SPC Induction Training – Unanswered Questions from Q&A

Introduction: A number of questions that elected members raised during the course of the April SPC training webinar could not be answered during the 'live' Q&A session due to time constraints. However, responses to unanswered questions have been collated and these responses are set out hereunder.

The responses to questions 28 and 33 were supplied by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Please note that the responses to questions 28 and 33 are for information purposes only and do not purport to be legal interpretation or advice; the responses provided by other parties do not represent or necessarily reflect the views of the Department.

Questions from Attendees
1. **How soon after an SPC meeting should the minutes be circulated to PPN reps?**
2. **Do sectoral/PPN members need to wait until minutes are adopted before reporting back?**
3. **Are SPC meeting minutes public documents, and should they be sent automatically to all councillors?**
4. **Are SPC minutes available for public scrutiny as with council meetings?**
5. **Should SPC minutes be signed, and what are the best practices for dissemination?**
6. **What are the restrictions (if any) on what PPN reps can report back to their secretariat?**

Answer to Q's 1-6:

The answers in this section refer heavily to the Corporate Policy Groups and Strategic Policy Committees Revised Guidelines (June 2024)

https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/corporate-policy-groups-and-strategic-policy-committees-revised-guidelines-for-establi.pdf

Where relevant and to ensure transparency, appropriate information should be made publicly available. The local authority should take reasonable measures to publicise the work of the SPCs, in particular the outcomes and impacts of the SPCs' work.

This includes making available in a timely manner minutes and reports processed by the SPCs. In instances where documentation is of a confidential nature, this should be specifically identified as such. Any documentation not so identified will be regarded as available to the public in general and the sectors in particular.

An agreed statement of (non-confidential) outcomes will be provided as soon as practicable after a meeting. (*Guidelines page 35*)

The local authority should provide a key contact person (other than the Director of Service) for all SPC members and particularly for sectoral representatives to deal with SPC matters. *(Guidelines page 17)*

SPC chairs should introduce SPC recommendations for full approval by the full council. The SPCs sectoral representatives should provide feedback to their nominating organisations on the activities of the SPC. Members of SPCs should be provided with automatic feedback on the outcome of the council's decisions on SPC recommendations. *(Guidelines page 19)*

SPC agendas and minutes are usually published on local authority websites.
The Standing Orders for each local authority and SPC will provide clear guidance on the process of before, during and after meetings.

Questions from Attendees

7. **Is there an obligation for the CPG to communicate back to the SPC and inform members how proposals are received or acted on?**

Answer to Q7

The role of the CPG is strategic and it links and co-ordinates the work of the different SPCs. Acting as a link between the SPCs and the full council, the CPG will have an active role in the preparation of the draft budget. It will determine whether a function will be discharged at the municipal district or authority level, where reference in relation to this question is made to it. It must also be consulted in the preparation of the corporate plan.

The Chief Executive supports the work of the CPG. The Cathaoirleach reports to the full Council on the work of the CPG, and should also report to the Council on the work (including proposals) of the SPCs on a quarterly basis (although this may be more frequent depending on circumstances). The Chairs of each SPC report back to their Committees similarly, as do the representatives of each municipal district to their fellow municipal district members. (*Guidelines page 3*)

The CPG links the work of the different SPCs, acts as a sort of cabinet and provides a forum where policy positions affecting the whole council can be agreed for submission to the full council. (*Guidelines page 6*)

The CPG, like an SPC, is a committee of the council. Its task is to advise and assist the council, with full decision-making authority remaining with the council. The Cathaoirleach reports to the full council on the work of the CPG. (*Guidelines page 6*)

The CPG approve the work programmes of the SPCs and monitor their achievement;
• co-ordinate the work of the SPCs;
• request SPCs to consider particular policy issues; where appropriate; and
 • provide feedback to the SPCs on council policy and views in areas relevant to the SPCs.
(*Guidelines page7*)

Questions from Attendees
8. Where can members access the policies in place for their SPC?
Answer to Q8 National policies can be found on www.gov.ie and local authority policies will be available on their own website

Questions from Attendees
9. Do external/sectoral reps have the same power as councillors on SPCs?
Answer to Q9 External and sectoral representatives and those members nominated by the PPN are full members of SPCs similar to the Councillors and play a vital role in the policy development process. However, but final policy decisions rest with the full elected council. While all SPC members participate equally in SPC discussions, the external and sectoral representatives do not have voting rights on the full council and thus don't have final decision-making power.

Questions from Attendees
10. How does a representative propose a topic or submit a motion?
Answer to Q Representatives can raise issues or a topic through SPC meetings structure by requesting inclusion on the meeting agenda through the SPC Chair or Secretariat. This is where your SPC meeting standing orders are important and should provide for this. You also can raise issues via PPN Linkage Groups, which can filter and support proposals for inclusion at SPC meetings.

