

Models of community engagement

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This short paper has been prepared to identify and describe the different models of community engagement in community planning. It is designed to provide additional material to the Guidance on Effective Community Engagement that accompanies the Local Government Bill.

The Guidance addresses the duty imposed by the Bill on local authorities to facilitate the community planning process. This includes the need to engage other partners, including voluntary and community groups. Expanding on this, the guidance sets out those matters 'which all those engaging in community planning should consider in making community planning work effectively'.

About engagement

The Guidance introduces the term 'engaging communities and other interests'. The meaning of the word 'engagement' is not defined, but its use is an important indicator of the type of relationship that Community Planning Partnerships should aim to establish. Previous policies on the relationship between governance and communities have been characterised by terms such as community consultation, or community involvement, and there has been criticism of the limitations of these ideas. Consultation suggests simply providing information to a community and requesting feedback, but carries no undertaking that there is to be any shift in what is done or how it is done. Involvement carries a stronger message: that communities need to be involved if activities and solutions are to be rooted in and understanding of the community's perception of its needs and issues. However, involvement implies that 'government' has decided the structures and decision-making processes, and that the community needs to be encouraged to get involved in them. The community has no part in deciding on the suitability of those structures or processes.

Engagement suggests a different sort of relationship. It suggests that there is a 'governance' system and a 'community' system. To build the collaborative relationships on which a complex activity such as community planning would depend, it is necessary for the governance system to fully understand the dynamics of the communities with which it seeks to work, and to be prepared to adapt and develop structures and processes to make them accessible and relevant to those communities. In this way, the term engagement warns us against making assumptions about communities: it asks for a dialogue. It also implies that the development of the relationship itself will need to be a focus for attention: 'government' will need to engage with communities as well as asking communities to engage with it.

There are many substantial issues that deserve careful consideration if community planning is to fulfil its potential as a way of engaging communities. In establishing models for engagement we can draw on significant experience and analysis. There is a strong tradition in Scotland of local authorities and their partners supporting various forms of community involvement and engagement¹; more recently the Social Inclusion Partnerships and Working for Communities Pathfinders have led to the emergence of many initiatives designed to help communities play a more informed and equal part in decision-making and action²; the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has commissioned an extensive series of research studies that set out and analyse the

¹ Strong Communities; Effective government, Scottish Community Development Centre 1995

² Involving Communities: Handbook of Policy and Practice, Peter Taylor for Working together, Learning together (unpublished)

experiences of communities across Britain³; and the Community Development Foundation has written guidance on the New Community Strategies, the equivalent to Community Planning in England and Wales⁴. We can draw on this material to establish a framework for community engagement. This can be considered from three perspectives:

- a) Key questions: principles and issues in engagement
- b) A development agenda: components of a model for engagement
- c) Towards sustainability: the process of engagement

Key questions: principles and issues in engagement

Who engages whom?

We welcome the introduction of the term 'engagement' to the discussion of the relationship between community planning and communities. Importantly, it implies a two-way process that has to be 'worked on', and as such represents considerable progress from the debate about 'involving' communities that has characterised much policy to date. Engagement implies that there is a need for those involved in community planning to think clearly about the communities they are working with, to understand their history and culture, the nature of local community organisations and networks, the range of local needs and issues and how they are experienced, the assets and strengths of the community that may be built on, and the nature of existing dialogue and participation in that community. In many cases, work will be needed to establish an understanding of these characteristics. Underpinning all this should be an understanding of community planning as a mechanism to strengthen and sustain communities, rather than simply as an activity that the community should somehow be involved with. As such the key question is: **how can community planning engage with community issues and community change**, rather than how can we engage communities in the community planning process.

What community?

We need to be clear, when considering engagement, about the nature and characteristics of the communities we are dealing with. Each community has unique characteristics: its population and socio-economic profile, its history and culture, its level of autonomy or dependence, its level of organisation, its isolation, and many other factors. As well as understanding these differences, it is important that community planning does not adopt a 'one size fits all' approach. A model of engagement that might work in a large town will not necessarily work in its rural hinterland. Indeed, what may work in a peripheral housing estate on one side of a city may well not work in a very similar estate on the other side.

