

# **GUIDELINES FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION NETWORKS**

To be established in each Local Authority.

NB Municipal Districts do not apply to Dublin City Council

**Effective April 2014 until further notice**

## **1.1. Framework for Public Engagement and Participation**

A new framework for public engagement and participation, to be called “The Public Participation Network (PPN)” will be developed within each local authority area (engaging in and within municipal districts and at the County/City level) to enable the public to take an active formal role in the policy making and oversight activities of the Local Authority’s areas of responsibility including those outlined in appendix 2 below.

The PPN will be the main link through which the local authority connects with the community, voluntary and environmental sectors without prejudice to other consultation processes.

The aim of the structures and processes is to facilitate and enable the public and the organisations to articulate a diverse range of views and interests within the local government system, not to reduce or homogenise this diversity. A parallel and equally important aim should be to facilitate the local authority in making better and more timely decisions. To allow the diversity of voices and interests to be facilitated and involved in decision-making, a network should be set up in each county/city and municipal district.

Members of the local community interact with local government at different levels. The PPN facilitates input by the public into local government through a structure that ensures public participation and representation on decision-making committees and bodies within local government.

All individuals may access local government through the existing arrangements in regard to their issues. For the purpose of this structured public participation within local government, individuals may join an existing group or organisation or they can establish an interest group or organisation and register it with the PPN.

The Network:

- Facilitates the participation and representation of communities in a fair, equitable and transparent manner through the environmental, social inclusion & voluntary sectors on decision making bodies

- Strengthens the capacity of communities and of the environmental, social inclusion, community & voluntary groups to contribute positively to the community in which they reside/participate
- Provides information relevant to the environmental, social inclusion & voluntary sector and acts as a hub around which information is distributed and received.

In particular the role of the Network is:

1. To contribute to the local authority's development for the County/City a vision for the well-being of this and future generations.
2. to facilitate opportunities for networking, communication and the sharing of information between environmental, community and voluntary groups and between these groups and the local authority.
3. to identify issues of collective concern and work to influence policy locally in relation to these issues.
4. to actively support 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.
5. to encourage and enable public participation in local decision making and planning of services.
6. to facilitate the selection of participants from the environmental, social inclusion and voluntary sectors onto city/county decision making bodies.
7. to support a process that will feed the broad range of ideas, experience, suggestions and proposals of the Network into policies and plans being developed by agencies and decision makers in areas that are of interest and relevant to the Network
8. to work to develop the Environmental, Social Inclusion, Community and Voluntary sectors so that the work of the sectors is clearly recognised and acknowledged and the sectors have a strong collective voice within the County/City.
9. to support the individual members of the Public Participation Network so that:
  - They can develop their capacity and do their work more effectively.
  - They can participate effectively in the Public Participation Network activities.
  - They are included and their voices and concerns are heard.

## **1.2. Key Principles of Working**

The Public Participation Network will

- Implement and abide by good governance structures. One way of doing this would be by adopting the 'Governance Code for Community, Voluntary and Charitable Organisations'.
- Work in an inclusive, respectful, transparent and collaborative manner.
- Act as the vehicle to gather feedback and input into policies and plans being developed by local authorities, reflecting both areas of disagreement and, where there is no consensus, the range of views.

The Public Participation Networks must operate in a manner that recognises that the sectors are broad and made up of people with many different opinions. It is not expected that the Public Participation Networks will come up with a 'one voice response' but that it will feed back the issues and suggestions raised by a broad range of environmental, community and & voluntary groups. It is recognised that where contradictory responses are presented to the local authority, the ultimate responsibility for resolving these in the finalisation of policies will rest with the elected members.

## **2. Public Participation Network (PPN) Structures**

### **2.1. Outline of structure**

The Public Participation Network (PPN) will be organised:

- At County/City level
- At Municipal District level

Each PPN will have:

- A County/City Plenary at County/City level which deals with county/city level issues
- A Municipal District Plenary in each Municipal District which deals with issues at a municipal level
- Linkage Groups which deal with specific issues
- A secretariat at county/City level that is a facilitation and communication

mechanism. Details on these structures are provided below.