Questions from Attendees
11. Are sectoral-nominated members adequately supported and oriented?
Answer to Q Yes, sectoral members, especially those from PPNs, receive training and supports facilitated by the PPNs and local authorities. These include access to Linkage Groups for shared learning and collaboration, ongoing communication from the Secretariat and SPC Chair and support from PPN Resource Workers and training sessions. If additional support is required this should be included in your SPC work programme.

Questions from Attendees
12. Is there training and support for new SPC members?
Answer to Q
Yes, there is a comprehensive training programme being delivered by the department in partnership with AILG and the IPA and the induction presentation highlights importance induction training as part of supporting new SPC members. Ongoing training supports will be available from the PPN, SPC Secretariat, and through the roll-out of the training programme by the department and national bodies like AILG or IPA.

Questions from Attendees
13. How to raise a motion for newer members?
Answer to Q
New members can raise motions via the SPC meeting agenda-setting process.

Questions from Attendees
14. Input on time/dates of meetings for full-time workers /Participation of PAYE workers and accessibility of training.
Answer to Q
Meeting times are governed by your SPC Standing Orders, which should include the setting of times, days, and locations with regard to accessibility and availability. Consideration needs to be given to appropriate accessibility requirements for all members including those in employment. It should be noted that many local authorities have hybrid meeting facilities with online access which are increasingly designed to accommodate and promote inclusive participation.

Questions from Attendees
15. How is the SPC workplan/work programme formulated and where can it be accessed?
Answer to Q
Having a work programme aids in clarity around the role of the SPC for members and gives a clear direction for their efforts; it also aids in ensuring accountability and transparency in goal-setting and progress achieved.
All SPC members should have the opportunity to contribute to the preparation of the work programme. Where reaching agreement is challenging, it is suggested that the 18 local

authority make use of a facilitator. The work programme should be linked to the local authority's corporate plan. (Guidelines page 17-18)

In devising their SPC arrangements, local authorities will also need to have regard to key corporate objectives identified as part of their SDPs process and reflected in their corporate plan, and, where necessary, to matching SPC structures and internal organisational arrangements in a way which supports the achievement of those objectives. (Guidelines page 21)

Questions from Attendees

16. Are there examples or templates of SPC workplans/work programmes?

Answer to Q

A sample SPC workplan for training/orientation for SPC members is currently being developed and will be made available to SPC members once finalised.

Questions from Attendees

17. Is the work programme for 1 or 5 years?

Answer to Q

Work Programmes are linked to full council plans and the annual work plan. They will have specific objectives for each year.

Questions from Attendees

18. Does legislation set out number/split of members, or is it at the discretion of councils?

Answer to Q

Each SPC should have as a minimum a total membership of nine.

At a minimum 6, and where appropriate, 7 sectors should be represented in each local authority's SPC configuration. These are: Agriculture/Farming (for Rural Authorities), Environmental/Conservation, Development/Construction, Business/Commercial, Trade Union, Community/Voluntary, Social Inclusion. (Guidelines page 24/25)

19. What is the recommended number of meetings in a year?

Answer to Q

A calendar of SPC meetings should be agreed at the start of each year. Meetings of SPCs should generally be held a minimum of twice yearly at suitable times for all SPC members. However, each SPC may choose to meet with a greater frequency, depending on the demands of their work. The SPC meeting calendar should be structured in such a way as to fit in with policymaking timeframes, including statutory timeframes, to allow SPCs to perform their role in supporting the plenary council's policy-making as fully as possible. From this perspective, the timing and sequencing of meetings can be essential to strengthening the impact of SPCs' work. *Guidelines page 20.*

20. Should presentations/agenda be circulated in advance?

Answer to Q

The local authority should involve, as far as possible, all members of SPCs in drawing up the agenda, and they should return their views in a timely manner. (*Guidelines page 20*)

Local authorities should ensure that documentation concerning SPC meetings is sent well in advance of the meetings, ideally four weeks in advance. The agenda and minutes of SPC meetings should also be circulated well in advance to all SPC members. In particular, the agenda should be circulated to all SPC members four weeks in advance of meetings. Minutes should include action points which assign responsibility to a specific party or parties in respect of each action. (*Guidelines page 2*)

21. How can SPCs ensure delivery of their programme and tangible policy outcomes?

Answer to Q

SPCs need to be involved from the preliminary phases of preparation of a policy and to assist in the setting of overall parameters, identification of issues to be addressed and approaches to be taken etc. In this way, SPC members can have a meaningful involvement in presenting to the full council for decision the values and choices which are important elements of plan preparation.

