

# Public Participation Networks: Critical Agents for Mobilisation of Community Climate Action

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Action

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## Executive Summary

As an existing government-funded structure the Public Participation Networks (PPNs) have enormous unfulfilled potential to mobilise community climate engagement and action. Spanning the 31 Local Authorities, PPNs have significant community reach, with over 18,000 community group members<sup>1</sup> each of which themselves involve many multiples of thousands of active participants.

To date in Ireland mobilising climate action has focused at national policy level and on the action of individuals. We know that collective action will be critical to achieving our climate action goals and PPNs represent the mechanism through which this can be mobilised at community level, in turn informing, encouraging and demonstrating actions that will more effectively then be taken up by individuals, and other communities.

The PPNs are already directly involved in climate action on the ground and provide exceptional value for money given their role in helping to support so much voluntary action. However, voluntary and community groups need more support to prevent burn-out and to build their capacity to deliver action. PPN staffing levels are already inadequate to manage their existing workload. It is vital that additional staff capacity is provided for PPNs to be able to take on climate action and community animation roles. In addition, staff dedicated to communications in this area is critical.

Provision of an additional 3 staff for each PPN is proposed (bringing the overall staff complement to 5/PPN) is proposed. The staffing arrangements in PPNs vary, so it is not appropriate to be prescriptive about individual staff roles but instead it is proposed that the staffing skill sets and combined roles are required to fulfil the overall functions set out here in addition to existing PPN work.

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<sup>1</sup> Public Participation Networks Annual Report 2021, Department of Rural and Community Development.  
<https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/241560/6658b85e-79e8-43e6-87de-ee862ec8f566.pdf#page=null>

## 1.0 Introduction

This paper sets out the pivotal role that PPNs could carry out in all Local Authority areas to animate and support climate action within local communities, if adequately resourced.

## 2.0 The challenge

For Ireland to meet its stated targets, **everyone**, across all sectors, must support and take the action they can to achieve our climate goals. All mechanisms that can animate and support this need to be optimised. When it comes to action at community level, PPNs are uniquely placed to raise awareness, network information, skills and experience, and to support engagement and activity by local groups.

## 3.0 The PPNs

PPNs are based in all 31 Local Authority areas and were established in the restructuring of the relationship between local communities and their local authorities. Under the Local Government Act 2014<sup>2</sup>, PPNs were established as formal networks which are the main link through which the Local Authorities engage with local communities and *vice versa*.

Together PPNs have a total of over 18,000 community group members<sup>3</sup>, which themselves involve many hundreds of thousands of active participants. They, in turn, impact on a far greater number of people within the community; those that use the facilities and services they provide, that engage in sporting, arts, recreational and heritage activities, and those that benefit community-wide from work undertaken in maintaining and enhancing our built and natural environments, etc. **There is no other structure with such community outreach in Ireland.**

As noted by Minister O'Brien, PPNs have already fed into national policy on climate action and are acknowledged as key players in the Climate Action Act (2021). Speaking in February 2023 he made clear *"Public Participation Networks give communities across Ireland a voice in local decision-making and bring valuable on-the-ground, experience and expertise into local and national policy development. The strength and impact of PPNs can be seen in how they represented voluntary and community groups within the responses to COVID-19, working with local authorities and state agencies. Through local action, PPNs also contribute to policymaking at national level, such as the development of the Climate Action Plan 2021, when PPNs hosted and facilitated important local community conversations around the country."*<sup>4</sup>

## 4.0 Why PPNs are critical players in the effort to mobilise community action within communities

PPNs have a unique relationship with community organisations across all areas (social inclusion, community & voluntary, and environmental), and an understanding of the challenges they face and of the barriers to climate action that they experience (see below).

PPNs have a statutory role to represent the community voice and, as such, are an established structure to input on policy and programmes for climate action to ensure a real understanding amongst policy/programme makers of how these are functioning in practice on the ground and how they can be made more effective and achieve greater take-up and positive climate impact.

