



Local Government Bill Evidence submission to the Committee of the Environment

November 2013

Belfast Healthy Cities is pleased to have the opportunity to submit evidence to the Committee stage of the Local Government Bill.

Belfast Healthy Cities is a partnership organisation working to improve the health and wellbeing of people in Belfast and beyond. The organisation acts as the link to the World Health Organization (WHO) European Healthy Cities Network on behalf of Belfast as a WHO Healthy City, and currently holds the WHO secretariat for the Network. The role of Belfast Healthy Cities is to bring organisations and sectors together to consider how their work contributes to health and wellbeing; to share evidence and build capacity, and to introduce and pilot new concepts linked to core themes identified by the WHO European Healthy Cities Network. DOE is among Belfast Healthy Cities' key partners, alongside Belfast City Council, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, Bryson Group, DHSSPS, DSD, DRD, NIHE, Public Health Agency, QUB and UU.

Engaging communities and service users in decision making is a core principle of the Healthy Cities approach, which seeks to focus action on how people's wider physical and social living conditions contribute to their life and health outcomes. Healthy urban planning has also been a core theme for Healthy Cities for a number of years, and work in Belfast has recently focused in particular on exploring elements of child friendly cities. The concept of healthy urban planning aims to identify how spatial planning shapes both people's lives and the work of other sectors, and how collaboration across sectors can maximise benefits and enhance synergies. Our evidence submission is based on these principles, and will as such focus on the community planning elements of the Bill.

Comments on the Bill

Clause 69

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the introduction of community planning to Northern Ireland. Community planning offers an important new opportunity to agree a shared vision for an area between stakeholders across sectors, and to develop shared action towards this vision. Community planning can be particularly valuable for strengthening health and wellbeing and tackling inequalities, as health outcomes are shaped by

people's wider living conditions, and community planning offers a platform for considering these links with all stakeholders.

A key issue not raised within the Bill is how equity across council areas will be ensured, and how community plans will link to the Programme for Government. The latter would seem particularly relevant, in that many community planning partners will be directly involved in delivering PfG targets, and appropriate linkage could maximise both impact and resource efficiency. It can also be noted that while Local Area Agreements in England have been abolished, in Scotland the Single Outcomes Agreement (SOA) system has been viewed as valuable for promoting a coherent approach across government. Notably, the SOAs are linked to the Scotland Performs performance management system, which consists of a limited set of outcomes and performance indicators that both Scottish Government and councils work towards.

Belfast Healthy Cities believes it would be helpful to consider a mechanism, potentially modelled on the Scottish system, that sets out how community planning aims and objectives should reflect or link to central government objectives. In itself, this would ensure an appropriate balance of local flexibility and equity across the region in terms of the overall aims and objectives set in community plans.

Clause 70 – community planning partners

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the proposal to consult proposed community planning partners regarding the relevant bodies that should be included. However, as the Bill sets out statutory provisions that community planning partners have a duty to comply with, identifying core community planning partners in this primary legislation would create important clarity and promote effective collaboration.

It would also be very helpful to clearly set out that partners include community representatives, since community planning as a concept is about engaging local residents and community and voluntary sector bodies in the decision making process.

Clause 71 – community plan

It would be helpful in this section to include reference to baseline data, community profiles and analysis of local needs, in order to ensure that the community plan is built on a sound evidence base. In addition, it would be helpful to set out a broad timetable for the production of a community plan. While sufficient time should be given to allow for thorough engagement with stakeholders, data gathering and debate on issues arising, a timetable or pathway to production would be helpful to encourage an effective process. A suggested timetable might be to allow one year for initial engagement and up to two years for agreeing a plan, setting a cut off deadline for production of a plan within three years.

If possible, it would be particularly helpful to set out provisions that encourage simultaneous production of the local development plan and the community plan, as

these will have significant impacts on each other and valuable synergies could be achieved by aligning the production processes.

Clauses 72-73 – review of community plan

Engaging with the wider community as part of the review is important, in order to gain an understanding of how local people, service users, providers and businesses feel the community plan has delivered against its aims and objectives. It would therefore be helpful to include reference to engagement beyond partners as part of the review process.