As well as an awareness of the differences of place, it is important to recognise that there are also communities of interest and communities of identity, and that each individual citizen may be involved in a unique mix of communities based on their age, gender, interests and circumstances. Community Planning needs to acknowledge this diversity if it is to be effective. Equally, it is important to recognise the range of levels and focus of community groups and organisations and not simply work through a single recognised channel, whether it be a forum, umbrella group or community council.

³ see for example: Reflecting Realities, Anastacio et al, The Policy Press, 2000

⁴ The New Community Strategies: how to involve local people, CDF 2001

The importance of process

All that has been said above cautions us against developing prescriptive models: we need to understand the dynamics of communities and seek to engage with them rather than impose externally designed solutions. So it is of fundamental importance that ways are found to develop collaborative and relevant approaches, based on dialogue with the key interests in communities, including those that are frequently excluded from such debate. So, models of engagement should be understood essentially as models of process, rather than models of outcome. However, the outcomes should be informed by key considerations, as explored in the next section.

A development agenda:

a: components of a model for engagement

The Working together; Learning together programme (WTLT)⁵ has developed a simple model of 'inclusive regeneration': the 'CIRCLE' model – an acronym for its key ideas: Capacity, Inclusion, Resources, Community organisation, Listening and learning, and Effective participation. These headings encapsulate the main recommendations from research that should be borne in mind when establishing participative and inclusive forms of regeneration partnership. Given that community planning is also partnership based, and equally based on a recognition of the need to engage with communities, these ideas should inform the development of engagement strategies.

Capacity – building skills

The use of this term can be contentious: it has been used to imply that 'the community' lacks the skills, knowledge and confidence to act in its own interests, and that public agencies respond by providing 'capacity building' initiatives that are designed to address these deficits. WtLt argues that all partners need to develop their understanding of each other, and all need to develop knowledge and skills. Nevertheless, WtLt has demonstrated that the community sector is the most excluded at the partnership table, and that there should be investment in supporting communities to gain access to the information and knowledge, and to help develop the skills they themselves identify as needed.

Inclusion – building equality

An awareness of inclusion issues is crucial. Community planning must engage not only with the 'formal' representatives of communities, but also with the whole range of groups and interests. Some of these - the very poor, the carers and cared-for, those with language and communication difficulties, those excluded through prejudice and discrimination – may be difficult to identify and engage with, but if community planning is to address all community issues and perspectives it must also find ways to engage with the excluded. It is also important to be aware of diversity, recognising that a diversity of origin, perception and need in communities is a source of strength; something to be recognised and taken into account.

Resources – sustaining change

We have already discussed the vulnerable resource base of many communities. We must also recognise that the lack of resources and assets is a core determinant of poverty and exclusion. Thus community planning should find ways to build on the

⁵ see www.wiltntnet.org.uk for further information

assets that communities do have: these can be buildings and institutions, but are also intangibles like local knowledge, networks, motivation and energy. In engaging with communities, community planning should adopt an explicit aim of building on the assets and resources that a community has. We discuss ways in which this might be done later in this paper.

Building community organisation

Effective communities can often be identified by the range and functions of the community-led organisations that they have. A strong community will have a rich network of groups providing mutual care and support, bringing together interests and concerns, making representations and linking to the wider economy and society. By engaging with and building good relationships with such groups and organisations, and by helping establish new groups where they are needed, community planning can both strengthen the infrastructure of communities and make engagement more productive.

Building understanding - listening and learning

Given their diverse range of interests and perspectives, it is important that effective ways are found to identify the range of views, issues and needs of communities. Many techniques - focus groups, participatory appraisals, panels, forums and juries – have emerged as methods to find out what communities are saying⁶. But finding information alone is not enough: community planning partnerships should also ensure that they are working interactively as learning partnerships, involving all the key stakeholders, and developing methods to monitor, evaluate and learn from the changes they are putting into place⁷.

