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Public Participation Networks and Local Democracy

Addressing Challenges and Amplifying Opportunities

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Public Participation Networks and Local Democracy: Addressing Challenges and Amplifying Opportunities

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Introduction

The Irish government has, in recent years, placed increasing emphasis on strengthening the processes and mechanisms of local democracy, attempting to facilitate greater influence on policymaking in Local Authorities (LAs). A core component of this has been the establishment and development of Public Participation Networks (PPNs). PPNs are described by the Department for Rural and Community Development as 'the "go-to" for all local authorities who wish to benefit from community and voluntary expertise in their area' (DRCD, 2024). PPNs are designed to incorporate local communities more firmly into the processes of local politics and policymaking, contributing in part to oversight of LAs (Bennett, 2021: 20).

Developments around PPNs are particularly significant in the Irish context, given the historically high levels of political centralisation in the Irish system (Reidy, 2018; Ladner *et al.,* 2016). Following the principles of deliberative democracy, PPNs could be perceived as an attempt to break down such centralism. Nevertheless, although 'recognised as the main conduit by which Local Authorities engage with their communities' (Bennett, 2021: 20), the establishment of PPNs via the Local Government Reform Act (2014) makes clear that authority must remain with LAs, which may 'take such steps as [they consider] appropriate to consult with and promote effective participation by the local community in local government' (Local Govt Reform Act, 2014: section 46).

PPNs, then, represent an opportunity to transform local governance, and include local communities in the processes of local government and policymaking. Yet they are faced with numerous barriers that represent somewhat of a disconnect between potential and reality when it comes to implementing the PPN model. This paper, drawing upon a combination of research funded by the IRC (now Research Ireland) *New Foundations* programme[i] and PhD research on deliberative democracy and economic inequality, explores some of the opportunities and barriers experienced by

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PPN members and staff, and the potential means of addressing these barriers. This paper is partly adapted from a paper presented at Social Justice Ireland's (SJI) national conference, *Managing Change to Build a Just Society: Policy Outcomes for a New Social Contract*. As part of the New Foundations project, SJI partnered with the research team to provide technical expertise and advice, and to collaborate on dissemination strategies.

PPNs, deliberative democracy and deepening local engagement

Our research demonstrates that people involved with the day-to-day running of PPNs see significant value in them, notwithstanding the challenges they face. The engagement from staff who are often overworked and underpaid cannot be overstated. Likewise, the success of PPNs so far is also a result of the strong levels of engagement with local community organisations.

PPNs, although ostensibly a relatively new structure in local democracy and policymaking, have been designed to be compatible with (or as a development of) existing mechanisms of local democracy such as Local Community Development Committees (LDCs) and Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs). Indeed, PPNs feed directly into the work of SPCs on local councils through the nomination of SPC members or chairs from PPNs. As such PPNs can be seen as an addition to, or bolstering of, existing channels of local democracy. Yet the increased engagement of local and community organisations, with PPNs acting as a conduit between groups and local government can open local policymaking processes up to wider sections of the population.

One method of harnessing local engagement is deliberative democracy – a concept which has driven the design and implementation of PPNs since their creation through the Local Government Act (2014). Deliberative democracy involves mutual recognition of different groups and people from different backgrounds, coming together to discuss and collectively make decisions regarding political and social issues (Bächtiger *et al.,* 2018: 2). Since the establishment of PPNs, the concept of deliberative democracy has been one of their core guiding principles (e.g. Bennett, 2021). This potentially indicates a desire to radically overhaul local democracy, in the face of historically high levels of political centralisation, in which LAs were often simply the implementing bodies of centrally-developed policy (e.g. Quinn, 2016). As such, there is a potential tension between the ideal of bottom-up decision-making and policymaking associated with PPNs and the highly structured, top-down approach to policy and politics in Ireland. This is represented in the reflections of research respondents, and our tentative recommendations.

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As our combined research finds, deliberative democracy is worth pursuing, but it sets a very high bar for political and civic engagement that can be difficult to achieve in a representative democracy (e.g. Landwehr and Schafer, 2023). As such, though PPNs have made a significant impact since their inception, there remain multiple barriers or constraints to their effective operation, including political inertia, potential lack of visibility, under-resourcing, and political and social scepticism and/or competition.

