

Section 1. Your views on Mazars Report and Recommendations

Following the publication of Mazars [Structural Review of the Public Participation Network – Report](#), the Department of Rural and Community Development is eager to hear the views of all Public Participation Networks and other stakeholders on the report.

A. General feedback

1.1 What is your broad feedback on Mazars Structural Review of the Public Participation Network – Report?

Whilst the report is comprehensive in some regards and highlights many issues that exist, it does not go far enough in dealing with previously notified issues in Annual Reports etc, many of which were not addressed by the DRCD.

It is also over critical of the PPN at local levels which is disappointing given the efforts of representatives and staff involved in trying to administer what effectively is an underfunded and overcomplicated process. This critique is more disheartening as it fails to really recognise the efforts of those people who are volunteers. The overall review seems to expect more of them which is very unreasonable for volunteers. The Volunteer sector in rural Ireland was at the forefront of addressing local needs during the past 2 years during the COVID Pandemic. We as a community should note and recognise this fact. Without the support of local volunteers, the outcome could have been drastically different and we would be foolish not to acknowledge this.

1.2 Are there areas that you think are important but which were not addressed by the report? If so, please give detail

The terms and conditions for staff has been submitted nationally by the RWN and Wexford PPN staff fully support these submissions. The point about simply changing job titles for staff is dismissive and goes nowhere to address concerns given the expectations of the DRCD for PPN staff.

It is felt that PPN staff should be recruited specifically for the requisite skills and competencies of the roles. The Secretariats of all PPNs need to be fully involved in this process. Only then can any deflection of responsibility for HR matters as suggested in the report, be granted to an outside agency such as

The Wheel. Should an outside Agency be appointed on matters of Human Resources it is imperative that this does not dilute the role of the Secretariats. Staff should be employed outside of the County Council and as such should be advertised both locally and nationally, possessing the required skill set to carry out the work of the PPN independently.

Increased funding is required for all PPNs in order to support the future development of PPNs and this has not been addressed nor has there been any significant increases since the PPN began. The expectations are that essentially small businesses are to be operated on a very small budget, with more expectations of staff and volunteers at a time when rising costs are affecting everybody. Funding of the PPN must be addressed and reasonable gratuities put in place. We would recommend a new funding structure for each level (Secretariat, staff, Local Reps), which would encourage a more inclusive element to the PPN which is what we all hope to achieve. We would encourage Local Reps to run Town Hall meetings relevant to their group to convey back the aspirations of the local community.

There are also matters regarding the attitude of Local Authorities to the PPN ethos. The ethos of the PPN is to have a voice at the table. In some circumstances we feel this is not cohesive, meaning that some Reps feel they are being side-lined at committee meetings. This is partly due to the fact that some meetings (e.g. Joint Policing Committee, Planning Committee) are not being kept in the loop outside of the meeting and projects have progressed from meeting to meeting.

There are still many concerns that the PPN is not being allowed to operate in the manner that was intended at its inception and Representatives are not being allowed to partake actively in participative democracy as expected. Training and inductions are necessary in more detail and this should include members of all local Secretariats. Whilst training has been mentioned in the report we feel that this does not address the importance of this within the local PPNS and communities. We also feel that as a group of volunteers, GDPR is curtailing Local Reps in liaising with community groups and addressing the needs on the ground.

1.3 Is there existing good practice in particular areas that could serve as a model for addressing any of the findings in the report?

Many examples have been provided to the DRCD especially for previous Annual Report submissions, yet they have not been introduced or factored for. The Mazars report should only be considered relevant when a definitive timeline has been set for all the previous submissions and considerations to be implemented.

1.4 Do you have any other ideas or want to raise any other issues in relation to Mazars Report?

There appears to be no recognition in the proposed structure for a local Secretariat to be in place. This is essential as they are elected at a local level by the plenary of a PPN. To disband this structure would take away the very essence of local democracy from the PPNs. It would also have adverse effects on the workload for staff at a time when their expected duties are excessive to begin with. This would lead to a higher turnover of staff which is already at a high level in Wexford PPN.

We believe it would likely lessen the membership of PPNs by taking away this structure as groups would be apathetic to a national controlled process. It is our further belief that members would prefer a local structure that they can relate to, with local people being available for stewardship and reference.

Wexford PPN strongly supports the retention of a local Secretariat as well as the maintaining of the existing college and pillar system. However, we do believe that given the make up of our own member groups, it should not be a case that the resources of a PPN are unduly pressured where devotion of a majority of time and budgets are on matters that appertain to a pillar which is actually the smallest in our membership and if Climate Change is to be dealt with the vital importance that is required then additional funding should be allocated for same. At present Wexford PPN has a majority of groups assigned to Community and Voluntary and we feel that more funding should be given in equal increments to all pillars of the PPN.

