Administration, vol. 69, no. 4 (2021), pp. 135–149
doi: 10.2478/admin-2021-0031

Public participation in a time of crisis: A case study of Dún Laoghaire–Rathdown residents’ associations’ response to Covid-19

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Introduction

This paper begins with a brief overview of the origins, purpose and structure of the public participation networks (PPNs). The authors then outline some key points related to the Dún Laoghaire–Rathdown PPN (DLR PPN) before describing the Community Call initiative and subsequent rationale for the study. The results of the study are summarised with conclusions on how the feedback helped shape the local emergency policies and response to the Covid crisis. Finally, conclusions are drawn as to the potential for PPNs to promote stronger relationships between local authorities and communities.

Public participation networks

PPNs emerged on foot of the *Report of the Working Group on Citizen Engagement with Local Government*, published in 2013, which recommended greater input by communities into decision-making at local government level. In normal circumstances, this translates into

ensuring representatives sit on various committees (strategic policy committees, local community development committees, LEADER, rural taskforce, etc.).

The networks were established as a mechanism to enable citizens to 'have a greater say in local government decisions which affect their communities' (Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD), 2017, p. 3). As the report highlighted, an important distinction needs to be made between engagement and participation, as the latter is 'regarded as more inclusive' (Working Group on Citizen Engagement with Local Government, 2013, p. 9).

This document, which was fundamental for the creation of PPNs, defines participation as follows:

to participate is to take part, to share and act together. The level at which a member of the public is involved varies with the relevant legislation, and with the aspirations and interests of the public. Participation is an integral part of the process of assisting the local authority lead overall community efforts to move towards an economic, environmental and socially sustainable future that delivers an improved well-being for this and future generations. (Working Group on Citizen Engagement with Local Government, 2013, p. 10)

The report describes the principles which underpin the framework for active citizenship as including social dialogue, equality of opportunity and enabling people to 'participate in issues which affect them' (Working Group on Citizen Engagement with Local Government, 2013, p. 15). Local authorities are mandated to work for the public and in the benefit of the local community, and as such they need to be aware of the needs of the public, and to involve the community in decision-making processes.

From a practical point of view, a PPN can complete its mandate by enabling local representatives to make the voice of the community heard on the various local and regional committees such as:

- strategic policy committees;
- joint policing committees;
- local community development committees;
- other (sports partnerships, Comhairle na nÓg, age friendly alliances, etc.).

As the DRCD indicates, since the establishment of the thirty-one PPNs in the Republic of Ireland (one for every local authority), the number of representatives nationally has steadily grown, with a total of 882 in 2017 (DRCD, 2018) and the latest figure, for 2019, being 928 representatives (DRCD, 2020).

An important mention is that, although PPNs are meant to follow the same guidelines, the working processes, the structure and the mode of interaction with the membership vary significantly from one PPN to another, due to the local flavour of each context. This fact has been highlighted in the *Public Participation Networks Handbook*, published by the DRCD in November 2020. The following are a number of significant differences between PPNs:

- For instance, an important difference is that each local authority decides on the number, remit and purpose of each of the strategic policy committees and other committees in their area.
- While most local authorities incorporate municipal districts, which have to be represented on the local authority committees by PPN representatives, some do not have this distinction, and would operate under the umbrella of electoral areas. The latter are therefore not under the same obligation to have representatives from each electoral area on the various committees – this is the case for DLR PPN.
- The number of and selection criteria for the secretariat members vary depending on the requirements for including municipal districts, pillars or electoral areas. Fundamental differences exist between the roles that linkage groups play in selecting representatives. In some PPNs, linkage groups nominate the candidates, while in others, candidates are nominated by the pillars. The latter is the case for DLR PPN.

A significant number of the PPNs are based within the local authorities. The two other existing options are for PPNs to be established as an independent organisation (with or without charitable status) or to be hosted by an organisation external to the local authority. The latter is the case for DLR PPN.

The different approaches have led to a lack of uniformity in responses to the Covid crisis from PPNs. An example is the case of Kilkenny PPN, where the role the PPN played was defined as supporting social inclusion initiatives as part of a subgroup but it was not involved in other subcommittees, whereas other PPNs were

participating as full members of the stakeholder forum. Other PPNs were involved in organising a local food bank or in coordinating volunteers to help with the delivery of groceries for those who were cocooning. This present study deals solely with the response of the DLR PPN and does not account for other initiatives.

The DLR PPN was involved early on in forming a group to support the local community, which predated the government's directive to organise the Community Call stakeholder groups. An initial team of local stakeholders, which included DLR County Council, the DLR Volunteer Centre, the local partnership, local GAA clubs and a few age-friendly groups, met one week before the government announcement and began working on a plan to support the local community through enlisting and deploying volunteers, identifying resources needed for the vulnerable and sharing information to all member groups.

