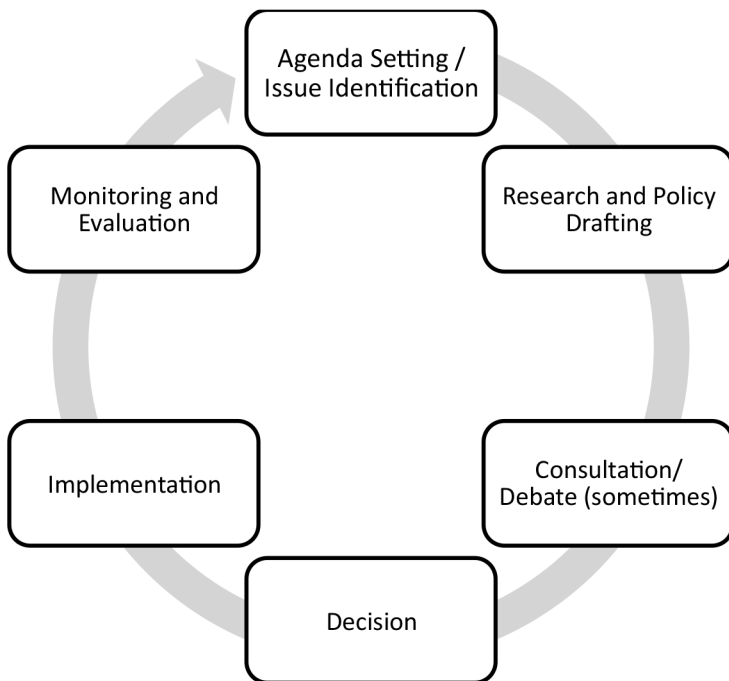
Active Citizenship and Civil Society

"I believe that it is this conception of the participative citizen who is active in a community of citizens and who is empowered to participate and flourish is a powerful idea that can especially be resonant at this moment in our history"

President Michael D Higgins 2016[88]

One key way of measuring active citizenship is through volunteering. The CSO (2015) estimated that approximately 520,000 people volunteer in organisations annually in Ireland, contributing 116 million hours, with a value of over €1bn at minimum wage. Ireland ranks 5th in the EU for the participation of people in organisations with a social, cultural, sporting, environmental or economic interest (Eurobarometer, 2013).[89] In addition, volunteering has been shown to enhance personal well-being and mental health (Volunteer Ireland, 2017)[90]. Volunteer-led organisations contribute to social, economic and environmental infrastructure and services at local, regional and national level. Working directly in local communities they are very aware of issues on the ground and how policy decisions are impacting. Thus, civil society organisations have a specific role to play in encouraging active citizenship and also in bringing a representative community voice to policy and decision making.

Local Government Reform in Ireland
The current system of Local Government in the Republic of Ireland comprises 31 Local Authorities (LAs), mainly structured around county and city boundaries. They deliver a wide range of local services such as housing; planning; roads; water supply; environmental protection; provision of recreation and amenities and community infrastructure. LAs also play a key role in supporting local economic and enterprise development in cities and counties.

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[88] The report of the Presidents Ethics Commission (2015)
[89] Eurobarometer (2013) "EUROPEANS' ENGAGEMENT IN PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY" viewed at http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/FLASH/surveyKy/1118.
[90] Volunteer Ireland (2017) " The impact of volunteering on the health and well-being of the volunteer " available at https://www.volunteer.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Volunteer_Ireland-Report_FINAL.pdf

Local Government supports many initiatives which drive local communities. These range from local festivals and events; design of streetscapes and village renewal schemes; support for micro-enterprises, business parks and incubation units; arts, culture and heritage, social inclusion, involvement in energy efficiency projects; planning for major investments etc. Thus, under the principle of subsidiarity, this is the lowest effective level of governance in Ireland for people to participate in. However, the Irish system has been criticised by the Council of Europe for being far too centralised, with little real power and decision-making devolved from the Oireachtas to Local Government[91]. The OECD (2016)[92] reports that Ireland is one of the most centralised countries of the OECD.

In 2012 the Irish Government produced a major policy document 'Putting People First'[93] heralding a significant reform of Local Government in Ireland. The document outlines a vision for local government as 'leading economic, social and community development, delivering efficient and good value services, and representing citizens and local communities effectively and accountably'. One of the stated aims of this process of local government reform is to create more meaningful and responsive local democracy with options for citizen engagement and participative democracy. The report also initiated new local government structures such as Municipal Districts, Local Community Development Committees, the merging of some County and City Councils and the abolition of Town and Borough Councils.

