

# Participatory planning in Northern Ireland: the 'learning community' approach

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## Introduction

Northern Ireland is a society deeply divided along politico-religious lines. It has seen very little participatory planning. Governed by 'direct rule' from London for the last 25 years, it has no democratic local government equivalent to 'parish councils'. This 'global' situation may be changing with the creation of a new provincial assembly and moves towards new local government regions. However, it has been largely left to civil society to make up for the social exclusion from the planning process which is part of this 'democratic deficit', although there have been some statutory attempts to consult with the public on specific areas, notably a Department for the Environment regional plan. Whilst there are numerous civil society organisations, including hundreds in rural areas, most have never assisted local communities to engage with strategic planning. Many of these organisations still need to address social exclusion, including exclusion on politico-religious grounds, in terms of their own work.

This article introduces an approach towards enabling citizenship called the 'learning community'. It describes the new tools used to facilitate participation and learning, including the 'local website'. It discusses what we have learned from the experience of piloting the approach in rural County Down (a region in Northern Ireland). The work is part of an action research programme being carried out by the Rural Development Council for Northern Ireland (RDC) and Queen's University Belfast funded by the European Union LEADER II programme in collaboration with Ballynahinch, Drumaness and Spa (BDS) Community Group and community based organisations in other areas.

## The approach

The 'learning community' tries to draw the community into a strategic planning process which is empowering, inclusive, builds a sense of community and is sustainable. It is also ongoing, reflective and collaborative. The approach recognises that such a process is meaningless if people in the community have no opportunity to influence wider decision-making. It aims to link into the development of a new institutional tier in Northern Ireland, in which communities, politicians and professionals can develop partnerships in regional level planning.

It is important to note at this stage that 'exclusion' in the

Northern Ireland context refers to exclusion from social, economic and political processes, not only due to reasons of poverty, gender, disability, ethnic group or sexual identity but also associated with politico-religious belief. The 'community you come from' is a distinct marker of identity. 'Two communities' are generally recognised: a community with predominantly Protestant and Unionist<sup>1</sup> sympathies and a community with a mainly Roman Catholic and Nationalist<sup>2</sup> allegiance, although the picture is of course more complex than this. Most people live in 'single-identity' areas. Activities that aim to involve both communities are termed 'cross-community'.

## The tools

To address social exclusion and to promote participatory learning throughout the planning process, we developed a broad approach, which included: the development of a core planning and support group, continuous and effective promotional work, 'active reflection' workshops, a broad-based questionnaire survey, focus groups, a concluding 'Search Conference'<sup>3</sup> and a Launch Day. Alongside implementation of the plan itself, the exercise can help to establish a community action group or forum, inform local town planning and feed into the District Area Plan to ensure engagement with the wider decision-making process.

*Active reflection workshops* target those least likely to participate due to marginalisation<sup>4</sup>. The aim is to create the space, support and opportunity for participants to reflect on their own experience of life. Empowering arts-based approaches are used to capture snapshots of these experiences and participants define a set of action points to take to the formulation of the action plan at the search conference. 'Issue-based' *focus groups* are organised to encourage imaginative discussion around key themes linking to sustainable community development. Again, each focus group presents a 'piece' of the final action plan in preparation for the final 'Search Conference'.

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<sup>1</sup> In favour of continuing political union with Great Britain.

<sup>2</sup> In favour of the unification of Ireland.

<sup>3</sup> Based on the Search Conference idea, developed in Britain and Australia and adapted in Sweden (Gustavsen 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Many people can be considered historically marginalised from decision-making and so lack a sufficient sense of empowerment or responsibility for shaping local quality of life. The range of people who find it difficult to respond to the ideas and possibilities of local community development and who might be addressed by this approach is substantial.

The *questionnaire* is a tool used by, within and for the community. The survey provides an opportunity for a larger number of people to contribute to the process and engages those who would prefer to participate from home, in writing and/or in an anonymous way. The survey results are included in the search conference process in order to develop priorities.

