



**An Roinn Caiteachais
Phoiblí agus Athchóirithe**
Department of Public
Expenditure and Reform



**An Roinn Forbartha
Tuaithe agus Pobail**
Department of Rural and
Community Development

Public Participation Network

Case Study



**Our Public
Service 2020**



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Summary

This case study charts the journey of the Public Participation Network structure in local authorities from its genesis in the review of Local Government ‘Putting People First: An Action Plan for Local Government’ in 2012 which set out a vision for active citizen engagement in local government. Since its roll out across all local authorities in 2016, the PPN structure has evolved to become a strong and vibrant entity. The study provides an overview of the Public Participation Network project design and implementation. The key challenges arising during the process are outlined, and the lessons learned are set out. Although only four years in existence, PPNs have been established nationwide across all 31 Local Authorities. The membership has been increasing steadily year on year, and in 2020 stands at some 16,000 member groups. The rich variety of local engagement initiatives that are now part of the routine work of PPNs highlights their success in evolving over their relatively short life to become an integral part of the local government infrastructure.

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Foreword

The Reform Delivery Office (RDO) in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform has developed a series of case studies on citizen engagement, in partnership with researchers and public bodies, as a commitment under the Our Public Service 2020, Development and Innovation Framework.

The key objectives of this initiative are to:

- Document and capture learning around implementation and delivery of citizen engagement initiatives;
- Acknowledge progress made and share best practice in citizen engagement initiatives; and
- Create valuable educational resources that add to the existing body of knowledge on the Irish Public Service.

These case studies are not intended to be evaluations of the overall success and impact of the case examined, rather, the aim is to capture reflections on citizen engagement initiatives.

Furthermore, by telling the story behind these Case Studies, it is hoped to communicate achievements and lessons learned and to acknowledge the significant progress that has been made under Action 4 of Our Public Service- **to significantly improve communications and engagement with the public.**

The case studies initiative builds on the pilot case studies project that was undertaken by the RDO in 2017. The pilot project was established to produce teaching resources for lecturers and students of public policy and public administration, as well as for those broadly interested in public policy and its implementation. The initiative is intended to encourage learning among students and practitioners of public policy and also to inform the design and implementation process of future policy.

Four Case Studies on Citizen Engagement have been undertaken by the RDO, in collaboration with the following public bodies and research institutions:

- **Comhairle na nÓg and Ireland's National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making 2015 – 2020** – Department of Children and Youth Affairs in collaboration with the University of Limerick (UL)
- **€300k – have your say** – South Dublin County Council in collaboration with the Institute of Public Administration (IPA)
- **Public Participation Networks** - Department of Rural and Community Development in collaboration with the Centre for Effectiveness Services (CES)
- **Basic Payment Scheme 100% Online 'Roadshows'** – Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in collaboration with the Institute of Public Administration (IPA)

These four case studies represent a broad spectrum of citizen engagement initiatives and are being published as a compendium together with an accompanying overarching paper.

The Case Studies benefit from the input of the key public policy practitioners who led and continue to lead these citizen engagement initiatives, and are based on interviews and research undertaken by leading researchers.

The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform would like to acknowledge the contributions of all those involved in the production of these Case Studies, without who time and dedication, this project would not have been possible.

Reform Delivery Office

June 2020

1. Introduction

1.1 The PPN and its emerging democratic potential

Public Participation Networks (PPNs) are a structure that is in place in each of the 31 Local Authorities in Ireland since 2016. Although only four years in existence, PPN membership has been increasing steadily year on year, and now in 2020 stands at some 16,000 member groups.

The role and remit of the PPNs has been evolving strongly, with extensive involvement of members in capacity building activities, building of local networks, participating in and promoting public consultative processes.

Although the PPN structure is in its relative infancy, in organizational terms, it has already achieved a huge level of engagement within the local government structure. Its scope for improving community building, for adding a community voice to policy development, and for building partnerships across the local authority system will be evident in this case study. PPNs are now well established in many counties as the primary channel of communication between the local authority and local communities. The PPN potential and remit for strengthening participative democracy and citizen engagement is proving significant, with active support from the Department of Rural and Community Development.

1.2 Background to PPNs

The overarching purpose of the PPN is to empower, enable and encourage local people and communities to contribute to local decision-making, and to have a greater say in the local government policies and programmes that impact on their communities.

The origin of the PPN structure is from the Government's review of local government 'Putting People First: An Action Plan for Local Government' carried out in 2012.¹ The vision for local government proposed in the Action Plan emphasizes citizen engagement and reflects the international evidence supporting the role of citizen engagement in building

open and inclusive policy making, and the contribution of volunteer-led community building:

Local government will be the main vehicle of governance and public service at local level - leading economic, social and community development, delivering efficient and good value services, and representing citizens and local communities effectively and accountably.²

The Action Plan develops this theme, proposing the development of additional mechanisms for citizen engagement:

... additional mechanisms for engagement with citizens and communities and encouraging participative democracy, such as participatory budgeting, petition-related rights, plebiscites, and regular town/area meetings, will be explored as potential ways to empower communities by facilitating direct, meaningful contact between councils and the communities they represent. These mechanisms could be deployed on a county or city-wide basis, or could be focused on municipal districts, certain areas, localities or neighbourhoods, depending on the context. Such measures would provide a means of broadening the range of interaction between a county council or a municipal district council and their citizens.³

Following on from the publication of the Action Plan, the PPN structure came into being in 2014, as part of the reform of Local Government, and following the report of the Working Group on Citizen Engagement with Local Government, published in February 2014.⁴ The membership of the Working Group was drawn from across the Community and Voluntary Sector and the Statutory Sector. The Working Group made recommendations on more extensive and diverse input by citizens into the decision-making processes at local government level. It outlined the ways in which structures and processes for securing the engagement of organised civil society with local government could be strengthened. To do this, the Report proposed that a Public Participation Network be established in each local authority area to enable the public to take an active formal role in relevant policy making and oversight committees of the local authority.

² Ibid, p9.

³ Ibid, p159.

