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Establishing a Community Panel to
support the work of ABC Community
Planning Partnership
Report on the Community Engagement Process

ABSTRACT

This Report provides a summary of feedback following a community engagement process with members of the Community and Voluntary Sector in the Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Council area, regarding the establishment of a Community Panel.

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Introduction

The Community Planning partners have agreed the formation of a community panel to ensure formal ongoing participation of the community and voluntary sector and social enterprise sector within the community planning governance structure and programme of work to implement the Community Plan.

Anna Clarke, Director at Prospect Awards was commissioned to facilitate an engagement process with the Community and Voluntary Sector in the ABC council area. Throughout February 2018 the engagement process was undertaken with community and voluntary sector organisations across the area, to scope and design the framework for the community panel, seeking to ensure the process is as inclusive as possible.

During this process;

- 3 public events were facilitated with members of local community and voluntary sector organisations;
 - Banbridge Leisure Centre, 12th February 2018
 - Craigavon Civic Centre, 19th February 2018
 - Armagh Palace Demesne, 26th February 2018
- 3 focus groups meetings have also been held with representatives from LGBTQ+, Women's Sector and Traveller Support organisations. Further focus group discussions are being planned with other Section 75 groups to explore what will support their involvement on an ongoing basis.

Discussions focussed on the following main areas of consideration:

- Purpose of the Community Panel
- Position of the Community Panel within the ABC Community Planning governance structure
- Membership of the Community Panel
- Recruitment of Community Panel members
- Communication and ongoing engagement

The key features of the engagement discussion are outlined under the above headings.

Purpose of the Community Panel

There was good discussion around this element of the engagement with a wide range of views and opinions expressed and also questions raised. Some of the more common themes within the discussion identified the following purposes for the Community Panel;

- Act as a mechanism for **ensuring CVS is represented** on the Strategic Partnership and on the Thematic Action Planning groups
- Provide a mechanism for **ensuring ongoing engagement** between the CP Strategic Partnership and wider CVS. In this, information, views and ideas would need to flow both ways between CP Governance structures and the CV sector and the wider public
- The Community Panel can provide the means for the **voice of CVS and of communities** to be expressed and heard. The liaison and connection with grassroots communities and groups was raised on several occasions and seen as an important and quite fundamental element that needs securing. There was support for ensuring that local voices, experience and knowledge contribute to a co-production approach to shaping services to meet local needs.

- **Scrutiny, challenge and oversight** roles – acting as the community panel and through members of it coming forward to sit on the Strategic Partnership.
 - Within the context of a scrutiny role, it was also identified that the Panel could have an equality impact assessment role here too, assessing extent to which work of the Partnership and implementation of the plan/s are really meeting needs of those most marginalised and disadvantaged.
 - Ensuring facilities, services and resources are distributed fairly across Borough
- **Build better relationships across and between sectors.** The collaborative intent of community planning was recognised as an opportunity to establish greater strategic direct links to statutory agencies
- **Networking local CVS groups/organisations** together – bring the sector closer and provide a clear rationale for developing innovative approaches to really engage with communities and not just groups
- **Raising public awareness** of resources available
- Community Panel can help **create new ABC identity** as a new Borough wide structure focussed on future plans and actions
- Contribute to strategically **promoting positive aspects of the Council area.** Through the Community Panel the CVS can actively engage across the range of thematic areas within the Community Plan and this gives scope for special interest groups to engage strategically in areas for development, for example; groups and organisations with an interest in local history, built environment, heritage, environment, infrastructure etc.

Questions and Challenges in relation to purpose;

- What power will the Community Panel have to influence policy decisions? Without the power to influence, the level of engagement is limited and unequal.
- Common theme raised around importance of equity among all members and commitment to genuine partnership working - needs to be recognised or people will become disenfranchised and walk away
- Discussion around what people will get out of being involved. The benefits and gains need to be clearly identified and expressed. Participation needs to be action orientated – not just talking – those on the panel and the wider CVS will want and need to see short term tangible outcomes.
- The time commitment and resourcing to support this requires serious consideration. The CVS does not have the resources to underpin the process.

