



IPA REPORT
ON A REVIEW OF
STRATEGIC POLICY COMMITTEES
(SPCs)

2024

Review of the Strategic Policy Committees

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1. Introduction

1.1. Purpose of the review

The Institute of Public Administration, in 2023, was engaged by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (hereafter referred to as ‘the Department’) to undertake a general review of the operation, role and impact of the strategic policy committees (SPCs). This committee system, which operates across Ireland’s local government sector, assists elected councils in the formulation, development and review of policy.

Given changes to the SPC system in 2014, coupled with the 2020 *Programme for Government* commitment to ‘mandate the establishment of climate action SPCs’ in each local authority, the Department believed it timely to review this committee structure (Department of the Taoiseach: 2020, p. 119). A Stakeholder Working Group (SWG), chaired by the Department, was established to oversee, advise on and steer this review.

According to its terms of reference, the review is intended to evaluate the operation of SPCs, including the legislative provisions and the Department-issued guidelines which provide for SPCs, with a view to:

- enhancing the effectiveness of the operation, role and impact of SPCs;
- enhancing the effectiveness of the interaction of SPCs with the Corporate Policy Group;
- further strengthening and empowering elected members of local authorities in their policy-making role;
- ensuring that communities and all stakeholders, have appropriate input, via SPCs, to policy-making processes at local level in an inclusive and facilitative manner.

1.2. Research methodology

A qualitative research approach was largely taken for the review which drew on the experiences and views of councillors, sectoral representatives, public officials and other stakeholders involved in the SPC process. This research approach provides valuable information on the context within which practitioners operate while also reveals insights into their attitudes. Qualitative methods, which involve in-depth interviews, direct observation and the review of documentation, allows researchers to understand the perspectives of others and thereby ‘study selected issues in depth and detail’ (Quinn Patton, 1990, pp. 11-13). As Ospina, Esteve and Lee note, qualitative data ‘at their best, are words that emerge from observations... interviews... or documents... are collected (or accessed) in a naturalistic way... and are processed through several iterations of systematic analysis’ (2017, p. 596). Research findings produced by a qualitative approach helps to improve decision-making, inform actions and solve problems.

To gather as many views on the SPCs as possible, a survey was carried out as part of the project. The responses from this short online survey, which was targeted at SPC members, officials, and other stakeholders, supplements the qualitative data from the consultations and interviews and provides a quantitative aspect to the research.

The research methodology for this review, which was carried out from June to November 2023, had the following elements:

- Desk-based analysis of relevant documents (SPC written material, reports, government policies etc).
- Numerous stakeholder consultations and interviews were held to gather a wide range of views on key aspects of the SPC system. This research phase involved a representative sample of local authorities, relevant government departments and stakeholders. See Appendix 2 for a complete list of the organisations that participated in the review.
- SPC members across the thirty-one local authorities and key stakeholders, were invited to participate in an online survey. The Department, on behalf of the IPA, circulated the survey link to all local authorities and the SWG requesting its completion.¹ The target audience for the survey were members of SPCs across local government, council staff who facilitate the operation of the SPCs, members of the SWG and relevant staff in their organisation.

For clarity, in the report, all the individuals who took part in the consultation sessions, interviews and survey, in general, are referred to as ‘contributors’ or ‘research participants’.

1.3. Structure of the review

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 provides information on the background and context of the SPCs. Chapter 3 presents the review findings under key headings. Section 3.2 examines how the committees are configured and their membership; section 3.3 explores practical aspects of the SPC meetings. In section 3.4, the linkages between the SPCs and the plenary council and CPG are explored; section 3.5 looks at the impact of the committees; and section 3.6 considers the introduction of climate action-only SPCs. Chapter 4 presents key findings from the survey of stakeholders. Finally, chapter 5 provides a conclusion and recommendations arising from the review. Section 5.1. contains the conclusion while section 5.4. sets out the recommendations relating to key aspects of the SPC process.

The Department’s 2014 guidelines provide a general framework for the operation of the SPCs. Before presenting the findings in Chapter 3, each section highlights aspects of the guidelines most relevant to

¹ This online survey was open for responses from 13th to 24th November 2023. There were 655 respondents to the survey.

the topic under consideration. This approach helps readers to compare how the SPC system should operate on paper, with current practice in local authorities.

2. Background and context:

2.1 Government reform and the introduction of the SPCs

Today's SPC system is the product of the modernising efforts of policymakers nearly thirty years ago. *Better Local Government: A Programme for Change*, a 1996 white paper which proposed the establishment of SPCs, stressed the need for a strategic approach to 'local government renewal' (Government of Ireland, 1996). One of the reform programme's guiding principles - 'strengthening local democracy and widening participation' - provided the impetus for the introduction of SPCs. Inspired by the success of Ireland's 'social partnership' model, these new participative structures were established in each local authority, focusing on policy issues related to council functions. Policymakers, at the time, saw the SPCs as a mechanism to help councillors realise more fully their policy role, while simultaneously involve local groups in the decision-making process.

The first SPCs were set-up in the late-1990s, but it was not until the passage of the Local Government Act 2001 that the committees were given a legislative basis. The SPCs, according to the Act, would be established by city and county councils to 'consider matters connected with the formulation, development, monitoring and review of policy' relating to local authority functions, while the committees would also advise the plenary council on such matters (section 48 of the Local Government Act 2001). In addition, the Act legislated for the formation of a Corporate Policy Group (CPG) in each city and county council which would, among other duties, coordinate the work of the SPCs.

Following their introduction, government expectations were high in terms of the SPCs helping to strengthen the councillor and community role in the local policy process. With partnership at the heart of the SPC system, it was clear that the different groups involved – councillors, sectoral interests and local authority management – would need to effectively collaborate to ensure success (Oireachtas, 2000).

However, the operation of the SPCs has not come without challenges with the committees reviewed periodically to address problems and improve performance. For example, the IPA reviewed the committees in 2004, while the Department carried out a survey of SPCs in 2009. Furthermore, the 2012 *Putting People First: Action Programme for Effective Local Government*, which acknowledged that the SPC system had 'achieved a measure of success', promised that the SPCs would be reviewed and strengthened accordingly (Government of Ireland: 2012, pp. 132-34).

2.2 Key elements of the SPC system

Since the inception of the SPC system, the Department, from time to time, has updated its guidelines on the establishment and operation of the CPGs and SPCs. The most recent guidance, covering key aspects of the SPC process, was published in 2014. The below table, adapted from these guidelines, outlines the main features of the SPC system.

| Summary of the SPC System | |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. | The role of the Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs) and the Corporate Policy Group (CPG) is to formulate policy proposals, evaluate and report on policy implementation, for consideration and final decision by the full council. |
| 2. | A focus on the SPCs' policy-making and strategic role is fundamental to the SPC concept. In their work, SPCs are not concerned with individual representational or operational issues. |
| 3. | The SPC system presents councillors with a prime opportunity to become more involved in policy formulation. It provides a chance to review and optimise committee structures and related procedures, which demands a rationalisation of existing committees and standing procedures. |
| 4. | Each authority will have generally four SPCs, with the option of more in the largest authorities, if warranted. |
| 5. | SPCs are to be chaired by one of the councillor members. |
| 6. | SPCs are to have a minimum total membership of nine. |
| 7. | One third of the members of each SPC are to be drawn from relevant sectoral interests; to provide relevant expertise and advice and allow for a range of inputs in the formulation of policy. |
| 8. | At a minimum 6, and where appropriate 7 sectors, should be represented in each local authority's SPC configuration. These are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Agriculture / Farming (Rural Authorities) - Environmental / Conservation - Development / Construction - Business / Commercial - Trade Union - Community/Voluntary - Social Inclusion |
| 9. | Relevant organisations for each sector will be identified as early as possible, parallel with the drafting of the scheme. |
| 10. | Each sector will select its own nominee(s) via the PPN, where appropriate. |
| 11. | The CPG is to comprise the Cathaoirleach of the local authority, the SPC chairs and a representative of each municipal district, as needed, in accordance with section 133(1) of the 2001 Act. It is to be chaired by the Cathaoirleach. It will be supported by the Chief Executive. |
| 12. | The role of the Corporate Policy Group (CPG) is to coordinate the work of the SPCs and facilitate the flow of the outcome of the work of the SPCs to the council. |
| 13. | Area Committees can complement the SPC system in local authorities that do not have a municipal district. Local operational matters should be assigned to these area committees as the SPC system will not deal with local representational issues and operational issues. |

Source: Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (2014)

Each local authority, according to the guidance, will prepare an SPC scheme explaining how it will operationalise the SPC system. Lasting the duration of the council term, the schemes set out the

number of SPCs in the local authority, their policy focus, the number of councillors and sectoral representatives on each committee and how many meetings will be held annually.

The SPC process, by its nature, is highly collaborative, involving a variety of actors: elected members; sectoral representatives; directors of services; administrative staff and other groups. The guidance makes it clear that the success of the SPCs depends on high levels of engagement, collaboration and support from the council executive. Appendix 1 provides a diagram setting out the role of the key actors in the SPC process.

But of course, the departmental guidelines only advise how the SPC system should operate, so the document does not represent a set of instructions. Individual local authorities, therefore, have some flexibility to vary their operational approach. Ireland's local government sector is rather diverse, with the 31 local authorities having different resources, capacities and priorities. In this context, where local circumstances have a significant influence on the sector, the objective of the guidelines is to 'create a common general framework' to support local authorities in the configuration and operation of the SPCs.

2.3 The current SPC cycle (2019–24)

Following the 2019 local elections, all local authorities prepared and adopted an SPC scheme. According to an analysis of these SPC schemes, and information obtained from local authority websites, there are currently 159 SPCs operating across the local government sector. The number of SPCs in each local authority varies according to local circumstances, but generally there are between four and six committees. One local authority has eight SPCs, which is the most in the country, while another local authority has three SPCs which is the fewest. The vast majority of SPCs cover council service areas but are arranged in differing groupings or combinations across the local authorities; however, there are some SPCs which are based on themes (e.g. a Governance SPC).

The titles of SPCs also reflect policy priorities for local authorities. In the context of the climate emergency, twenty-seven local authorities (of the thirty-one) have an SPC with 'climate' in its title. In addition, there are some SPCs with 'land use', 'marine', 'placemaking' and 'mobility' in their title, highlighting the salience of these policy topics at the local level.

3. Findings

3.1. Introduction

This chapter presents findings from the review of the SPCs. The consultations, interviews, and survey,² which focused on the role, operation and impact of the SPCs, examined the strengths and weaknesses

² Responses to the two open-ended questions in the survey informed this findings chapter.

of the SPC process and sought to identify ways to strengthen the process. The views, opinions and suggestions of contributors, based on their experiences of the SPC system, have been analysed under the following themes:

- The role, configuration and membership of the SPCs;
- Meetings of the SPCs;
- SPC linkages with the plenary council and the CPG;
- The impact of the SPCs;
- The proposal for climate action-only SPCs;

Under each of these themes, key insights and issues - identified from the research data - have been presented. As the topics examined by the review are closely related, it should be noted that there is some overlap in the findings presented under several of the themes. Relevant points from the 2014 guidelines are highlighted to clarify for readers how the SPC system should operate, while it will allow for a comparison of how the committees work in practice. Of course, it needs to be remembered that the guidelines provide a broad framework for the operation of the SPCs thereby affording local authorities a level of discretion.

3.2. SPC role and remit, configuration, membership and topics of discussion

This section considers the role of the SPCs, their configuration in relation the local authority functions, and also the membership and the topics considered by the committees. This theme elicited a range of views from contributors to the review.

3.2.1 The role and remit of the SPCs

What the guidelines state

- The SPCs assist the council in the formulation, development and review of policy
- SPCs bring together both elected members and people actively working with social, economic, cultural and environmental bodies to develop and review policies related to council services. The SPCs thus provide elected members with external views as they discharge their strategic role in the development of the local authority, including their policy development and oversight roles within the local authority
- A focus on the SPCs' policy-making and strategic role is fundamental to the SPC concept.

Source: DECLG, 2014

Our findings: Key insights and issues emerging

When asked about the positive aspects of the SPCs, many contributors praised the concept of the SPC system. It was widely felt that bringing elected representatives and sectoral interests together to

discuss policy issues, in a spirit of partnership, is a very worthy endeavour. The SPC system attracts individuals who are knowledgeable of key policy areas and often passionate about improving local services. Given time pressures at full council meetings, it was also noted that the SPCs play a valuable role in affording elected members the space to consider policy matters in greater depth.

The participative nature of SPCs was often praised, making them a valuable structure from a good democratic governance perspective.³ Discussions at SPC meetings involve an exchange of views and ideas which promote a shared understanding of policy issues across a range of stakeholders. When the process works well, contributors argued that the SPCs provide a structured mechanism through which policy recommendations, after they are ratified by the full council, can become practice at the local level. Thus, in line with the original ambition of *Better Local Government*, the SPCs can strengthen the policy role of councillors.

Despite this, many participants in the research felt that the SPCs do not always work as they should. As one individual saw it, while the SPCs offer councillors ‘huge potential to influence’ policy, for various reasons the committees are often not very effective.

How an SPC operates in practice depends on a range of variables; for example, the quality of the chair, the level of secretariat support and whether or not a work programme is in place. Where it was reported that the SPCs don’t work as effectively as they should, several research participants noted that the focus at committee meetings often shift from strategic to more operational matters. In this context, there was a sense that while the SPC concept is very good, overall, the performance of SPCs varies significantly across local government. Many contributors stressed the need for change to the SPC system to bring about greater consistency in how the committees operate.

