



County Longford Public Participation Network

Submission to Longford County Council
Corporate Plan Review 2015-2019

June 2017

INTRODUCTION

County Longford Public Participation Network was established in 2015 as part of the Putting People First Strategy.

The aims of PPNs are to

- Facilitate the participation and representation of communities in a fair, equitable and transparent manner in decision making by encouraging and enabling public participation in local decision making and planning of services.
- Facilitate the selection of representatives from the environmental, social inclusion and voluntary sectors on to County decision making bodies.
- Support a process that feeds the broad range of ideas, experience, suggestions and proposals of the PPN into policies and plans being developed by agencies and decision makers.
- Strengthen the capacity of communities and of the environmental, social inclusion & voluntary groups to contribute positively to the community in which they reside/participate by actively supporting the inclusion of socially excluded groups, communities experiencing high levels of poverty, communities experiencing discrimination, including Travellers to enable them to participate at local and county level and to clearly demonstrate same.
- Sharing information relevant to the environmental, social inclusion & voluntary sector and acts as a hub around which information is distributed and received.

Currently there are 203 community groups across the three pillars affiliated to County Longford PPN, 82 in the Longford Municipal District, 53 in the Granard Municipal District and 68 in the Ballymahon Municipal District. The PPN has 40 representatives on the following decision-making bodies in the county (*Ref: Strategic Functional Objectives; Community – Social Development page 16*):

- Local Community Development Committee (LCDC): 5 Reps
- Strategic Policy Committee's (SPC's): 10 Reps
 - Economic Development & Enterprise SPC: 2 Reps
 - Housing SPC: 3 Reps
 - Infrastructure & Environment SPC: 2 Reps
 - Planning and Development and Cultural SPC: 3 Reps
- Joint Policing Committee: 1 Rep
- Older Persons Council: 2Reps
- Longford Sports Partnership: 5 Reps
- County Heritage: 1 Rep
- Longford Volunteer Centre: 1 Rep
- County Longford Childcare Committee: 1 Rep

- Citizen Information Service (CIS): 1 Rep
- County Longford Drug and Alcohol Forum/ Midlands Regional Drug and Alcohol Task Force: 1 Rep
- Longford Community Resources Ltd: 2 Reprs
- County Longford Tourism: 3 Reprs
- URBACT Local Group: 5 Reprs
- LEADER Evaluation Committee; 2 Reprs

These are members of the community who give their time voluntarily to make Longford a better place in which to live and work and bring up families. The PPN has for the first time given these local community volunteers a say in the local decisions that directly affect their lives

LONGFORD COUNTY COUNCIL'S CORPORATE PLAN 2014 - 2019

County Longford PPN welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Longford County Council Corporate Plan review. The PPN has recently held plenary sessions in each of the three municipal districts and heard first-hand the issues that are facing the people of County Longford. It has become clear to us that most local groups do not fully understand the functions of the Council or the decision making mechanisms.

The PPN is the main channel to inform community groups of the broad work LCC carries out. It is important that any decisions affecting a community or local area are communicated through the PPN so that the reason and impact can be clearly communicated and understood. Too often communities only hear of a decision when the action is being implemented.

As part of the reform of local government, the report from the Working Group on Citizenship Engagement stated: *'the approaches to engage citizens in local authority policy formulation and service design must go beyond the range of communication, consultation and citizen participation mechanisms used in the past'*.

In this regard it is proposed that when the Longford County Council (LCC) is undertaking policy changes and is planning a consultation process that the following is undertaken:

- The PPN is informed so that the information is distributed to relevant community and voluntary group representatives. (specifically, under "*Consultative Process*" page 13 and *Strategic Organisational Objectives 3 & 7 page 14*)
- Public information meetings and/or specific consultation workshops are held for particularly significant plans/policies.
- Information is communicated in clear and accessible language – 'plain English'.
- Guidelines and some supports are provided to groups on making a submission. It is important to recognise that community groups are volunteers whose meetings do not always fit with short deadlines.
- Draft plans are widely circulated prior to their adoption by the Council.

