



Public Participation Network Sligo



STRATEGIC POLICY COMMITTEES: A PPN GUIDE 2024 - 2029

Participating in Strategic Policy Committees

Since the reform of local government, community representatives have new opportunities to participate in the work of their local authorities, not only in their Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs), but in other local consultative bodies (e.g. Local Community Development Committees, Local Community Safety Partnerships). This is a short overview of SPCs, what they do, why they are important, the role of Public Participation Network (PPN) representatives and some of the issues arising.



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Local authorities and Public Participation Networks

County and city-based local authorities were introduced by the British government in 1898, their role being continued by the Free State in 1922. By the end of the century, there was a view in public administration that they needed reform. Voting in local authority elections had fallen and questions had been raised about the effectiveness, relevance and accountability of both elected representatives and officials. At a wider political and philosophical level, the reform was intended to ensure that representative democracy through elected councillors be complemented - but not replaced - by participatory democracy channelled through community organizations. The key document was Better local government - a programme for change, 1996.

These Irish reforms came at a time of the introduction of new concepts in Irish public administration: civil society, citizen engagement, social capital, active citizenship, social inclusion. They matched what in continental Europe was called 'the long march through the institutions' of a civil society empowered by the continent-wide democratic reforms dating to 1968. However, in Ireland these reforms were introduced by government at national level and had not been sought by local authorities themselves, which may explain their limited buy-in to them.

An important feature of Irish local government is that it deals only with certain functions, principally housing and building; roads; development, planning and land use; recreation and amenities; libraries; and some aspects of environmental protection. Even then, these functions may be largely controlled and funded by central government, mainly through the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. This means that campaigns for change by community groups can only deal with certain issues in certain ways through the local authorities: to be fully successful, they must engage with a much wider range of actors further afield.

Social Policy Committees (SPCs)

Under Better local government - a programme for change, local authorities were required to set up at least four Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs) for their city, county or area:

They were expected to focus, as their name suggested, on strategic and policy issues, not routine administration or casework for individuals;

Their titles should reflect the principal functions of the local authorities as outlined above. Economic development and enterprise support were added later.;

They should comprise councillors and 'sectoral' representatives, drawn from the 'social partners' (commerce and business; agriculture and farming; development and construction; trade unions); and voluntary and community groups, including the 'disadvantaged';

The work of each SPC was to be supported by an official of the local authority and the appropriate director of services; Overall responsibility for functioning of the SPCs was vested in each local authority's Corporate Policy Group, which included the chairperson of the council, the chairperson of each SPC and the chief executive.



SPCs lasted for the duration of the mandate of the local authority and were renewed after each set of local elections every five years. It was the practice of the local authority, after local elections, to issue a scheme to govern the operation of the SPCs for the next five years. Following the local elections in June 2024, schemes are now being issued to cover the period to 2029.

Typically;

SPCs meet four times a year and meetings last around 90min.

SPCs may sit in local authority offices or their meeting rooms, or in external venues (e.g. hotels). Some SPCs even meet in the local authority chamber, although it is designed for a larger group.

The work of SPCs was quite interrupted by Covid, when Zoom meetings became the norm. Now, local authorities have both Zoom and in-person meetings which is proving effective for community representatives.

SPCs are normally convened by a local authority assigned to the task and chaired by a Councillor.

Those present on the SPC committees are councillors; social partner representatives; PPN representatives of the voluntary and community sector; and officials, of whom quite a large number may attend.

Public Participation Networks (PPNs)

Following the report of the Working Group on Civic Engagement, Public Participation Networks (PPNs) were introduced later, in 2014, under the Local Government Reform Act of that year, to provide a formal structure and system for the participation of community groups. They were divided into three pillars or streams: community; environment; and social inclusion.

Voluntary and community groups were encouraged to register with the PPN of their local authority under one of these headings. Although PPNs were funded by the local authority and central government and hosted by local authorities, they were expected to function at arm's length from them. Most PPNs have their own websites. Typically, each has a coordinator and a management 'Secretariat' elected by the PPN as a whole. Selecting and supporting PPN representatives on SPCs and other consultative bodies is one of their functions. PPNs have now been in operation for ten years.



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*"There is no power for change
greater than a community
discovering what it cares
about."*

– Margaret J. Wheatley

SPCs are important to voluntary and community representatives because:

- They enable them to raise issues of concern to them at a formal part of the local authority structure, getting them 'on the agenda', with the prospect that they progress;
- They give them access to officials and councillors that would not otherwise be available and which they may then pursue between meetings;
- SPC meetings provide them with a flow of information sooner than they would otherwise get, valuable for the wider PPN membership, delivered by people who may be useful for their subsequent work.
- They offer influence, information and access. Although many representatives speak of the value of having a 'good' relationship with the local authority, it is more important to have an effective one.