The role of the SPCs, according to the guidelines, involves assisting the council in the ‘formulation, development and review of policy.’ The SPC process is therefore not just concerned with policy development or formulation,⁴ but also with reviewing policy. So SPCs have quite a broad role. Feedback from the consultations and survey suggest that the Department, in an effort to promote a better understanding of the SPC process, needs to provide greater clarity on how the different parts of the policy role should work in practice. For example, does the review of policy just mean scrutinising a local statutory policy before it is adopted by the full council? Or does it also involve monitoring the local policy’s implementation? Furthermore, the guidelines fail to draw a distinction between local and national policy in the work of SPCs, only ever referring to ‘policy’. Similarly, the primary legislation

³ Participation is a key aspect of the Council of Europe’s twelve principles of good democratic governance. For more, see: [https://www.coe.int/en/web/good-governance/12-principles#:%225565951%22:\[0\]](https://www.coe.int/en/web/good-governance/12-principles#:%225565951%22:[0])

⁴ The exact difference between policy ‘formulation’ and policy ‘development’ seems unclear.

governing the SPCs does not refer to local policy, leaving the policy role of the SPCs open to interpretation in terms of how it is performed. Does this mean, therefore, that an SPC should review national as well as local policy? There needs to be a clear and common understanding of the role.

Feedback from research participants highlights a sense of uncertainty about the remit of the SPCs. For one contributor, there is 'no clarity around which actual policies the SPC has oversight of or what your body of work should be'. Examples were cited of SPC members working on policy proposals but subsequently being told by the executive that these policies were outside the remit of the SPC. To help manage expectations regarding the work of the SPCs, committee members need to be clear from the outset which policy areas their SPC can and cannot make recommendations on. In the absence of such clarity, members can misunderstand the role and remit of the SPCs, leading to heightened expectations and frustrations with the process.

This matter of clarity is of central importance to the success of participative structures and can be an area of concern for many of those involved. For example, a review of the PPN, in recent years, observed a lack of clarity around the PPN's role in the engagement process and made recommendations to improve stakeholder understanding of roles and responsibilities (Mazars: 2022, p. 25 and p. 31).

Along with a desire for greater clarity in respect of its role and remit, there was a view that the SPC structure could be fundamentally changed to 'add value' to the wider policy-making process. Opportunities to formulate local policies, it was argued, are limited at the local level given that councils operate within a highly centralised system. However, in line with bottom-up approaches to policymaking, it was felt that the SPCs could provide practical information and feedback on public services and policy proposals to government departments as they develop national policies. Indeed, such an initiative would appear to support efforts by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to encourage a more co-design approach to public services.⁵ However, a 'feedback loop' role from SPCs to government departments would need to operate in a systematic manner, underpinned by adequate resources, with the policy impact of their feedback/submissions clear to SPC members. Such a change would represent a significant departure from the current formal role of the SPC system where it only advises the full council.

Related to this question of the SPC role is a point about the title of the committees. It was observed, by a couple of contributors, that the title 'Strategic Policy Committee' can be somewhat misleading for members, creating unrealistic expectations in terms of the committees' role and impact on policy.

⁵ See the *Design Principles – Designing Our Public Services* document published by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in October 2022. <https://www.ops.gov.ie/designprinciples/>

Arguably, after twenty-five years of the SPC system, there needs to be an acceptance by the Department and stakeholders that it is not possible for the SPC system to consider purely strategic matters as the SPCs will always deal with operational items to some extent; therefore, the title should better reflect this reality. Equally, it should be noted that a number of contributors were, by and large, satisfied with the role of the SPCs, whether or not the committees were fully focused on strategic policy.

Numerous operational issues, raised by elected members, sectoral representatives, officials and other stakeholders, contribute to a sense of frustration with the SPC process. Despite these issues, which will be examined in subsequent sections, contributors widely believe that the committees help to strengthen local democracy and broaden participation in local government but they want to see changes to the SPC system so that it contributes better to the policy process. While there is much agreement on the need for change, views on the type and extent of this change vary.

Good practice – local authority SPC guidelines

In addition to adopting an SPC scheme, Kilkenny County Council produced its own guidelines on the SPCs. This document, which is available on the local authority's website and summarises parts of the departmental guidelines, sets out what an SPC does and how it works.

The guidelines clearly explain the role of the SPC chair as well as the policy development stages in Kilkenny County Council. For example, it states that the SPC chairs' report is an agenda item for Plenary Council meetings. The guidelines also clarify the local authority's position regarding conflicts of interest, conduct at meetings, lobbying and transparency while it makes commitments in respect of work programmes, training and expenses.

These guidelines are an example of a local authority going beyond its statutory requirements in a practical way, helping to clarify for SPC members how the SPC should work.

Kilkenny County Council's SPC Guidelines 2019-2024 can be found at this link:

https://kilkennycoco.ie/eng/your_council/about-the-council/strategic-policy-groups-and-committees-spcs-/strategic-policy-committee-guidelines-2019-2024.pdf

3.2.2 Configuration of the SPCs

What the guidelines state

- The SPCs should reflect the major functions or services of a local authority within the broader context
- Each local authority shall form an SPC entitled the ‘SPC for Economic Development and Enterprise’⁶
- In light of the local authority’s role across a range of public services delivered locally, SPCs should have a reasonably broad remit

While the exact remit of SPCs varies from local authority to local authority, depending on the individual SPC scheme, generally speaking, most local authorities have established either four or five SPCs. Source: DECLG (2014)

Our findings: Key insights and issues emerging

Since the introduction of the SPC system, the committees have been structured around local authority functions. Naturally, as these functions have evolved over the years, the remit of the SPCs have reflected these changes. The exact configuration of the SPCs is determined by each local authority and is considered when the SPC schemes are being prepared for a new council term.

From a resource perspective, is it not possible for local authorities to have a separate SPC for each council service area, therefore, an SPC’s remit will often include multiple service areas. But much depends on the size of the local authority concerned. For example, a large local authority might have an SPC exclusively dealing with Housing, whereas a smaller authority might have an SPC covering Housing, Community and Cultural Development. When the SPCs are being established, local circumstances (i.e. local priorities and resources) will determine why certain council functions have been combined under the remit of a particular SPC.

For several contributors, the current SPC configuration works well for the needs of their local authority, referring to good alignment between the SPCs and the council directorates. Against this view, another participant argued for greater consistency or coherence in terms of how SPCs are configured. For example, it was argued that Planning can be included in the remit of an SPC along with other functions like Community Development or Environment, service areas that do not naturally complement each

⁶ Updated guidelines relating to the Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs), prepared by the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage in 2021, set out a clear role for the SPC for Economic Development and Enterprise in relation to the development and implementation of the economic elements of the LECP. For more, see: <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/203831/6de42a77-4db5-4761-8e74-076a72765d22.pdf#page=null>

other. On the face of it, there may be a question over the policy remit of some SPCs, but as just noted, local circumstances heavily influence SPC configuration. Given that local authorities, by their nature, differ in terms of scale, resources and priorities, a contributor was adamant that the discretion afforded by the guidelines for configuring the SPCs is essential. Overall, there was a sense that while it is necessary to review the operation of the SPCs in the context of an ever-changing policy environment, it must remain the decision of individual local councils to determine the number of SPCs that they operate and their policy focus.

Alternative approaches for configuring the SPCs were suggested. Several participants spoke about the possibility of centring the committees around themes, instead of the traditional focus on council service areas. It was argued that many of the issues facing SPCs are cross-cutting, affecting multiple committees and therefore the creation of thematic SPCs could result in fewer SPCs but which deal with a greater range of policy issues. Another suggestion was to broadly link the SPCs to strategic objectives identified from the local authorities' corporate plan. If work programmes linked to corporate plans are not being prepared for all SPCs, then perhaps there is an argument for the configuration of SPCs to be linked to corporate plans as it might help make the committees more strategically focused. Longford County Council, for example, showed initiative and strategic vision in their thematic approach to the SPCs which has received some attention at the national level. An overview of Longford's approach is provided in the below vignette.

Thematic SPCs in Longford County Council

In preparing the 2019-24 SPC scheme, Longford County Council looked at how the SPCs had been configured up to then and, considered the best approach for establishing the committees for the next council term. Following feedback from relevant stakeholders, a revised SPC scheme was adopted which took a more thematic approach to the configuration of the SPCs. The following SPCs were established by Longford County Council covering for 2019-24:

- Climate Action SPC
- Placemaking SPC
- Strategic Infrastructure SPC
- Governance SPC

The Governance SPC, for example, is the only SPC in the local government sector focused solely on governance matters. The remit of the SPC is mainly 'back-office' policies and procedures relating to the areas like finance, corporate, HR, risk management, health and safety and ICT. The National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC), in their scrutiny report of Longford, noted that the Governance SPC is 'working well' (NOAC: 2023, p. 28). Indeed, the council's internal auditor was asked to present on their approach to governance and risk at a recent NOAC audit workshop during which the work of the Governance SPC was highlighted.

Source: <https://www.longfordcoco.ie/your-council/committees-and-groups/strategic-policy-committees/>

3.2.3 Membership of the SPCs

What the guidelines state

- Each SPC should have as a minimum a total membership of nine
- Some flexibility in the level of membership should be considered if particular local circumstances indicate the need for greater membership
- Each SPC must have one-third of the membership drawn from sectoral interests
- Particular care should be taken to avoid excessively large or unwieldy committees
- SPC councillor membership should reflect the proportionality and the distribution of elected representation on the full council
- The chairs of the SPCs should be appointed by the full council from among the councillor appointees to the SPC
- SPC Membership for Councillors should be for the lifetime of the Council
- It is desirable that sectoral nominees retain membership of the SPC for the life of the Council.

Source: DECLG (2014)

Our findings: Key insights and issues emerging

From our consultations, many councillors, perhaps unsurprisingly, felt that the SPC system needs to maintain the current membership balance in favour of the elected members. In the opinion of one research participant, the policymaking and representative roles of councillors would be fundamentally undermined if this balance was changed. It is important to remember that a factor behind the *Better Local Government* reforms was the acceptance by policymakers that the potential of the councillors' policy role had not been fully realised.⁷

SPC members should have a high level of interest in the remit of the committee(s) that they serve on; however, for different reasons, their interest can wane over time. One official acknowledged the challenge of trying to maintain the interest of members in the SPC process, especially if they perceive the committees as having limited influence on policy. Also, it was noted that some SPC members struggle to meaningfully engage with policy issues if they lack expertise or familiarity with the service area concerned, whereas better informed members can be more engaged and impactful. It is necessary, therefore, that efforts are made to ensure that individuals are nominated onto SPCs that complement their skills and expertise.

It was argued that five years is a relatively long period to expect individuals to sit on a particular SPC. While committee members gain valuable knowledge and experience of a service area by serving the

⁷ For more, see <https://www.kildare.ie/localdev/LocalGovtReform/BETTER%20LOCAL%20GOVERNMENT.html>

full term, this is perhaps not the optimal approach for sustaining good levels of interest and engagement among the membership. Suggestions were put forward by contributors to help address this. For example, it was stated that there should be greater flexibility in the SPC system to allow members move between committees during the five-year cycle with the suggestion that local authorities undertake a mid-term review of the SPC membership. Reflecting this desire to see greater flexibility regarding membership, a view emerged that guest speakers should be invited to SPC meetings to provide their expertise on certain policy topics. This would enable SPC members, to help inform their deliberations, hear the views of external policy experts.

Given the importance of social inclusion in an increasingly diverse Ireland, it is vital that SPC membership remains representative of wider sectoral interests. The question of which groups are potentially missing from the SPC process prompted a range of views, with contributors broadly welcoming the prospect of a more diverse representation. For example, it was stated that the PPNs should be bringing other marginalised groups into the SPC process. This comment is perhaps linked to an issue with the PPN structure itself. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the structural review of the PPN highlighted the need to improve diversity across the PPNs (Mazars: 2022, p. 29).⁸ More broadly, a number of contributors wanted the PPN membership on the SPCs expanded. They desired a change to the rules so that each SPC could include two PPN representatives from each of the three colleges: community and voluntary, social inclusion and environmental. Likewise, it was felt that the committees should be more active and innovative to help attract young people to the process. There were also calls for the inclusion of additional business and agricultural representatives to bring a ‘broader view of what’s happening out there.’ Several contributors felt that a diversity of voices brings different perspectives and real-world experiences which can enhance policy deliberations. It is important, in this context, for SPCs to review their membership and consider which local groups should be better represented. However, practical considerations need to be borne in mind as excessively large SPCs could make the process unworkable.

3.3 The organisation and management of SPC meetings

A focus of this review is how the SPC system operates in practice and how it can be improved.

Throughout our consultations, SPC members, officials and stakeholders were asked about practical aspects of the organisation and management of meetings including:

- Agenda setting and work programmes;
- Participation by SPC members at meetings;

⁸ The Department of Rural and Community Development has commissioned research into this issue with a report due later this year.

- Preparatory work before meetings;
- The number, sequencing, location and time of meetings;
- Policy focus at meetings;
- Conduct of SPC members;
- Chairperson's role;
- Provision of policy supports to SPC members;
- Media representatives at meetings;
- Training for committee members;
- Expenses for SPC members;
- Ethics framework governing SPCs.

Our research findings highlight examples of good practice and suggestions to improve procedures for SPC meetings.

3.3.1 The work programme and agenda

What the guidelines state

- Each SPC should have an annual work programme and the work programme should be linked to the local authority's corporate plan
- The CPG should decide the work programmes of the SPCs and recommend issues to be considered by the SPCs. The CPG would also monitor their work programmes;
- The SPC chair and relevant Director of Service should meet well in advance of an SPC meeting to clarify the agenda for the forthcoming meeting
- The agenda and minutes of SPC meetings should also be circulated well in advance to all SPC members.

Source: DECLG (2014)

Our findings: Key insights and issues emerging

The guidelines repeatedly state that annual, or multiannual, work programmes linked to the council's corporate plan should be developed for each SPC, providing committee members with focus and certainty in their role. In turn, meeting agendas should be based on these work programmes.

