



Community Planning in Belfast

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**A Paper based on a Forum sponsored by the Belfast Local Strategy
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Louise Mc Neill

Gavan Rafferty

Ken Sterrett

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Introduction

This paper is based on a discussion forum on the theme of *community planning in Belfast*. Community planning is an important issue associated with the Review of Public Administration (RPA). The attendees were selected to represent the diverse civic and public policy interests in Belfast. In keeping the number small to accommodate participation and exchange by everyone, the list was never intended to be comprehensive. The session was based on Chatham House Rules, where participants were asked to talk freely, understanding that no comments would be attributed to individuals.

Beginning with two short presentations from individuals associated with community planning practice and research, the discussion was framed around five central questions:

- ***Definition:***
 - **Can we get a clear definition of what community planning will be in Northern Ireland and how does this compare with the rest of the UK?**
- ***Status:***
 - **How will the community planning function relate to the statutory planning function in the new local authorities?**
- ***Implications:***
 - **What might all of this mean for Belfast? What difference will it make to the governance of the city? How will it connect with ‘A Shared Future’, for example?**
- ***Delivery mechanisms:***
 - **What mechanisms will be put in place to ensure the effective delivery of community plans and area (development) plans?**
- ***Local impact:***
 - **How will community planning drill down to local areas and local communities?**

Spatial and Community Planning

The first speaker gave a brief presentation outlining how community planning has been shaped in England, with an emphasis on the legislative framework. It was stated that community planning, under different guises, had a long history in England from the New Towns initiative to the Skeffington Report of 1969, community planning in the Inner Cities and more recently since the Labour Government came to power in 1997.

The participant outlined the statutory basis for community planning as defined by the Local Government Act (2000), highlighting that the Act defines the Local Authority as the ‘community’ in question and that this can lead to confusion particularly in two tier councils. The linkages between the move to community planning and a shift to spatial planning were also noted. This shift to spatial planning was enabled by the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act (2004), which introduced a number of specific issues relating to community planning: regional spatial strategies, core strategies (replacing local plans), spatial distinctiveness, the integration of land-use planning with other sectors and a statement of community involvement. There has also been a focus on developing strategic integrated plans and an emphasis on creating sustainable communities. Attention was then directed to the Lyons Report¹, an ongoing review of the future of local government, which has identified that **local government should be about ‘place shaping’ with planning as one of the most useful tools in this process**. A number of considerations were brought to the fore: the legal ramifications of spatial planning impacting upon human rights; issues of co-terminosity; and priorities for consultation.

Moving on, an academic in the field of community planning gave the second presentation, translating the information from the first speaker into a local context. The words of Professor Janice Morphet² were referenced, who has indicated that the community plan should be the ‘*plan of plans*’ and that the development plan (in a

¹ On 20 July 2004, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer commissioned Sir Michael Lyons to undertake an independent inquiry to consider the case for changes to the present system of local government in England. For more information see <http://www.lyonsinquiry.org.uk/>

² Professor Janice Morphet is a visiting professor at The Bartlett School of Planning UCL and was a member of the Modernising Local Government team and e-government advisor at the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister – recently renamed Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG).

local context, the area plan) should give ‘spatial expression’ to that. The speaker detailed an ongoing action research community project taking place in partnership with the Donegall Pass Community. It was explained how an interdisciplinary team from Queen’s University Belfast were collaborating to undertake a holistic examination of the area, with the outcome of producing a comprehensive vision. This in turn would present an opportunity for providing feedback to the policy environment. The speaker commented that this vision process was lacking in the present Northern Ireland Area Plan production process, with the exception of the Regional Development Strategy (RDS), and **identified the potential for linking community planning with spatial planning, facilitating a more coherent delivery of services.**

Following the two speakers the Chair put forward the five abovementioned questions for consideration. The Chair presented a set of presumptions to help frame the discussion:

- 1. Implementation of a seven council model**
- 2. Restored active local assembly**
- 3. Continued prevalence of Regional Development Strategy (RDS)**
- 4. Adoption of Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP)**
- 5. Policy context – Section 75, Targeting Social Need & A Shared Future**
- 6. Co- terminosity – convergence of statutory development plans framed on a seven council model**

Main Discussion

In response to the first question, one commentator noted that there is widespread support for community planning in principle but there is little *understanding* of what the term means. Another participant agreed with this statement adding that the term brings together two familiar words yet when used together there is no clear understanding of its meaning. Furthermore, there was consensus that the term can mean different things to different people and that the local council should take the lead with other stakeholders.

Another participant interjected, noting that the process had drawn experience from European ‘powers of competency’ as a way for councils to plug gaps, noting that this had been translated to a ‘power of well being’ in a UK context. Other commentators suggested that the community planning process made logical common sense and was “a sensible next step”, as well as “a happy coincidence.” There seemed to be a synergy of views from a diverse range of sectors; simultaneously embracing the notion of developing and promoting community planning as a natural progression for sustainable development.

