

Is Local Democracy Working in Northern Ireland?

*Saturday 24th November 2018
9.30am – 1.00 pm
Clifton House, Belfast*



engage

Table of Contents

THE ENGAGEMENT	3
What is an 'engagement'?	3
The main features	3
CONTENTS OF THE ENGAGEMENT	4
The NI Open Government Network	4
Local Democracy in Northern Ireland	4
FORMAT OF THE ENGAGEMENT	5
DISCUSSION OUTCOMES	6
Discussion 1: What's the problem with local democracy? (What works? What doesn't work?)	6
Top 3 Challenges	6
General Comments	7
Discussion 2: How can we improve local democracy? (Policy changes and other recommendations)	10
Top 3 Recommendations	10
General Comments	11
Discussion 3: What can activists do? (What strategies and tactics have worked for you?)	13
Top 3 Strategies and Tactics	13
General Comments	14

The Engagement

What is an 'engagement'?

An 'engagement' has evolved out of the concept of a Town Meeting. A Town Meeting is a form of participation in local government practiced in the U.S. region of New England since colonial times, when an entire community was invited by government officials to gather in a public place to formulate suggestions or provide feedback on policy actions.

In its modern version, the electronic Town Meeting (eTM) and now an 'engagement', the most fundamental features are that information on the discussion topics are provided thanks to electronic means and the stakeholders can participate in debates and express themselves individually on those issues.

The main features

The method combines the live aspect of small-scale discussion with information and communication technologies: on one hand it allows rapid transmission of work-group results to a plenary assembly; while on the other it permits surveys of individual participants' opinions through a polling system.

The 'engagement' consists of four different work steps, all aimed at facilitating the participants' discussion of the themes at issue:

- Information and in-depth investigation, allowing the participants to gain confidence with the topics of discussion;
- Discussion in small groups, allowing reciprocal listening and the confrontation between different perspectives;
- Reflection, during which the results of group work are summarised and sent back to the whole assembly; and
- An optional polling step, in which participants may be asked to individually answer questions generated during discussion.

Contents of the engagement

The NI Open Government Network

The Northern Ireland Open Government Network is a loose alliance of individual citizens and representatives of voluntary/community organisations aiming to engage in dialogue with the NI Executive to campaign for a more open form of government. We want government to be more transparent, participatory and accountable to the people it serves. We aim to use the international Open Government Partnership as a vehicle to achieve this objective and are making links with similar civil society networks in the UK and Ireland.

Local Democracy in Northern Ireland

With the establishment of the 11 new super councils in 2015, significant new powers were transferred to local authorities. At the same time, legislation introduced the concept of "community planning", which requires councils to work with statutory partners and communities "to develop and implement a shared vision for promoting the well-being of an area, community cohesion and improving the quality of life of its citizens".

Three years on, the NI Open Government Network invited activists from across Northern Ireland to give their views on whether community planning is working and to discuss how local democracy might be improved. This workshop provided a forum for engaged citizens to give their views on community planning in Northern Ireland, given the original vision of new local authorities that would place "the needs of all citizens at their core".

Workshop participants were asked to share their experiences of community planning, to explore what lessons have been learned in terms of effective engagement, and consider what actions might be taken to make local government more transparent, accountable and responsive to citizens' needs. The results from this discussion were presented to participants at the workshop for discussion, and have been compiled in this report for further analysis and dissemination.

Format of the Engagement

The topics described above formed the basis for discussion on the day. The overall structure of the workshop was as follows:

Time	Session
9.45am	Tea and coffee
10.00am	Local Democracy & the Open Government Network David McBurney, NI Open Government Network
10.05am	How local democracy (in particular, community planning) works Louise O'Kane, Community Places
10.20am	Workshop Overview Brian Cleland, Ulster University
10.30am	Discussion 1: What's the problem with local democracy? (What works? What doesn't work?)
11.10am	Discussion 2: How can we improve local democracy? (Policy changes and other recommendations)
11.50am	Tea and coffee
12.05pm	Discussion 3: What can activists do? (What strategies and tactics have worked for you?)
12.45pm	Feedback and Closing Comments
01.00pm	Lunch

Discussion Outcomes

Discussion 1: What's the problem with local democracy? (What works? What doesn't work?)



Top 3 Challenges

Table 1

1. A lack of vision from within council ensures public has no confidence.
2. Little or no consequence for councillors taking bad or poor decisions. Code of conduct seems irrelevant.
3. Lack of integrity from both councillors and officials within council.

Table 2

1. Perception of tokenistic as opposed to meaningful actual engagement.
2. Usual suspects, often green and orange, act as gatekeepers in communities.
3. Perception that people can't make a difference. Need for a **CONTRACT** outlining what citizens can expect when they engage.