## **2.2. Municipal District PUBLIC PARTICIPATION NETWORK (PPN)**

Under the Local Government Reform Act 2014, each county is divided into Municipal Districts.

Each Municipal District will have a Public Participation Network (PPN). This is made up of community, voluntary and environmental organisations within the Municipal District. These organisations work together on agreed objectives based on promoting the well-being of this and future generations. Where the local authority would find operation of the Network as sub-Municipal District level advantageous, this can be provided for.

### **2.2.1. Municipal District Plenary**

The Plenary is the ruling body of the Municipal District PPN and is made up of all registered community, environmental and voluntary organisations in the District.

Each Member Organisation will have one vote. They may select two people to represent them on Plenary of the Municipal District PPN. One of these people will be the main *Representative* and the other the *Alternate*.

The plenary of each Municipal District PPN will meet formally at least twice a year. The initial meeting in year one will be convened by the County/City Council after which the Municipal District PPN makes its own arrangements.

Each Municipal District PPN will commence its work by going through a process to set out what it considers necessary to promote well-being for present and future generations.

The PPN in each Municipal District has the freedom to engage as it sees fit in whatever way it wishes to promote local development and in this way it can harness local capacity and strengthen local development in a very real manner.

The Plenary of each Municipal District PPN nominates one person to the Secretariat for the County/City PPN.

Member organisations of the Municipal District PPN may also be members of the City/County PPN.

In order for the Network to work effectively, it is recommended that there is one County Register for all environmental, voluntary and social inclusion groups, a copy of which will be maintained by the local authority in accordance with Section 128 of the Local Government Act 2001.

All groups must be registered by an agreed date in any given year, in order to have voting rights in the following year.

Network registration forms should be completed annually by organisations in the Public Participation Networks (PPN).

### **2.3. County/City PPN:**

All registered organisations in the County/City are members of the County/City PPN. The PPN will be the main channel through which people will be selected to participate in various processes of the County/City Councils and their Boards/Committees.

Participants will be chosen by the PPN and should not be rejected by the County Council or any of its structures. Likewise, the Council or its structures should not bypass the PPN in choosing representatives from the social inclusion, environmental or voluntary sectors to sit on any of its Boards/Committees.

#### **2.3.1. County/City Plenary**

At a county level the Plenary is the ruling body of the PPN

Member organisations are represented on the Plenary of the County/City PPN.

The County/City PPN Plenary will meet formally at least twice a year. The first meeting in year 1 will be organised by the Local Authority after which the County/City PPN Plenary will make its own arrangements.

Each Member Organisation will have one vote. They may select two people to represent them on the Plenary. One of these people will be the main *Representative* and the other the *Alternate*.

A Plenary Meeting shall be deemed a valid meeting if at least 15% of the Member Organisations are represented and also only if at least 4 of those present are members of the Secretariat. There must also be an automatic and guaranteed 21 days' notice of the meeting.

### **2.4. Secretariat**

Each City/County PPN will have a Secretariat whose role is to

- Facilitate the implementation of the decisions of the Plenary
- Ensure the proper functioning of the PPN in between Plenaries
- Coordinate activities of PPN
- Communicate extensively and regularly with all PPN members and in this process disseminate information concerning all PPN activities as widely as possible
- Manage the resource worker who will be provided to PPN at a county level to enable them in delivering their objectives

The Secretariat will meet at least four times a year.

The Secretariat will be made up of:

- one representative nominated from each of the Municipal District PPNs
- An equal number of representatives from each of the electoral colleges of the PPN, i.e. Community, Social Inclusion, and Environment. The minimum should be two from each.

The Secretariat should be provided with an office and have a resource worker. There should be provision for agenda-setting, including of matters of importance to the local authority.

## 2.5. Linkage Groups

The Linkage Group mechanism is central to ensuring that:

- All member organisations are enabled to participate in shaping the decisions that affect them that are being developed by any structure of the County/City Council.
- All member organisations play a direct role in choosing their participants in County/City Council structures addressing particular issues.
- The views of all those involved will be communicated within the relevant County/City structure.
- All member organisations will be fully up to date with developments in all of these County/City structures.

