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A Fresh Look at Community Engagement and Regeneration: Toward Good Practice and Innovative Policy in Northern Ireland

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[R]egeneration programmes have too often concentrated on changing buildings, rather than helping people...Past experience has shown that massive investment can be made in building or refurbishing residential or business property with very little impact on local people.
(Social Exclusion Unit 2000, 29)

Background

This briefing addresses public-private and statutory planning consultation processes that impact on the quality of shared spaces in urban areas across Northern Ireland. It presents and discusses research and field-work undertaken since 2012. The research builds on seminal studies about deeply established ethno-sectarian division and marginalization of the public, in terms of development decision making, that shape Northern Ireland's social and physical environment (E.g., Boal 1996; Hayes and McAllister 2015). It focuses on perceived shortcomings in public engagement (i.e. local neighbourhood consultation) processes for major public/private regeneration projects that fall within Assembly remits, through the Executive Office and Ministerial Departments including Infrastructure; Economy; and Communities. As well as examining statutory consultation requirements, the briefing argues that public engagement objectives, as set out in the Fresh Start Agreement (2015) are relevant to current policy and are worthy of re-examination to inform best practice.

The findings herein suggest how a range of active tools for gathering public information in major projects can be more effective to planners, policy-makers, developers, and communities alike – resulting in better quality data, and better value for money in terms of public-private expenditure on such processes. The sections below discuss the findings, including how more effective engagement can better inform models of urban investment for liveable urban places for all communities across Northern Ireland (Buck et al. 2005; DOENI 2014).

Planning Policy Shifts: Community Regeneration and Consultation

As argued here, two of the most significant changes to planning and regeneration policy in recent NI history were the implementation of new planning laws (*The Planning Order (NI) 2015*), and the launch of The Fresh Start Agreement in the same year. The Planning Order decentralised the bulk of planning powers to the 11 newly formed local Councils in Northern Ireland, with certain powers remaining under the remit of the regional Department of the Environment, DoE (since 2016 divided into new Departments for Infrastructure, where the bulk of planning powers remain; of Communities, with powers over regeneration and historic buildings; and of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, which includes countryside management). The Fresh Start was launched as a “far-reaching and comprehensive framework for addressing some of the most challenging and intractable issues that have impacted on [local] community” (Executive Office NI 2015, 5). It included “Draft Guidelines On Good Practice In Public Consultation- Engagement” (2015), with objectives to:

- Enhance decision-making;
- Improve the acceptability of decisions reached;
- Build capacity internally and externally for improved relationships and stakeholder input to political processes.

Key to this research, the 2015 Order requires new ‘major’ projects, above a defined threshold, to undertake a pre-application consultation process with the local community (community being a term this report addresses). Unique to NI, in the UK context, individual Councils set out the key stages for public engagement and informs the community of how and when they can become involved (Inter-Parliamentary Research and Information Network 2016). Equally important in the context of this report, regeneration powers - affecting funding and procurement of large-scale projects in specified (red-lined) urban areas were also proposed to devolve to local councils but remain with the regional Department of Social Development, now the Department of Communities, DoC (Givan 2016).

Argument

This briefing argues that mandatory statutory consultation requirements, as implemented in key projects, continue to be seen as top-down versus more inclusive processes. Best practice for implementing statutory consultation in the full spirit of legislation, and Fresh Start aims, remains unclear and is often seen as developers and statutory bodies fulfilling the minimum requirements to:

(a) hold at least one public event in the locality in which the proposed development is situated where members of the public may make comments to the prospective applicant as regards the proposed development; and

*(b) publish in a newspaper circulating in the locality in which the proposed development is situated a notice containing [a specified list of required information] (*The Planning Order (NI) 2015*)*

Engagement processes can, however, be more inclusive. Like more successful urban spaces and regeneration schemes that are open and accessible (e.g., see Fig 1, over), consultation can aim for the widest diversity of stakeholders and stakeholder knowledge versus more closed and exclusive frameworks.

