Sligo Public Participation Network

Líonra Rannpháirtíochta Pobail Shligigh

Sligo PPN

Vision for
Community Wellbeing

Thematic Report of Community Policy Needs

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This document sets out the principal themes and significant issues raised by the Sligo community that need to be addressed within the County. It pulls together all the inputs received in relation to each of these issues in order to more fully describe the relevant policy needs.

1.0 Background

In the widespread consultations carried out to inform development of Sligo PPN's Vision for Community Wellbeing, extensive inputs were received from across the PPN's member groups. These inputs formed the basis of the PPN's Master Issue Index document. As the consultation inputs were collated for this document, it became clear that a number of clear themes were emerging and those form the focus of this document.

1.1 Community Wellbeing

PPNs around Ireland have pioneered the approach of asking communities themselves to describe what wellbeing would mean for them. This is what the Vision for Community Wellbeing sets out. To assist with this, a model for considering and exploring community wellbeing was developed, including 6 different but overlapping headings (see Fig.1 below).

Fig.1 PPN Model for Community Wellbeing

At a high level of resolution, the PPN's Vision for Community Wellbeing presents the overall goal of communities in the County; what they want to see achieved. It describes this under each of the six headings, which build together to set out their goal. However, these headings are not completely separate or discrete. Often an issue is relevant under more than one heading. The consultation inputs received reflect that.

2.0 Presenting policy needs

In this thematic document, the different aspects of the most significant issues raised in the Vision for Community Wellbeing across all headings are brought together to better describe what communities are looking for in relation to these specific issues; the relevant policy needs.

2.1 Identifying key thematic areas

The recurrence of an issue*, extensive inputs relating to an issue, the strength of sentiments expressed on an issue, or the fundamental nature of the issues raised for those it impacts, have all been considered in identifying the key themes to be included in this document. In some cases, there may be limited numbers of inputs on a particular issue but this does not necessarily affect the significance of that issue. It should be remembered that the issues presented here do not include all the points raised in the consultation and it is important to reference the Sligo PPN Consultation Masters Issues Index to see all the issues raised by PPN member groups.

* please note that recurrence of an issue is not a measure of its importance but indicative of the range of different groups that raised it, or consultations/ contexts where it was raised.

2.2 Content

What is presented here is a compilation of the inputs received and represents the contributions of members. No attempt has been made to further develop these themes of refine them. That work may be undertaken by member groups subsequently, in which case this document forms the basis for informing development of more detailed policy positions by the PPN.

In a number of cases, the themes are broken down into sub-headings where that is appropriate. The Index to this document includes the principal sub-headings but is not an exhaustive list. While most of the contents presented are interconnected, the ordering of this document places themes that are particularly relevant to one another, next to each other.

2.3 List of thematic areas included

The following is the list of significant thematic areas identified for inclusion in this document:

- Attitude and Ambition
- Collaborative planning and working; communities and local government
- Community & Voluntary Sector
  - Governance and Administration
  - Grants and Funding
  - Volunteering
- Tailored Community Supports
- Inclusion and Awareness
- Heritage
- Local Authority
- Community Spaces and Facilities
- Housing
- Infrastructure
- Safety
- Transport
- Economic development
  - Support for enterprise
  - Support for workers
- Health
  - Health services
  - Mental health support
  - Supports for wellbeing
- Minding Nature and Resources
- Waste
- Energy
- Scenery and Access to Recreation

It is important to note that while the first two themes relate to over-arching issues, the order in which the subsequent themes are presented does not indicate a prioritisation.

3.0 Policy needs

3.1 Attitude and Ambition

In Sligo, we want measures that recognise the central importance of our environment for our long-term sustainable future. Here we need to support a strong community spirit, ensure a good work-life balance, and respect for each person's dignity and uniqueness. We want to maintain a precious community that is friendly and safe.

3.2 Collaborative planning and working: communities and local government

We want vibrant urban centres with accessible, attractive and green public realms that are pedestrian centric. We want measures that will make Sligo the most environmentally friendly town in Ireland.

We need the County Council to work in genuine partnership with local communities to ensure joined up thinking about local needs across all aspects of services and infrastructure, and how they can best be delivered, to enhance life for everyone. An example of this would be community-based retirement planning and a citizen's assembly to discuss how we will develop new ideas to plan for retirement.

We need to be future focused (as in the example above) and this requires careful consultation with young people, ensuring that their concerns are heard, addressed, and their suggestions taken on board to secure their futures and those of further generations.

Everyone must have a voice and be supported to use that voice and be heard. It is vitally important that the community be kept informed and up-to-date on developments and activities and that they can find information on these easily. We need to see the County Council meaningfully engage in conversations with local communities about the challenges they face and how the Council can work with them to best address these and secure vibrant futures in communities across the County.

While the scenery in Sligo and our natural surroundings are lovely, Sligo town itself is not attractive to walk around. Efforts are needed to improve appearances in places and ensure that everyone feels safe.

3.3 Community and Voluntary Sector

The community and voluntary sector represents huge value for the resources it receives in delivering services and providing community supports, not otherwise available to people from the state. Support and resources for this sector would increase capacity and create greater stability. The PPN member groups support increased funding for additional community development staff working within the community across the County (rather than only in certain areas) and paid fair wages.

3.3.1 Governance and administration

Member groups recognise community activity as something that is positive for wellbeing for everyone involved. However, all the red tape, paperwork, and "hoops to jump through" has begun to cause more stress and many are leaving groups as a result; "[we] Need more informal groups for folk to meet each other (befriend your neighbour) but paperwork for Garda vetting etc. is killing this type of initiative." Provision of a community hub or resource centre for community group to access practical support and facilities, for example to assist with governance tasks would help with this.

While the PPN member groups recognise that there has been bad practice by some groups, they feel that everyone is being punished as a result; effectively draining the goodwill out of community activity. It is clear that there is an administration overload which is particularly onerous for groups that are entirely voluntary. This is reported as resulting in a situation where there is no time to enjoy the community activity which is the purpose of the group. Moreover, increasing requirements for good governance is resulting in some groups closing altogether with impacts that are not measured and huge loss of value to the community. There is an urgent need for a reduction in bureaucracy and the regulatory burden on the community and voluntary sector. A number of specific issues are identified for action.

