

## Local Government Research Programme

# Getting “under the skin” of Community Planning Understanding Community Planning at the Community Planning Partnership Level

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This research was conducted to support the work of the Community Planning Task Force by helping it gain a better understanding of the development of Community Planning at the level of individual Community Planning Partnerships. The aim of the research was to “get under the skin” of Community Planning by examining how Community Planning Partnerships are approaching a number of key issues and challenges.

## Main Findings

- There is widespread support for the principles underlying Community Planning in all of the case study areas and key stakeholders demonstrated a strong commitment to ensuring that these principles are translated into practical action.
- There is some evidence that Community Planning can mean different things to different people. However, there is also strong resistance to adopting an over prescriptive, “one size fits all”, approach to the development of Community Planning at a national level.
- There is limited evidence of the extent to which Community Planning has impacted on the mainstream business of partner organisations, and an acknowledgement amongst stakeholders that more people need to be involved in the process.
- The need to produce a range of different plans, funding bids and policy documents, as well as constantly respond to new initiatives from the Scottish Executive, is perceived to be an unnecessary burden. It also means that partners are not always able to devote sufficient time and resources to the Community Planning process.
- Many Community Planning partnerships are grappling to find the best way to integrate other planning systems and partnership structures into the overall Community Planning framework. The evolving relationship between health improvement planning and the Community Planning process illustrates some of the difficulties and tensions involved, however, the issues raised by the research can be applied equally to other policy themes.
- While considerable effort is being made within individual partnerships to secure greater community involvement in the Community Planning process, the available evidence suggests that this is an area where more progress can be made in the future.
- The key benefits and achievements that can be directly attributed to the Community Planning process are largely intangible but nevertheless important.
- If Community Planning is to fulfil its potential, and meet the expectations that have been set for it, there are a number of challenges and barriers to be faced. Some of these need to be addressed at a local level by Community Planning partnerships. However, there are also a number of issues that need to be tackled at a national level to help support the process.

## Introduction

This research was commissioned by the Community Planning Task Force to help it gain a better understanding of the development of Community Planning at a local level. The overall aim of the research was to get “under the skin” of Community Planning by examining a number of key issues:

- Understanding of, and commitment to, Community Planning
- Community Planning partnership structures, roles and responsibilities
- Different approaches to developing Community Planning
- Achievements and benefits delivered by Community Planning
- Aspirations for the future development of Community Planning
- Challenges and barriers to the development of Community Planning
- Expectations of the Scottish Executive in relation to the development of Community Planning
- Expectations of the Community Planning Task Force

In addition to these general themes the research also examined the relationship between health improvement planning, as an example of a key cross-cutting policy initiative, and Community Planning.

## Community Planning as a Concept

Community Planning is a complex and multi-dimensional concept that encompasses a number of different principles. It is perceived as being about promoting “joined-up” working between organisations in order to develop a shared strategic vision for a geographical area, providing greater opportunities for community participation and encouraging more integrated service delivery across organisational boundaries.

There was strong support for the principles underlying the concept of Community Planning in all nine case study areas. Community Planning is perceived as being a key aspect of the process of modernising government at a local level, and in particular to promote better working relationships across organisational boundaries.

The key principles that are perceived to be underlying Community Planning as a concept are:

- Developing a **strategic vision** that is accepted by all partners and forms the basis for planning to meet the economic, social and environmental needs of an area.
- Providing greater opportunities for **community participation and involvement** in the process of identifying priorities and planning how these priorities can be addressed by partner organisations.
- Promoting greater partnership working and more **integrated service delivery** to meet the needs of customers and citizens.

The key issue facing most partnerships is how to translate these principles into practical action. Many stakeholders believe that Community Planning offers the potential to provide an overarching framework within which other collaborative working can be developed, but most accept that it has not yet realised this potential.

There is some evidence that Community Planning can mean different things to different people and that this causes some tensions within some partnerships. However, in other partnerships there appears to be a strong consensus amongst participants suggesting a shared understanding of the approach to Community Planning being taken in their area.

## Community Planning Partnerships

There is no single model of Community Planning partnership and the structures adopted, or being developed, are different in each of the case study areas. There is also evidence that structures are evolving as Community Planning develops as a concept, and that different structures may be needed at different stages of the process.

Key learning issues suggested by the research about partnership structures included:

- Partnership structures need time and space to develop. A strong emphasis should be placed on developing relationships and building trust amongst the members of various groups. On the other hand, groups need to have clearly defined tasks, otherwise there is a danger that they could become “talking shops” and some people could become disillusioned with the process.

■ While flexibility is important there also needs to be clearly defined and accepted operational rules. In particular, as structures develop there will be a need for clear lines of accountability and delegation to ensure that the structures are working effectively.

■ While it was generally accepted that there is a need for further experimentation to ensure that structures are “fit for purpose”, there was also a strong desire for some stability to allow structures to mature and develop.