¹ Department of Environment, Community and Local Government, 'Putting People First: An Action Plan for Local Government' 2012. https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/putting_people_first_-_action_programme_for_effective_government.pdf

⁴ Department of Environment, Community and Local Government. Report of the Working Group on Citizen Engagement with Local Government <https://www.socialjustice.ie/sites/default/files/attach/civil-society-article/3393/wgcereport.pdf>

The PPN framework was given a legislative underpinning (Local Government Reform Act 2014, s46). The first full year of operation was 2016, by which time the basic structures of PPNs were in place in every local authority, with a range of supports and administrative systems.

At the outset, the development of the PPN structure was the responsibility of the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government. In 2017, the responsibility for PPNs was transferred to the new Department of Rural and Community Development. That Department now has overall policy responsibility for the PPN structure, and a Unit within the Department provides oversight and support for PPNs.

The Department of Rural and Community Development engages in a consultative relationship with the (now) Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government in respect of local government matters of mutual interest.

1.3 This case study

This case study, which has been undertaken as an initiative of the Reform and Delivery Office (RDO) in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, examines the role and operation of the Public Participation Networks from a citizen engagement perspective. The main objectives of this case study are to:

- provide organisational learning to embed future citizen engagement initiatives;
- provide greater understanding around the implementation and delivery of citizen engagement initiatives;
- increase public awareness and acknowledge the significant progress that has been made to date;
- share best practice in citizen engagement by public servants; create valuable educational resources for use in third level and other educational institutions; and
- more generally, add to the body of knowledge on the Irish Public Service by publishing a number of case studies on citizen engagement.

Section 2 of the case study describes the role and workings of the PPN. It describes the structures and processes through which the PPN operates to deliver on its citizen engagement mission; the supports provided to enable and equip PPNs for their role at national and local level are also outlined in this section.

In **Section 3**, the case study outlines how the PPN structure is evolving over the course of its relatively short life, in terms of reach and membership; the kinds of local engagement and activities being undertaken by PPNs are described, and specific case examples of the work of PPNs are provided.

Section 4 focuses on the issues and challenges being met by this emerging structure as it looks to find its place and assert itself in well-established decision-making structures at local government level and how these are being addressed.

Section 5 In this section, the emerging successes of the PPN as experienced 'on the ground' are described, along with case studies demonstrating the diversity of citizen engagement initiatives being undertaken by PPNs.

The lessons learned for citizen engagement from the work to date of the PPNs are captured in **Section 6**.

The Centre for Effective Services wishes to acknowledge the support of the Department of Rural and Community Development and the PPN National Advisory Group in developing this case study, and the views and resources generously shared by interviewees in the course of preparing the case studies.

2. The PPN: What it is, how it works

2.1 The role of the PPN

Among the main roles set out for the PPN in the initial Guidelines⁵ were the following:

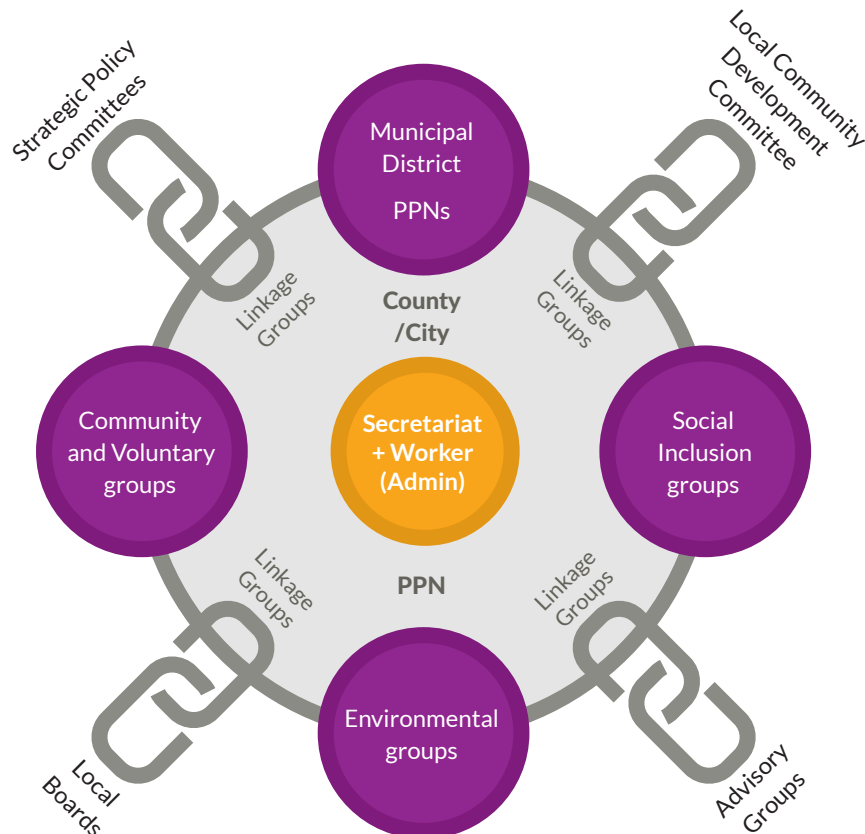
- To contribute to the Local Authority's development of a vision for the wellbeing of the City/County into the future
- To facilitate opportunities for networking, communication and sharing of information among and between member groups
- To identify issues of collective concern and to work to influence local policy on these issues
- To actively support the inclusion of socially excluded groups
- To encourage and enable public participation in local decision making and planning of services

- To facilitate the selection of participants from the environmental, social inclusion and voluntary sectors onto city/county decision making bodies and to develop these sectors to give them a strong voice within the City/County
- To build the capacity of members and member groups so as to enable them to participate more effectively and that their voices can be heard.

Alongside its general role, each PPN is tasked with developing a community wellbeing vision statement that sets out what the PPN considers necessary to promote wellbeing for present and future generations in the County. This process is developed at both Municipal District and County/City level. The wellbeing vision is designed to act as a guiding vision, setting out the main issues of PPN member groups, to inform both the PPN and the range of external organisations and policy makers with which the PPN engages.

