

Examining the challenges of participation in multi-level governance and spatial planning

Report of workshop organised by the Spatial Planning Action Network (SPAN) in Knightsbrook Hotel, Trim, Co Meath

26th June 2007

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I Purpose of the workshop

The purpose of this one-day workshop, as outlined by Brendan Bartley, National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA) and National University of Ireland (NUI) Maynooth was to consider the experience of County Meath, in the areas of spatial planning and multi-level governance, in the context of SPAN's pioneering work in these fields in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown. The function of the workshop was to ask and answer the following questions:

- How does the experience of County Meath compare to that of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown?
- What are the points of similarities and differences and what makes them so? What do the two areas have in common in spatial planning and multi-level governance? What are the overlaps? The parallels?
- When it comes to participation, who is involved? At what stage? At what level? With what outcomes? How do they compare and contrast?
- Is Dún Laoghaire exceptional - or can its experience be applied elsewhere?

SPAN originated, explained Caroline Creamer of NIRSA and NUI Maynooth, as a transnational cooperation project in spatial development within the European Union INTERREG IIB programme. SPAN was informed by the *European Spatial Development Perspective*, the *Spatial Vision for North West Europe* and the *Guiding principles for sustainable spatial development on the European continent*. SPAN brought together, around NIRSA, three Irish bodies: Meath County Development Board, the Southside Partnership, and Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Development Board (CDB) as well as three sets of partners in France, Belgium and Northern Ireland. Their focus was on the twin themes of multi-level governance and strategic territorial planning, especially the development of participatory approaches involving officials, policy-makers, elected representatives and the local community. Within Ireland, the project's two pilot areas were Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown and County Meath. The ultimate aim of SPAN was to build the capacity of both local government and local development agents in both areas to work more strategically, especially with disadvantaged communities there.

NIRSA has carried out an analysis of public participation in the development plan review process in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown and a review of the governance structures there, while external consultants have examined the issues of community infrastructure provision and voter participation. In County Meath, SPAN was involved in the writing and publishing of *Meath in transition - a socio-economic profile* (May 2005). Transnationally, a number of exchanges and workshops have been carried out in all the partner territories.

The workshop was formally opened by Cllr. Jimmy Mangan, Chair of Meath County Development Board, who spoke of the timeliness of the workshop, coming at a time when Meath County Council has just completed a two-year review process around the county's development plan.

II Participation in planning: meeting the challenges

The first half of the workshop was entitled *Participation in planning: meeting the challenges* and comprised:

- *Review of public participation in the Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown development plans*, a presentation by Brendan Bartley and Jeanne Meldon of NIRSA and NUI Maynooth
- Discussion: *Meath - integrated planning for a county in transition*
- *Synopsis of issues raised*, provided by Kevin Stewart, Director of Economic Development and Innovation, Meath County Council.

Review of public participation in the Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown development plans

Brendan Bartley and Jeanne Meldon described the process and experience of public participation emerging from their study of the Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown development plan, taking the story from its background in new ideas in European and national spatial planning that seek to promote public involvement, through the current processes and into speculation about the future.

The background

Planning has now evolved, they explained, from top-down hierarchical approaches to a new approach which involves multiple levels (local, regional, national, transnational) and many different sectors (e.g. housing, health, transport and education). A shift has occurred toward what is now called 'vision planning'. Whereas before the local authorities facilitated development by producing 'predict and provide' spatial plans, now they are expected to break with prevailing trends where necessary in order to maximize development opportunities.

New planning legislation, dating to 2000, required the local authorities to prepare a plan 'setting out an overall strategy for proper planning and *sustainable* development indicating the *development objectives* for the area of the planning authority' (emphasis added). There were significant changes in arrangements for the preparation of a development plan. Before, development planning was top-down, with flexible time limits (although a review should be carried out every five years); it was largely based on trend projections with a requirement for the draft plan to be put on public display at a relatively late stage in the process. After 2000, fixed time limits were introduced, and the process was required to be bottom-up and more inclusive. Provision was made for vision planning and additional public involvement in the public review process, which now extended to allowing public consultation at the earlier pre-draft stage of the plan, as well as the later stages. Methods of public participation have also evolved over the years: the traditional method was to try to involve everybody and

hold large meetings, but the downside was that, in practice, people were consulted toward the end of the process, with little follow-through on the outcome of the consultation process. Now, newer methods are favoured which include: the targeting of the most interested, smaller-scale activities, involving people at the beginning and middle - as well as the end, with a more active influence on decisions. Inevitably, this has generated a higher level of expectation in the new development plan.

