
Planning and Consultation Framework for the Community Plan in the Strabane District Council Area

Community Technical Aid
Queen's University Belfast
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1. Introduction

Terms of Reference

1. This report summarises the main themes of a programme of research into the development of appropriate consultation methods and strategic planning in the Strabane District Council area. The assignment was commissioned by Strabane District Council and Strabane Local Strategy Partnership (SDCLSP) with the following brief:
 - *Conduct a short review of the current community planning in the District in addition to the identification and synopsis of successful integrated planning process (based on evidence of need) in other areas;*
 - *Facilitate a workshop to outline the results of step 1 (above) and identify the way forward. The workshop should include the LSP and Council staff as well as Councillors;*
 - *Make recommendations and set out a framework for the development of future community planning processes in the District.*

Methodology

2. The work was conducted in four stages:
 - **Stage 1** involved the identification of best practice in consultation from international, national and local experience. This led to the identification of critical success factors for successful participatory planning in the District.
 - **Stage 2** involved a postal survey of the groups listed in the Strabane Community Directory. There are 65 groups listed and the survey achieved a response rate of 55% (36 groups).
 - **Stage 3** involved qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews with 14 representative agencies and interests in the area including: business (1); community (6); statutory (4); Council (1) and other interests (2).
 - **Stage 4** involved a workshop with 24 people including representatives of the LSP and SDC, community and voluntary sector, the statutory sector and Councillors in the Strabane area.

3. The results of stage 1¹ and stages 2 and 3² are described in separate Working Papers. This report draws together the main themes of the programme of research in order to set out the implications for the development of appropriate systems in the District. The next section summarises the main themes from the research and the results of the workshop into participation and community planning systems in Strabane specifically. This is followed by a ten point plan which identifies the key actions required to move to a new planning approach for the area.

¹ CTA/QUB (2003) *Working Paper 1: Community Participation, Practices and Methods*, Belfast.

² CTA/QUB (2003) *Working Paper 2: The Experience of Consultation in Strabane*, Belfast.

2. Critical Success Factors

Definitions

4. Working Paper 1 reviewed community planning processes and highlighted the need to adopt a *participatory planning* approach by which we mean:

Participatory planning is a set of processes through which diverse groups and interests engage together in reaching for a consensus on a plan and its implementation... participatory planning is culturally aware and sensitive to differences in power and seeks to ensure that these do not pre-determine outcomes (ODPM, 2003, p. 8)³.

5. It is clear that effective participation requires a coherent planning framework within which to *engage, mediate and negotiate* different interests involved in the planning process. This report highlights the need to move to this form of active practice in order to produce sustainable plans that fully involve the key stakeholders in the District. It should also be emphasised here that we are not working on a blank sheet and that the existing Community Plan and Round Table Conference have provided a valuable and important base for the development of more appropriate systems. The approach should build on this good practice but tailor future consultation exercises and planning styles to the changing needs of the District.

Criteria for Successful Consultation

6. The review of comparative practice is useful for the development of the critical success factors upon which effective and efficient consultation models can be based. The following list includes the key issues that the process in Strabane must address if it is to be sustainable in the context of the Community Plan:

Clarity of Purpose

- Advance publicity.
- Supply the right type and quality of information.
- There should be consensus about the problems and how to resolve them.

³ Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2003) *Participatory Planning for Sustainable Communities*, London, ODPM.

Reach

- Equality issues must be prioritised.
- Neutrality must inform the conduct and location of consultations.
- The approach must be inclusive and address the needs of under-represented groups.
- Some interests may require technical support to ensure that the consultation is legitimate.
- The consultation should be comprehensive.

Continuity

- Consultation is not a one-off event but a continuous process of reflection and development.
- The process must be responsive and provide feedback to participants.
- The consultation should be linked to the policy making and evaluation process.
- It must produce achievable results.

Methods

- Audits should try to establish the baseline issues for the District.
- Methods must relate to the task.
- Mediation and negotiating skills are crucial.

Consultation Experiences in Strabane

7. Working Paper 2 summarises the attitudes of the stakeholders in Strabane to the current consultation and community planning process. Respondents felt that the Community Plan served an important range of functions and presented a coherent and integrated agenda for the District. Moreover, they felt that there were opportunities for different sectors to review and influence the progress of the plan via the Round Table Consultation Conferences.
8. However, there were also some concerns about **both** the plan style and the related consultation methods. Many felt that the Community Plan presented a mix of strategic ideas and wish list projects, that some important groups were marginalized in the Round Table method and that there were too many plans making the consultation process itself confusing and difficult to engage across the District.