⁵ Department of Environment, Community and Local Government. Local Government Reform/Citizen Engagement Guidelines. Circular Letter CVSP1/2014

2.2 The membership, operation and structure of the PPN



Membership of the PPN is open to volunteer-led/not-for-profit organisations. Groups are divided into three 'colleges' based on their main area of interest – Social Inclusion, Community and Voluntary, and Environment. The structure is built around formally constituted groups in order to reflect and strengthen its representative nature. Individual membership is not part of the structure. Associate Membership is provided for in some counties, to facilitate groups who do not meet the full membership criteria but who wish to be involved and receive information. The broad composition of the PPN membership is set out below:

Table 2: Composition of PPN membership 2017 and 2018*

College	2017 (n=29)	2018 (n=29)	% total 2018	% increase over 2017
Community and Voluntary	10,014	11,699	79%	17%
Environmental	422	502	3%	19%
Social Inclusion	2,389	2,645	18%	11%
Total	12,825	14,846	100%	16%

Based on 29 Returns. Includes Associate Members

The formal structure

In those counties that are divided into Municipal Districts,⁶ each Municipal District is required to have its own PPN, with its own schedule of Plenary Meetings where decisions are taken by representatives of member organisations and where a representative to the County PPN Secretariat is elected.

The PPN is described as a flat structure. This means that the Plenary body is the ruling body of the PPN, at both municipal and county level, with policy decisions and elections to Council Committees taken at Plenary meetings. Reflecting the independence of the PPN, the flat structure may be achieved in a number of ways, for example through revolving Chairs, or appointment of conveners.

The administration of the PPN is overseen by a voluntary secretariat drawn from the membership. Council staff are not members of the Secretariat. The Secretariat is responsible for ensuring the proper functioning of the PPN in line with the flat structure which underpins PPNs. There is no elected President or County/Municipal Chairperson. The role of the

Secretariat is to ensure that decisions taken by the Plenary, the decision-making body of the PPN, are carried out.

Legitimacy, accountability, equality of 'voice'

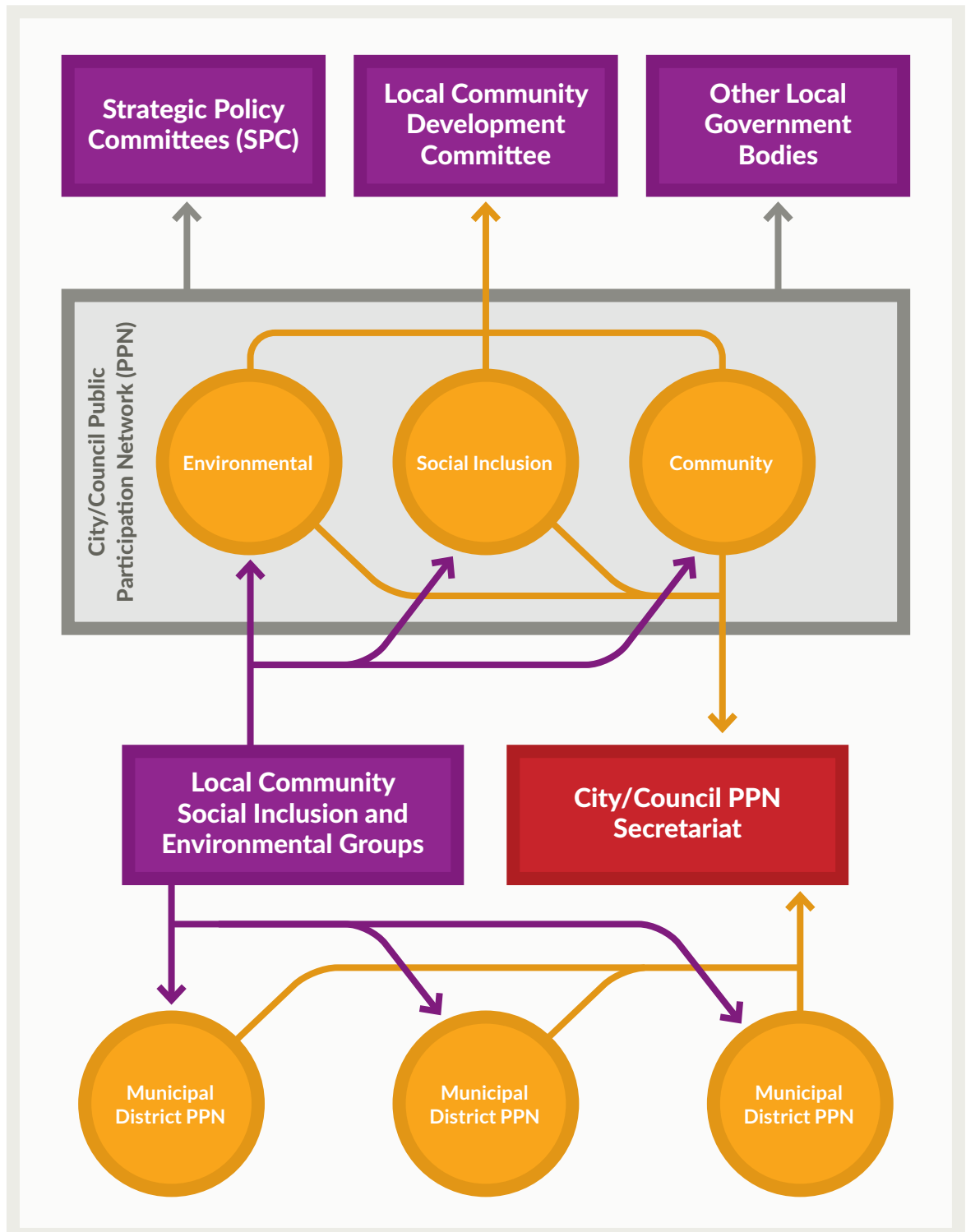
There is strong emphasis on the fact that PPN representatives on bodies are representing the collective view of the PPN, and not the views of their own organisation. Members are encouraged and expected to come together in theme-based or issue

based groupings known as **Linkage Groups**, whose task is to elect members onto bodies and committees dealing with these issues, to bring forward proposals or raise relevant matters and to provide a means through which the representative can both report back and get guidance/advice. This mechanism aims to ensure that all voices are heard on equal terms.

