

Subject:	Community engagement – background paper
Date:	09 October 2018

1.0 Purpose of the Report

This report presents initial research on how the community and voluntary sector (CVS) can be represented within the community planning process and additionally how the views of the residents or 'civic voice' can also be heard and taken into account. It is clear that a multi-faceted approach will be required to ensure that we effectively reflect the needs of all citizens and communities in the delivery of the Belfast Agenda. As a result, we must explore how we use a range of tools and platforms, such as direct representation, consultations, focused events and interactions and innovative online interactive tools. Whatever the approach or approaches adopted, it is vital that the people of Belfast feel connected and empowered by the ambitions of the Belfast Agenda.

This report is not intended to provide a definitive list of options or a conclusive recommendation as to how to strengthen CVS involvement in community planning. Rather it has been written to provide partners with initial research and areas for consideration.

2.0 Recommendations

The Community Planning Partnership are asked to consider the detail contained within the report and feedback any early views. It is proposed that this issue is considered in more detail at a workshop in early December. Comments on the make-up / attendees for the workshop are particularly welcome. All recommendations on the way forward will be brought before the CPP for final agreement.

3.0 CVS Representation

Background

The legislation and statutory guidance for community planning outlines the need for Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) to ensure they seek to involve the 'Community' (in its widest sense) in the community planning process, to ensure that community has a voice into the process and that views are taken into account.

Additionally the guidance makes clear that CPPs can invite support partners (which may include representatives from Community Voluntary, Social Enterprise and business sectors) to participate in the Community Planning process – this may be at the strategic partnership level, or in other working groups or delivery partnerships etc. However the guidance suggests that where support partners are invited as representatives of others, they should have an accountable structure that mandates them to represent the views of others.

The Belfast Agenda CPP was formally established following its meeting on 20 February 2018. Up until this point, representation from the CVS to the Community Planning Partners Forum had been limited to a NICVA representative and latterly the Belfast Area Partnerships.

CVS within Belfast

NICVA's latest State of the Sector study reported that Belfast had the highest proportion (26.89%) of voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations in Northern Ireland. The study further suggests there are approximately 1,648 organisations within the CVS in Belfast.

Government agencies and departments increasingly recognise the important role of community forums and area-based partnerships (which have been formed in many areas of Belfast to help give direction to the regeneration of local communities throughout the city). The progress of community development has arguably not been consistent throughout the city and the level of knowledge and expertise differs significantly from area to area and from group to group.

CPP Engagement to date

In developing the Belfast Agenda, the Council and its partners embarked on an extensive consultation and engagement programme, known as the Belfast Conversation. Through this the CVS played an influential role helping to shape the Plan. For example, four 'Let your voice be heard' public consultation events were held across the city, specifically to engage communities of geography. In addition, further briefings, meetings, presentations and discussions were held with area based organisations and partnerships, including Area Partnership Boards, Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships and Urban Villages.

Following the extensive public engagement that had informed the plan's development, further consultation was conducted to understand 'have we got it right', engaging with CVS stakeholders from key communities of interest and section 75 categories. This was vital to ensure the inclusiveness of the consultation. Over 60 stakeholder meetings, briefings, workshops and events took place across a range of communities of interest including: existing partnerships in the city (such as the Policing and Community Safety Partnership, Shared City Partnership and Belfast Strategic Partnerships); arts and culture stakeholders (including a workshop with Community Arts Partnership, and presentation at Belfast Festivals Forum); older people (the Healthy Ageing Strategic Partnership); children and young people (Belfast City Council Youth Forum and Play service); ethnic minorities (Belfast City Council's Equality Consultative Forum, Migrant Forum and a workshop discussion with migrant residents hosted by Lower Ormeau Residents Action Group); people with disabilities (Cedar Foundation's Belfast User Forum); LGBT community (Cara Friend, Rainbow Project and Hear NI); and gender specific (Women's Resource Development Agency).

Overall, 92 organisations and 244 individuals made responses to the consultation on the draft Belfast Agenda. Of the 92 organisations that responded, 59 were from the CVS.