The *search conference* draws together the focus and active reflection groups, with the common goal of building a full action plan, including indicators to measure progress against established goals. The participants work on an equal basis as co-contributors on behalf of the whole community. All discussion is practically focused and is expected to lead to action. The *launch* presents the action plan to the wider community, including local authorities and businesses. It demonstrates wide ownership and interested organisations or individuals are invited to identify parts of the action plan they feel they can contribute to from their own activities and resources. In particular, the core group and the local council should be able to identify aspects they can contribute to. The value of now working together to achieve goals is explained and discussed.

The focus group work and search conference may pave the way for other action and networks to be developed. *Inquiry groups* may be formed if focus groups decide they do not know enough about a particular issue from which to define an action point. A *forum* might be established of search conference participants to discuss ways of implementing

the plan, using the same basic 'rules'. Such a forum could foster continuous community involvement.

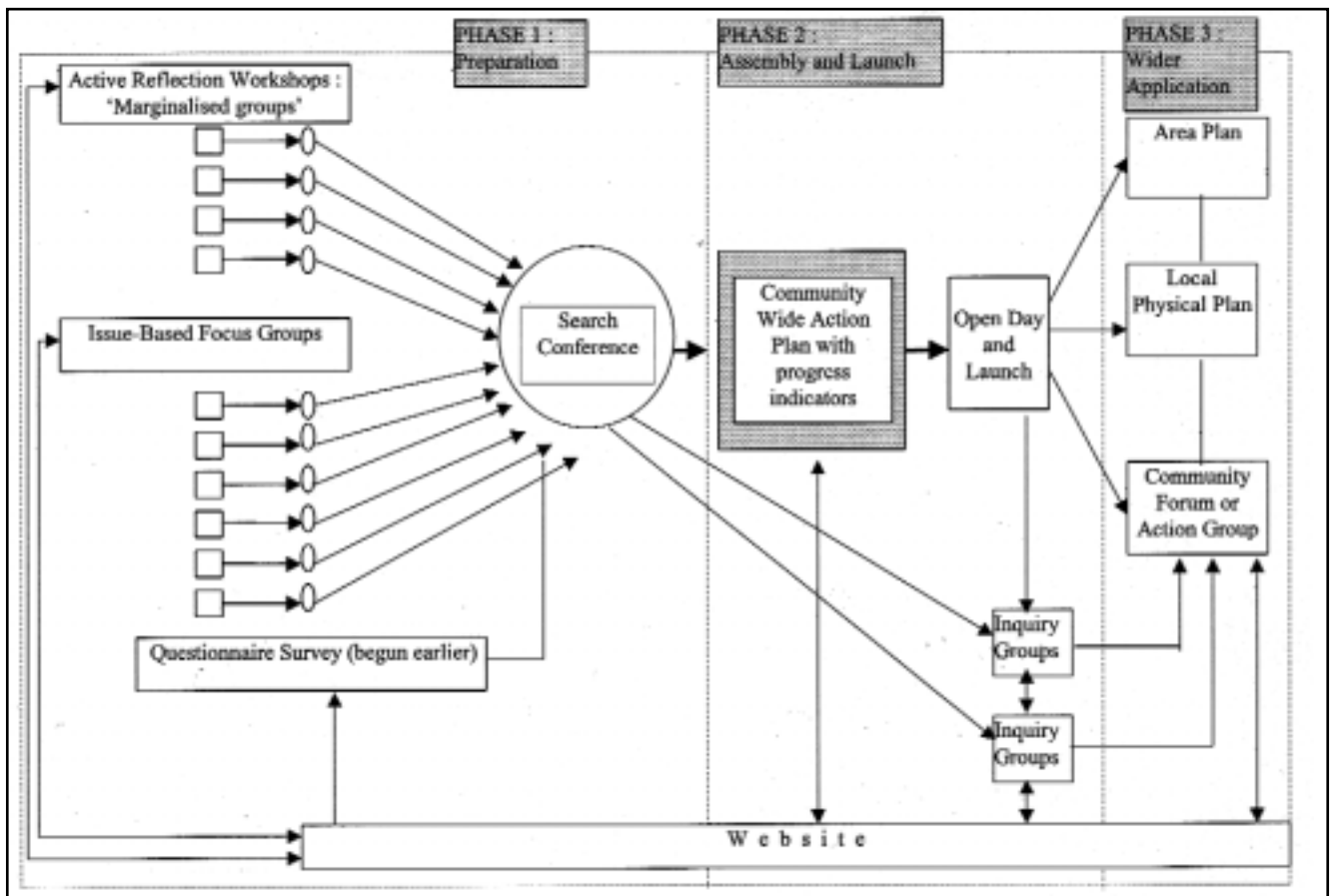
*Promotion* is an integral part of the process to make people aware of the project and to encourage them to engage with it.