3.3.1.a   Garda Vetting

PPN member groups identified the Garda vetting system as being slow and cumbersome. A simplified Garda vetting system that removes the need for repeated vetting by multiple organisations for the same individual is proposed. Many people volunteer in more than one organisation. A single application for an officially issued vetting card indicating the level of vetting approval for an individual volunteer, as in other countries, should be considered. This would remove repeating the application burden across multiple community groups for the same individual.

3.3.1.b   Insurance Costs

Insurance costs continue to rise and are becoming prohibitive for the community and voluntary sector. A system for small, voluntary organisations to obtain affordable cover is needed.

3.3.1.c   Risk Assessment

The requirements for risk assessment present significant demands for the community and voluntary sector, particularly for small organisations. The "Be Smart" tool (besmart.ie) is useful to assist with this but community groups are struggling with these requirements and need support and resources to meet them.

3.3.1.d   GDPR Requirements

The legal requirements around GDPR are challenging for community groups. There is work involved in having trained members who understand and can then manage an organisation's GDPR responsibilities. Such roles are rarely what a volunteer joined an organisation to do. In addition, GDPR can pose challenges for groups in just keeping people informed about their activities.

3.3.1.e   Support to meet Governance Requirements

PPN member groups identify an urgent need for support, ideally through community development workers, with mentoring and assistance to meet governance requirements including accounting, record keeping, risk assessment, grant applications, GDPR, and so forth. At present, if an organisation does not involve work with vulnerable groups, then PPN members find it hard to get help.

3.3.2   Grants and funding

The PPN is clear that the community and voluntary sector delivers an enormous amount of important community services and benefits with very little financial support. The sector achieves excellent value for the funding it receives. Lack of funding is becoming critical for many groups and the PPN believes that financial support needs to be significantly increased. This includes funding that can be used to meet professional fees that are often required for groups to meet requirements for good governance. In addition, there should be resources available to address barriers to active participation. One of these would be funding to pay volunteer expenses.

3.3.2.a   Funds Available

While it is acknowledged that there are a wide number of grants available to a range of community organisations, the requirements to be eligible or meet application criteria are often far too complex or demanding, particularly for smaller groups. In addition, the amounts available are often relatively low, with limited funds being thinly spread across numerous groups. In some instances applicants may be told that funds have run out, so that while they are eligible and have put the work into the application, they receive nothing.

A need for funds to be made available to organisations throughout the whole of the County in both rural and urban areas is identified. It was also noted that funding needs to be made available for investment in groups focused on invisible disabilities.

3.3.2.b   Funding Conditions

Often the conditions attached to grant schemes are unrealistic for the community and voluntary sector. Flexibility is seen as extremely important in funding available to this sector. Many schemes are too restrictive and the PPN is seeking reduced requirements for levels of match funding and the frontloading of grants, as many groups do not have capital to initiate projects and pay invoices before claiming awarded grant monies.

Groups often experience significant delays in receiving funds awarded, despite having successfully completed multiple pages of detailed applications that have clearly met the required criteria. Where funding is to be paid on completion of work, it is vital that there is a fast turnaround from project completion to payment; grants must be paid over promptly to enable community groups to function. Otherwise they can create genuine difficulties for the viability of organisations.

3.3.2.c   Application Process

There is considerable overlap in information required across applications for different funds and frequent repetition of data to be entered by organisations. This is also generally repeated annually and involves considerable work for a community organisation. Larger groups with paid staff may be better equipped to do this, while smaller groups may not have the level of expertise required. PPN member groups want to see a simplified and co-ordinated application process for grants which are currently overly cumbersome for the funds available. Suggested changes include online forms that can be rolled over from year to year to save repeated entry of core data about the organisations (name, address, office bearers, purpose, etc.) and be adapted as necessary. An extension of this would be where that core data element for an organisation can be shared between different grants or funds so that it does not have to be re-entered for each. This is critical to assist community and voluntary organisations to access funding available. Support and assistance with applications is also needed by community and voluntary

organisations.

Once a funding application deadline closes, there should be a limited period for responses to be made (say 3-4 weeks). Straightforward and streamlined requirements are needed for drawing down of grants that are awarded as this may otherwise prevent groups who need funding from accessing it.

3.3.2.d   Support with Applications

Well-written applications are more successful in securing funding. While application requirements remain as complex and lengthy as they are, the PPN recognises the need for skilled supports to assist community groups with expertise in filling out applications.

3.3.2.e   LEADER funding

Sligo Leader Partnership's grant process is particularly difficult and, in many cases, not possible for community and voluntary organisations to access. The application process needs to be less cumbersome and include consistent criteria. For those organisations that have applied for funding, the experience is that the process is far slower since the County Council took over the partnership and there is a real sense of disillusionment resulting from applicants receiving responses that there are no funds available.

3.3.3   Volunteering

The PPN sees volunteering as a means of encouraging greater involvement in one's community and creating many benefits for the volunteer, those they volunteer with and for, and for the wider community and environment. The PPN wants to see volunteering properly valued which can be achieved in many ways from acknowledgement and recognition to financial credits.

3.3.3.a   Recruiting Volunteers

There are very significant challenges for community and voluntary groups in recruiting volunteers, committee members and directors for boards. There is also a clear challenge in securing successful generational transfer of community groups and often the work falls to a core groups continuously, sometimes across more than one groups.

Organisations need support to engage and communicate, particularly with young people, and to find ways in which they can contribute and that are rewarding for them. Ideas including short video communications, schools initiatives, and volunteer fairs need to be explored.

3.4   Tailored community supports

The PPN knows that there is good networking and a collaborative approach amongst community groups. Nonetheless, however committed volunteers may be, they cannot take on everything and they need additional supports.

Many of the local voluntary organisations that provide such important services and supports to communities are burdened with governance, administration and other requirements which can threaten their long-term sustainability. In addition, they need to be involved in the integrated planning that is required for community wellbeing; including around housing, health and mental health services, education and economic development. These groups, such as Sligo Sanctuary Runners, provide some of the most essential supports to people on the margins of our communities.