What SPCs Do

In theory, SPCs consider the strategic and policy issues arising from the work of their respective field. But how do they actually do this? For new representatives, the best way to find out is to go through the records of previous meetings (agendas and minutes), normally available on the council websites. They show that:

- Officials and councillors often invite individuals or representatives of organizations to make presentations, following which they may be questioned or cross-examined. Local authority officials may be invited to report on or give an 'update' or 'progress report' on a particular issue, project, fund, research, plan, strategy or scheme, following which there is discussion, key points of which will be minuted;
- External experts may also be invited by the council to give presentations. Again, the subsequent discussion may be minuted;
- Issues may be raised on 'Matters Arising', 'Any other business', or 'Correspondence' (if submitted beforehand). A small number of SPCs have 'Issues raised by PPN members';
- New developments, plans, consultations or projects in the local authority may be put out for discussion.

In housing SPCs, it is especially evident that housing officials report on the progress of various housing building schemes ('updates') and progress in helping homeless people, supplying a considerable volume of administrative detail - but from the minutes it is not evident how such discussions are either 'policy-focussed' or 'strategic'.

Examination of these records suggests that:

- The process is state-centric and designed to enable local authorities and their officials to communicate their issues outward, rather than welcome inward a range of informed comment;
- Agendas may be crowded out by the local authority bringing in a set of internal and external presenters, often time-consuming, giving voluntary and community representatives little chance to raise issues directly themselves;
- There is little evidence that they serve a strategic or policy purpose, or that the outcomes are subsequently fed into the main local authority process;
- There is little evidence of agenda items being tabled by voluntary and community representatives or that they have made successful interventions at other points.



Role of SPC Representatives

The first responsibility of the SPC representative is to **attend** SPC meetings, all of the meetings and on time. This is easier said than done, for it is itself a problem area. The timing of SPC meetings is generally set to suit councillors and officials and their rhythm of life rather than PPN representatives, who may find it difficult to manage the meeting time around professional and family commitments. Be that as it may, PPN representatives are entitled to argue that meeting times should suit them as much as any other group.

The second responsibility of the representative is to **report back** to the PPN on what is addressed at the SPC meeting. Most PPNs have report sheets, often a single page, which their representatives are invited to fill in about what happened, for subsequent circulation. Most PPN representatives devise additional ways of reporting back verbally at events and on other occasions. They may also circulate minutes of meetings to give an idea of what is discussed. They can bring items to the attention of the local media, although this appears to have been little done to date.

The third responsibility of the representative is to **be pro-active** in identifying and channelling issues of concern to PPN members. The representative could and should ask organizations in the PPN what issues do they wish to see pursued. The representative can and should take the initiative to explore what short, medium and long-term issues could and should be progressed during his or her time on the SPC in question (2024-9).

Fourth, a function of the PPN representative is to **ensure**, through the SPC, that the **council is held to account for its action** (or inaction) in the appropriate fields. This can be done at meetings seeking information, asking questions and by tabling items for discussion.

Fifth, the role of the PPN representative is to **act on behalf of its members** between and outside of meetings. The SPC meetings provide access into the system, to councillors and officials. Granted the short duration of meetings, what the representative can achieve between meetings is likely to be more productive than during meetings. Most of the functioning of the local authority takes place informally, outside meetings more than in them, 'in the corridors'. The meetings are only the beginning of a process of building connections to councillors and officials.



Skills for a PPN representative on the SPC

Being an effective member of the SPC requires three sets of skills:

Social and ‘people’ skills: how to work with confidence with other representatives on the committee, councillors and officials, both at the meeting and outside, formally and informally, ‘in the corridors’;

‘Book skills’: obtaining the information and publications of the SPC ecosystem;

Procedural skills: learning the procedures of SPCs and local authorities, how they work, how they open opportunities for participation and what to do if denied the opportunity to contribute.

Social skills

Social skills are so essential because most of what is progressed at local authority level is the outcome of the informal interaction of all the individuals therein at multiple levels. This puts a premium on persuasive representatives are able to identify the people - councillors and officials - who can help; who can present a case verbally one-on-one and in groups; who know when to confront and when not; who can win allies; who know when, where and how to intervene; and can deal with conflict. They may also wish to win supporters further afield (e.g. press).

Book skills

Book skills mean that representatives must obtain and read the documentation relevant to the work of the SPC:

The departmental guidelines on how SPCs are supposed to work;

The new SPC scheme in the local authority;

Agenda and minutes of previous meetings, which give an idea of how they function;

Other rules governing the operation of local authorities e.g. standing orders.