The PPN bases its legitimacy and accountability on a number of features, including the requirement for member groups to be properly constituted groups, the election systems for representatives onto various Council bodies, and the structure of Linkage Groups. The flat structure is designed to ensure equality of voice and influence. These governance features will continue to be supported into the future by the ongoing development of Codes of Conduct and Representatives' Charters, and by the forthcoming PPN Handbook.

⁶ A Municipal District is a subdivision of a Local Authority Area. Councillors meet at Municipal District level as well as in full Council. MDs were established following the reform of Local Government Act in 2014.

2.3 How the PPN contributes to local policy making and decision making



The route to influence

In the case of local government policy, the PPN influence can follow a number of routes:

1. Responding and contributing to proposals that emerge from the Council (the main Council or a Council Committee); the ultimate decision on policy matters will rest with the elected Council.
2. Raising policy issues through Council committees
3. Contributing to consultations on policy matters
4. Community-based dialogue.

One of the key policy development structures on which PPNs are now represented are the **Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs)** within the Local Authorities. These Committees, which have a legislative basis, advise and assist the Council in formulating, developing and reviewing policy. All Councils have at least four SPCs, dealing with policy in areas such as social housing, transport, planning and economic development.

PPNs also have strong levels of representation on the Council's **Local Community Development Committee (LCDC)**, a council-led interagency committee that prepares and implements the community elements of the Local Economic and Community Plan for the County, in addition to making funding decisions in relation to SICAP, Leader and the Community Enhancement Programme

Among the other Committees and Groups on which PPNs may be represented are Council-led Committees such as the local Joint Policing Committees, Traveler Accommodation Committees, Comhairle na nÓg, and other local structures such as the County Childcare Committee, Regional Drug and Alcohol Task Force, Disability Forums.

Both statutory and non-statutory public consultations are an integral part of the process of policy development at local authority level, and the development of byelaws and regulations. PPNs around the country are now increasingly involved in bringing their membership organisations together to formulate collective inputs to consultations and are often formally consulted by Councils alongside the wider public consultation. PPNs, as part of their community engagement role, also promote and inform local communities about local consultations.

2.4 Community engagement and capacity building

As well as the core role of contributing to policy development at Council level, PPNs are tasked with reaching out to communities, through their membership, to engage, inform and help build local community capacity for civic engagement. In the case of community outreach, and engagement, the PPN has a high level of autonomy and independence, within the national framework for PPNs.

A key facet of this work is the simple but hugely significant foundational work of letting people know about relevant activities that are happening in their area.

At national level, the **National PPN Advisory Group** has the role of providing oversight, monitoring and evaluation of PPNs, and to act as the channel through which the progress on the development of PPNs will be collated and reported to the Department of Rural and Community Development. The National Advisory Group, chaired by the Department, is made up of representatives of resource workers, PPN volunteers, national representatives from the Environment Sector, Social Inclusion and Community and Voluntary Sectors, and the County and City Management Association.

Three **National PPN Conferences** have been held to date. Also, at national level, the Department has provided training for the PPN members on a wide range of matters mainly to do with the governance and management of the PPN.

3. How the PPNs are evolving

Since the beginning of the roll out of PPNs following the enactment of the 2014 Local Government Reform Act, the evolution of the PPNs can be tracked through annual reports in 2016, 2017 and 2018.

3.1 Membership

The Annual Reports show that, nationally, the membership of PPNs in 2018 stood at 14,846, an increase of 16% over 2017.⁷ At the end of December 2019, this figure had increased further to 16,744. According to the 2018 Annual Report, there were 924 representatives on 325 boards and committees which covered a wide range of local policy development and community activities. Examples of policy areas to which PPN members have contributed include:

- Draft Council byelaws on Parks, beaches, Open Spaces, Street Trading, Waste Management
- Transport matters, including new routes and route changes
- Review and revision of Community grant schemes
- Restructuring of the LEADER Programme for rural development
- Joint Policing Committee Strategy.

3.2 Consultations

The extensive range of national and local consultations in which PPNs participated, or which they promoted is documented in Annual Reports. In 2018, 47 consultations were held by Local Authorities where the PPN was the primary vehicle of consultation, and PPNs were notified of 210 consultations. Examples of consultations in which PPNs participated include the local Age Friendly Strategy, Local Area Plans, Play Policy, Loneliness Taskforce, Traveler Accommodation Programmes, Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy, National Digital Strategy, Climate Action Plans at national and local level, National Volunteering Strategy.

3.3 Staffing

Since 2016, Resource Workers have been appointed in all PPNs. Additional funding was provided in 2019 for the appointment of a Support Worker, in recognition of the growing workload of the PPNs. This funding is being maintained in 2020.

3.4 Capacity Building

Almost 4,000 people attended a range of training programmes in 2018, across topics including Social Media use, Governance, Garda Vetting processes, Local Authority Budgeting, Local Area Plans, Accounting and Financial Management.

PPNs across the country have taken a range of initiatives to support their own members' development, and to strengthen their practice. The range and variety of these initiatives underline one of the key strengths of PPNs, namely their flexibility and capacity to respond to local people's needs and interests, and to innovate from the ground up. At the same time, many of the initiatives will be of interest to other PPNs, so that networking and sharing of experience are of huge value. The National Public Participation Network Conferences, held in 2017, 2018 and 2019 provided the opportunity for such exchanges of learning and experience.

⁷ Government of Ireland. Public Participation Networks Annual Report 2018 <https://assets.gov.ie/31701/a4e32947bf2547ed81ddf7f7311f776.pdf>

4. The issues and challenges

Any new and complex structure is likely to depend for its effectiveness on a wide range of local and national stakeholders and will inevitably face challenges in the establishment stage. The main source of information about the issues and challenges for the PPN that have emerged through the set-up stage and documented here have been gleaned from:

- Annual Reports 2016, 2017, 2018.
- Discussions with Department PPN team
- National Advisory Group members (group discussion, written feedback and interviews)
- PPN Conference reports
- Interviews with stakeholders

While the PPN structures are standard nationally, these structures may take account of the unique circumstances locally, for example, the particular Linkage Groups that are appropriate for the local authority area. In every case, there are differences in local context, personalities and pre-existing relationships, and in the critical role and approach adopted by each Local Authority. The diversity of the local experience across all local authority areas would be difficult to reflect and capture, so the issues, challenges and successes described here represent the range of experience, but will not necessarily apply in every county, or every PPN.