This is how the Linkage Groups work.

1. When the County/City Council has public participant seats to fill on any of its committees/structures it will notify the PPN Secretariat and ask that the representatives to fill these seats be chosen by the PPN.
2. The Secretariat will then
  - Notify ALL member organisations in the County/City of this situation, and
  - Arrange a time and place for a meeting of **all those organisations with an interest/involvement in the issue(s) being addressed by the particular body or, in the case of places representing particular interests of communities, those organisations which fit the relevant criteria.**

**This group will constitute a PPN 'Linkage Group' for this particular body and the topic(s) being addressed.**

- The Linkage Group will choose their representative(s) for the body.
- The person(s) chosen to represent the PPN in such bodies will meet their Linkage Group regularly.

- The Linkage Group should operate as their reference group on the issues arising.
- They will report back to the Linkage Group after every meeting.
- They will take direction from the Linkage Group on the positions they are to take on particular issues.

Each representative taking up such a position for the PPN must

- Represent the views of all the members of the Linkage Group and not just those of their own organisation.
- Abide by the communications protocols set out above.

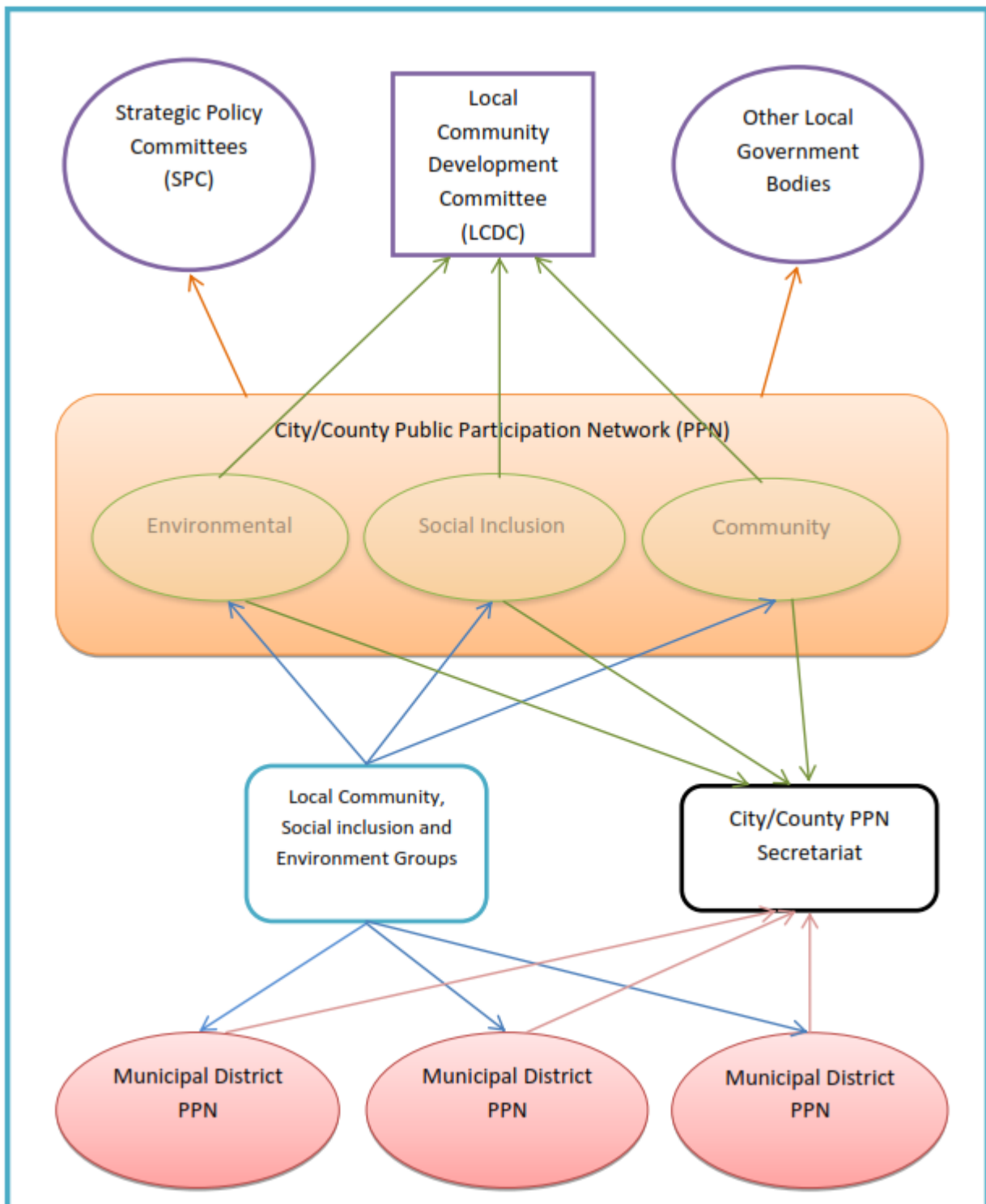


Diagram to show the relationship between the Public Participation Network Structures and Local Government Bodies - The arrows indicate nominating rights of the different bodies. This is just an example, there may be more than three Municipal Districts.



## **2.6. ELECTIONS of PPN Representatives for various bodies**

In all elections of PPN representatives, care will be taken to ensure:

- Gender balance
- Geographical spread of representatives

All nominations are formally ratified at the Plenary meeting of PPN.

### **2.6.1. Electoral Colleges**

Member Organisations when joining the PPN at a county level must opt to be a part of one of three electoral colleges within the PPN:

- Environment
- Social Inclusion
- Voluntary

To join the environment Electoral College an organisation's primary objectives and activities must be environmental (i.e. ecological) protection and/or environmental sustainability. Membership of this Electoral College will be validated by the Environmental Pillar at a national level.

To join the Social Inclusion Electoral College an organisation's primary objectives and activities must focus on social inclusion / social justice / equality.

