



Rural Community Network
SUPPORTING RURAL COMMUNITIES

**Community
Places**



Rethinking Engagement Project

Rural Community Network and Community Places



**Good
Practice
Report**

October 2018



Re-thinking Engagement Project

Rethinking Engagement developed out of a first phase project, Rethinking Nimbyism, which looked at the issue of community engagement and the siting of large-scale renewable energy technology (RET) in rural areas which has become a divisive issue in some communities.

To access the first phase project report click [here](#). The project was supported by the Building Change Trust (BCT) Civic Activism Awards Programme. The Re-thinking Engagement project was developed to explore whether the Public Conversations Project (PCP) dialogue technique could be applied to other divisive issues offering a deliberative approach to engaging communities.

The purpose of the project was to share learning and reflections with a range of participants on the challenges of effective community engagement. We also wanted to further test the [Public Conversations Project dialogue technique](#) to assess how it might be applied to a range of contested issues across the region. The project also explored how organisations needed to design and invest in community engagement using more creative approaches and how these could enhance democratic engagement and participation at the local and regional level. The project was undertaken between July 2017 and September 2018.

The themes that we applied the PCP dialogue technique in phase 2 were:

- The relocation of Ulster University from the Jordanstown campus to Belfast City centre
- The issues around the location of a new social housing development in a small town
- Issues around the re-imagining of paramilitary murals in a village
- Issues around the re-siting of a bonfire to make way for social housing.

Six workshops were delivered to approximately 70 people in this phase of the project and a final learning event on community engagement was attended by almost 50 people.

Practitioner workshops in this second phase were a one-off opportunity to disseminate learning from phase 1 of the project and highlight the lessons for better community engagement. Participants then took part in a 'real-world' roleplay which allowed them to experience how a PCP session may work to encourage people to discuss issues related to that theme. They were then encouraged to reflect and explore how they could apply the PCP dialogue technique in their work.



The Public Conversations Dialogue Technique - a Background

The [Public Conversations Project](#) began as a research initiative to develop more constructive communication in civic life. The Public Conversations Project describes its methodology as reflective structured dialogue and it was developed out of, and informed by, family therapy approaches, neuroscience and meditation.

The purpose of PCP is dialogue, deepening understanding and building relationships between people who hold opposing views rather than reaching agreement on issues.

This deliberative approach may lead to agreements and facilitate the development of consensus in the future but that isn't its primary aim. The technique encourages participants to actively listen as others are speaking. It encourages participants to speak from personal experience so that participants can develop an understanding of the breadth of experience that informs people's views on an issue. It also encourages participants to share the values that inform their opinions to enable people to develop empathy with others who hold opposing views.

PCP aims to allow participants space to reflect on the complexity of issues and to test stereotypes and assumptions. Communication agreements with participants emphasise the importance of avoiding inflammatory language and the structure of the dialogue helps participants to manage their feelings and takes some of the heat out of discussing divisive issues.



Public Conversations Project

Dialogue – Methodology

PCP Dialogue sessions begin with a welcome from a facilitator who will:

- Speak about the purpose of the dialogue
- Create an opportunity for participants to introduce themselves and
- Mention any housekeeping issues such as anticipated finish time, whether people will need to leave the session early etc.

The facilitator agrees ground rules with the participants, all of whom should have had some contact in advance so that they are aware that a structured process for managing the conversation will be used.

The facilitator poses a carefully crafted question based on their preparation and initial discussion and understanding of the issues in that community.

Participants are given two minutes to gather their thoughts and think about how they will respond to the question. They are told they will have up to one minute to speak and then the facilitator will ask them to bring their remarks to a close.

Participants can pass up their turn to respond if they wish.

The facilitator reminds participants that in these initial “go rounds” of responses to the questions no one is to interrupt or ask questions. Participants are asked to focus on active listening even if they really disagree with the points being made by the speaker. Participants have a notepad and pen to allow them to note questions, points of clarification and comments that will form part of the open part of the dialogue.