The 2014 Act made provision for early presentation of proposals to the local authority connected with the formulation, development, monitoring and review of policy. The first step in this is the presentation of these proposals to the SPC, and the Chief Executive is required to discuss, in outline form, or on the basis of very preliminary papers, the

development or amendment of any policy, and how and when its implementation is to be monitored and reviewed.

This will require discussion between the Chief Executive/ Director of Service and the chairperson of the SPC in advance of the preparation of any papers and the preparation and the presentation of the preliminary papers in the light of these discussions. The SPC will then be in a position, during these early stages, to advise on the preparation of preliminary papers for consideration by the council. (*Guidelines page 12)*

Questions from Attendees

22. How to influence policies created at national level?

Answer to Q

While SPCs operate at local authority level, local policy development is informed by national and regional strategies. To influence national policy, SPCs can feed into national and regional consultations, PPNs and sectoral representatives can channel views upwards through their national bodies and networks and well-developed local policy proposals can inform national discussions or be adopted as models.

Questions from Attendees

23. What are the vehicles for emergency legislation if policy change or an item is seen as critical and change period too long?

Answer to Q

Early presentation of proposals to SPCs is encouraged for timely input. However, the Chief Executive or elected council may escalate urgent matters for direct consideration by the SPC. Special council meetings may be convened to address critical issues. For emergency legislation at national level, this must go through the Oireachtas.

Questions from Attendees

24. If a policy is rejected by council, what happens?

Answer to Q

If a policy developed through the SPC process is rejected by the full council and it is not adopted, it may be sent back for revision or further discussion at SPC level. The SPC may rework the proposal considering council feedback. However, as detailed in the presentation final authority always lies with the full elected council, so SPC recommendations are advisory, not binding.

25. Can SPCs work together on a policy issue (internally or between councils)?

Answer to Q

See CPG answer (Q7) – they coordinate work of SPC so should identify links to allow opportunities for effective collaboration

26. Is there a mechanism of recording the effectiveness or outcomes of work or action points agreed?

Answer to Q

To evaluate outcomes of the work of the SPC, mechanisms that can be used include:
- Following your multi-annual work programme linked to the local authority's Corporate Plan.
- Maintain meeting minutes, agendas, and action logs.
- Ensure that your SPC has included policy review processes within your work programme which assess outcomes, accountability, and alignment with strategic objectives.
- Ensuring the effectiveness of your SPV work will be evaluated in the ultimate policy approved by the elected council flowing from the SPCs.

27. Role of CEO/executive in relation to elected members and AILG's view on staff roles in shaping policy.

Answer to Q

This question strikes at the heart of ongoing tensions between elected members and the executive/administrative arm of local government in Ireland. Under the Local Government Reform Act 2014, a clear distinction was reinforced between reserved functions (elected members) and executive functions (Chief Executive and staff). In theory, elected members set policy, while the executive implements it. However, the AILG has consistently raised concerns that this balance is being undermined in practice:

- Policy Input vs Policy Shaping: AILG acknowledges that staff and officials will, by necessity, have a strong input into policy development – especially in technical

or statutory areas – but it maintains that elected members must remain the ultimate policy-makers, not passive recipients of pre-packaged decisions.

- Concern Over "PowerPoint Policy": The practice of presenting dense, staff-driven proposals in PowerPoint form at SPC or Council meetings, often with limited time for deliberation, has been criticised. AILG views this as diminishing the deliberative function of elected members and reducing them to endorsing staff-led agendas rather than shaping them. However, this is where the importance of the chair and SPC members comes into force to take responsibility for the working of their SPC, including their work programme, meeting agenda's, effective chairing of meetings etc.

- Call for Enhanced Member Capacity: AILG argues for greater resources and training for elected members and SPC members, including independent policy analysis support, to rebalance the policy-making process and allow councillors and SPC members to challenge, amend, or reframe executive proposals.

- Ethical Governance and Transparency: AILG stresses that transparency in how policies are formed – including early engagement and meaningful debate – is crucial to preserve the democratic legitimacy of local councils.

In summary, the AILG sees staff as essential advisors and implementers, but policy authority should remain firmly with councillors, and processes must ensure this is genuinely the case.

Questions from Attendees

28. **What action can be taken nationally re balance of power and also balance between 'service' and 'authority' in Council conduct and culture, which might enable community reps to point to, given current local authority behaviour?"**

Answer to Q

The SPC system is intended to give councillors and relevant sectoral interests an opportunity for full involvement in the policy-making process. Under the Departmental guidelines SPCs should draw one-third of their membership from sectoral representatives and be supported in their work by a Director of Services. In addition, the guidelines advise that the local authority should provide a key contact person (other than the Director of Service) for all SPC members and particularly for sectoral representatives to deal with SPC matters.