Table 3

1. Needs to have a standard consult process communicated to all so that folk are aware consult are happening.
2. Structures are not citizen-friendly for day engagement.
3. Our apathy coming from a sense of powerlessness.

Table 4

1. Too much power by council officers.
2. Councillors need to be better skilled.

Table 5

1. Concerns over accountability in decision making where community voices are influencing or not planning decisions.
2. What is the skills base, culture and knowledge of those who are to implement principles of community planning? What constitutes a meaningful CP process? Number of people engaged is too low.
3. It seems there are no mechanisms in place to hold decision makers to account

General Comments

Table 1

- Unaware of PB plans. Deliberately concealed from the public. Poor communication leaves the public unaware of what's happening within council.
- Things have got worse in twenty years since GFA, more polarised.
- Criminality embedded in Councils, many scandals decision makes corrupted.
- Council official bully the Councillors.
- MLA make pitch to council even though plans were deemed illegal thus the planning then gets passed
- Has Council become a corporation in every way acting as a private business, thus removing itself from the people
- lack of independence in the governance system, slow and open to influence
- No mention of the disabled in the presentation
- Council operate to appease big business, throw crumbs to communities but give preference to big money
- Good at drawing money down but bad at spending it.
- Lot of buck passing within council, passed from one department to the other and generally grinded down

Table 2

- Challenge in getting local people involved.
- Need to encourage people and show their input has impact.
- Can't understand how Newry Park happened
- Councillors are accountable.
- Trust didn't send staff to meetings personal and public steering group at a health trust
- things councils don't want to hear when overstretched.
- Usual suspects are gatekeepers with community
- Big problem with community engagement and reaching people
- Important gaps, e.g. suicide, cycling infrastructure, in CP
- Communication of the engagement method. Bus lanes, who agrees with them. Top down decision-making without right to challenge

Table 3

- No consistency, no process for putting forward projects, no objective decision-making, consultations are predetermined.
- Told at consultations that there are predetermined positions.
- Agenda setting elsewhere as to what is going to be consulted on.
- CEO seems to have to take leadership and his ideas have been set in stone
- His ideas come first and good he started the ball rolling but didn't open up after that.
- Only half the community even votes so how representative are our councillors.
- People are apathetic as they don't believe they can make a difference. Civic responsibility
- Once a matter becomes controversial it becomes confidential
- This was evidenced in the minutes of the council
- If councillors and officers could open up to participation it could be very liberating
- Deal better with risk
- From c gov are we really getting at the people we need to over the vested interests
- NI politics but also gate keeper
- The community vol statutory consultees

- Choosing who you consult with to steer the message
- Proper engagement is not happening
- When consulting don't use an analysis or lens on who is there
- Needs to have a standard consult process communicated to all so that folk are aware consult are happening
- Accessible timely consistent and reported back on.
- Folk don't know when these consultations are happening
- Beyond consultations everyday communication from individuals and small groups to council is v difficult
- structures are not citizen friendly for day engagement
- Is community itself disintegrating as we sit in front of tvs creating apathy and the time pressures on people
- Concerns over environmental issues, no safeguarding of designated protected areas for mineral development
- Economic development prioritised over protection of designated areas

Table 4

- Our councillors are not skilled enough to make decisions
- No training
- Councillors are afraid to stand up
- Because the 5 parties are quite balanced it allows them to hang back and not take accountability
- Policy priorities: the Belfast agenda is very economy/investment led.
- Is there correlation between economic development and people being less involved?
- Life is easier when you don't have to listen to other people
- Too much power by council officers
- The chief executives don't want the officers and the public to have a good relationship because that makes them less in control
- Highest staff sickness in NI of all of Europe
- People doing the work on the ground should have more autonomy
- If the councillors speak up their career may be in jeopardy
- Disconnect between the higher staff and the lower staff
- Accountability
- Ability of the elected members to present a well-rounded challenge
- Are we making sure our elected members are recruited in terms of their abilities, or in terms of local representation?
- Better informed electorate
- In the reforms only looked at the officer reform, not at the party process of the reform of local government
- The elected members are not free to speak
- A year pre-skilled before being elected
- Providing something out of the party structures.
- Electoral Commission looks at what existing, but we need something new
- Everyone who is elected should go through an educational process
- Performance related
- When councillors are not turning up to meetings, they are not doing the work they should be doing.
- It is about what they do when they do turn up
- When you're not properly trained you can be easily manipulated
- If we don't address that there are risks of scandals