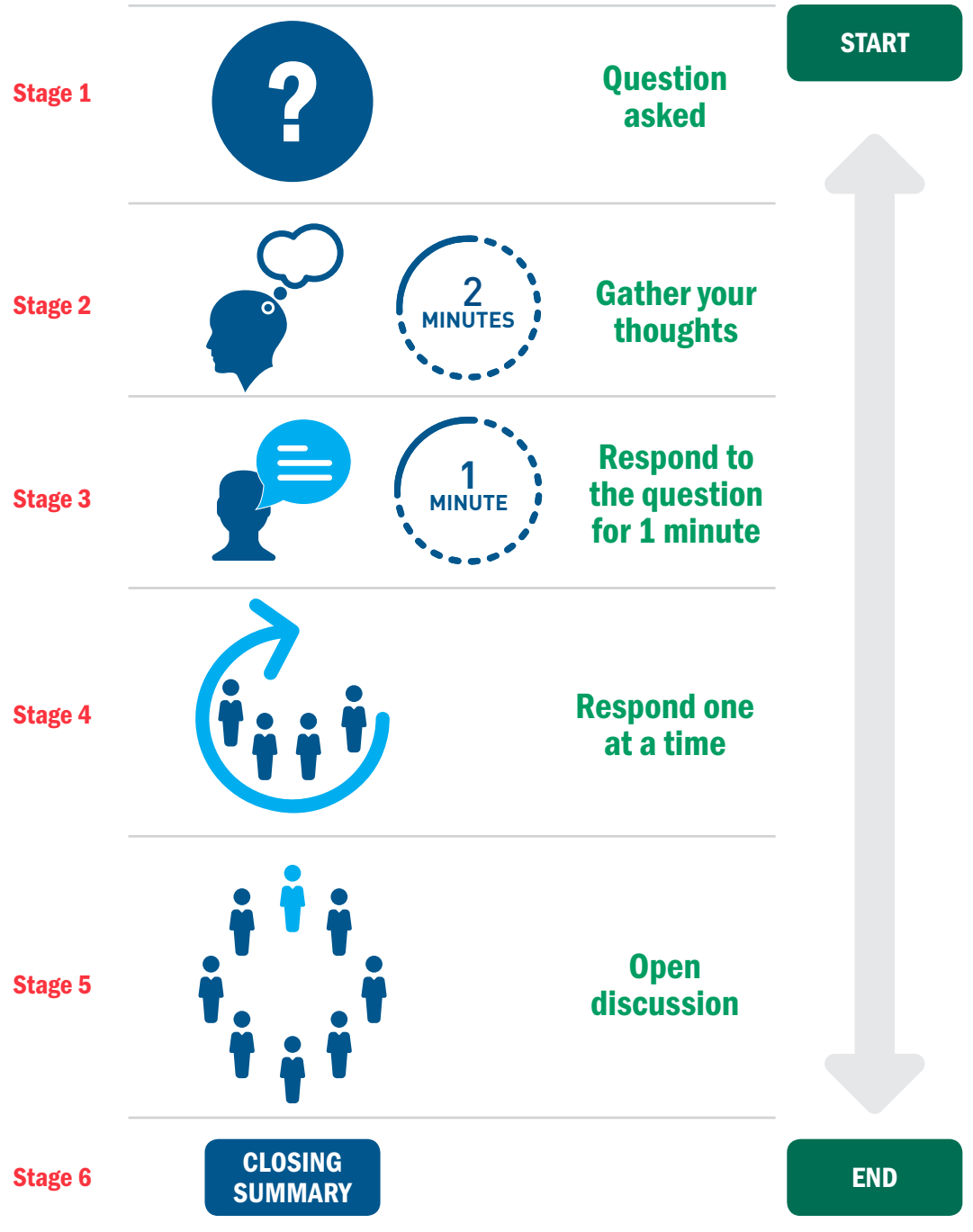
The process of “go rounds” to respond to critical questions happens two or three times in the structured part of the session. Facilitators need to ensure they time participants’ contributions and ask people to bring their remarks to a close if they speak longer than a minute.