Building involvement - effective participation

All the foregoing considerations are central to making the relationships between the community planning process and communities effective. It is important to recognise that participation can work on several levels, as can be seen in this typology⁸:

Approach ⁹	Strategic level – setting priorities	Delivery – decisions on implementation	Community control over resources
Passive, one way People are informed about what has been decided: information shared between professionals only	Community and user groups, newsletters	Community and user groups, newsletters	Information made available to community on opportunities for resource control (eg grants or awards schemes)
Reactive ‘community consultation’ People are consulted or answer questions – the process does not concede any share in decision-making. Professionals under no obligation to take on board peoples’ views	Questionnaires, surveys, focus groups, panels and juries	Community groups and forums respond to service proposals. Users in the minority on management committees	Meetings with groups and community interests to explore opportunities for resource transfer
Proactive	Joint planning groups	Joint management	Local service

⁶ Effective Public Involvement; Community Learning Scotland & Fife Council

⁷ Learning, Evaluation and Planning (LEAP), Scottish Community Development Centre / CDF

⁸ adapted from Pretty, 1995

⁹ These types of approach

<p>'community participation' Communities influence priorities, resource use and service provision to be provided through the Community Planning Partnership</p>	<p>and forums. Some co-options to statutory committees</p>	<p>arrangements over specific projects and activities</p>	<p>development on a franchise basis: terms and conditions set by the 'purchaser'</p>
<p>Interactive or Partnership working People participate in joint analysis, development of action plans and the strengthening of local groups and institutions. Learning methodologies are used to seek multiple perspectives, and groups decide how resources are used.</p>	<p>Support is provided for community to have equivalent access to expertise, advice and training</p>	<p>Users / community has management control of specified services</p>	<p>Local service provision with joint community / public sector control, or negotiated contracts</p>
<p>Community mobilisation / empowerment People participate by taking initiatives independently to change systems. They develop contacts with external institutions for the resources and technical advice they need, but retain control over how those resources are used.</p>	<p>Pressure group and campaign activity to influence policy</p>	<p>Complete community authority for management of services</p>	<p>Service provision independently funded and managed by the community</p>
<p>Entrusted community control As above, but community also influences prioritisation and control of service provision or associated budgets¹⁰</p>	<p>Community has leading voice in determining priorities in policy</p>	<p>Community has leading voice in delivery of public services</p>	<p>Community making decisions over public budget allocation</p>

This classification is helpful in considering how communities could engage with the community planning process. From the perspective of local authorities and their partners the starting point is, arguably, that participation is essentially functional: it is a policy requirement and it will contribute to the outcome of the community planning process being more focussed and effective. From the perspective of communities, or at least from the perspective of organised communities, participation is about interaction: the opportunity to influence policies and services, or it is about mobilisation: people wanting to do something about the problems they experience. Community Planning partners should be aware of this typology and, as argued later in this paper, there is a case to be made for investing in the interactive and community mobilisation models in so far as they are functional to the requirement to engage.

To summarise, models of engagement for community planning should draw on and reflect these considerations. The components set out above are the main criteria that

¹⁰ see Community Budgeting consultation www.scotland.gov.uk/consultations/social/cbcd-00.asp

may be used when Community Planning Partnerships are considering what needs to be put in place to establish and sustain an engaged relationship. The criteria may be used in many ways, for example:

- to assess the capacity of a given community to participate
- to consider whether the community has the knowledge and skills it needs
- to review how well established is the network of community groups and organisations
- to identify any gaps there may be
- to assess the quality, relevance and objectives of any supports that may be offered by community planning partners
- to consider whether the offer of grant or other support would really help deal with weaknesses in the community infrastructure

Community organisations themselves may also be subject to scrutiny on similar or related criteria: for example:

- do they represent the cross section of community interests or one particular grouping?
- are they transparent and accountable in their decision making processes?
- do they themselves engage with excluded or minority interests?