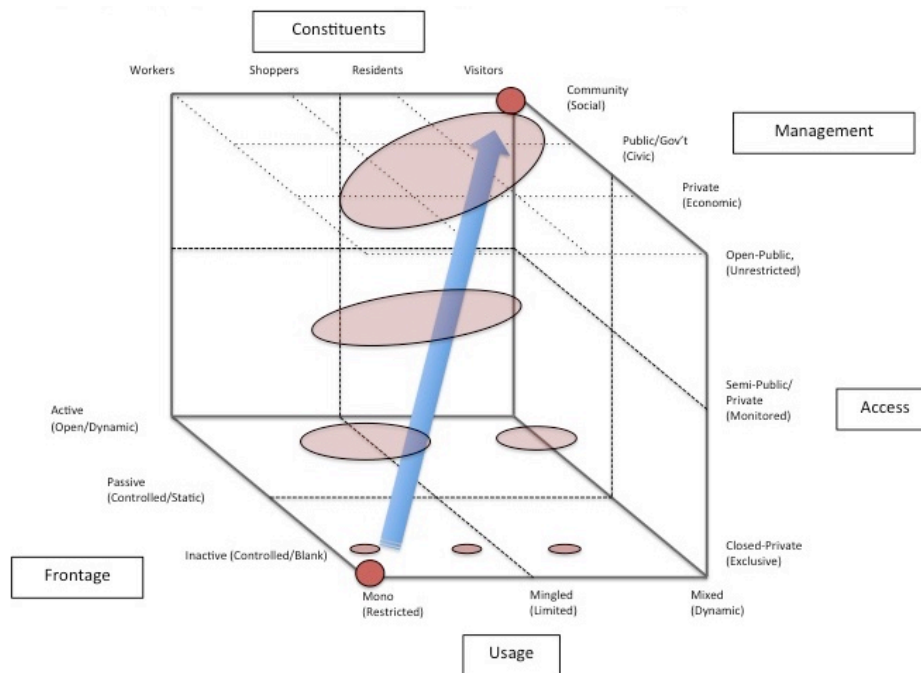


Figure 1: City space qualities – more open versus closed urban places that can be akin to consultation (Golden et al. 2015)

Key Activities: Developing engagement tools in the field

Consultation on large-scale projects can often seem foreboding to members of the public, and as a nuisance or unnecessary delay to commercial developers. Members of the public who are identified loosely as Communities or Constituents in Figure 1, individuals and groups, often do not – or do not know how to – engage with consultation processes effectively. This lack of capacity impacts on the quality of data gathered for planning decisions; it can lead to low turn out at statutory events (exhibitions, town-hall type meetings), and consultation fatigue from repeated or re-launched proposals over a number of years in the same urban areas.

As alternatives to what is here termed “static” statutory consultation methods including online surveys, formal meetings in churches and libraries or town halls, and through flyers or poster displays, the authors developed and led what they refer to as more “active” approaches, based on international precedents. They involve working directly with a range of public, private, and third sector organisations in parallel to (and within the time-frames of) consultation events held by government agencies including the Department of Communities, and others by developers. The following sections describe the primary tools used and evaluated by the authors:

1. Interactive Briefing Exercises: Developing methods for all parties to work together, the authors chaired several briefing forums (called Briefing Events) with representatives from community groups, local residents, political parties, local businesses and representatives of the neighbourhood renewal bodies. These forums looked to embed across the developer and statutory project team the value of briefing events as *interactive planning and design exercises* that would let community participants explore and test some issues concerning their neighbourhood regeneration, with a modicum of agreed influence over possible outcomes.

2. Art-based workshops as public-private engagement events: Avoiding formal rows of seats and presentations “to” people, these events were formulated as social art and culture based events out in the areas targeted for regeneration, including walks, evaluative “games” and interactive exhibitions. As informal social events and casual conversation, data-gathering thus becomes a positive and less forced by-product where histories and key aspects/priorities for future growth can be identified.