As has been described elsewhere in this book, trust between people and the state is low. Figure 3 demonstrates that Irish people are more likely not to trust government than the EU as a whole from 2010 to 2015 (European Commission, 2017[94]). More recently, levels of mistrust have decreased compared to the EU average, but remain worryingly high at 55% for National Government and 44% for Local Government. While the figures for Ireland have improved slightly, this level of mistrust makes it difficult for policy makers to engage with those already disaffected citizens. Any

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91   Council of Europe (2013) "Local Democracy in Ireland" viewed at https://rm.coe.int/168071a75c
92   OECD (2016) "Ireland Profile – subnational government" viewed at https://www.oecd.org/regional/regional-policy/profile-Ireland.pdf
93   Department of Environment, Community and Local Government (2012) "Putting People First – action programme for effective Government available at http://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/putting_people_first_-_action_programme_for_effective_government.pdf
94   European Commission (2017) Trust in Local and Regional Government. Viewed at http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Chart/getChart/chartType/gridChart//themeKy/18/groupKy/92/savFile/10

review of social media comments on policy issues demonstrates a very vocal group who do not view politicians and public servants in a positive light, and for whom the common good is a somewhat alien concept.

Figure 3 Trust in Local and Regional Government

Proportion who "tend not to trust" National (NG) and Local Government (LG) in Ireland and the EU

Source: Eurobarometer (2017)
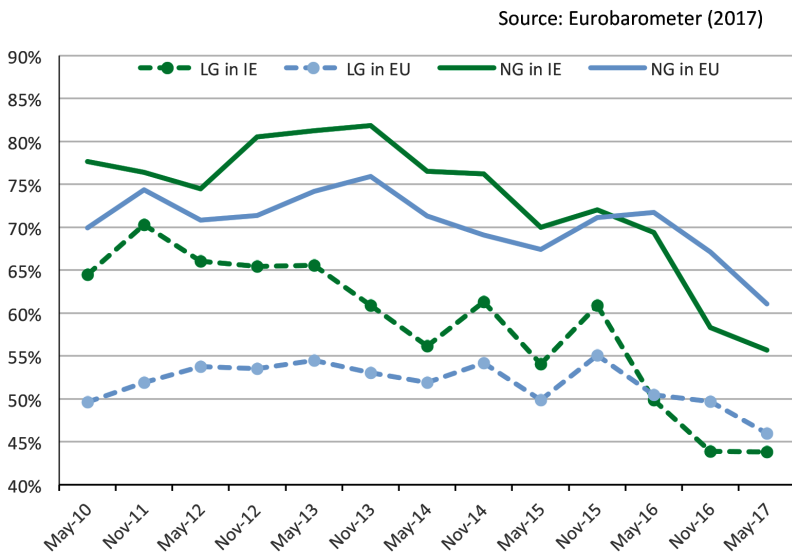
Public engagement with Local Authorities covers both representative and participative elements. Councillors are elected ever five years to the Local Authority from geographic areas with a population ranging from 20,000 in sparsely populated rural areas to over 70,000 in dense urban locations. The average ratio at the 2014 election was one member per 4,800 of population[95].

In terms of participative democracy, LAs have a variety of mechanisms. Individuals or groups can lobby elected members and council staff directly

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95   Department of the Environment (2013) "Local Electoral Area Boundary Committee Report" Dublin: Stationary Office.

on matters of interest to them. The LA has a statutory requirement to hold public consultations when devising new plans such as the County Development Plan, Local Economic and Community Plan etc. Some LAs also extend this to consult with communities about local plans and other sectoral policies and proposals. In addition, representatives of the community are given an opportunity to sit on decision making and advisory boards and committees led by the LA. Examples of this are Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs), Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs) and Joint Policing Committees (JPCs). The role of each is briefly described below.

LCDCs aim to develop, co-ordinate and implement a coherent and integrated approach to local and community development. The membership of LCDCs includes elected councillors, local authority staff, representatives of public bodies which provide services in the area; local community representatives via the PPN and representatives of publicly funded or supported local development bodies. The main function of an LCDC is to prepare, implement and monitor the community elements of the six-year local economic and community plan (LECP). It also oversees Community Development programmes such as the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) and the Rural Development Programme (LEADER), Town and Village renewal. Typically, LCDCs meet monthly.

SPCs advise and assist the council in the formulation, development and review of policy. The SPC system is intended to give councillors and relevant sectoral interests an opportunity for full involvement in the policy making process from the early stages. They bring together various stakeholders in LAs including staff, elected councillors, representatives of business, farming interests, trade unions and PPN reps from social inclusion, environmental, community and voluntary sectors as appropriate. Typically, SPCs meet 3-4 times a year.