Considering these questions can lead us towards establishing some of the criteria that might inform a more systematic approach to sustaining community infrastructures as part of the process of engagement. We return to this theme later.

b: Models of community engagement

Although all the discussion above has emphasised the importance of process it may be helpful to provide a classification of some of the models of community engagement that have emerged in recent years. The value of these models to engagement can be assessed from the perspective of the different level on the ladder of participation – and the ‘CIRCLE’ can also be used in this way. In practice the models overlap, and most community organisations reflect a mixture of the different strands.

Consultation / public participation models

These are usually employed by public authorities to elicit views and perspectives from a wide range of community members on needs, issues or responses to proposals. They can include opinion polls, surveys, workshops, focus groups, open space events, planning for real, and a wide range of other methods. Community organisations may also use these models.

Asset-based / social economy models

These focus on recognising the value of the physical assets and human resources of a community, and try to maximise the community control over, and benefit from, these assets. Community based housing associations, particularly those involved in the ‘wider role’ initiatives; community development trusts; the recent acquisitions of islands and forests by community trusts are all examples.

Community Democracy models

These set out to extend local democracy into the community by, in effect, establishing an informal community tier of government. The most active community councils can work in this way, as does Wester Hailes Rep. Council, which adds

economic development and learning strategies too. The Community Forums that have emerged in some areas through Social Inclusion Partnerships draw on this thinking.

Identity based models

These are typically developed by black and ethnic minority communities, and disability groups as a means of finding and expressing a voice. They often blur the distinctions between volunteering, community action and community development

Learning-led and popular education models

These focus primarily on building and supporting the skills and confidence of community members. They seek to encourage people to reflect on their place in the wider world, and often have an internationalist perspective. They also focus on finding training, employment and personal development opportunities for activists within the community sector. People's College, the Communities Against Poverty Network, and the SEAD community network are examples. The WtLt programme has drawn on the services of 'community trainers' from the CAP network, while the Dickshill Pathfinder in Stranraer employs local people as community agents.

Service development models

Many community groups and organisations have grown from providing direct responses to gaps in public service provision or to identified local needs. These include playgroups and playschemes, youth clubs, food co-operatives, credit unions, community flats, arts and sports groups, lunch clubs, environmental clean-ups, community transport and many other activities. Much of the work of the local voluntary sector, and of volunteers, lies in this area.

Community organising

A considerable force in the US, but not widely found in the UK, community organising involves building coalitions of action involving churches, unions and community groups to establish a strong power base to challenge the policies of companies or other institutions, often leading to the establishment of a wide range of community-controlled services and resources.

Regional and national networks

It is vital to recognise that community engagement does not take place only in local communities. There is an important need for communities across Scotland to link with each other, share experiences, and feed perceptions into the policy process. The Partnerships Representatives Network, the community health networks serviced by CHEX¹¹, and the Communities Against Poverty Network are examples.

Towards sustainability

The history of virtually all community level organisation and development has been its short-term nature and its vulnerability. This has caused frustration and cynicism amongst those who give their time and energies to community activity. It is hard to think of any example of community initiative or organisation that is not based on short-term funds whether sourced from public authorities or charitable trusts. Such initiatives are typically expected to become self-financing after three or five years, or to be 'mainstreamed' into public authority programmes with an attendant loss of community control, combined frequently with a continuing vulnerability to expenditure cuts. There are other experiences in which successful community led organisations,

¹¹ www.chex@cdf.org.uk

while financially more viable, have been vulnerable to politically-driven interference, particularly where they have challenged the policy of public authorities. It is for these reasons that there has been an interest in the potential of community-based organisations that have a strong asset base, sufficient to secure some independence from local political control or patronage. Community-based housing associations, community enterprises and community businesses, and the rural community land ownership movement are examples of this approach. However, although such examples are typically financially viable and substantially autonomous, their energies are often devoted more to management and to direct benefit to their members than to representing and negotiating community interests.