Nevertheless, the principles and practice of deliberative democracy contain within it a potential path to reform, given that practices of deliberative democracy are iterative and should be responsive to the needs of, and developments within, local communities. Of course, reflection on current processes, strengths and weaknesses takes time, and deliberative practices need to be accorded the appropriate space and time to take hold, which does not always mesh well with policymaking, especially in an era ever more characterised by 'fast policy' (Peck and Theodore, 2015) and 'crisis policymaking' (Zaki *et al.,* 2024) that privilege urgency and often centralised control.

An immediate goal for policymakers and political actors should be, therefore, to identify strengths and weaknesses within the current institutional and political architecture, while working to identify potential opportunities for transformative change. Given institutional inertia and the complexities of multilevel policymaking, this latter goal is *only* possible by involving directly in the policymaking process those people and organisations at the local and community levels who have experience and knowledge of the opportunities and barriers to participation associated with PPNs and local government.

Our analysis is based on:

- Qualitative fieldwork with different PPN workers, PPN members, and those in political life who have had engagement with PPNs
- PhD research on deliberative democracy and community wealth building

Here, we present a brief snapshot of some of the findings and reflections pertinent to the operation and development of PPNs.

Finding time and space for deeper dialogue, and improving capacity

Participants in our research highlighted massive time and resource constraints that hindered their ability to work effectively. In many cases, PPN staff had to prioritise to the extent that there was little time to build the engagement required for deliberative democracy after the handling of day-to-day tasks. Those engaged with, or working for,

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PPNs also remarked how although PPN members' involvement on SPCs was important, there was not enough training or awareness of how SPCs functioned. Our research contained multiple reports of otherwise enthusiastic members of the community not being able to attend council meetings and SPC meetings, due to, *inter alia,* these meetings being held in standard work hours while most PPN members have their own organisations to run or jobs to hold down. One respondent in the PPN project, a former TD, remarked that the provision of some form of stipend or expenses would help significantly with attendance at council meetings because the cost of missing or rearranging work could be offset. This was a sentiment echoed by PPN workers.

The once-off nature of many meetings can pose problems, especially for complex local issues. Nevertheless, for high profile problems LAs do often arrange multiple meetings of different formats. PPNs could be particularly useful in this context, in organising and maintaining meetings and attendance. Regular forums can exist, such as those piloted in Waterford's People's Transition project, that bring together stakeholders such as residents, local organisations, Local Development Councils, schools, and councillors and TDs.

Capacity building is essential to improve both participation levels and participation quality (as discussed later in this paper). Capacity can be built in different ways: identifying more efficient practices such as combining email recipients or consolidating multiple similar submissions to LAs into one submission where possible. On this latter point, this will also help to strengthen the communication of key arguments and campaigning points. Finally, PPNs may sometimes find themselves in the middle of competing interests; should they work to support their members in grassroots fora and activities, or turn their attention to working with, and through, the LA to achieve local successes? Often PPNs attempt to do both simultaneously, out of a deep commitment to their members and a duty to fulfil their remits. Yet PPNs do not have the financial and personnel resource capacity to do this long-term, and ultimately one or both sets of activities will suffer.

Uncertainty of purpose and process

Stakeholders involved in the New Foundations project all expressed a level of uncertainty regarding the exact role of PPNs. Although official documentation and communications around PPNs provide clear mission statements, governance structures and so on, the reality of the situation is such that these do not always translate easily into practice. A number of PPN workers described PPNs operating more as community hubs or information providers rather than active conduits in the

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processes of local democracy and policymaking. This could, of course, be linked to the previous issue of time, space, and mechanisms not matching the ambitions of the PPN model. Given limited resources, PPNs often must prioritise what they feel will have the biggest (visible) impact, such as providing support for grant applications for local groups, and publicising the activities of these groups. While this is important, it is not (or perhaps should not be) a primary objective of PPNs. There are (or, at least, *should be*) other routes for support with these activities. PPNs themselves become stuck between wanting to support the community organisations they work with in the immediate term while also attempting to fulfil their original goals. This suggests that enhancing or reviewing knowledge of the workings of PPNs as well as further clarity on organisational and political goals for all actors – community groups, local authorities, PPNs themselves, Councillors and TDs – is important. This situation also suggests that knowledge and understanding of PPNs' remit can be improved amongst local communities, and even LAs in some cases. LAs should be encouraged and supported to facilitate a clearer demarcation of roles, while supporting PPNs and other locally-rooted institutions in supporting local groups' activities.

