

IBM Smarter Cities Challenge

The Smarter Cities Challenge was set up as a philanthropic initiative by IBM to offer their expertise to address major challenges facing cities around the world. IBM teams work with local leaders to deliver recommendations on how to make a city smarter and more effective.

Belfast participated in such a Challenge in 2013. A team of six IBM experts travelled to the city to consider more effect approaches to tackling the persistent issues of deprivation and health inequalities.

During a three week period the team carried out extensive interviews with our councillors, community organisations, academics, community leaders and services providers – particularly those faced with the challenge of tackling deprivation and health inequalities in parts of west and east Belfast.

The team were hugely impressed with the commitment and hard work of the people they met during their time in the city. There were also taken by the warmth of the welcome they received from all quarters. Representatives from across the city were keen to talk to them about their experiences in tackling these issues.

Key findings

After analysing a wealth of material the team's final recommendations seek to address the fundamental issue of how Belfast's organisations can work together in 'smarter' ways to tackle persistent, complex social problems.

Their findings confirm the broad consensus of the people they met that complex, often seemingly intractable, problems of poverty, social inequality, crime, segregation or health require well thought-out interventions and sustained, focused commitment by many different organisations working together to achieve shared outcomes. Their main findings noted that:

- There has been an abundance of interventions and funding especially in the most segregated neighbourhoods of the city.
- Many uncoordinated initiatives, agencies and government departments are addressing similar issues independently based on individual, agency and political needs.
- Funding support for interventions is often short term and does not address lasting social change.
- Accountability is based on allocation of resources rather than desired outcomes.
- Measurement focuses on independent individual and city variables, instead of the causal relationships among variables and outcomes.
- Belfast lacks an agreed long-term strategy (mission, vision, values, and priorities) that drives measurable initiatives and outcomes.

The general view expressed by many of interviewees was that, while many of the interventions over the past years have been significant and worthwhile, ultimately core 'intractable' issues remain largely unresolved. There was a strong sense that the city needs thinking on smart governance and decision-making.

Key recommendations

The full Belfast report is a substantial document that has made a significant contribution to the council's thinking about the future governance of the city. However, at the core of the report is the judgement that the new duty of Community Planning, if done well, can help overcome systemic barriers to tackling major social problems facing the city.

The team suggest that Belfast needs to:

Create a collaborative planning environment: The city should put in place a Community Planning framework and a shared structure for better community engagement.

Define an evidence-based decision-making: Belfast needs to foster a planning culture based on outcomes that allows partners to make decisions based on objective data. If organisations agree to measure success using standard approaches then it begins to make it easier for partners to find out if their interventions are actually making a difference to people's lives.

Technology: The city should put in place suitable software systems to makes it easier for partners (and citizens) to engage and to gather and compare results; to support decision making; and to capture and manage information over time.

Next steps for Belfast

Belfast City Council is directly involved in many initiatives to address the major issues of inequality and deprivation that were the subject of IBM's investigation. Whether it's working with our partners in addressing community safety, or tackling health inequalities, or working to build good relations in the city, the Council continues to make an important and meaningful contribution.

The IBM report supports us in thinking about how we, with our partners, can take such work to another, smarter, level. It's about harnessing the opportunities presented by Local Government Reform, including our new powers of Community Planning, Wellbeing, and urban regeneration, and seeking over the next few years to use them in a more effective manner for positive quality of life outcomes for our citizens.

Our immediate practical next steps include:

- (i) **Build an inclusive approach to Community Planning:** Working from a number of the IBM recommendations we are planning how we can design an approach to Community Planning in the city that involves our residents and seeks to harness the contribution of our partners in more effective ways.
- (ii) **Develop a common way to measure our work:** We are proposing to work with our partners in government and elsewhere to develop standard, objective ways to measure the impact of our work.
- (iii) **Develop a system to manage impact data:** This is often an expensive option. As a first step we're proposing that we begin with a modest pilot project to adapt one of our own in-house data management systems for this purpose. This would allow us to begin to manage and share evaluation data in preparation for community planning.
- (iii) **Data analysis and decision-making:** The council will seek to enhance our in-house analytical skills to support decision-making particularly with the use of neighbourhood data. We want to work with our councillors and our partners to consider how the use of such data can support decisions.
- (iv) **Urban data reference group:** We will bring together staff from a number of organisations and agencies to support the data requirements for Community Planning.