Community planning perhaps presents the opportunity, and the challenge, to establish models of community engagement that have sustainability built into them. If community planning is serious in its intentions to put the community first, it can hardly avoid taking up this challenge – to support the development and sustaining of community infrastructures that will both meet community needs and represent interests to the community planning partners. When a school, or a health centre is built in a community, the community is not expected to make that school financially self-supporting after five years. Yet when community-led initiatives are established they typically have to accept these conditions. Energies are thus spent as much on maintaining viability as in delivering the support and development services for which they were established. If community planning can develop ways of engaging communities that include sustainable arrangements for longer-term viability the interests of communities will have been well served.

Engagement implies the need for some form of structure or process to be in place that will properly elicit and represent the views of communities, and negotiate on their behalf. Such structures would be led by communities, accountable to communities, supportive to community activity and development, and recognised and validated by the key public and voluntary organisations providing services and developing strategies. Such mechanisms would be classified in the 'interactive' and 'community mobilisation' sections of the participation typology discussed earlier. There are many examples of such mechanisms in place: some having been established and developed by communities themselves – for example Wester Hailes Rep Council, others being the product of social inclusion partnerships (many community forums) or of devolved local government. Such examples have emerged in response to different community problems, or in response to the policies of local authorities.

The capacity for effective community engagement would be significantly enhanced if there were a network of community infrastructure supports throughout Scotland. They would need to be community-led, and could serve as local development agencies as well as being a vehicle for engagement of communities in community planning (and other interactions between communities and public policy).

We should be very cautious about proposing a particular approach or model – after all it is the essence of engagement that it is a two-way process involving both the communities concerned and the community planning partners. However, it is possible to set out some considerations around which such a process might be secured. The aim of such a process would be to establish appropriate mechanisms, by which a community infrastructure could be sustained in the long term, providing certain terms and conditions were met.

Such an arrangement would be of clear advantage to communities, as it would provide:

- Support and advice to local projects and initiatives, and to community engagement with community planning and other policy development
- Employment – developing various forms of social economy activity, perhaps including developing the skills of local people as researchers, evaluators and consultants to public agencies
- Relevant services – both community run and, through better understanding of community needs, issues and priorities, impacting on public services
- Local control over local resources – and collective benefit from such assets
- A resource to support local capacity and the capacity of public service agencies
- Influence over public policy and service quality.

It would also be advantageous to community planning as it would provide the process of governance with:

- Clarity of vision and priority
- A mechanism for delivering certain services and developments
- Complement to the political process
- Source of feedback – better targeting and effectiveness

The LEAP framework¹² for planning and evaluation in community partnerships provides a way in which these gains can be achieved and sustained.

Under this scenario public agencies would invest – over the long term - in independent community infrastructure organisations in return for those organisations agreeing to meet certain conditions or standards. These might include:

- Community management – ownership, leadership and direction originating within their communities
- Transparency – in decision making
- Accountability – to the communities they represent
- Financial probity – clear conditions and mechanisms for ensuring best value and good practice
- Equalities – conditions to ensure that all community interests and needs are identified and respected
- Service level agreements to secure the above criteria in relation to particular community – led services or projects
- Contribution to community planning – as a condition of continued financial support
- Feedback and monitoring – on criteria negotiated and agreed between all interested parties – on outcomes and outputs.

If an approach can be found to establishing, securing and being accountable on these criteria, community organisations could then be free to pursue opportunities and challenges, or to develop creative new approaches to community issues and priorities. Some community-based housing associations have already followed this route. It might be argued that having responsibility for assets, an operating within a clear regulatory framework, would permit community organisations to claim a higher degree of authority as representative bodies for their constituency.

A step further – such institutions could develop community-originated standards of performance for the community planning partners and mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating progress towards agreed outcomes. Such standards could form a

¹² developed by the Scottish Community Development Centre for application in Community Learning Plans

crucial element in the achievement of best value and ensuring that the efforts of community planning were truly focussed on greatest need and truly reflecting a community agenda. Again, the LEAP framework provides a model within which such development could take place.