From our research, it appears that many SPCs do not have detailed work programmes in place, leading to somewhat ad hoc approaches to agenda setting and policy discussions at meetings. To help prepare the agenda, the guidance states that the SPC chair should meet with the relevant director of services in advance of SPC meetings. However, from our research, there appears to be an inconsistent approach

to this practice. While in some cases the chairs of SPCs discuss upcoming meetings with directors, this can be dependent on the proposed agenda and therefore these discussions do not always take place.

While the extent to which SPCs have annual or multi-annual work programmes is somewhat unclear, our research findings indicate a desire to see a greater focus on work planning. It is the role of the CPG, according to the current guidelines, to decide on SPC work programmes and recommend policy issues for consideration. Several contributors argued that work programmes should be prepared in an open and inclusive manner involving all committee members, while it was also suggested that these programmes need to be better managed and monitored to ensure progress. But the point was made that preparing work programmes is complicated by the fact that SPC members don't always agree on the issues to be included. In such circumstances, there may be an argument to use independent facilitators to support the development of a work programme.

By setting out the policy items and priorities to be considered by an SPC over a fixed period, a work programme provides committee members with clarity and a greater sense of purpose and continuity as each meeting should seek to progress the policy issues identified in the programme. However, a work programme should afford some flexibility for SPC members to consider strategic policy matters that unexpectedly arise; for example, a motion relating to council policy referred to it by the full council.

The timing of the agenda being circulated to SPC members is another issue, especially for PPN representatives who need to receive feedback on agenda items from PPN colleagues. As one frustrated contributor put it: 'not much time to consider [agenda] items and even submissions are not sought from members in terms of what should be an item on the agenda.' This comment also reflects difficulties experienced by SPC members with proposing agenda items.

The guidelines, it should be noted, are not explicit about who should set the agenda for SPC meetings, meaning that local authorities can take different approaches to determining the agenda. But the point was repeatedly made during our research that the executive can overly control which items are included on the agenda, while in some cases, it seems that the agenda is presented to the SPC with seemingly limited or no input beforehand from committee members. For example, a number of SPC members spoke of challenges to get items onto the agenda. This issue arose if the proposed item was not already under consideration by officials, or if it was deemed operational or inappropriate for that particular SPC. For one contributor, rather than the agenda being agreed by the SPC chair and the executive, there needs to be a more open means to enable all SPC members propose agenda items. Difficulties with setting the agenda contribute to a sense that the SPCs' role is being stifled which can frustrate committee members. As another research participant stated: 'Many SPC members are

participating on a voluntary basis, but it doesn't feel very collaborative, we're just being told that we have to attend this meeting and you have to agree with what you're told.'

In addition, the matter of non-elected members raising motions for SPC meetings was highlighted. It seems that in some cases sectoral representatives cannot raise motions for consideration at SPC meetings, which runs counter to efforts to promote inclusivity at meetings. The current guidelines make no reference to motions at SPC meetings. Indeed, the view was expressed by a number of contributors that executive staff, overall, exert too much influence in the SPC process. In the view of one contributor, SPC meetings contain too many updates from council staff on issues selected by council staff, while according to another, the 'executive only want presentations'. Going forward, it was argued that the SPC process needs to work better for SPC members: 'Agenda needs to be less Executive led with more engagement in areas of policy of interest to the participants'. It should, however, be borne in mind that council staff are policy practitioners, and their expertise is essential for supporting SPCs through often complex and evolving policy areas.

Such problems might also be linked to the question of clarity regarding the agenda setting process. Reinforcing this point, one council official was adamant that the SPC should be the driving the agenda not the executive but believed that there was little expectation among committee members that they should set agendas. This suggests that some SPC members are not fully clear on the process according to the SPC scheme, while it might also reflect a lack of engagement in the process.

There was also a view that the development of more meaningful work programmes and agendas is severely hindered by the centralised approach to policy-making in Ireland. This can result in rather light agendas being set for SPC meetings. One contributor remarked that some agenda items can be questionable, while an official argued that the lack of council powers and funding means that, at times, they are 'scrambling for an item to add to the [SPC] agenda.' Indeed, Phelan, in his paper questioning whether SPCs were 'talking shops' or 'active participants' in the local policy process, observed this lack of powers for SPCs to develop policy (Phelan: 2021, p. 156).

In some local authorities, the practice has emerged of the full council, and municipal districts or area committees, referring policy items and motions to SPCs which end up on SPC agendas. According to one interviewee, the SPCs can serve as a 'clearing house' for the full council, while another observed that the SPCs 'are very good for streamlining council meetings.' However, this is perhaps not how the guidelines envisage the SPC process working. Agenda items, it would appear from reading the guidelines, should not be sent from the full council or municipal districts or area committees to SPCs, rather annual work programmes should be decided by the CPG with meeting agendas presumably based on these. Although it must be acknowledged that the guidelines are not explicit about this.

Arguably, this practice of SPCs dealing with policy items and motions raised at non-SPC council meetings, almost like sub-committees of the full council, is a response to the limited policy-making role of local authorities and a desire to have a fuller agenda for SPC meetings. Equally, it suggests a lack of knowledge in respect of the procedures for managing council business. In this context, the SPCs' role has evolved in a practical and necessary way that was not envisaged by policymakers in the late 1990s.

Good practice – an annual policy programme

Fingal County Council prepares and publishes online, an annual policy programme for its SPCs. This policy/work programme is agreed by the CPG in the context of the Corporate Plan and the Annual Service Delivery Plan. The document describes how the full council, the CPG and SPCs in Fingal interact in the policy framework. For example, it confirms that SPC members can input into the formulation of the annual policy programmes, whereas the agenda will be agreed by the SPC and the relevant director of service.

The appendices include a table of the submissions, received from SPC members, for consideration/inclusion in the annual policy programme and if the submission is rejected, a reason is provided.

Fingal County Council's SPC Annual Policy Programme 2023 can be found at this link:

<https://www.fingal.ie/sites/default/files/2023-06/SPC%20Policy%20Programme%202023.pdf>

3.3.2 Participation at SPC meetings

What the guidelines state

- Full participation in meetings of the SPCs should be confined to the members of the SPC.
- It is important that every effort is made to have an SPC scheme that ensures participation and support from all political representatives.
- SPC meetings should be conducted in a much less rigid and formal way than full council meetings in order to create an informal and collaborative atmosphere that would allow honest views and opinions on policy issues.
- The success of the SPCs is crucially dependent on the active involvement of councillors and on a positive mindset from all involved – councillors, sectoral representatives, Chief Executives, directors and staff – that are focused on the strategic role of SPCs.

Source: DECLG (2014)

Our findings: Key insights and issues emerging

The SPCs, to operate effectively as participative structures, require members who are highly engaged and collaborative. During the consultations, a range of views were expressed about the level of participation at SPC meetings, painting a rather mixed picture. Given the membership make-up of the

SPCs, many contributors tended to make comparisons between the participation of councillors and sectoral groups.

SPC members, it seems, can be less engaged in the SPC process than would be hoped. While a couple of contributors to the review observed poor participation from councillors and sectoral representatives at meetings, others reported that elected members can be better engaged. It was also noted that the interest and participation of sectoral representatives in the SPC process can wane over time. However, based on other feedback, it seems that, generally, there is a good level of engagement from all SPC members.

By its nature, the SPC system is diverse which makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions about how it operates. Across local government, with 159 SPCs and approximately 1,300 members, it is unsurprising that some individuals will be more participative at meetings than others. Contributors cited different reasons to help explain poor levels of participation. For example, an SPC member might have little interest in the work of the committee, while it was also felt that a lack of funding for SPC work, and the holding of hybrid meetings can discourage participation. Comments in support of hybrid meetings were also expressed with a view that they facilitate the participation of busy sectoral representatives. Hybrid meetings therefore suit some people, but not everybody. The reality is that individuals who are highly engaged in the SPC process are likely to participate at meetings regardless of whether they are held in-person or online.

From the research team's firsthand experience, the SPC meetings were held in an inclusive manner, affording opportunities for the members in attendance to participate in discussions on the various topics. However, one contributor to the review, who works closely with PPNs at a national level, reported a perception among some sectoral representatives that they don't have an equal voice in the SPC process.

Closely related to the matter of participation, is the attendance of SPC members at meetings. Poor attendance by elected members and sectoral representatives was raised by numerous contributors. It was reported that issues of non-attendance can undermine the SPC process and make it difficult to reach the quorum. In one case, it was stated 'we've had people [as sectoral representatives] that we've never seen [at meetings], we've had to ditch people and look for more, so it's been very difficult in that space'; separately, another research participant remarked that 'some elected members rarely attend meetings'. In this context, there was a sense that attendance needs to be better monitored and appropriate action needs to be taken if a committee member is repeatedly absent from meetings. For example, one contributor argued that those who fail to attend three meetings should be automatically replaced, while another suggested the introduction of an allowance for all committee

members to help improve attendance. Of course, the reasons for poor attendance can vary. For example, individuals might lose interest in the process or become disillusioned with it, or their personal circumstances change.

Another issue raised at consultations is that some sectoral representatives only participate in discussions on topics of particular interest, failing to engage on a broader range of issues. It was felt that this rather limited participation was not in keeping with the spirit of the SPCs. Committee members should never focus on a single issue, instead they should take a broader county or city-wide perspective of matters during discussions. Balancing this view, it was stated that some councillors tend to focus more on operational issues than on broader strategic concerns.

Good practice – roundtable discussions – South Dublin County Council

To increase engagement from SPC members, it was suggested that local authorities should adopt a more participant-friendly meeting format with the roundtable approach cited as an example. This form of discussion is considered a very helpful way for stakeholders to interact and engage with a particular policy issue.

South Dublin County Council, for example, endeavour to hold their SPC meetings in a less formal manner than full council meetings by using the roundtable format. The council also favours using alternative meeting rooms for SPC meetings where all participants sat randomly around the table and share in hospitality while engaging in policy discussions. From the council's perspective, this meeting format encourages an informal and collaborative atmosphere, facilitating open and constructive discussion between SPC members on policy issues.

The University of London (UCL) Public Policy team, in their guidance on academic policy advisory groups and roundtables, provide helpful advice which is relevant to Ireland's SPCs.

Why host a roundtable?

- Compared to other formats, it allows more people to participate in discussions;
- Offers an opportunity to bring together experts from different sectors to discuss current policy topics;
- Useful for mapping out the policy topic, research needs, state of play and policy recommendations.

According to UCL's guidance, the chair should be experienced and knowledgeable and act as a strong moderator, leading discussions and teasing out themes and issues. In addition, the chair should 'involve less confident participants and deter "over-zealous" members' at the table, while keeping discussions 'moving in a relaxed but purposeful way'.

A briefing paper should be issued in advance to participants to set the context for the policy discussion. After the roundtable, a policy brief or commentary of the discussions should be provided to 'summarise the discussion, draw out key points, policy recommendations and research gaps'.

Source: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/public-policy/sites/public_policy/files/policy_advisory_groups_and_roundtables_guidance.pdf

3.3.3 Preparation for SPC meetings

What the guidelines state

- SPCs should adopt a multi-annual work programme linked to the local authority's Corporate Plan. This work programme should be updated regularly as necessary.
- SPC meeting documentation should ideally be circulated to SPC members two weeks in advance of meetings.
- The work of the SPC chair and Director of Services is of critical importance in operation of the SPC system.
- The SPC chair and relevant Director of Service should meet well in advance of an SPC meeting to clarify the agenda for the forthcoming meeting and to agree on objectives and what they would like as expected outcomes.
- Local Authorities should develop as practicable as possible the policy support role for SPCs.

Source: DECLG (2014)

Our findings: Key insights and issues emerging

The focus of SPC meetings should be the consideration of agenda items linked to an agreed work programme. The more preparatory work that can be undertaken ahead of meetings, the more impactful the meetings will be. Ideally, position papers or policy options, prepared by executive staff, would be provided to SPC members in advance of meetings to inform their deliberations. However, consultation feedback suggests that the arrangements in place for such advance preparation are inconsistent.

If the SPC chair and relevant director of services fail to undertake the necessary preparatory work, as envisaged by the guidance, it was felt that that the strategic policy focus at meetings can be lost to day-to-day issues. But the picture is mixed. For example, in one case, it was stated that council staff undertake a lot of work to prepare agendas, minutes and they engage with SPC chairs. Against this, another contributor confirmed that there are no work programmes in place for SPCs in their local authority.

Committee members, in some cases, are encouraged to suggest appropriate topics for SPCs to consider. But in the view of one research participant, the fact that SPC members submitted very few policy items for consideration reflected a sense of disillusionment with the SPC process and 'how little people expect to get out of it'. However, in the experience of another official, sectoral members were well-prepared for meetings, displaying a keen interest in the documentation they receive from executive staff and making valuable contributions at meetings.

In the context of a hectic working environment and competing priorities, and reflecting comments made in section 3.3.1, an official acknowledged that the practice of the SPC chairs and directors discussing agendas and work programmes in advance of meetings had ‘fallen away’. While in another local authority, it was reported that there is no formal process in respect of SPC chairs and directors of services meeting to discuss agendas, rather, the engagement is ad hoc, dependant on the issues to be discussed at upcoming SPC meetings.

As previously noted in section 3.1.1, some research participants felt that meeting documentation is circulated too late, giving SPC members little opportunity to adequately prepare for meetings which proves frustrating. This point is even more pertinent given that councillors are part-time while sectoral representatives are volunteers, consequently their time to read documentation is limited. Several contributors strongly argued that committee members need enough time to properly prepare for meetings.

Furthermore, the point was made that council staff, when preparing meetings, must fully consider the needs of SPC members with disabilities. For example, accessibility to buildings, the provision of hearing aid loops and captioning for online meetings are essential for making SPC meetings an inclusive experience.