Dún Laoghaire–Rathdown PPN – Key points

At the time when the present study was conducted (April 2020), DLR PPN had finished the mandatory process of re-registration of its member groups. Groups must register at least every two years to ensure that member details are up to date. The group membership comprises residents' associations, sports clubs, environment groups, age active organisations, charities, social enterprises, new Irish communities, etc. As of January 2020 it counted 450 member groups, divided into three pillars (or colleges):

- the Community and Voluntary Pillar;
- the Social Inclusion Pillar;
- the Environment Pillar.

DLR PPN does not operate with a distinction between municipal districts but identifies the areas of activity under six geographical districts (see Figure 1) as:

- 1) Blackrock
- 2) Dundrum
- 3) Dún Laoghaire
- 4) Glencullen–Sandyford
- 5) Killiney–Shankill
- 6) Stillorgan

Figure 1: Geographical districts in Dún Laoghaire–Rathdown ***Community Call initiative***

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in Ireland brought about the need for an emergency response to the crisis for the purpose of supporting communities and individuals in Ireland. The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) for Covid-19 was established on 27 January 2020 with a mandate to:

oversee and provide direction, guidance, support and expert advice on the development and implementation of a strategy to contain coronavirus in Ireland. It facilitates the sharing of information between the Department of Health and its agencies. It provides a forum for agreement on strategic approaches to public health emergencies. (Government of Ireland, 2020a)

The NPHE Covid-19 Subgroup – Vulnerable People was subsequently set up in March to provide specific guidance around the needs of vulnerable people and the actions required to protect vulnerable groups in society. An integrated cross-government

approach by the subgroup is set out in its terms of reference, with the DRCD taking the lead.

The DRCD established a Covid-19 Advisory Group on Community Response, comprised of stakeholders from the statutory and community and voluntary sectors. This group's work led to the development of the *Government Action Plan to Support the Community Response* (the Action Plan) and the Covid-19 Community Outreach Initiative (National Economic & Social Council (NESC), 2021, p. 7).

NESC's report *Community Call: Learning for the Future* provides a comprehensive study on the structure and remit of this initiative across the country (NESC, 2021). The Action Plan, published by the DRCD, proposed three types of supports: volunteers, community supports and a dedicated helpline. In addition to these supports, the Covid-19 Community Outreach Initiative was coordinated by The Wheel and Irish Rural Link, and funded by the DRCD. This initiative comprised a network of 'community champions', who linked those in need of assistance (some within vulnerable communities) with the supports available within their local areas. The community champions were recruited by Irish Rural Link. The CEOs of the local development companies had strong representation as community champions. The community champions were also recruited from other community-based organisations. This initiative also had the purpose of monitoring the emerging situation at local level to report to government. In addition to the supports contained within the Action Plan and the work of the community champions, a range of activities were developing and ongoing at local level to provide supports and assistance with local communities.

It soon became apparent that a more coordinated national approach was required to ensure that the efforts being made locally were not duplicating supports or leaving gaps in the provision of services. There were also concerns for the safety of volunteers and vulnerable people, and for the capacity of newly formed local groups to comply with requirements such as Garda vetting, data protection and insurance (NESC, 2021).

While the DRCD had taken the lead on coordinating the Action Plan, it was acknowledged that the local authority structures were best placed to reach into local communities. The Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government instructed the chief executives of the thirty-one local authorities to put in place a 'Framework for Local Authority Community Support', with helplines and support structures made available for medically vulnerable people (Department of

Housing, Planning and Local Government, 2020). The government delegated the responsibility of creating and running Community Call initiatives to the local authorities, in collaboration with a number of local stakeholders, including the PPNs, such as local volunteer centres, local community development partnerships and organisations working with specific age groups.

At the launch of the Community Call initiative, Minister Michael Ring, TD, said:

We are now asking that those networks – formal and informal – be mobilised so that everyone in our communities can look after each other. If your neighbours or relatives are required to stay at home – check with them to see if they need supports. And if you are in that category yourself, don't hesitate to ask for help – whether it's with shopping, fuel delivery, collecting medicines or any other necessities of daily life. The Local Authority helpline is there as a safety net, to ensure that everyone is looked after. (Department of the Taoiseach, 2020)

The role undertaken by each stakeholder was different in each county; however, local authorities followed a common set of objectives such as linking in with volunteers, identifying the medically vulnerable and linking in with businesses (NESC, 2021, p. 15). The coordinated approach can be described as a 'top-down' approach, with organisations enlisting the services of volunteers to help support the local community. The Institute of Public Administration (IPA) described it as 'a localised approach with national guidance' (IPA, 2020, p. 2). The government advised that Community Call forums should be established in each local authority. These were chaired by the chief executive, with membership of the forum including those already involved in delivering supports to communities within the local authority area, members of staff from a variety of local authority departments (community, GIS), and representatives of regional organisations and state agencies (IPA, 2020, p. 2).