Beyond this, there is a much wider range of important background information:

- The PPN Handbook, issued by the department. This is especially important in outlining the role and expectations of participation, the rights of representatives and provision for dispute mediation and resolution;
- Evaluations of the work of the SPCs and PPNs (e.g. Mazars);
- The local authority's own documentation. Representatives must be familiar with its activities in the field relevant to the SPC concerned: plans, reports, studies, projects, evaluations. Most county councils host a wide range of material on their website, so it is important to be familiar with its main elements, where the documentation of most relevance is to be found and its publication cycle. Here, it can be helpful to check the site regularly, subscribe to newsletters or get on mailing lists. Annual reports can be helpful in outlining the range of council activities, as can be newsletters and chief executive reports to the council.
- The Institute of Public Administration Yearbook, which gives an overview of all the agencies in Irish public administration, with a section on each county council, identifying the key staff. It includes local press and media.

Doing this 'homework' requires that representatives give at least some time to reading and research. Not only does this save time but it can make all the difference to being effective or not.

Procedural Skills

Local authority officials and councillors live in a procedures-intensive world: people who work in voluntary and community organizations generally do not. Getting to know rule books, standing orders, guidelines and directives may sound intimidating, boring and distracting, but they are an important part of the role.

Some local authorities will be helpful in explaining these to new representatives. Here, procedures are essential in knowing where, when and how to intervene in meetings and how to deal with officials and councillors afterwards. A knowledge of procedures is especially essential in knowing what to do when problems arise, for example:

- How to get an item on the agenda - and what to do if it's not done;
- How to deal with not being given an adequate opportunity to speak at meetings;
- What to do when issues do not progress between meetings and seem to 'disappear into the sand';
- What happens if minutes do not reflect your concerns;
- What to do if not treated seriously or respectfully at meetings;
- How to bring systemic problems to the attention of officials and progress them;
- How to initiate complaints.

Examination of the minutes of SPC meetings shows few minuted interventions by PPN representatives, or even their use of existing agenda headings (matters arising, correspondence etc).

Problem Issues

The SPC - PPN interaction has been far from problem-free. Evaluations have been critical, from Area Development Management (2002) to Mazars (2023).

The most common issues reported over the past ten years have been:

- State centrism, in which meetings are dominated by the local authority's agenda and issues, not concerns which PPNs might wish to raise. Attempts to put items on the agenda may be frustrated;
- Lack of respect for voluntary and community representatives, who have been made to feel that they have inferior status, lack parity of esteem, are not treated seriously and are 'talked over'. At some meetings, elected representatives, to emphasize their superiority, sit at a visibly higher table. At others, representatives have been (incorrectly) told that they are only 'in attendance', without the right to speak. PPN representatives did not appear to be put on the civic list to be invited to council events, so they miss possible interactions with councillors and officials;
- There was an imbalance at meetings of age, gender, experience and ethnicity;
- Meeting venues, timing and forms (Zoom, rather than in-person) did not suit PPN representatives. Mazars drew attention to virtual meetings as exclusionary;
- There was poor quality of administration, with inadequate documentation sent out late;

- Meetings were so short and infrequent that they were not a meaningful site of voluntary-statutory interaction. Some were as short as 30min;
- Consultation on issues took place after key decisions are taken, not at the more important early stages;
- There was little engagement with officials or councillors between meetings;
- Voluntary and community representatives did not challenge the interpretation of standing orders, the failure to respond to representations, the frequency or timing of meetings, poor administration, inadequate minuting of decisions, nor the late availability of minutes. They were deferential. Complaints mechanisms were used rarely;
- PPN representatives did not appear to have engaged with the local media or contacted them in connection with meetings or the issues that they raise there. Few had written up or documented their experiences.
- A particular problem in some SPCs was that minutes could not be circulated for three months until they were approved at the next meeting, making it difficult for representatives to report back to their PPNs. This was neither challenged nor circumvented;
- There was little evidence of voluntary and community organizations having an identifiable, visible policy impact through the SPCs. The (im)balance of power at local level appeared to be little changed, which means that the reforms initiated in Better local government remains unrealised. The principal gain instead was improved potential access to officials and councillors, as well as other agencies.

Final Points

Strategic Policy Committees provide a valuable opportunity for voluntary and community representatives in Public Participation Networks to interact with, make their case to and persuade local authorities, their councillors and officials.

But:

They remain state-centred. Their organization and agendas do not yet give voluntary and community organizations adequate space, opportunity, or status to be influential;

Despite their brief being 'strategic' and 'policy-focussed', they serve more an administrative function;

PPN representatives are challenged to be pro-active at meetings, use them as a channel of accountability and report back effectively to refine their mandate;

What happens between meetings in pursuing issues, 'in the corridors', is as important as what happens during them. SPC meetings can open up access to councillors and officials.

To be successful, representatives need a combination of social skills, book skills and procedural skills. The last are especially important in ensuring that they can make their contribution at meetings effective.

It is a challenging role. There are many examples, though, across the country of where PPN coordinators have provided important and valuable moral and practical support for representatives in their role to enhance the experience.