Would such an approach be achievable or viable? This would need to be assessed in more detail. The community organisation that (arguably) comes closest to the model set out above is Wester Hailes Rep. Council. In relation to this model it is often argued that it is very expensive and took many years of dedicated and skilled work by both the community and its staff to establish – thus it would be hard to replicate. Yet it is possible that an analysis of the benefits of WHRC in the form of additional income to the community, reduced costs, and more effectively targeted public services as well as the services provided by the social economy it has generated, might well outweigh the costs to the public purse of funding such a mechanism.

On the basis of the considerations set out above, models of engagement for community planning may perhaps best be understood as informing a process, rather than anticipating an outcome. Understood in this way, engaging communities could be seen as involving the following stages:

Identifying needs, issues and assets

As in all stages of the process, this should be done in partnership with communities. The needs, issues and assets are to do with the nature and capacity of the community and its infrastructure – rather than with any policy or thematic issue. Thus the assessment should focus on the nature of the community, its groups and their learning and development needs, the range and effectiveness of community groups and organisations, the nature and outcomes of participation. The source and quality of support to the community should also be identified. Some guidelines for such assessments are found in LEAP, in ABCD¹³, and in the recent publication 'Assessing Community Strengths'¹⁴.

Setting a development agenda

Again, with community partners, an agenda or vision for the relationship between the community and community planning should be set. This should address issues of capacity, inclusion, infrastructure, support and ownership. The agenda should be agreed as a framework for the actions of the community planning partners and for the community itself.

Building capacity

The agenda set in this way should thus form the basis for a set of actions to strengthen the community and its infrastructure. This stage of planning should consider what resources will be used, how the actions will be carried out, and what will be done.

Learning lessons

It is crucial that community planning partnerships actively monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of their plans, to know whether their work to strengthen communities and to engage with them in community planning has had a real impact. A robust evaluation framework helps in this task, and can assess the impact on conditions in

¹³ references: Achieving Better Community Development, Barr and Hashagen, CDF publications 2000.

¹⁴ Assessing Community Strengths; A practical handbook for planning capacity building, Skinner and Wilson, CDF publications 2002 : (see www.jrf.org/knowledge/findings/housing/242.asp)

the community as well as whether the actions that have taken place have led to that impact. A number of auditing and benchmarking tools are of value here¹⁵. This provides a way to address the question posed in the 'monitoring' section of the draft framework: should the statutory guidance include a requirement for community engagement to be monitored?

Support for engagement

Most forms of community engagement depend on access to some form of developmental support if they are to succeed. Neighbourhood work or streetwork is needed to identify and engage with individuals and to encourage them to participate in community activities, groups and organisations. Adult learning and community learning skills are often needed to help translate visions for change into practical plans involving several partners. Organisational support and specialist legal and financial skills are needed as community organisations become more ambitious and expand their horizons. The availability and quality of such supports across Scotland is very mixed, and some investment is required to improve the quality and consistency of services across Scotland.

A summary and conclusions

While these comments probably fall beyond the brief of the task, it may be important to consider what strategies community planning partners, Communities Scotland and the Executive may need to adopt to support the development of communities that can engage effectively in the community planning process. The main tasks are:

1. To explore ways, through community planning, that the community sector could be placed on a more viable and sustainable financial footing. This could involve consideration of ways in which community organisations might be 'registered' and expected to conform to certain (negotiated and agreed) standards, in return for long-term funding. If the role of Communities Scotland is to build community capacity, this could be an agenda it might take forward
2. To recommend that community planning partners see engagement with the community as a long term process, which should include planned investment in communities – particularly poor, excluded and marginalised communities
3. to support the development of national networking opportunities for communities engaged in community planning
4. to consider ways in which the sources of support and advice to communities within community planning could be better resourced, accountable to the communities benefiting, and made more consistently available throughout Scotland.

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¹⁵ see for example, Active Partners, Yorkshire Forward, or Auditing Community Participation, Burns and Taylor, The Policy Press 2000