At the end of the “go rounds” the facilitator initiates a less structured discussion. This begins by giving participants the opportunity to ask questions of clarification in relation to the issues/themes raised before opening into a broader conversation on the issues.

The facilitator closes the session by summarising some of the key themes that have emerged, explaining how information from the session will be shared amongst the group (if appropriate) and arrangements for any future sessions (if part of a multi-session dialogue).



PCP Dialogue



PCP Dialogue in Practice

The PCP dialogue technique uses a process that appears, at first glance, deceptively simple. We found it an extremely powerful way to manage dialogue sessions on divisive issues. Behind the simplicity of the techniques used to manage sessions lies a significant process of developing relationships and advance preparation.

- The first step is to make contact, build relationships and develop trust with key people you want to engage in dialogue. This can be done by being open and honest as to the purpose of the dialogue, discussing what will practically be expected from people, i.e. one or more dialogue sessions, the venue and timing, whether childcare or other support such as travel expenses will be available to facilitate people's participation. As well as practicalities participants should have a clear understanding of the types of issues that will be discussed, why they have been approached to take part and what they can bring to a dialogue. It's also important that potential participants know that the dialogue will involve people with opposing views but that the process used will allow people to share their diverse views in a safe way and that the purpose is dialogue and deepening understanding rather than debate and agreeing a collective position.
- Getting the right people in the room. These dialogue sessions work best with a range of views and opinions in the room on an issue. They also work better if people who are involved in a dialogue session have a direct interest in the issues and are prepared to speak about their own personal involvement, motivation and the values that inform their position. It's important to use community and peer networks to ensure the right people are invited to take part in a dialogue session.
- When discussing divisive issues potential participants will have concerns as to how conflict will be managed. Be open and honest about the potential for conflict within the workshop but also reassure people that conflict will be managed. People can also be reassured by explaining that they can withdraw from a dialogue session if they feel uncomfortable.
- Setting ground rules. Participants will find it easier to get involved in dialogue sessions and contribute fully if they are involved in discussions that shape the ground rules for dialogue sessions. Be clear about the purpose of dialogue as well as what the discussions are likely to cover. In our phase 1 project we agreed with participants that the dialogue sessions would not have any bearing on the live planning applications for Renewable Energy Technology in two of the communities participating. Participants also made agreements with each other that comments made would not be attributed to anyone without their prior agreement. We agreed that, as facilitators, we would produce a short note of each session which set out main points covered in dialogue sessions and that these were circulated to participants for comment and could be amended by them. We also agreed that we would take on the role of Devil's advocate in dialogue sessions where participants were of a majority view on an issue. We found that using two facilitators per session allowed one facilitator to be aware of how people were feeling in the group whilst the other kept time and made notes of key points and issues emerging.

- **Crafting questions.** PCP dialogue sessions begin with a structured process of talking and listening. To initiate this process participants respond to a series of questions that allow them to share their perspective on the issues and some of the values and experiences that inform those perspectives. PCP emphasises the importance of carefully crafting questions that participants can respond to. Finding the right questions to ask needs to be informed by pre-session preparation that has explored the context of the issues in that community.

Some of the questions we used were:

- **How did you hear about the proposal to build the wind farm in the area and how did it make you feel initially?**
 - **How do you think that the proposed development would impact on the area?**
 - **Who are the key people from outside the area with an interest in the proposed development? How do you think they will be affected?**
 - **How do you think students/staff will be affected by the move from the Jordanstown campus to Belfast City Centre?**
 - **How do you think the re-location might affect inner city communities in North Belfast?**
 - **What does the re-location say to you about the wider issue of urban regeneration in Belfast?**
 - **How did you hear about the proposal to build Greenacres estate in the area and how did it make you feel initially?**
 - **How do you think that the proposed development would impact on the area and community relations? How have you responded to news of the proposed development? What informed your response?**
- Have you felt any uncertainties about the issues since the Greenacres proposal emerged? Do you have mixed feelings about the proposal and its impact on community relations that you are willing to share?**

Reflections on Using the PCP technique

The structured process of speaking, listening and reflecting helps facilitators to manage dialogue on divisive issues. The need to wait to respond to an opposing view of another participant until the open part of a dialogue session encourages people to be more reflective and deliberative. Along with the agreement to refrain from using abusive language or terminology we experienced how empathy and understanding was fostered between participants.