Organisations whose primary objectives are other than those listed above will be members of the Voluntary Electoral College.

Each of these three Electoral Colleges

- Chooses an equal number of people (but not less than two) to represent them on the PPN Secretariat.
- Elects members from among their own college members to represent them on the County's Local Community Development Committee.
- In this respect, 5 members are to be nominated to the LCDC from the PPN (two from the Community and Voluntary College, two from the Social Inclusion College and one from the Environment College).

### **2.6.2. Criteria to guide choosing of PPN representatives to any bodies**

The following criteria will apply in making the decision about who to nominate:

- The track record of the nominee in working on the issue that is the focus for the representative forum.
- The ability of the nominee to make an effective contribution.
- The participation of people experiencing the problem/issue to be addressed at the representative forum.
- Whether the problem/issue to be addressed at the forum is a 'core issue' for the PPN member.
- As far as possible ensuring fair distribution of positions across geographical areas.
- As far as possible ensuring gender balance.
- A commitment from the person(s) to operate the linkage arrangements set out below.

In addition to the above, the following generic requirements must be met:

- Elected representatives of Local Authorities cannot be nominated through this process.
- If anyone nominated through this process subsequently decides to enter electoral politics he/she must immediately resign their PPN representative role and the relevant nominating PPN unit (Electoral College / Linkage Group) will choose a replacement.
- A person who has been an elected representative of any level of Government (local or national) should not be chosen to represent PPN in any representative role for one year after completing their term of office.
- Employees/professionals, where there is a conflict of interest, cannot be nominated.
- All PPN representatives must meet the criteria laid down by the unit that nominates them to their representative role.

## **2.7. Representing the PPN**

The nominees are required to represent the PPN and are accountable to the PPN membership. They are not representing their own organisation.

Specifically the role of the representative is to

- Bring issues of relevance from the body that chose them to the policy making arena.
- Give feedback to their Linkage Group, Electoral College and/or Plenary as appropriate on the outcomes of the policy meetings and the issues being raised.