In designing the new Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown Development Plan for 2004-2010, the local authority enunciated a vision of sustainable development, with high-quality residential, working and recreational environments, accompanied by sustainable transportation patterns - and doing so in an inclusive, balanced and integrated way. The drawing up of the plan involved a flow of activities, events, and processes over 2002-4 with contributions by four main actors: managers, councillors, citizens, and other bodies. Eleven precise stages were set down, with three rounds provided for public consultation: pre-draft (eight weeks), draft (ten weeks) and amendments (four weeks).

The experience

It was possible to map the contributions at Enumerator Area (EA) or District Electoral Division (DED) level for each of these three rounds of consultation and correlate them with social class. Taking the submissions as a whole, 68% came from individuals, with 4% from landowners and the corporate sector. The research mapped 583 comments on the pre-draft plan, 2,848 on the draft plan and 1,190 amendments to the plan (there were additional comments which were not mapped, because full addresses were not available, such as those submitted by e-mail). Analysis at Enumerator Area (EA) level showed, as expected, a generally higher rate of contribution for higher social class areas.

During consultation at the pre-draft stage, while numerous general issues emerged such as transportation, zoning, waste, residential, cultural/ and community issues, two specific issues generated much interest and debate: the future use of the land formerly occupied by Dún Laoghaire golf club (24% of submissions) and Ballinaclea reservoir (10%). When the draft plan was published, the main issues were residential zoning, transport, open spaces, amenities, conservation and heritage, with specific issues being Ballinaclea reservoir (15%), the golf club (14%), Shanganagh park (11.5%) and Stepside golf course (5%). A key test of the impact of consultation was, of course, to look at the outcomes. Here we can itemise them:

<u>Item and issue</u>	<u>Manager recommendation</u>	<u>Councillor decision</u>
<i>Ballinaclea reservoir - retain</i>	<i>Housing</i>	<i>Retain</i>
<i>Dún Laoghaire golf club - retain</i>	<i>Residential & mixed</i>	<i>Retain</i>
<i>Shanganagh park - retain</i>	<i>Residential</i>	<i>Agreed</i>
<i>Stepside gold course - extend</i>	<i>Housing</i>	<i>Retain</i>
<i>Eastern by-pass - make reservation</i>	<i>Set line</i>	<i>Against</i>

The golf club was the most contentious issue, with hundreds of submissions objecting to a change of zoning, and the manager's recommendation being overruled by councillors - though this was subsequently reversed by the Minister responsible. Although the majority of submissions came from individuals, residents associations were important in mobilising opinion around specific issues, e.g. the reservoir and the golf club, especially at the pre-draft stage (10% of pre-draft submissions). Submissions by corporate interests and landowners constituted 16% of submissions at the pre-draft stage.

The research found that planners were very positive about the changed nature of the planning process after 2000: for them, the new system set clear time schedules as well as providing clarity and direction. It was a more demanding process: significant resources were required to make it work well, both internal and external. And interestingly, there was far more public involvement in the 2004 plan than the previous 1998 plan.

By contrast, the local authority councillors found the process to be rushed and unclear: they had goodwill for the new system but needed more support to operate it properly. Public views were mixed, with typically strong lobbying and the marshalling of opinion by middle class groups on selected issues; but disadvantaged areas were less involved and less well informed, with criticism of the lack of feedback on comments made.

Research on the role of civil society groups found that they were very clued in to the process, with a clear understanding of the different roles of the many players and extremely conscious of the need to bring in poorer areas through community development approaches and building the capacity of participating organisations. Overall, planners were happy with the new system, but there was a demand for greater involvement by councillors (especially at pre-draft and issues stage) and by voluntary and community organisations. Also, the public surveys suggested that the more awareness people had of the system, the more satisfied they were with it - and the greater was their stated willingness to participate in the consultation process. This all indicated to the potential for a positive educational role in the process.

The future

For the future, ways must be found to intensify the process of participation in both structures and processes, targeting especially those who do not participate yet. The new system has provided opportunities to 'grow' participation and bring in excluded groups; for example through building the capacity of community groups and working through networks, notably organisations such as the Southside Partnership (i.e. local development agencies). The aim should be to build up the community's capacity to participate earlier in the planning processes, and to strengthen their links with planning staff and councillors. For the next development plan review in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, preparation of which will begin in 2008, consideration should be given to bringing in 'new voices, new conversations, new perspective, new experiments and new passions'.

