

7. Developing Our Vision for Community Wellbeing

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Introduction

In 2014, the Local Government Act was amended to introduce Public Participation Networks (PPNs). The PPN recognises the contribution of volunteer-led organisations to local economic, social, and environmental capital. It facilitates input by these organisations into local government through a structure that ensures public participation and representation on decision-making committees within local government. PPNs have been established in every Local Authority area in Ireland. By the end of 2021, 17,548 community and voluntary, social inclusion and environmental organisations were members of a PPN. Over 1,013 PPN representatives were elected to 397 committees on issues such as strategic policy, local community development, joint policing and more.¹

PPNs were developed following recommendations made by the Working Group on Citizen Engagement with Local Government convened by the (then) Minister for the Environment & Local Government, Phil Hogan in September 2013. The paper advocated for PPNs to be established in each Municipal District of each Local Authority and stated that “each Municipal District PPN will commence its work by going through a process to set out what it considers necessary to promote well-being for present and future generations”.² This was reiterated further in Circular Letter CVSP1/2015 addressed to each CEO, Local Authority and cc’d to each director of Community Service which stated, that the role of the PPN included a role “To develop a vision for the well-being of this and future generations”.³

¹ <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/2c4a7a-public-participation-network-annual-reports/>

² <https://www.socialjustice.ie/system/files/file-uploads/2021-09/2014-02-28-workinggroupreport-published-final01.pdf>

³ <https://assets.gov.ie/88422/e1ffe238-bd9c-4539-8213-965578621b0f.pdf>

Developing & Piloting the Process

From 2014, PPN stakeholders, including local authorities, community organisations and community volunteers began the process of developing the structures and practises that allowed the networks to establish and embed themselves in their designated geographical areas at county and city level.

In tandem, a reference group was established to hold national stakeholder discussions to identify how PPNs could be supported to develop a Vision for Community Wellbeing. Funding from the Environmental Protection Agency in 2017 enabled a pilot project to work on this. A call went out to PPNs and four were selected (Wicklow, South Dublin, Roscommon, and Longford) to work with representatives from the Environmental Protection Agency, the Irish Environmental Network, and Social Justice Ireland to develop and pilot a process to develop a Vision for Community Wellbeing for their areas. The project was coordinated and supported by Dr. Harriet Emerson, independent consultant.

The pilot group came together in late 2017 and their first task was to define “wellbeing” for the purposes of the project. While wellbeing is often used to describe the physical and mental health of individuals, it quickly became clear that community wellbeing is much more than the health of its citizens. Community wellbeing includes the conditions that are important for the wellbeing of the whole community. These conditions could involve any aspect of our environment, society, or economy. Following extensive discussion, it was agreed that if all the elements across the six domains of Health; Economy & Resources; Social & Community Development; Participation, Democracy & Good Governance; Values, Culture & Meaning; and Environment & Sustainability (Figure 1) were premium quality, then the community would have optimal wellbeing.

Figure 1

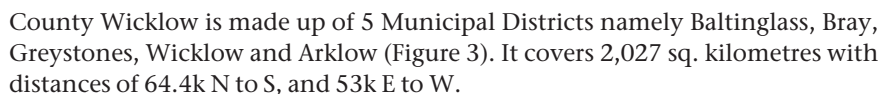


A process was then developed (Figure 2) to run consultations with communities and use the inputs from the consultations to develop Visioning Statements (now called Visions for Community Wellbeing).

Figure 2



Figure 3



Baltinglass is the largest Municipal District and is somewhat separated from the rest of the county by the Wicklow Mountains, causing an urban rural divide.

As part of the pilot process, Wicklow PPN decided to begin consultations in Baltinglass, the largest Municipal District, and to run two workshops, one in Hollywood (north) and one in Carnew (south). This was repeated throughout the year aiming one workshop for the main town areas and one for the rural hinterland of each Municipal District. A total of 11 physical workshops were run

throughout the county in 2018. This was followed by an online survey. Written submissions were also received from the Co Wicklow Comhairle na nÓg⁴ and Wicklow Dementia Support Group

Workshops began with asset mapping where communities were asked what they valued in their community and wished to maintain for this and future generations. Smaller groups were then asked to provide input on each of the community wellbeing headings and asked if their community was the best it could be, what would it have, look like, feel like? More specifically, they were asked:

Social & Community Development

How can we be an inclusive community where we support each other and ensure no one is left out? What are the important social services and facilities we need to live well from childhood to old age?

Environment & Sustainability

How do we value our natural environment and man-made heritage? What can be done to conserve, protect and restore these? How can we interact with the environment in a sustainable way, and hand it on to the next generation in a better state?

Work, Economy & Resources

How can our communities thrive economically, with good jobs, and supports for enterprise, business and for people not in work? What resources do we have and are they used effectively and sustainably without causing harm to social and environmental sustainability?

Health

How can all members of our community enjoy the best possible physical and mental health? What about people with special needs, older people, and carers?