Drawing comparisons with Scotland, one participant suggested insight could be gained from the Scottish Executive’s definition of community planning, describing it as “a process by which the well being of the community is promoted by the council with key partners ... with an emphasis on community engagement.” It was also noted that current definitions of community planning are largely aspirational, with the *process* being of equal importance as the end *product*. This potentially new situation offers opportunity for fundamental cultural change in the way we deliberate and deliver services provision. Another participant, in agreement with the above, **suggested that definitions of community planning have been left deliberately vague to allow flexibility for different approaches to emerge.**

The Chair at this point questioned whether a clear definition would be drafted in the current Taskforce proceedings, due to report at the end of June 2006. In response, it was suggested that the report would be presented to the working group and Minister for comment and in September a two-year consultation and legislative process would begin. It was felt that in England the process had largely been shaped by the Labour Party and in Scotland by the Councils. In Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) has been strongly advocating council led community planning in recognition of the fact that councils were progressing along a transformative path. **In its view, councils should lead the way, given that they have demonstrated the skill, willingness and competence to do so in recent years.**

The debate then moved on to explore: the legal status of community planning; how it would function in relation to statutory plans in the 7 Local Authority areas; and if the process would have any real teeth?

Two diverging views emerged from this discussion: one strand of thinking felt that community planning should not get bogged down in legislation while a competing view urged that it should be underpinned by a statutory obligation for stakeholders to participate or a real opportunity would be missed.

It was suggested that at present there is no indication that references will be written into guidance on community planning to create a linkage with, or to have regard to, land use planning. The discussant felt that operational opportunities might exist within councils, for example, to locate community planning and land use planning staff within the same office would greatly increase the opportunities to facilitate *integration*. **However it was urged that community planning should only develop a ‘loose relationship’ with land use planning, at an operational rather than a legalistic level, until the current land use planning framework receives a major over haul; once this happens the discussant agreed that they should be linked. Other participants endorsed this opinion noting that community planning could struggle under a strict legislative process where powers of examination were utilised. However it was felt that legislation should be used to ensure key stakeholders participate in the community planning process.**

At this point, another participant offered the example of the visioning processes, which had occurred in a number of areas across the province. It was indicated that despite considerable effort the visioning exercises had left no practical outcome, suffering from a lack of authority. Thus, community planning could meet the same fate if it lacked statutory authority and were to be defined so loosely that it became limited in scope with no one having responsibility for overseeing and directing the implementation process. It was also argued by the same participant that it is important that careful consideration is given to the relationship between community planning with other planning ‘layers’ throughout the province: in other words there is a need for clarity about the hierarchy of plans within Northern Ireland. **In this participant’s view, community planning should have a clear ‘fit’ with both the Regional**

Strategy (RDS) and statutory area planning. Supporting and reiterating this point, another participant stressed that a major opportunity would be missed if both processes were not connected.

Progressing further, another discussant indicated that future guidance would give Local Authorities a statutory power to produce community plans and place a duty on all other statutory agencies to participate in this process. This led a number of participants to question whether the legislation would give stakeholders the flexibility to pool resources etc., while one commentator remarked “we are being encouraged to think laterally yet we still receive funding in vertical silos.” Although a fundamental change to the prevailing *modus operandi*, it was recognised that this was a major challenge that would be addressed in accompanying guidance.

Another perspective introduced at this point was that although land use planning and community planning are unlikely to merge in the foreseeable future they *should* develop a closer relationship. Furthermore, the point was raised that councils could demonstrate this relationship by integrating development opportunities on their land with the community plan, which will embody a wealth of other issues. **Greater synergy and complementarity between the existing, modified and/or newly merging planning functions will be critical to its success and to its commitment in creating sustainable communities. For instance another discussant highlighted how the action research community project in Donegall Pass is attempting to demonstrate the value of taking an *integrated approach to planning at a local community level*. This has involved broadening the definition of planning to facilitate the integration of land use planning with other disciplines, fields of policy, and the multiplicity of community data to create an enhanced ‘planning’ function. **This model offers a new way of planning *with* a community and hopefully the major opportunity offered via the RPA to reconfigure service delivery in Northern Ireland is not missed.****

The issue of community participation and perception was taken up further. One participant argued that *there is no credible link between people and planning in Northern Ireland*. It was pointed out that the general public do not understand what ‘planning’ actually does nor do they appreciate the underlining principles or the

opportunities that it presents. Moreover, the RDS cries out for a more effective and efficient planning process - like community planning. In addition, planning should be about '*place shaping*', referring to Patsy Healey when saying "we need to engage the development of policy communities, which learn and transfer this experience to other places", adding "exactly what we are doing here."

Another discussant identified the challenge of linking community and land use planning within two jurisdictions in the 'island of Ireland'. An example here might be the planning situation in Derry/Londonderry and Letterkenny. The community here transcends the border and yet there are very different approaches across the two jurisdictions.

In summary, the Chair noted the consensus in the room that there should be synergy between community planning and land use planning professionals and that the community planning process should receive a quasi-statutory status, which might represent a compromise between the competing views.

The discussion progressed to the 3rd question: what difference would community planning make to the governance of Belfast?