It is also worth noting that the issues and challenges identified in this case study are in the main seen as an integral part of the set-up and bedding-in phase of an entirely new structure; the challenge of the set-up stage and creating a new structure that balances both a ground up approach with leadership and direction from the centre is an important stage in the evolution of an organisation that cannot be skipped. The expectation of key stakeholders is that these challenges can be managed and are being managed in the course of this development phase.

4.1 Issues and challenges: an overview

Managing the local context

The Community and Voluntary sector has a long and deeply established presence and role in every county in Ireland and at national level. There has been for decades a plethora of arrangements through which sectoral Community and Voluntary organisations engage with parent departments, e.g. in the health sector and in education, in the disability sector and the environmental sector, to name but a few.

It follows that a new organisational structure working in the social/community field will not be setting up in a 'green field'. The new entity may bring a new set of activities that complement existing services and groups, or they may involve change to the roles of existing entities. Existing groups may need to move over and make way. Inevitably this involves change for some people and groups, and so the set-up stage requires to be managed as a change project.

In the case of the PPN, with its unique local government focus, it will in some counties have been a new structure but in others will have taken over from pre-existing Community and Voluntary Fora and Partnership Companies. Stakeholders point to the experience in some counties of the challenge of transition and feel that not enough time was allowed for consultation with existing grass root organisations. The handling of the transition will have been a key factor in shaping the ease or otherwise of the process of introducing the PPN structure at county level.

Learning points



A new structure for citizen engagement in any field of public service delivery will be more likely to succeed where there is a partnership approach to designing the new structure, involving the central government body working in partnership with the relevant communities of interest.

The implementation of a new initiative to promote citizen engagement could begin with a mapping of existing networks and structures already involved in the field, and the web of current relationships, and should involve a plan for managing the transition to the new arrangements.

Creating the national infrastructure

Setting up and rolling out a new nationwide locally based vision for citizen engagement with local government is a big undertaking, and one that requires formal structures to underpin the development. The infrastructure for the PPNs was set down initially by the then parent Department, the Department of Environment, Planning, Community and Local Government, underpinned by legislation.⁸

Inevitably, challenges in implementing the proposed structures emerged. For example, the concept of a flat structure where there is consensus decision-making, and a secretariat with a co-ordinating role but not an executive role, was a new and challenging approach for many people used to more traditional ways of working in community groups. Members had to adjust to different understandings of how a committee works and learn how to manage effectively without the traditional roles such as that of Chairperson. Also, the Linkage Group – a sub-structure within the PPN through which representatives on various committees would liaise with local people regarding the work of a particular committee or theme – has been challenging, on account of the volunteer time needed to invest in this extra structure.

⁸ Local Government Reform Act 2014.
www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2014/act/1/enacted/en/html

Some organisations who were used to their full local autonomy found it difficult to cede that autonomy and to work within these national guidelines. However, while their independence is prized by PPNs, there is an acceptance that there has to be a framework of rules that maintain the overall integrity and common purpose of the PPN structure. The concept of being independent but accountable is seen as offering the scope for the right central/local relationship.

The feedback gathered by the Department and the National PPN Advisory Group is feeding in to revised User Guidelines that draw on the learning from the early stage experience on the ground. The advent of the National PPN Advisory Group with membership reflecting the stakeholders on the ground, along with the Annual Conferences and Annual Reports that capture and publish the local experience are key means of building a bridge between national guidance and local experience. This blend of the national and local is likely to be a continuing feature of a structure that must be constantly evolving in response to local realities.

Learning points



A nationally mandated local programme of citizen engagement in any field of public provision will require a sensitive blend of national frameworks and oversight with local experience and independence. The right central/local balance in terms of guidelines is best based on emergent learning arising from evolving experience.

Building new role understandings

Gaining acceptance as a legitimate part of the local government system and communicating the benefits of the PPN has been a key part of the success of the PPNs. Stakeholders suggest that a greater investment in laying the early groundwork at local level for the new set of roles and relationships would have made the startup process easier and faster. They point to the challenge of creating a shared understanding among the key parties at local level about their respective and complementary roles in working with the local communities; they argue that mutual respect between local authority staff, councillors and PPNs which grows out of role clarity will be of huge benefit to communities.

An investment in formal shared training/induction for councillors and PPN members could have eased the path to shared views about roles; this training is now in the pipeline and will benefit new councillors.

Alongside communicating the PPN to established stakeholders who 'know the ropes' such as Council staff, councillors and established community groups, a challenge for PPNs is to make the wider public aware of the role. This is seen as needing a national 'push' alongside the communication work being done through local websites, ezines and events. It will be helpful to ensure that stakeholders, and particularly citizens, know where they can go for information and advice regarding the work of the PPN. The Department intends to roll out a PPN Communications Strategy in 2020 to address this specific challenge.

Learning points



The success of any new citizen engagement structure or project will depend on a substantial investment in communicating the purpose to all stakeholders, including those stakeholders directly involved or affected, and the general public. The investment in communication must be at the start, and throughout the life of the initiative.

Constructing the relationship with elected councillors

In all local authority areas, local elected councillors have a well-established and legally mandated representational role. The introduction of a new entity with a mandate to represent the same citizens in the Council's policy forums calls for a new and sophisticated understanding of the possibilities for blending representative and participative forms of local democracy.

The integration of participative and representative democracy is a sophisticated task, and arguably would have needed a strategy in its own right. As the PPN structure has bedded down, and its role has emerged at local level, the potential for both roles to work together has emerged, and concerns about overlap is seen to have reduced. For example, there are examples at local level of joint work among councillors and PPN

members on the planning of local initiatives and joint engagement in securing investment in local facilities.

A new suite of training opportunities for councillors regarding the interface with the PPN is planned, which will support the relationship.

