



Northern Ireland
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Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

Community Planning in Local Government – how do we do it?

Colin Knox: Ulster University

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Abstract:

One of the key reforms in local government reorganisation is the statutory power of community planning which has been described as the equivalent of *Delivering Social Change* (OFMDFM) at council level. There is however a dearth of information on how to take the principles of community planning from concept to practical implementation in Northern Ireland. This presentation will draw on a pilot study and sets out one approach to the outworking of community planning in local government. It will highlight potential tensions between community planning partners in relation to the issue of accountability: vertical accountability to the Minister, and Assembly and horizon accountability to the community planning partnership. It will also offer insights into emerging central-local government relations and whether community planning could rebalance a devolved administration which has been centripetal in nature.

The context:

Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 gives new 11 councils power of community planning.

What is community planning as defined in the legislation?

Community planning is a process by which the council and its community planning partners identify long-term objectives for:

- (a) Improving the social, economic and environmental well-being of the district and contribute to sustainable development in NI; and
- (b) Identifying actions to be performed and functions exercised by the council and its community planning partners (including in relation to planning, provision and improvement of public services for (a) above.

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Key (selective) elements of the legislation are as follows:

1. A council must initiate and, having done so, maintain, facilitate and participate in community planning for the district.
2. Every community planning partner of a council: must participate to the extent that such planning is connected with the partner's functions; and must assist the council in the discharge of its duties under (1) above.
3. The DoE may by order specify the bodies or persons who are to be the community planning partners of a council.
4. The council or community planning partner must take all reasonable steps to perform the action or exercise the function in accordance with the community plan.
5. Community involvement: council and its community planning partners must seek participation of and encourage the following to express views and take them into account in community planning process (residents, non-residents who receive community planning services, representatives from voluntary bodies; businesses).
6. DoE may issue guidance on any aspect of community planning which council and community planning partners must have regard to.
7. Duties of departments: So far as it is reasonably practicable to do so, every NI department must: (a) in exercising any function which might affect community planning, promote and encourage community planning; (b) have regard to any implications of a community plan for the exercise of that department's functions.

The detail of community planning

Community planning is about producing more effective joined-up public services and providing opportunities for greater involvement of communities. In the process, the local council has a **central role in initiating, maintaining, facilitating and participating in community planning**. The council becomes a 'junction box' for the locality, seeking to integrate and join up public service delivery for the benefits of all people, and the long-term success and sustainability of the area (our emphasis). In short, community planning is about improving the quality of life for people living in council areas by public service providers and people working together.

The process:

Typically a community plan will comprise:

- (1) An overall vision/mission statement for the Council area.
- (2) A small number of **high-level cross-cutting themes** which require collaborative actions across community planning partners with an identified lead organisation.
- (3) An action plan linked to the cross-cutting themes with measurable targets and outputs.
- (4) A formal commitment to the community plan by partners through their own internal planning and decision making processes.
- (5) Monitoring and evaluation of progress in meeting the targets/outputs outlined in the community plan (through the proposed Community Planning Partnership).

We emphasise that themes and actions should be judiciously selected, few in number, high-level and cross-cutting to make the point that the community plan is **not** a composite of the internal and external plans of partner organisations.

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X District Council's vision is:

To make X District a prosperous, healthy, sustainable and quality place in which to live and work.

Cross-cutting themes (at a high level)

Typical high level themes deriving from consultation process could be:

- The Economy and improved prosperity
- Health
- Education and Lifelong Learning
- Community Safety

Action Plan (linked to cross-cutting themes)

The action plan follows from agreed themes. Again, by way of example only, if we take one theme identified in X's Corporate Plan and locate this in an action plan template, this could be presented as follows:

THEME: Economy and Improved Prosperity

What will we do?	How will we do it?	Targets for action	Lead Partners	
1. Further develop and improve the economic, social and community well-being within the region.				
2. Strengthen and further develop the position of X district council				
3. Address the infrastructure deficit for the region.				
4. Develop collaborative ways of working in relation to planning and spatial policy directives.				
5. Engage and influence a system of education and training appropriate to the needs and aspirations of the people and the economic needs of the area.				