## **2.8. Facilitating two-way communication in the Network**

In order for the Network structure to meet its objectives, it is critical that the representatives from the PPN actively give and seek feedback from its membership. It is therefore critical that appropriate dialogue structures are developed to facilitate this engagement, keep its membership up to date on work being progressed and gather information in relation to issues of concern by its broader membership. It is therefore recommended that for the Network:

- A representative's charter should be agreed
- Feedback forms/mechanisms should be agreed and must be completed by all representatives
- Web/social media mechanisms should be developed to communicate with the wider Network. This would include putting Agendas and agreed meeting notes up on the web for all structures and sub structures of the Network
- Newsletters should focus on feeding back and seeking feedback from / to the membership of the Network
- Specific consultation workshops should be held for particularly significant plans/policies. These could be organised by the Network in order to gather the ideas/suggestions of the wider environmental, community and voluntary sector
- Updates on all aspects of the work should be provided at Plenary meetings
- Opportunities for PPN members to feed into plans/policies that might be relevant to them should be highlighted

## **2.9. Promoting Well-being**

According to a study by the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) "a person's well-being relates to their physical, social and mental state. It requires that basic needs are met, that people have a sense of purpose, and that they feel able to achieve important goals, to participate in society and to live the lives they value and have reason to value."<sup>1</sup> A society's well-being requires that economic, political, environmental, cultural and social developments all be sustainable. It also requires a focus on inter-generational justice to ensure the well-being of future generations is promoted.

As noted already, the County/City Plenary and the Municipal District Plenary of the PPN will commence their work by going through a process to set out what they consider necessary to promote well-being for present and future generations. This process begins at Municipal District

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<sup>1</sup> NESC, 2009 *Well-Being Matters – A Social Report on Ireland*, NESC Dublin.

level. Such a statement may also be developed by other units of the PPN structure (e.g. Linkage Groups) if they wish to do so.

This statement will act as a guiding vision statement for everything done by the group that drew up the statement e.g. choosing representatives, taking positions on issues, developing activities of any kind etc.

Well-being statements should be reviewed by the PPN bi-annually.

#### **2.10. Benefits to groups in joining a Network**

- Only those groups who are members of the Network may nominate individuals to sit on Boards/Committees as Network participants/representatives
- Receipt of regular information which highlights and promotes the work of the Network and the activities of its members
- Receipt of information on opportunities to learn about and feed into policy and plans that may be relevant to the group
- May be part of a Linkage Group which meets directly and regularly with those representing the PPN on various County Boards/Committees dealing with issues of concern to the particular member organisation.
- Receipt of and submission of information / being part of a communications system managed by the Network
- Vote as an organisation to elect members on the countywide Secretariat
- Participate in training courses and workshops organised by the Network that support the development of the sectors involved and their representation on decision making bodies
- Engage in the wide variety of activities organised by the Network
- Can be elected on to policy making bodies in the city/county.
- Member groups can be part of a collective voice.

#### **2.11. Interaction of the Network with the Local Authority (LA) on LA Committees**

**The expectation of the Local Authority** from the Network representatives is that they will bring the knowledge and expertise of this sector with them and ensure that any policy developed has taken

into consideration their needs. It is expected that this should foster a higher degree of community relevance and local participation.

The LA will have a duty of care to ensure that the network is supported so that it can achieve its objective/purpose.

**The expectation of the PPN representatives** from the Local Authority is that Local Authorities will recognise their right and responsibilities in these areas. They will also have to ensure that engagement with the public really is participative. For appropriate participation of the public, user-friendly and easily accessible structures and processes are required.

#### **2.12. Network Meetings**

A timeline for Network Meetings across the county should be agreed annually so as to maximise inter-network collaborative working.

Care must be taken by both the Local Authority and the PPN to facilitate as far as possible the participation of volunteers who are not in a position to attend meetings during office hours.

Attendance at meetings should be monitored for the purpose of identifying problems with the process and structure. In the event of non-attendance for three consecutive Network meetings by an organisational representative, a meeting should be sought between the organisation and Network Facilitator and / or Chair to seek a resolution. If no resolution can be found, a replacement representative should be sought.

#### **2.13. Feedback structures – re representative on decision making structures**

- Feedback mechanisms should be agreed and must be completed by all representatives
- Representatives charter should be agreed

As well as meeting regularly with the relevant Linkage Group each person representing the PPN in any arena should complete a report of each meeting for circulation to the Linkage Group and to all others in the Network.