Previous CVS Workshop

In May 2016, a CVS workshop was held in City Hall with over 120 representatives of Belfast's diverse community and voluntary sector. The workshop aimed to introduce and update attendees on the development of the community plan and commence the conversation about the potential roles and opportunities for the CVS to participate in community planning going forward. The event was facilitated by Colm Bradley of Community Places as part of their 'Representation, Engagement and Participation' (REP) project, funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.

There was a strong desire for a fair and transparent process to enable CVS representation within the various structures. In addition, there was further support for a proposed CVS forum or panel, from

which representation to the CPP and delivery structures would be drawn. The option to develop a CVS panel is further explored Section 4 below.

The feedback from the workshop was generally very positive, with the attendees advocating for CVS representation at all levels and as an equal partner in the community planning process. It is important to note that at this stage, the governance structures for the Belfast Agenda were still being developed and therefore the options could not be effectively tested, with a view to implementation.

4.0 Considerations for the CPP

In preparing considerations for the Community Planning Partnership, council officers have engaged internal colleagues, external partners (including CVS organisations), community planning colleagues from other councils and representatives from the NI Assembly. It is expected that engagement will continue to provide further research for discussion at the upcoming workshop.

Ensuring accountability and underpinning principles

When considering models for CVS representation, it is important that the following issues are explored and considered. Key questions that we will need to ask ourselves is how does our approach....

1. provide an effective means of communication and feedback between community planning governance structure and the CVS?
2. improve information sharing within the CVS and between it and community planning?
3. reflect and take account of the rich diversity of the CVS in the Belfast City Council area?
4. ensure representation is reviewed and refreshed?
5. provide transparency and accountability between the agreed reps and the wider sector?

Furthermore it is important that we consider how our approach takes cognisance and has regard to of the diverse CVS in Belfast. This includes:

- communities of geography – specific to particular areas of Belfast (for example, North, South, East, West and smaller neighbourhoods);
- communities of interest – e.g., section 75 categories (for example, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, race) ; and
- communities of practice – e.g., the arts, health partnerships, youth sector etc.

Examples of existing models

The development of an accountable structure such as a 'CVS panel' is by far the most prevalent approach adopted by CPPs (in Northern Ireland and elsewhere) to ensure that the CVS are represented within the community planning process. There are however a number of options by which such a panel is developed and populated and how representatives are identified and agreed.

A summary of the approaches adopted other CPPs is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: CVS Models across the CPP network	
Council	Summary of approach for CVS representation in community planning
Antrim and Newtownabbey	No formal CVS representation on CPP; identified CVS represented invited to participate in thematic working groups.
Ards and North Down	3 rd sector community planning forum, council secretariat – nominate themselves onto thematic groups (open door policy). NICVA, National Trust and Chair of 3 rd sector forum on CPP.
Armagh Banbridge Craigavon	Wider CVS panel from which 2 reps on CPP and 2 on each action planning team. Eligibility for wider panel is ability to feed info and views in and out to wider CVS.
Causeway Coast and Glens	Developing an area wide community engagement consultative forum, led by Council, representative of CVS and geographical coverage of Borough.
Derry and Strabane	Eight local community planning chairs, North West Community Network and the Chair of the LAG (10). Currently engaging to review process.
Fermanagh and Omagh	CVS forum consisting of 40 members (10% of all groups). Two members sit on CPP (one the vice-chair of the Board) and there are 2 nominated to each thematic group based on interest.
Lisburn and Castlereagh	Exploring options for development of a community forum or network. Currently no CVS representation on CPP
Mid Ulster	CVS Panel – 10 members represented on 5 thematic groups based on interest. Voted onto these groups and CPP
Newry Mourne & Down	CVS Strategic Stakeholder Forum (SSF) – 2 co-chairs on CPP. SSF nominates 3 CVS reps to the 4 thematic groups based on interest. 7 DEA co-ordinators (council officers) are also allocated to thematic groups. Each DEA coordinator looks after a DEA forum (consisting of 5-7 councillors and up to 8 nominated CVS and business reps – who are nominated by networks and must represent more than one group). These reps are vetted by NICVAs Sector Matters