The structure of PCP sessions provides an opportunity for everyone to share their views and is very effective in managing time in sessions. It also ensures less vocal participants' views are heard and that participants who tend to be more vocal do not dominate the conversation.

PCP works better with small numbers of participants. The style of structured discussions used are not suited to groups of much more than twelve participants. If more people need to take part then additional dialogues with dedicated facilitators should be used.

It is vital to invest time in pre-dialogue preparation work to develop understanding of the issues in that community context and to develop relationships and build trust with at least some of the participants in advance of a dialogue session. Developing relationships in advance and building trust enables a more open conversation in dialogue sessions.

The PCP dialogue technique is suited to practitioners in proactive situations who want to initiate dialogue on divisive issues. It is less relevant to practitioners who are engaging with service users in more reactive scenarios. So, for example, PCP dialogue may be useful to a housing officer who wants to discuss with a group of tenants the underlying reasons for anti-social behaviour in their community. It wouldn't be appropriate to use with groups of people who need repairs carried out on their homes because of anti-social behaviour.



Participants in the project were also asked to reflect on how they could apply PCP dialogue technique to their work:

“ In meetings with representatives of the community to allow people to have their say.”

“ Very useful in meetings I would need to attend regarding complex complaints in my role on a steering group of a charity.”

“ Actively listen, consider before responding. Be open minded to other opinions.”

“ I could apply what I have learned with my two youth groups. It will help in facilitating difficult conversations regarding good relations, diversity and diverse groups in our society.”

“ Our unit is involved in organising and facilitating community engagement/consultation in rural areas. Every engagement is different. I definitely think PCP could be used in the right circumstances.”

“ Useful in dealing with contentious issues. Also useful for staff meetings and assisting community groups to deal with issues.”

“ The techniques are very useful in setting up a civilised productive discussion. They will be useful in carrying out community consultations for new build developments.”

“ I would be keen to discuss the PCP Dialogue model with my superiors who are likely to be engaging with the public/agencies around contentious issues e.g. bonfires and parades.”

“ Structured questions to focus thinking in community consultation. The chance for everyone to be heard in a timed manner with no interruptions, any questions to be asked later.”

Community Engagement and Participative Democracy

A final learning workshop for the project was held in September 2018 attended by over 50 people. The participants represented community and voluntary sector organisations, local councils, other statutory organisations and academics. The keynote speaker was Dr Claire Bynner, from the University of Glasgow, Research Associate with [What Works Scotland](#). A summary of the learning from Rethinking Engagement was presented and Dr Bynner shared some of the experience and insights from the What Works Scotland initiative which aims to deepen community engagement in the re-design of public services in Scotland. Participants were also involved in workshop discussions and a plenary session.

There is considerable learning from the Scottish experience where citizen engagement is integral to their approach to policy making and public service delivery. This is evident from a series of initiatives including:

- The Christie Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services in 2011.
- Policy and resource support to Participatory Budgeting (PB) which is now seeking to use PB processes as a way of distributing some mainstream public budgets and services.
- The Community Empowerment Act 2015.
- The relaunch of the National Standards for Community Engagement in 2016.

All these measures contribute to an environment where the starting point appears to be how do we engage citizens to ensure we deliver better public services. Too often the starting point in Northern Ireland appears to be; "our public services are currently unsustainable how can we manage cuts in public spending?"

We need to accept that community engagement isn't and shouldn't be an add on at the end of a process to rubber stamp decisions. It must be resourced properly and carried out so that citizens know their participation will make a difference and have impact. Undertaking community engagement in a tokenistic way can often cost more in the long run if communities object to a decision which can then involve additional costs due to delays from planning appeals, judicial review of decisions and, in some cases, public inquiries.