Discussion: *Meath - integrated planning for a county in transition*

Here, the discussion compared the Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown experience with that of County Meath during its recent planning process. A number of key issues were identified:

- Like Dún Laoghaire, the problem of ***how best to bring in socially excluded areas and groups*** in County Meath must be addressed. Groups like area partnerships could and should play a key role here.
- ***Differential knowledge*** of the process. It was evident from the Meath experience that an inner circle of people, especially developers, had much more knowledge of the planning process and they were much quicker, at all three stages, to get through the door to planners and councillors to make their views known when and where they mattered. When outsiders saw this inner circle at work, it led to cynicism about the planning process.
- The ***importance of issues papers*** prepared as part of the pre-draft stage. Here, planners faced a real problem. If they left the issues very open, they could be accused of being vague or even clueless and people found it hard to respond to issues papers full of generalities. On the other hand, if they were very specific, they were open to the accusation of deciding everything before consultation even opened.
- The ***importance of involving councillors, not just planners, in preparing the pre-draft plan and issues papers*** was recognised. The decision to ensure that councillors were involved from the outset in the pre-draft Vision Plan stage for the next Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Plan was considered to be a very beneficial development.
- The ***need to fully resource planning departments*** for their new responsibilities following the 2000 Act. The Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown planners were adamant that they did not need more planners, as such: but they needed the resources and time to carry out the community consultations. Training in various methods of consultation would also be helpful.
- The importance of a ***more consistent approach to consultation and participation*** across the different local authorities. At present, each local authority 'did its own thing' - guidance from central government could be helpful. Instead of a patchwork of approaches, local authorities should be helped to devise systematic participation strategies.
- The need to ***start the early stages of the development plan review in good time***. Although drawing up the next plan in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown was to start in 2008, now (i.e. 2007) was the time to start thinking about it. The real impact of the changes of the 2000 legislation may begin to set in during this new period.

Synopsis

A *Synopsis of issues raised* was provided by Kevin Stewart, Director of Economic Development and Innovation, Meath County Council, who made the following observations:

- Despite all the high-level talk about governance and vision, most planning remains an intensely local experience. This can be seen in the high level of individual participation in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, where individuals comprised 68% of submissions. Similarly, in County Meath, most of the comments on the development plan belonged to the 'please re-zone my field [or not]' category. Most of the amendments to the Meath plan, at the final stage of the process, were of this intimately local character. It is not easy to work with people with mainly localised concerns to 'do the vision thing'. Although Meath CDB has a database of 800 community groups, and all were contacted as part of the development plan review process, only about 25 to 30 made comments that were not local in nature.
- There remains a discernible power imbalance in the planning process. Developers often contract well-rewarded consultants who know their way into the system and 'get the ear' of planners and councillors. As a result, we tend to get developer-led solutions.
- Community issues are still a low priority. An observation on the planning process in County Meath was that the recently concluded development plan review process was dominated by zoning issues. Community issues were not reached until late in the day, 'by which time it was obvious that all the suits had gone home'.
- Much more could be done to improve the quality of participation of community groups and get beyond the notion that 'putting an ad in the paper is participation' (which is all that happened in the Meath Development Plan review process). Feedback should be given to those who do go to the trouble of making submissions - something more than just a letter of acknowledgment. Time should be given at council meetings for oral submissions and these could achieve a much better qualitative outcome. Councillors should be given the originals of submissions, not summaries. The views of voluntary and community organisations should be sought through the Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs).

III Local governance and its multiple tiers - building blocks for effective contribution

The second half of the workshop was entitled *Local governance and its multiple tiers - building blocks for effective contribution* and comprised:

- *Review of county governance structures in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown* by Dr. Brendan O’Keeffe, NIRSA and Mary Immaculate College, Limerick
- Discussion: *Governance structures in County Meath - defining roles in a crowded landscape*
- *Synopsis of issues raised*, by Michael Killeen, Director of Community & Enterprise, Meath County Development Board; and
- *Closing comments* by Cllr. Tom Kelly, Leas Cathaoirleach, Meath County Council

Review of county governance structures in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown

In his presentation, Brendan O’Keeffe set his review of governance structures in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown in the context of Ireland’s position in the broader European league table on democracy and participation. Here, Ireland was in a middle position for being democratic and participative, better than Britain but not as good as the Scandinavian countries - but trying to improve. He quoted the Taoiseach’s view that the quality of life of society and the health of our communities depended ‘on the willingness of people to become active and involved’. Good planning was all the more important now, given our population growth, especially in the areas around Dublin, and the on-going problems of deprivation in particular localities. In County Meath, the rate of population increase was three times the national average and this rate of growth had big implications for planning. The county had many new communities, comprising in part people who had left Dublin in search of new housing, but many new residents hardly knew their neighbours. All over, there were new communities in the making. Many were young parents with small children and because of the domestic demands on their time, not to mention commuting, they posed additional challenges for participation.