The national Climate Action Plan 2021 makes clear that achieving our climate action targets will *"require a coordinated effort across Ireland and every economic sector will be involved. It requires no less than a national transformation over the coming years in how we work, travel, heat our homes, source our energy and use our land. This is a national endeavour that will require a positive, sustained engagement from people across all*

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<sup>2</sup> Local Government Reform Act 2014, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2014/act/1/enacted/en/html>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Minister Joe O'Brien, press release 21 February 2023, <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/abfdd-minister-joe-obrien-urges-community-groups-to-join-public-participation-networks-as-national-awareness-campaign-launched/>

communities, all walks of life and all sectors.”<sup>5</sup> (p.8) However, how the actions related to the national dialogue on climate action (NDCA) are translated to widespread citizen and community engagement in climate action is not clear. The importance of our communities as dynamic and powerful catalysts for action is not presently fully recognised, as demonstrated in the focus on individuals in the present national Climate Conversations engagement. To achieve our climate goals, most climate action needs to be collective. Activating community and voluntary groups to inform, encourage and demonstrate through collective actions is critical both for these actions themselves and to disseminate necessary action by individuals within communities. Supporting community and voluntary groups to take action is the role of the PPNs and they require additional capacity to undertake the work needed in the area of climate action.

PPNs are optimally positioned to mobilise communities in this national endeavour; to raise awareness amongst community organisations about possible climate action and assist them to get involved in taking this action. PPNs exist at the grassroots level, are focused on community development, and have the widest contact with community and voluntary organisations across the Country. The literature attests to the importance of the potential to implement social innovation and change from the “bottom up” and moreover that community-based collective action on climate change holds the key to broader social change<sup>6</sup>. There is also increasing evidence for the power of community-based action to deliver change<sup>7</sup>. As an existing structure in all local authority areas, PPNs already provide an established focus for community organisations looking for information and support in taking climate action and with additional funding and support could be developed further as “one stop shops” for grassroots community action.

## 5.0 Barriers and challenges faced by community groups to engaging in climate action

The PPNs conducted a survey<sup>8</sup> of PPNs and their member groups to inform this report. While environmental groups make up less than 4% of PPN members, it might be expected that they would be dominate the responses received concerning climate action. However, 74% of responses came from groups in the Community and Voluntary College (58.4%) and the Social Inclusion College (15.6%). This demonstrates clearly the widespread interest in taking climate action across the full range of local community organisations.

Survey results indicate the range of animation and supports communities need to identify and undertake climate actions.

### Barriers to Climate Action Identified by Community Groups

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	There is a lack of community and stakeholder awareness of the need to transition to a low carbon society or how to go about it	1%
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	We are not clear of what is involved in climate action	17%
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	We don't know what possible climate activities we could get involved in	34%
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	We do not have the expertise to run climate activities	20%
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	We do not have the resources/ funding needed (for training, materials, etc.) to carry out climate action	61%

<sup>5</sup> Climate Action Plan 2023 (CAP23) Changing Ireland for the Better, <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/256997/b5da0446-8d81-4fb5-991e-65dd807bb257.pdf#page=null>

<sup>6</sup> Kent, J. (2015) *Community Action and Climate Change*. Routledge.

McNamara, K.E. & Buggy, L (2017) Community-based climate change adaptation: A review of the academic literature. *Local Environment*, 22 (4), 443 – 460.

<sup>7</sup> ECOLISE (2019) *Reshaping the future: the first status report on community-led action on sustainability and climate change in Europe*.

<sup>8</sup> This online survey (n=83), done at short notice, was to capture information for the development of this paper. It was circulated to all PPNs for dissemination to their member groups.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> We do not have the volunteers/ staff or help needed to run climate activities	48%
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Other	33%

These responses point to the need for information, sharing of skills, knowledge and experience, training and tailored support for communities to take action, as well as the need to feedback community experience of policy and programmes. Such work falls directly within the terms of reference of the PPNs.

A wider range of other barriers to community climate action were identified by community groups. These are set out in Appendix 1.

Despite these barriers, a significant number of member groups have been involved in climate action and the development of toolkits, training and supports. However, there is low awareness of these resources more widely or replication of such successful initiatives.

PPNs are also engaged in initiatives to build capacity for climate action but are struggling with a lack of capacity themselves both to participate and to disseminate learning and supports like these so that more community groups can act. Examples of these include the Community Climate Coaches project in County Tipperary, and the Sligo PPN Environmental Action Academy Toolkit, details of which can be seen in Appendix 2.