3.3.4 Location and timing of SPC meetings

What the guidelines state

- Local authorities should also consider the most appropriate locations for holding SPC meetings perhaps making greater use of community halls and centres.
- SPC meetings should be held at suitable times for all SPC members.

Source: DECLG (2014)

Our findings: Key insights and issues emerging

The location of meetings was highlighted as another practical concern. It appears that SPC meetings are very often held in the council chamber during the working day. However, some participants in the review argued that the chamber was not an appropriate venue for SPC meetings. In the context of hybrid SPC meetings, it was remarked that there could be ‘three people physically in a room that is built for 50 people’, whereas a smaller, more interactive venue with a round table would encourage better engagement. Moreover, it seems that the council chamber can be a somewhat intimidating environment for SPC meetings, contributing to a sense of hierarchy among sectoral groups. That said, from a logistical perspective, it was noted that some local authorities lack an alternative suitable venue

for holding SPC meetings, therefore, the council chamber is often the best available in terms of accessibility and IT equipment.

Several contributors argued that the time of meetings was an important consideration in the context of encouraging good attendance. The timing of meetings can be an issue for sectoral representatives, many of whom are volunteers, but who are keen to contribute to the SPC process. It was suggested that a greater number of meetings should be held in the evening-time or perhaps rotated between daytime and evening-time. In the context of efforts to encourage greater women participation in local government structures, a contributor stressed the importance of staggering meeting times and setting fixed finishing times to facilitate committee members who rely on childcare.

3.3.5 Number and timetabling of SPC meetings

What the guidelines state

- A calendar of SPC meetings should be agreed at the start of each year. SPCs should normally be held about 4 times yearly.

Source: DECLG (2014)

Our findings: Key insights and issues emerging

The number of SPC meetings held each year was also raised. For some research contributors, their SPCs are quite busy, and they do not meet frequently enough, while others felt that, at times, there are not enough meaningful policy issues for SPCs to consider and therefore four SPC meetings annually are too many. While there is an expectation in local government that SPCs should meet every quarter, our research indicates a desire for greater flexibility in respect of the number of meetings, especially as the breadth of the policy agenda varies across SPCs and local authorities. For example, a Housing SPC in a large council is likely to have a busier agenda than a Sport and Recreation SPC in a small council and therefore the former SPC may need to meet more often. As one participant surmised: 'I suppose the four meetings per year is a bit restrictive; although sometimes three meetings a year are enough ... Maybe a minimum of two meetings [for each SPC] each year, but as many as you need after that'.

As previously discussed in section 3.2.1, there was a sense that the views and suggestions of SPC members should feed into local authority processes in a more structured manner. The number of meetings each year, therefore, is less relevant to the SPCs' success than the scheduling of them. To maximise the impact of the SPCs, it was argued that the timetabling of meetings should be closely aligned to key dates in the local government calendar. For example, the schedule of SPC meetings could be arranged to correspond better with the dates of full council meetings thereby enabling SPC policy proposals to be brought before the elected council in a timely manner. There was a suggestion that

the timetabling of Planning SPCs should complement the statutory plan-making process: ‘Would be good, for example, if an SPC met three or four months before extensive work on a development plan review commenced ... SPC feedback could help to identify points of success or lack of success’. This view was shared by another contributor who saw great scope for the SPCs to add value to their role: ‘it might be the case where you need two SPC meetings within six weeks of each other or you don’t have one for six months because documents or proposals aren’t ready’. It is important, therefore, not to have an SPC meeting quarterly for the sake of it or out of a sense of expectation, but to timetable meetings in a way to support the development of statutory local plans more effectively.

3.3.6 Focus at SPC meetings

What the guidelines state

- A focus on the SPCs’ policy-making and strategic role is fundamental to the SPC concept. In their work, SPCs are not concerned with individual representational or operational issues.
- Local operational matters should be assigned to area committees as the SPC system will not deal with local representational issues and operational issues.

Source: DECLG (2014)

Our findings: Key insights and issues emerging

Based on feedback from participants in the review, it is apparent that, at times, SPC members stray from discussing strategic matters to more operational. Maintaining a focus on purely strategic policy matters has been a longstanding challenge with the SPC system.⁹

While SPCs consider policy matters relating to the whole county or city administrative area, elected members also participate in municipal district or area committee meetings which are intended to deal with matters pertaining to services in particular areas.¹⁰ The role and remit of these structures – the SPCs, municipal districts and area committees - are all clearly defined. In theory, municipal districts and area committees should complement the work of the SPCs by ensuring that local operational issues and strategic policy issues are discussed separately: in theory, there should be little or no overlap between their work. Despite this, elected members can be preoccupied with operational matters at SPC meetings. But rather than a single factor hindering the strategic focus of SPCs, it seems that there are several at play.

This preoccupation may reflect a misunderstanding among some members about the nature of the SPCs, while other members, regardless of the committees’ strategic role, might perceive SPC meetings

⁹ This lack of policy focus was a challenge that was highlighted in the IPA’s 2004 review of the SPCs.

¹⁰ Areas committees operate in Cork, Dublin and Galway city councils and in Dún Laoghaire Rathdown, Fingal and South Dublin County Councils. All of the remaining local authorities have municipal districts.

as a good opportunity to raise operational issues with council staff. One participant at a consultation, for example, observed how SPC meetings often ‘turn into county council meetings’. But given their representative duties and demands from constituents for assistance, it is perhaps difficult for councillors to fully divorce operational matters from the more strategic. It is worth noting that Moorhead, in her review of the councillor role and remuneration, referred to the ‘over burden of the representational aspect of the councillor role’ (2020: p. 85). Also, as councillors make up a majority of each SPC’s membership, it stands to reason that they are more likely to steer SPC discussions in a certain direction, if allowed to by the chair.

In some local authorities, as discussed in section 3.3.1, the plenary council send items or motions to the SPCs for their consideration. While this practice frees up the council’s time for other business, it was observed that it can also overburden SPCs and divert their focus away from strategic policy and work programmes. Similar procedural issues of unclear delineation between council structures and of motions being raised and dealt with incorrectly was highlighted in previous IPA research (See Boyle *et al.*, 2020, p. 47).

Most SPCs cover multiple local authority functions or service areas.¹¹ In this context, it was felt by some contributors that certain service areas, perceived as more urgent than others, can dominate SPC discussions. For example, taking an SPC for Housing and Culture, as housing is such a pressing public concern, it can dominate discussions at meetings to the neglect of cultural issues. But of course, as local authorities have a greater level of responsibility in some service areas than in others, logically, there will be more policy matters to consider in these. Nevertheless, a proportionate approach should be taken to ensure that all service areas within an SPC’s remit are covered at meetings.

Related to this matter of focus at SPC meetings, is the question of executive influence. As previously noted, in section 3.3.1, there is a view that the executive can overly control the SPCs in terms of the agenda and policy discussions. This gives rise to a perception among SPC members, whether rightly or wrongly, that the focus of meetings is often on policy issues selected by the executive. As one participant asserted: ‘SPCs are not there only to be given updates on selected matters - selected by the Executive ... Too much time is spent on updates which don't require any decision and not enough at all on formulation and development of policy which would require decision making’. This sentiment was echoed by another contributor who observed: ‘over-management of SPCs by the Executive, rolling out report after report to be presented as time fillers for meetings instead of discussion’. However, as

¹¹ While the remit of most SPCs cover a number of functions, in some larger local authorities, there are SPCs that focus on a single function.

previously mentioned, experiences of the SPC process vary and the high level of centralisation in Ireland limits the policy role of SPCs and consequently the focus of meetings.

The matter of policy focus among SPCs also raises a question about how policy is interpreted. This is a necessary consideration as one SPC member's understanding of what constitutes policy might differ to that of another. So, what exactly is strategic policy? As observed in section 3.2.1, the departmental guidelines fail to clarify this. Strategic policy can perhaps mean different things to different people, with the line between strategic and operational policy becoming blurred. During the consultations, examples were cited of SPC members seeking to raise issues for discussion at meetings but being told by the chair or executive staff that these were not strategic in nature. One research contributor spoke of 'strategic policy' being a confusing term, arguing that its meaning needs to be considered, while another hoped that the review of the SPCs will result in the Department explaining what it means by 'strategic policy'.

It is important to remember that the SPCs, according to the legislation, are concerned with the 'formulation, development and review of policy'. But what exactly is the difference between formulating policy and developing policy? As pointed out in section 3.2.1, the guidelines fail to elaborate on the SPC role. In performing the 'review' aspect of their role, it is perhaps difficult for SPC members to avoid discussing operational issues. Presumably, reviewing the implementation of policy or reviewing draft policies necessitates committee members asking some operational-type questions? Whether intentionally or not, the departmental guidelines are not explicit about which policies (national or local) the SPCs should be concerned about. So, while SPCs can only ever assist in the development of local policies, it seems that they can review both national and local policies?

Elected members raising operational issues at SPC meetings is perhaps an inherent challenge in the SPC process which can never be fully overcome. Currently, the local government sector has a narrow range of functions and limited policy-making responsibilities and until this situation changes, it is very likely that SPC discussions will always be operational to some extent.

Good practice – the preparation of outcomes statements at the end of meetings

In the context of PPN representatives participating on local authority committees, the PPN handbook encourages the preparation of outcomes statements at the end of meetings. These statements are distinct to minutes. According to the PPN handbook:

An Agreed Outcomes Statement means a brief summary of what has been agreed at a meeting, the outcomes of any discussion (this doesn't mean the full detail of every discussion, but outcomes should be noted) and any actions to be taken before the date of the next meeting.

The preparation of an outcomes statement for all SPC members following a meeting would perhaps offer a greater sense of clarity and purpose among committee members in respect of the SPC's work.

For more, see: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/9db5e3-ppn-handbook/>

3.3.7 Conduct at SPC meetings

What the guidelines state

- The views must be sought of the national pillars of key stakeholders, the PPN and other more local interests in an effort to ensure that the SPCs are inclusive and effective.
- SPC meetings should be conducted in a much less rigid and formal way than full council meetings to help create an informal and collaborative atmosphere for the exchange of honest views and opinions on policy issues
- Standing orders should include provision for the right to speak and equality in making views known.

Source: DECLG (2014)

Our findings: Key insights and issues emerging

How meetings are conducted is a hugely important part of the SPC process, influencing the level of engagement from members and the policy work that they carry out. From our consultations and survey, many positive experiences of SPC meetings were reported. However, a number of issues relating to conduct were also raised.

Our research indicates that tensions can, at times, arise between SPCs members. According to several contributors, there can be a degree of hostility between elected members and the sectoral representatives, especially if councillors feel that their representative role is being undermined. For example, the culture at SPCs, in one contribution to the review, was described as 'unwelcoming to external representatives', while separately, it was stated that councillors can resent engagement from what they view as non-elected SPC members. This issue of tense working relationships between committee members, however, is nothing new. Previous research, from 2005, confirmed 'that an uneasy relationship exists between councillors and voluntary and community representatives at SPC

meetings' (Forde, 2005, p. 141). According to Forde, in a system designed to bring together representative democracy and participatory democracy, such tensions can be partially attributed to incompatible motivations and interests between elected and non-elected SPC members (Ibid). Our research also highlighted tensions between elected members, unsurprising in a political system. For example, at another consultation, it was remarked that there can be something of a divide between rural and urban councillors at meetings owing to differing interests and priorities.

Furthermore, several contributors referred to 'strong voices' dominating proceedings which can steer discussions in a certain direction. In addition, a sense of hierarchy can be evident at meetings. Some contributors expressed the view that SPC meetings can evolve into more of a council meeting rather than a meeting on strategic policy. It appears that the 'informal and collaborative atmosphere' at meetings, as envisaged by the guidelines, where all members are treated equally can, at times, be absent.

The recording of minutes was another issue that was brought up. It was felt by some SPC members that their contributions at meetings are inadequately reflected in the minutes. According to one research participant, 'I find that what I say is not recorded, there's no record of contributions'; another lamented the fact that the 'richness of debate' is not captured in the minutes and instead is 'lost in the ether'. The point was also made that it can be several months before the minutes are issued to members meaning that their recollection of discussions at the meeting concerned is largely forgotten by then. Ideally, the minutes should be issued shortly after the meeting has taken place to allow members comment on them while the meeting is still relatively fresh in their mind. However, the quality of the minute-taking varies across local government. Some local authorities, it was remarked, produce comprehensive minutes of SPC meetings which are available on their website.

Standard orders, regulating the conduct of SPC meetings, were raised by several contributors to the review. There was a view that the SPC standing orders should be updated to promote a more inclusive SPC process, closely reflecting the departmental guidelines on the SPCs. It was suggested, for example, that standing orders should confirm that each agenda will be circulated well advance of meetings to allow PPN representatives consult with their Linkage Groups.

Good practice – SPC standing orders in Waterford City and County Council

In Waterford, separate standing orders for SPC meetings have been created. This document, which is available online, clearly sets out how meetings of the council's SPCs will be regulated.

The standing orders, for example, outline the rules of debate, confirms how each SPC will link in with the CPG and makes provision for an SPC to establish a sub-committee/working group.

These SPC standing orders, which is separate to standing orders for other council meetings and separate to the SPC scheme, helps to clarity for committee members how the SPC process should operate.

These standing orders are available here:

<https://www.waterfordcouncil.ie/media/meetings/2021/plenary/december/5.%20Draft%20SPC%20Standing%20Orders%20for%20Plenary%20Meeting%209.12.2021.pdf>

3.3.8 Role of the chairperson

What the guidelines state

- SPCs are to be chaired by one of the councillor members
- The SPC chairs have a pivotal role of the in ensuring the success of CPGs and SPCs
- Local authorities are asked to ensure that SPC Chairs are selected on the basis that –
 - they have an interest in the work of the SPCs,
 - they are fully aware of the leadership role of SPC Chairs and
 - they appreciate the need to work with the relevant Director of Service.