As part of his research into governance structures, Brendan O’Keeffe mapped community infrastructure in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, covering facilities such as community centres, meeting places, parish centres, libraries and resource centres. Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown had quite extensive community infrastructure, be that facilities or organisations (e.g. Community Forum, Platform). He also mapped the locations of community and voluntary organisations affiliated to the Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown Community Forum and showed clearly where they were concentrated. The map did not show a correlation between affiliated groups and social class, but one was still left with an impression that ‘middle class voices remain strong’. Positively, the Forum had been demonstrably effective in bringing in views and voices from disadvantaged areas, like Ballybrack; although not all the poorer parts of the local authority area were effectively represented. It was possible to establish a correlation between the

number of submissions and the presence of community groups in a given area. Not only was the Community Forum important to the planning process (it has about 200 member groups), but the area also had a Community Platform comprising 22 groups working in the area of social inclusion, and linked to the Southside Partnership. Another important player in the process in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown was the County Development Board - though there were unresolved issues as to whether it should be an internal body within local government, or a coordinating body trying to persuade local government.

The research indicated that work still had to be done to improve governance and accountability in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown and new vehicles found for citizen participation. There were still some silos that had not been brought into the process and ways must be found to (a) develop community level partnership and (b) work with new target groups; for example, the new immigrant communities in the area.

Discussion: Governance structures in County Meath - defining roles in a crowded landscape

The workshop returned to examine, in more detail, the extent to which this experience was echoed in County Meath. The following perspectives emerged:

- The **mapping** of community groups, community infrastructure, and the pattern of submissions in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown was valuable, and could usefully be applied in County Meath.
- **Community infrastructure may be weaker in County Meath.** There is no comparable Community Platform in Meath and some parts of the county (e.g. Kells) are unrepresented in its Forum. There were a number of Area Forums though, which could be developed further. Also on the positive side, some good work has been done in involving Travellers in the planning process. This should be further developed over the next number of years, in line with the *Active Citizenship* programme now being promoted by Central Government.
- **More intelligent use must be made of the existing institutional infrastructure.** To give some examples, the cohesion process introduced by the Department of Community, Rural & Gaeltacht Affairs has meant that community development projects must have their plans approved, but this has not been required of the large state agencies - and this has made participation uneven. Community and voluntary members of the Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs) have been overburdened with excessive and inappropriate documentation, which has further impeded their participation. The County Development Board has been insufficiently involved in the development plan review process. Creative ways should be found to develop participation. 'You *could* have a planning focus groups with only four people - what's wrong with that?'
- It was a real challenge to **lift planning out of an intensely local focus.** County Meath is full of single-issue groups or people and groups with very narrow agendas (e.g. stop-the-incinerator) and this has impeded broader and more strategic plan-

ning. Ways must be found to encourage groups and individuals to take a broader view.

- County Meath has a proportionately lower **planning staff and other resources** than Dublin in general, and Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown in particular. The county also has a low rate base, and only two towns are recognised as metropolitan (Clonee and Dunboyne). Planning resources have simply not kept pace with the reality of the county's rapid expansion.

Synopsis

In his *Synopsis of issues raised*, Michael Killeen, Director of Community & Enterprise, Meath County Development Board expressed the views that:

- The County Development Board could play a bigger role in strategic planning in the future. As a result of a review by Indecon, now due, it would become more effective and impactful.
- The use of Area Forums could improve the process of participation in planning, although they are about more than the planning system. Although some areas are not yet covered by them (e.g. Kells, Dunshaughlin), they will be soon. Even where Forums have not yet been established, there are plenty of amenity grant applications, suggesting that these areas are not as poorly developed as one might imagine.
- Although planning in County Meath is dominated by the rapid growth of new populations, many parts of the county remain intensely rural - and participation in planning must address both situations.

Closing comments by Cllr Tom Kelly, Leas Cathaoirleach, Meath County Council

SPAN is due to conclude its work at the end of 2008, but the possibility of a follow-up project is now under consideration. Tom Kelly, on behalf of Meath County Council, expressed his support for the concluding phase of the project, the council's preparedness to contribute to its discussions, and the hope that it would lead to the Minister for the Environment providing more resources for Meath County Council for the further development of participative processes in planning.

