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Local government reform: Community planning and the quality of life in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

Local government in Northern Ireland has undergone a significant reform process in terms of both the number of councils (from twenty-six to eleven) and their functional responsibilities. Councils in Northern Ireland have always been regarded as the ‘poor relation’ of central government or non-departmental public bodies which deliver many of the services performed by local government in other parts of the UK (education, social services, housing). The reforms in Northern Ireland, while devolving relatively minor additional functions, offer councils a significant role in community planning – the legal power to hold central departments to account for services provided by them in local areas. This paper argues that councils can use this power to improve the quality of life of their inhabitants.

Keywords: Local government, community planning, quality of life

Introduction

Local government in Northern Ireland entered a new phase of its development in April 2015 when twenty-six pre-existing councils were reduced to eleven local authorities with a range of additional functions (see Figure 1). This structural change is significant for a number of reasons. First, the new councils represent the culmination of a process of reform which commenced in 2002 under the Review of Public Administration, whose remit incorporated wider changes to health, education and functions delivered through non-departmental public bodies. Second, the original intention of the review was to create ‘more powerful councils with responsibilities for an increased range of functions’ (Pearson, 2004, p. 1). Given the history of local government in Northern Ireland, such a move signalled a renewed confidence in councils to deliver services in an impartial way (Tomlinson, 1980). Third, in recognition of the complexity of devolved governance

Figure 1: The eleven new councils



arrangements at Stormont, with twelve government departments created primarily to meet the requirements of power-sharing, local councils offer the prospect of providing integrated public services which are more responsive to users. This paper provides a brief overview of local government (1972–2015) up until the most recent structural changes – a *retrospective* narrative. It also considers the potential for the eleven larger councils to improve the quality of life of its citizens through new statutory powers of community planning – a *prospective* analysis. Community planning is a key element in the reform of local government, which is underpinned by the Northern Ireland Executive’s vision of ‘a strong, dynamic local government creating communities that are vibrant, healthy, prosperous, safe, sustainable and have the needs of all citizens at their core’ (Department of the Environment, NI, 2014, p. 4). The paper concludes with a case study example of one new council (Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Council) to illustrate how community planning can, in practical terms, be used to hold central government departments to account for service provision at the local level.

Local government in Northern Ireland – Its troubled past

From 1921 a dual system of local government existed in Northern Ireland. There were two county boroughs, Belfast and Londonderry, which were described as all-purpose councils, and in the rest of Northern Ireland a top tier of six county councils and a lower tier of urban and rural district councils. This structure remained unchanged until the mid 1960s, when ten larger urban districts were granted borough status. This resulted in seventy-three separate local authorities (Table 1).

Table 1: Structure of local government, 1965

Corporations		County councils	
2		6	
Borough councils	Urban district councils	Rural district councils	
10	24	31	

Source: Birrell & Murie (1980).

Despite the huge differences in size and financial resources available to councils, they all had similar statutory powers, leading to the creation of many joint and ad hoc bodies to deliver services beyond

the confines of individual local authorities. Councils were also highly dependent on central government for their resources – around 75 per cent of their income came from Exchequer grants and those councils with a low population base generated limited revenue from local rates. These weaknesses in local government led to a series of consultations and the production of proposals for reform in the late 1960s. The reform process was overtaken by the outbreak of civil disturbances in 1968 and a new review body (Review Body on Local Government, 1970), known as the Macrory review, was established to make changes. Local government became the focus of criticism in the civil rights protest, which, *inter alia*, demanded the introduction of ‘one man [sic], one vote’ in local elections. In October 1969 housing was removed as a local government function and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive was created. This crucial decision on housing dictated, to a large extent, future reforms. Macrory divided public services into two categories: regional (requiring large administrative units and responsible to Stormont) and district (suitable for small areas and responsible to councils). His proposals included the establishment of twenty-six borough or district councils and the creation of appointed area boards to decentralise the administration of education services. The recommendations were subsequently passed into law under the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland), 1972.

Local government in Northern Ireland therefore evolved from the turmoil of the early 1970s against a background of special circumstances which the Macrory review felt were crucial factors in its proposals. The existence of a regional government at Stormont in future governance arrangements underpinned Macrory’s recommendations. The prorogation of Stormont in 1972 and the introduction of direct rule from Westminster embittered Unionists and, in their view, effectively destroyed local democratic institutions (Alexander, 1982). The absence of a regional tier is referred to as the ‘Macrory gap’, something of a misnomer since he was not responsible for it, and argued later that it made a nonsense of his proposals.