⁴ Comhairle na nÓg are child and youth councils in the 31 local authorities of the country, which give children and young people the opportunity to be involved in the development of local services and policies.

Values, Culture & Meaning

What is needed to ensure that everyone both feels, and actually is, included and valued, and that our different values and cultures are respected and nurtured? What are the important parts of our culture that we want to hand on to future generations?

Participation, Democracy & Good Governance

What is necessary to ensure that our local government structures support the wellbeing of our community for this and future generations? What is necessary to ensure that we have a voice in the decisions that affect us and that all voices are being heard?

Approximately 2,500 individual suggestions in total were input in the whole process. The inputs were as diverse as the communities themselves as well as being an indication of what their needs, interests, and priorities were at that particular time. However, there were also many similarities and cross-cutting themes. The inputs were listed under the wellbeing domain headings under which they were discussed in the first instance. This information was collated in to a “What We Heard” document for each of the Municipal Districts. The “What We Heard” documents are available to view and download from the Wicklow PPN website.⁵

Some examples of recurring messages:

- Better transport services
- More local employment opportunities
- Use the areas assets to their potential for the benefit of the local community
- Welcoming, inclusive communities
- Valuing local culture
- Opportunities to learn from each other
- Easy access to health & support services
- More transparency in local government
- More communication & information provision
- More consultation with communities

⁵ <https://countywicklowppn.ie/represent/>

- Better infrastructure
- Our natural and built heritage is protected
- Develop/implement a system to get people to deal with derelict properties

Following this, the data was further analysed to identify any similar or cross cutting themes under each heading. This brought the data to a higher level allowing the Vision and High-Level Goals to be developed, initially for each Municipal District and then for the whole county.

The Co Wicklow Vision for Community Wellbeing (2018) is shown in Figure 4 below. The Visions for Community Wellbeing for our 5 Wicklow Municipal Districts can also be found on the Wicklow PPN website.⁶

Figure 4



⁶ Ibid.

The Benefits for the PPN and its Member Groups

All Wicklow PPN stakeholders have greatly benefited from undertaking this work. The main and lasting benefits were in the collaborative working, relationship building and networking that underpinned all the elements of the work.

At the beginning there was the learning and support between those involved in the Vision for Community Wellbeing Toolkit Development Team. This was followed by the real and positive engagement with member groups during the consultations. Due to the intensive nature of the consultations, the PPN enlisted the facilitative help of other agencies working in the community sector. This cross sectoral engagement resulted in a deeper understanding and mutual respect for all the community development work being done in the county by agencies, organisations, and the community groups and volunteers themselves. For example, as a direct result of the networking opportunities provided by this process, Hollywood Community Forum⁷ was developed and has since gone on to implement various projects to benefit their local community. As their capacity grew the Hollywood Forum reached out to other Fora and networks in the district for peer support and to identify areas where they might work together.

Using the data

Wicklow PPN use the data gathered from the Vision for Community Wellbeing consultations regularly as a reference and to direct all our work. We have also used them to try to influence the work of other groups and agencies. For example, the burden of governance and bureaucracy was a repeated concern throughout the consultations. Wicklow PPN has since run a number of training sessions in relation to good governance and practice. Encouraging intergenerational learning was another repeated suggestion which we have passed over to the community section of the Wicklow & Kildare Education and Training Board (WKETB) and Wicklow Comhairle na nÓg. They then went on to provide opportunities for intergenerational support and learning as well as providing networking opportunities between Wicklow Comhairle na nÓg and Wicklow Older People's Council.

⁷ Hollywood Community Forum is a network of community groups operating in the Hollywood area of West Wicklow. The network was formed as a direct result of the Wellbeing consultations.

The data gathered from the Vision for Community Wellbeing is very versatile and has formed the foundation for many Wicklow PPN submissions to various local and national plans and strategies.

Examples of Submissions Led by Our Vision for Community Wellbeing

- Various County Policing Plans
- WCC Climate Change & Biodiversity Action Strategic Policy Committee Workplan Development
- Social Inclusion & Community Activation Plans for Co Wicklow
- Draft WCC Customer Service Strategy
- Towards a National Action Plan Against Racism for Ireland
- NTA Review of the Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area
- Public Consultation on the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy
- The Co Wicklow Outdoor Recreation Strategy
- Heritage Ireland 2030 Public Consultation
- WCC Draft Corporate Plan

The data also acts as a reference and mandate for PPN Representatives.

Reviewing the Visions for Community Wellbeing in 2022

As part of the process of developing the Visions for Community Wellbeing, it was always intended that they would be reviewed to examine any changes in community priorities. Wicklow PPN had intended to start this process in 2021 however the Covid pandemic stalled this, and the review did not begin until February 2022.