Small scale examples of good practice in some communities and on some issues were identified. However, the consensus was that the formal public consultation process was seen by public authorities as the way to do community engagement. Too often large documents are placed on a website and comments invited on a narrow range of options already decided by officials. This approach can't be considered as community engagement and will exclude most people, only appealing to those groups and individuals with a specific interest or expertise on that issue.



Conclusions from the final learning workshop

Statutory engagement and consultation which is jargon heavy can be very formulaic and leads to public disengagement. This does not necessarily mean citizens are apathetic rather we need to re-evaluate the methods we use, take a much more deliberative approach to create space for conversations and exchange and clearly demonstrate the impact the engagement process has made.

For community engagement to be effective we need to be aware of and remove barriers to citizens becoming involved, e.g. timing, travel and childcare as well as creating an environment where people can share their views and ask questions. Evidence has shown that more deliberative styles of engagement are effective in reaching better decisions on public policy and service delivery e.g. Mini Publics.

The questions and issues we engage communities on have to matter to people to get them interested and we need to ensure

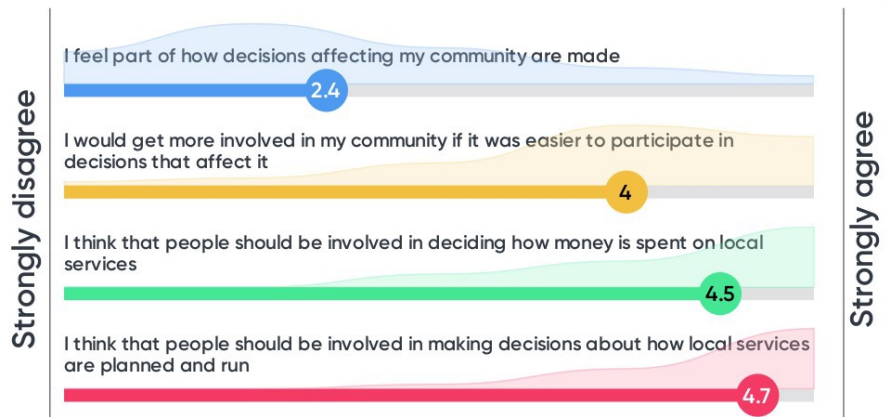
community engagement has an impact. Too often citizens are asked their opinion and nothing changes as a result.

We need to be clear about our purpose, what's been decided and what can be changed because of community engagement.

Community engagement must be representative of a wide cross section of the community: young/old, men/women, professional/personal etc. Otherwise community engagement can be dominated by vocal, well-educated and well-organised middle class stakeholder groups. How representative are the groups we engage with? Genuine engagement takes time, commitment and resources to build trust and garner honest exchange.

At the outset of the workshop we wanted to gauge the views in the room towards engagement and participation using a Mentimeter interactive poll. The results are illustrated below:

Re-thinking Engagement



It is clear from the results above that less than half of the participants feel they currently have a say in how decisions affecting their communities are made. Yet, there was a clear desire to get more involved in: how decisions are made, how resources are allocated and how local services are planned and run.

Citizens are beginning to engage in new ways in Northern Ireland, some of which have been facilitated and enabled by Building Change Trust Civic Activism funding, e.g. [Participatory Budgeting Works](#) project, the Open

Government Network and the developing Citizen's Assembly. How do we harness the energy of citizens involved in these new arenas? How will this inform, shape and change the traditional structures of representative democracy and the channels of engagement and governance that they use. The challenge facing practitioners is how do we enable better community engagement which leads to deeper participative democracy that can strengthen representative democracy when the NI Assembly is reinstated.

Choose two words to describe today's workshop



Useful Links/Further Information

Copies of the full report of the Phase 1 project and Executive Summary available on RCN & Community Places websites:

Rural Community Network

www.ruralcommunitynetwork.org

Community Places

www.communityplaces.info

Further Information

The Public Conversations Project has been renamed as Essential Partners further information at <https://www.whatisessential.org/>

Professor Patrick Devine Wright, University of Exeter for further information on his research on NIMBYism

http://geography.exeter.ac.uk/staff/index.php?web_id=Patrick_Devine_Wright



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