JPCs provide a dedicated forum to support consultation, cooperation and synergy on policing and crime issues between An Garda Síochána, local authority officials, elected representatives and PPN community representatives. Typically, JPCs meet monthly.

Public Participation in Local Government in Ireland

Task Group on Citizen Engagement

In 2013, the Government commissioned a Task Group on Citizen Engagement in Local Government, chaired by Seán Healy of *Social Justice Ireland* to come up with proposals for more extensive and diverse input by citizens into the decision-making process at local government level. The report of that group in late 2013[96] proposed the development of Public Participation Networks (PPNs) in every Local Authority Area. These networks would be the main point of contact between Local Authorities and the environmental, social inclusion, community and voluntary organisations in an area. Their core role is to

- Facilitate the participation and representation of communities in a fair, equitable and transparent manner through the environmental, social inclusion, community and voluntary sectors on decision making bodies

- Strengthen the capacity of communities and of the environmental, social inclusion, community and voluntary groups to contribute positively to the community in which they reside/participate

- Provide information relevant to the environmental, social inclusion, community and voluntary sector and acts as a hub around which information is distributed and received.

Structure of PPNs

The guiding principles and values of PPNs (Figure 4) are designed to reflect those within the Council of Europe Code of Good Practice for Civic Participation in the Decision-Making Process.

Participatory and Inclusive

PPNs bring together all the volunteer-led organisations within a city / county. On average PPNs have 400-member groups, comprising environmental, social inclusion community and voluntary activities.

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[96]   Department of Environment, Community and Local Government (2013) "Working Group Report on Citizen Engagement with Local Government" viewed at http://drcd.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/Citizen-Engagement.pdf

PPNs are ideally placed to meet the recommendation in the Code (CoE, 2009) to "collect and channel views of their members [and] user groups." These views can be brought to policy makers either via submissions to consultations, or direct participation in decision making fora.

Figure 4 Principles and Values of PPNs

PPNs elect representatives to sit on various LA policy and decision-making bodies as described above. These representatives are supported by a Linkage Group of members who are stakeholders in a particular issue. For example, groups with an interest in safety and security would come together to be the Linkage Group for the Joint Policing Committee, bringing grass roots experiences to the policy table via their representative. This structure maximises involvement from member groups, and ensures that representatives bring forward the views of the PPN, and not their personal opinions. It also stimulates member groups to make submissions in their own right on matters of importance to them.

The PPN is a flat structure with no designated leaders, which means that it operates in an open and accessible way, and there is no charge for

membership. The overall decision-making body of the PPN is the Plenary, or meeting of all member groups. PPNs are also mandated to actively engage and include groups representing people whose voices are not generally heard in policy making.

Every PPN communicates regularly with its members via newsletters (electronic and print), ensuring they are informed about relevant activities, plans and opportunities for consultation. They also work to build the capacity of member groups by offering training courses.

Each member group has an opportunity to participate in the PPN at the level that suits them. Activities include

- Registering as a member and receiving information via email

- Attending Plenary or Municipal District meetings or consultations

- Attend training organised by PPN.

- Becoming involved in one or more Linkage Groups on topics of importance to them and feeding into policy.

- Nominating representatives for election to LA Boards or Committees or the Secretariat

- Voting in elections to Boards or Committees or the Secretariat

- Having a member of their group as a PPN representative on a LA Board or Committee or on the Secretariat

All of these elements of the structure contribute towards one which is inclusive and participatory.

Trust, Accountability and Transparency
PPNs are administered by a voluntary Secretariat, supported by a resource worker. However, all decisions are taken by the Plenary which meets at least twice per year. Each PPN agrees a Memorandum of Understanding with the LA and an Annual Workplan. Both financial and workplan reports are completed and made available to members and presented to the Plenary. When PPN representatives attend a meeting, they report back to the PPN

via the Linkage group. Frequently these reports are placed on the PPN website. Any member organisation can join a Linkage group of their choice and thus be able to have an influence.

Independence
PPNs are defined as being independent from the LA, and from any political or vested interests. Although they are funded through the LA, they operate under the direction of the Plenary and the administration of the Secretariat and worker. For credibility with member groups, and to be able to advocate critically, it is essential that the independence of PPNs is maintained and respected.

Development of PPNS

The networks were to be introduced, along with the remainder of Local Government Reform with the Local Elections in June 2014. That year, *Social Justice Ireland* along with the Environmental Pillar organised a series of roadshows for both LA staff and volunteers to explain and promote the new structure. In 2015, *Social Justice Ireland* employed a part time worker to support the development of PPNs across the country. They delivered a series of training programmes, offered phone and email mentoring and organised regional meetings for PPNs to share best practice and challenges. They are also in the process of researching the implementation of the PPN structure and its efficacy. This paper includes some preliminary output from that work.