Source: DECLG (2014)

Our findings: Key insights and issues emerging

The guidelines are clear on the centrality of the SPC chair to the operation of the committee system. Effective chairing strikes the right balance between creating a collaborative atmosphere at meetings, while dealing with agenda items efficiently. Many views pertaining to the quality of the chairs were expressed at our consultations.

While one contributor described a particular chair as 'not the best and rambles a lot', another stated that some chairs are better than others. It was noted that SPC chairs, sometimes, can 'shoot down' motions forwarded by committee members, discouraging new motions or policy ideas. In addition, it was argued that some chairs are not properly trained for the role, while others may have limited interest in the remit of their particular SPC. The point was also made that an SPC's impact can be contingent on the quality of its chair. For example, when a chairperson introduces an SPC recommendation to the plenary council, it was suggested that that a 'strong chair' can exert a greater degree of influence at council meetings to get the recommendation ratified.

Overall, there was a sense that the inconsistency in how SPCs operate across local government can, partially at least, be attributed to the mixed quality of SPC chairs. Several suggestions were made to help improve the chairing of meetings. For instance, it was argued that a national training programme needs to be organised, while it was also thought that an SPC chair network should be established to support members in this role. There was also a suggestion that the performance of each SPC chair should be reviewed annually in an effort to improve the quality of chairing. Rather than simply rotating the position of SPC chair between councillors, several contributors believed that, in the interests of equality, sectoral representatives should be considered for the position of chair; the Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) was cited as an example to follow. It should be acknowledged, however, that this particular change to the SPC process would diminish the functions of elected members. Moreover, by having non-elected members as SPC chairs, arguably, it would run counter to the original intention of the SPCs, as outlined in *Better Local Government*, which was to enhance the policy role of elected members.

3.3.9 Provision of policy support

What the guidelines state

- Local Authorities should develop as practicable as possible the policy support role for SPCs. This could include making greater use of the research capacity within local authorities and also making greater use of external agencies such as the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA), third level institutions etc.
- Directors of Service should undertake appropriate research on relevant policy options when SPC members are formulating policy. These options should be presented to the Chairs and members of SPCs in a clear, concise and brief manner.

Source: DECLG (2014)

Our findings: Key insights and issues emerging

It was argued by a number of participants in the review that additional support is needed to empower the SPCs in their work. Before SPC chairs can introduce credible recommendations to the plenary council, it is crucial that proposals have been properly teased out at SPC meetings. However, SPC members are very often under time pressures. To examine evidence and consider policy options thoroughly, committee members need to be properly supported by the council executive.

As one contributor asserted, if an item is sent to an SPC to be considered, then it is done for good reason and therefore requires 'in-depth research on it before the council can say that yes this is a good idea or good policy'. SPC policy recommendations, therefore, are only as good as the groundwork undertaken by the committee members, which in turn is heavily dependent on policy support.

Director of services, in conjunction with their staff, are expected to support the operation of the SPCs. This policy support, for example, can involve executive staff identifying strategic issues to include in work programmes or carrying out research on different policy options for SPC members to consider. A view emerged that there is considerable scope for directors and their staff to more effectively support committee members ahead of SPC meetings.

Several contributors identified a need for dedicated secretariat support within local authorities to service the SPCs, rather than the current situation whereby the committees are often an 'add-on' to a staff member's existing duties. It was also noted that council staff themselves need to be equipped with the necessary skills (e.g. policy-making, writing and research) to effectively support the SPCs. As observed by the OECD in a review of Ireland, 'effective policy development cannot be achieved without the right set of skills and capabilities in the public administration' (OECD: 2023. p. 11).

It was reported that the documentation provided to committee members and topics discussed at meetings can, at times, be rather complex, making it a struggle for volunteer members to understand fully. In these cases, members would be better supported if council staff adhered to the 'Plain English' principles when preparing documentation and delivering presentations as this would help to simplify the policy issues.

Linked to this issue of support, it was noted that a lack of specialist knowledge or skills among SPC members in some policy areas can limit the committees' performance. To support the work of SPCs, it was suggested that the committees should draw on external expertise when required to advise on policy issues. But this depends on SPCs having annual work programmes in place so that policy options are researched, and external experts can be organised well in advance of meetings. Perhaps more pertinently, the level of policy support that local authorities can provide is often dictated by the availability of local authority resources.

In the context of competing priorities and heavy workloads, many local authorities are struggling with limited resources. Given the demand pressures on authorities, one official described capacity constraints as a 'major challenge' to supporting the SPCs, while another bluntly stated: 'Would love to put more into the SPC process, would love to have a team of people ... but the resources aren't there'. At another consultation, an official remarked that staff undertake a lot of background work for the SPCs in their local authority but described this support as resource intensive. The reality for many SPCs is that they can be poorly supported in local authorities that have limited capacity. How the SPC system operates and its effectiveness, in many ways, is a function of how it is supported and therefore the available resources. But as the guidelines make clear, when determining its SPC framework, each local

authority must factor in the need to ensure that the organisational and financial resources are ‘not over-stretched’ (DECLG, 2014, p. 14).

Good practice – policy development toolkit - international example

In a recent paper on strengthening policy development in Ireland, the OECD explored key enablers for effective policymaking at the national level. The report highlighted the importance of policy capability infrastructure and toolkits in the policy development process. Of course, such toolkits can also support policy professionals at the local level in their everyday work.

For example, Worcester City Council, back in 2012, produced a policy toolkit to improve how policy/strategy is developed across the council. This practical document, which was designed for council staff tasked with producing policies, strategies, plans or procedures, follows a five-stage process.

- Stage 1: Policy Identification and Justification
- Stage 2: Policy development
- Stage 3: Consultation and Approval
- Stage 4: Implementation and Communication
- Stage 5: Policy Monitoring and Review

This document provides practical information such as: definitions of key terms, a diagram on the stages of the policy/strategy development process and a policy checklist.

For more, see: <https://committee.worcester.gov.uk/documents/s20979/Appendix%203%20-%20Policy%20Toolkit.pdf>

For more on the OECD report, see: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/strengthening-policy-development-in-the-public-sector-in-ireland_6724d155-en

3.3.10 Presence of the media at meetings

What the guidelines state

The departmental guidelines make no reference to the media at SPC meetings.

Our findings: Key insights and issues emerging

While representatives of the media are entitled to attend SPC meetings (unless a local authority deems it desirable that they are absent), it seems that journalists rarely do. Views from contributors on this matter were mixed, suggesting that a media presence at meetings can have a positive and/or negative bearing on proceedings.

It was felt that press reporting of the SPC meetings helps to make local government more transparent and open to the public, while it can also put pressure on local authorities to make policy decisions and follow through on commitments. In the context of citizen engagement with local government affairs,

a number of contributors stressed the importance of growing public awareness of the work of the SPCs.

But against this view, several contributors stated that a media presence can influence the tone of discussions and what SPC members say, potentially stifling discussions. It was suggested that, sometimes, councillors use an SPC meeting as an opportunity to attract media coverage for themselves rather than to participate meaningfully in policy discussions. Contributors referred to ‘playing to the gallery’, ‘creating headlines’ and ‘using it as a political platform’ when describing how some councillors tend to behave at meetings in front of the press. In this context, it can be challenging for an SPC to reach a common position or consensus on a policy matter. As some agenda items at SPC meetings require difficult conversations between committee members, it was felt that these should not be discussed publicly. One official, while supporting the notion of public SPC meetings, argued that at certain times ‘in-committee’ meetings are warranted given the sensitive nature of some policy issues. In addition, given that many SPC are volunteers, and not elected representatives or public servants, the point was made that they should not be exposed to public scrutiny.

3.3.11 Training of SPC members

What the guidelines state

- Training programmes would be valuable for SPC members and consideration of needs in this regard could be included in the Training and Development Programme for Councillors.
- Effective meeting skills would be useful for SPC chairs and training on policy areas would be significant for all SPC members. Policy development/ research skills and facilitation skills would be valuable for Directors of Service and their support staff.
- The local authority should include in the draft scheme provision for the enabling of on-going training of members of the SPC. This should include:
 - Workshops on policy to cover the various areas within the remit of the SPCs;
 - Briefings on the reform of local government;
 - Briefings on the role and functions of local government;
 - Skills orientated training such as team building.
- Each local authority’s Training Officer has a role in identifying the training needs of SPC members through a consultative process.

Source: DECLG (2014)

Our findings: Key insights and issues emerging

Training was a topic routinely raised in our consultation and survey feedback. It was strongly felt by contributors that more needs to be done by executive staff and by the Department in the provision of

training for committee members. Repeatedly, contributors referred to the need for members, both councillors and sectoral representatives, to understand more fully what the SPCs can and cannot do in respect of policy. For example, it was stated that some sectoral representatives need guidance on which policy responsibilities fall within the SPCs' remit, while it was also argued that a regular training programme would help councillors to remain focused on strategic matters.

A related issue was the depth of knowledge or expertise of SPC members in respect of policy. As previously noted, skills and capacities are key enablers for the policy development process (OECD: 2023, p. 74). In reference to PPN members, a contributor argued that some representatives are not fully confident at meetings, feeling that they lack the necessary expertise or skills to contribute meaningfully. This issue was seen to reflect a need for capacity-building. Making a similar point, another research participant called for the provision of a training programme, via the PPN, to support representatives in key aspects of the SPC process; for example, developing motions, inputting into policy proposals, participating at meetings and public speaking.

While most, if not all, local authorities offer training for SPC members at the start of a new council term, it is clear that an ongoing training programme is required throughout the five years. Refresher type training was deemed to be an urgently needed requirement, especially for members who join an SPC after the five-year term has started. One senior official, who has been involved with SPCs for over twenty years, spoke of the need to remind all SPC members of the founding principles behind the SPCs and called for the Department to organise a national training programme to help promote a common understanding of the SPC process across the local government sector. A lack of clarity on the role and remit of the SPCs creates uncertainty and misunderstanding among members in respect of the committees' parameters, leading to confusion and frustrations with the process.

3.3.12 Payment of expenses

What the guidelines state

- In general, any expenses arising for a SPC member would be met by the organisations the SPC member is representing. However, those SPC members whose expenses could not be met in that manner would be entitled to travel expenses for attendance at SPC meetings. The expenses will be met by the local authority.

Source: DECLG, 2014

Our findings: Key insights and issues emerging

The matter of expenses for SPC members was brought up during our research. It was noted that sectoral representatives, many of whom are volunteers, often travel far or take time off work to attend

meetings. Generally, travel expenses incurred by sectoral representatives are provided by the organisation that they represent. However, in some cases, it seems that sectoral representatives do not receive expenses. To facilitate a greater sense of equality and to encourage attendance, the local authorities should ensure that instances of non-payment of expenses are identified, and the situation resolved.

3.3.13 Ethics framework

What the guidelines state

- Standing orders will be adopted by the Council following recommendation from each SPC and efforts should be made to reflect the various perspectives represented on the SPCs and the nature of the business.
- The standing orders should make provision for procedures for identification of conflicts of interests and abstention from discussions and voting.

Source: DECLG (2014)

Our findings: Key insights and issues emerging

The question of potential conflicts of interest among SPC members was brought up. The ethics framework pertaining to local government, which entail legislative requirements and codes of conduct, regulate the activities of councillors and local authority officials. However, some participants in the review observed a governance gap, in respect of sectoral members potentially representing vested interests, which needs to be addressed.

For example, concern was expressed about potential conflicts of interest arising for sectoral representatives on Planning SPCs in the context of their discussion of planning matters. It was argued that local authorities and the Department need to guard against individuals with vested interests joining Planning SPCs, or indeed any SPC, to improperly influence policy decisions. While the SPCs are only advisory structures with no actual decision-making powers, it was felt that a public perception of SPC members trying to advance their own interests can badly undermine public trust in local government.

Good practice – Declaration of Interest forms for all SPC members - Dublin City Council

To avoid potential conflicts of interest, the Dublin City Council standing orders state that:

Each Sectoral Member of a Strategic Policy Committee must complete and return a Declaration of Interests form upon being nominated to the SPC.

For more, see page 15 of the Standing Orders 2019. These are available at the below link:

<https://councilmeetings.dublincity.ie/documents/s26719/Standing%20Orders%202019%20draft%206.pdf>

3.4 Linkages between the SPCs and the plenary council and the CPG

SPCs cannot work in isolation within each local authority. To operate effectively, the SPCs should work in tandem with other council structures. This means that there needs to be strong linkages and co-ordination between the SPCs and the CPG and the plenary council. Effective collaborative working practices with the CPG and the plenary council are crucial to the success of the SPCs. However, evidence for effective links between the SPCs other council structures appears rather limited.

3.4.1 SPC links with the CPG

What the guidelines state

- The CPG links and co-ordinates the work of the SPCs and monitors their work programmes. The CPG is represented at meetings of the council by the Cathaoirleach. The Cathaoirleach reports to the full Council on work of the CPG.
- The CPG does not act as conduit between the council and the SPCs
- Furthermore, the CPG can request SPCs to consider particular policy issues where appropriate.

Source: DECLG (2014)

Our findings: Key insights and issues emerging

While SPC chairs sit on the CPG, it appears that the strength of the linkages between the SPCs and the CPG varies. In one case, it was stated that the ‘conduit of ideas’ from the CPG to the SPCs is very good. However, in other cases, the coordinating and monitoring role of the CPGs in respect of the SPCs seems unclear or absent. For example, in one local authority, a contributor saw no link between the CPG and the SPCs and wasn’t sure if the SPCs were even being discussed at CPG meetings; in the view of another SPC member, the CPG seemed to take ‘no active role in guiding us’. Another comment referred to a CPG that forwarded items to SPCs without much consideration.