Responsibility for regional services rested with the British Government working administratively through the Northern Ireland Office. Elections to the 26 new district councils took place in May 1973, based on the proportional representation (PR) system, when 1,222 candidates competed for 526 seats. This compared with the previous local government elections in 1967 when the majority of seats were uncontested. The political composition of councils also reflected

the PR electoral system in that there were relatively few councils where one political party had an overall majority, and there was a greater representation of minority parties. By October 1973 the new system of local government was in operation across Northern Ireland with relatively limited functional responsibilities, disparagingly referred to as ‘baths, bins, births and burials’ (Knox, 1998). More formally, councils had four key functions: ceremonial functions; executive functions in regulatory services (e.g. environmental health, building regulations) and minor public services (e.g. refuse collection, leisure facilities and tourism); representative functions on public bodies delivering education, and health and personal social services; and consultative functions on planning, housing and roads in their areas.

In the absence of political progress at the macro level, however, local government became embroiled in the wider constitutional imbroglio. The move to electoral politics by Sinn Féin¹ played out in the local government elections of 1985, when 59 councillors from the party (out of 526 seats in total), representing 11.8 per cent of the votes, were elected to councils across Northern Ireland, with a significant presence in Belfast (7 councillors), Fermanagh (8 councillors), Omagh (6 councillors) and Newry and Mourne (5 councillors). Before the 1985 elections Sinn Féin had eased their way into local government through by-elections in 1983 and 1984 with 2 members in Belfast City Council and 1 member in Omagh District Council.

In the run-up to the 1985 local elections a Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) motion passed by Belfast City Council called on all councillors throughout Northern Ireland to have no dealings with Sinn Féin. Sammy Wilson, the DUP councillor behind the motion (and Lord Mayor at the time), claimed: ‘those who think the council is disruptive now can expect far more disruption after the May 1985 elections with the presence of half a battalion of IRA men in it’ (Pollak, 1985, p. 5). The two main Unionist parties, the Ulster

¹ Bew & Patterson (1985) described how the IRA hunger strikes of 1981 propelled Sinn Féin somewhat unexpectedly into electoral politics – Bobby Sands, the Provisionals’ commanding officer and hunger striker in the Maze Prison was elected as an MP at a time when the Sinn Féin leadership feared rejection at the polls. At Sinn Féin’s 1981 annual conference (Ard Fheis), Danny Morrison put the question: ‘Who here really believes we can win the war through the ballot box? But will anyone object if, with a ballot box in one hand and an armalite in the other, we take power in Ireland?’ The Ard Fheis voted to contest the local elections and take seats if successful.

Unionist Party (UUP) and the DUP, placed opposition to Sinn Féin as their electoral aim. Both parties were intent on opposing the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which they viewed as leading to Irish unity. Following the 1985 local government elections, the two Unionist parties formed a pact and set about fulfilling their electoral pledge of 'smashing Sinn Féin'. The DUP claimed: 'The Sinn Féiners must be ostracised and isolated... none of our councillors will be fraternising with them before, during or after councils meetings' (taken from 1985 DUP local council elections manifesto). Tactics used by Unionists varied from refusing to acknowledge their presence, preventing or interrupting their contribution to debates, refusing to sit at the same table and keeping them off council committees. The entry of Sinn Féin councillors into local government in May 1985 transformed the council debating chambers into a platform for vehement and sometimes violent opposition to Sinn Féin's presence (Knox, 1987). Local government stood at the forefront of the protest against the Agreement in which Unionists adjourned council business and refused to strike rates. A series of acrimonious encounters with other political parties, notably the Alliance Party, ensued and recourse to the courts became a key strategy in resisting Unionist tactics.

Faced with widespread defiance and the imminent breakdown of local services, the government took new powers which enabled them to appoint commissioners and maintain essential services. In the wake of a number of legal rebukes, court fines and resolve on the part of the government, the adjournment policy faltered and Unionist councils drifted back to normal business. The morale of councillors had been severely dented by the protest strategy, and relationships within the DUP and UUP pact were, on occasions, badly strained. Ulster Unionists had been reluctant partners in defying the law and had recoiled at some of the proposals of Democratic Unionists, such as mass resignations (Connolly & Knox, 1988). Support for the protests dwindled and from 1988 onwards the strategy was moribund. By way of an olive branch for dispirited Unionists, the government announced proposals aimed at councillors who espoused violence, in which those standing for election to local council would be required to declare that they will 'neither support nor assist' the activities of any banned organisations. Although primarily aimed at Sinn Féin, it included anyone who openly supported a proscribed paramilitary organisation.