IV Comparing the two pilot areas

The purpose of the workshop was to bring the experience of one pilot area, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown to another, County Meath, and see what comparisons could be made between the two in the areas of participation, spatial planning and multi-level governance. From the workshop, it was apparent that there were important differences between the two local authority areas. Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown was a relatively stable local authority area, with a possibly better developed community infrastructure. Because of the research, we now have a good knowledge of the public participation process, the stages and nature of consultation, participation according to social class, and the outcomes of the process. Meath, by contrast, presented the picture of a county in rapid transition, demographically the most rapidly evolving in the country, with substantial numbers of new residents in a county that remains, in some parts, still quite rural. We do not yet have research in Meath to match Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown's experience of the recent development plan review process, so comments were made with this reservation in mind. The Meath representatives were conscious that much less provision was made for public inputs to their new development plan review in comparison to Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, and were concerned about the relative under-resourcing of their planning system.

A number of points in common also emerged from this workshop:

- Although the 2000 Act has attempted to bring wider concerns, frameworks, and considerations into the planning process, development remained dominated by local concerns, zoning and single issues. Even with the legislative changes, lifting the quality of the planning experience would take some time.
- There was a consciousness that the planning process remained an uneven playing field which should be rebalanced. Some groups, especially developers, were perceived to be 'advantaged' in terms of knowledge and access within the planning process, especially during the crucial early stages.
- There was a widespread awareness of the importance of bringing disadvantaged areas and groups into the planning and governance process, especially in those areas where community infrastructure was weak.
- An institutional infrastructure was already in place within the local authorities, such as the County Development Boards, Community Forums and Strategic Policy Committees - but they needed refinement so that they might work more effectively.
- The tools of analysis developed in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown were useful, especially the mapping of the location of voluntary and community infrastructure and organisations; and participation in the different stages of the development plan by category, phase, location and social class. They were especially valuable in identifying those areas where improvement should be sought.

From the common experience of Meath and Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown in the workshop, a number of forward directions could be identified:

- Planning departments need assistance in developing new strategies, tools, methods and systems for participation. More sophisticated systems of planning require some new investment in resources. Central government could usefully give practical advice, assistance and training in this process - covering such areas as issues papers, working with community groups, and getting a better balance of participants in planning.
- A number of concrete refinements to the planning process have been identified. This include involving councillors in the pre-draft and issues stages; oral submissions; putting community issues at the start of the consideration of the plan rather than after zoning; and inviting the involvement of the community representatives in the Strategic Policy Committees. The establishment of small, focused planning groups could also be an area of experimentation. Feedback should be provided to contributors as to whether their proposals have been accepted or not and if not, for what reason - with a report on how contributions have shaped or reshaped the plan.
- There is a need to build the capacity of voluntary and community organisations, especially those working with disadvantaged communities. This could take the form of investment in the partnerships, support for Community Forums, construction of Community Platforms, the building of Area Forums, and a training role or function for the voluntary sector in public involvement in targeted activities - including the development plan review process.
- For the new development plan review process in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, due to commence in 2008, now is the time to begin consideration of what is involved, in particular how the local authorities could reach those hitherto least involved, new target groups, and new issues, as well as the strategies and tools to be considered.

Annex: List of participants

Brendan Bartley, NIRSA/ICLRD, NUI Maynooth
Cllr Andrew Brennan, Navan Town Council
John Byrne, Director, Mid-East Regional Authority
Clare Carr, Planning Department, Meath County Council
Rosemary Corr, Community & Enterprise, Meath County Council
Caroline Creamer, NIRSA/ICLRD, NUI Maynooth
Deirdre Fallon, Planning Department, Meath County Council
Brian Harvey, Independent social researcher & writer
Liam Henry, Director of Services, Meath County Council
Cllr Peter Higgins, Meath County Council
Cllr Tom Kelly, Meath County Council
Michael Killeen, Director of Services, Meath County Council
Claire King, Community & Enterprise, Meath County Council
Michael Ludlow, Meath LEADER II and Meath County Development Board
Matthew McAleese, Planning Department, Meath County Council
Cllr Liz McCormack, Meath County Council
Sarah McDaniel, Planning Department, Meath County Council
Cllr Vincent McHugh, Trim Town Council
Maureen McKinley, Community & Enterprise, Meath County Council
Cllr James Mangan, Meath County Council
Jeanne Meldon, NIRSA, NUI Maynooth
Kevin Mooney, Planning Department, Meath County Council
Fergal O'Bric, Planning Department, Meath County Council
Cllr Danny O'Brien, Trim Town Council
Darragh O'Halloran, Planning Department, Meath County Council
Nicholas O'Kane, Planning Department, Meath County Council
Brendan O'Keeffe, NIRSA, NUI Maynooth/Mary Immaculate College
Kevin Stewart, Director of Services, Meath County Council