



**Galway City Community Network**  
**Líonra Pobail Chathair Na Gaillimhe**

**The Public Participation Network in Galway City**

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## **Seanad Public Consultation on the Future of Local Democracy**

**GCCN Submission**

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**September 2023**

### **Preface**

Established in 2014, **Galway City Community Network (GCCN)** is the Public Participation Network in Galway City. It represents over 160 groups and organisations in the community, voluntary and environmental sectors in Galway City. The twin objectives that GCCN pursues are to:

- Advance the values of sustainability, equality, culture, community, empowerment, and inclusivity and embed these in the policies, programmes and practice of local government, state organisations, national government, and civil society.
- Develop and implement progressive models of, and approaches to representation, participation, and engagement for civil society in informing and shaping policy development and implementation.

## Submission to the Seanad Public Consultation on the Future of Local Democracy

GCCN welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Seanad Public Consultation on the future of Local Democracy. GCCN is particularly concerned with the promotion of meaningful and effective participation of communities in the decision-making processes that affect their lives. GCCN is deeply committed to the principles of participation, representation, and consultation as we believe that:

- It is the right of people to participate in decisions and policies that affect them and their communities.
- The participation of people and communities' benefit and improve decision-making and policy development.

GCCN opposes tokenistic forms of participation, representation and consultation and advocates for true collaboration between policy makers, decision makers and those who are impacted by the decisions being taken. True collaboration has the potential to mobilise ideas, resources, and support for jointly created solutions, in a way that does not marginalise issues within more traditional social dialogue processes favouring economically powerful actors. As such, its relevance as a vehicle to address issues such as poverty, inequality, homelessness, climate change, and social exclusion is clear.

### Strategic Policy Committees and Participative Democracy

According to the Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage Strategic Policy Committees were established "to advise and assist the council in the formulation, development, and review of policy. The SPC system is intended to give councillors and relevant sectoral interests an opportunity for full involvement in the policy making process from the early stages" (<https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation-information/92877-local-government-policy/>).

This is not the experience of GCCN Representatives. GCCN Representatives report that there is little to no deliberation on policy at SPC meetings and many SPC meetings consist of presentations on work underway rather than discussions on policy development. Where policies are presented, they are done so in draft form with little opportunity for input and change.

Since their inception, Public Participation Networks (PPNs) have developed themselves to be a key conduit for community engagement. The relationships they have built within their community group members and their ability to network and facilitate connections are reaping huge benefits for all community stakeholders. They are ideally placed to support and facilitate citizen engagement.

**However, PPNs need to be resourced properly to enable them to reach more marginalised communities to build their capacity to engage at local government level.**

GCCN, as the public participation network for Galway City representing over 160 member groups, believes that public engagement and participation in the local government process and functions is the cornerstone of local democracy.

## What should public participation look like?

There are several guideline documents that outline what public participation should look like in practice. GCCN uses the **idea of a Ladder** drawn from the work of Sherry Arnstein and Roger Hart to consider participation on a spectrum, **moving from non-participation to tokenism and consultation, to true power sharing**. We use this idea because meaningful participation to us involves seeing **real influence** on the policies and plans that affect our groups.

Real influence is achieved by public participation that goes **beyond voting (representative democracy)** to a situation where **people and government work in partnership to co-create infrastructure and services, solve problems and work towards the well-being of all (deliberative democracy)**.<sup>1</sup>

However, **achieving the kind of meaningful participation needed to influence** goals and outcomes is a **much more complex challenge**<sup>2</sup>. There are guidelines that outline the kinds of actions, or processes needed to make this happen.

For example, the Local Community Development Committee Guidelines for operations<sup>3</sup> highlight the importance of a **bottom-up, collaborative** approach to community and citizen engagement, with a clear focus on the social inclusion of marginalised groups. **Information** regarding LCDC activities should be **published regularly for transparency and accountability** and meetings should entail a **two-way information flow** between community and sectoral interests and the local authority. **Decision-making should be transparent** and allow for appeals where relevant. The frequency, location and timing of meetings are decided by the Chairperson in consultation with the Chief Officer. This means that there is room to negotiate for **meetings to be held at times that facilitate attendance** by all members removing barriers to participation.