The leadership role of councils is generally accepted by other partners on the basis that they are often the largest organisation with the widest range of responsibilities. There is also recognition that councils provide a link to the democratic process and in many cases have more established relationships with the community and voluntary sectors.

Some stakeholders expressed concerns about the potential for the council to seek to dominate the Community Planning process by wanting to be involved in everything. However, very few examples of real conflict were cited in support of this fear, and many stakeholders accepted that this was more a question of perceptions rather than presenting practical difficulties. On the other hand, some council stakeholders felt that some of their partners were happy to let the council take on the leadership role, as this meant it would have to shoulder the bulk of the workload. This was often taken to be an indication of a lack of commitment by other partners.

The level of involvement of councillors in the Community Planning process is varied. In some areas councillors, or at least leading councillors, are heavily involved and appear to exercise a strong leadership role. However, in other areas councillors are only involved at the margins or not at all.

The involvement of councillors can bring its own challenges. In some areas a few stakeholders from other agencies said that they sometimes felt uncomfortable when councillors were involved in discussions because they were not used to operating in an overtly political environment. Conversely, some councillors indicated that they were uncomfortable in partnership meetings where relationships between officers and elected members were less clear-cut than within the council.

## Developing Community Planning

Many partnerships are grappling to find the best way to integrate existing planning systems and other partnership working into the overarching Community Planning

framework. Individual partnerships are seeking to address this issue in different ways, depending upon local needs and circumstances, however, it is possible to identify four broad approaches:

**New Build** – This approach involves setting up a new infrastructure based on the key themes identified in the Community Plan. Existing structures and processes are then expected to fit into the overarching Community Planning structure. There is an expectation that this approach may lead to a rationalisation and simplification of existing structures. However, there is limited evidence that this has actually happened to any great extent in practice.

**Incremental Gap Filling** – Under this approach the Community Planning structures and processes are being used to address issues where there is no existing mechanism already in place. Community Planning is also seen as providing the overall strategic direction for other partnership structures and processes but there are no formal reporting mechanisms. It is also anticipated that in the future Community Planning structures will be utilised to address new issues or initiatives requiring a collaborative approach rather than new mechanisms having to be established.

**Restructuring** – This approach involves a process of alignment of existing partnership structures and mechanisms with the themes identified in the Community Plan. In some cases the alignment process has been relatively “painless” and a clear match has been made between existing structures and Community Planning themes. However, in other cases it is more complex and can involve extending the role and remit of existing partnership structures.

**Organic Networking** – This approach does not seek to develop a formal structure but rather relies upon good communications and information sharing, to ensure that various planning systems and collaborative working arrangements operate in an integrated manner.

There are clearly opportunities for the rationalisation of existing partnership activity. However, it is perhaps inevitable that this will take place on an incremental basis as opportunities arise and the Community Planning process develops and matures. There is also evidence of a degree of conservatism or inertia which means that people are cautious about changing structures that they may be comfortable with, particularly when the Community Planning structures are relatively new and untested.

As Community Planning partnerships move from the initial visioning and strategy setting stages of the process most have delegated responsibility for implementation to thematic

groups. Delegating implementation and action planning to thematic groups is an effective way of managing the Community Planning process. Care needs to be taken, however, to ensure that there is both effective vertical integration between the thematic groups and the overall Community Planning partnership as well as horizontal integration between various thematic groups.

Almost all partnerships have community representation either on the main partnership group or in thematic groups. However, they also recognise that this type of representation is not an adequate substitute for wider involvement of the community in the Community Planning process.

It is possible to identify three broad approaches to securing greater community participation in the process.

- Some partnerships propose to develop and build upon existing **representative structures** e.g. Local Committees/Forums or Community Councils.
- Other partnerships propose to integrate **other community based structures** e.g. neighbourhood forums, social inclusion partnerships etc. into the Community Planning structure.
- A number of partnerships have established, or are planning to establish, **new participation structures** either at a area/neighbourhood level or covering the whole of the Community Planning area.

Very few partnerships would claim to have fully developed effective mechanisms to engage communities in the Community Planning process. Some have established structures but they are still very much in their infancy and the evidence of their effectiveness is limited.

## Achievements and Benefits

There is limited evidence of tangible outputs that can be attributed directly to Community Planning. Many stakeholders were able to identify a range of intangible benefits that had been gained from the process. These benefits generally related to organisational and cultural changes resulting from closer working between Community Planning partners.

One of the key aims of Community Planning is to break down barriers between organisations and many stakeholders felt that changing existing organisational cultures was a necessary prerequisite to achieving this. They felt that the Community Planning process had made a significant contribution towards this, but that this needed to be built upon, particularly by broadening involvement in the process.

While most partnerships have developed performance indicators linked to key policy outputs there is less evidence of partnerships having established “softer” indicators. These could be used to monitor progress in implementing process issues, such as effective partnership working and community involvement.

## Barriers and Challenges

If Community Planning is to fulfil its potential there are a number of challenges and barriers that will need to be overcome. The changes required to make Community Planning work effectively are perceived to be cultural as well as structural. Achieving these changes is seen as being one of the most complex challenges facing partnerships and individual partners.