The forums led to the coordination of supports, including:

- working with the HSE, An Post, local community groups and the local community welfare office service to identify vulnerable groups and individuals in each local authority area;
- ensuring delivery of targeted social care supports and assistance to those vulnerable groups and individuals;

- identifying issues arising through older persons' councils, PPNs, community groups and helpline calls;
- providing assistance to vulnerable individuals in isolation;
- ensuring the resilience of existing community services;
- harnessing offers of assistance from enterprises/businesses generally; and,
- collecting and mapping information on services and voluntary groups across the country to help direct requests for assistance and identify gaps in service. (IPA, 2020, p. 2)

Considering the wide range of activities and supports to be coordinated, some forums had subgroups which focused on specific issues like food poverty or digital exclusion. These subgroups were also useful in differentiating between, and responding to, operational and strategic issues.

In April 2020 the government announced the launch of a Covid-19 Emergency Fund, to be administered by the local authorities. These funds would have a two-fold purpose:

- to allow groups and initiatives to cover costs related to their Covid-19 response for the benefit of the local community;
- to fund the local authority itself for a number of initiatives such as information leaflets, food banks, book drops through local libraries and other similar projects.

Rationale for the study

In this context DLR PPN identified the need to understand the 'grassroots' response to the unfolding situation and how the community could best be supported on a neighbourly level. It was particularly important that voluntary groups be given the opportunity to influence the grant categories for the Covid-19 Emergency Fund and other emergency policies and decisions.

Premises and methodology

There were three premises for our study. The starting premise was that geographical proximity ('same neighbourhood') would make residents' associations a natural source of support for people who are elderly and who were (at the time) advised to cocoon. The second premise was that familiarity is preferred to the support given by an

unfamiliar volunteer, and that individuals would more likely trust their neighbours to help. The third premise was that needs vary across the residents' association depending on the estate and the age and income demographics.

For the study, we designed a set of eight open-ended questions, as follows:

- 1) How is your association/group responding to the emergency on the local level (if at all)?
- 2) Are you organising support for the vulnerable in your estate/street? What kind?
- 3) Are you aware of any groups that are organising support?
- 4) What are the needs of your group?
- 5) Have you considered mapping the local area in terms of vulnerable people?
- 6) How do you stay in touch?
- 7) How can the PPN best support you?
- 8) Are you aware of the DLR Helpline?

The DLR Helpline was set up to provide support to local residents who were cocooning. The landline, mobile and email numbers were circulated in an email to the DLR PPN membership, and all stakeholders who were part of the Community Call were asked to circulate the information about the DLR Helpline in all correspondence, to ensure a wide sharing of the information

The target group was the ninety-four residents' associations that were at the time on our database. All residents' associations were contacted by phoning the primary contact or alternative contact, where available. The study was conducted between 2 and 9 April 2020 by DLR PPN staff, under the format of a semi-structured interview. The conversations were not audio recorded, but notes were made after each interview by the staff and were collated into a report.

Once completed, the report *Residents' Associations in DLR Respond to the Covid-19 Crisis* was sent to the local authority and to the other Community Call stakeholders. The report was published on the DLR PPN official website¹ and was also circulated to all our members.

¹ See www.dlrppn.ie

Results of the study

Sixty-eight residents’ associations responded to our study and we conducted the semi-structured interview with them. Out of the sixty-eight associations that responded, fifty-three organisations mentioned that they organised a micro-level response of providing support for the vulnerable either cocooning or in self-isolation. That represents 78 per cent of the organisations that responded. Fifteen associations (22 per cent) did not organise support, but were aware of family supports already in place for the vulnerable (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Neighbourhood support results

Out of the fifty-three associations that provided support, forty-four reported that they were responding in an informal way, neighbour to neighbour or by a road representative. The other nine mentioned that they had set up volunteer groups to respond.

The residents’ associations communicated with their members in multiple ways during the initial lockdown, with emails mentioned as the main method by thirty-two residents’ associations, followed by WhatsApp messages (twenty associations) and text messages (fifteen associations) – see Figure 3.

The benefit of having an existing communication structure in place was highlighted by some of the participants. There was a particular mention of the Community Text Alert System as this was used by

many to get the message out. It was trusted by those who did not use emails or social media, or who did not have smartphones and so did not use WhatsApp.

