



# LAOIS PUBLIC PARTICIPATION NETWORK

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SUBMISSION

Draft Strategic Policy Committee Scheme 2019-2024

## 1. Introduction

Laois Public Participation Network (PPN) was established under the Directive of the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government and in accordance with legislation in the Local Government Reform Act 2014 (Section 46).

Laois PPN is an independent organisation and is a framework for public engagement and participation with sustainability and wellbeing at its core. The aim of this structure is to facilitate and enable public organisations operating within the wider community to articulate and give voice to a diverse range of views, issues and interests within the local government system.

Laois PPN currently represents 540 registered community/voluntary, social inclusion and environmental groups across the county.

Laois PPN conducted meaningful consultation with the Secretariat, Representatives and member organisations of the PPN. The Secretariat of Laois PPN will make this submission on behalf of Laois PPN member organisations using comments and feedback gathered.

## 2. Climate Change: A Cross Party Consensus for Action

Laois PPN welcomes the four proposed SPC's that are represented on the Draft Strategic Policy Committee Scheme 2019-2024, those being:

- Housing Regeneration and Planning SPC
- Climate Action and Community SPC
- Transport, Environment and Emergency Services SPC
- Enterprise, Economic Development and Tourism SPC

The establishment of the proposed SPCs such as Climate Action and Community SPC, Transport Environment and Emergency Services SPC and the Housing and Planning SPC is a welcome reflection of the change in our society and the importance placed on the crisis that is facing our communities and society as a whole.

**'Climate Change: A cross Party Consensus for Action'** published in March 2019, by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate Action. This action plan highlights the importance of making decisions and how decisions made today will impact the present and future generations. Chapter 3 outlines clear recommendations that should be followed and implemented.

- 3.3 'Local authorities have significant structures and experience in engaging citizens through their planning functions, particularly local area planning and **as facilitators of the Public Participation Networks (PPNs)**. They can also effectively contribute to climate action in the fulfilment of their existing statutory functions. Climate Change considerations should be addresses across all local authority plans, policies and activities including their existing Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs) and a dedicated new Climate Change SPC for Climate Action'
- 3.4 **'Government must continue its support for Local Development Committees (LCDCs) and PPns**, financed through the Department of Rural and Community Development, as both offer the potential to act as key drivers of effective local action. However, there is currently no specific mandate for these bodies to address climate change. The Committee recommends that the **PPNs and the LCDCs be fully utilized and supported with additional resources to address climate change as part of their remit** and build capacity among communities to carry out projects which directly tackle climate change stating Budget 2020'
- 3.6 'The Committee recommends: The Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment should enable each local authority to establish or designate a Climate Action Strategic Policy Committee (SPC), to be incorporated into the SPC scheme for each Local Authority after June 2019. External representation on this SPC should be inclusive if all social, economic and environmental stakeholders (Section 3.3)'

### 3. Membership of the Strategic Policy Committees

Laois PPN broadly welcomes the allocation of 7 seats across the 4 SPC's, but notably are concerned that Laois PPN has no allocated seat on the Enterprise, Economic Development & Tourism SPC.

Throughout the county Community & Voluntary groups are leading the way in both retaining and creating employment in Laois. The Laois Commuter Survey 2018 identified a commuter profile detailing the skills, education and employment sectors of our 11,477 outbound commuters. This built a comprehensive profile of our commuter workforce which is now be used to promote Laois as a place to do business.

Community and Voluntary group have taken the lead in this regard with the establishment of digital hubs throughout the county, for example the Web Mill in Mountmellick and Bloom HQ in Mountrath just to name a few. Community and Voluntary groups such as Mountmellick MDA and Mountrath Community Forum are the driving force behind such initiatives and are streets ahead of the commercial sector in this regard.

Based in the Mountmellick Development Association (MDA) building in Irishtown, the Webmill co-working Digital Hub boasts the following:

- High-speed broadband
- Modern office setting
- Day and long-term usage options
- Flexible working hours
- Free car parking
- On campus restaurant
- On campus crèche
- Adjacent to park and river walks
- Be part of a like-minded community
- Access to 3rd level institutions
- Supports in place to turn you ideas into realities

“Mountmellick Webmill is the ultimate mash up of entrepreneurs, start-ups, growth companies, educational institutions, the Laois Chamber, state agencies and local government. Mountmellick Webmill allows entrepreneurs to use collaborative spaces, co working spaces, mingle with other entrepreneurs and have efficient access to everything from insights into the latest technology to legal and financial advice. Rather than endure long commutes and daily congestion, residents of the Digital Hub can choose to work and live in places that are connected, walk able, bike-able and connected by technology.”

With the in mind Laois PPN propose the allocation of 1 Community and Voluntary Seat to the Enterprise, Economic Development and Tourism SPC. This can be facilitated be moving the

Community/Voluntary seat currently allocated to the Housing and Planning SPC to the Enterprise, Economic Development and Tourism SPC. The table below provides a breakdown with the changes above reflected.

Committee	PPN Environment	PPN Community/Voluntary	PPN Social Inclusion	Total PPN Seats
Housing Regeneration & Planning SPC	1	0	1	2
Climate Action & Community SPC	1	1	1	3
Transport, Environment & Emergency Services SPC	1	0	0	1
Enterprise, Economic Development & Tourism SPC	0	1	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>7</b>

Section 3.2 – ‘A Strategic Role’ of the Draft SPC Scheme 2019-2024 states “consideration of the needs of people with disabilities in the formulation and implementation of relevant policies and the integration of sustainable principles to particular services and strategic monitoring of local authority services”

Laois PPN have noted that the Disability sector is not represented within the 4 proposed SPCS or as an Indicative Policy Area of any SPC. According to the 2016 census 14% of the population of Laois, or 11,393 people, have at least one disability.