All change

The local government elections of 1989 marked a turning point in council chambers, with a degree of moderation not unrelated to the decline in representation from the political extremes. From this more stable political context there were three significant developments in local government: the conferment of more functions on councils; the beginnings in some parts of local government of a form of 'responsibility-sharing' in which political parties in councils agreed to share power (irrespective of political control); and the concept of partnership along with associated principles of inclusive forms of decision-making.

New functions

Local authorities were traditionally incidental players in economic development, confined to contributing to voluntary bodies which developed trade, industry and commerce in their areas, or more generally in furthering 'the interests of the council, its district or inhabitants' (Section 115, Local Government Act, 1972). Total payments were limited to 3p in the pound on the rateable value of the district. In 1992, however, councils were permitted to spend up to 5p in the pound from rates for the specific purpose of economic development. Though modest when compared with the budgets of central government agencies (the Industrial Development Board and Local Economic Development Unit) tasked with the same responsibility, councils were innovative in its usage. They established networks with private companies, set up arms-length enterprise facilities and used their limited resources as seed-corn finance or matching grants to tap into larger EU funding sources.

Responsibility-sharing

Although power-sharing is now the *modus operandi* of the Northern Ireland Assembly, local government led the way with this model of governance and received little acknowledgement for so doing. In 1988 an experiment in 'responsibility-sharing' evolved – this term was used in deference to Unionist sensitivities over the words 'power-sharing'. Dungannon District Council is credited with leading the way in rotating the council chair between two main political parties, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and UUP, although some councils (Down, Omagh, Newry & Mourne, for example) claim

to have been doing this for years in a less high-profile manner. In addition, the Enniskillen bombing of November 1987 appeared to have a profound impact on local politicians. One observer noted that councillors 'felt the need to bring an end to sterile adversarial politics... and found in their opposition to political violence more in common than they had previously recognised' (Beirne, 1993, p. 7). In the wake of the 1989 local government elections, 11 local authorities appointed mayors/chairs and deputies from both political traditions. The power-sharing trend continued after the 1993 elections and there were encouraging signs of a climate of accommodation, conspicuously absent at the macro political level (Knox, 1996). Even the more tempestuous councils (such as Belfast and Craigavon at that time) boasted power-sharing arrangements. The 1997 local government elections produced Belfast's first Nationalist Lord Mayor in its 150-year history and 12 councils, mainly Nationalist controlled or hung, operated power-sharing arrangements.

Partnership building

Local authorities became pivotal brokers in partnership arrangements designed to deliver European-funded programmes (Greer et al., 1999). The European Commission expressed a preference that funded initiatives should be embedded in local participative structures through the creation of new partnerships, with district councils as a major stakeholder. Typically these comprised an equal number of representatives from the council, community and voluntary sectors, and the business, trade union and statutory sectors. Partnerships helped to remove barriers preventing dialogue within council chambers. Ironically, while some local authorities remained beset by inter-party hostility, especially those which had Sinn Féin elected representatives, partnerships in their areas frequently enjoyed unprecedented engagement and cooperation, advancing shared interests of both communities. District partnerships, in which councils played a key role, were therefore able to forge agreement, consent and, above all, cross-community engagement. In that sense, the level of spending, marginal in the context of the public sector budget for Northern Ireland, was almost incidental. What proved important was the process of changing attitudes, creating social inclusion and capacity building. Local government was at last emerging from the bear pit of sectarianism. See Table 2, showing a timeline of events in Northern Ireland local government.

Table 2: Key Events in Northern Ireland local government

<i>Year</i>	<i>Event</i>
1973	October elections to new 26 councils (526 councillors) with limited functional responsibilities.
1985	May elections of 59 Sinn Féin councillors to local councils. Some councils adjourned and all 18 Unionist councils refused to carry out normal duties.
1985	November local government campaign against the Anglo-Irish Agreement – all Unionist councils adjourned in protest and refused to strike district rates. Local government becomes the conduit for macro politics – the only mechanism available to express democratic disapproval.
1986	Local Government Temporary Provisions Northern Ireland Order empowered the government to appoint commissioners when day-to-day services were at the point of breaking down.
1988	Support for local government protests dwindled amongst Unionists.
1989	Local government election marked a turning point in council chambers with a degree of moderation. Experiments in 'responsibility sharing' took place in Dungannon, Down, Omagh, Newry and Mourne. Some 11 councils appointed mayors/chairs and deputies from both political traditions.
1989	Central Community Relations Unit invited councils to develop cross-community contact schemes with 75 per cent central government funding.
1992	Councils permitted to spend up to 5p in the pound from rates for the specific purpose of economic development.
1995	EU Peace 1 district partnerships (€300 million package) provided a mechanism which mobilised elected representatives and community and voluntary nominees with participants from business and public bodies. These partnerships created cross-community engagement.
1997	Local government elections resulted in Belfast's first nationalist Lord Mayor in its 150-year history, and 12 councils, mainly Nationalist controlled or hung, operated power-sharing arrangements.
1998	Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement: Devolution and plans for public sector reforms.
2002	Review of Public Administration and promise of strong local government.
2014	Local Government Act (Northern Ireland), 2014. Elections to 11 new shadow councils with wider range of powers.
2015	New councils fully operational from 1 April 2015.