Learning points



Where new roles are created as part of a new citizen engagement initiative, the alignment with existing roles is likely to require careful groundwork. This groundwork is best done early in the implementation process, to optimise the prospects for success and to minimise unnecessary tensions that may require mediation later on in the process.

Investing in relationship building to develop trust and shared vision

Closely linked and interwoven with the challenge of building local readiness for a new structure is the need to build the interpersonal relationships on which the success of such an endeavour depends.

Stakeholders who contributed to this case study place a strong emphasis on the importance of these interpersonal relationships for both the set up and the ongoing success of the PPN at local level. Partnership working at all levels is seen as the key to success for PPNs. Stakeholders see the need for time and care to be invested in these relationships, on an ongoing basis. Where PPNs have struggled, poor relationships are often at the root of the difficulty. Where relationships of trust have been built up around the set up and ongoing work of the PPN, the work is developing well. Stakeholders are clear that it takes time to build these relationships.

The work of the Department in building relationships through the National Advisory Group, the Resource Workers Network, the Secretariat Network, and the County and City Management Association has supported the local relationship building.

Learning points

Building good Interpersonal relationships is seen as a fundamental task in implementing new structures where people in different roles must work together and share influence. Creating trust and shared vision takes time and investment.

Ensuring meaningful participation

Stakeholders are clear that structures are but the beginning of meaningful participation. Achieving real participation to achieve goals and outcomes is a much more complex challenge.

For PPN representatives to contribute effectively on equal terms in Council Committees, timely information on Council business, and preparatory training/induction are essential supports. Practical challenges also exist, where PPN volunteers may have to get time off work or other commitments to attend meetings while Local Authority staff or other representatives engage in the committees as part of their job.

Another facet of meaningful participation that comes across from stakeholders is the need to ensure that the PPN is an inclusive structure, reaching all communities, including young people. Many PPNs have active links with the local Comhairle na nÓg, the child and youth councils in the 31 local authorities which give children and young people the means to be involved in the development of local services and policies.⁹ Children and young people may also be represented in the work of the PPN through their membership of community groups such as sports groups, environmental groups.

Reaching diverse groups calls on a range of skills, especially community development skills, on the part of PPN Resource workers in particular, and many resource workers bring these skills to the task from their previous work experience.

The Department's investment in training and capacity building, and in providing budgets for organisational supports such as the Salesforce database software is geared towards helping to build the local capacity for meaningful participation.

Learning points

The skills and expertise, and the time needed to do this community building effectively must be factored into planning, time management and resourcing of citizen engagement initiatives, and capacity building must be resourced.

Resources and supports

The key resources that are referenced by PPNs include staffing and administrative supports, training and development opportunities, as well as structural supports such as national forums, and national Guidelines.

From the outset, a range of resources and supports were put in place, initially by the former Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, and then by the Department of Rural and Community Development. These included a funding package, National Guidelines and a national training and support programme. As the PPN structure has developed and grown, the kinds of resources and supports needed have also inevitably grown and clarified and are the subject of ongoing dialogue with the Department.

The role and remit of a PPN as outlined by Resource Workers on the ground is vast i.e. providing information, promoting and establishing networking, encouraging voluntary engagement, building the capacity for voluntary engagement and supporting it to happen, along with the work it takes to develop and maintain the organisation. The geographic spread of groups and counties adds to engagement time. The Department is very cognizant of these challenges and in 2019 secured additional funding to allow each PPN to recruit a Support Worker to assist the work of the Resource Worker. This funding is also being maintained in 2020.

9 www.comhairlenanog.ie/who-we-are/

Learning points



Citizen engagement initiatives across diverse groups and geographic areas are likely to require a level of resources and skills that increases as the initiative rolls out and gains traction. This incrementally growing resource investment will need to be factored into budgets by the budget holder/provider.

4.2 Responding to the issues and challenges

The Department of Rural and Community Development has been responding to the evolving needs of PPNs in a number of ways. National level support structures continue to be developed. The Network of PPN Resource Workers and the Network of Secretariat members are mechanisms for collaboration, communication and the gathering of learning, to enable ongoing learning and organisational development. The National PPN Advisory Group has been restructured to be fully inclusive of all stakeholders. That Group, chaired by the Department, now includes PPN volunteers representing the different 'pillars' that constitute PPNs (Community and Voluntary, Environmental and Social Inclusion Sectors), the PPN resource worker and secretariat networks, and the City and County Managers Association.

The Annual Conference is now an established feature of the PPN landscape, and a place where exchange of learning and experience is a priority focus. The Annual Report captures in considerable detail the work of PPNs across the country, but also uses an innovative approach of publishing a set of recommendations based on a survey of stakeholders, thus offering a transparent record of views and proposals coming from the local level. An updated User Handbook is currently being prepared to take account of and respond to the experience from all the stakeholders in the course of the initial set-up phase. It is proposed that a review of the PPN structures will commence in 2020, along with rollout of a Communications Plan. Training and capacity building for all stakeholders will continue to be provided.

Additional resources have been provided by the Department to augment the initial resource allocation, and the new resources enable PPNs to have a Support Worker in each PPN to assist the Resource Worker in the delivery of the PPN work programme.

Learning points



The evolution of the PPN structure and work has benefited from the early establishment of ways of capturing and responding to learning, through national representative structures, training supports responsive to assessed needs, and opportunities to share good practice.

Any new citizen engagement structure will need to be subject of a critical review process to take stock, see what is working and respond to issues and challenges arising with fresh thinking and new approaches where needed.

5. The PPN successes

While a focus on issues and challenges is inevitable in the course of establishing a completely new national structure, stakeholders highlight the progress made in the short time since the first full year of the PPN operation in 2016.

5.1 The expanding and inclusive membership

The success of the capacity building activities of the PPNs, for example, is captured in the data recorded in Annual Reports, with, for example, almost 4,000 attendees at 386 training events in 2018, ranging across an extensive programme of training events and topics. The majority of PPNs report positively on their work to promote social inclusion, through themed events for vulnerable groups and targeted consultations.