Table 5

- Party political process
- Don't feel engaged

- Disconnect between people (historical) so people don't go to public events
- feels
- Engagement feels like tick-box exercise
- Number of people engaged is too low
- People have been dismissed as 'can't have you coming in late to the process'
- Process of consultation itself seems that the less people engage the better
- There are attempts to engage better
- When we do engage decisions were already made, and our involvement in consultation was only to prop up what already has been agreed
- Is there a missing link?
- People don't feel confident or empowered to take part in consultation
- Where is evidence that objections from local people to spatial planning are considered?
- Concerns over accountability in decision making where community voices are influencing or not planning decisions
- Feedback to community is missing
- What is the skills base of those who are to implement principles of community planning

Discussion 2: How can we improve local democracy? (Policy changes and other recommendations)



Top 3 Recommendations

Table 1

1. An independent EPA the same as the rest of the UK for local government.
2. Third party right of appeal needs to be legislated for to deepen our democracy.
3. In order to have civic engagement at every level of society equality legislation needs to be implemented.

Table 2

1. Contract of engagement between citizen and decision-maker
2. Improved communications and messaging around consultation topics, times and deadlines in a user friendly form. Consultation hub - with details of all current and upcoming consultations
3. Is participation valued? Can we Incentivise participation - for example: civic dollars and PB

Table 3

1. Publicly accessible database for contacts groups and individuals to be contacted for consultations themes. This must be marketed constantly through all the media
2. Greater sense of civic responsibility within the community
3. Consultation timelines are too short
4. Opt-out electoral registers and non-geo-specific voting channels

Table 4

1. Electoral reform: banning bad behaviour, making sure the councillors are skilled, they have to prove they are worthy of holding that office
2. Improving councillors performance through recall mechanism
3. Citizen responsibility: we should know who we are electing

Table 5

1. Transparency of consultation processes - community to participate in prioritising actions
2. Plain language and consultation that can be understood by ordinary citizens, supporting people in the process, multiple mechanisms of engagement. Timescales of plans for physical/ environmental plans should be shortened
3. Those standards of performance should include an independent audit mechanism. Minimum measurable standards for community engagement to meet Community Planning principles

General Comments

Table 1

- Major planning applications need a public notice on site in order to inform the local community, local press has become ineffective.
- Third party right of appeal is necessary for our democracy, they have it in the rest of the UK.
- Mandatory education for councillors as happens in England is also a requirement.
- An Independent Environmental Agency is needed for more openness in local democracy.
- More effort should be made to encourage people from disadvantaged communities.
- Equality legislation not implemented.
- In terms of policy when it goes wrong there is no consequence for decision makers, no legal redress. In any other job you would be dismissed. The Ombudsman is ineffective.
- Promote civic engagement at every level of society.
- There needs to be a buy in for society.
- Right now trust is at an all-time low, many people are disengaged because of this.

Table 2

- Do we need a Community Empowerment Act?
- Ownership of system and process as well as community right to buy assets.
- National standards for engagement required.
- Roles and responsibilities, access to info - look at Scotland and reference
- Ask First Youth Engagement Standards.
- Go to where people are to spread the word.
- PSA or Ads for Community Engagement?
- Need link between LDP and CP.
- Economics tend to dominate decisions.

Table 3

- Compulsory voting.
- Demonstrating objective need for projects that has a transparent analysis business case process not one for you and one for me!
- Clear rules on what must be consulted upon and enforced with penalties
- Shouldn't be left to citizen to be left with only judicial review.
- Penalties not sufficient and only corporate
- Address grassroots apathy by promoting civic engagement and responsibility
- Councillors and officers can be held to account and penalties severe enough to enforce compliance.
- Ombudsman hasn't the clout.

Table 4

- Electoral reforms
- Councillor performance. Improving individual performance, comparing it.
- If they are not performing, there should be a mechanism to show how they are not performing
- Councillors attendance should be reported, but it is not easy
- Training. We are expecting a lot from the councillors, but it is not an easy job
- Declarations of interest. They are not scrutinized very much
- Because we don't have that we have faith in local democracy being eroded, lower turnout. there should be more consequences in poor behaviour
- The electoral system is flawed, a recall mechanism could be good
- There must be consequences to bad behaviour in local government
- Making councillors more accountable
- Training & accountability
- If you have them trained, you can hold them accountable
- They are scared of the repercussions and chief executives
- If there is corruption going on, whether financial or non-financial, councillors should be whistleblowers
- Code of conduct
- Whenever there is punishments, they are not like they should be.
- Abuse of public office should lead to not working there again
- Consequences right now are not enough. independent body
- It all comes down to electoral reform
- Failure to address problems is leading to less votes, people not engaging etc
- 40% of people not voting could be a resource
- Making parties behave better, rather than banning them from saying things
- Apathy is a huge problem, people think they cannot make a change