Principle of Representation

The method for recruiting and refreshing members to an accountable structure can take a number of forms, including:

1. Open call for CVS representatives – a transparent recruitment process facilitated by an independent third party based on set criteria such as ability to actively participate; inform and influence policy; and feedback to wider forums and networks. For example, the Shared City Partnership used such a method to recruit 4 members from the CVS that were representative of North, South, East and West Belfast and gender. In addition, NICVA use a similar method to populate their Joint Government Voluntary and Community Sector Forum. Similarly, the Northern Ireland Policing Board use a similar system to appoint independent members to the PCSPs and DPCSPs.

2. Nomination / voting – all CVS organisations within the city are asked to nominate members to represent them on an accountable structure. If nominations exceed the size of the agreed membership, a voting system would choose the successful candidates. The Forward South Partnership employed such a method to populate their Community Support Group which speaks on behalf of the CVS in South Belfast.

Other Considerations

Additional issues raised as part of early research included:

- Length of service – what would be the optimal duration that CVS representatives sit on community planning structures.
- Resourcing / expenses – how would an accountable structure be resourced / supported. Would statutory community planning partners be required to provide secretariat support to an accountable structure?
- Governance arrangements for an accountable structure – detailed terms of reference would be required covering membership, the recruitment and refreshment of representatives, appointing positions of responsibility, role of representatives on community and desirability for representation.
- Sustainability and vibrancy is a key issue – how do we ensure ongoing and effective participation?

Ongoing Communication

In addition to the principle of representation, good practice also suggests the need for ongoing communication with the wider sector. In 2006, the Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) and Sustainable NI made suggestions for good practice in Community Planning, which focussed on developing and sustaining open, two-way communication and information sharing with the community.

Options for involving the CVS are primarily focused on governance and fitting within the existing structures that have been agreed to oversee and implement the Belfast Agenda. The CVS could also be engaged through CVS seminars or events. A regular (for example, annual) CVS conference (or alternatively a series of smaller events) would provide ongoing engagement and communication opportunities with the sector.

A CVS conference would therefore provide an opportunity to invite all members from the sector to communicate key messages and provide engagement opportunities for future priorities. This could also provide the forum to recruit and refresh members to an accountable structure.

5.0 Citizen Voice

Community engagement

Under the Local Government Act (NI) 2014, a council and its community planning partners must "seek the participation of and encourage [relevant] persons to express their views, and take those views into account" in connection with community planning. Those 'persons' are defined as residents, businesses, users of services provided by the council or its CP partners, voluntary bodies, housing associations and anyone else who has an interest in improving the social, economic or environmental well-being of the area. This is referred to in the legislation as community involvement.

There is a clear distinction between the role of CVS representatives on the community planning partnership (mandated to speak on behalf of the sector) and the involvement of the wider community or citizens within the community planning process. Considering the population of Belfast has grown in excess of 340,000 residents this is clearly a challenging task.

Research from the 2016 Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey showed that only 11% of residents across the region knew that a community plan was being developed within their district. The remainder of this report considers the role of community engagement and involvement in the community planning process.

Definitions

The terms consultation and engagement are often used interchangeably; however, there is a significant difference between them. Consultation is specific and time bound, with decisions made by the organisation initiating the consultation. Engagement, on the other hand, describes the wider and ongoing process of involving people - in discussions, deliberations and action planning - about issues that affect them or interest them.