Genuine commitment to climate action in communities needs to come from the bottom up, building and spreading the ambition and skills already present. Additional capacity within the PPNs, particularly with enhanced staffing, can enable community action and link with local authorities to achieve the change that is needed.

PPNs do not at present have the capacity to initiate the work sought by community groups to enable them to take climate action, to ensure that the appropriate tools and resources are developed, to see that successful best practice is disseminated and replicated around the country, and that the challenges experienced at grass roots with national and local policies and programmes are fed back to government so that they can be improved.

## **6.0 How PPNs can animate and mobilise deliver of community climate action**

It is well established that successful, and ideally local, examples of action have the most powerful mobilising impact and multiplier effect. It is vital that such examples are achieved across all areas of community interest to motivate others to take climate action.

PPNs need to be able to work in the following areas specifically on climate action.

### 6.1 Communications and networking

Excellent communications and networking enables sharing of information, training and support on climate action; from raising awareness, through highlighting successful actions, sharing experience and knowledge on how to plan, fund, source necessary expertise, and organise relevant training to get actions underway.

Local communities need to be supported to re-imagine their futures and be encouraged to lead by example in creating these. The PPN is central to developing the capacity and confidence for this at community level, working to help make things possible and be solution focused.

### 6.2 Provision of training and resources

PPNs are skilled at working with communities to identify the training they need and in providing training that specifically meets those needs. Training is needed from basic introductions on why climate action in the community is needed, through what climate action involves and what community organisations can do, to the development of plans, and training in how to apply for funding applications and necessary approvals. PPNs are optimally placed to source and deliver appropriate training, to ensure the best form of delivery, and that it is fully accessible.

Ideally suited to become the “One Stop Shop” for community climate action information, advice and support, the PPNs can develop a comprehensive set of shared tools to support this.

### 6.3 Support for individual groups

Feedback consistently points to the need for voluntary community groups to receive support in putting together plans and funding proposals to deliver climate action. While specialist inputs may be needed depending on the proposal, PPNs need to be able to assist groups in putting together what is required to take action. These may be training sessions, workshops or one-to-one sessions, which are vital to assist groups to move beyond planning to achieving action.

### 6.4 Co-ordinating community voice and feedback on climate action policies, plans and programmes

However well-conceived a particular programme to secure climate action (e.g. the Sustainable Energy Communities Programme), it is vital that there is feedback to identify challenges that arise in how it operates in practice. PPNs are ideally placed to gather and present this feedback, leading to improved initiatives that deliver more and better climate action. This enables faster take-up and roll-out of schemes, reducing frustration and challenges for users, and wider public participation and buy-in. PPNs can co-ordinate community feedback locally, at Local Authority level, and, on national plans and programmes.

The diagram in Appendix 3 illustrates the many aspects of work in which PPNs wish to engage to support member groups to deliver climate action. These are interlinked and would also hopefully be networked into both Local and National government policies, programmes and actions for climate mitigation and adaptation. The complexity of this work and the need for it to be delivered seamlessly and as close to the community as possible, is one of the reasons that the PPN is the optimal vehicle for delivery.

Important Note: The above activities (illustrated in the Appendix 3) fit within the scope of the role and function of the PPNs<sup>9</sup> but cannot be undertaken without the provision of additional resources (see 7.0 below). While PPNs have a particular role in the relationship between communities and local authorities, they are frequently engaged on national policy (through consultations, informing the 2021 Climate Action Plan, etc.).

## **7.0 What PPNs need to realise their potential to mobilise and support community climate action**

If climate action is to take-off within communities, then policies and programmes must ensure that those communities experience the benefits of this action. This is essential to accelerate and sustain local action. Everyone in our communities should reasonably be able to take action, the benefits of which must be experienced right across the community and should reduce marginalisation rather than exacerbate it. PPNs stress that this approach needs to underpin all government’s policies and programmes in order to secure widespread engagement.

The PPNs themselves need to be equipped in the following ways to deliver on their potential to enable community climate action.

### 7.1 Enhanced staff capacity

PPN staffing levels are already inadequate to manage their existing workload. It is vital that additional staff capacity is provided for PPNs to be able to take on climate action and community animation roles. In addition, recognised dedication of staff to communications is clearly critical.