3. “Activentions”: Temporary pop-up activities in public spaces targeted for regeneration as a means to share information and test out future planning and development proposals. A “lighter, cheaper, quicker” approach (Project for Public Spaces 2011; Golden 2013) that includes enacting possible activities in areas that might become new public spaces, working directly with local residents, neighbourhood groups and representatives, businesses, and voluntary organisations to undertake activities as a low-cost, low-impact (reversible) and collaborative process – set out as a testing and gathering process rather than a finished product.

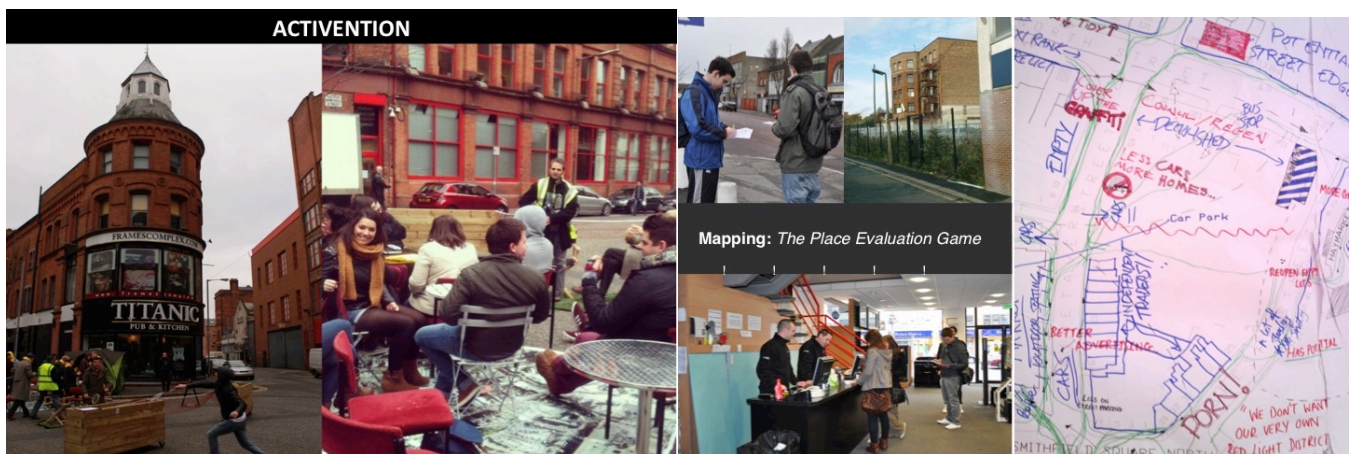


Figure 2: Examples of activentions and art-based workshops outcomes in Belfast (Source: Authors 2018)

Evaluative Tools: Evidence Gathering About The Research Activities

Evidence based evaluations of the tools promoted in this briefing include the use of anonymous surveys and written feedback from public-private stakeholders involved in consultations for regeneration initiatives, as well as more anecdotal observations from projects in the field. These methods are a means to compare and contrast perspectives on traditional versus alternative visioning and consultation tactics.

Questionnaires focused onto qualitative feedback with open and closed questions about:

- *involvement in consultation and project proposals;*
- *sources of information about development;*
- *reasons for responding or not responding to traditional consultation;*
- *priorities for investment and development impacting public space;*
- *perceptions of active approaches including pop-up street events, exhibits, walking workshops;*
- *comments on statutory consultations with follow-up areas for specific views.*

Key Findings And Suggested Actions

The proposals out for consultation that were considered in the research, primarily in and around Belfast, were almost always at advanced design stages by the time statutory consultations began. Major design proposals, out for comment, tend to be based on the prior input of “key stakeholders” and consultants (typically design and financial consultants from outside NI). Major schemes here are still, in the main, being produced with no - or very little - work being done at the earliest visioning stages to inform design from the bottom-up, with greater opportunities to then be able to transfer knowledge to newly designed buildings, streetscapes, and shared space in a more cohesive way, balancing financial as well as social and environmental aspects.