Position of the Community Panel within the ABC Community Planning governance structure

The core common theme that emerged here was that the Community Panel should be integral to the CP governance structure. Within the structure it should clearly demonstrate how it links the CVS into the Partnership Board and into the thematic action planning groups and acts as a clear mechanism for facilitating the flow of information, views, ideas etc from decision making level (Partnership Board) to grass roots community organisations and back.

In exploring this element of the discussion, several views were put forward about the level of input from the Community Panel to the Strategic Partnership Board;

- 2/3 Representatives from Community Panel onto the CP Strategic Partnership – the rationale here being that while each statutory partner has 1 representative, to only have 1

representative from the Community Panel would be potentially intimidating and marginalising the CVS voice

- The Community Panel and Partnership should be evenly matched in numbers – e.g. 13 members of the Community Panel join the Strategic Partnership. The rationale here being that the CVS cannot be marginalised, collectively the CVS is as well represented as the statutory sector and the voices of the CVS sector can all be heard.
- Discussion also explored how the Community Panel could connect with the wider CVS and in this regard the model within NMD Council area was highlighted as providing a structure for wider engagement. There was widespread support for the establishment of a ‘sub-structure’ either through formalising the links with other networks, establishing a Borough wide network of some kind, or creating a more localised network perhaps at DEA or thematic level. There was discussion at each public meeting about the importance and need to support individual members of the public who do not currently sit on constituted organisations to be able to engage and be heard. The voices of the wider community were seen as important and efforts made to be inclusive of them.
- The Community Panel should be chaired by one of community representatives on the Panel as should any sub-structure
- There was also discussion on connecting across council areas on issues such as health (Southern Trust covers 3 council areas) shared outcomes and indicators.

Membership of the Community Panel

This element of the discussion explored two key strands;

- the types of groups and communities whose interests should be reflected through membership of the Community Panel, and
- potential criteria that those applying/expressing interest should be expected to meet.

In relation to the first point, there was widespread support for ensuring that the diversity of the CVS was represented as well as those organisations working with marginalised and disadvantaged communities. The range of organisations included:

- Infrastructure/service providers such as Community Transport
- Support and networking organisations such as Volunteer Now, TADA (Rural), ABC Network (Urban), Supporting Communities
- Age specific organisations working with children, young people and older people
- Organisations working with BME communities/ Travellers
- Organisations working with communities of identity – e.g. LGBTQ+ community
- Organisations working with people with Disabilities, special needs
- Faith based groups/Churches forum
- Chamber of Commerce/Social Enterprise support organisations
- Specific interest groups such as Sports, Tourism, Cultural Organisations or those with a thematic focus such as health, education, Victims groups, Carers groups

- Some consideration of geographical spread particularly ensuring a mix of rural and urban across the Borough.

In relation to criteria, there was widespread discussion on qualities and characteristics seen as necessary. The table below presents the prioritising of seven key criteria following a prioritisation task whereby participants were asked to prioritise their key criteria using a simple voting system.

Criteria	Ratings at public meetings	Priority Highest to lowest
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Panel members should understand the needs of communities experiencing inequality and disadvantage within the Council area, including S75 groups and communities of place 	Craigavon 25/2 nd Banbridge 29/1 st	1.5
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Panel members should have the ability and commitment to gather views of the wider sector to feed into the community planning process and also to disseminate and share information about the community planning process with the sector. 	Armagh 12/2 nd Craigavon 23/3 rd Banbridge 28/2 nd	2.3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Panel members share commitment to an agreed code of conduct/way of working as a group 	Armagh 8/4 th Craigavon (deemed mandatory so given 1 st place) Banbridge 15/6 th	3.6
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Panel members should have experience and/or knowledge of one or more of the thematic areas from the community plan 	Armagh 15/1 st Craigavon 12/5 th Banbridge 19/5 th	3.6
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All panel members should be either a Trustee/Director, Volunteer or staff member of a constituted community, voluntary or social enterprise organisation within the ABC Council area. 	Armagh 8/3 rd Craigavon 9/6 th Banbridge 23/4 th	4.3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Panel members should be willing and able to commit to joining at least 1 thematic group as well as attend meetings of the community and voluntary sector panel and or partnership meetings in order to ensure there is community representation across the levels of decision making within the community planning process. 	Armagh 8/4 th Craigavon 13/4 th Banbridge 15/6 th	4.6
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Panel members should be drawn from different geographical areas across the borough 	Craigavon 6/7 th Banbridge 27/3 rd	5

Further discussion around the criteria raised several other points. These are detailed below in order of the frequency and strength of feeling expressed;

- Only community and voluntary representatives should be on the Panel, no statutory sector representatives
- A code of contact should be mandatory and everyone on the panel expected to sign up to one. This should include issues such as integrity, accountability etc. like the Nolan Principles/Standards in Public Life.

