DTNI
Empowering Communities

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COMMUNITY PLANNING

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

In thinking about the priorities for enhancing community rights and how these might be delivered within a community planning framework, we need to look at the scope of existing legislation, processes, plans, and performance in NI.

Preface

The coronavirus pandemic is disrupting public service provision and steering society into a dire economic crisis. Local government – and other service providers – are adopting agile and innovative approaches for the delivery of services, which may have longer term consequences. The pandemic is setting the foundations for a radically alternative future which will have unknown implications across public, private, and third sectors and for society at large.

Early and anecdotal evidence points towards a future where health and well-being will be paramount both for citizens and the state. Recent shifts in policy thinking emphasisethe importance of targeting interventions at a local level for reducing social and economic inequalities and, more widely, preventing the potential impacts of the impending climate crisis. It is undoubtable that such rapid change and restructuring will have a profound effect on the kind of services our society will need in the future and how these will be funded, designed, and delivered.

It is against this backdrop that any discussion on advancing community rights in Northern Ireland should consider the valuable role that citizens as individuals, and communities can play in co-producing innovative solutions in what will be very challenging times ahead.

This summary paper explores community planning, spatial planning, and community asset transfer, and seeks to inform and shape ongoing discussions on advancing community rights in Northern Ireland (NI). The suite of separate but complementary papers provides the grounds for serious debate on expanding the remit of responsibilities beyond local government for ensuring that the community voice is further legitimised in local decision-making and democratic practices.

Introduction

In thinking about the priorities for enhancing community rights, and how these might be delivered within a community planning framework, we need to look at the scope of existing legislation, processes, plans, and performance in NI. There is a need to consider community planning in terms of public interest and social well-being, alongside openness and transparency and trust and power relationships in decision-making. If we are to move the debate forward we need to understand the opportunities and challenges posed by community rights in general, and to community planning for providing public services.

Context

Substantial change has occurred in public administration across the UK and Ireland in recent decades. Local government reforms in both the Republic of Ireland (ROI) and Northern Ireland have identified the need for vibrant, and stronger, local government systems. In Scotland, at both national and local government, there has been a strong focus on delivering public service reform.

At the heart of these reforms is repositioning local government as the democratically accountable leader for economic, social, and environmental well-being outcomes. This repositioning acknowledges the need to engage better and more meaningfully with local people, to involve them more effectively and experiment with new ways of and co-delivering solutions.

Public service provision plays an important role in democratic practices and has a direct bearing on individual quality of life and collective social well-being, crucially influencing the dynamics of a place and directly influencing well-being outcomes of those who live there. Community planning (the process of managing public service provision) should be viewed as a complementary place-shaping instrument to the apparatus of spatial planning.

Public Service Delivery

Community planning is associated with local service provision and delivery, having emerged as part of a process of public sector reform and continual improvement. That process of improvement, for efficiency gains in public service management, recognises local government as an 'enabler' rather than a sole deliverer of public services (Pemberton and Peel, 2016). The move towards a contractual relationship between local state actors and citizens, concerning how public services are conceived and delivered, has seen the introduction of Citizens' Charters and Customer Service Excellence schemes with an emphasis on improved standards and empowering citizens. This perceived improvement approach, however, failed to deliver on the minimal requirements for true contractual relationships between service providers and citizens: mutuality, parity, reciprocity, and legal enforceability (Drewry, 2005: 17).

The changing landscape of government's role in public service – e.g., surrendering elements of service provision to external parties - is coupled with an expansion of its role in other areas, including policy advice, regulation, partnership working, and interacting 'with external entities to elicit their productive contributions' (Alford and O'Flynn, 2012: 5). And this can include local communities.

Community Planning UK & Ireland

New relationships are emerging across other parts of the UK and Ireland that have overseen a proliferation and differentiation in legislation and policy guidance associated with public service delivery. While there are criticisms of the rationale and vigour of the differing localism agendas evolving in Scotland, Ireland, and England, the respective laws in each context are attempts to decentralise some powers from local government to enable a form of empowerment that gives communities stronger rights in the design and delivery of public services and in asset management.

The national reviews in Scotland and Wales (the 2011 Christie Commission, and the 2014 Commission on Public Service Governance and Delivery respectively) identified significant conclusions (table 1 below) that offer insight into the debate in NI on the relationship between community planning and   community rights.

Table 1: Public Service Commission Recommendations (Wales & Scotland)

Wales

A clearer shared vision and sense of common purpose between government at all levels, citizens, and communities.

A much greater focus on co-production with citizens and communities to identify and implement means of pursuing those outcomes.