- Final plans are widely disseminated.

SOCIAL INCLUSION

As the PPN was not fully established when the Local Economic Community Plan (LECP) was approved we would ask LCC to add the PPN Social Inclusion College which now consists of 30 social inclusion groups working on issues ranging from marginalised men, women, older persons, disability to social training . *(Ref: Strategic Functional Objectives; Community – Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP)page 16.)*

For example, we have seen that women as a target group have been excluded from SICAP. This is despite all of the evidence within the sector that targeted funding and supports are needed for disadvantaged and marginalised women within our communities. Under the 2013 local government reform process, many groups lost their LCDP funding which was used to deliver on the very elements outlined in this new support scheme – social inclusion, poverty and equality. *(Ref: Strategic Objective 4 - An Equal and Inclusive Society)*

As a PPN we also hear first-hand from disability groups who are struggling due to a lack of funding and resources. Recently the PPN submitted a list of access issues facing people with disabilities and older persons and we are delighted to hear the LCC have commenced work on addressing some of those issues. We would urge LCC to add the development and maintenance of footpaths, traffic lights, tactile pavement and any other work that can be carried out to allow all citizens a quality of life that allows them to move safely and freely to shop, go to work, access all amenities, roads and streets while living independently *(Ref: Strategic Objective 4 - An Equal and Inclusive Society)*

Many local authorities around the country organise an annual ‘Social Inclusion Week’. Such a week provides an opportunity to highlight the excellent work that community and voluntary organisations are doing to address disadvantage and improve the quality of life for all residents. The week involves many different groups running activities which illustrate responses to social exclusion. Programmes and actions can reflect the diversity of groups and programmes taking place. We would hope that LCC would encourage and support the ongoing development of such diversity within the county and fully utilise the networking potential the PPN offers. Additionally, such a week can strengthen the connections between local communities and the Council.

UNEMPLOYMENT

Recent CSO figures revealed that Longford is currently the county in Ireland with the highest unemployment. If our communities are to prosper this issue must be addressed. Other rural counties are currently achieving much higher employment figures than Longford, research into this discrepancy might usefully point out some solutions. Decent jobs is the most effective route out of poverty and social exclusion.

HOUSING

The lack of quality affordable housing is creating great hardship for many people in the county. An urgent priority is to increase the social housing stock in the county. LCC must strive to eliminate homelessness and overcrowding in the county.

TOURISM

The arrival of Center Parcs has highlighted opportunities to increase the tourism revenue into the county. However, in order to market Longford effectively the tourism office needs to be expanded to include a team headed up by an experienced professional fulltime tourism development officer. It's worth noting that a high proportion of PPN community groups are tourism focused whether on a large scale to attract visitors to their area or just to maintain and keep their locality clean and picturesque. We also have 3 reps participating on the Longford Tourism Committee and 5 reps on the URBACT Local Group who feedback developments to the wider PPN community.

One issue that has been raised by some of our tourism groups is because they are voluntary and have day jobs it is not possible for them to meet council officials from 9am -5pm so they would appreciate an out of office service from 6pm -10 pm and possibly on occasion meet in their local halls and centres. *(Strategic Functional Objective; Economic Development – Tourism page 18)*

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In line with the sustainable development goals outlined, all future development in Longford needs to ensure the maximum use of sustainable energy, reduction in carbon emissions and care for our natural environment

ENVIRONMENT.

In the recent past, there has been a series of conflicting measures adapted by Longford County Council with respect to the implementing of its stated environmental policy and the stated national policies.

In its recent submission to the National Planning Framework, "Ireland 2040 Our Plan: Issues and Choices" it refers to "Climate Change" five times. Twice as a heading and the others in respect of support for other project's it wishes to attract.