Figure 3: How residents’ associations communicate with members

An important part of the study focused on capturing the needs that the various associations had identified in their particular context. These needs were communicated to the local authority and helped influence the administration of the Covid-19 Emergency Fund.

The following three major categories of needs were identified.

Communication needs

- 1) The need for funds to print newsletters for residents, some in large format.
- 2) Funding for credit and designated phones. Groups have phones for sending WhatsApp and text alerts. These need to be topped up.
- 3) Community tablets and dongles need to be brought to the elderly so that they can arrange for online meetings with relatives. A point was made that the elderly really miss the face-to-face contact with relatives and friends, but might not use smartphones because of hand tremors.

- 4) Laptops and printers – due to the libraries and workplaces being closed, there was no access to computers and no possibility to print materials, either for children or for other purposes.
- 5) Information/communications needed in easy-read/large format, and leaflets with games.

Well-being – Keeping up morale

- 1) Funding for quiz prizes, care packages, public address equipment to organise neighbourhood events from a safe distance.
- 2) Funding for group bakes (fruit cakes as a calling card).
- 3) Craft supplies – knitting needles and wool to distribute.
- 4) Funds to set up a board game library.

Sanitising of common areas

- 1) Hand sanitiser and wipes were identified as a stringent need for communities living in apartment buildings.
- 2) The need for funds for this type of purchase was also mentioned for groups doing shopping and engaging with the vulnerable.

An important and positive observation is that the great majority of the associations (94 per cent) were aware of the DLR Helpline and were actively promoting the contact details (see Figure 4). A small number of associations mentioned that residents took the time to text, drop a note in the door or call those who they think may be alone and need some help. Concerned that the vulnerable would not respond to the notes, they asked for formal notification about the DLR Helpline to be sent to each household.

Figure 4: Awareness of the DLR Helpline

Discussion

This study provided an understanding of the informal, neighbourly help provided within communities at a time of crisis. By using the existing network of residents' associations, the study allowed for the identification of vulnerable people at the neighbourhood level. As outlined in the report by NESC (2021, p. 19), a benefit of the Community Call method of identifying those in need of assistance is that it does not rely on area-based designations of disadvantage.

One interviewee noted that previously, and to some extent still, disadvantaged people were identified and services were focused on them using area-based methods. Such methods include area-based partnerships and DEIS schools, for example. However, changes in service provision, such as the move from large social housing estates to single units of social housing in larger housing developments, mean that this method of identifying and focusing on disadvantaged people is not as effective as it was. Engaging with the residents' associations allowed for a more granular way of understanding local needs and reinforced positive relationships between the local authority and the community.

It is therefore also important to consider whether there are residential areas which are underserved by local residents' associations. The existing network of residents' associations and associated infrastructure (Community Text Alert) provided the local authority with the means for establishing communication with members of the community in order to identify needs for support. However, the demand for increased and improved communications across a range of mediums was also identified.

The responses from those interviewed highlighted the continuing need to address the digital divide within communities in the longer term, and highlighted the reliance by some on access to technology and associated services through the local libraries.

The study also identified specific supports required to protect community well-being and to maintain morale. The importance of these supports is evident in the 'Keep Well' campaign, which was launched in October 2020. The government's report *Resilience and Recovery 2020–2021: Plan for Living with Covid-19* makes very clear that individual and community resilience are extremely important in promoting a recovery from Covid-19 (Government of Ireland, 2020b). The Keep Well campaign promotes physical and mental health and well-being under five pillars: keeping active, staying connected,

switching off and being creative, eating well and minding your mood. DLR County Council has a range of supports available to the community under these five pillars, and this highlights the cross-disciplinary approach required for community health and well-being and the coordinating role that the local authority can play. As outlined by NESC (2021, p. 23):

Although all local authorities have an economic and community development role, and all provide a range of funding to local communities, a number found that the experience of Community Call connected them more strongly to local communities in their area, particularly vulnerable communities. They have become more aware of the role they can play in the sphere of social inclusion and community wellbeing, and their engagement with the Government's *Keep Well* campaign is testament to this new awareness.

Conclusions

The results of the interviews helped inform the categories taken into consideration for the Covid-19 Emergency Fund. It provided ideas from the community for initiatives and it allowed for a snapshot of the grassroots response to the crisis in DLR.

Most importantly, the study provided a sketch of the informal, neighbourly help provided at a time of crisis and also helped contribute to the moral support of the community. This is an important part of the role of a PPN, which helped complement the initiatives set in place by the local authority and the other stakeholders who were part of the Community Call forum.

This study highlights the important role that the PPN played during the Covid-19 pandemic. It also supports the conclusion that there is potential for PPNs to promote deeper partnerships between local authorities and their communities (NESC, 2021, p. 23).

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