5.2 PPNs as an established communication channel

The role played by PPNs in supporting local and national public consultations also comes across strongly in the Annual Report data. PPNs are often the main channel through which a Local Authority will conduct or jointly host a consultation.

Stakeholders refer very positively to the way in which the PPNs have so quickly established themselves as a key channel of communication between the Local Authority and local communities. Many Local Authorities now rely heavily on the PPN to channel information, for example on community grants, support with Town and Village Renewal projects. A further and related acknowledged success is the way PPNs facilitate networking and information sharing among community groups. This role in connecting the local authorities and communities is seen as a valuable one by local authority stakeholders.

Having a single point of contact through which community groups link together and exchange information around events, activities, new projects and exchange of ideas is a considerable benefit to local people, and a valuable mechanism to support change and community development.

5.3 PPNs as a source of high-quality citizen engagement

The case examples described below highlight the diversity of PPN initiatives and outcomes, ranging across community wellbeing, Climate Action, access for people with disabilities.

Wicklow PPN Developing a Vision for Community Wellbeing

The Working Group Report on Citizen Engagement with Local Government stated that “Each county/ city PPN will commence its work by going through a process to set out what it considers necessary to promote wellbeing for present & future generations”¹⁰. Wicklow PPN was one of 6 PPNs that piloted the development process for the Community Wellbeing Vision.

The first step was to ascertain what community wellbeing means. 6 factors were identified that must be in place to enable communities to thrive i.e. physical and mental health, work economy and resources, participation, democracy and good governance, values, culture and meaning, social and community development, environment and sustainability.

The next step was to identify the best ways of approaching communities to develop wellbeing statements. PPN member groups came together to identify the aspects of their community that they want to preserve and protect under the various wellbeing headings and what would make their area the best it could be for future generations. Following the consultations, groups set about establishing an overall vision for wellbeing in their counties and a vision under each of the headings with high-level goals.

The entire process involved 11 workshops and 5 online consultations. Engagement, relationship building, outreach and cross community learning and collaboration with other agencies which took place through the process were seen as of huge value. The membership base of the PPN in Wicklow has greatly increased since undertaking this process and there is a sense of pride in developing a useful process for community consultation and development. The PPN intended to use the outcome of the process as a foundation for their strategic plan for 2019 and as the foundation for future annual plans, as a reference support for representatives and for PPN submissions, to inform local plans and strategies and as a monitoring tool for policy development, decision making and local development.

Resilient Communities: Wexford PPN Project

The concept of community resilience is that individuals and communities use their strengths to prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies which may, for example, be weather related, health related. It involves empowering communities to be self-sufficient during an emergency. The Community Resilience project encourages local communities to engage in innovative activities that enhance their resilience.

The Wexford PPN were key members of the Wexford Resilience Group – a cross agency committee facilitated by Wexford County Council and involving a diverse mix of groups including GAA, IFA, Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Muintir na Tire, Order of Malta, An Gardaí, HSE, serving as a one-stop-shop for community resilience activity. The objectives of the group include taking an active role in building community resilience, disaster recovery planning and developing practical emergency management arrangements. Activities to date include public resilience workshops, a Guide on Preparing for the Unexpected, and Community First Responder (CFR) training. The PPN provided facilitation for the development and testing of the Guide, which has been circulated to all households in Wexford. PPN members were also involved in the delivery of the certified CFR training.

The involvement of the PPN in this programme has increased awareness of the role of the PPN and highlighted the benefits of cross agency collaboration for both PPNs and the communities they serve.

¹⁰ Department of Environment, Community and Local Government. Working Group Report on Citizen Engagement. www.socialjustice.ie/sites/default/files/attach/civil-society-article/3393/wgcereport.pdf

Access for All: Disability Awareness Workshops Co Kerry

The vision behind the Access for All project was the need to create understanding and acceptance of the social model of disability, which recognises that structures, systems and decisions of society are disabling. The background analysis based on census data suggested that at local level, many basic access issues remain to be resolved.

High level Goal 3.7 of the Kerry Local Economic and Community Plan 2016-2021 'to create an environment where people with disabilities can participate in communities with equal rights to live life to their full potential' provided the context for the project. Kerry PPN was identified as the lead partner for the delivery of this action. The PPN linked with the Disability Federation of Ireland and local access groups to design and run a series of strategically solution focused workshops to consult with people with disabilities as a first step. The workshop objectives included creating awareness of the challenges people with disabilities face, to strengthen links and improve communications among community, voluntary and statutory agencies, and to develop a disability representative group at county level linked to the PPN.

The workshop themes were built around and linked to the work of the County Council's Strategic Policy Committees dealing with areas such as roads, housing, transport, parks and open spaces, the arts, economic development and enterprise. Issues raised included community involvement, isolation, limits on independence, poorer mental health, and the costs of disability.

Among the many positive outcomes were the relationships built across statutory services and local access groups, access issues as a standing item on the agenda of council committees and Local Link Kerry. Several practical initiatives also resulted including walkability audits, a portable loop system for the PPN, and a new campaign on dog fouling. The range of actions identified through the workshops will be pursued with the aim of making Kerry a more disability friendly county.

Creating a Local Sustainable Future: Practical Actions for your Community

A Collaborative Conference to strengthen community wellbeing and resilience involving Kilkenny, Tipperary, Carlow, Wexford and Waterford PPNs

A key purpose of this regional collaborative conference was to build capacity in the community to engage with the Environmental College in each PPN and with the Irish Environmental Network and to create ideas for a programme of ideas and actions around Climate Action.

The 5 PPNs came together to plan this conference, recognising that collaboration across PPNs can maximise resources and achieve common goals, as well as engaging a broader audience for the PPN.

Four workshops were organised around four key themes, supported by the PPN Regional Network which identified the themes and questions, provided support workers to report on each workshop, publicise the invitations to members and identified guest speakers. The workshops covered the Sustainable Development Goals, Community Initiatives to Future Proof Communities, Water Catchment Management and Actions for Biodiversity.

Through the workshops, a comprehensive set of ideas for action was developed, which ranged across community biodiversity programmes and projects, public education, creation of local networks involving schools, community organisations and businesses, lobbying politicians and use of local media to promote climate action. The Conference also voted that PPNs would adopt the Sustainable Development Goals and promote local awareness about how to achieve these goals.