## The learning community in Ballynahinch, Drumaness and Spa

Ballynahinch (*island town*) is a historic market town with a population of approximately 5200 and a Protestant majority. Drumaness is a nearby former linen mill town of 1700 people, predominantly Roman Catholic. Spa is a dispersed, mainly Protestant, farming settlement of about 1600, neighbouring Ballynahinch. The BDS area has a mix of private and social housing. There is an expanding population, local agricultural, retail and light industrial employment and commuting to work. The area is considered to be relatively deprived<sup>5</sup>. Some residential areas and all schools are 'single identity' and there are social tensions relating to sectarianism which lead to the involvement of a police 'mobile force' on a regular basis. At the same time, there is a wealth of community regeneration activity.

<sup>5</sup> According to the Robson Index which combines indicators chosen to cover a wide range of areas including health, education and income into a single deprivation score for a geographical region. A region can be as small as an enumeration district (there are 3729 in Northern Ireland). However, the indicators are derived from the 1991 Northern Ireland Census and so are becoming progressively out of date.

**Figure 1 shows how the elements of the approach fit together over time**



The area does not have one clear centre where people travel regularly for work, shopping or leisure. Given the dispersed location of the communities, the social divisions and this lack of a clear centre, this presented key challenges in terms of communicating the process and bridging social exclusion. It also presented an opportunity to move forward in terms of building inclusion and learning within the community about the community.

In order to pilot the 'learning community' approach, the RDC first contacted the BDS Community Group as a key gatekeeper and facilitator to working with the community in the Ballynahinch area in early 1999. A core group of volunteers from the community, who were interested in forwarding the process, was established. Three of them undertook an orientation on facilitation (organised in conjunction with a parallel process in nearby Newcastle).

The goals of the exercise in BDS were to:

- establish a clear and inclusive community action plan for the area;
- maximise ownership, support and interest across the communities in the development of the plan;
- ensure opportunities for all sections of the community to contribute to the plan *and* to its implementation;
- facilitate clear and understandable roles for the implementation of the action plan for all local organisations who wished to be involved;
- use the exercise to inform local town planning for Ballynahinch, Drumaness and Spa and the District Area Plan; and,
- identify and include indicators enabling an annual review of progress against the plan and new community planning over time.

A broad community questionnaire was designed and delivered by the BDS Community Group, with assistance from the RDC and analysis by Queen's University. Seven focus groups were held, involving more than 200 people, including sessions with senior citizens, mothers of toddlers, a youth group, a community-police liaison committee and a housing interest group. Participants from statutory agencies and other key players were kept informed of progress but were not directly involved in the focus groups, as it was felt that this might inhibit the articulation of the community viewpoint and shift the balance of power in the discussions. The approach was flexible. In some cases participants were invited to discuss the issues in the evening at a neutral venue (for example, the housing interest group was invited to the sports centre). Transport and childcare facilities were offered. In others, the facilitators went to groups of participants in cases where the participants would have found it difficult to give up time in the evening. Facilitation and recording was provided by community development workers from neighbouring groups through a local community network. One community development worker was taking part in order to learn about the process for replication in his group. Active reflection was undertaken through photography. Disposable cameras

were provided to young people, who took 'their view' of life in BDS and provided captions as a commentary on the images at a facilitated discussion evening on the pictures. The photographs and captions were made into a display for discussion at the search conference.

Participants enjoyed the focus groups which made use of mind-mapping exercises, anonymous voting by 'sticky dots' as well as discussions. They talked about the main issues affecting them and drew up action points on those themes. Participants in the focus and reflection groups remarked on how much they had learned about what was happening in their local area and about the differing perspective of fellow participants. Some of the group participants were surprised to think that what they were doing was important enough to be recognised and could make a difference. They initially wondered whether the community had the 'right' to discuss and draw up action points, and whether telling agencies how to serve the community 'was what the community were supposed to be doing'. A sense of purpose and responsibility was built through the focus and reflection groups.