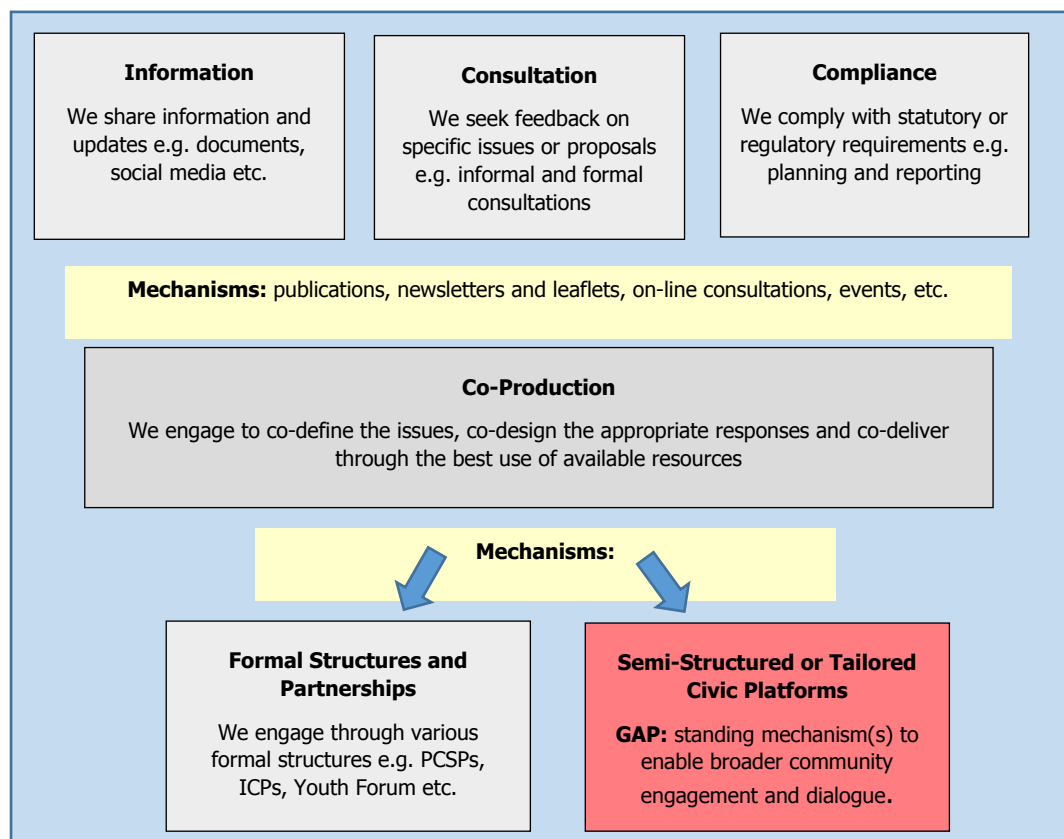
In relation to Belfast community planning, we could suggest that community engagement is defined as any purposeful and participative activity or process that:

"brings people together to help to understand issues facing Belfast and to influence and shape decisions, priorities and actions aimed at addressing those challenges or opportunities so as to improve local quality of life"

Community Engagement Framework

Given the breadth and scope of the Belfast Agenda, engagement will inevitably incorporate a wide spectrum of activity and interaction; this could be lead and initiated by an individual partner organisation or it could involve a coordinated approach on behalf of the partnership. It is important therefore that as a community planning partnership we can clearly articulate the engagement framework(s) that we will use to involve and engage people and the level of involvement that people will have in terms of the decision making processes. Figure 1 below provides an indicative framework for community engagement:

Figure 1: Indicative Engagement Framework



Mechanisms are already in place to enable the individual members of the Belfast CPP to consult and engage. Many of these have been established in response to specific legal requirements or in response to the increasing public expectations to be consulted.

Key Issues:

Although we can utilise the individual engagement mechanisms of our partners, the community planning partnership itself does not have a broad-based and representative mechanism for engaging with Belfast citizens. It would not be desirable or appropriate to rely on partner mechanisms given that organisation and service specific engagement needs must be balanced against the desirability for more strategic joined-up engagement. For example, whilst tenant forums might provide an ‘easy’ access to local people, they have a specific remit that must take precedence.

Earlier this year the CPP agreed that this was as a key gap that needed to be addressed. A number of options and tools could be commissioned (see indicative examples below) but they will require resources, clarity or purpose and open, fair and transparent governance.