#### **2.14. Supports Necessary to Make the Network Effective**

Direct support for the Network should be provided by dedicated staff from the Local Authority with the support of Local Development structures where appropriate.

### 2.14.1. State Supports necessary to make the Network effective

Government and the local authorities need to play their part in ensuring that the community, voluntary and environmental sectors can actively and positively engage with its decision making forums. The following actions are suggested:

- **Local Authorities** to agree and adopt a Protocol for all committees/decision making committees with PPN representatives which will enable the representatives to engage appropriately
- **Local Authorities** to set aside resources for participation on key decision making committees to cover travel and subsistence expenses for PPN representatives
- **Local Authorities** to facilitate access to a library of relevant thematic documents focused on groups and committees that the **Network** are represented on
- **Local Authorities** to provide for one whole time equivalent staff member for the **Network**. It is essential that this resource is funded on an on-going basis so that the capacity of the development /coordination position is built upon and relationships with the community, voluntary and environmental sectors are developed on an on-going basis.
- **Local Authorities** to provide programme funding for all **Networks** which would allow them to
  - Roll out their annual programme of activity
  - Roll out minimum of 4 newsletters per year
  - develop web site/social media tools
  - Provide training supports for public Participants / Representatives
- Local Authorities to provide additional resources to enable effective participation in these structures. In particular, care should be taken to resource those who are most vulnerable and/or whose voices are least heard.

### 2.15. Training Supports that may be required for Representatives to enable them build their capacity for the role of PPN Representative.

**Training supports should include:**

- induction pack for new committee members
- An induction meeting to brief a new member should take place prior to the first policy making meeting
- If a key policy/plan is being developed, a workshop with key information on the policy/plan should be organised to build capacity of community to feed into the policy/plan
- Non-technical summaries of the main points of technical documents should be made available to all members of committees
- Technical mentors should be sought on a voluntary basis initially to enable all members to fully understand technical issues and to aid decision-making
- The Network's administration support should include office accommodation with a library of relevant documents available to representatives focused on the thematic groups they are represented on.
- Networks should organise guest speakers and workshops in relation to current topical areas /policies and plans to ensure members are kept up to date and informed on key national and local policies and plans.
- Network will work with other agencies in the county to develop a specific training plan for representatives that could include topics such as committee skill, advocacy, facilitation skills etc.
- The Network will give priority to training, up-skilling and enabling volunteers.

**2.16. Oversight, Monitoring and Evaluation**

The work of the PPN will be monitored and evaluated regularly in line with best practice. The focus of this oversight will be an assessment of whether or not they are achieving their overall purpose of facilitating engagement with the local authority and whether the structures, systems and processes are supporting the achievement of that purpose. This could be undertaken by the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) or a small Oversight Group appointed by the Minister.

### 2.16.1. Indicators in relation to measuring the work of the Network

In order to provide assurance that appropriate environmental, community and voluntary structures have been developed on the ground and that they are actively supported to engage with the decision making forums of the local authority, the information listed below should be among the data collated on an annual basis as part of their work programme.

In addition, the **Network** will be monitored on an ongoing basis and audited at least once in the lifetime of the local authority term.

Suggested Indicators to be collated on an Annual Basis

- Number of members of **the Network**
- Number of representatives on decision making bodies
- Number of decision making bodies that the **Network is** represented on
- Level of attendance at decision-body meetings by PPN Representatives.
- Level of attendance at Linkage Group meetings by PPN Representatives on decision-making bodies.
- Number of consultation workshop held by the **Network**
- Number of newsletters issued
- Number of email newsletters circulated
- Qualitative indicators, e.g. related to effectiveness would need to be developed
- Number of training supports developed or held for **Network** representatives
- Number of feedback forms completed by representatives
- Number of submissions made in relation to new policies/plans
- Number of hits on web site

In this process special attention should be paid to ensuring that the views of the PPN member organisations on promoting the well-being of present and future generations in their locality are being effectively communicated by PPN representatives in all arenas in which they participate.