Representatives from most of the focus and reflection groups attended the search conference. A large room was used as the venue, in which the original flip-chart sheets recording the focus groups and the active reflection photographs and captions were presented. Again, no 'officials' were present and an informal atmosphere developed. In the introduction to the conference, people were reminded that they were 'experts' on their own situations and were at the conference as community representatives, in order to draw up a major action plan. In preparation for the conference, the main issues and action points prioritised at all the focus groups had been distilled into main thematic areas: childcare and health, the environment and consultation, traffic and parking, community safety and community facilities.

After an 'ice-breaker', the conference got underway with a short presentation on the main issues in each of these areas. Participants were then asked to move to one of five tables. Each table was designated for one issue. A facilitator sat at each and recorded the action points, indicators of progress and desirable timescales decided upon. The results from the survey were also distilled into the five main themes and provided information at each of the theme tables. At time intervals, participants were reminded by the co-ordinating facilitator that they could move to other issue tables they felt they could contribute to or they could stay with the planning group they were currently involved with. Throughout the conference, the facilitators worked to encourage equal participation and that dialogue remained focused.

At the end of the search conference, each facilitator reported back on the main action points, timescales, which community group, statutory institution, local authority or business each point concerned and indicators according to theme. They were discussed by the participants and slight

Table 1 Summary of the main action points of the BDS community plan	
Issue	Action point: what and how?
Consultation and participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage collective community discussion through search conference every 8-12 months.</li> <li>• Statutory agencies should form more cohesive approaches to action and include public participation in planning, including young people.</li> <li>• Community should develop on-going forum for issue raising with statutory agencies, local authorities, business etc. and maintain website as a dialogue point.</li> </ul>
Community safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce vandalism to cars, street crime, destruction of property, assault by young people through increasing <i>community</i> policing, education on these issues and parenting classes.</li> <li>• Reverse perception of Ballynahinch as a 'no go' area on Saturday nights through persuading the media to report in a less sensational way.</li> <li>• Reduce joy riding and illegal driving through forming enquiry team to talk to courts about sentencing policy, police traffic branch etc..</li> <li>• Raise awareness and profile of Community-Police Liaison Committee programme.</li> <li>• Deal with drink and drugs abuse through checks on age of drinkers by licensees and other measures.</li> </ul>
Traffic and transport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase use of car parks and more car-parking spaces for disabled persons' use.</li> <li>• Improve road safety through measures to reduce speeding and increase pedestrian crossing points.</li> <li>• Improve public transport through changing timetables, increasing routes, introducing frequent minibuses.</li> </ul>
Community facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inform community about community group committee membership meeting times and aims, to avoid secrecy and encourage openness.</li> <li>• Improve and make safe places to walk in Ballynahinch and Drumaness.</li> <li>• Hold events in Ballynahinch square involving the community in planning.</li> </ul>
Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiate zero tolerance of litter through more bins and investigating possibility of traffic wardens also becoming 'litter police'.</li> <li>• Prevent flooding by listening to the community's reports on <i>when</i> and <i>where</i> it happens.</li> </ul>
Childcare and health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve ease of getting appointments at the doctor's surgery, the attention and time given to patients and the attitude of surgery staff through a meeting with surgery staff and the appointment of a community representative on the surgery committee.</li> <li>• Get part-time crèche at the shops by approaching the <i>Supervalu</i> supermarket manager.</li> <li>• Secure more affordable childcare through encouraging schools to follow the example of one primary school in setting up a nursery.</li> </ul>

changes made. These were compiled as an action plan by the BDS Community Group and launched a few weeks later in April 2000 to the public and to statutory agencies and other key players involved. The process is now entering the third phase (see Figure 1). A summary of the main points from the plan is provided in Table 1.

### Website: using the global for the local

The participatory planning website was an idea that developed in the course of the project. It was developed in response to some of the key challenges that presented themselves in continuous reflection on the process. These were that the process needed alternative publicity, that younger people and farmers were not participating in the process and that setting up a community dialogue on the issues in a rural area was difficult where there is no one centre which most people travel to on a regular basis. The planning website itself was widely publicised, in particular through secondary schools in the area, where all children have the opportunity to learn internet skills. There is growing on-farm usage of the internet due to farm IT development programmes and it was hoped that many farm families would also have easy access. Promoting

access to people without home, school or business access was a concern. A computer and telephone line were provided in the public library which offered free access via the internet to the website. Training for the librarians in how to access the site and to support other first-time users to participate was also supplied.

