



NICVA response to consultation on Community Planning Guidelines

Background to NICVA

NICVA (the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action) is the umbrella body for the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland. It provides over 1,000 members with information, advice, training and support services on a wide range of issues, together with representation for the sector as a whole.

NICVA works to achieve progressive social change, based on equality and equity, working through a community development approach, to empower local communities to pursue their own needs and agendas.

General Comments

NICVA welcomes publication of the draft community planning guidelines and the opportunity to respond to the department's consultation on them. We have welcomed the process of local government reform as an exciting opportunity and a chance for civic leadership at a local level.

This consultation response is informed by our continued engagement with Community Planning and through a consultation event held in NICVA on the 2nd of March with departmental officials who engaged with 20 NICVA members on the guidelines.

There are many points in the consultation which we particularly welcome, including:

- The focus clearly remaining on providing better outcomes for people and their communities.
- The positioning of the community plan as the key overarching framework for its area, not an additional process and the ability of plans to be thematic.
- That statutory partners should embed the implementation of community plans into their corporate, resource and business planning and budgetary decisions.
- The commitment to meaningful engagement.

We would note concern however at a number of issues with the guidance which we feel warrant further consideration.

Representation of the voluntary and community sector on the Community Planning Partnership

NICVA welcomes that the guidance recognises the role that the voluntary and community sector can play in shaping and delivery of community planning. However when referencing the members who are likely to be represented on the Strategic Community Planning Partnership the voluntary and community sector is not listed.

The voluntary and community sector is uniquely placed to help capture the feelings of citizens and to assist in ensuring their voice is heard in the planning process. This is particularly true with hard to

reach groups who we are pleased to see given specific reference in the draft guidelines. We would like to see the guidance amended to include the voluntary and community sector.

NICVA would be pleased to work with the Department and local Councils in identifying a way to make this representation of the voluntary and community sector on the Community Planning Partnerships possible.

Potential for Regional Disparity

NICVA has a few concerns around the potential for regional disparity throughout the Community Planning process.

We note the timeframe for the production of Community Plans is one year, however at our consultation event there was a suggestion that this will not be a final deadline. Whilst we recognise the necessity to get the correct plan, rather than the quick plan we believe a maximum limit should be considered for the publication of plan. This would ensure all councils begin working towards the plan immediately and nowhere would be left without one for an indefinite period of time.

The lack of regional oversight of individual community plans is worrying as there will be no judgement made on the quality of a community plan until its review. There is also no mechanism laid out to measure the effectiveness of a community plan. This lack of overview, review and impact measurement could clearly lead to wildly differing outcomes across the 11 council areas.

When considering equality and good relations there is no outline for how they could be or should be embedded in a community plan and how or if this process will be monitored. NICVA would welcome assurances that equality and good relations will form a key part of community plans and that the guidance will include information for councils on how to do this.

We would also note a council for the potential of regional disparity and continuity of services from council to council and would be keen to hear how the department will guard against this.

Best Practice

One topic which was raised consistently at the NICVA consultation event was the need for a robust evidence base to back up the content of the Community Plan.

We believe that we do not need to reinvent the process with community planning and it is good to learn from best practice elsewhere both Scotland and Wales have gone through this process and a lot can be learnt from their experiences of it.

We also note that there is no assistance for the collaborative work that will have to be undertaken throughout this process. Collaboration is not a natural way for people to work together; relationships need to be carefully nurtured, developed and facilitated. We would have serious concerns that there is no mention of this in the draft guidelines and that without this facilitation/technical assistance the process may not be as successful or as smooth as it could be.

Community Engagement

In terms of community engagement NICVA has noted that there is no mechanism for a community to 'appeal' should they feel they have not been consulted with.

As we have noted in the previous section Scotland and Wales can be used as examples of best practice in this regard, particularly Scotland where there is a wealth of knowledge already in existence for how to best engage with the community and voluntary sector throughout the community planning process. Scotland has developed National Engagement Standards which could be considered.

For more information contact

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