This illustrates the considerable work done by groups beyond their basic function and the PPN is clear that additional community development workers should be provided based within community settings to support community groups.

In addition, the PPN has noted a number of supports that need to be provided and tailored specifically to groups within the community.

3.4.1   Support for Families

Support for families with parenting, childcare, and affordable activities should all be provided within the community throughout the County:

- Parent/ carer and toddler groups to provide support and social outlets to parents and young children;

- Affordable, accessible and high quality childcare places and afterschool clubs that enable parents, particularly women, to get involved in work, the community, policy making, etc.;

- Kids play areas, indoors and/or outdoors and recreational opportunities;

- A new library, where it is comfortable to read or study, and with space for parenting programmes, access visits, parenting support, possibly incorporating/ co-located with the Family Resource Centre;

3.4.2   Support for Youth

We need to value and respect the voices of children and young people in a "real" way. This should be started with the adoption of local youth participation guidelines by the County Council and other statutory agencies operating in Sligo, which can be found on the Children and Young Peoples' Services Committee (CYPSC) website. In addition, a citizen's assembly at County level for young people to liaise with the County Council is suggested.

There are currently only very limited free or affordable recreational opportunities for children and young people. A variety of venues and activities are needed throughout the County; from kids play areas to drama, music and volunteering opportunities. Volunteers working with young people and local youth groups all need additional support and assistance to become self-sustaining. Young people can also benefit from initiatives that develop skills in communication and co-operation and other areas (as can all age groups).

It is important for their wellbeing that young people feel welcome and can participate within their community. Discount schemes or affordable options for students should be introduced wherever possible.

There is specific concern that young people's mental health needs are not being recognised or met in Sligo. These need to be understood and appropriate, accessible services provided to support them to be well.

Students in the Institute of Technology need to be better connected to Sligo town with safer pedestrian and regular public transport options. They need assistance to find part-time work to support their studies and the provision of adequate, up-to-date, library services.

3.4.3   Support for people with disabilities

Understanding & Advocacy

People who do not have mobility difficulties do not think about the challenges that face people who do. There needs to be a wider understanding and thoughtfulness across society which would help ensure problems, particularly with access, are minimised either by careful design and construction or conscious behaviour to prevent issues arising. This would create greater equality and benefit everyone.

Continuing initiatives to raise awareness and understanding are important, such as the Make Way Day (Disability Federation of Ireland) and Back in 5 (IWA), as is having advocacy groups that can engage and contribute knowledge and expertise.

Access

Being able to access places indoors or outdoors, and activities that they want to take part in, when they want is taken for granted by most people. People in wheelchairs, of which there are different types, must plan ahead and cannot confidently assume that access will be possible for them. This creates work in advance to find out if access is available, to plan journeys and activities, leaving nothing to chance. There is also always the risk that circumstances will change; some new obstacle appear on a narrow pavement that disrupts a planned outing or activity. The challenges involved generally mean more limited choices for people using wheelchairs; to reach destinations, access spaces and buildings, and so on.

Transport:

Accessible community transport, particularly across rural areas, to enable access services in the city is essential to address isolation. For clients that do not drive themselves, they have to rely on others to provide transport where there is no suitable public transport. This has a huge impact on people's ability to make their own choices about where and when they travel. It was stressed that accessible transport services across the West of Ireland would generate a positive impact for the wide community and economy (for example tourism).

At present bus services are poor and vehicles are generally not appropriate for wheelchair users. An example was given of Expressway service where the buses are accessible but require the paths and curbs to be adapted to function and enable wheelchair users to board via the lifts. Bus Eireann has an agreement with the Local Authority to make these adaptations but the work has not been carried out. This means that the buses cannot be accessed by people using wheelchairs.

Parking:

For wheelchair users travelling in cars it was pointed out that parking for disabled drivers is often located at a significant distance from shops and services, which exacerbates the problems of navigating pavements and the route from the parking to the destination and shows no appreciation for the challenges of trying to carry an significant purchases. If cars are parked in order to enable people with mobility issues access to services, but not strictly in accordance with parking regulations, they are ticketed despite displaying a blue badge.

Public spaces – safe and accessible:

Challenges for people in wheelchairs and with mobility difficulties to navigate towns and villages are not well understood by others, for example the problems presented by broken pavements, or steep slopes/hills that have to be avoided. Provision that is made, such as dropped kerbs, are often not consistent or joined up i.e. with a corresponding dropped kerb across the street. It is essential that pavements are made accessible and safe for users. There appears to be no understanding amongst those responsible for design and maintenance of public spaces of the dangers for those using wheelchairs or will mobility difficulties. One example is the provision of parking spaces for people with disabilities on streets on hills in Sligo which it is hazardous or impossible for people in wheelchairs to use. Another is problem of certain textures of pavements and the changes from one material type to another, uneven surfaces and pot holes, for people will visual impairment and mobility issues.

It was suggested that a group of people with a range of different disabilities could be invited to work with local engineers to develop their appreciation of the challenges faced by people with mobility difficulties, and to ensure funds available are used wisely to maximise accessibility. An example of where such a group did a walk around with the town engineer in Carrick on Shannon was given.

The IWA has recently published revised access guidelines for engineers and it is recommended that this become required reading and reference for Local Authorities and developers.

Litter management:

Litter creates a real impediment for access by people with mobility issues and needs to be eradicated. (see 3.16 below).

More accessible opportunities:

There was a general desire that more activities be made accessible, for example bowling.

Good access to churches is important to allow wheelchair users to worship and express their faith, and not to feel restricted or excluded.

It was recognised that there is presently limited provision for wheelchairs users at the popular Hawks Well Theatre but such venues need increased capacity for such patrons, particularly since attendance often involves considerable organisation and pre-planning that is typically arranged by groups that involve more people keen to attend than there is space to accommodate. This example also illustrates the point that there is often separate access points provided for people with impaired mobility, sometimes to the side or rear of premises and these may still requiring special assistance or attendance. This can make wheelchair users and those with other mobility challenges feel like second class citizens; there should be 1 door for everyone.