The BDS website evolved from a simple site with a greetings page and request for comments to be added to the page (which were screened to make sure nothing offensive was posted on-line) to encourage a community dialogue. When the young people had participated in the active reflection, some of the photographs were scanned in, with captions, to stimulate discussion as well as interest. Finally an online version of the questionnaire was designed and added to the site for 2 weeks. The process was very much a self-taught learning exercise and numbers of visits to the site were not counted until the last two months, when 50 visits were recorded.

In a parallel process at Newcastle, the website attracted some negative comments from agencies who had misunderstood the intention of the site and complained that it portrayed Newcastle in a poor light. Agencies were

assured that the site had not been registered with search engines<sup>6</sup>. The aim here was to facilitate a way in which the community could 'talk to itself'. This is using the 'global' facility for the advantage of the 'local'.

## Conclusion and learning

The experience of the process so far has shown the following.

- Continuous and creative promotion of the process is vital to its success. In BDS, press releases on progress were sent to the press regularly and the website was launched with a press conference in Ballynahinch library. Posters were displayed in a variety of venues including doctor's surgeries, mobile libraries and shops. Bookmarks were printed to promote the website in particular and made available in the BDS office, leisure centre and presented in library books. Information letters were sent out to schools and community groups. This multi-media promotion strategy attracted and maintained focus on the process.
- To create space for the community and particularly the more disempowered to express their views, statutory players are not involved in the production of the plan, although they were made aware of it. A website has potential to be a key part of a participatory planning process when access issues are addressed. To ensure maximum impact, a website needs to be set up and publicised from the start of the process. Keeping the website regularly updated is crucial to the promotion of dialogue but can prove time-consuming.
- A participatory planning process needs to be ongoing, reflective and flexible to allow for mid-process change and innovation (the introduction of the website was one such innovation).
- Continuity, momentum and focus must be maintained. There is a need to remind participants at every stage that their work is part of a process. There is a tendency for people to get so involved in their area of interest and discussions that the wider process is forgotten and the part of the process they are involved with at that moment becomes an end in itself. At the same time, it is important that people feel they have achieved something at each stage so that a sense of 'closure' is experienced.
- The core group needs to consist of wide cross-section of the community who are involved in the planning of the process from the start and who are encouraged to be involved in the ongoing co-ordination.

Making the process both ongoing in the long-term and capable of influencing wider decision-making processes remain key challenges. There are threats to the future of the process due to the short-term nature of funding for community groups and projects in Northern Ireland. The future of the BDS Community Group development worker and office is in question because of a lack of funding. Without on-going support the future of the 'learning community' may be diminished. However, the commitment of the BDS Community Group committee members will

ensure that the process does not halt and many elements of the action plan and questionnaire survey results have been immediately incorporated into funding bids which should prove strong, given the clear, wide community backing. The local further education college is taking on the website to continue as a focus for community dialogue and learning. Small community interest groups have agreed to take on part of the action plan and at the public launch of the action plan, key statutory and strategic players expressed interest in looking at the parts of the action plan that the community has suggested they take on board.

In BDS, the process to date has built interest and a sense of community and has achieved full cross-community participation. It has addressed aspects of social exclusion and the democratic deficit. It is now going on to tackle particular problems identified during the first two phases of the process, including the lack of recognition by agencies of the community voice, community violence and environmental and health matters. Looking to the future of the process, as part of the action plan itself, the community has decided to commit itself to assessing progress against the plan, and replanning accordingly, on an annual basis, at a search conference, as a learning community. It has also committed itself to establishing a long-term forum for on-going issue raising with statutory authorities and other key strategic players.

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## References

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<sup>6</sup> When designing websites to advertise products or a place for tourism or development purposes, the aim is to register the site with 'search engines' – software to help people find sites of interest, using keywords. The website designer selects keywords which people are likely to search for and attaches them to the site pages so that it is easily found by those using the search engine.