

CORK ENVIRONMENTAL FORUM

www.cef.ie



SUBMISSION TO

**Cork County Council
Strategic Policy Committee Scheme**

November 2009

The enclosed observations were collected from CEF members who have served as representatives on Cork County Strategic Policy Committees in the past.

Introduction

Cork Environmental Forum is a non-governmental organisation founded in 1995 to promote and foster sustainable development at a community level in County Cork in accordance with the principles of Local Agenda 21. One of the core aims is to engage people in representing the Environmental Pillar on select committees.

We welcome the draft Strategic Policy Scheme and are grateful for the opportunity to assist the formulation of a quality plan.

General observations

- The proposed SPC structure does not include representation for the Environmental Pillar on either the Economic Development or Tourism committees. It is the view of Cork Environmental Forum that the Environmental Pillar should be represented on these committees.

We refer to Department Circular LG 12-09 Environmental and Sustainable Development in which the importance of the environment is highlighted as follows:

The Minister also wishes to emphasise the importance of environmental/sustainable development issues informing the work of the SPCs as a whole. Such matters should not be viewed as being the concern of the Environment SPC alone. On the contrary, issues relating to the environment and sustainable development are relevant to the work of each SPC. It is considered that the Corporate Policy Group has a significant role to play in ensuring a harmonised approach in this context. In addition, the Minister has also asked that the respective County/City Development Board be kept informed of the SPCs work on environment / sustainability matters, with particular reference to the work of SPCs on Planning/ Development/ Environment/ Transport.

- The representation of 'Others' included in the various committees is unclear. We feel that the operation and structure of the SPCs should be made as transparent as possible, and in the following cases there remain ambiguities.
 - There are 2 'Others' included on the Environment Committee – it is unclear who these are intended to be.
 - The 5 'Others' on the Economic Development Committee appear to be drawn from 8 agencies (if it is assumed all 5 Local Development Agencies are to be represented individually – if not it is 5 'Others' from 4.)
 - It appears that Fáilte Ireland have been invited to provide 4 representatives on the Tourism Committee. We would question why this should be the case when no place has been provided for the Environmental/Conservation sector.
 - There are 3 'Others' included on the Transport Committee – it is unclear who these are intended to be.
 - There are 3 'Others' included on the Arts & Culture Committee – it is unclear who these are intended to be.

Role of the SPCs

Cork Environmental Forum has played an active role in the County SPCs since 2000. In that time hundreds of hours have been devoted by our voluntary representatives to these committees – many of whom take leave from their jobs in order to attend meetings. It is generally felt that the Role of the SPCs – as defined in 4 lines on page1 of the draft scheme – is a totally inadequate plan for a decision making process which involves many external representatives giving their time voluntarily to assist in policy formation.

We respectfully suggest that the final SPC scheme delineate in much greater detail what exact role an SPC plays ‘to advise and assist the Council in its work’ with reference to the relevant department literature. It has been our belief for many years that the SPCs can indeed play a positive role in the policy making process – however it is an essential requirement of any such scheme to have a clear and transparent plan from the beginning.

The draft scheme states that *‘the SPC system will give Councillors and sectoral interests an opportunity to be fully involved in the policy making process from an early stage’*. **We must stress that the experience of the majority of our representatives in the past that this has not been the case.** Typically committees are issued with documents and given a presentation by council staff – for example on the County Council’s programme for the distribution of funds for secondary roads or fire service improvements for the coming year. The meetings then mainly consist of councillors making a case for spending in their areas.

Feedback

Most representatives report a lack of feedback – how the work of their SPCs has contributed to downstream policy formulation and decision making.

Remit of the SPCs

The policy issues under the remit of a SPC should be clearly explained to members before / at the initial meeting and updated with time. The existing policies should also be explained and the SPC should decide on the policy issues to be considered at future meetings.

SPC Chair

The role of the SPC Chair is critical in deciding the meeting agenda etc. However the procedure for appointment of the Chair is not clear from the council document. The draft scheme mentions however that the appointment of the Chair will be ‘for the lifetime of the Council’. This contradicts the ‘Towards Better Local Government’ document which states that *‘... His/her term of office will be for a period in excess of one year’* (2.19).

Agendas and other documentation

Representatives of CEF in the past have frequently noted that agendas and documentation for the SPC meetings were seldom received in adequate time before the meetings. This has led to a widespread feeling amongst external representatives that the work of the SPCs has not been as productive as it could have been.

Full use of appropriate technology should be made to circulate such documents.

Meeting arrangements

In order to encourage the voluntary engagement of members of the wider society, we propose that wherever possible meetings are held at times that suit the unpaid members of the SPC. To avoid extra cost to the Council, staff attending these meetings can be given time in lieu.

Many committees have consistently failed to communicate adequately with the external representatives regarding upcoming meetings, and indeed the dissolution of the committees earlier this year. Again, full use of appropriate technology should be used to keep people informed of upcoming arrangements well in advance.

We would respectfully ask the Council to take our recommendations into account when finalising the SPC Scheme.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Patrick Treacy". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping 'P' and a long, curved tail on the 'y'.

Patrick Treacy
On behalf of Cork Environmental Forum