Table 5

- Minimum measurable standards for community engagement to meet Community Planning principles
- Those standards of performance should include an audit mechanism
- Needs to be public consultation on how consultation should be conducted.
- Co-designing the consultation process
- Transparency of consultation processes - community to participating in prioritising actions
- Participatory budgeting
- Community groups sometimes don't speak for people as biased due to funding from council - consultation with residents directly
- Create a culture where collaboration is desirable
- Clear evidence base to inform decisions
- Greater use of digital media tools for engagement
- Plain language and consultation that can be understood by ordinary citizens
- Deliberative processes of engagement and consultation could meet the needs of the community better
- Citizens need to see clearly what stake they may have

Discussion 3: What can activists do? (What strategies and tactics have worked for you?)



Top 3 Strategies and Tactics

Table 1

1. Good communication and good clear strategy when campaigning works. A clear, easily delivered and understood message works.
2. Open and transparent networking is conducive to good outcomes.
3. Give a good idea away, let others take credit as long as a good outcome for the community happens.

Table 2

1. Profile councillors and identify those who should be sympathetic
2. Mobilise significant support
3. Use appropriate deliberative engagement methods

Table 3

1. Stay positive when they go low we go high - have fun!
2. Do the research and have a plan and programme; avoid knee-jerk reactions
3. Keep the community informed and with you. Tackle all fake news

Table 4

1. Activists should engage with the public: make people believe they can make a change. Growing the pool of available activists
2. Activists should engage with other organisations and should support each other
3. There is a need of a civil rights bill/framework to give activists more rights in relation to councils.

Table 5

1. Mobilising, strengthen and connect your local community and create spaces to come together and become actively involved
2. Pushing Council to produce evidence but also produce evidence ourselves
3. Need to focus on the positive when engaging with Council, as more likely to be genuinely heard and engaged

General Comments

Table 1

- Good communication works.
- Personal contact.
- Networking with other groups across NI is positive for activists, brings people together.
- Motivating people to march for justice.
- Lead by example, use the press, always do research with regard to legal basis.

Table 2

- Setting the standards: engage.hscni.net
- Make better use of technology - webinars, meet-up, etc.
- Project Echo - networking tool to move info not people.
- System change - change agent.
- Decision-maker attitudes to sovereignty of the people

Table 3

- Know who you want to target and how far you will go
- Bringing food to bring people to the table.
- The importance of having fun to engage
- Refusing to go negative or personal
- Research and prepare your asks and arguments
- Don't let it go party political, especially here in NI
- Create wins for all those involved but it doesn't always work even with constructive alternatives!
- Activists can attempt to save everyone's face
- Be creative skits, plays, pop-ups. Bring the children
- Have a plan and programme and avoid any knee jerk reactions everyone in the group owns the message
- Know who are your important decision maker targets. who influences the decision you want made.
- Keep the community fully informed

Table 4

- Activists can engage with the public. The only thing that can shift them is public support
- Engage and make people believe that they can make a change
- People seem to like being contacted and asked about things
- People like to be involved
- Engagement/involvement is getting rarer
- Opportunities in communities that are mixed.
- Life is structured, less opportunities for interaction with other groups
- The activists should engage with other organisations
- Kids are ignored very frequently, they believe they might be able to make a change
- It's good to have young people involved
- Activists should support each other in discussions, people should support each other
- Use social media for spreading messages, but use face to face work as well
- Keep people informed of progresses
- Putting stuff on Facebook can lose its meaning, face to face is better
- Civil rights movement for activists, or some strategy
- We need to know as communities what's available for us to be activists.

- We should have the right as local communities to access funding for local projects
- Money is never the insoluble problem
- Civil rights strategy for Northern Ireland
- The right to advocate for electoral change, legislative framework, etc
- Community planning means having more rights, but not clear what to do with it
- NI: engage both communities is important
- Engage new communities

Table 5

- Need to focus on the positive when engaging with Council, as more likely to be genuinely heard and engaged
- Mobilising your community to engage and become actively involved
- Challenging decisions
- Pushing Council to produce evidence but also produce evidence ourselves
- Getting expertise 'pro bono'
- Know your local community
- Lobbying Councillors, not Council staff
- Strengthen and connect your local community and create spaces to come together
- Local Facebook group to raise awareness and engage people
- Take ownership of own community rather than relying on others to do it for you
- Negotiate with Council to come up with solutions which meet the need of both, Council and Community

NI Open Government Network: 'Is Local Democracy Working in Northern Ireland?'
Clifton House, Belfast, 24th November 2018



NI Open Government Network: 'Is Local Democracy Working in Northern Ireland?'
Clifton House, Belfast, 24th November 2018