This was fortunate for two reasons. In the first instance, following the restrictions that Covid had placed on networking and connections in the community, people were enthusiastic to re-connect. This brought an added element and positive energy to the consultations. Secondly, Wicklow County Council (WCC) were also about to enter extensive consultations to develop their second Local Economic & Community Plan. Wicklow PPN approached WCC, and it was agreed that our organisations would collaborate in our consultations using the Vision for Community Wellbeing process. The consultations began by launching an online survey that could also be accessed in hard copy in local libraries. The first workshop was run on International Women's Day with a group of 60 women from a variety of diverse backgrounds. Consultations continued

throughout May with workshops running in each of the Municipal Districts. A specific workshop was also run for PPN Environmental College groups.

The collaboration between Wicklow PPN and WCC encouraged the Wicklow Local Community Development Committee (LCDC) to apply for funding accessed by the Department of Rural & Community Development from Dormant Accounts to support 4 LCDCs (as pilot projects) to develop strategies to engage hard to reach communities with the Local Economic & Community Plan development process. Wicklow was successful in its application and this project is currently under way.

Differences and Nuances

To date (October 2022) the analysis of all the Vision for Community Wellbeing inputs has not been totally completed. However much of it has been sorted into some themes and while many of the identified issues and visions in 2018 remain, some slight differences and nuances have become apparent.

Issues such as lack of transport facilities, poor communications, disconnection between local government and communities, access to services, better infrastructure, and development of more local enterprise, were all topics that came up in both consultation rounds. However, this year we noted that the language changed around some of these issues. Conversations seemed to delve deeper into the topics and terms such as connectedness, and placemaking were introduced and used a lot.

Placemaking was a relatively new concept in the 2022 consultations. While the importance of “Keeping it Local” was strong in both rounds of consultations, in 2018 this was mostly discussed regarding employment and governance, whereas in 2022 it seems to be more about the importance of developing strong, supportive, and resilient local communities. Some discussions highlighted the vision of adopting a holistic approach to planning & development so that people and the environment could be nurtured and supportive of each other in urban and rural settings.

Connections and Connectedness were the predominant terms and strongest message in 2022. Connectedness was used in relation to transport and the need for better access to educational, recreational, and social services. It was used in regard to information provision and communications. It was also used to connect people and place, as well as connecting people with people. Discussions painted visions of built environments that would be specifically designed where

there are no divisions within them so that people can easily pass through and connect with others via green recreational areas that include places where people will socially interact.

In the 2018 consultations people spoke about the need for more access to local government in the way of more conversations and consultation with communities, more local decision making and more transparency within local decision making. The 2022 discussions indicated that community groups recognise and have more confidence in the value of the work they do with the limited resources they have. They also seemed to recognise the limitations of local government more. Their vision is that local government should interact with communities more so that they can work in partnership towards optimum community benefits. Accompanying this was the vision that local communities should have the power and influence to effect local development and social change.

A Learning Journey

Wellbeing is subjective. Like Maslow's theory of needs, wellbeing is dependent on immediate needs. For example, wellbeing for some individuals might be governed by the basic need of putting food on the table, whereas for others it might be buying a second car. Similarly, community wellbeing can be influenced by the make-up of the group, what their purpose is, who their client group or membership is and what they are ultimately trying to achieve. For a Traveller support group this might be access to housing and basic human rights, whereas for a community council it might be maintaining a hall for the community to use. Community wellbeing equates to equality of access and inclusion for all to achieve their potential. Due to the diversity and uniqueness of our communities, and those living in them, there will be differences and nuances in their wellbeing vision and therefore the supports and approaches they need to attain their vision will also need to be diverse.

Wellbeing is vulnerable to external influence and can change instantly and profoundly if significantly impacted. The recent pandemic is a prime example, as is the current climate change and biodiversity loss crisis, and the impacts of the war in Ukraine. These global problems have brought concerns and challenges for local communities and have tested their resilience on many levels. Many community groups rose to the challenges inflicted by the pandemic as was evidenced in the many voluntary supports and initiatives that were provided to the most vulnerable members of our communities. Likewise, many community groups are adapting and developing their activities to combat the effects of

climate change and biodiversity loss and many groups are supporting Ukrainian refugees in Ireland. It is very possible that these events have influenced the differences in responses to the 2018 and 2022 consultations as our communities change and adapt to their current situation.

We entered into this work with a very limited understanding of what community wellbeing was and were very sceptical of the value this work would provide. However, the benefits, as highlighted earlier in this paper, were significant and our learning continues with every conversation we have. More importantly, our engagement and relationship with our communities is richer. It is apparent that this work must continue if we are serious about knowing, understanding, supporting, and collaborating with our communities with the aim of lobbying for policies to be developed, implemented, and monitored to ensure that they are working for communities on the ground.

Since their inception, PPNs have developed themselves to be a key conduit for community engagement. The relationships they have built within their communities and their ability to network and facilitate connections are reaping huge benefits for all community stakeholders. They are ideally placed to continue this work of examining community wellbeing, documenting it, and using it to influence policy and decision making.