We can identify three basic stages in the development of PPNs from their initial announcement to the present.

Phase 1 *Introduction Period – April 2014 – June 2015*
During this period, LAs were given responsibility for establishing PPNs within their catchment area. Implementation coincided with the reform of Local Government and significant internal reorganisations within LAs, which meant that PPNs did not always receive the priority they required. A budget of €12,000 per LA was provided for the roll out. Because of this lack of both human and financial resources, the initial implementation was patchy across the country, with the level depending on how committed individuals in the LA were to the process. There was also some confusion and lack of trust amongst both potential member groups and the LA about

the new structure, which some saw as overly-complex. In other cases, there was a positive welcome for the PPN which was seen as a new and innovative organisation with real potential to rejuvenate community engagement.

Because of the need to establish LA committees after the elections, community representatives were nominated to various LA committees from legacy bodies on an interim basis. As the Linkage Group structure was not well developed, many of these individuals were reliant on their own knowledge, experience and network to inform their representation.

LAs (in particular the Community sections) commenced registering PPN members and sharing information with them. Some Secretariats (administrative body of PPN) were elected and took on the task of developing the PPNs. Towards the end of the period, some interim representatives were replaced by election from the PPN membership. Most PPNs operated on voluntary work, while some had administrative support from their LA.

Phase 2 *Development Period - June 2015 - Dec 2016*

In June 2015 a funding line was established for PPNs involving up to €50,000 from Central Government to be matched pro rata with at least €30,000 from LA funds. This was to facilitate the employment of a resource worker to support the work of the volunteers in developing the PPN. PPNs could now move forward. There was much variation around the country, with some PPNs being assigned a worker from within the LA, and others employing a new worker. Having a worker was key to development, and by the end of 2016, all PPNs had operational Secretariats, elected representatives to Boards and Committees, a register of members and most had made progress in developing Linkage groups, delivering training and capacity building. During 2016, a lot of time was taken up with necessary administrative tasks including developing procedures and protocols.

Data presented at the first National Conference for PPNs in Sligo in October 2017 reported that over 11,150 organisations were members of their local PPN at the end of 2016. The organisations ranged from countywide organisations with hundreds of members to small locally based bodies. At an average of 25 members each, that means that over a quarter of a million people were connected to a PPN. PPNs had elected over 800 representatives to over 300 policy and decision making bodies. In addition to the LCDCs,

JPCs and SPCs, PPNs also participated on committees dealing with matters as diverse as Tourism, Ageing, Disability, Sports, Arts, Local Development, Anti-Racism, Addiction and many more.

A National Advisory Group was established which involved people from all the stakeholders; the Department of Rural and Community Development[97], resource workers, Secretariats, Local Government, Community and Environmental Pillars. A User Guide for PPNs was produced to further explain the PPN process and to address some frequently raised issues about running a PPN. The Resource workers established a peer support network. *Social Justice Ireland* continued to organise regional meetings to enable Secretariat members and representatives from different PPNs to network, improve their skills, learn from each other and be better informed on relevant developments.

Phase 3 *Consolidation Period – 2017*
In 2017, PPNs had a steady budget line, the majority had recruited a dedicated resource worker, and it was an opportunity to build on the foundations which had been created. While the quantitative data are not yet available, research suggests that PPNs have increased their impact in all three areas of work; representation, capacity building and information sharing. Many are using social media and have developed websites to communicate effectively with their members. Representatives are receiving policy related training and improving their ability to make an impact. Linkage groups are beginning to function, and some PPNs are developing their own policies in a participative way. More and more agencies are coming to PPN seeking support with consultations or representatives. This however, has increased the workload for the resource worker and Secretariat, and there is now a need to increase the resourcing of the PPNs to enable them to fulfil their mission.

The majority of PPNs have good working relationships with the Local Authority, with a designated contact person. However, the relationship remains very dependent on senior LA staff's enthusiasm (or otherwise) for public participation, and the level of support can change as personnel change.

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[97]   Formerly the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government

Some PPNs have offered direct training to LA staff. *Social Justice Ireland* has delivered programmes to senior LA management and staff as well as to LA elected Councillors to increase understanding of how an active PPN can add real value to the work of the LA. In other PPNs, resource workers or Secretariats have made presentations to Councillors, LA staff, SPCs etc. In all cases the feedback has been positive and engagement with the LA beyond the community section of the Local Authority has improved.