Accessibility audits, involving people with disabilities need to be carried out to identify problems like the step into the children's library, heavy doors and other challenges for people with disabilities that can be addressed.

Similarly, health and safety and risk assessments are needed as part of planning requirements for concerts and other events, to ensure ease of access to community events.

It was suggested that organisations such as the IWA and others such as the Centre for Independent Living could act as venues for example during festivals. This would enable clients have better access to events but also encourage others to become familiar with these locations and support greater inclusivity. (See "Community Interaction" below.)

In addition, fully wheelchair accessible accommodation in attractive destinations (e.g. at the coastal) to cater for holiday makers using wheelchairs would be much appreciated. Full access to other recreation opportunities such as the Sligo Folk Park is also needed.

Local hub

Another hub, like the Centre for Independent Living, would mean that more people in local communities could avail of services provided and the space available. Restrictions on space, exacerbated with Covid-19 requirements, means there is limited opportunities for people at present.

It was recognised that it is important to have opportunities to come together and share views, as well as to share information on what is available for people.

Isolation

The pandemic highlighted the problems of isolation particularly in rural areas, which needs to be addressed.

Community interaction

The opportunity to introduce others to the IWA and its clients to the wider mixed communities now in Sligo would be appreciated, so that there is shared learning about one another's cultures and day-to-day living experience. It was suggested that this could be done through sharing food and other cultural traditions, perhaps through intercultural weeks and other events to learn about and celebrate diversity in all its forms. This would help foster awareness and understanding between people throughout the County.

Meaningful engagement

There must be genuine engagement with groups representation people with disabilities, leading to concrete actions that enable them to participate fully in all aspects of life in Sligo. (See 3.7 Local Government below).

3.4.4   Support for Women

It is often difficult for new people to join existing groups and activities, especially where organisations do not take into account different cultures or experiences. This is particularly important for people who are new to the County and women coming to Sligo for the first time

specifically identify a need for regular opportunities to meet with others around both social and practical activities to make friends and build a social network.

Greater opportunities and flexible arrangements to accommodate women in employment and as public representatives are needed in Sligo, with equal pay assured for women. Supports, particularly childcare, for women to access training and education are needed and also for them to develop social enterprise opportunities.

There is a clear need for a dedicated women's health centre in Sligo (see 3.14.1.a).

3.4.5   Support for Older People

Initiatives that support older people are important and should be expanded to enable them to live independently where they wish, to enable them to stay engaged in the community, and to support intergenerational interactions.

3.4.6   Support for Carers

Carers of all ages require to be recognised and supported in Sligo, particularly through the provision of adequate respite services.

3.4.7   Support for Men

Social groups and support activities for men should be supported.

3.5   Inclusion and awareness

3.5.1   Including all People of all Cultures

It can be hard for people to fit in if you live in Sligo but weren't born here. There are friendly, welcoming and inclusive people here but migrants continue to experience a lot of unintentional racism. Positive initiatives are needed that prepare communities to welcome people newly arriving in the area, that challenge fake news and fear about people with different traditions, and illustrate how such people from other cultures can contribute positively here.

There are fantastic, inclusive initiatives that welcome people here, such as the Sligo Sanctuary Runners, the Migrant Women's Workshop and the Sligo Intercultural Project Craft Mornings, but more are needed and involvement of the wider community is important. Opportunities for social activities are needed and people from all cultures and age groups should be encouraged and invited to get involved in volunteering.

Practical supports are needed, for example translation services for key documents e.g. Child First training, English language classes, and a one-stop shop where new residents can access information.

PPN member groups want Sligo to be a place where no-one feels like an outcast or experiences racism. We want to be a community that respects differences and to see real opportunities to celebrate the different cultures that we have here and build relationships between them. This includes recognising and preserving the positives of our church communities.

3.5.2 Including People with Disabilities

There is a need to increase awareness and understanding around disabilities, invisible or unseen illness and disabilities and the challenges these present.

Sligo needs to improve provision of ramps for accessibility in all towns and villages.

3.6 Landscape, History & Heritage

We need to preserve, protect and promote our wonderful landscape, archaeological and heritage sites. Work is needed to understand more of Sligo's history in a modern context and we wish to see appropriate development of heritage sites and museums including Sligo town, gaol, the Streedagh Armada wreck site, etc. A network of organised tour guides to enhance visitor experience to these locations is needed.

A review of listed buildings in the County is needed; many properties are not looked after because of the expense associated with requirements for works conducted on listed structures. Options to support preservation of these buildings should be explored.

We need harmonious planning that brings together old and new elements of our towns, which prioritises and actively supports the re-use/ repurposing and maintenance of existing buildings that add character to our streetscapes.

Our cultural facilities are important and need to be maintained and developed (for example, theatres)

3.7 Local Authority

PPN member groups identify a need for the County Council to operate more transparently and accountably, ensuring it communicate its decisions to everyone. It is important that the County Council addresses the gap that people identify between themselves and local government through a genuine social contract with citizens, including young people and those who are new to the area, and includes them meaningfully in decision-making around issues that affect them. This is vital to build trust that is currently lacking between members of the community and those in positions of responsibility within the County Council. There is also concern that continuing professional development is required for all Council staff.

3.7.1 Elected Representatives

Elected representatives need to reflect more accurately the community of people within Sligo. Support should be provided for more diverse candidates to run for election, for example through provision of affordable childcare. In addition, elected representatives need to make it their business to engage with young people, understand their issues and recognise that they need to consider the long-term interests of future generations in their decision-making. Elected representatives also need to work harder to earn the trust of citizens.

3.7.2 Consultation and Participation

The County Council needs to improve its communications with citizens, consult more closely and

listen to the inputs they receive. The community in Sligo is looking for genuine participation in local democracy. In particular, it is vital that engagement with groups representing people with disabilities by all groups and agencies such as the County Council is not tokenistic but leads to concrete action and financial investment, with a clear recognition of the benefits for wider society from this.

