

**Consultation:**

Open Government Partnership
Ireland: Have Your Say

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Participation, engagement,
targetting

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No

Observations:**Theme:** Do you have ideas on how to improve citizen engagement?**Title:** Enhancing Community Development - Enhancing Participation, Consultation & Representation

Introduction

Community Work Ireland is a national organisation that promotes and supports community work/community development as a means to address poverty, social exclusion and inequalities.

CWI acknowledges the work that has been invested in the Open Government Partnership and welcomes the opportunity to make a submission. We welcome the aim to foster greater citizen consultation and involvement to strengthen democracy and improve public services, and acknowledge:

- The need to balance greater, and more meaningful consultation with the specific requirements of all diverse interests; and
- The practical considerations that will encourage and enhance active participation in the development and implementation of policy.

We concur that meaningful participation increases the legitimacy of public decision-making and we welcome the acknowledgement that citizen participation requires accessible and timely information about policy and service development proposals. We welcome the objective of embedding citizen participation in a sustainable way in public policy making and service delivery across the spectrum of national and local work.

Below CWI sets out a number of observations that we hope will make a constructive contribution.

Observations

Participation must be resourced and supported. Opportunities for participation have been seriously eroded at local and national level in recent years as organisations and groups have had their resources reduced and their priorities changed. Whereas a number of years ago, a vibrant, dynamic community sector facilitated empowerment processes that ensured 'citizens' were supported to participate, these opportunities have been significantly impeded by a new focus on labour market activation instead of community development. A much more robust programme to facilitate community development at local level must be reinstated if the government is serious about the aspirations in the OGP.

- The status of the Open Government Partnership needs to be enhanced. While guidance is useful, and principles very important, they can remain ignored, side-lined or taken less than seriously. It is the experience of CWI members that while consultation is a term frequently used at national and local level, it is rarely a genuine exercise. CWI members have frequently used the terms 'tokenistic', 'going through the motions' and 'a tick-box exercise' to describe their experiences of consultation processes. The fact that the guidance does not have legal force is problematic and we would encourage a legislative framework.
- The power to decide. CWI would be concerned that the power to decide consultation mechanisms - processes, with whom and by whom - still remains with officials. CWI has seen evidence, for example, where a number of stakeholders are selected to be consulted with and other genuine stakeholders are omitted from processes. The recently established Public Participation Network National Advisory Committee is a case in point - members were selected without recourse to any process. If the objective is meaningful participation to enhance democracy, this practice cannot be allowed to continue and clear and transparent processes of consultation must be developed. At local level, while CWI acknowledges the importance and potential of the Public Participation Networks, consultation should not be confined to the PPNs. Similarly, at national level, there is a growing tendency to rely on the Community and Voluntary Pillar as the conduit for consultation, participation and indeed representation. The C&V Pillar is not a representative structure for the community or voluntary sectors and does not operate in this way. Consultation, participation and representation processes and structures need to move well beyond the C&V Pillar structure.
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- CWI would be concerned at any assumption that there is a level of understanding and acceptance of the importance of stakeholder input in policy design by officials. As stated above, such understanding is frequently absent. It is the experience of CWI members that the community sector, and specifically those working in community development whether on a paid or voluntary basis, are those that most often ask for and engage (when invited) in consultation processes. It is also their experience that these efforts are often stymied and thwarted by what is ultimately a failure to engage in processes in a meaningful way. Therefore, much more emphasis needs to be put on:
 - building the awareness of officials at all levels of central and local government to appreciate the importance of stakeholder engagement;
 - Building their capacity to engage effectively and genuinely.
 - Ensuring a commitment to genuine and meaningful engagement

In that context officials need not only to be made aware of the action in the Civil Service Renewal Plan to develop more open approaches to policy-making, they need to understand that it is an imperative and need to be supported to implement mechanisms that will make this a reality.

- CWI believes that the principles upon which the Open Government Partnership process is built is very important. The key word in relation to the principles is genuine. If consultation is genuine – that is if there is an understanding and a commitment to the value of the contribution consultation can bring to policy development – the process of consultation will follow. Therefore, it is our view that the emphasis needs to be put on establishing the foundations and the rules governing processes of engagement and consultation.

- Process. It is the experience of CWI that what is often presented as consultation represents bad practice. For example, consultation events being organized with little notice, inadequate time provided for submissions, documents being made available at the last minute and in formats that are difficult to follow, lack of timely (or at times any) feedback etc. This bad practice can be particularly challenging for members of marginalised communities such as Travellers, migrants, people with a disability etc., for whom written communication can be difficult. Therefore, we believe that an emphasis needs to be put on the following:
 - Consultation mechanisms have to be planned and the elements of the consultation plan should be communicated widely;
 - Appropriate methods of consultation need to be negotiated with communities and representative organisations;
 - Barriers to participation including the well documented barriers preventing the participation of women must be identified and addressed and supports (including childcare/social care and disability supports) put in place to ensure maximum participation of those whose voices are frequently absent.
 - The onus should be on the public body to ensure that consultation mechanisms are appropriate and adequate and not on communities and community organisations to respond to unrealistic deadlines.
 - Feedback. It is acknowledged that feedback is explicitly mentioned as an important part of consultation. It is the experience of CWI members that feedback is hardly ever provided to those that engage in consultation processes. There should be an imperative on public bodies to provide feedback and an explanation for decisions.
 - CWI is concerned to ensure that local government officials who are now being charged with increasing roles and responsibilities in the area of community development and local development, should be required to provide evidence that they are fulfilling their obligations to consult in a genuine and meaningful way, and not in ways that perpetuate the mistakes of the past.
 - Monitoring and a complaints mechanism. We believe that a monitoring and complaints mechanism is a prerequisite to ensuring that this guidance will have a positive impact. It is no longer adequate to say that consultation is important and that it benefits policy development and implementation. If there is genuine sentiment underpinning this principle, its implementation needs to be monitored at all levels and a complaints mechanism developed and enforced, supported by sanction where appropriate.
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Number of Documents Attached: 0

Boundaries Captured on Map: No