This is important as a case study of PPN operations notes that **for PPN representatives to contribute effectively on equal terms in Council Committees, timely information on Council business, and consideration of practical challenges need to be addressed**. For example, PPN volunteers need to get time off work or other commitments to attend meetings while Local Authority staff or other representatives engage in the committees as part of their job.<sup>4</sup>

The **Local Economic and Community Plans Guidelines (2021)** also call for a bottom-up **collaborative approach** in which **key stakeholders contribute in meaningful ways** and **can see their views**

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<sup>1</sup> [Public Participation Networks - Launch of the 2020 Annual Report | Social Justice Ireland](#)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> [281118173519-f678a0f50ea64eff8a2f7dd9808285b6.pdf \(assets.gov.ie\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Public-Participation-Network-Case-Study-June-2020.pdf \(ops.gov.ie\)](#)

**represented** in the development of local plans. There is a call for **active participation** in this guideline document based on the idea that plans and policies will not be effective without the input of those affected in the **design, implementation and monitoring** of the plan.

The values and ideas about collaboration, partnership, and transparent decision-making in public participation are in line with the **Council of Europe's Code of Good Practice for Public Participation** (2009). This document outlines key local authority responsibilities in participatory policy formulation, from agenda setting to drafting, and from decision-making to monitoring and reformulating policy if necessary. It is recommended that local authorities **develop and transparent decision-making process, providing clear, open, and accessible procedures for participation and for co-decision-making**.

However, this document also contains ideas that could improve participation at a local level, yet are not adequately addressed in policies and processes. It states that Local authorities must also take steps to be **responsive to groups and representatives to ensure their active involvement by listening, reacting, and giving feedback to consultation responses and civil society input**, including specific needs arising from circumstances around policy implementation.<sup>5</sup>

Responsive communication and ethical engagement inform the International Association for Public Participation's (IAP2), **seven core values** that should **"help make better decisions which reflect the interests and concerns of...affected people and entities."** These values include **involving the public only when they will have a real, tangible influence on the ultimate decision**, providing **participants with sufficient information to participate**, and **informing participants about how their input affected the final decision or issue**.<sup>6</sup>

**The Scottish National Standards for Community Engagement** also affirms **ongoing communication processes** as a crucial component of meaningful engagement and describes the features this process must have if it is to be fair, effective, and successful<sup>7</sup>.

- **Information** on the community engagement process, and what has happened as a result, is **clear and easy to access and understand**.
- Information is made **available in appropriate formats**.
- Without breaking confidentiality, participants have **access to all information that is relevant to the engagement**.
- **Systems are in place** to make sure the views of the wider community, particularly marginalised groups, **continuously help to shape the engagement process**.
- **Feedback is a true representation of the range of views** expressed during the engagement process.
- Feedback includes **information on: the engagement process; the options which have been considered; and the decisions and actions that have been agreed, and the reasons why**.

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<sup>5</sup> [Code good practice en \(socialjustice.ie\)](https://www.socialjustice.ie/code-good-practice-en)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.iap2.org/page/corevalues>

<sup>7</sup> [Communication — VOICE \(voicescotland.org.uk\)](https://www.voicescotland.org.uk/communication)

The IAP has summarised what Public Participation is, and how it should happen, and we think this is a fair description:

- Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a **right to be involved** in the decision-making process.
- Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will **influence the decision**.
- Public participation **promotes sustainable decisions** by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision-makers.
- Public participation **seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision**.
- Public participation **seeks input** from participants in designing **how they participate**.
- Public participation provides participants with the **information they need to participate in a meaningful way**.
- Public participation **communicates to participants how their input affected the decision**.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> [Spectrum of Public Participation – Organizing Engagement](#)