When determining the SPC framework for a local authority, factors to be considered include the provision of adequate opportunity for participation by councillors and sectoral interests. The drafting of the SPC framework should also consider feedback from sectoral representatives via the Public Participation Network. The Department-issued guidelines recommend taking steps to ensure that the views of the sectors, including the PPN and other stakeholders, should be sought, to help ensure that the SPCs are inclusive and effective.

The SPC guidelines also advise that approaches to stimulate greater citizen engagement should complement rather than diminish, compete with, or substitute for local representative democracy and the primary responsibility and accountability for decision-making within the local authority will remain with the elected council. However, decisions by local authorities will be informed and strengthened by more effective community/citizen engagement and increased public participation in local government.

The guidelines emphasise that 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. The Department issues codes of conduct for elected members and employees of local authorities, which amongst other things set out principles and standards of conduct, and advise of the importance of courtesy, respect and equality.

Questions from Attendees

29. Do local media attend meetings in some areas and do some councils live stream SPC meetings?

Answer to Q

In most cases, local media do not regularly attend SPC meetings, mainly due to:
- o Perceived lower news value compared to full Council meetings
- o Resource constraints in local journalism
- o SPCs being more technical or preparatory in nature

However, in some local authorities – especially where controversial policies or strong public interest are involved – local reporters may attend SPCs. Attendance tends to be sporadic and topic-driven.

In terms of live streaming of SPC Meetings, while many councils now live stream plenary Council meetings, SPCs are generally not live streamed. There are concerns about the informal or workshop-like nature of SPCs, and whether public broadcasting could stifle open discussion, are often cited as reasons. A growing number of councils now publish SPC agendas, minutes, and supporting documents online.

Standing Orders will outline the procedures for the presence of the public and media representatives at SPC meetings, in accordance with section 45 of the Local Government Act 2001, as amended.

Questions from Attendees

30. How to engage PPN reps and sectoral members—especially in remote/hybrid meetings?

Answer to Q

PPN and sectoral members can ensure effective engagement at meetings by engaging in training/support provided by your local PPN network on using accessible technology and to ensure effective remote participation. Use your local linkage groups for shared learning and

support on meeting agendas, meeting support documents, and minutes in advance to allow time for consultation. Also your SPC chair must encourage active facilitation to ensure all voices are heard. You can also maintain open lines of communication through email updates, virtual briefings, and PPN support staff.

Questions from Attendees

31. Do SPCs of all councils share the subjects/ research projects/ topics in a repository of good practise/ research etc? This could be useful as a source for references/ learning on particular subjects.

Answer to Q

SPC members should try and access relevant topics and research specific to their SPC via national research and policy papers published by government departments, public agencies, and national bodies. Members should also have access to local authority plans and policies to guide your work. Some local authorities also publish their SPC documents online, including agendas, minutes, and reports which can also be a good information tool for you.

Questions from Attendees

32. Is it possible to get a selection of example of standing orders from different county SPCs?

Answer to Q

Suggested standing orders that were circulated in 2002 include guidance on the running of local authority committees, including SPCs and may be helpful when drawing up SPC standing orders.

Please refer to page 32 of the Notes for the Assistance of Local Authorities Incorporating Suggestions for Standing Orders

Attendees can also refer to https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/circular-lg-07-2020-guidelines-for-supplementary-standing-orders-regulating-the-procee.pdf for Guidance

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Questions from Attendees

33. Town Councils: Is their reintroduction being considered?

Answer to Q

The Local Government Reform Act 2014 dissolved 80 town councils, which represented just 14% of the population. The previous town council system also led to duplication both in administrative and electoral terms. Instead, the Act saw the introduction of 95 municipal districts in 25 of the 31 local authorities at sub-county level, while area committees would

operate in the 3 city authorities of Cork, Dublin and Galway, and the 3 Dublin County authorities.

Each municipal district can include several towns and their hinterlands, with local matters dealt with at municipal district level and wider strategic issues decided at county level. The result is an integrated administrative structure in each county, which maximises operational efficiency while ensuring devolved decision-making throughout the county.

The Programme for Government 2025 - Securing Ireland's Future contains a commitment to convene a 'Local Democracy Taskforce' with the local government sector to finalise a programme for the reform and strengthening of local government. The Taskforce will bring forward proposals, which the Government will consider, on issues including strengthening the framework and powers of municipal districts and area committees and the establishment of town councils in large towns, on a regional phased basis, to provide a focal-point for raising concerns of towns and coordinating town-focused activities.

The Terms of Reference for the Taskforce are currently under development in the Department and these will have due regard to the commitments in the Programme for Government. Following further consideration and input from key stakeholders, they will be brought to Government for approval. The first meeting of the Taskforce will take place as soon as possible thereafter.

Questions from Attendees
34. Can you please provide link to IPA Report on a Review of Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs)
Answer to Q https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/ipa-report-on-a-review-of-strategic-policy-committees-spcs.pdf