Some of the most significant barriers to the development of Community Planning identified by stakeholders were as follows:

- **Capacity Building** – If Community Planning is to fundamentally change the way organisations operate it will require individuals to change the way they work. A number of stakeholders suggested that existing human resource policies in partner organisations did not always support collaborative working and, in fact, could sometimes work against it.
- **Managing Conflicting Priorities** – The need to produce a range of different plans, funding bids and policy documents is perceived by many stakeholders to be both an unnecessary burden and a distraction from developing the Community Planning process.
- **Constant Organisational Change** – Many of the key partners involved in Community Planning have had to deal with major organisational change over recent years. This has been unsettling and is perceived as having made it much more difficult to develop effective partnership working.
- **National versus Local Priorities** – Some stakeholders said that there was a perception that the need to deliver nationally set policies restricted some partners ability to respond to local priorities that are identified through the Community Planning process.
- **Boundary Issues** – The lack of coterminous boundaries in most Community Planning areas is seen as making it more difficult to develop effective partnership working than in those areas where most partners share the same boundaries.

# The Future of Community Planning

Stakeholders identified a number of key issues which they perceived to be important priorities that would need to be addressed by their Community Planning partnership over the next few years. The main issues identified included:

- **Broader Involvement** – There was general agreement that there was a need to increase the number of people in partner organisations who were involved in the Community Planning process.
- **An Accepted Way of Working** – Many stakeholders said they hoped that Community Planning would increasingly set the agenda for collaborative working as an accepted way of working within and between partner organisations.
- **Less Fragmentation** – Many stakeholders expressed a desire that, as Community Planning developed, it would become increasingly easy to rationalise and simplify other partnership and planning arrangements.
- **Learning from Experience** – Given that partnerships are still developing it is important that they continue to learn from experience and be able to adapt to changing circumstances.
- **Resourcing the Process** – A number of stakeholders felt that for Community Planning to progress it would require to have more resources devoted to it.

Many of the challenges facing Community Planning partnerships need to be addressed locally, however, there are a number of barriers that are common to all partnerships and can only be addressed at a national level.

The most frequently mentioned issue, which was raised by almost all stakeholders, was the need for the Scottish Executive to “lead by example”, by demonstrating a “joined-up” approach across its various departments and divisions. There was a strong view that the Executive was guilty of operating through organisational “silos”, which often resulted in policy initiatives being introduced which did not always appear to be integrated.

Some stakeholders perceived that the Executive had failed to emphasise the central importance of Community Planning. They felt that there was a need to reinforce the fact that it should be a key priority for all public sector organisations.

There was a strong view that the Executive could emphasise the importance it placed on Community Planning and help develop the process by rationalising the number of separate plans and strategies that partners are required to produce, both individually and collectively.

There was strong support for reducing the number of individual funding initiatives to address specific cross-cutting issues and replacing them with a more flexible approach possibly based on outcome agreements with Community Planning partnerships.

A number of stakeholders also suggested that the Executive could provide additional funding to support capacity building initiatives promoted by Community Planning partnerships. If this was promoted on a cross-sectoral basis, across the whole of the public sector in Scotland, it could make a significant contribution to breaking down some of the cultural barriers that are perceived as obstacles to more effective collaborative working between organisations.

## Conclusion

Community Planning has been described as an “idea whose time has come”. This research suggests that it is also an idea that needs to be given time to develop if it is to fulfil its full potential. At one level Community Planning is a simple concept reflecting broad principles about good governance that are widely acknowledged and accepted. However, the research demonstrates that translating these principles into practical action is a complex process that presents a number of challenges to which there are no easy answers or “quick fixes”.

There is a strong commitment to make Community Planning work amongst partner organisations at a local level. This commitment needs to be supported by a national policy framework that recognises the central importance of Community Planning to the modernisation of local governance, but is not over prescriptive about how the concept should be developed at a local level. Above all, Community Planning needs time and space to evolve and develop in order to meet the high expectations that have been set for it.

## About the Research

The research was based on nine case studies in the Community Planning partnerships in Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Highland, East Ayrshire, Argyll and Bute, Renfrewshire and Stirling. The research also draws on evidence gathered during a pilot exercise that was conducted in North Lanarkshire. The selection of case study areas was intended to reflect the diversity of approaches to Community Planning in different geographical areas. The four city partnership areas of Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee and Aberdeen as well as Highland were selected in order to provide information about Community Planning for the Scottish Executive's "Cities Review" in addition to informing the current research.

The research in each case study area involved:

- An examination of published and unpublished documentation produced by each Community Planning partnership.
- Semi-structured interviews with a number of key stakeholders involved in each Community Planning partnership.

Given the constraints of time and budget it was only possible to interview approximately 10 people in each case study area. However, an attempt was made to achieve a broadly representative sample of participants both within each case study area and across all nine areas.

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