Laois PPN in collaboration with the Disability Federation of Ireland hosted a consultation workshop to highlight, document and raise awareness of the challenges faced by people with disabilities in Laois. The aim of the consultation and subsequent report (copy included) was to highlight the needs of people with disabilities in Laois and propose responses to these needs through the SPC structure of Laois County Council. The Local Economic and Community Plan 2016-2021 High Level Goal 6 – Recognise and Support the Diverse Needs of People, “Work with key organisation to build a representative structure within the disability sector in Laois in order to facilitate their participation in decision making structures which inform social and economic policies and practice impacting on the sector”

Laois PPN recommends:

- “Disability” is included as an Indicative Policy Area under all 4 proposed SPC’s.
- A seat on each SPC is allocated to a representative of the Disability Special Interest Group of Laois PPN in order to convey views and represent the disability community in Laois.

The table below sets out the proposed changes in relation to Disability Sector.

Committee	Disability Rep	Total PPN Seats
Housing Regeneration & Planning SPC	1	1
Climate Action & Community SPC	1	1
Transport, Environment & Emergency Services SPC	1	1
Enterprise, Environment & Emergency Services SPC	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>

#### 4. Training Provision

Section 8.3 – “Training” of the Draft SPC Scheme 2019-2024 states “Laois County Council will provide on-going training for members of each SPC and for support staff, where appropriate and where resources permit”.

Laois PPN recommends that this provision be expanded to include appropriate training on:

- Induction to SPCs, including terms of reference and the processes and procedures of the SPCs.
- Briefing on relevant policy, including the reform of Local Government
- Workshops on the policy remit of SPCs
- Briefings on the requirement of the Transparency Code

Laois PPN feels that this provision is an enabling measure to best support all members of the SPC in fulfilling their representative roles and will result in quality outcomes for Laois County Council and SPC members.

Laois PPN further recommends that if an SPC provides training a report should be compiled by a designated representative who attended training and shared with representatives of the SPC. This would prove very beneficial to those who did not attend said training keeping them informed and ensuring they feel a welcome part of the SPC.

## 5. SPC Meetings

Section 3.9 – “Meetings” of the Draft SPC Scheme 2019-2024 states “Meeting will be held at a suitable time for the SPC members” and “Laois County Council may also consider varying the location of SPC meetings, and making great use of community halls/centres”.

As stated, Laois PPN is a network of 540 Environment, Community/Voluntary and Social Inclusion Groups. The majority of these groups are volunteer run and led. Laois PPN seek representatives from these groups to fill Environment, Community/Voluntary and Social Inclusion seats on the SPCs of Laois County Council. Many of these representatives are employed during the day. There is no financial cover for them missing work and it is unfair for them to lose their income or to interfere with their holiday allowances.

Laois PPN recommends:

- Laois County Council considers holding some, if not all SPC meetings outside normal working hours to accommodate volunteers.
- Laois PPN are on the Agenda at each SPC meeting.

In addition Laois PPN also recommends:

- Laois County Council issues a clear calendar of meetings, at least 4 per year, and that these dates are circulated to all representatives who sit on the SPC well in advance. These dates should also be published on the Laois County Council website and Laois PPN website.
- That these dates are adhered to, except in exceptional explained circumstances. This is particularly relevant to Laois PPN representatives on SPC’s as they represent the PPN as a whole and it is of vital importance that they have the opportunity to consult with their relevant Linkage Group ahead of SPC meetings.
- The Directors Report to be circulated to all representatives of each SPC with the Agenda in advance of all meetings. This will ensure that all representatives have the opportunity to study all material noting any queries they may have in order to put them to the chair at the relevant SPC meeting.
- Laois PPN recommends that the press be in attendance at SPC meetings. This is a privilege afforded to the press at Monthly Meeting of Laois County Council which should be extended to SPC meetings. This would ensure good communication with the wider public keeping them informed and giving them the opportunity to engage with their local representatives and Elected Members.

Having a good chairperson on an SPC is vital to their success and it has been commended that some of the chairpersons on previous SPCs have been outstanding. The attitude and abilities of the chairperson play an important part in how PPN representatives experience their role on the SPCs including:

- Feeling respected by and equal to the other members of the committee.

- Having the opportunity to share their experience and knowledge.
- Feeling that their knowledge and expertise is utilised.
- Knowing that their time, as a volunteer is valued.

PPN representatives are often coming into a culture and environment they are not familiar with. A positive atmosphere with mutual respect for all members will ensure that the SPC representatives will want to engage with it.

Suggestions on how these issues can be improved:

- Training for SPC chairpersons on how to run effective, inclusive and collaborative meetings.
- Chairpersons welcoming committee members and giving members of the SPC the opportunity to introduce themselves as standard procedure.
- An informal meeting the Chairperson and Laois PPN representatives before they attend their first SPC meeting to discuss the SPC.
- Chairperson to briefly outline procedures and protocol that will be followed during the meeting.

## Conclusion

Laois PPN welcomes the opportunity to feed into the Draft Strategic Policy Committee Scheme 2019-2024 and make this submission on behalf of the Environment, Community/Voluntary and Social Inclusion pillars of the PPN. We hope that Laois County Council find this submission beneficial, that it considers the suggestion put forward carefully and that the majority if not all recommendations are implemented in the new SPC Scheme.

In the meantime if you have any queries regarding the proposals contained herein please do not hesitate to contact us.