Consequently, a much stronger emphasis on enablement, empowerment, and prevention in the design and delivery of public services.

Scotland

Recognising that effective services must be designed with and for people and communities – not delivered 'top down' for administrative convenience.

Maximising scarce resources by utilising all available resources from the public, private, and third sectors; individuals, groups, and communities.

Working closely with individuals and communities to understand their needs, maximise talents and resources, support self-reliance, and build resilience.

Making provision in the proposed Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill to embed community participation in the design and delivery of services.

Scotland

The **Local Government in Scotland Act 2003** formalised the statutory basis for community planning to secure 'best value' in local government service provision, and more recently, the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015[1] has sought to strengthen community voice and rights in decisions about public services and enabling communities to own and manage land and buildings.

The Act and the policy environment that surrounds it presents a range of opportunities for communities around participation and planning, from initiating dialogue with public bodies on their own terms to the ownership or use of local assets. Community Planning Partnerships will have to produce Local Outcomes Improvement Plans (LOIPs), with an additional requirement to prepare locality plans for those areas where communities experience disadvantage and the poorest outcomes.

The Scottish act introduces participation requests as a means by which community groups can request to have greater involvement in, and influence over, decisions and services that affect communities, and sets out key definitions to clearly establish the criteria for the community body so that it can qualify as a community participation body to:

- Help people start a dialogue about something that matters to their community.

- Help people contribute to decision-making processes.

- Help people to participate in the design and delivery of service provision.

- Help people challenge decisions and seek support for alternatives.

The message from Wales and Scotland is strong and consistent; that further rights be bestowed on communities (the means) for producing appropriate public services (the ends), which in turn deliver impactful change and enhance local well-being outcomes in the public interest.

[1] Summary of the Act is available at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/community-empowerment-scotland-act-summary/

Ireland

The Government of Ireland's *Putting People First - Action Programme for Effective Local Government,* (2012) represented a significant policy change in relation to local government. At the heart of this reform was to give local government a more central coordinating role in local economic and community development. Allied to this is the outcome of achieving greater efficiency and effectiveness in local and community development programming and improving the delivery of services for citizens and communities.

The Local Government Reform Act (2014) provided the legislative basis for modernising local government. A restructured committee system consisted of Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs), Corporate Policy Groups (CPGs) and Local Community Development Committees (LCDC).

The establishment of Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) represents a significant departure from what existed before. The remit of LCDCs is to develop, coordinate, and implement a coherent and integrated approach to local and community development, promoting the interests of local communities (public interest) similar, in a way, to community planning in Northern Ireland. The composition of LCDCs will consist of local authority members and officials; state agency representatives; and stakeholders actively working with local development, community development, and economic, cultural and environmental organisations.

An innovation accompanying the community planning model in Ireland was the creation of Public Participation Networks (PPNs), which enables the public to take an active formal role in relevant policy-making and oversight committees of local authorities. These structures provide a network for sharing information and for giving communities of interest, within a community of place, a voice. Representatives on a PPN tend to be from the following sectors: local voluntary and community; social inclusion; and environment.

The process and action for creating and implementing services that communities need raises fundamental questions about the role citizens and communities have in influencing public service design and delivery. The ability to influence rests with having access to power that provides a degree of control. Community power and control must act as an influential counterweight, providing balance to the statutory authority of government and/or political power. How community power or influence is defined in any future legislation, policy, and operational design is central to the reframing of community rights in relation to community planning.

The Government of Ireland's 'Putting People First' - Action Programme for Effective Local Government, (2012) represented a significant policy change in relation to local government
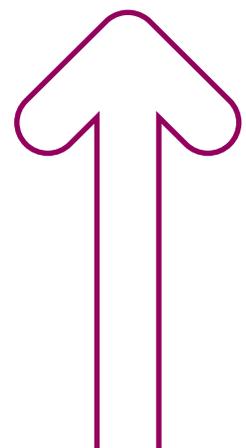
Table 2: Community Planning Comparisons across Northern Ireland, Ireland and Scotland