3.7.3   Planning

The Council needs to be proactive about integrated planning (see 3.2 above) for homes, infrastructure, and services in Sligo and doing this in a partnership with local communities. In this way, Sligo County Council need to address the derelict appearance of Sligo town, ensure that unoccupied houses in Sligo are taken over or otherwise made available for use, sympathetic recreational areas and opportunities are developed, and provide attractive and serviceable public realm areas that contribute to a pleasant experience for residents and visitors.

3.7.4   Services

Sligo County Council needs to address the outdated libraries in the County, to provide peaceful, comfortable and attractive places to read and study, with good internet connections. It also needs to provide more public meetings rooms, at low or no cost.

In public areas, the Council should provide and maintain accessible, clean public toilets, and street furniture (rubbish bins, seating, water refill points, etc.) that makes it easier for people to navigate and enjoy these spaces. It is essential that the County Council acts to prevent parking on pavements that make it impossible for wheelchairs and pushchairs to use footpaths. Concessionary parking spaces should be provided around town for older citizens.

Public transport throughout the County is seen as poor and initiatives to improve this are needed to provide access to work, services and amenities, to reduce isolation across all age cohorts and improve connectedness through sustainable transport options. The Local Authority should seek to develop and support this system.

3.8 Community spaces and facilities

3.8.1   Dedicated Community Facilities

Sligo has an inadequate supply of shared community meetings spaces. Across the County there is a need for dedicated accessible, fully serviced community facilities at low or not cost; for work spaces, co-learning, that are multi-purpose, flexible spaces which are sustainable. Many of these could be provided through community hubs in rural areas, and those that are affected by social and economic deprivation, where classes, social and recreational activities can be provided for all ages and abilities.

These spaces are vital to support community engagement and encourage people to become more involved. They need to be available, accessible and flexible for use at different times, by different groups and for a wide variety of purposes. They should be of good quality and well-maintained to reflect the value placed on the important work of the community sector across the County.

A specific need is identified for a purpose-built Sligo Family Resource Centre, perhaps in the Connaghton Road car park, to allow them to adequately deal with the needs of the most vulnerable groups in Sligo.

3.8.2 Public Realm

Provision of facilities, street furniture and services in public realm areas needs to be improved; with clean and accessible public toilets, seating on footpaths provided but that do not impair movement of wheelchairs or buggies, water refill points, and so forth.

3.8.3 Recreation

Recreational facilities also need to be provided or upgraded so that there are safe footpaths, cycle paths, coastal swimming facilities (e.g. at Rosses point), as well as development of a skate park, bowling alley and swimming pool.

3.9 Housing

We need a variety of house types within communities throughout the County to allow for households down-sizing or trading up as needed within the same area and for a variety of income groups. Such a mix will support an inclusive community, improving integration and counteracting isolation. This includes affordable and accessible homes to rent and buy, as well as good quality social housing that is well-maintained. There should also be sheltered housing provided in community settings. Planning and housing development needs to ensure the timely provision of infrastructure and services necessary to support communities; schools, transport, shops, recreation, etc.

A range of different models can support achieving this goal of a rich diverse community including co-housing, co-working and co-learning that allow fully integrated communities with the very young to the elderly including people with different cultures and abilities, living close to one another; handing down skills and trades, supporting neighbourhoods, sustainable communities, resource use, managing waste together, with strong community bonds that make them resilient in a crisis.

A variety of schemes need to be introduced to ensure that homes are affordable.

Everyone is Sligo should have a suitable home and the Council should ensure that derelict or abandoned buildings are put back into use to provide a variety of housing options. Mixed use, where commercial units on the ground floor have flexible, affordable accommodation above should be encouraged to retain life in commercial centres and provide a variety of accommodation. Planning should ensure future proofed building design wherever possible to create the opportunity for adaptation as family/ household needs change.

People need to be encouraged to live in small towns and villages, redevelop houses as needed and enabled to develop accommodation alongside small businesses.

Opportunities for education, training and learning about DIY (Do-it-yourself) is important to enable people to adapt and create better spaces for themselves.

3.10 Infrastructure

A number of different infrastructure elements are identified as requiring attention in Sligo:

- Sligo needs to be better served with well-maintained transport infrastructure and connections throughout the County, for public and independent travel.

- County-wide fast and reliable broadband access is needed throughout the County.

- Management of waste from food businesses needs to be improved.

- Green infrastructure* needs to be developed.

* Green infrastructure is "a strategically planned network of natural and semi-natural areas with other environmental features designed and managed to deliver a wide range of ecosystem services in both rural and urban settings." (European Commission, 2013a, Green Infrastructure (GI) — Enhancing Europe's Natural Capital - COM(2013) 149)

Broadband

The cross-community benefits of high quality, reliable broadband services are widespread; enabling jobs and sustaining communities and activities in rural areas. It was felt that this infrastructure is important for choice and democracy, supporting remote working and increased activity across the County. It also represents opportunities for people with disabilities to engage and contribute in all aspects of life.

3.11 Safety

While the County is recognised as a largely safe place, a number of significant safety concerns exist.

3.11.1   Safety at Night

Night-time culture in Sligo, when mixed with alcohol and substance misuse, can be very intimidating. In this context there is an issue with sexual harassment and assault in bars and nightclubs, with unwelcome comments and touching becoming commonplace. A number of responses are sought to this;

- a night-time venue and activities that don't focus on alcohol are needed;

- universal sign-up by venues to the "Ask for Angela" initiative, and widespread awareness of this support for people who feel threatened;

- increased Gardaí and security on the streets at night.

3.11.2   Community Safety

Support for active Community Alert schemes throughout the County is needed.

3.11.3   Zero Tolerance

Initiatives that promote a zero tolerance response to unacceptable behaviour, whether racism, nuisance, sexual abuse are needed.

3.11.4 Safe Independent Travel

Investment is required to ensure that people can walk and cycle safely to school, work or college. This includes successful management of excessive speed by vehicles on our roads.

3.12 Transport

Across and between all transport modes, better connections are needed with appropriate infrastructure and facilities (e.g. bus stops, bike parks, electric car charging points, parking). Sligo also needs to have good links to major cities and airports.

3.12.1 Public transport

Public transport networks and services are inadequate. There is negligible public transport outside Sligo town. The experience of public transport in the County is that the service is irregular and unreliable.