- Understanding the needs of different communities in the ABC area was seen as critical – there was strong support from the Focus groups to seeing specific minority voices reflected in the Panel makeup and not marginalised, for example from the Traveller community/ LGBTQ+ community etc.
- Willingness to share information and feedback to the wider CV sector also seen as very important. Panel members need to be connected into the sector generally and within specific sub sectors and these connections need to be fostered, utilised and nurtured to grow the trust, relationships and ongoing communication
- Small groups need to have their voices heard, valued and acted upon – again strong support for ensuring a mechanism for this is put in place.
- All panel members should have a commitment to promoting the Borough – have a positive attitude, open to new and innovative thinking and ideas
- Panel members should have experience of community work, sitting on committees, be confident and willing to undergo training
- Ensuring Panel membership reflects geographical spread right across the borough was of less importance than the sense of getting the right people for the job. However, a rural/urban mix was considered important and at one of the public meetings there was a strong view that there should at least be an equal membership from each of the 3 ‘legacy’ council areas.
- There was recognition that not every group could have a representative on the Panel but aiming to ensure that ‘sub-sectors’ within the CVS were represented was valued, as long as there was a clear mechanism for connecting and communicating with the rest of the ‘sub-sector’.
- One discussion group felt that places on the community Panel should correspond to the demographics of the area i.e. % of children in the ABC area should match % of panel members working within the children’s sector and so on.

Recruitment of Community Panel members

Discussion around the process for recruitment identified several options and raised a number of questions.

- There was widespread support for the recruitment process to be publicly advertised in local press, social media, via networks etc and for targeted promotion with key support organisations and ‘sub’ sectors to reach and encourage those who work with minority and more marginalised groups to apply
- One group suggested a Letter be sent to every CVS group/organisation in the ABC Council area
- Clear terms of reference are needed in advance, a clear process for recruitment outlined and guidance on the time commitment and expectations of members.
- In terms of assessment the following points were raised;
 - Ensure clarity on the scoring mechanism
 - Points system for each criterion
 - Not qualifications based
- Guidance should also set out the groups/sections of the community that need to be represented, so for example, the Section 75 groups should be listed, and any other groupings agreed.

- There were differing views on the degree of formality between application form/expression of interest, and interview/group information meeting. However, the Focus Group discussions highlighted the importance of keeping the process and any forms short and simple and in plain English – and avoiding making the process so onerous it becomes a barrier to participation. On this basis, the option of an Expression of Interest form and an Information meeting may be more welcoming and inclusive approach, while still being open, fair and accountable.
- The idea of seeking referees/nominators was also discussed, this would help to confirm a number of the criteria including that they are part of a ‘bona fide’ organisation and have access to the level of connectedness needed to ensure the flow of communication as well as being suitable for the role.
- Discussion on term of office – 2-3 years was considered acceptable and reasonable within the Community Planning timeframe for the Action Plans but also ensuring that turnover doesn’t happen all at once.
- Non-attendance should lead to void of membership.

There was discussion in all the workshops around who makes the decisions in relation as to who will assess applicants coming forward and make final decisions on who sits on the Community Panel. Some participants felt the Strategic Partnership should make the decisions along with an independent person from VCS and others felt no statutory agency should make decisions about who from CVS should be involved.