Community plan 'proofing': The action plan should be drawn up with the following criteria in mind:

- High level commitments to 'what we will do' – these must add value to the existing work of planning partners.
- Limit the number of actions but make them truly collaborative, realistic and achievable – in other words, partners need to co-operate to make them happen (cross-cutting, joined-up commitments).
- Measurable targets associated with 'how we will do it'.
- Community plan should be 'budget neutral' – making better use of existing resources.
- Ultimate test of community planning is whether its implementation improves the quality of peoples' lives in X district council. We therefore need to begin with baseline information in order to assess whether improvements have happened.

Improved quality of life?

Key question is: what is the impact of integrated service planning on the quality of life of our residents. If community planning is to be an effective process, then ultimately it must improve the quality of people's lives. In order to capture this, we pilot the adaptation of the Audit Commission's Quality of Life (QoL) indicators¹ in the context of Northern Ireland. Although designed for Great Britain, we propose selecting indicators aimed at tracking progress on the themes agreed in the community plan. This represents a significant challenge in a number of ways:

- (a) Adapting QoL indicators to the circumstances of Northern Ireland – not all of the data are available to operationalise Audit Commission indicators in the Northern Ireland context.
- (b) Moving out of the 'comfort zone' of service-specific targets.
- (c) Greater transparency and accountability for improving things that matter to the quality of citizens' lives.

We set out in table form the baseline information which is available for X District Council and compare the indicators to Northern Ireland overall.

¹ Audit Commission: <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk>

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BASE LINE INFORMATION
X DISTRICT COUNCIL – example for illustrative purposes only
Quality of Life Indicators

	<i>X District Council</i>	<i>Northern Ireland</i>	<i>Better</i>	<i>Worse</i>
<i>Crime/community safety</i>				
% Recorded crime (12/13)	35.3	26.6		-8.7
% Burglary (12/13)	12.9	11.3		-1.6
% Theft (12/13)	25.4	26.3	+0.9	
% Offences against the person (12/13)	25.9	24.8		-1.1
<i>Housing</i>				
Total number of new dwellings completed per 1,000 population	6.6	5.5	+1.1	
% of all houses that are unfit (census 2011)	28.0	29.4	+1.4	
% Owner occupied (census 2011)	69.6	72.0		- 2.4
<i>Health and Social Well-Being</i>				
% Teenage pregnancies per 1,000 females aged under 17	6.7	6.5		-0.2
Life expectancy at birth				
- Male	68	67.5	+0.5	
- Female	72	71.5	+0.5	
% People with long-term illness (census 2011)	19.6	20.4	+0.8	
<i>Education and Life Long Learning</i>				
% Degree level of higher qualifications (census 2011)	14.4	15.8		- 1.4
% Of school leavers into further and higher education (2013)	61.7	63.6		-1.9
% Of school leavers with 5+ GCSEs at grade C and above (2013)	54.3	58.6		-4.3
<i>Economic and Social Well-Being</i>				
% People (16 – 59/64) claiming incapacity benefits (2013)	12.7	10.7		-2.0
% People (18 – 59) claiming income support (2013)	11.5	10.8		-0.7
% School population entitled free school meals (2013)	19.3	18.9		-0.4
% Unemployed (census 2011)	4.7	4.1		-0.6
Median gross weekly earnings all employees (2013)	£332.7	£320.5	+£12.20	
% Economically active (census 2011)	61.2	62.3		- 1.1

Community Planning Process – X District Council

VISION STATEMENT

- X public, private, voluntary/community sectors agree vision and priority themes to improve the Quality of Life of its citizens

- Aims of the community plan
 - Supplementary principles
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THEMES

- High level
 - Cross-cutting
 - Few in number
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ACTION PLAN

- Multi-agency officials agree the detailed action plan and associated targets in the Community Plan
- Social partners consider ways to assist in its implementation

- What will we do?
 - How will we do it?
 - Who will lead?
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COMMITMENTS

- Partner organisations 'sign-up' to community plan
 - Establish Community Planning Partnership
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MONITOR & EVALUATE

- Community Plan endorsed by the Council and the wider community

- Monitor against action plan targets
- Evaluate against Quality of Life Indicators