Public transport is seen as essential to combat isolation and allow people, especially in rural areas, to participate and engage in all aspects of life within the County.

3.12.1.a Bus services

More bus routes, Rural Link and rural lift services are needed throughout the County, between towns and particularly in rural areas to "allow people to be part of things" across all age groups. Improved networks, connectivity, expanded services and responsive scheduling is needed to connect people with services; enable travel to work; movement around the County to visit family, friends and amenities; to shop; and for recreation, including attending night-time events.

Public transport needs to be low or no cost and consistently reliable. Frequent services across a comprehensive network with good connectivity should enable people to choose to take public transport instead of using a car. Improved vehicles and provision of bus stops are necessary to accommodate users and facilitate their use of public transport options.

3.12.1.b Rail services

Member groups identified the need to address rail infrastructure problems and establish reliable timetables but particularly stressed the problem of the high cost of rail travel.

Improved train services from Sligo to Longford would facilitate commuting. Extensions to the western rail-corridor into Donegal and Galway, including access to Knock airport, are seen as needed to boost local economies; support enterprise and workers, tourism etc.

3.12.2 Independent travel

3.12.2.a Walking

The opportunity to walk safely was recognised as important; safe from traffic and on open, well-lit and fully accessible pathways. There is a particular need to enable students to walk safely to school or to college.

Development of greenways for use by local people and tourists was recognised as important and a way to reap widespread benefits; appreciating, valuing and protecting Sligo's wonderful scenery and environment, enabling people to support their health and wellbeing through recreation, and creating positive economic impacts through enhanced visitor numbers

3.12.2.b   Cycling

In many rural areas cycling represents an important opportunity for recreation, exercise and transport. It can help support people's health, wellbeing and connection as well as providing access to services, employment and other recreational activities. However, cycling is hazardous on many rural roads and cycle lanes are needed. As with walking, the opportunity for students to cycle safely to school or to college is identified as particularly important.

Where provided cycle lanes or paths need to be effectively maintained.

Bike trails are needed to provide safe cycling opportunities and for tourism. The Coollaney Bike Trail is a good example.

3.12.3   Cars and parking

There is need for improved provision of affordable parking spaces, particularly for older people and those with mobility issues, around town. Wider parking spaces are also important. The high cost of parking and stringent fines are seen as disincentives to people coming into town and shopping.

The high cost of insurance and running expenses is a problem for those who rely on a car for transport.

Excessive speed in residential areas is identified as a problem that poses a risk for the safety of all local people but particularly children and the elderly needs to be addressed.

3.12.4   Road infrastructure

Roads, particularly in rural areas, that are in bad condition and dangerous (e.g. with narrows on bends) represent a hazard to all road users and are intimidating for new and young drivers. These must be repaired, modified where necessary and maintained in good repair.

3.12.5   Greener transport options

Member groups identified a range of services that are necessary to improve transport sustainability in Sligo:

- Expanded park and ride services will enable more people to join up with and make use of public transport systems;

- Good network of recharging points across the County for electric cars and maps of these kept up-to-date and easily available to support electric car usage;

- An electric vehicle sharing scheme could be introduced;

- Reasonable pricing for transport using an App (like Uber);

- A volunteer "Uber" type community drivers scheme (as in Kerry) .

3.12.6   Access and transport for people with disabilities

Being able to access places indoors or outdoors, and activities that they want to take part in, when they want is taken for granted by most people. People in wheelchairs, of which there are different types, must plan ahead and cannot confidently assume that access will be possible for them. This creates work in advance to find out if access is available, to plan journeys and activities, leaving nothing to chance. There is also always the risk that circumstances will change; some new obstacle appear on a narrow pavement that disrupts a planned outing or activity. The challenges involved generally mean more limited choices for people using wheelchairs; to reach destinations, access spaces and buildings, and so on.

Transport:

Accessible community transport, particularly across rural areas, to enable access services in the city is essential to address isolation. For clients that do not drive themselves, they have to rely on others to provide transport where there is no suitable public transport. This has a huge impact on people's ability to make their own choices about where and when they travel. It was stressed that accessible transport services across the West of Ireland would generate a positive impact for the wide community and economy (for example tourism).

At present bus services are poor and vehicles are generally not appropriate for wheelchair users. An example was given of Expressway service where the buses are accessible but require the paths and curbs to be adapted to function and enable wheelchair users to board via the lifts. Bus Eireann has an agreement with the Local Authority to make these adaptations but the work has not been carried out. This means that the buses cannot be accessed by people using wheelchairs. [I missed the reference Clare gave dated 2016]

Parking:

For wheelchair users travelling in cars it was pointed out that parking for disabled drivers is often located at a significant distance from shops and services, which exacerbates the problems of navigating pavements and the route from the parking to the destination and shows no appreciation for the challenges of trying to carry an significant purchases. If cars are parked in order to enable people with mobility issues access to services, but not strictly in accordance with parking regulations, they are ticketed despite displaying a blue badge.

Public spaces – safe and accessible:

Challenges for people in wheelchairs and with mobility difficulties to navigate towns and villages are not well understood by others, for example the problems presented by broken pavements, or steep slopes/hills that have to be avoided. Provision that is made, such as dropped kerbs, are often not consistent or joined up i.e. with a corresponding dropped kerb across the street. It is essential that pavements are made accessible and safe for users. There appears to be no understanding amongst those responsible for design and maintenance of public spaces of the dangers for those using wheelchairs or will mobility difficulties. One example is the provision of parking spaces for people with disabilities on streets on hills in Sligo which it is hazardous or impossible for people in wheelchairs to use. Another is problem of certain textures of pavements and the changes from one material type to another, uneven surfaces and pot holes, for people will visual impairment and mobility issues.

It was suggested that a group of people with a range of different disabilities could be invited to work with local engineers to develop their appreciation of the challenges faced by people with mobility difficulties, and to ensure funds available are used wisely to maximise accessibility. An example of where such a group did a walk around with the town engineer in Carrick on Shannon was given.

The IWA has recently published revised access guidelines for engineers and it is recommended

that this become required reading and reference for Local Authorities and developers.

