

## National Advisory Group

*Date/Time:* Thursday, 21<sup>st</sup> September 2021, 14:30

*Venue:* Webex via Department of Rural and Community Development

### Minutes

Attendees:

*Pillar Representatives:*

- Seán Healy (Social Inclusion Pillar),
- Catherine Lane (C&V Pillar).
- Charles Stanley Smyth (Environmental Pillar)

*PPN Volunteers:*

- Lynda O'Shea (Waterford PPN; C&V representative),
- Bibiana Savin (South Dublin PPN; Social Inclusion representative),

*PPN Resource Workers:*

- Helen Howes (Wicklow PPN),
- Sarah Wetherald (Sligo PPN).
- Kieran Walsh (South Dublin PPN)

*CCMA Representatives:*

- *Rebecca Loughrey (CCMA) – late joining*
- *Alan Farrell (CCMA)*

*Department of Rural and Community Development:*

- Ciara Bates (Chair), Deirdre Kelly, Elaine Jennings, Caoimhín Ó Tuathail, Alan Monks.

The Chair opened the meeting which was conducted on-line due to the current restrictions as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic.

### Minutes

## **1. Adoption of Minutes of 17<sup>th</sup> Meeting of Group on 13 May 2021.**

## **2. Matters Arising.**

The Chair acknowledged the sudden passing of Terrence McDonough, a member of this Group.. Terrence was a Secretariat member of Galway City's PPN and represented the Secretariat Network on the Advisory Group. The Chair advised that the Department would include a piece on Terrence's contribution to the PPN in the forthcoming PPN Annual Report with the approval of his family.

The meeting was informed that Catherine Conroy (DRCD) commenced a career break at the end of August, and sends her regards to the NAG.

The Chair also welcomed Deirdre Kelly, who will be taking over Catherine's role. She will officially be joining us in a couple of weeks' time but she's here today as an observer to start getting up to speed on the current PPN priorities.

## **3. Update on PPN Structural Review**

All of the consultation stages of the review (survey, focus groups, written submissions) have concluded. There was great demand for the focus groups, and so once the numbers of nominees became clearer, DRCD asked Mazars to hold extra sessions, and in that way were able to accommodate the vast majority of those who wished to participate.

The NAG received a one-page overview of the stakeholder engagement. This document was put together by Mazars based on a suggestion from the Oversight C'tee. It provided an update on the progress to date and the remaining steps in the project that can be used to update colleagues/stakeholders and keep momentum.

Highlight figures:

Survey: 665 responses

Focus groups: 13 (approx. 206 participants)

Written submissions: 34

Mazars are currently working on their review report, we are currently on track for the first draft to be ready in October, with the final report expected to issue in November.

The draft report will be shared with the Oversight Committee, which has representatives from the Secretariat network, RWs, and CCMA for fact-checking and any major observations. The NAG expressed its agreement with this approach unless serious concerns were flagged.

Following consideration of the final report, consideration will be given to next steps which may require an Implementation Group to be established to

oversee this. The size and composition of the group will not be finalised until we have sight of the final report.

#### **4. Subgroups**

##### **I. PPN Handbook Changes (document circulated)**

A draft document was circulated outlining some suggested text for updating the handbook. These updates have been drafted by SJI. These updates came about following of a couple of issues that arose in practice during the year that the existing Handbook was unable to resolve. This is an emergency update to cover the gaps that have been discovered, and will be issued as a circular at the earliest opportunity.

Observations on these updates were previously sought from the Handbook sub-group, and the NAG was requested to make additional observations. The NAG members raised a number of points during the meeting, which will be considered, and were requested to submit further points by email.

Once all observations have been made, it is the Department's intention to issue a Circular adding the following mandatory updates to the Handbook, which will be modified slightly to reflect the feedback received

Incorporating these updates into the Handbook design will follow at a later stage.

##### **II. Communications Strategy RFT (draft circulated for discussion)**

DRCD advised on findings from the survey we circulated to the NAG earlier in the year. This survey led to a revised, more clearly structured RFT. Observations on this draft RFT are being sought from the NAG and the DRCD Press Office. Once all observations have been incorporated, the RFT will be ready to issue to market.

##### **III. Annual Report**

The link to the AR return and explanatory video were circulated to all PPN's on the 17<sup>th</sup> of May 2021. The closing date for receipt of the returns was 14<sup>th</sup> of June 2021. Some PPN's experienced issues with the online format and SJI provided assistance to those who required it. A total of 30 PPN's completed the return.

The 1<sup>st</sup> draft has been received from SJI. DRCD are hoping to have the final draft ready for translation by the end of the week.

DRCD have offered to include a piece on Terrence in the Annual Report and are speaking to Galway City PPN on this matter subject to family agreement.

Carlow PPN have agreed to manage the design and printing process again this year.