At both the May and June meetings the elected members of Longford County Council voted to increase the setback distance for wind turbines to 10 times the tip height and to increase the development charges by a factor of 1,000%. This plus the subsequent massive increase in development charges effectively rules out wind turbines as a sustainable energy source in Longford. In our view this is a retrograde step and in direct conflict with national policy.

In a recent publication “Transitioning to a Low Carbon Energy System” for the Electricity Association of Ireland commissioned by PwC to set out a potential roadmap to enable Ireland to meet the targets of reducing its greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. It predicts that Ireland will be required to reduce its greenhouse gasses by 94% in transport, 80% in heat and 92% in electricity generation. It is likely at this time, that Ireland will not meet its short-term targets in this challenge, consequent on a more severe challenge in the longer term.

Against this background, it is required that all human beings can enjoy prosperous and fulfilling lives and that economic, social and technological progress occurs in harmony with nature. We must seek to foster a peaceful, just and inclusive society which is free from fear and violence.

In support of the above, Longford PPN would request that the following be included in its Corporate Plan

- **Access to justice in environmental matters:** Members of the public and environmental non-governmental organisations have the right to seek a review of decisions made which may affect the environment. The review procedures must provide “adequate and effective remedies ... and be fair, equitable, timely and not prohibitively expensive”. (*Ref: Strategic Functional Objectives; Corporate Services – Freedom of Information page 15*)

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (commonly referred to as the Aarhus Convention) was adopted on 25 June 1998. Ireland ratified the Convention on 20 June 2012. Statutory Instrument S.I. No. 133 of 2007 and S.I. 662 of 2011

- **Climate Change:** That LCC would support and lead in addressing the matters of Climate Change.
- **Pollinators and Biodiversity:** That LCC would support and lead in promoting all aspect of pollinators and biodiversity.
- **Special Areas of Conservation:** That LCC would lead and support the preservation of all areas of Special Status within its jurisdiction.
- **Waste Management:** The PPN requests that Revamp 3R and Willow Traders be added to Measure Methodology under *Strategic Function Objectives; Environment – Waste Management page 18*). Revamp account for over 40 tonne diverted from landfill each year in their furniture restoration
- **Heritage & Architectural Buildings:** That LCC would support and lead in all areas of conserving and maintaining heritage and architectural buildings. (*Ref: Strategic Function Objectives; Library and Cultural Services – Heritage page 25*)

EDUCATION

Access to education is another critical barrier faced by those most marginalised. In particular female, educational attainments rates in Longford are low (only 29% of females in the county have completed third level – CSO, 2011). Overall, the proportion of adults with third-level education in County Longford is the second lowest in Ireland (Trutz Haase, 2013).

A recent UCD study found that it is the education levels of the mother, not her marital or cohabitation status that has the most significant impact on the well-being of the child. Indeed, the fact that ‘transaction costs’ such as travel are likely to increase in line with the distance to a third level institution means that there is a reduced possibility of students from these areas attending third level institutions. As part of the LCC Corporate Plan review, the PPN asks that LCC include community education as an element of realising Strategic Objectives 2, 3 & 4 (*Lead Economic Development through County wide initiatives, Partnership with the Community and An Equal and Inclusive Society*). Community education programmes are currently being run by PPN member organisations Longford Women’s Link and the EDI centre.

In general, more third level education opportunities need to be brought to the county to ensure that future generations have easy access to this level of education and can reside in their home area if they so wish to do so.

GENDER EQUALITY AND LOCAL DEMOCRACY

LCC has particularly poor gender balance at elected representative levels. The recent Local Elections, unfortunately, did not result in an increase of the two female incumbents. The council’s senior management is predominantly male. Such imbalances, therefore, impact on the composition of committees.

As part of Strategic Objectives 6 & 7 (*Support and Enhance Local Democracy, Support and Enhance Community Participation*), we urge the LCC to take a leadership role when nominations are being made to committees to seek gender balance and that all committees should have a minimum of 40% of either gender.