Litter management:

Litter creates a real impediment for access by people with mobility issues and needs to be eradicated. (see 3.16 below).

More accessible opportunities:

There was a general desire that more activities be made accessible, for example bowling.

Good access to churches is important to allow wheelchair users to worship and express their faith, and not to feel restricted or excluded.

It was recognised that there is presently limited provision for wheelchairs users at the popular Hawks Well Theatre but such venues need increased capacity for such patrons, particularly since attendance often involves considerable organisation and pre-planning that is typically arranged by groups that involve more people keen to attend than there is space to accommodate. This example also illustrates the point that there is often separate access points provided for people with impaired mobility, sometimes to the side or rear of premises and these may still requiring special assistance or attendance. This can make wheelchair users and those with other mobility challenges feel like second class citizens; there should be 1 door for everyone.

Accessibility audits, involving people with disabilities need to be carried out to identify problems like the step into the children's library, heavy doors and other challenges for people with disabilities that can be addressed.

Similarly, health and safety and risk assessments are needed as part of planning requirements for concerts and other events, to ensure ease of access to community events.

It was suggested that organisations such as the IWA and others such as the Centre for Independent Living could act as venues for example during festivals. This would enable clients have better access to events but also encourage others to become familiar with these locations and support greater inclusivity.

3.13 Economic development

We want to move from a growth-based economy, which is unsustainable, to a caring economy, with a focus on a strengths-based approach to development that secures a strong economic future for our people, with a range of employment opportunities and good livelihoods for all. This should involve thriving green businesses and a tourism sector, linked to our clean sea, air, water, soil, etc. with development of green infrastructure and expertise that employs environmental scientists, ecologists, etc.

We want to be innovative leaders in new technologies and research focused on our local strengths, such as a marine research centre focused on the sea life on our doorstep.

3.13.1   Support for enterprise

Infrastructure, particularly effective transport provision (see 3.12 above) and high speed, County-wide, reliable and affordable broadband access, are essential to support economic development in Sligo.

The community in Sligo wants to see development of sustainable jobs for the future, that allow

young people to stay or return here and that will create a resilient and flexible economy. A variety of promotions and supports are identified for economic development in Sligo based on this:

- Sligo should be marketed directly to a variety of businesses (production, services, retail, etc.) as an attractive place to locate or start up, with a variety of incentives to support this.

- Provision is sought across the County for more affordable hot desks and business hubs in small communities; to support remote workers and co-working.

- Affordable artisan/ arts workspaces are needed; co-located to encourage collaboration.

- Social enterprise supports are needed for community initiatives e.g. an international café where different cultures can share their traditional cooking.

- A change in corporation tax to a regional system e.g. 22% in Dublin, 12% in Sligo would encourage decentralised business location and development, with associated benefits.

3.13.2   Support for workers

Workers in Sligo will benefit from increased employment opportunities that offer good wages. Supports for businesses that secure these will benefit workers. In addition, it is recognised that Sligo needs to:

- Increase provision of high quality, affordable, accessible and flexible childcare;

- Ensure that women are paid a fair wage and the same as men doing the same work;

- Encourage flexible working hours, work from home, and remote working opportunities that allow more people to access work.

3.13.3   Support for those Seeking Work, Education or Training

It is important to ensure that clear information about training and education options, and the requirements for these, is easily accessible. We need to provide flexible and relevant re-training options in Sligo for people who are looking for work, re-training, need to change career, etc.

Initiatives are needed to:

- Support those who find access to education and work more challenging e.g. those with disabilities, autism, etc. with programmes that tap into their strengths;

- Assist individuals and families where employment and education is not a priority (e.g. Breaking the Cycle);

- Ensure a range of employment opportunities are available for women, with supports to help them access and succeed in these;

- Provide childcare to allow parents enter education, training or work;

- Support sustainable tourism that does not over-commercialise Sligo's scenery or natural assets;

- Enable creatives (artists and makers) to develop viable businesses;

- Encourage development of diversified and entrepreneurial businesses and retention of home-grown talent.

It is important that we consider those who will be workers in the future and ensure that young people who are not engaging at school or reaching their potential because of personal, mental,

physical or family issues are provided with support e.g. YESS Programme, Tubbercurry.

3.13.4   Agriculture and Food

Sustainable family farming should be supported and encouraged in Sligo. Farmers in Sligo should receive better training and funding support for organic food production and about opportunities for land use diversification that are available. This should be supported with a Sligo food branding initiative, bringing together farmers, producers, retailers and restaurants (e.g. Fuchsia Branding seen in West Cork).

3.13.5   Tourism

Sustainable tourism that is compatible with maintaining our beautiful and clean natural environment, should be promoted in Sligo. Positive activities compatible with the environment such as seaweed baths and wellness activities are preferred to stag and hen parties.

We have spectacular scenery that "speaks for itself" and do not need to be reliant on W.B. Yeats to bring in visitors, but do need to ensure that there is sufficient accommodation for them

Local people should be encouraged to visit our tourist destinations, perhaps encouraged through the use of a "passport" system where they qualify for reductions on return visits.

3.13.6   Retail and Entertainment

There is a wide offering of restaurants and coffee shops but initiatives are needed to increase the quality and variety of retail offerings in Sligo and to diversify the indoor recreation and entertainment opportunities available.

Good public provision of facilities such as toilets and libraries are also vital to ensuring a rich and positive experience of our town centres. For this to be how local people and visitors experience our towns then we need planning and development to address derelict and disused sites and buildings and provide attractive people-focused public spaces.

3.14 Health

The PPN's member groups wants to see Sligo as a place where success is based on the health and wellbeing of the community rather than our response to ill health.

3.14.1   Health services

All people in Sligo should have access to high quality, comprehensive health services (including those for mental health) when they are needed. Waiting times should be minimal and costs should not prevent anyone from receiving the care that they need. Medical and nursing staff should receive the best training and rewarding jobs be made available for them. Patients must be assured that staff in the healthcare system will understand their different backgrounds, beliefs and cultures so that they can feel comfortable.