The Consultation Workshop

9. Many of these themes were rehearsed in the workshop with the key interests. The table below presents a balance sheet on the current Plan and consultation process by those involved in its delivery.

Table 1 Balance sheet of the consultation and planning process in Strabane

Credit	Debit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive energy that attempted to engage as wide a range of interests as possible; • Good networking opportunities, especially through the Round Table Conference; • The Plan made an attempt to speak with a common voice for the area; • The strategy represented the first real attempt to construct a coherent, singular vision for the District; • The Round Table was transparent and everyone had a chance to participate; • The consultation and Community Plan facilitated quicker implementation of the PEACE II Programme under the LSP; • The strategy is comprehensive and covered all the main issues and sectors; • The strategy was categorised into themes to identify actions in each area. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan is too much of a wish list; • Mix of high level strategic and operational detail unclear; • Lack of emphasis on delivery and implementation; • Timescale not set out clearly; • Limited impact on other key agencies, especially those with resources; • Apathy in the consultation and fatigue in processes generally across the sectors; • Lack of strategic connection to wider region-wide plans; • Limited monitoring and evaluation or feedback to participants in the consultation process; • Limited rationale for the plan in terms of evidence base or clear statement of needs; • Not clear how the plan will guarantee sustainability in projects, equality and the environment; • Consultation needs to be more streamlined and inclusive of weak and underrepresented communities.

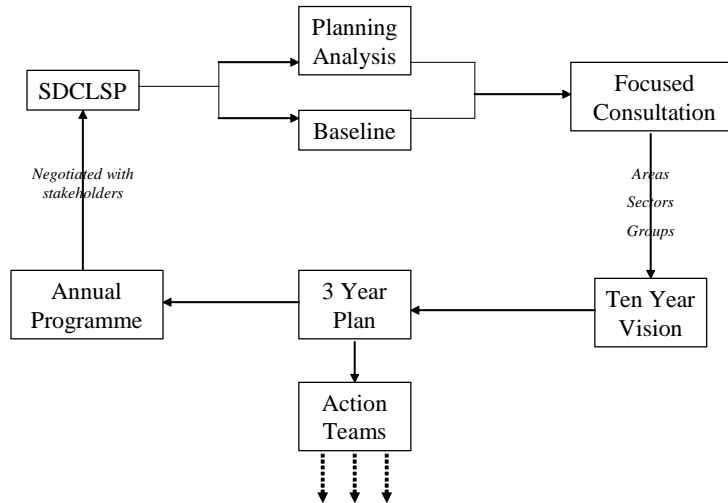
10. A key theme to emerge from the discussion was that the plan needed to be *negotiated*, especially with delivery agencies operating inside and outside Strabane. There was a recognition that ‘*we need to cut the deal*’ if the plan is to produce meaningful results against its objectives. This raised issues about the priorities that participants wanted to see from the plan and consultation exercises and these were constructed around the nine issues set out in the table below. The idea was to identify the three key outcomes from a list of desirable activities associated with the plan making process.

Table 2 Priorities from the consultation process (rank order of items)

Item	Rank
1. We need to concentrate on the delivery of actions that achieve change in the District	2
2. We need to ensure that people have more information or evidence to decide on plan priorities	=3
3. The community plan needs to be clear about the difference between strategic themes and more operational issues in the way it is presented to the public	=3
4. Open forums for consultation need to be replaced with more focused arrangements	9
5. We need to find ways to ensure that the right people are involved in the development, negotiation and implementation of the strategy	1
6. We must provide feedback on the consultation	=7
7. We should work to achieve consensus around the plan and the priorities	6
8. There needs to be political and civic leadership and coordination to drive the consultation and strategy making process	=3
9. The consultation should be continuous and not just a one-off event	=7

11. The table shows where the collective workshop ranked each item and, looking at the top three, a common theme emerges around the need to negotiate actions that are deliverable in the context of the plan. For this to happen, the right decision makers and programme managers need to be involved in the design and implementation of the Community Plan. In order to test out these priorities a planning and consultation framework was proposed, which consisted of a number of integrated elements as shown in the diagram on page 9.
12. An effective consultation process is predicated on clear functional responsibilities and transparent planning principles. We suggest here that the SDCLSP reinforces their role as a coordinating mechanism for the production and the delivery of a longer term, ten year plan. We also recommend a shorter-term plan for three years that would operate via three *Action Teams* to negotiate delivery of actions with the key development agencies and community stakeholders. These would report annually and there would be three sequential operational plans leaving the tenth year for a comprehensive review of the whole approach. By that stage the impact of the review of public administration will have clear implications for Strabane and the North West more generally.