Additionally, the monitoring role of the CPG appears rather weak. Where SPCs do not have work programmes, it means that a CPG cannot monitor the progress of agreed work items. While SPC

chairs often update CPG meetings about the activities of their respective SPC, this should not be considered effective monitoring or coordination of SPC work.

Several contributors to the review want to see stronger linkages to connect the work of each SPC with the CPG. This would help to provide SPC members with a stronger sense of direction and purpose, and crucially, clearer feedback on their policy work. The matter of training, again, was viewed as necessary to strengthen the linkages: ‘Ongoing training for everyone involved in SPCs and CPGs would be helpful to ensure that everyone knows the protocol’.

3.4.2 SPC links with the plenary council

What the guidelines state

- SPC chairs should introduce SPC recommendations for full approval by the full council.
- Members of SPCs should be provided with automatic feedback on the outcome of the council’s decisions on SPC recommendations.

Source: DECLG 2014

Our findings: Key insights and issues emerging

Similarly, it seems that linkages between the SPCs and the full council can be weak. For some SPC members, there is uncertainty regarding the extent to which full councils consider proposals from SPCs. On the topic of SPC recommendations, one contributor stated: ‘are they actually taken on board, how often are they adopted, are they discussed at full Council level, are all pertinent questions and SPC members deserve answers so they can see that their efforts have effect’.

Several suggestions were made to help strengthen linkages. For example, it was argued that the way SPCs feed into full council meetings should be clearly set out and formalised; the timeframe for feedback from the elected council on SPC recommendations ought to be quicker; while it should be a standing item on the council agenda for the SPC chair to report to the plenary council on matters arising.

3.5 The impact of the SPCs

An objective of the review is to consider the impact of the SPCs and suggest ways to enhance their effectiveness. However, the guidelines do not explicitly state what impact the SPCs should have, nor does it outline a mission statement or vision for the SPC system. Rather, the impact of the SPCs, as envisaged by the Department, must be inferred from the description of the SPC role.

Currently, the role of the SPC system is to support and advise the full council on policy matters with final decision-making resting with the elected members. The only impact that SPCs can have,

therefore, is the influencing of policy decisions made by public representatives in the council chamber. Of course, these decisions should lead to the delivery of better local services.

Throughout our research phase, we asked participants about the impact of the SPCs and how it could be improved. The research findings highlighted a diversity of opinion and insights on this crucial matter.

3.5.1 The need for clear outcomes

What the guidelines state

- The SPC chair and relevant Director of Service should meet well in advance of an SPC meeting to clarify the agenda for the forthcoming meeting and to agree on objectives and what they would like as expected outcomes.

Source: DECLG (2014)

Our findings: Key insights and issues emerging

From their experience of the SPC system, several contributors reported very good policy outcomes. For example, it was noted that one SPC was flexible and efficient in its approach, developing policies in 'reaction to real life issues'. Another spoke about the regulatory changes at national level, concerning the registration of landlords, which resulted from the work of a Housing SPC.

Balancing these positive views, other research participants felt that the SPCs' impact is not always clear. Indeed, the lack of a discernible policy impact from the process is a source of frustration for many. In one case, for example, it was reported that SPC members put forward policy suggestions and ideas at meetings but often their contributions are only noted by the chair and executive staff with seemingly no follow-through or action taken as a result. In other cases, it appears that there can be little evidence of SPC policy recommendations even being considered by the plenary council. While praising the quality of engagement at SPC meetings, one individual was rather sceptical about the outcomes: 'SPCs are fantastic for robust and constructive discussion however they can feel like that is their main goal is discussion with minimal tangible outcomes'.

There was a sense that the meaningful policy decisions are agreed before meetings. The point was made by several contributors that the SPCs don't properly engage in policy discussions. Rather, council staff often introduce draft policies almost as a 'done deal', with little scope for the SPC members to shape it. One contributor, while questioning the culture at the local authority concerned, reported that officials present policies 'as a *fait accompli* to the SPC members who are not allowed or fail to challenge this paradigm'. As previously noted, there was a view that the council executive exerts too much power at meetings; as one contributor rather despondently put it: 'It can feel like a very disempowering task

to be a rep'. However, such frustrations are perhaps partly symptomatic of a need for training to clarify the SPC role and expectations. It is important for SPC members to understand that the SPC role is not to develop or agree policy *per se*, rather, it is to *assist* and *advise* the elected council in the development, formulation and review of policy.

However, for another contributor, the problem with the SPC process is not at the committee or full council stage, but with the implementation of policy. It was observed that after an SPC recommendation is ratified by the full council, it can be a struggle to see the SPC's policy, or amendment to a policy, being implemented by the relevant council department. The policy route - from initiation at SPC level to approval at plenary council and finally to implementation by the local authority executive - needs to be much clearer for SPC members. It was suggested that each council department should have a section or member of staff assigned to deal with SPC policy recommendations and update SPC members regarding implementation.

This lack of visible impact can have a knock-on impact on SPC membership. According to one contributor, many PPN representatives have resigned from SPCs as they felt that their contributions were not influencing policy. To maintain the interest and engagement of SPC members in the process, whether councillors or sectoral representatives, it is imperative that they see concrete policy results from their efforts.

Good practice - the Dublin City Summit Series

Several years ago, the SPC for Economic Development and Enterprise in Dublin City Council introduced the Summit Series as an initiative to enable committee members and invited speakers discuss pertinent topics to help inform policy decision-making. The Summit Series is described as:

'a collaborative platform to bring key sectoral stakeholders together and discuss key sectors, challenges and themes in more detail while developing stronger networks and more meaningful engagement'.

Invited guests, such as elected representatives, academics, experts and practitioners, have discussed a range of topics including:

- Brexit
- Apprenticeships
- Social enterprise
- Infrastructure

After each Summit, an outcomes report, containing an overview of the contributions, insights, and presentations, was published and disseminated widely.

Source: <https://www.dublincity.ie/business/economic-development-and-enterprise/strategic-policy-committee/summit-series>

3.5.2 Key barriers limiting the impact of SPCs

What the guidelines state

- SPCs have a major role in assisting and advising the council in relation to functions of a strategic statutory nature.

Source: DECLG (2014)

Our findings: Key insights and issues emerging

Despite the guidelines stating that the SPCs have a 'major role', many contributors perceive Ireland's centralised approach to policymaking, and the influence of council staff, as barriers to the work of SPCs. In the eyes of one contributor, the SPCs are essentially 'talking shops to rubber stamp policies created by either government or council management'. It seems, according to a number of contributions, that little deliberation on policies takes place at some meetings, rather executive-led policy proposals are presented to the SPC with little opportunity for members to input and shape these. 'All we can do locally is a bit of tweaking here and there', is how participant perceived the SPCs. Many members are frustrated with the SPC process, while wishing to influence policy recommendations at meetings they feel constrained in their powers. Such an attitude towards the SPC system can contribute to low levels of participation and engagement among members disillusioned with the committees.

The limited scope of the SPCs to develop or formulate policy means that the focus of meetings can often shift to more operational concerns. One frustrated contributor, who sees great potential in the SPC system, lamented that the SPCs in their county 'are run as a one-way information stream and talking shop', while another observed that a culture of updating the SPC members had 'crept in and diluted their focus on policy'. Overall, there was a sense that the SPC system has moved somewhat away from its founding purpose to support the elected members in their policy-making role. Instead, many SPC meetings feature presentations by council staff on work programmes or draft statutory policies, followed by a discussion on the topic by committee members. In the judgement of another contributor: 'The SPC ends up being a reporting forum on policies coming from central government ... it goes against the original purpose of the SPC'. From the research team's experience of attending SPC meetings, the focus tended to be on service delivery updates followed by operational-type questions from members.

The lack of funding in the SPC process was cited by a number of research participants as a major impediment to the SPCs being more impactful. It was felt that discussions on funding encourages engagement at meetings, while the availability of funding is essential for the implementation of policy. The SPCs contrast sharply with the LCDCs which have responsibility over funding streams, and

therefore some stakeholders, it was argued, will always be more interested in joining the LCDCs than the SPCs.

Highlighting the importance of funding, it was observed that where SPCs make funding-related recommendations to the full council, the level of engagement from SPC members is generally better. For example, in the experience of one contributor, discussions on funding schemes at SPC meetings ‘make it [the SPC process] more real for everyone’, while another stated that ‘funding can make the SPC effective and generates a lot of interest from various stakeholders’.

Good practice – standing item for sectoral representatives on the SPC agenda

During the review, it was noted that some SPCs have a standing item on each meeting agenda to ‘check-in’ with the committee’s sectoral representatives. This doesn’t replace the ability of representatives to add items to the agenda in the traditional way but is an additional measure to ensure that they have an opportunity to engage in proceedings at SPC meetings.

3.6 Climate action-only SPCs

Our findings: Key insights and issues emerging

In light of the climate emergency and the *Programme for Government* (PfG) commitment regarding a climate action SPC, during our consultations we asked about the possibility of introducing a dedicated climate committee.

Recognising the urgency of the issue, and the central role that local government plays in climate action, the sector has already taken the initiative with almost all local authorities addressing climate action through either a climate specific SPC or where it is covered in combination with other relevant policy/functional areas (i.e. environment, planning).

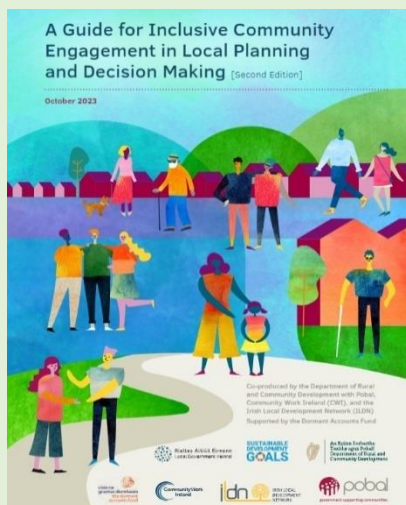
While all contributions recognised the need to address climate action, on the specific question of mandating an SPC on climate action, contributors expressed differing views on the matter. Several contributors were in agreement with the PfG commitment to mandate a climate specific SPC while from a resource perspective, many other contributions felt that another mandatory SPC (along with the mandatory Economic Development and Enterprise Support SPC) could potentially create an extra burden for already stretched local authority staff. In addition, given the cross-cutting nature of the climate challenge, it was further argued by several contributors that mandating a climate action SPC could potentially run the risk of climate being considered in isolation from the other council service areas. For example, members of Transport, Housing and Planning SPCs would need to consider climate change in their deliberations and not leave all matters relating to climate to the preserve of a standalone climate SPC. It is interesting to note that the results of the online survey carried out for this

research (see below) are broadly in line with these findings on the specific question posed around a dedicated SPC for climate action.

For those local authorities who were already working with a dedicated SPC on climate action it was also noted that this could be a first step in gaining legitimacy for prioritising climate action before looking to mainstream climate action across the agendas of all the SPCs operating within a local authority.

The capacity of the members of the SPCs to cover climate action sufficiently was also highlighted by several contributors. Climate action is seen as a relatively complex area of policy which is technical in nature, particularly in terms of how it interacts with other related policy areas (i.e. circular economy and biodiversity). In this regard, it would be important to consider expectations in terms of the competencies involved while also highlighting the need to assess training and education requirements for those who are currently participating in the SPC process and for those who will be seeking nominations for future representation (i.e. 2024-29).

Good practice - A Guide for Inclusive Community Engagement in Local Planning and Decision Making



The *Guide for Inclusive Community Engagement in Local Planning and Decision Making* focuses on engaging marginalised communities and their representative bodies in local policy, planning and decision-making processes.

It sets out principles for inclusive community engagement and explains how these can be put into practice during core phases of the engagement process.

The guide offers very practical advice for practitioners. It makes the following points in respect of feedback to participants that are highly relevant to the SPC process.

- Make sure any consultation is followed by a feedback process to explain what is happening as a result of the consultation. Lack of feedback can contribute to frustration, consultation fatigue and poor engagement among communities;
- Feedback on what was included and why, and what was not included and why is essential to make sure that people remain engaged and feel that their contribution was valued;

For the full guide, see:

<https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/274611/a547919e-0cf5-412b-8983-f260c8ed66ed.pdf#page=null>

Chapter 4 – Survey of Stakeholders

4.1. Introduction

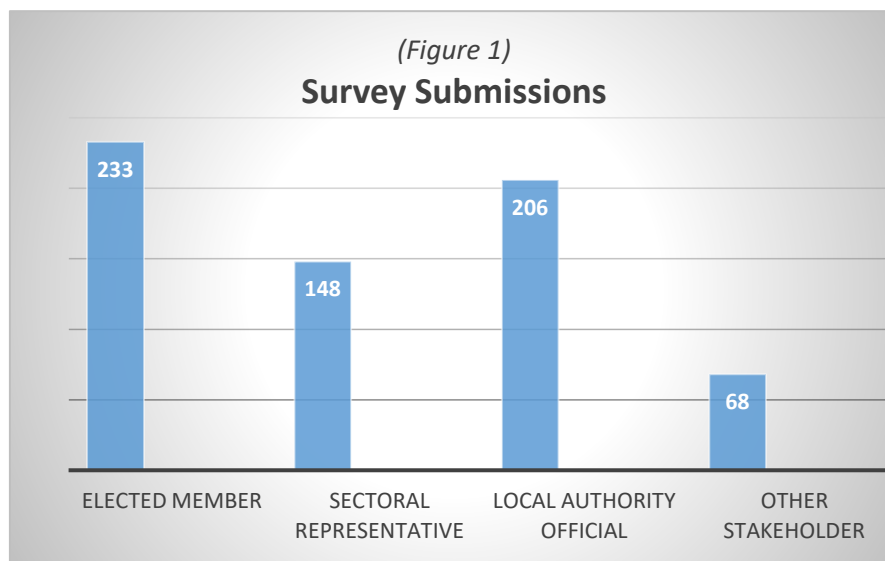
This chapter presents summary findings from the online survey of stakeholders undertaken for the review. The survey provides a quantitative dimension to the review, supplementing the mainly qualitative research approach taken with respect to the various interviews and consultations. The intention of the survey was to gather the views of a range of stakeholders involved in the SPCs - committee members, council staff and others – who have had different experiences of the SPC system and who could offer different perspectives.