A broad range of integrated, primary health care services that are fully equipped and staffed to meet population needs should be located as close to communities as possible. A social prescribing scheme is also required. Health centres should be responsive and support the holistic care of individuals, include various disciplines and accommodating alternative therapies. It

is particularly noted that out-of-hours GP services are needed throughout the County.

Services to support recovery from addiction and injury are needed, as well as rehabilitation of those trying to re-enter work or take up their lives.

More information on the services available and contact numbers needs to be provided, for example for the Samaritans, acupuncture treatment, in museums, libraries and hubs like the Centre for Independent Living in Sligo.

3.14.1.a Services for Women

A dedicated women's health centre is required in Sligo, where there is full, free, access to reproductive health and family planning.

3.14.2 Mental health supports

3.14.2.a Recognition and understanding

More work is needed to ensure everyone understands more about mental health and illness and that stigma around this is removed. The focus needs to shift from crisis responses to prevention through creating places to live that are supportive and where we combat loneliness and distress.

For everyone in the community, recent experience of the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for us to come together, across the generations, to learn from one another and appreciate one another. This is extremely important for mental health and reducing isolation, and needs to be encouraged and supported.

3.14.2.b Supports and Services

Services need to be empathetic, tailored to the individual and must be available as they are needed.

Information on the agencies, supports and services that are available and what activities people can get involved in need to be readily available to everyone and equally accessible to all.

The important role of community groups and services that carry out home visits or hold sessions that allow people to connect, combat loneliness and ensure people feel welcome and valued need to be recognised, supported and integrated with more formal services.

3.14.2.c Services for Young People

Young people have many worries. They are under constant pressure and FOMO (fear of missing out) makes switching off from constant engagement with social media challenging, even when they are aware of the negative impacts of this.

Lack of access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the County needs to be addressed. A comprehensive network of supports for young people's mental health is required across the County. (Reference is made to the "Mind your Head" youth mental health initiative as a positive model to be explored.)

3.14.3 Supports for Wellbeing

Our wellbeing can be supported in the services and infrastructure provided for us, and how they are delivered.

We need well-planned communities that accommodate households of different types, with future-proofed building designs that create the opportunity for adaption, or where we can trade homes according to our household needs to live better but be able to remain in the same community when we wish to. Appropriate housing should be available for everyone. Effective co-housing models should be explored as a way to integrate communities, provide support between residents, and reduce depression and mental health issues.

Our communities and public spaces need to be planned and adapted to be fully accessible and safe for all ages and abilities. A disability audit on public spaces and public accessed spaces is a step towards delivering this.

We need to have free, responsive public transport throughout the County, with frequent scheduling, that connects people with services. We also need access to safe footpaths and cycle lanes for transport and recreation.

Accessible opportunities for safe recreation, indoor and outdoors, are needed to enable us to mind our physical and mental health.

We need to have education and information provided appropriately and accessibly throughout our lives on how we can live healthy and well.

We must recognise the work of carers and ensure that they are supported and not struggling alone, particularly through the provision of respite services but also with community engagement.

3.15 Minding nature and resources

The PPN member groups want to see Sligo's landscape and natural resource protected and unspoilt. This includes protecting the quality of our waters (marine and fresh water), our air and our soils from pollution, dumping of rubbish, or misuse. We also want to see actions to protect our wildlife and biodiversity, with farmers incentivised to promote biodiversity through provision of grants and information, including possible study options available at Sligo IT. We need to see the real value of the services that our environment provides for us.

We wish to see the use of native species in restoration efforts, and particularly in initiatives to rewild derelict or unused areas. Similarly, we wish to see reforestation use native woodland species.

Everyone needs to be encouraged and supported to "do the right thing" in terms of behaviours that affect the natural environment; and measures to make this easier are welcomed. An awards ceremony of some form of recognition for people who offer examples of templates of sustainable living of work benefitting the environment would promote these actions.

Projects seeking grant funding should be required to demonstrate that they are sustainable/green or have no negative impact on the environment.

3.16 Waste

We want a zero waste community and to prioritise initiatives that reduce our waste, before focusing on recycling. Sligo should seek to:

- ban excess food packaging;

- minimise use of plastics and facilitate this through bringing back public refill points for water bottles, and;

- ensure all "wet" and "dry" waste is sorted, eliminate "wet" waste (compost and biodigest to produce biogas), then focus on reducing "dry" waste further, resulting in less weight and carbon dioxide emissions from garbage trucks.

3.16.1 Facilities for Recycling

Despite the necessity of drinking bottled water for 2 years because tap water has not been fit for human consumption, communities around Sligo have no bins or facility for disposing of large plastic drinking water barrels. Sligo County Council needs to ensure suitable facilities in all towns and villages.

Sligo should lead the way in piloting or introducing a monetary return service for cans, bottles etc. to incentivise recycling.

The Council and all service providers also needs to provide transparency on where and how recycling is handled and where it ends up.

3.16.2 Waste & Litter Management

There is a need for more accessible and locally based waste management services (7 days/week). The Council needs to design to avoid illegal dumping and enforce penalties for this, as well as addressing dog fouling.

Litter along country roads or pavements represents an obstacle for people in power wheelchairs, who may be unable to lift or move the rubbish themselves and who find their way blocked. A similar situation arises where bags of waste are left out for collection effectively block sidewalks and make them impassable for wheelchairs. This must be addressed to enable access by people with restricted mobility.

3.17 Energy

In Sligo, we want to see local/ community green energy schemes supplying energy close to where it is needed, via village windmill, solar PV fields, etc. We want to see accessible schemes providing advice, support and funds for these initiatives.

Where fossil fuels are still permitted, these should be as low-impact as possible.

3.18 Scenery and Access to Outdoor Recreation

Access to the outdoors needs to be facilitated through the provision of more marked walking routes, greenways and cycle paths.

Initiatives to provide sympathetic outdoor recreation activities such as kids play areas, skate parks and bowling alleys are needed.

In addition, fully wheelchair accessible accommodation in attractive destinations (e.g. at the coastal) to cater for holiday makers using wheelchairs is needed. Similarly, access to other recreation opportunities such as the Sligo Folk Park is also needed.