Assessment of PPN Progress

Returning to the Council of Europe Levels of Participation (Figure 1), how can the PPNs be assessed at this stage? Are they increasing the engagement of people with Local Government?

At least 800 PPN representatives are in place on over 300 LA Boards and Committees to bring forward the concerns of the community. PPN representatives are now a feature of these LA bodies. Through the PPN structure, these representatives must feed-back information from the Board or Committee to the PPN Stakeholders and in turn be directed by them. This can promote greater awareness of the policies and plans of the LA and initiate dialogue. Many representatives report being welcome on the Committee and respected for the views they bring and the inputs they make.

However, some issues continue to hamper the process. LA Boards and Committees generally involve elected members, staff, other state agencies and PPN representatives. Many meetings take place during normal work hours which suits paid staff, but excludes many volunteers with work and caring responsibilities. In some cases, there is a clear power imbalance, and meetings involve the presentation of research, or already scoped policy proposals, forcing the PPN to react rather than being able to proactively set the agenda. Some PPN representatives complain of over-formalised procedures within LA committees which, they feel, inhibit them from contributing equally.

Another challenge identified is reaching out to all their member groups, and getting them active within the network. As one Secretariat member put it "we are sending out a lot of interesting information, but I'm not sure how many people read it". The pressure on volunteers, who are already active within their own community, is significant and some, while interested,

may not have the time to give to the PPN. There is also evidence of general volunteer fatigue. The lack of understanding of Local Government and how it operates was also apparent, with many people not recognising how much locally made decisions affected them.

Nonetheless PPNs have made significant progress over the past 3 years along the continuum of participation, as described below

Information:
In all cases there is a satisfactory level of information provision from the LA to PPNs and on to the community as a whole. This generally takes the form of an e-bulletin which brings together useful items, which otherwise would have to be found in a plethora of sources. These include notice of consultations being held on various plans and programmes, and invitations to participate; notification about events and activities being organised by the LA and other agencies, funding and training opportunities.

Consultation
There is some evidence of increased responses to consultations when they are shared via the PPN. PPNs themselves are starting to gather information from their members and make submissions to consultations. However, the second part of the equation, the feedback from Local Authorities to consultees is less clear. It is evident that if people do not see a clear response to their inputs, they will experience consultation fatigue, decide that there is no point to their efforts at engagement and cease participation.

Dialogue
The level of participation which can be ascribed to PPN representatives on Boards and Committees varies between Consultation and Dialogue. In some cases PPN representatives play a full and active part in open discussions with the ability to set the agenda, while in others their views are noted, but with little impact. This can vary from PPN to PPN and within a PPN between different committees. As previously stated, the attitude of the Chair or Chief Officer of a committee to community participation has a major effect on the level which can be achieved.

Partnership
At this early stage, there are few real examples of fully-developed partnerships involving the PPNs. Initiatives such as Healthy Ireland and

Age Friendly Counties have potential to develop a partnership approach, in which programmes can be co-created with cross community participation. The co-creation of such partnerships at a local level, engaging both the PPNs and the LAs, is one of the major challenges faced by both entities in the period immediately ahead.

Conclusion

The PPNs are a structure which can be part of a movement to reconnect people and the state. Reconnecting people and re-establishing trust at local government level is essential if trust is to be developed at a national level. Positive experiences of volunteering and participation, and seeing real change happen as a result of that participation, are required to move towards a more participative society.

However, participation invokes both rights and responsibilities in the context of the social contract. It is incumbent on Government locally and nationally to create real opportunities for broad collaborative dialogue and partnership, which are accessible and interesting to people. They must be truly open to a wide range of inputs from the full diversity of people. They need to continuously feed back to people on how their suggestions and ideas have been considered and incorporated (or otherwise) into policy. To achieve this will require significant capacity building for staff in government and state agencies. We need more innovative ways of gathering views and working with people, which fit in with the realities of busy lives. It also requires a public and civic education programme to rebuild peoples trust and address consultation fatigue. In turn, people must make the effort to inform themselves and avail of opportunities to input in a considered way to policy and decision making processes. This will require developing an understanding of the constraints under which decisions have to be taken, being able to come up with coherent and viable policy proposals (however informal), and being willing to take on the extra responsibilities that come with real partnership.

Public Participation Networks have the capacity to work at grassroots level to develop the community side of the social contract. To do this, they must be properly resourced by both Local and Central Government and be guided by the principles and values identified in this chapter. If that is done, then the PPNs will be able to play a crucial role in reconnecting

people and the State. The question remains, however, – how much change is the State willing to make to create a really deliberative democracy? The years immediately ahead will provide the answer to this central question.