#### IV. Annual Conference (HH)

- The meeting was informed that the Hotel has agreed to hold the prices for the conference at those that were quoted had the conference gone ahead in late 2020.
- Collaboration & Inclusion (Participation & Community Resilience)
- Some of the ideas for the workshops discussed were as follows:
  - Presentation on the New Handbook
  - Presentation on the Structural Review
  - Presentation on the Communications Strategy and perhaps a launch of the PPN National Logo

Caoimhín will be DRCD rep on the Conference Subgroup. Charles also agreed to join the group.

It was also suggested that perhaps the PPN's could present to the DECC what they want to see in the Climate Action Plan as opposed to the officials from the DECC presenting their own vision. Climate Adaptation Policy is huge and the expectations on communities are enormous.

### 5. Funding, Finance & Returns

#### I. Funding

All but one PPN has now received its 1<sup>st</sup> tranche of 2021 funding. Following a review of the PPNs' financial situation nationally, DRCD has decided to defer recouping the 2020 SW underspend from the 2<sup>nd</sup> tranche of 2021 funding. The 2020 underspend will instead be recouped from the 2022 1<sup>st</sup> tranche.

A circular letter will issue from the Department shortly to all PPNs in this regard. We aim to pay the 2<sup>nd</sup> tranche due to PPN's in late October.

As previously flagged, any underspend will be used to fund additional supports for the PPNs.

#### II. Internal Audit (PPT presentation)

A random sample of six PPNs were selected by DRCD's Internal Audit unit for detailed onsite verification testing. At the request of the Unit, two more were added. With the exception of one PPN, which was conducted virtually, all seven other PPNs were visited with a number of issues noted. One of these is significant and has resulted in two Medium recommendations.

Upon finalisation of the report, communication will issue to the PPNs outlining the issues raised in the audit. There are specific recommendations in relation to individual PPNs and the Department will contact those PPNs directly. Suitable reminders will also issue.

A review will be undertaken by the Department of the Financial Controls document to ensure that matters raised in this report are advised upon. A further selection of PPNs will be included in the Auditors work programme for 2022.

## **6. Online Training**

Early notifications were circulated on the 16<sup>th</sup> of July and 10<sup>th</sup> of August. Two additional reminders were sent on the 27<sup>th</sup> of August and 3<sup>rd</sup> of September regarding the deadline for registrations to be completed by 7<sup>th</sup> of September.

The online induction took place on the 13<sup>th</sup> of September and early indications are that participants are looking forward to the course beginning in earnest. With 100 places available, a total of 86 people registered, however one of these withdrew at the last minute. The level of participation in training in some counties is quite low and consideration may have to be given to target these areas in the final cohorts in the New Year.

## **7. Additional Supports RfT**

This service is intended to give PPNs access to professional advice on HR, governance and conflict resolution queries. These are areas that have been coming up repeatedly in terms of the advice PPNs are seeking from the Department, and these are also areas where issues tend to arise. Responding to these queries and following up on these issues has become a large part of the Department's workload, and DRCD is concerned that this is an obstacle to the Department's work on more future-oriented projects that would benefit all PPNs.

It is the current intention that each PPN will be able to access a certain number of hours of advisory services per year (provisionally an average of 30), and the contract is covered by DRCD.

This service will also help to coordinate submissions for national policy consultations where several PPNs wish to participate. This will help give the PPNs and the local groups they represent added voice at a national level. This is also intended to assist the Department with work such as sign-ups for training courses or workshops, which take up a significant amount of Departmental time.

Charles suggested that the service provider would submit an anonymised annual report on the types of issues arising, and DRCD will take this suggestion on board.

It is the intention to issue this RFT shortly on e-tenders.

## **8. PPN's and Climate Action**

DRCD acknowledges Sarah's submission of a proposal RE climate training for the PPNs, particularly in advance of next year's LECs.

DRCD is working on arranging climate training for LCDC and PPNs stakeholders to influence LECs next year. DRCD are considering a number of options for carrying out such a training project, including working with other departments and providing bespoke training.

## **9. A.O.B**

DRCD drafted an information document on Freedom of Information and circulated it to the PPN's/ NAG and Secretariat Network Facilitator. A request came back from a member of the NAG which DRCD will follow up on and report back once a response has been received.

DRCD have been in touch with AILG with regards providing training to PPN Staff and representatives as requested by Helen/ NAG. Online webinar training will be accessible to PPN representatives but it wouldn't be possible for them to attend "in person training" as this is reserved for members DRCD will share further information with the PPN's when received from AILG.

There are a number of ongoing PPN cases (around 7/8 over the course of the year) that the Department are in touch with relevant parties to resolve. The Department provided the NAG with examples of some of the issues arising across PPNs that the Department has been handling throughout 2021.

## **10. Next Meeting:** Webex/Trinity Point. *(To be agreed, DRCD to send out doodle poll)*