



## **Response to consultation on draft statutory guidance for the operation of community planning Department of the Environment**

**March 2015**

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the opportunity to comment on the draft guidance.

Belfast Healthy Cities is a partnership organisation seeking to improve health and wellbeing, by identifying ways to tackle inequalities in health and create healthy urban environments. The organisation's key role is to fulfil the requirements of Belfast as a World Health Organization Healthy City, and to act as the link between Belfast and WHO Europe. Within the city, the key roles for Belfast Healthy Cities are to facilitate intersectoral collaboration, and to work with partners to share evidence, build capacity and test new concepts and ways of working relevant to the core themes. Key partners include Belfast City Council, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, DHSSPS, DOE, DSD, NIHE, Public Health Agency, QUB and UU.

The Healthy Cities approach is based on the social model of health, which emphasises that health is the outcome of wider social and physical living conditions – in particular income, which is largely determined by education and employment. The core role of Belfast Healthy Cities is to identify how inequalities in health can be prevented and tackled through a joined up approach to policy development and service delivery. This includes working with partners to identify, explore and test how a joined up approach and investing in preventative measures can help deliver healthier people and communities. The comments on the draft guidance are made in this context.

### **Evidence, engagement and timescale**

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the emphasis on long term aims and objectives in the guidance. In particular health outcomes are shaped over the life course, and changes to living environments and lifestyles also take time to bed in. Taking a long term view, with actions over the short and medium term, offers a more promising route to sustainable and lasting change. Belfast Healthy Cities also welcomes the stated aim of creating a shared agenda for stakeholders across the community planning partnership. A shared vision is essential to underpin the coordinated and sustained action required to achieve lasting change.

It is also positive that evidence based decision making is mentioned. However, Belfast Healthy Cities believes that more emphasis should be put on this, as community planning offers a significant opportunity to put in place systematic mechanisms to ensure decisions are made on the basis of evidence and local needs. It would also be helpful to give greater clarity on the types of evidence that should be used, and on the mechanisms to be used to ensure local needs are robustly identified. It would be very

helpful to consider options and opportunities for creating systematic needs assessment models to ensure a consistent and equitable model, and streamline the contribution sought from regional community planning partners. This could build, for example, on the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment approach used in England. The Scottish Single Outcome Agreement and Scotland Performs models would be very helpful models for ensuring a coherent system that also appropriately links to the Programme for Government and Departmental priorities.

Further clarity on the aim and purpose of community engagement would also significantly strengthen the guidance. Community planning offers a major opportunity to engage local residents and communities to identify local assets and opportunities as well as needs, and inform effective delivery. Setting out these benefits, as well as a clear framework for community engagement, would help maximise this opportunity and ensure local expertise can be effectively utilised in the process. Ideally, the guidance should set out a clear expectation that a plan for community engagement should be prepared at the outset of the community planning process, unless an adopted Statement of Community Involvement developed for a Local Development Plan process is available and deemed appropriate as an engagement template for community planning.

In light of this, and considering the importance of effective engagement to instil confidence among stakeholders in the openness of the process, the proposed one year timescale appears highly ambitious. A more achievable target might be expecting agreement on the themes and priorities within one year, with a final action plan agreed within 18 months.

Belfast Healthy Cities has developed and tested a number of engagement models with children and older people, focusing on the built environment. The Shaping Healthier Neighbourhoods for Children model uses art and photography to give children an opportunity to demonstrate their wishes for their local environment. It has to date engaged 400 primary school children to identify priorities for child friendly places in Belfast, and was presented to the Minister of the Environment in June 2014. This model is available at <http://www.belfasthealthycities.com/shaping-healthier-neighbourhoods-children>.

The Walkability Assessment for Healthy Ageing model offers older people an opportunity to share their experience and expertise on the walkability of local neighbourhoods. It provides a tool primarily for engaging older people and gathering local, lay and tacit knowledge, which adds the perspective of a vulnerable group to information available for decision making. Over 150 older people have participated in facilitated walks undertaken to date, and have identified key areas for further work. This tool is available at <http://www.belfasthealthycities.com/active-travel>.

## **Partnership and consensus**

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the focus on building consensus in the guidance. Community planning offers a vital opportunity to develop a shared direction for a place, and its key value lies in realising this opportunity. To enable this, however, it would be helpful to provide some additional guidance on how 'consensus' should be defined, and how it can be deemed that an appropriate level of agreement has been reached. This is important to ensure that partners can have trust and confidence in the openness and

equality of the process. It is also important to provide clarity to councils, as lead partners, on relevant courses of action should difficulties in this regard arise.

Further clarification in relation to the structures for community planning would also be helpful. In particular, it would be helpful to recognise the full role of the voluntary and community sector, as technical experts in specific fields that can provide access to learning and effective models for action, as well as representation in relation to specific user groups. Utilising the full potential of the sector would not only broaden the community planning partnership, but also strengthen the final plan and its ability to maximise change.

Belfast Healthy Cities would in particular welcome clarification on the role of partnerships and their position within the structures. Through their fundamental nature, partnerships will have valuable experience on effective ways of working across sectors, and the guidance should provide clear advice on how this can be utilised in the community planning process.

Above all, however, it is important to note that some partnerships are constituted as independent organisations. Belfast Healthy Cities would welcome a clear demonstration of how the term 'partnerships' is understood in the guidance, and believes that it is essential to explore how independent partnerships can effectively participate in the process. Crucially, the position of and implications for independent partnership organisations needs to be clarified in relation to proposals that the community planning partnership should decide which partnerships remain over time. Belfast Healthy Cities believes, furthermore, that the full community planning partnership, rather than just the statutory partners, should make decisions regarding changes to structures. This is central to ensure that all partners can take ownership of and responsibility for the process.

Overall, it would be helpful if the document was more clearly focused on providing guidance for the future, and structured more systematically. For example, consensus is mentioned in a number of places, but there is limited cross reference to the section where further detail is provided. Similarly, evidence is mentioned throughout, but the guidance would be more user friendly if this was consolidated into a clear guidance section. Examples and case studies of potentially promising models would also significantly assist in ensuring the guidance is as user friendly as possible.