Clause 76 – community involvement

Belfast Healthy Cities would stress that in keeping with the spirit of the community planning concept, persons listed under subsection (2) are stakeholders in community planning, and not only consultees. Therefore, relevant representatives for these groups should be part of the core community planning partnership(s), while provisions under this Clause should set out how to engage with these persons as a wider community.

It is important to note that engagement can take place at several stages of the community planning process, from identifying issues and wishes as evidence for the process, to commenting on proposals and reviewing progress against these. Engagement can also take many forms, from traditional public consultations to workshops and creative sessions with children and other harder to reach groups. Significant benefits can be gained from effective engagement, both for the community plan itself and for the health and wellbeing of local people – for example, working with local communities on local priorities enables a sense of ownership that not only promotes delivery, but also for its part contributes to mental wellbeing and community cohesion.

The Clause might helpfully in either Clause 76 or Clause 77 clarify that guidance is to be provided on methods for engagement, to ensure fairness and a degree of consistency across council areas.

Clause 77 – guidance

Many organisations outside councils and their representative bodies will have considerable expertise and experience in relation to issues relevant to community planning. It would be important to reflect this and incorporate a provision to engage community, voluntary and public sector bodies in developing guidance as relevant, in order to ensure guidance developed is based on the widest possible knowledge.

Clause 78 – duties of Departments in relation to community planning

Departments will retain a wide range of functions crucial to community planning, and as such the success of community planning will depend on Departments participating effectively. It is perhaps helpful to note that effective community planning will provide

significant benefits to Departments and effective participation can strengthen these – for example, an intersectoral approach to promoting mental wellbeing can reduce absenteeism and pressure on health care, while action on community safety can reduce pressure on these budgets. Therefore, it would be helpful if this Clause made provision for stronger promotion of community planning by Departments (eg. through removing the words ‘aim to’).

A cross government approach that aligns central government and community planning aspirations – such as the Scottish Single Outcome Agreement linked to Scotland Performs - would also provide a clear basis on which Departments can participate and be assured of mutual benefits.

Clause 80 – Amendments to the Planning (Northern Ireland) Act 2011

Belfast Healthy Cities strongly welcomes the provisions in this Clause, which link spatial and community planning. Spatial planning sets the overall context within which all other services are provided and developed, and has direct impacts on people’s lives and through this, their health and wellbeing. For example, zoning plays a key role for the job opportunities people can avail of, and in extension, has an impact on people’s income and through this, both lifestyles and health outcomes as well as local spending power. Transport is a key intermediary; good public transport can help especially more disadvantaged groups and areas widen the relevant area for job search.

Based on this understanding, it is crucial that the local development plan and community plan are appropriately aligned, and ideally prepared simultaneously.

Clause 82 – Council’s general power of competence

Belfast Healthy Cities supports the introduction of the General Power of Competence, but some concern is expressed that the previously suggested power of wellbeing has been withdrawn. This power provides for councils to undertake action that enhances the wellbeing of residents, and offers an important opportunity to focus on how action to strengthen wellbeing enhances wider social, environmental and economic aims. It is not clear how the general power of competence can be used, and to what extent it offers an opportunity to focus on wellbeing. Belfast Healthy Cities believes it is essential that guidance should be provided at an early stage to aid understanding of the power and potential ways to utilise it to enhance the social, environmental and economic wellbeing of local people and places.

Clauses 87-90 Improvement duties

In relation to all of the above Clauses, the focus is on self identified improvement goals and self certified improvement. While later Clauses make provision for audits by the Local Government Auditor, in line with performance management principles it would appear appropriate that local stakeholders and rate payers are given an opportunity to contribute to targets as well as review improvement against these

targets. It would be helpful if this was reflected more strongly in provisions in this Part, especially under Clause 90 – consultation on improvement duties.

Experience from Scotland indicates that linking local government to the overarching Scotland Performs framework has provided clarity and a shared approach that helps stakeholders assess the relative performance of both central and local government.

In conclusion, Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the Local Government Bill and the provisions made for introducing community planning. People's health is shaped by their wider physical and social living conditions, and many opportunities to prevent ill health and tackle inequalities have been missed due to a lack of an intersectoral platform for considering cross cutting impacts and effects. Community planning offers an opportunity to bridge such gaps, and can also effectively engage local people in decision making that affects their lives, encouraging participation and taking control of personal lives. Learning from other places where community planning has been implemented can help develop local practice, and some elements could also contribute to legislation that effectively supports the process.