An invitation to participate in the survey was emailed by the DHLGH, on behalf of the IPA, to the local authority Chief Executives asking for the survey link to be circulated to all SPC members and relevant staff who facilitate the operation of the SPCs. Similarly, an email was issued to members of the SWG requesting that the survey link be sent to relevant staff in the organisations represented on the working group.

The survey asked nine close-ended questions and two open-ended questions. Responses to the open-ended questions were also instructive in helping to inform the findings set out in chapter 3. The key findings from the survey are summarised in figures 1 to 4. Section 4.2. provides a breakdown of the survey submissions received; section 4.3. provides a summary of the scores by stakeholder group (i.e. elected members, sectoral representatives, local authority officials and ‘others’) including the differences between the score for each group and the total score. In section 4.4., the total scores are ranked from lowest to highest while an analysis of the data is provided in section 4.5. All numbers presented in figures 2 to 4 relate to percentages.

4.2. Survey submissions

The diverse nature of the SPC system made it very difficult to determine the potential size of the target audience for the survey. However, despite this a total of 655 responses to the online survey were received which was a significant sample number. Respondents to the survey were asked to select whether they were an elected member, a sectoral representative, a local authority official or 'other' stakeholder.¹² Figure 1 below provides a breakdown of the submissions received with good representation across all the stakeholder groups that responded to the survey.



¹² 'Others', for example, may have included departmental officials or staff working for organisations with some involvement in the SPC system.

4.3. Breakdown of scores by stakeholder groups

| | Overall (655) | Local authority official (206) | Sectoral representative (148) | Elected member (233) | Other (68) |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------|
| Review of the Strategic Policy Committees-Survey | 49 | 2 | -7 | 5 | -8 |
| Through its engagement with policy issues, the SPC(s) has a positive impact on policy. | 60 | -2 | -5 | 9* | -16* |
| Through its engagement with policy issues, the SPC(s) improves the quality of local services. | 58 | -2 | -5 | 6 | -5 |
| How satisfied are you with the level of engagement from elected members and sectoral representatives on policy issues at SPC meetings? | 52 | -7 | -1 | 10* | -9 |
| How satisfied are you with the management and operation of SPC meetings? | 66 | 9* | -10* | 0 | -8 |
| How satisfied are you with the capacity building/training opportunities made available to you to help you perform your SPC role? | 32 | 0 | -5 | 0 | 8 |
| The governance and administrative arrangements in place for the Corporate Policy Group (CPG) to coordinate and monitor the work of the SPC(s) are operating well. | 39 | 5 | -12* | 6 | -11 |
| Is it clear that the SPC(s) is working to an agreed annual or multiannual work programme? | 47 | -1 | -8 | 9* | -10 |
| Is the SPC(s) closely following the 2014 departmental guidelines on the establishment and operation of CPGs and SPCs? | 41 | 15* | -15* | 1 | -16* |
| Overall, how satisfied are you with the performance of the SPC(s)? | 49 | -1 | -1 | 3 | -7 |

Figure 2

Positive differences indicate that the group is *more favourable* than the total score, while negative differences indicate that the stakeholder group is *less favourable* than the total score. Lighter green and red shading highlights positive and negative differences, whereas darker green and red indicate differences that reach the level of statistical significance.

4.4. Total scores from lowest to highest



Figure 3

4.5. Analysis of survey data

The survey data complements the research findings from the consultations and interviews with responses to the survey strongly indicating the need for change across key aspects of the SPC system with a view to enhancing overall impact of the process.

The overall favourable score from the survey, based on the total scores for the close-ended questions, is 49 percent (see figure 5), indicating that just over half of those participating in the process are not satisfied with current performance and that considerable scope for improving the SPC process exists. For example, it is clear from the responses that work programmes, capacity-building/training, the role of the CPG and the engagement of SPC members are areas that need to be addressed. These findings are significant and broadly mirror much of the feedback from the consultations and supports the

timely nature of this review in terms of looking at next steps to improve the performance and impact of SPCs.

| | Overall (655) | Local authority official (206) | Sectoral representative (148) | Elected member (233) | Other (68) |
|---------------------------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------|
| Review of the Strategic Policy Committees-Survey | 49 | 2 | -7 | 5 | -8 |

Figure 4

Individual experiences of the SPCs vary, spanning a broad spectrum: from strong satisfaction at one end, to strong dissatisfaction at the other. With so many participants involved in the SPC process, who have different interests, motivations and priorities, this is perhaps understandable.

It is interesting to note, however, in figure 4, the relatively large gaps between the stakeholder groups (i.e. elected members, sectoral representatives, local authority staff and ‘others’). From the survey data, and the feedback at consultations and interviews, it appears that the SPC system, as it stands, is meeting the needs of some stakeholders more than others. Indeed, a trend of elected members and council staff being more favourable than sectoral representatives and ‘others’ is evident in the breakdown of scores from the survey.

The elected members responded most favourably to the questions relating to the impact and performance of the SPCs, the role of the CPGs, engagement at meetings, and work programmes. Furthermore, they were never below the *total favourable* score for any of the close-ended questions (see figure 2). In terms of the overall survey score of 49 percent, elected members had the largest positive difference (see figure 4).

Sectoral representatives were never above the *total favourable* score for all questions (see figure 2), and were very unfavourable in respect of the management and operation of SPC meetings, the role of the CPG, work programmes and the guidelines. They had a negative difference of seven percent in respect of the overall score for the survey (see figure 4).

Local authority officials were the most favourable stakeholder group in terms of the management and operation of meetings and on the question of SPCs following the departmental guidelines (see figure 2). In addition, they were the stakeholder group that differed the least from the 49 percent overall survey score (see figure 4). The survey data broadly indicates a gradient where on a relative basis the elected members represent the most satisfied group followed by local authority officials and finally the sectoral representatives and “other” group representing the least satisfied of the stakeholder groups with the current operation and impact of SPCs.

Conclusion:

The response to the survey was significant with 655 submissions received and represents key supporting analyses for the review. By surveying elected members, sectoral representatives, council staff and other stakeholders, to gain an understanding of how they feel about aspects of the SPC process, the exercise has provided rich insights. In summary the survey has provided the following.

- Complements the research findings from the consultations and interviews undertaken for the review reinforcing areas where improvement is required and strengthens the evidence base for the recommendations chapter.
- That only one in two of those participating was satisfied with the overall performance of the SPCs strongly indicating the need for change, and
- There is disparity among those participating in terms of how needs and expectations of different stakeholder groups are being met.

5. Conclusion and recommendations:

5.1 Conclusion

Since their introduction in the late 1990s, the SPC system has become institutionalised within Ireland's local government system, fulfilling a crucial local democratic and participative role. But it is an imperfect system with many committee members feeling frustrated by their experiences of the SPCs. Furthermore, despite all the reforms and developments that the sector has experienced in recent decades, it is striking that many of the issues identified in this review are similar to findings in the IPA's review of the SPCs in 2004. But as one long serving local government official concluded about the SPCs: 'the people change, but the culture stays the same'.

Ultimately, the SPCs exist to support plenary councils in their policy role, and this consideration needs to be foremost in the minds of policymakers as they seek to reinvigorate and strengthen the SPC system. While many contributors to this review were broadly satisfied with the performance of the SPCs that they are involved with, it is also clear that many more would welcome changes to the SPC process to make it more impactful and relevant.

A key common message throughout our consultations was the need for greater consistency and transparency in the SPC process and a clearer understanding of it. SPC members need to see evidence that the full council is considering their proposals and recommendations. If committee members perceive little policy dividend from their contributions, it creates frustrations and disillusionment with the process.

This review has highlighted the need for SPCs to take a more systematic approach to their work. This includes consideration at the outset of how the SPC scheme itself is developed (at the initiation of the 5-year cycle) followed by how annual work programmes might be developed and agreed with the executive. Following on from this is the need to address more practical issues that arise including links to the Corporate Policy Group (CPG) and full plenary council, role of chairpersons, agenda setting, membership of committees and participation at meetings.

There is also the need to address the frustrations within the system around where little scope exists to impact policy at local level which is effectively set at central government level. The system is further frustrated in terms of being able to identify what influence the SPCs can have at the local level on policy matters which are local and where the committees can potentially have impact. A dual role may be possible with SPCs having a clear mandate on how they can engage effectively with local policy while also being able to feedback into national policy which has been developed at central government level, but which requires implementation at the local level.

In many respects, the research is highlighting the need for the SPCs to follow the 2014 departmental guidelines more closely in terms of how the committees should operate but also where the guidelines need to be further enhanced to ensure the SPCs can have more relevance and impact.

Related to the above is the key fundamental objective for individuals involved in the SPCs, whether councillors or sectoral representatives, to be very clear about the role, remit and powers of the SPCs and what 'assisting the council in the formulation, development and review of policy' means in practice. In this regard, and building on the need to enhance the guidelines, is the requirement to have more robust and sustained training in place to keep members routinely reminded of the role, remit, and powers of the SPCs. Without such support the SPC process will inevitably frustrate and dishearten many of those involved.

The review revealed a range of views on the *Programme for Government* commitment to statutorily mandate a climate action SPC. It is clear that climate is becoming increasingly important across the functions of all local authorities and this in turn is reflected in the fact that almost all local authorities have an operational SPC with climate action in the title which are for the most part linked to the broader environmental theme. This has no doubt evolved organically to meet the rising demand of the system, however, it is not clear if the mandating of a separate SPC dedicated to climate would be a prudent course of action. Such a mandate might run the risk of introducing a more siloed approach to how climate is integrated into decision making and, in the process, potentially undermining the need to mainstream climate considerations across the activities of all SPCs. An alternative approach may be to consider how best to achieve the latter.

The recommendations have been set out under three headings: administrative, operational and strategic.

5.2 Recommendations

Administrative

5.2.1 SPC agendas and minutes

- Agenda items should be issued well in advance of meetings. Many PPN members require enough time to receive feedback on agenda items from the wider PPN structure, therefore, the guidelines should perhaps advise that the agenda is issued as much as four weeks in advance of SPC meetings.
- There is a desire to see the setting of agendas for SPC meetings less executive-led and for a more open and inclusive process to be introduced. To give members a greater sense of involvement in the SPC process, revised guidelines should encourage local authorities to get all SPC members more involved in determining agendas.

- Greater efforts need to be made so that SPC chairs and relevant directors of services meet to discuss upcoming SPC meetings and agenda items. If necessary, these one-to-one meetings should be scheduled at the start of each year to ensure that they take place.
- In respect of the minutes taken at SPC meetings, guidance should be provided to local authorities in an effort to standardise the approach taken by all SPCs. As part of the preparation of minutes, action points should be produced, setting out specific responsibility for each action. This would help to provide clarity in terms of the actions agreed at SPC meetings, while ensuring appropriate follow-up after discussions and a greater sense of continuity between meetings.
- In addition, revised guidelines should encourage local authorities to speed up the issuance of minutes following meetings. In the interests of transparency, minutes should be available on each local authority's website.

5.2.2 Location and timing of SPC meetings

- In an effort to promote inclusivity, a greater sense of equality between members, and to improve overall levels of attendance, local authorities should consider using alternative venues to the council chamber for meetings. Perhaps a commitment could be made in the SPC scheme to rotate between different venues for meetings.
- Many committee members are volunteers with various professional and personal commitments, but they still wish to contribute to the SPC process. In this context, the timing of meetings needs to be given careful consideration. For example, SPC meetings could be rotated between daytime and evening times.
- All SPC members should be consulted before the SPC scheme is finalised to get their suggestions on meeting times and locations. Commitments to vary the meeting venue and the meeting time should be stated in the SPC scheme.

5.2.3 Payment of expenses

- There should be a standardised approach to expenses across the SPC system. Local authorities should survey all sectoral members on their SPCs to ensure that they are receiving travel expenses. No members should be at a financial loss by participating in the SPC process.
- The SPC scheme for every local authority should specify that where the expenses of SPC members are not being met by the organisation that they are representing, individuals can claim these expenses from the local authority.

Operational

5.2.4 Provision of policy support

- It is clear that many local authorities are struggling with a lack of resources to fully support the policy role SPCs. Consideration should be given to provide funding to enable local authorities enhance their level of policy support. For example, researchers could be employed to prepare policy papers to help inform SPC members, while independent facilitators could be engaged to run workshops to develop work programmes or policy proposals. Furthermore, funding could be used to obtain external expertise to advise SPCs in their policy work.

5.2.5 SPC links with the CPG and the Plenary Council

- The coordinating and monitoring role of the CPG, envisaged by the guidelines, needs to be clearer. To provide clarity for SPC members, the manner in which the CPG interacts with the SPCs should be detailed in local authority SPC schemes.
- The process of how SPC recommendations and proposals are introduced to the plenary council need to be more transparent. Furthermore, feedback from the plenary council on recommendations and proposals ought to be provided to SPC members in a structured manner. The SPC scheme for each local authority should confirm how the work of SPCs will link in with the full council.