Provision of an additional 3 staff for each PPN is proposed (bringing the overall staff complement to 5 per PPN). The staffing arrangements in PPNs vary, so it is not appropriate to be prescriptive about individual staff roles. However, the additional staff would be responsible for ensuring each PPN delivered climate action work in the following areas:

- Information provision & awareness raising on climate change and climate action by communities.
- Member groups’ needs analysis
- Communications (within each PPN and Local Authority area, and nationally)

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<sup>9</sup> page 3, PPN Financial Controls Updated March 2022 Supported by circular CVSP 2/2022

- Networking on policy & programmes to share knowledge and experience across the PPNs, to optimise groups' ability to take action and to co-ordinate feedback on government initiatives and the grass roots situation. This would include support of climate linkage groups and thematic networks, a National PPN Climate Network, and identification and initiation of collaborations to support climate action in communities (between community groups themselves, between agencies, knowledge communities and community groups or the PPN itself). Effective networking combined with excellent communications would reduce duplication of effort by ensuring rapid dissemination of information about initiatives, actions, expertise, etc.
- Sourcing and provision of appropriate, targeted training for community groups.
- Identifying and providing necessary supports and resources to enable community groups to realise their climate actions. This would include inputs to shared online resources such as "jargon busters", funding application tutorials and guides, step-by-step action plans, a searchable database of community climate action completed or underway allowing communication and collaboration amongst community groups on specific actions/ areas for action, etc.
- Representing/ supporting the representation of the community voice on climate action. Introducing significant climate policy expertise, capturing inputs to Climate Conversations, generation of PPN submissions, inputs on specific programmes and policies, engagements with communities, at Municipal District level, with the Local Authority, etc. and linking with other PPNs to inform national representation.

A national level Environment and Research Officer, shared amongst all PPNs, is also proposed to assist with research expertise and to assist with evaluation of PPN work in support of community climate action (see below).

### 7.2 Supplementary programme budget to support additional work areas

PPNs are expert at generating value for money and making a tiny budget achieve enormous things. However, the additional work involved in activating climate action in communities will incur additional costs. Four key areas of cost are identified:

- Shared online resource costs – for a centralised community climate action website, database and other resources.
- Provision for additional staff salaries, travel and expenses.
- A limited demonstration fund be provided to each PPN, to support small scale and creative community climate actions not otherwise eligible for funding. The intention of this fund would be to create working examples of varied and innovative climate action by communities within the Local Authority area that could in turn be used in training, disseminated to others, and to trial ideas. (NB. This is not an additional funding stream for community action to be administered by the PPNs but to support their own local engagements. The PPNs would propose that existing funding streams for climate action specifically consider and designate funds for community initiatives.)
- Provision for evaluation and measurement (quantitative and qualitative) of the community climate action animated by the PPNs. This could most efficiently be done as part of the work of the national Environmental Research Officer (outlined above) with feed in from individual PPNs.

While the costs of additional staffing and the additional programme budget may be higher than the current modest PPN budget, the imperative to create community-wide commitment to climate action is priceless in terms of what is needed to achieve Ireland's climate goals. Failing to invest in securing this buy-in now will incur incomparable costs.

### 7.3 Mechanisms for PPNs to feed into climate policy and programmes

The importance of the PPNs as a platform in enabling climate change within communities and thereby helping deliver vital change towards our climate targets needs to be recognised and supported.

People in communities identify quickly where difficulties arise with initiatives rolled out by government and are uniquely able to highlight how these programmes impact on different groups, often creating additional tensions. The PPNs, embedded in communities, have an unrivalled ability to assess how communities, and the many different groups within them, experience the climate change policies and programmes of government.

The ability to tap into this understanding represents a huge opportunity for national and local government to evaluate the operation and impacts of their initiatives.

Clear mechanisms need to be established for PPNs to engage with policy makers and agencies rolling out climate change programmes, to ensure that these are fit for purpose and operating as intended, and that they can be adjusted from an informed perspective where this is necessary.

## **8.0 Conclusion**

In conclusion, the PPNs are in a unique position to work at a local level, nationally, to mobilise community climate action, through their established network and specific experience of working with community groups. Such community action is likely to generate a multiplier effect as member organisations' initiatives act as trusted local demonstrations of possible actions by groups and individuals.