Figure 1 Proposed planning and consultation framework



13. There was broad endorsement of the overall planning framework at the workshop and some of the key issues to emerge included:

- The proposed focused consultation is a sound idea but needs to target areas, sectors and issues that have been traditionally silent or under-represented in previous initiatives;
- The *overlap* between what people want and what is deliverable should frame years 1 and possibly 2 of the plan but over time, the former should start to shape the latter with influence via the plan and consultation processes, influencing resource allocation decisions and the priorities of key agencies;
- The process needs to involve a two-way information flow with the baseline analysis capable of responding to issues raised over the life of the plan by local interests. Flexibility and responsiveness should hallmark the approach;
- The private sector needs to be involved right throughout the consultation process, on strategic and Action Team structures and in the delivery of projects on the ground;
- The need for specific skills training to support community groups, and other sectors, in negotiation and mediation are crucial to a successful consultation and implementation process;

- The proposed *planning analysis* is a way of engaging the key agencies in raising awareness about the Community Plan whilst the Action Teams could secure ownership for the strategy when it comes to implementation;
- The coordinator role is vital and getting the right people to participate at the appropriate level will be crucial to the success of the approach;
- There was a concern about the resource implications of the proposal especially on Council and LSP staff as well as those involved in the Action Teams;
- However, it was argued that a single comprehensive plan should facilitate the efficient preparation of community relations, community safety, community support and other plans;
- It is crucial that the approach makes a connection with the political representatives outside the District and especially to the Assembly if and when power is restored to it. In this regard, the Community Plan should also link with the priorities set out in the Programme for Government.

3. A Ten Point Plan

14. In this section we set out the implications of the research, interviews and workshop for the development of appropriate planning and consultation systems in the Strabane District Council area.

Recommendation 1

Establish clear objectives for the consultation exercise.

15. We suggest the following objectives for the consultation as part of the preparation of subsequent Community Plans:

1. To animate the concept of partnership governance in the formulation, delivery and evaluation of the strategy.
2. To build the capacity and confidence of groups and agencies in the development of the Strabane District Council area.
3. To ensure that the most marginal and excluded interests are brought into the strategy formulation process.
4. To engage key groups and agencies in the implementation of the strategy.
5. To develop a continuous system of strategy monitoring and evaluation to ensure that it is locally relevant and responsive.

Recommendation 2

Prepare a planning analysis and baseline to inform the planning and consultation processes.

16. A clear information base is required to help structure the consultation and the Plan itself around both strategic and more operational themes:

- The **Planning Analysis** should establish the programmes, spending commitments and policies of the key agencies involved in the development of the Strabane area. This audit would be especially useful in identifying and mapping the key stakeholders and how they might be integrated into the first year of the Action Plan cycle (as described below at para. 21);
- The **Baseline** would set out a review of socio-economic, environmental and demographic conditions in the District in order to establish local priorities to be debated via a more focused consultation process. This data will provide an

evidence base or justification for a limited number of strategic objectives for the Community Plan.

Recommendation 3

Adopt a more focused consultation approach to the preparation of the Community Plan.

17. It was broadly agreed that there should be more localised and sectoral consultations rather than the large-scale open meetings, which characterised previous approaches. These could be done on a geographic and theme basis with say five focused meetings in each case. We suggest here that the agenda would be more informed and narrower than the blank sheet methods of the past. In particular there is a need to focus on more strategic themes relevant to the development of the District rather than operational programmes and individual proposals or project ideas.

Recommendation 4

Set a high level ten year strategic vision for the District.

18. A Ten Year Strategic Vision would focus on a smaller number of themes and, as an illustration, we suggest that three might be relevant for Strabane:
 - Economic development and the labour market;
 - Physical infrastructure investment;
 - The social and community fabric of the District.
19. Consultations should clearly draw upon the baseline analysis and planning framework, which should set out the really critical issues for discussion. In short, there should be evidence and reasons why there should be key strategic priorities over other, and often very localised concerns. For example, we know some issues about the labour market and economic position of Strabane including the persistence of the 'development gap' with the rest of Northern Ireland, the nature of the jobs deficit and the comparatively weak rates of business innovation compared to benchmark authorities such as Dungannon, Magherafelt or Cookstown. This style of analysis would justify the concentration of the consultation on strategic economic, employment and employability issues. The consultation meetings would be more structured and concentrate, *inter alia*, on reviewing the analysis and definition of the issues, establishing critical priorities and determining delivery methods, targets and evaluation procedures. Ultimately, this first phase of the consultation should be led by strategic planning priorities crucial to the long-term development of Strabane.