The Review of Public Administration

The devolution of powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly and its Executive Committee of Ministers in December 1999 following the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement² heralded a process of embedding peace and stability in Northern Ireland. While devolution was unfolding, albeit erratically, a process of local government reform was put in place by the (then) First Minister within a wider agenda entitled the Review of Public Administration. Launched in June 2002, its aim was to review existing arrangements and bring forward options for reforms which were consistent with the principles of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement. It was tasked to report by the end of 2003, yet its findings in relation to local government only took effect in April 2015. The reform process suffered from the on-off nature of devolution, with British ministers taking control of the agenda and producing proposals for structural changes in health, education, local government and other public bodies (Knox, 2012). The ‘final’ decisions of the review announced by the (then) Secretary of State, Peter Hain, in *Better Government for Northern Ireland* in 2006 were revisited by the incoming devolved government minister Arlene Foster, who embarked on ‘a review of the review’. She announced her vision for local government to the Northern Ireland Assembly in March 2008 as follows:

Our vision is of a strong, dynamic local government that creates vibrant, healthy, prosperous, safe and sustainable communities that have the needs of all citizens at its core. Central to that vision is the provision of high-quality, efficient services that respond to people’s needs and continuously improve over time... It reflects the strong desire that central and local government should work in partnership to deliver the *Programme for Government* and the vision for local government. (Foster, 2008: 14)

However, it was not until 2014 that the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) received Royal Assent, introducing the legislative framework for eleven new councils, which came into operation on 1 April 2015.

² The Belfast Agreement, also known as the Good Friday Agreement, was reached in multi-party negotiations and signed on 10 April 1998. The Agreement comprised three key areas: the creation of a democratically locally elected Assembly (at Stormont), the creation of a North/South Ministerial Council, and the creation of a British–Irish Council and the British–Irish Governmental Conference.

Among the reforms, the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland), 2014, included:

- New governance arrangements for councils. For the first time, sharing council positions of responsibility across political parties and independents has been enshrined in law. The public will also now have more access to council meetings and documents.
- A new ethical standards regime – there is now a mandatory code of conduct for councillors.
- A new council-led community-planning process – partnership with other public service providers to develop and implement a vision for the economic, social and environmental well-being of the district (discussed later in the paper).
- The general power of competence – gives councils the power to do anything that individuals generally can do that is not prohibited by other laws. The aim is to develop innovative approaches to improving the economic, social and environmental well-being of their area.
- Performance improvement to deliver high-quality, efficient services – including the requirement for councils to report annually on performance.
- A central-local government partnership panel – made up of Executive ministers and elected representatives from the councils to discuss matters of mutual interest.
- End of the dual mandate – by placing a bar on MLAs, MPs, MEPs, Members of the House of Lords and members of the legislature of any other country from being elected or being councillors. (Department of the Environment, NI, 2015)

An examination of the new functional responsibilities of local government (Table 3) shows that councils remain relatively small players in the delivery of public services in Northern Ireland. In part, this resulted from a limited request by councillors during the consultation process on local government reform, but it also reflects an unwillingness of central government politicians and officials to devolve functions to councils and threaten their political and administrative fiefdoms, respectively. Notwithstanding the marginal increase in functional responsibilities of the new councils, the legislation confers on local government the statutory power of community planning. The remainder of this paper examines the potential for councils to use community planning to lever significant

change by holding to account public sector agencies which deliver local services and, in so doing, improve the quality of life of their constituents.