To undertake the expanded role of engaging and building community capacity for climate action, PPNs will require additional staff and supporting budgets. PPNs already have a strong track record in delivering remarkable quantities of excellent work on limited budgets. The value of the climate action that can be motivated through targeted investment in community engagement and capacity via the PPNs will far exceed the investment made, and continue to reap dividends.

PPNs have unrivalled potential to champion climate action at local level, supported through training, networking, knowledge sharing, communications and the provision of a 'one stop shop' for community action, as well as through feedback and representation on national policy. This is an opportunity to enable community climate action on a national scale.

There is no other structure with such community outreach in Ireland. Given the right resources, the PPN can mobilise the community climate action we need.

## Appendix 1 Summary list of barriers to community climate action

A wide range of barriers to engagement in climate action were identified by community groups. These include:

- Lack of PPN resources, staff capacity and severely limited annual funding to support work in this area.
- Lack of equipment, facilities, training materials, outreach & promotion.
- Lack of genuine ability to access decision-makers and influence higher level policies and the approach to climate action plans for communities. Change culture to making things possible!
- Lack of opportunity & capacity amongst community groups to share expertise.
- Local authority interpretation of the role of community climate action officers resulting in their limited relevance for local community action.
- Lack of ambition within the local authorities and underestimation of the power of community.
- Expertise focused within local authorities not accessible to, or community friendly. Different arms of local government unaware of one another's actions/ roles – no co-ordination.
- Lack of commitment to climate action reflected in many grants still contrary to good practise.
- Poor policy and programmes, overly rigid, not consistent, and don't work for communities.
- Funding issues including lack of funds to undertake initial plan development, impossible requirements for matching funds; insistence on retrospective payment of funds; lack of core funding available to manage projects, funding streams too narrowly defined.
- Barriers and red tape forced on club volunteers and staff simply puts people off; the amount of time and energy looking for grants is exhausting and time consuming for volunteers. Administration & reporting requirements take up more time than the actual action. Governance requirements, especially for charitable status are unreasonable for small organisations.
- Reports written in inaccessible language, so public often don't won't understand contents or relevance, making it v. difficult for public to ensure standards are being observed. Confidence in the assessment and enforcement system is undermined.
- Lack of ownership/ long-term access to land/ buildings to enable groups to act.

## Appendix 2. Example PPN initiatives to animate and enable community climate action

### COMMUNITY CLIMATE COACHES (TIPPERARY)

*Tipperary PPN, in partnership with Cultivate and the two local development companies, funded under the Community Climate Action Programme.*

Through a Community of Practice, the project is building the capacity of facilitators, coaches, environmental and sustainability practitioners, advocates, and local authority staff interested or active in facilitating community-led climate and biodiversity action across Co. Tipperary. This Continuous Professional Development programme will build the skills and knowledge of participants to empower change at grassroots level. Through the project a toolkit of methodologies and approaches, and training for engaging communities in climate action is co-designed with participants. This project takes on a bioregional approach by facilitating conversations and dialogue between participants in the same region or municipal district of Co. Tipperary.

Programme activities include:

- Establishing a Climate Coaches Community of Practice or training network in County Tipperary
- In-Person and Seven Online Sessions
- Learning with experts
- Co-hosting multiple community events in each of the five municipal districts
- Developing climate resilience projects within participating communities
- Co-designing a Toolkit for community-led development and sustainability
- Replicating best practices nationally
- Addressing climate anxiety and overwhelm through reconnection and action

### POWER TO CHANGE (SLIGO)

*This project, led by Atlantic Technological University in partnership with the Sligo PPN, is funded under the Community Climate Action Programme.*

The Power to Change project will facilitate connection/reconnection with nature and build capacity within community groups to lead on change. It consists of four initiatives, with a key focus on engaging with groups that have been under-represented in the Climate Conversations and it will be guided by best practice to ensure inclusivity and accessibility. The project will create:

- A database of case studies
- Good practice guides
- A virtual learning environment

to aid capacity building within community groups, and ultimately establish lasting connections and networks.

**Climate Adaptation and Mitigation Plan Toolkit for community groups** This initiative will provide participating communities with training, mentoring and guidance to create, implement and maintain operational climate change mitigation and adaptation plans. A toolkit will be developed to provide simple and achievable steps that groups can put in place and will also provide a way to monitor how changes in operations feed into local climate action targets.