5.2.6 Role of the chairperson

- The SPCs were originally established to enhance the policymaking role of councillors. In this context, efforts to improve the partnership approach at the heart of the SPCs should not reduce the functions of the elected members. However, if SPCs set up sub-committees or working groups, in the interests of inclusivity, non-elected members should be eligible to become the chairperson. There may also be scope to appoint non-elected members to an SPC deputy chair position.

5.2.7 Membership of the SPCs

- The possibility of introducing greater flexibility regarding SPC membership should be examined by the Department. For example, a mid-term review of the membership could be undertaken by local authorities, providing members with the opportunity to move to another SPC if desired.
- SPCs should be encouraged to invite policy experts to meetings, who are not standing committee members, to share their views on particular agenda items. However, the appropriate SPC ethics framework should apply to guest speakers to avoid potential conflicts of interest.

- An exercise should be carried out by the Department to identify which sectoral interests are currently not represented within the SPC process. The Department of Rural and Community Development and/or the PPN National Advisory Group could input into this exercise. Revised guidelines should reflect the appropriate approach for including these groups.

5.2.8 Participation at SPC meetings

- There needs to be a renewed focus on making the SPC process as inclusive and collaborative as possible by fostering an informal and open atmosphere to improve participation from all members. For example, local authorities in the SPC schemes should commit to the values and principles outlined in the *Guide for Inclusive Community Engagement in Local Planning and Decision Making* which supports public participation and engagement at the local level (Department of Rural and Community Development 2023).¹³ In addition, this guide should inform the design of future training programmes for SPC members.
- In addition, when preparing SPC schemes, local authorities should survey elected members and sectoral interests to get their views on how to improve levels of participation at meetings.
- The guidelines should state that local authorities, when preparing SPC meetings, must always take into account appropriate accessibility requirements.

5.2.9 Reporting on the work of SPCs

- Revised guidelines should encourage local authorities to provide more visibility on the work of the SPCs and better report on the impact/outcomes of the SPCs.

5.2.10 Ethics framework

- It should be a standing item at every SPC meetings that all committee members are reminded of their obligations under section 177 of the Local Government Act 2001. In addition, during the meeting rollcall, each member should confirm whether they have a conflict of interest in respect of items on the agenda.
- All SPC schemes or standing orders should include a section on the ethics and lobbying framework, clearly setting out the legal obligations of members.
- The possibility of extending the current ethics framework to cover sectoral representatives on SPCs, or preparing a separate ethics code, should be explored by the Department.
- Any mandatory annual training programme should cover the ethical and legal responsibilities of SPC members while serving on a local authority committee (many organisations, for

¹³ This guide was co-produced by the Department of Rural and Community Development with Pobal, Community Work Ireland and the Irish Local Development Network.

example, have compulsory annual training requirements for their staff in respect of the GDPR or anti-money laundering).

5.2.11 Presence of the media at meetings

- The current guidelines are silent on the matter of the media reporting on SPC meetings.¹⁴ Clearly, there are mixed views on the merits of media representatives attending meetings. But to promote clarity and a common understanding, revised guidance should explain the legal position regarding the media (and members of the public) attending SPC meetings.¹⁵

Strategic

5.2.12 The role of SPCs

- In terms of the current role for SPCs (i.e. dealing with local matters), many contributors associate the committees with policy development or formulation, but this is only part of the SPC role. The review aspect of the SPCs seems to be somewhat overlooked. Each aspect of the SPC role – formulating, developing and reviewing policy - needs to be clearly defined for members to avoid confusion or misinterpretation. Key terms relating to the SPC role like ‘strategic policy’, ‘policy development’, ‘policy formulation’ and ‘policy review’ should be defined. The less defined the role is, the more open the SPC process is to different interpretations which can lead to unrealistic expectations and frustrations among committee members. The guidelines should therefore better illustrate the multifaceted nature of the SPC role by providing clear examples of SPCs formulating, developing and reviewing policies.
- Consideration should be given to encouraging different approaches to configuring SPCs. For example, the SPCs could be aligned to local authority themes or strategic objectives (e.g. sustainable development) as opposed to being strictly aligned to the Director of Service functional areas designated within the executive. However, local authorities should retain some level of discretion to take account of local circumstances.

5.2.13 SPC work programme

- To engage meaningfully with policy issues, it is essential that all SPCs have an agreed work programme in place. Ideally, agreed work programmes would be a mandatory requirement for all SPCs. Where there are difficulties for SPCs in agreeing on a work programme, consideration should be given to using a facilitator to support the process.

¹⁴ In addition, the guidelines do not refer to members of the public attending SPC meetings.

¹⁵ For more on the legal position, please see section 45 of the Local Government Act, 2001. Available at <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2001/act/37/enacted/en/pdf>

- Revised guidance should outline a process for the wider involvement of SPC members in the preparation of work programmes. But to effectively input into work programmes, committee members need to be clear on the policy parameters within which the SPCs operate.
- To facilitate the timely preparation of work programmes and to maximise the impact of committees for the full term they serve, it will also be important that SPCs are established as soon as possible after local elections.

5.2.14 Training of SPC members

- A limited understanding of the SPC system among members, especially in terms of its role and remit, can lead to confusion and frustration with the process. Revised SPC guidelines should explicitly reference the need for refresher and induction/onboarding training during the five-year SPC cycle.
- Consideration ought to be given to the introduction of mandatory online training to be completed on an annual basis by SPC members and support staff. For example, a short self-paced online course, perhaps organised by the LGMA, could help to remind SPC members of their role and obligations and the parameters within which the SPCs operate.
- Training programmes for SPC members need to be effectively designed. While training must cover how the SPC process operates and the roles and responsibilities of participants, the broader context within which the SPCs operate is also crucial. All SPC members need to be aware of the functions, structures and funding of local government and understand the sector's strengths and limitations. Equally, the relationship between local government and central government should be covered. In addition, the timing of induction training will be a critical consideration and should take place as soon as possible after the SPCs are established so as ensure from the outset that the work of the SPCs is appropriately informed.
- Consideration needs to be given to the financial resources that local authorities have at their disposal. Perhaps funding in training budgets needs to be ringfenced for annual SPC training.
- The review has highlighted the need to provide capacity-building programmes for SPC members to develop their knowledge and expertise in policy areas and in doing so, build their confidence. Training needs in respect of the SPC process vary across local government and in this regard, it may be necessary to organise bespoke training sessions at individual local authority level, in addition to national-level training programmes. Representative bodies would have a key role to play in training SPC members.
- Specific training programmes should be developed for chairpersons in terms of meeting management skills and to ensure that proceedings are not dominated by any SPC members.

- Efforts should be made to establish a national-level SPC chair network to support training, opportunities for peer learning and networking. Such a network could potentially be hosted by a representative body of elected members. This could also be relevant where a decision is taken to establish a network to provide feedback on national policy (see recommendation below above on potential dual role for SPCs).

5.2.15 Number and timetabling of SPC meetings

- The guidelines should encourage greater flexibility with the number of meetings held each year to reflect the fact some SPCs do not need to meet four times a year if the agenda is light, while other committees may need to meet more often. For example, the guidance could state that SPCs should meet at least twice each year, but as often as required thereafter. This will also be relevant in terms of whether a thematic approach to SPCs is adopted. The number of meetings held each year by an SPC should ultimately be enough to support its work programme.
- The guidelines should encourage better timetabling or sequencing of meetings to help make the SPCs more impactful. Each SPC chair and relevant director of services should consider how to align better the times of SPC meetings with statutory policy-making timeframes. A joined up approach to the timetabling of meetings could enable the SPCs to support more effectively the full council in respect of statutory policy matters.

5.2.16 Guidelines and a policy toolkit

- New revised guidelines should be developed depending on what recommendations are taken forward. In this regard, it might also be worth investigating a two-tiered approach to same (i.e. mandatory and discretionary).
- In addition to revised guidelines, and in keeping with the OECD's recommendations on fostering an 'enabling environment' for effective policy development, consideration should be given to developing a policy toolkit for the SPCs. Such a toolkit, which would complement the SPC guidelines, would offer best practice advice and represent a valuable resource for SPC members and council staff.

5.2.17 Standing orders

- Many local authorities have just one set of council standing orders covering plenary council meetings, but with separate sections for other types of meetings (e.g. SPC or municipal district meetings). In the interests of clarity and a common understanding among SPC members, it would perhaps be a prudent step if local authorities prepared separate standing orders – informed by the departmental guidelines and good practice - for its SPC meetings. Building on the SPC scheme, detailed SPC standing orders would help to flesh out for

committee members how the SPC process should operate and how business should be conducted. Furthermore, it would help to ensure a more consistent approach to how SPCs are managed in each local authority. Of course, it is of utmost importance that the standing orders are closely followed by members of each SPC.

5.2.18 Title

- While recognising the importance of a strategically focused structure within each local authority, the title of the SPCs perhaps requires consideration. As it stands, the name 'Strategic Policy Committee' can create certain expectations among participants that do not live up to the reality. Of course, this can also depend on how 'strategic policy' is defined and how the role is set out. Based on what recommendations are taken forward, and the likelihood that SPCs will always deal with operational issues to some extent, there might be a need to consider renaming the SPCs to reflect more accurately their actual role and impact. This review, and previous research carried out by the IPA, has shown that an SPC over its five-year term, to varying degrees, deals with both strategic and operational issues. Therefore, a less specific title could be used such as 'Policy Advisory Committees' for example.

5.2.19 Partnership Approach

- A partnership approach underpins the SPC process. In keeping with this spirit, implementing changes to the SPC process should include consultation with others. For example, the process of revising guidelines or drafting an ethics code should involve input from key stakeholders like the PPN National Advisory Group, the DRCD and relevant representative bodies.

5.2.20 Ongoing review of the SPC process

- Despite the existence of guidelines, SPC schemes, standing orders and training programmes, a range of operational issues relating to the SPCs have been highlighted by this review, many of which are longstanding across the sector. In this context, and in the long-term interests of the SPC process, consideration should be given to the introduction of a formal mechanism to review, on an ongoing basis, how the SPC system operates in practice. For example, there may be a role for NOAC to review the SPCs in greater depth. Perhaps a NOAC working group could examine the possibility of developing performance indicators relating to the SPCs. However, greater scrutiny of the SPCs should only happen in conjunction with extra powers and resources for the SPC process.

5.2.21 A broader policy role?

- Several of the contributors to this research highlighted concerns on the exact role of SPCs in developing or recommending policy. For example, is there a common understanding among those participating of what the expectations are around local policy, both at the individual

committee level but also more generally across all SPCs. In addition, the research notes a significant degree of frustration across the system in terms of policy being set at the national central government level leaving little or no scope for policy development at the local level. This of course reinforces the on-going debate concerning Irish government expenditure and policymaking becoming more centralised. In this regard it is interesting to note the recent monitoring report from the Council of Europe on the European Charter of Local Self Government which highlights that Ireland still lacks a formalised and regular process for central government consultations with local government on matters that concern them directly.¹⁶ The report goes on to recommend that a system of formal and regular consultations be introduced between central and local government to address this and to help build trust between different levels of government.

- Within the context outlined above the IPA believes that scope exists for SPCs to potentially play a key role in providing feedback on issues relating to how national policy is implemented at local level with a view to identifying issues or barriers which are impeding effective implementation. Consideration should be given to examining how an SPC regional network could be established, perhaps initially on a pilot basis, to provide such feedback including what governance and administrative structures would be required at the national level in terms of receiving and assessing the feedback. For an initial pilot approach, it may be that a steering group is established with representatives from both local authorities and relevant central government departments to set out a clear terms of reference in trialling the concept across specific policy areas (i.e. climate, housing).

5.2.22 Climate Action SPC

- While the review highlighted different views on the *Programme for Government* commitment to statutorily mandate a climate action SPC, it is not clear if the mandating of a separate SPC dedicated to climate would be a prudent course of action. To ensure climate action considerations are mainstreamed across the activities of all SPCs the Department should explore through revised guidance where every SPC must consider the climate impacts of any policies being considered. This would bring additional strategic coherence to the overall process and in doing so potentially increase the overall effectiveness and impact of the SPCs. Such an approach would reflect, to some degree, the administrative procedures which are seen at central government level where government memorandums being brought to government on new policy proposals (or amendments to current policy) must consider the

¹⁶ For more, see <https://ailg.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Monitoring-of-the-application-of-the-European-Charter-of-local-Self-Government-in-Ireland.docx.pdf>

impacts on the wider climate action agenda. To further underpin strategic coherence, climate action should also be considered in its wider context in terms of interacting with other relevant policy areas such as biodiversity, water and land use.

- From a capacity perspective and linked in with the recommendations on training, it would also seem prudent to ensure that specific climate action training is provided for all SPC members (current and future). It is noted that the sector is currently developing a new climate action training programme for the period 2024-2027 and there may be potential synergies here to ensure relevant training modules are included. It is further noted that the recent and on-going recruitment of both climate action officers and climate action community officers within local authorities should enable the executive to play a more informative role in how climate action is considered within the respective work programmes of the SPCs.

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Abbreviations

CPG Corporate Policy Group

DHLGH Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

DRCD Department of Rural and Community Development

LCDC Local Community Development Committee

LGMA Local Government Management Agency

NOAC National Oversight and Audit Commission

PfG Programme for Government

PPN Public Participation Network

SPC Strategic Policy Committees

Appendix 1 – role of key actors in the SPC process (as per the guidelines)



Appendix 2 List of organisations and groups that participated in consultations

Chambers Ireland

Cork County Council

Department of Education

Department of Environment, Climate and Communications

Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

Department of Rural and Community Development

Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media

Department of Transport

Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council

Irish Congress of Trade Unions

Irish Farmers' Association

Leitrim County Council

Limerick City and County Council

Monaghan County Council

National Transport Authority

Office of the Planning Regulator

Public Participation Network Environmental, Social Inclusion, Community and Voluntary pillars

Public Participation Network National Advisory Group

Westmeath County Council