Improving political and communication skills

Following from the uncertainty problem, a number of participants in the PPN project remarked that some members of PPNs did not necessarily have the political skills or knowledge to engage effectively with LAs, such as through chairing SPCs. PPN workers and a TD reflected that often expectations for what can be achieved are too high, and that, in some cases, PPN members who would be excellent street-level activists cannot always translate these skills into the boardroom diplomacy needed in LA settings. Almost all participants suggested that more regular and improved training for PPN and staff would be beneficial. How this is structured would require discussion, but some suggestions included induction events, or national events. No doubt these events already take place in many PPNs across the country, but it was a desire of multiple participants that there could be more systematic organisation on a national scale. On the latter point, multiple PPN workers brought up the prospect of a more formalised national organising committee or national structure, through which training could be organised and best practice disseminated, which could then be adapted where appropriate for the unique local contexts of each PPN. On this point, a number of respondents – PPN workers and a national consultant in particular – had remarked that such a structure had been proposed or suggested to government on more than one occasion but had been rejected or downplayed.

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Increasing the salience and effectiveness of local democracy through PPNs

PPNs are central to the government's plans to enhance local democracy. While deliberative democracy has been identified as an important operating principle for PPNs, it of course operates within the context of Irish local and national democracy. A major aim of deliberative democracy is the decentralisation of power and decision-making, in this case devolving decision-making further to the local level. In reality, however, the structures of democratic politics can act as barriers. A number of respondents, for example, reflected on whether some councillors may see PPNs as threats to their own roles, or as potentially duplicating effort between LAs and PPNs and thus becoming a *less* efficient form of local decision-making. Linked to earlier points about expectations, knowledge and training, it can be easy for PPN members to become frustrated with a perceived lack of progress. Again this is hardly, if ever, directed at the PPNs themselves, but rather the structures in which PPNs sit. Often those PPNs that are seen to achieve the most are the ones with the strongest and most productive relationships with LAs. Yet participants in our research suggest that this is not simply a case of PPNs reaching out; Local Authorities also need to demonstrate the will to engage with PPNs. In those cases where a strong relationship exists, PPNs find they are able to request funds and other resources, local authorities are more likely to proactively engage with PPNs, and decision-making processes become more mutual. A fundamental point, then, is that the first step to building a more deliberative local democracy must be mutual communication and support. It is also important to note that where this does not exist or is not as strong, it is not necessarily an agential problem but could be structural. It is not necessarily local authorities consciously shutting out PPNs, but a symptom of what is still a highly centralised system of politics and policymaking in which local institutions have simply been the implementors of nationally-made policy.

Tentative Recommendations

Based on our research, we would tentatively suggest a number of recommendations to be considered to enhance the operation and capacity of PPNs, enabling them to better fulfil the objectives of both deliberative democracy and local politics and policymaking. Based on the discussions above and in the broader research that contributed to this paper, we argue that PPNs, Local Authorities and the Department for Rural and Community Development could derive significant benefit from:

- Focusing on relationship development; within PPNs and with community groups, but especially between PPNs and LAs

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- Standardise support mechanisms and resources from LAs to PPNs, where possible
- Increase targeted financial support such as stipends and expenses to attend council meetings etc.
- Emphasise formal and informal training and briefings, potentially at the national level
- Examine overlap and differentiation of roles and tasks, internally and externally.

Conclusions

Public Participation Networks are a crucial institution within local politics and policymaking, having been established and embedded within local frameworks over the past decade. They enjoy strong support from members and many political actors. They have demonstrated that they can act as a conduit between local communities and local authorities, as well as facilitating the growth of deliberative democracy, at least at the local level.

Nevertheless, PPNs face difficult challenges that cut across agential, structural and resource-based themes, as this paper has demonstrated. To develop a meaningful deliberative democracy, and to facilitate PPNs' involvement in meaningful policymaking at the local level, there are a number of achievable steps that central government can take both in the immediate and longer terms.

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