	Legislation	Processes	Plans	Performance
Northern Ireland	The legislative basis for Community Planning in NI is specified in the Local Government (Northern Ireland) Act 2014. Section 73 (Part 10) of the Local Government (Northern Ireland) Act 2014 identifies the statutory requirement for community involvement.	The legislation specifically refers to councils working with 'community planning partners' in Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) to collaboratively agree actions and functions related to the planning, provision, and improvement of public services.	Community Planning Partnerships are established in each district, comprising the council, statutory bodies, agencies, and the wider community, including community and voluntary sector. The partners develop a shared Community Plan for their respective council district area	There are varying degrees of experimentation of directly involving community representatives within the governance structures of community planning. Some community planning structures, e.g., in Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon, and Belfast City Council are unique in creating community panels; others have established forums and local area-based partnerships alongside their Community Planning Partnership, to proactively capture the 'community voice'. Statements of Progress are required to be completed by each Community Planning Partnership every two years.
Republic Of Ireland	The Local Government Reform Act (2014) provided the basis for modernising local government by enhancing the electoral mandate through a restructured committee system.	Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs), Corporate Policy Groups (CPGs) and the Local Community Development Committee (LCDC) were established as a result of the restructuring of local government.	The remit of LCDCs is to develop, coordinate and implement a coherent and integrated approach to local and community development, promoting the interests of local communities. The LCDC is statutorily required to prepare and implement the community elements of a 6-year Local Economic and Community Plan.	Public Participation Networks (PPNs) were created to enable the public to take an active formal role in relevant policy-making and oversight committees of local authorities. The network is supported by a National PPN Advisory Group which was established in 2016 for monitoring and evaluating the operations of PPNs.
Scotland	The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 formalised the statutory basis for community planning to secure best value in local government service provision. The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 sought to strengthen community voice and rights in decisions about public services. The Land Reform Act 2016 expanded community rights in relation to land reform.	Community Planning Partnerships produce Local Outcomes Improvement Plans (LOIPs). Community participation bodies (community groups) can request to have greater involvement in, and influence over, decisions and services that affect their community. These Participation Requests were introduced as part of the 2015 Act.	Local Outcomes Improvement Plans (LOIPs) replace traditional community plans that cover an entire council district. In addition, Locality Plans are prepared in areas where communities experience particular disadvantage and the poorest outcomes.	Community Planning in Scotland has been revised leading to additional instruments and developments e.g. the Concordat (2007) and a Statement of Ambition (2012). The reviews restated the importance of community planning in advancing public sector reform and positioned community planning at the heart of an outcomes-based approach aligning with the Scottish Government's National Performance Framework.

Complexities with 'Community' and 'Community Planning'

When discussing community planning and community rights, an immediate dilemma emerges with the term 'community'. Hillery's (1955) research discovered 94 definitions of community, acknowledging four common characteristics across 69 of the definitions: people, common ties, social interaction, and place. It is a complex yet extensively used term in public policy discourse, and has its own unique connotations for people and place in Northern Ireland. In helping to further refine the term, Duane (1997) offers the following classification:

- **A community of place** a neighbourhood, a village, town, or a collection of streets.

- **A community of identity** women, youth, black and minority ethnic communities, people with a disability or communities of sexual identity and age.

- **A community of interest** perhaps citizens concerned with climate change, heritage, sport, or the arts.

Communities are not easily definable; they are fluid and interlocking. Communities do include physical spaces, neighbourhoods if you like, which will comprise people from various ethnic identities, ages, and genders with specific and passionate interests and none. The above classification provides a valuable framework for interpreting community planning – and for informing the debate surrounding community rights. What types of communityare involved in community planning and under consideration in the progression of community rights legislation in Northern Ireland?

Recommendations

The following are proposed for consideration in any future debate on progressing with legislation and supporting structuresto introduce community rights in Northern Ireland:

1. Defining a 'community' with rights

The experience in Northern Ireland, as a divided society with contested notions of place and identity, along with learning from Scotland, suggests a need for clear articulation of what constitutes a community when considering any expansion of rights. Provision of a definition of community, setting out clear criteria when considering rights is necessary to set clear workable parameters in deploying any expanded rights to a sub-local government level.

2. Capability Building

Thus far, community planning has more meaningfully engaged communities of interest than communities of place and identity in decision-making. Moving towards strategically engaging with communities of place is not without challenge. Many citizens do not live in localities with properly-constituted community bodies or access to the right mix of skilled, influential support, to participate in decision-making processes. The learning from Scotland and Ireland points toward attempts to create a support culture and a set of structural arrangements that address community capability issues.

Future legislation, guidance and supporting infrastructure needs to reflect the policy principles of subsidiarity, recognising and harnessing the potential of communities to play their co-productive role. The NI Executive illustrates an acceptance of this approach for enhanced civic participation in public life. *New Decade New Approach* details that 'People and communities will have an opportunity to shape the future Programme for Government and the budget, through citizen engagement and co-design' (2020: 9).