The newly published National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020 includes a number of strategy actions designed to support the participation of women in public life, specifically under Objective Four: Advance Women in Leadership at all Levels. Action 4.14 in particular looks at supporting ‘women’s community organisations to identify relevant local structures for participation and support the participation and progression of women within these structures locally, regionally and nationally’.¹ We believe there are significant opportunities for local authorities such as LCC to engage with women’s community organisations as part of this objective.

¹ Department of Justice and Equality (2017) *National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020: creating a better society for all*, p.61

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

The PPN can report that a social inclusion PPN organisation working directly with women who are victims of Domestic Abuse have highlighted the incidences of accompaniment to both the courts and the Gardaí have risen dramatically (78 court and five Garda accompaniments in 2014 rising to 141 court and 48 Garda accompaniments in 2016). These figures suggest that an increasing number of women are seeking help from the legal and justice systems because the option of leaving and finding alternative accommodation for them and their children is unavailable. Specific measures in relation to housing and accommodation for women in abusive relationships need to be put in place. Locally, women who access Longford and Westmeath emergency accommodation find that it takes anywhere from nine to 18 months to secure rental accommodation roughly in line with the rental caps. We recommend that housing programmes make specific provision for victims of domestic violence as a vulnerable category of homeless clients as well as providing out of office responses to emergency housing needs and maintaining an adequate supply of emergency accommodation for women and their families.

CONCLUSION

The PPN was established as the main link between LCC and community groups in order to engage citizens more at local government level. The PPN to date has successfully engaged 203 groups around the county, set up 15 Linkage groups, facilitated the election of 40 community representatives onto 17 decision making committees both council and outside agencies and delivered training to both community groups and Council employees.

While reviewing the Corporate Plan it is visibly clear the intertwining relationship LCC and the PPN have. Apart from the references mentioned above many PPN groups are currently enjoying partnering with the Arts Office in order to create giant visual artefacts for display at the CRUTU Festival. (*Ref: Strategic Functional Objectives; Community – Arts page 17*)

We also welcome and are grateful for the rich relationship PPN community groups share with all our libraries. (*Ref Strategic Functional Objectives; Library and Cultural Services page 24*). We appreciate the late hours library staff work to accommodate our plenary meetings.

As a PPN we are continually growing and expanding but there is a risk to sustaining this active, effective and efficient network. The risk being the heavy workload on the current full time LCC worker. In relation to *Strategic Functional Objective – Finance Value for Money page 20* the PPN would like to recommend that LCC consider raising the PPN budget to cover the cost of hiring a part time administrator or offering administrative support to the PPN. Other PPN's around the Country have already put these supports in place.

Although at local and national level the Longford PPN to date is recognised as one of the lead networks, the real work from here on in is to develop and maintain the network, develop capacity among members to engage and participate at all levels and ensure that the 40 reps

positions we have obtained on the various committees can be filled with persons of equal competence, confidence and passion in the future.

The PPN allows for a real opportunity to bring community groups together for the betterment of the county rather than working individually. The PPN's goal is to be the one stop shop where LCC and other agencies can come when seeking community representatives, consultations, policy changes, reviews, a wide range of knowledge and experience while building relationships that enhance community spirit. The PPN is grateful for the support LCC has giving the network to date and looks forward to sharing continued success.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

PPN Secretariat on behalf of the Community & Voluntary, Social Inclusion and Environmental Colleges

Longford Environmental Alliance

Ballinamuck Community Enterprise Society

Edgeworthstown District Development

Lough Ree/Lanesborough Angling Hub

Multiple Sclerosis Longford

Longford Challenging Access

Longford Women's Link

Revamp 3R

Drumlish Tidy Towns

Drumlish Heritage & History Society

LCC is invited to contact any of the PPN community groups who participated in the review to discuss their areas of expertise further.