There was across-the-board support that it was likely to make a substantial difference to the governance of the city, fundamentally changing procedures and even how the local authority and city appears. In addition, another commentator observed that it would enhance local area level planning, allowing communities to track their participation from initial stages of consultation to the final production and delivery of a plan. It has the potential to create a one stop shop for community services; create knock-on effects for land use planning; and develop the role of the community and voluntary sector.

It was acknowledged that a new form of civic leadership is critical, drawing on the example of Glasgow, which was facilitated by "the right people, at the right place, at the right time." Furthermore, having an effective and strong civic leadership can be beneficial in many ways, for example, influencing matters that are outside ones control.

The discussion turned to the issue of community planning in a segregated city like Belfast. One participant warned that communities might want things for their own area rather than for the greater good, noting that at a very local level the process could encourage communities to look inwards rather than at a wider context – this would be at the expense of the *Shared Future* agenda. The following examples were noted: communities having to compete for hospital services in **Fermanagh and Omagh** and the example of the development of a Chinese Welfare Centre which was opposed by Donegall Pass residents.

The point was then made that levels of public confidence are very important. A participant drew attention to the reaction to the announcement that the social housing function might be returned to Local Authority control. It was questioned how civic society could be encouraged to come alongside politicians. Another contributor remarked that the Lyons Report suggested that where decision making would take place better locally, Ministers might need to learn to say to the public "raise it with your councillors" rather than coming to government. However it would take a brave Minister to take this route.

The Chair noted that a number of issues had been raised relating to class and race. Provoking debate the chair asserted that the city could be described as a collection of ghettos which it is hard to bring objectivity to, even in relation to issues of public sector housing. Also it was questioned whether the community planning process could 'raise the bar' or whether the opportunity would be lost because of issues of social class or racial discrimination in the city.

In reply one participant explained that they didn't think it would be able to make much of an impact on these issues. The participant further stressed that the *Shared Future* initiative would only have a chance when people see a pragmatic reason for sharing the future. On a more positive note one commentator explained that **it provides a real opportunity to deal with the so called "wicked issues", enabling communities to bring real issues of segregation, territory and the delivery of services which ought to be at the centre of debate out into the open.** Furthermore, it might not be possible to reach a solution but at least it will have triggered an

engaged debate. The previous commentator responded that the onus was on representatives from both communities to demonstrate practical reasons for ‘*sharing*’ and highlighting what each community would gain. Another participant noted that the Assembly members were doing a lot of good work behind the scenes sharing and working together, and that it was likely to improve further when powers are reinstated. This in turn presents a huge opportunity. It was indicated that another major opportunity was presenting itself in the Sustainable Development agenda, which was championing a transformational way of working by focusing on long-term solutions, which facilitate working together.

It was noted that in many ways Belfast is stagnating, operating at a sub-optimum level. Furthermore, there is no room for complacency over issues such as the Maze site or rationalisation of libraries. Community planning could be ‘a saviour’ if it is seized with enthusiasm and applied with boldness, it could reverse generational decline or it could become another platform to fight over.

The discussion moved on to the 4th question regarding the policy mechanisms or regulatory framework required to ensure community planning succeeds?

In response, a participant voiced that it was likely to be based on performance management and self-assessment, which would be verified by peer ratification. The NI Audit Office would verify the procedure using performance indicators to evaluate whether the community planning process was working. The issue of accountability was questioned; what or whose performance would be monitored? It was suggested that any regulatory framework would require clear rules and delivery mechanisms and these are at present not as clear as people would like them to be. It was noted that in Scotland it is Audit Scotland who undertake this remit in terms of reviewing the process and partner contributions. The participant highlighted that in Scotland the Minister rather than having an auditing role has a legislative duty to support and encourage the process. Another commentator questioned whether government would have to at least sign off the plans or in particular the plan making process. In response, it was indicated that more autonomous local governments are desired. Furthermore another contributor suggested the use of Local Area Agreements; however a

respondent noted that this option could be counter-productive leading to yet another layer of plans to be navigated.

Taking up this issue of change, another discussant raised the possibility of two models for accountability. Firstly, a funding model which would be grant based and would involve the Assembly, or secondly, a rates system where councils are self-financing. In relation to the latter, it was argued that accountability would become even more important.

Approaching the end of the discussion, the chair advanced to the 5th question: How will the community planning process drill down to the community level (as defined by local people and identity).

One participant noted, resonating with an earlier comment that, it is important to drill down to the local level to gain the benefits of community engagement. However, in the divided city of Belfast people may want to influence and protect their own area rather than open it out to a city wide level. **This reflects the ‘exclusionary concept of community’, and therefore it is important to bear in mind the civic contribution to the city - one that will engage people in city governance and enrich their lives and the ‘life’ of the city.**

Community planning offers an opportunity to put these issues at the forefront and engage both land use planning and the public - if facilitated properly. It was further argued that whatever potential the process offers to the community and voluntary sector they in turn must be ready to rise to the challenge. Citizens would certainly benefit from a one-stop shop approach to service provision. Again the issue of political accountability was raised. **For community planning to have an impact it needs to be meaningful at the local community level.**