3. Power and Influence

Decades of evidence demonstrates the inability of the state (unilaterally) to adequately understand, design, and solve complex public policy issues. Not addressing the skewed power imbalances between government and communities will perpetuate the underlying causes of the problems in the planning, provision, and improvement of public services. Recent attempts to experiment with more collaborative models of partnership working, bringing together the state, the market, and civil society, e.g. community planning reveals a willingness of government to share (some) responsibility.

Sharing responsibility does not equate to the equal sharing of power and influence. Future legislation needs to carefully consider the empowerment of the powerless, and, in doing so, ensuring that communities (whether of place, identity, or interest) are equal players in the decision-making structures and processes of making change. This should include participation requests (including participatory budgeting), the right to challenge, and the right to buy.

A more equitable distribution of influence and power offers the prospect to experiment with the building of more effective working relationships between public bodies, local partners, and local communities, producing reciprocal trust and openness to co-produce solutions to pressing social, economic, and environmental challenges.

4. Monitoring and Evaluation

Community planning lacks an adequate assessment of the quality of engagement that would provide a baseline to reflect on engagement practices and inform the debate on the future role of communities. Monitoring and evaluation processes appear much stronger in Scotland and Ireland, with supporting organisations, networks, and universities conducting reviews and independent research that offers valuable information and data to inform and refine future practice.

Legislation on community rights should outline clear and strong evaluative monitoring mechanisms to manage the acquisition and progression of rights, track engagement, ownership, and performance, and capture good practice in any new instruments for advancing well-being outcomes in the public interest.

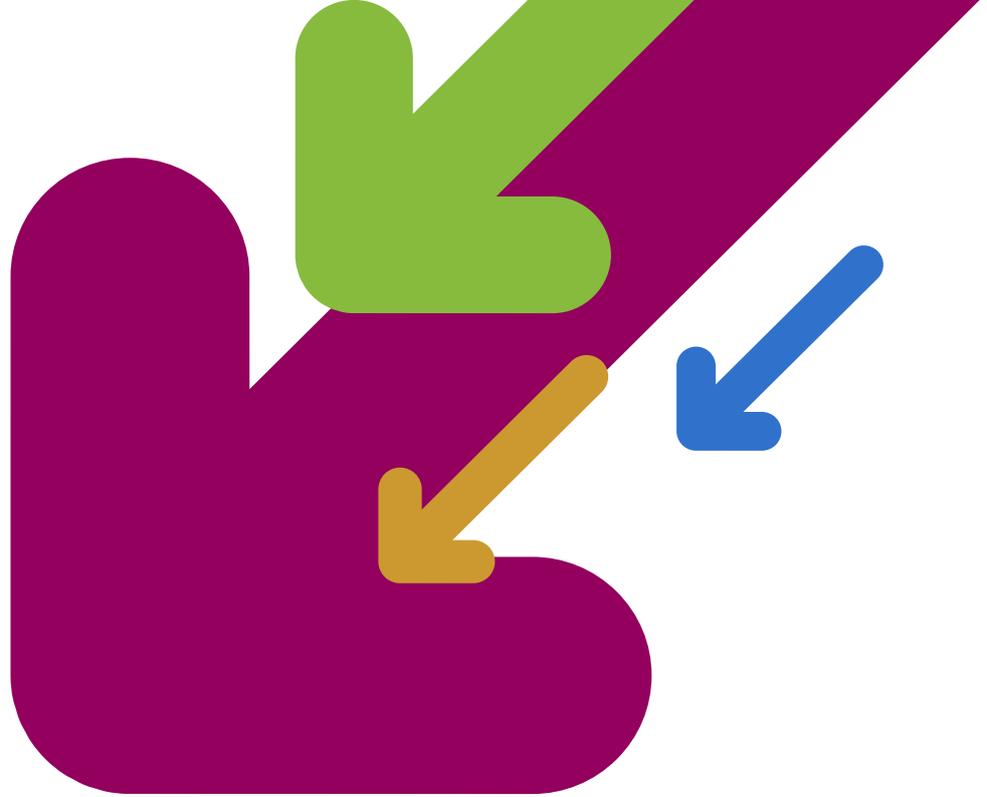## 5. Accountability and Transparency

There should be a recognition – and legal articulation – that community organisations or bodies that will be the likely basis for enacting greater community rights must be representative of legitimate concerns that relate to the broader public interest.

Legislation has to appreciate the nuances of the Northern Ireland context and ensure the introduction of community rights does not conflict with, or be counterproductive to, the ambitions set out in other social policy fields, e.g. building a shared society, space, and future.

There should be a requirement on community bodies pursuing community rights instruments that a strong evidence base is collected to support any right to challenge, bid or buy, which is underpinned by engagement with the wider community and with other community organisations or networks.

IMAGE HERE ?

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