The conference agreed that PPNs have a vital role to play in this area in respect of engagement and interaction with local authorities and relevant agencies. The collaborative approach among the PPNs allowed them to address problems more effectively, share knowledge, increase innovation and strengthen networking.

6. The Learning: An Overview

6.1 The design and development of effective citizen engagement depends on strong partnerships with communities of interest

The establishment of the PPN structure across every local authority area within the country is a major citizen engagement initiative. The experience from concept development, through design, and into set up and implementation represents an important source of learning from which other public service bodies considering a citizen engagement initiative on a similar scale can draw.

A key learning highlighted in the course of the preparation of this case study is that with an initiative of this nature, Government should plan an in-depth engagement with the communities of interest, drawing on community development principles.

A partnership between central government and the relevant community of interest provides the opportunity to build ownership and buy in from the start from the stakeholders on whom success depends. Such a partnership-led implementation strategy will provide the opportunity to map the stakeholder groups, networks and communities who can promote, support and drive the community-based implementation and can do this from a positive and supportive stance.

6.2 Map the stakeholders and plan the transition to the new engagement structures

There are few areas of public life in Ireland where there is a 'green field' in terms of no prior work or activity; thus any new initiative involves some disruption of existing communities of influence, who may have to cede that influence in order to make way for or be absorbed as part of the new initiative. New roles may be created, and existing roles changed. A plan for managing such transitions, based on

stakeholder mapping, will be an important foundation for success. Inevitably such a process must be led and resourced at the outset.

6.3 Place a high priority on relationships

Building good Interpersonal relationships is a fundamental task in implementing new structures where people in different roles must work together and share influence. Creating trust and shared vision takes time and investment. Processes such as a Code of Conduct, setting out ethics and values, and grievance procedures are important operational supports.

6.4 Engage, dialogue and share responsibility

An initiative along the lines of the PPN structure requires a balance of central support/oversight and local independence/accountability. Getting this sensitive balance right also involves an openness to a co-production model of organisational design, where there is a commitment at all levels to dialogue and shared responsibility for the outcome.

6.5 Take account of diverse cultures

Part of the challenge of a community-led citizen engagement initiative that depends on a close working relationship between communities and public authorities, at local or national level, is the challenge of creating a mutual understanding of each partner organisation's culture and in particular a recognition of the volunteer nature of community investment. Linked to this is the need to support community leaders to ensure that diverse groups are drawn in and that the citizen engagement is fully inclusive at all levels, including leadership and management.

6.6 Adopt change management principles and processes

A project on the scale of the PPN is a major change management project that calls on the principles of change management approaches to ensure success. An evidence-based approach to change management should be followed. Models of change management, such as Kotter's eight step model¹¹ include governance and strong leadership, a clear, strategic vision, a sense of urgency, engagement and empowerment of all stakeholders and clear communication. A clear and detailed implementation plan and a robust project management plan will help to ensure success.¹²

6.7 Provide the resources and supports

Successful sophisticated new initiatives are dependent on having access to a diverse range of resources, skills and time. The resources need to evolve in terms of quantum and type in line with the evolving initiative.

6.7 Capture the organizational learning and put it to work

As an integral part of effective organisational development, especially in the formative stage, arrangements for capturing learning and reflecting that learning in all aspects of the work and relationships, is an essential part of ensuring a healthy and sustainable future for the organization. Having good ways of capturing and responding to the early teething problems and implementation challenges will be likely to support the emergence of a strong organisation over time.

6.8 Capture the wider system learning: managing distinct democratic roles

The challenge of blending participative democracy initiatives, such as the PPN, with representative structures is not problem free either practically or theoretically.¹³ This topic is the subject of extensive literature in the field of political science and political philosophy. While it may well work out in practice, without the benefit of an underpinning conceptual framework linked to a set of evidence-based practice, this can't be taken for granted.

There is a strong case for work to be done with the PPN/local government structure to capture particular lessons in this domain, which could inform other citizen engagement initiatives.

11 http://college.emory.edu/faculty/documents/resources-chairs/Leading_Change_Why_Transformation_Efforts_Fail.pdf

12 <http://implementation.effektiveservices.org/>

13 www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03003930.2018.1548351

7. Conclusions

Draw on change management insights

The learning from the experience of designing and developing the PPN structure offers a valuable model for any large-scale citizen engagement initiative. The key lessons emerging underline the benefits of adopting a change management approach, through which a clear vision is supported by a strong coalition to advocate for and manage the change.

Enrich overarching vision with local experience

The PPN experience points to the value of creating a framework which, while requiring commitment to the overall vision, principles and structure, also allows for the freedom and capacity at local level to evolve in response to local needs, issues, aspirations and culture.

Invest in relationships

The PPN experience has also drawn attention to the critical role that partnerships and relationships play in the set up and ongoing management of a citizen engagement structure, as in any successful enterprise. Relationship building takes time and support.

Match resources with emerging needs

Resources for engagement range across staffing, skillsets, an infrastructure of national support and guidance, and mechanisms for ongoing evaluation and review. Resources need to keep pace with the growth of an emerging organisation.

Learn, reflect to guide evolving development

A core approach to supporting the healthy evolution of a new organisation is the task of capturing ongoing learning about the challenges emerging during the start-up phase, and having good ways of responding, in collaboration with stakeholders. Responding to the emerging learning on the ground is what will enable any new structure to grow in strength and capacity. This means building in time and space for processes of reflective practice. In the case of the PPN, several mechanisms have already been put in place for this purpose. This work will continue to be a key task of the Departmental team and the National Advisory Group, along with the opportunities for learning presented through the Annual PPN conferences and dialogue with local partners.

Celebrate success!

Successes warrant attention and celebration, alongside responding to challenges. In the case of the PPN, while there have been challenges along the way, these are seen by the stakeholders as intrinsic to any process of establishing such an ambitious citizen engagement project. The challenges are manageable and well balanced by the successes being achieved, as the structure beds down in the local government system.

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