PPN Conference, Carlow, October 2019 - Panel Discussion – summary notes.

Panel members acknowledged the issues and challenges that were identified in the membership survey. They concurred with the PPN members that compliance with, and adherence to, the Governance Code and associated best practice can be onerous and can pose challenges for population cohorts who experience social inclusion / inequality. However, they injected a note of optimism and encouragement into the deliberations, as they reported that the process is not as onerous as groups may genuinely perceive it to be. They encouraged groups to take on board the spirit and the letter of the governance code, and they referred to the benefits, including easier access to public funding and improved organisational efficiency.

The panel members acknowledged that while governance compliance is time consuming and requires investment and commitment, it benefits community groups in the longer term. Thus, they encouraged groups to avail of the supports that are open to them, including through the Local Development Companies (SICAP – Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme) and Volunteer Centres. The discussion noted the need for 'ongoing supports', including funding – not just once-off interventions – in enabling groups to adopt excellence in governance. They also indicated that the most recent guidelines issued by the Charities' Regulator have made the process more realistic and attainable for smaller groups. In essence, the panel members encouraged groups to engage with the process and to pursue it. They remarked that good governance engenders trust – trust with funders and with the general public.

Referring to the logistics of governance compliance, the panel noted that the system is based on 'comply or explain', and that this allows for bespoke responses and tailored approaches.

When asked about best practices and the mainstreaming of supports, the panel members noted that those groups that have good governance systems in place are now able to concentrate on strategy and development; they have time for discussion and engagement. The panel referred to the usefulness of information sessions in promoting good governance, and they underscored the value of inter-group and inter-PPN networking and information sharing.

The panel discussion noted that as groups put governance systems and procedures in place, they can find themselves moving beyond service delivery and local development, and assuming advocacy roles. This brings them into increased interfaces with local government and the statutory sector, and helps engender an environment and context that are more amenable to citizen engagement.

Good governance, community development and advocacy require particular skills, and groups were advised and encouraged to invest in their personnel – voluntary and staff. Thus, they may co-opt people with particular expertise and skillsets, although this process needs to be motivated and underpinned by a commitment to community development principles and to the inclusion of all population cohorts, including those who are currently under-represented in decision making.

Citing the five-year strategy and other evidence, the panel members referred to the economic and societal value of the community and voluntary sector, and its role in sustaining vital public services. The sector delivers public goods and needs to be acknowledge more in that regard. Thus, there is a need for metrics and for greater celebration and publication of the outputs and impacts of community and voluntary groups. There is also a need for more continuous and systematic approaches to partnership on behalf of statutory bodies, and there are merits in the community and voluntary sector being involved in the co-delivery and monitoring of the five-year strategy 'Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities'.