- Strong common support for some element at least of independent person/s either totally responsible for selection decisions or alongside others. Suggestion that existing networks could sit on interview panel, provided they were not in the process.
- There were also suggestions of a process like that used by the LAGs whereby all those who apply become members of a wider grouping who then vote on those coming forward for the Panel. This would be very much dependent on numbers expressing interest/applying and would also need a more phased approach, although this could provide a wider membership for an emerging ‘sub-structure’.
- There was also one suggestion of random selection/names in a hat.
- Another suggestion put forward was of panel member selection through sub-group selection, for example – If there were 8 applicants for/from youth organisations – that group of 8 could meet, discuss and agree one of them to go forward to the panel.
- The final point that was raised under the theme of selection was in relation to support for those Panel members once they are recruited so that can make an effective contribution to the community Panel and the work of the Partnership. It was recognised that across the Panel (and indeed within the wider CVS) it will be important to;
 - Build awareness and capacity of community planning and the working processes involved
 - Support the development of skills in partnership working, networking, communication etc
 - Support/service (at least initially) the community panel structure and any sub-structure emerging in the same way that other tiers of the governance structure are supported.
 - Give serious consideration to the time and cost incurred by CVS organisations to take part in the community panel

Communication and ongoing engagement

From the outset, communication was raised as a critical and fundamental element of the process for the community panel and the work of the community planning partnership. Points raised as important included:

- Ensuring effective and regular two way communication within the CP governance structures and across the sectors is a fundamental requirement and expectation.
- Communication needs to be open and honest around engagement - give reasons why certain ideas and suggestions or actions are not taken up or acted on
- Share good news stories – things that people can see are bringing benefit
- Develop an online Forum – blog, help desk to support all community groups
- Dedicated page on council website which produces newsletters and all statutory partners include a community panel page on their websites too
- Ensure that all panel members are listed on the website and the public know how they can be contacted. Encourage that communication and break down the sense of being 'distanced'
- Public information sessions and outreach into small communities – keep talking to local communities regularly about community planning, the community panel etc.
- Work to reach new people and identify barriers to engagement and help with innovation in engagement
- Could statutory agencies resource a paid Community Panel Co-ordinator to support panel and members' involvement?
- Support for a further 'sub-panel' or sub-structure to facilitate wider ongoing engagement at local or thematic levels within CVS. Could this be incorporated into a wider networking role for the CVS sector, serviced through the Council or other Borough wide/networking organisation?
- Consider ways to support the Community Panel to link and share with other community panels in other council areas – bringing people together to build a better society by sharing good practice and ways of working around broad commonly shared themes – health, employment, regeneration etc. Encourage and facilitate shared learning.

Next Steps

The consultation feedback has provided a good level of consistency and broad agreement upon which to finalise details for the development of the Community Panel. The information gathered will now be used to inform the recruitment process and Panel development over the coming months. This will include;

1. Finalising the primary purpose of the Community Panel, for inclusion within the Terms of Reference
2. Agreeing how to appropriately reflect the Community Panel within the Governance Structure
3. Agreeing the essential and desirable criteria for membership of the Community Panel
4. Finalising the recruitment and selection process of Community Panel members
5. Identifying key mechanisms for communication and what, if any other sub-structures might be supported to facilitate ongoing engagement with the wider CVS.

Appendix 1 – Attendees List

The following groups participated in the consultation events.

1. ABC Community Network
2. ABC Senior Network
3. ABC Sports Forum
4. Alzheimer's Society
5. Armagh Rural Transport Ltd
6. Armagh Traveller Support
7. Banbridge Twinning Association
8. Barnardos
9. Bluestone Business
10. Chrysalis Women Centre
11. Citizen Advice Bureau
12. City of Armagh Rugby Club
13. Craigavon Travellers Support Committee
14. Donaghcloney Yoga Community Group
15. Drumgath Ladies Group
16. Edenvilla Community Links
17. ESERG
18. Gilford Community Forum
19. Hartford Community Development
20. Jethro Centre
21. John Hewitt Society
22. Laurelvale and District Community Association
23. Lislea Community Association
24. Monbrief Community Association
25. Niacro Family Support
26. Parkrun
27. Portadown Armagh Railway Society
28. Promoting Wellbeing Division – SHSCT
29. PSNI
30. Rathfriland Regeneration Historical
31. Regenerate
32. Richhill Building Preservation Trust
33. Richmount Rural Community Association
34. Rural Community Network
35. Sail NI
36. Save Craigavon City Park and Lakes Community Group
37. Social Enterprise Hub
38. Supporting Communities
39. TADA
40. The Volunteer Conservations
41. Toybox NI
42. Ulster Scots
43. Volunteer Now
44. Waringstown Together
45. Women's Aid
46. Youth Action