In addition to the standing structures outlined below, there is also a wide range of engagement techniques that could be deployed to support meaningful dialogue, particularly around key developmental pieces. For example; future search, planning for real and participatory budgeting.

These tools tend to be used for specific issues or strategy development and would be tailored as needed. CPP partners have nominated reps to the Engagement Working Group; this group has been charged with developing a more strategic and joined-up approach to engagement and will make recommendations, as required, on the use of particular engagement tools moving forward.

The following paragraphs present a selection of potential approaches that could be considered:

Citizen Assembly / Citizen Juries

A citizens' assembly is a representative group of people (in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, social class) who are selected at random and brought together to discuss an issue or issues, and reach a conclusion about what they think should happen. Citizens' assemblies give members of the public the time and opportunity to learn about and discuss a topic, before reaching conclusions. Assembly members are asked to make trade-offs and arrive at workable recommendations. Citizens' assemblies, and other similar methods, have been used in the UK and other countries – including Australia, Canada and the United States – to tackle a range of complex issues.

A Citizens' Assembly for Northern Ireland is due to meet for the first time in October 2018 and is being designed to put people at the heart of decision-making on a range of important issues. The Assembly will consist of 50 to 100 citizens, selected to be broadly representative of Northern Ireland's population. It will meet over two weekends to consider what the public's aspirations are for a social care system fit for the future. It will give particular consideration to the respective roles played by the health service, communities and individuals. As well as helping to break the deadlock around the issue of social care, it is intended that the Citizens' Assembly pilot a model of deliberative engagement that may be adopted by the Northern Ireland Executive, the Northern Ireland Assembly and/or the Northern Ireland Office, to address further contested issues.

A citizens' assembly for Belfast could operate in a similar fashion to the Northern Ireland model, providing valuable engagement on issues relating to the Belfast Agenda and making subsequent recommendations for action.

These dialogue methods can be costly and can require a significant amount of work and therefore only tend to be used where detailed consideration of specific complex issues is required. To be practical, they tend to consist of small subset of the population and as a result their findings may lack credibility without other wider engagement.

BCC officers have initiated engagement with the Citizens Assembly and will ensure best practice is reflected in our ongoing considerations.

Citizen Panel

A citizen panel would operate in a similar fashion to the citizen's assembly, in that a representative sample of Belfast residents would answer questions on a range of topics and issues using an online consultation platform. There would however be no deliberation or debate amongst members as the individuals would answer questions individually and online. While open debate allows a group to come to consensus, this traditional method of engagement is directed mostly to those with an extroverted personality. Completing an online survey for example allows everyone to provide open and honest feedback, including views which participants may not wish to share in an open forum.

The benefit of a standing panel is that they can also be used to track changes in views and who thinks what and why. However, as the 'average' person may not volunteer effort is needed to ensure representativeness. Panels also need to be refreshed periodically to ensure participants do not become over familiar with the subject or issues. Similar panels can also be constituted by area or interest; usually referred to as neighbourhood or user panels.

On-line Engagement Platforms

In addition to standing forums or panel, there is a growing number of on-line public engagement options available and which could be used but the Partnership. These platforms are open to any individual or group and provide an open and participative dialogue with local people as opposed to consultations that tend to be one-way and individual. The platforms enable individuals to comment and respond to ideas and submissions from other citizens; they tend to be used at formative stages of discussions to generate a range of ideas or challenges and are intended to provide an open and transparent exchange of ideas. Some platforms are entirely open, whereby anyone can post a topic, proposal or debate, whereas others have control parameters whereby, the local authority, for example sets the topics for debate and discussion. The benefits of these platforms is that they provide a managed and cost-effective approach to open dialogue and debate that everyone can access and participate in as they choose. One example of this approach is CONSUL Open Participation (www.consulproject.org).

Other digital and innovative solutions

It is crucial that we maximise the use of digital technologies (such as social media) used by our citizens on a day-to-day basis. Individuals interface with us all using online technologies. Many organisations build on this interaction to inform strategy and shape service delivery. It is important that we consider this approach to remain relevant and adaptive to how our citizens interface with public services.