Recommendation 5

Prepare a Three Year Action Plan to deliver the strategic themes set out in the 10 Year Vision.

20. We propose a set of three year rolling Plans that will set out the actual delivery arrangements, programmes and projects within the strategic priorities. As noted earlier there should be no more than three strategic priorities given the size and scale of the issues in Strabane. The first three year plan should follow a pattern in which:
- **Year 1** would concentrate on the delivery of actions that were largely agreed although the opportunity to integrate these in mutually reinforcing ways should be maximised in this phase;
 - **Year 2** would try to bring forward projects or tailor proposals to the needs of the Vision and the strategic objectives set for the Plan. Again, in year 2 commitments may already be in some organisational planning cycles but there will be an opportunity to ensure that these are timed, changed or developed in the interests of the District;
 - **Year 3** could attempt to implement key developmental projects, bearing in mind that there will be two years to influence and negotiate with the relevant sectors and agencies to work up viable programmes and projects.

Recommendation 6

Establish an Action Team model to develop and implement the Action Plan.

21. The (say three) priorities would be worked through by Action Teams and each one would have a nominated co-ordinator. In economic issues, for example, this could be the head of economic development in Strabane District Council for the Economic Development Priority. This Team could draw in the relevant stakeholders for highly focused consultations around each theme. It is not suggested at this stage that the consultation would be extended beyond the participants on each Team although they could be selected for their representative capacity as well as their expertise in each discrete area. The Team would mediate and negotiate the three year programme of action with the stakeholders, but could focus on those with resources likely to deliver actions under each theme. This would be an opportunity to negotiate the high level strategy with key agencies outside Strabane who have a material effect on development in the District. This would include health, education and cross-border issues with Donegal County Council. At this stage the Planning Analysis would be especially relevant in the formulation of the three Action Plans.

Recommendation 7

Publish an annual statement on the activities agreed each year to the SDCLSP and make it available to the wider public.

22. The actions agreed each year should be summarised into an annual planning schedule that would have identified people and agencies, resources, including finance and specific timescales for the delivery of the agreed projects. We suggest that this would be a simple description of the actions that flow from the three-year plan so the staff resource implications would be comparatively limited here. This will be an important operational planning tool in that it can show where progress has been made, identify obstacles to the implementation of key projects and disseminate information on the delivery of the strategy to the wider public in Strabane.

Recommendation 8

Establish a system of monitoring, evaluation and feeding back progress to the wider public.

23. Monitoring and review procedures would feed into and out from the Action Teams to the wider public and the SDCLSP more specifically. The LSP has developed quite sophisticated systems for monitoring projects and *Community Evaluation Northern Ireland (CENI)* recently published a framework for evaluating the impact of socio-economic projects on social capital and community cohesion. A system of objectively reporting progress and the impact of the strategy on the problems and issues set out at the baseline stage needs to be established. This should be carried out and presented in a transparent way so that the wider public can have a meaningful role in assessing the progress of the plan.

Recommendation 9

Develop across all sectors the skills needed to effectively implement the proposed planning approach.

24. In order to move to this broad planning approach there is a need to develop the skills in advocacy, lobbying, negotiating and mediating that were identified as crucial to sustainable consultation and plan making processes. It is important that capacity building for its own sake is avoided and that the resources coming in to community development are maximised to ensure they support the move to the proposed planning framework. A programme, with resources, needs to be put in place to ensure these skills are acquired from the range of courses available.

Recommendation 10

Embark upon a publicity strategy to build understanding of the purpose and status of the Community Plan in the District

25. A clear identity for the proposed plan and consultation system needs to be established. It will only work effectively if the key agencies and interests understand its content and purpose and work to a broad agenda for the development of the District expressed in the plan. As noted earlier, this could help to create efficiencies in the way in which other plans and strategies are prepared within and for the District. Working Paper 2 highlighted confusion about the multitude of plans and even some uncertainty about the status of the Community Plan itself. It is essential that SDCLSP embark on a publicity programme to underpin the purpose and role of the revised planning approach in an inclusive and open way. This could also address the name of the plan to ensure that stakeholders in the private or statutory sector understand that it is a corporate approach rather than a strategy simply for voluntary and community groups.



Strabane Community Planning Process Planning and Consultation Framework

Community Technical Aid
445-449 Ormeau Road
BELFAST
BT7 3GQ

Dr Brendan Murtagh
School of Environmental Planning
Queen's University Belfast
David Keir Building
Stranmillis Road
BELFAST BT9 5AG