The use of jargon, acronyms and language within the PPN needs to be simplified. We would support a more cohesive approach to the PPN, removing acronyms and replacing them with a more user-friendly approach.

Travel expenses only excludes some volunteers from receiving any form of recognition for their time and effort. The return of the per diem (minimum fee) should be introduced for anyone not receiving travel expenses.

An Induction Training needs to be more comprehensive for staff. Whilst training can be suggested to be done by an outside source, it is important that the employment terms and conditions should not be outsourced any further than exists for Local Authority staff.

Simplifying roles and responsibilities and provide guidance and support would alleviate confusion with stakeholders, Secretariat and staff.

B. Feedback on Recommendations

1.4 Which three recommendations in the report do you think should be prioritised as the most urgent to address?

We would respectfully differ as to what should be prioritised here. We feel that recommendations previously made should be addressed as a matter of priority.

Firstly, a back-to-basics approach must be taken regarding the promotion of the PPN and the overall structuring. It is imperative that any structure is headed by the DRCD and overall controls are not derogated to any other agency. Local Authorities must also be asked to consider their roles as hosts in the operation and be reminded of their obligations to allow for Public Participation to be fully operational.

The resourcing including allocated budgets of a PPN is an immediate priority and necessary funds should be provided to each local PPN that adequately cater for the expectations of DRCD in the operations of a PPN. The annual funding model shows no commitment or security for future development of the PPN or for staff.

Staff terms and conditions and the accountabilities/competencies must be addressed. An immediate recruitment campaign should begin by the correct method of recruiting for staff for PPN to include the Secretariat in the process and not through local authority panels. It is imperative that specific training is provided, and the criteria should include an element of community development.

1.5 Do you think that a central coordination structure, set out in section 4 of the report, would be beneficial to PPNs?

*If so, which of the three recommended options do you believe would be most suitable?
If not, please provide your views as to why not*

Without clarity on the role of a local Secretariat we would prefer not to offer any comment on the suggested structuring examples. As repeated in our submission it is imperative that a local Secretariat is maintained and for them to be omitted in the report causes great concern for PPNs at a local level. We feel the local voice is pivotal in moving forward. The PPN is supposed to

be the voice for the people and by integrating a central body this could be interpreted as the local voice being diluted at the table.

1.6. Did you identify any areas which you feel were not addressed in the recommendations made in the Report? If so, please share your recommendations in this regard

We have already highlighted earlier in this submission about areas not addressed in the report. As we have mentioned before and the report has already highlighted, training needs to be addressed as a priority.

1.7 Do you have any other feedback on the recommendations made by Mazars in the report?

Before any implementations are made following the Mazars Report, there needs to be a return to a transparent process of consultation. From reading the report it appears a lot of decisions have been made already and arguably not for the benefit of the PPN process.

It is also unclear as to whether more stakeholders are to be introduced and this should not be the case for the PPN staff who are directly employed by a Local Authority with their HR Department.

Section 2. Your input on the Implementation Roadmap

A working group, representative of key stakeholder groups, will be established to develop a roadmap to guide implementation of the recommendations in the Mazars report and any additional recommendations that stakeholders agree on during consultation. We will seek members for the working group in due course.

The Implementation Roadmap will be used to guide action on strengthening the national Public Participation Network structure in the coming years.

2.1 What is your broad feedback on the areas that should be included in the Implementation Roadmap?

At this stage it appears too early to give input as presented. There are so many factors to be considered by the DRCD that are likely to be presented, including the views outlined here by Wexford PPN. It is also important to consider previously noted recommendations highlighted in annual reports and national action groups reports. We feel that only when the recommendations outlined are addressed, would we be in a more knowledgeable place as to how to address a new roadmap for the PPN.

2.2 What issues do you feel should be prioritised in the Implementation Roadmap process?

Again, we can only state that a back-to-basics approach is required with an active national promotion of the PPN and with full training and inductions provided to all suitable staff, voluntary Representatives, and local Secretariat members with a bigger budget to carry out the duties required.

2.3 Did you identify any issues that should be considered as part of the Implementation Roadmap that were not included in Mazars Report? If so, please provide further detail

Regular input from local PPNs should be encouraged going forward and the development of a regular Q/A bulletin should be considered by the DRCD, as is used by them for the LEADER grant operations.

2.4 Is there any other feedback you wish to share on implementation or any issues which you wish to raise?

In conclusion when a roadmap is put in place, it should include a definitive timeline for all recommendations to be completed. Wexford PPN is committed to being the voice for the people and it is imperative that we remain as such. We are lucky to have a committed team of Volunteers who have worked in community and respective areas for a number of years. We would implore the department to perhaps put themselves in the position of a small community group and discover a way for those voices to be heard as equals at the table.