ACTION 1: To address current failings, future policy reviews on major project planning should include strategic re-consideration on the extent of evidence of, and guidance for, earliest stage consultation.

Active approaches were shown to deliver better levels of local knowledge to planning proposals than static statutory data gathering processes alone; in one example for Streets Ahead and Northside proposals, 1/3 of all the consultation-period responses came from the authors’ one-day low-cost public *activation*, compared to statutory events waiting for the public to make comments over a number of weeks (Golden 2014). Data gathered through surveys and follow-up questionnaires highlights further how active approaches can produce a wider understanding about a range of priorities regarding development issues, such as those mapped below according to identified themes.

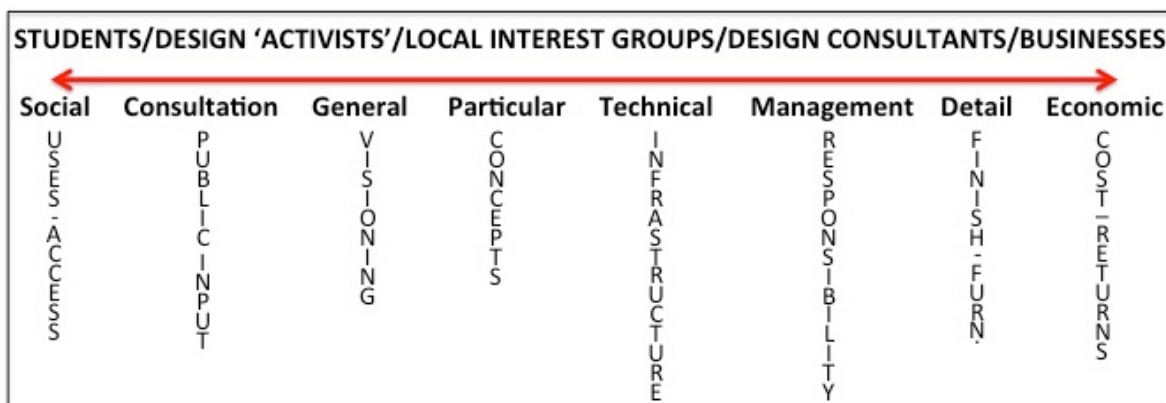


Figure 3: Wide spread of knowledge on development priorities from active approaches (Source: Authors 2018)

Figure 3 illustrates the value of including overlooked, non-expert insight into local development areas, to more fully understand and improve upon the acceptability of planning/design decisions. It captures data on more social and design focused concerns to those associated more with project management and costs/financing.

ACTION 2: To help avoid aborted time & capital expenditure (social & financial) Best Practice should promote wider use of inclusive, and active approaches, with managed processes to evaluate public data quality.

Concluding Discussion

The history and changing shape of cities are influenced through multiple narratives that Government and Statutory authorities can learn to better balance against market-led/financial models for urban development. In

Northern Ireland, collective societal memory and shared socio-urban values remain under-prioritised as drivers of high quality regeneration, and as the basis for effective consultation. Given the complexity inherent in contemporary planning processes, urban design and building procurement needs to be a process where a deep understanding of community and 'user' needs emerges through equally in-depth discussion with the development team, to test decisions at the earliest stages of development consideration with the public, well before any decisions on scope of red-lines, vesting, demolition, street changes, and/or mixes of uses are set.

In conclusion, engaging better with the public should be a driver for efficient and higher quality urban development, and for potentially longer lasting regeneration benefits to all involved and affected. If consultation is seen as an active, responsive, and collective problem-solving exercise, the process of compiling public information (data) can also become more resilient and inherently democratic. As this briefing has argued, where client, community, and statutory organisations jointly articulate planning, design and building aspirations through interactive exercises (including workshops and reviews discussed here) the result can be improved local buy-in and decision-making capacity (per Fresh Start objectives). Re-examining these objectives as policy can aid better decisions about the future qualities of all Northern Ireland's communities.

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