Table 3: Local government in Northern Ireland, 2015

<i>Functions pre-April 2015</i>	<i>Additional functions in 2015</i>	<i>Detail of new functions</i>
Advice and information	Planning	Local development plan functions
Arts and entertainment		Development control and enforcement
Building regulations		
Burial grounds and crematoria	Roads	Off-street parking (except Park and Ride)
Civic ceremonials		
Community services		
Dog control	Urban	Functions associated with physical development (e.g. environmental improvement schemes)
Economic development	regeneration and community development	
Harbours	(these powers will transfer in April 2016)	Area-based regeneration (such as Neighbourhood Renewal)
Health inspection		Some community development programmes for the voluntary and community sectors
Leisure and community centres		
Licensing		
Markets and fairs		
Museums and art galleries	Local economic development	‘Start a Business’ programme and enterprise shows
Parks and open spaces	(transfer from Invest NI)	Youth entrepreneurship (such as Prince’s Trust and Shell Livewire)
Pollution control		Social entrepreneurship
Public conveniences		Investing for Women
Recreation grounds and services		Neighbourhood Renewal funding relating to enterprises initiatives
Refuse collection and disposal		
Street naming and cleansing		
Tourism development	Local tourism	Small-scale tourism accommodation development
Consumer safety		Providing business support, including business start-up advice, along with training and delivery of customer-care schemes
Community relations		
Food standards		
War memorials		

Table 3: Local government in Northern Ireland, 2015 (contd.)

<i>Functions pre-April 2015</i>	<i>Additional functions in 2015</i>	<i>Detail of new functions</i>
	Local tourism (contd.)	Providing advice to developers on tourism policies and related issues
	Other	Some elements of the delivery of the EU Rural Development Programme Authority to spot list to enable councils to add a building to the statutory list on a temporary basis, subject to ratification by the Department of the Environment Authority to draw up local lists of buildings that are of architectural and/or historic interest Armagh County Museum Local water recreational facilities Local sports (greater involvement of local government in local sports decisions) Donaghadee Harbour

Community planning

Community planning is a process led by councils in conjunction with partners and communities to develop and implement a shared vision for their area, a long-term vision which relates to all aspects of community life and which also involves working together to plan and deliver better services that make a real difference to people's lives (Department of the Environment, NI, 2013). Community-planning guidance for councils promotes the integration of community planning, spatial planning and regeneration 'to recouple these functions at the new spatial scale of local government. The significance of this realignment will be to afford councils the ability to align land-use/physical development with quality public services to improve the

social, economic and environmental wellbeing' (Rafferty & Lloyd, 2014, p. 6).

Community planning is defined in the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland), 2014 [Part 10, Section 66], as a process by which the council and its community-planning partners identify long-term objectives for:

- a. improving the social, economic and environmental well-being of the district and contributing to sustainable development in Northern Ireland; and
- b. identifying actions to be performed and functions exercised by the council and its community-planning partners (including in relation to planning, provision and improvement of public services for (a) above).

Community planning is about producing more effective, joined-up public services and providing opportunities for greater involvement of communities. In the process, the local council has a central role in initiating, maintaining, facilitating and participating in community planning. The council becomes a 'junction box' for the locality, seeking to integrate and join up public service delivery for the benefits of all people, and the long-term success and sustainability of the area. In short, community planning is about improving the quality of life for people living in council areas through public service providers and people working together.

Community planning has been in place within local government in England and Wales since 2000 and in Scotland from 2003. The experience of Great Britain offers significant learning for Northern Ireland. Pemberton & Lloyd (2008 & 2011), for example, noted that the reality of partnership working was much more complex than anticipated and that there were real difficulties in securing integration of public services and activities. Sinclair (2008 & 2011; see also Cowell, 2004) identified tensions in reconciling partnership working with local authority leadership: between community planning as an additional or core duty of public agencies; between community engagement and the practical demands of policymaking; and between central government direction and local partnership autonomy.

However, there is a dearth of information on *how* to take the principles of community planning from concept to practical implementation in Northern Ireland. The authors set out one approach to the outworking of community planning in local government. This will

highlight potential tensions between community-planning partners in relation to the issue of accountability: vertical accountability to the minister, and Assembly and horizon accountability to the community-planning partnership. It will also offer insights into emerging central–local government relations and whether community planning could rebalance a devolved administration which has been centripetal in nature.

Key (selective) elements of the legislation are as follows:

- i. A council must initiate and, having done so, maintain, facilitate and participate in community planning for the district.
- ii. The Department of the Environment may, by order, specify the bodies or persons who are to be the community-planning partners of a council (at the time of writing, the department is consulting on the naming of statutory community-planning partners).
- iii. The council or community-planning partner must take all reasonable steps to perform the action or exercise the function in accordance with the community plan.
- iv. The Department of the Environment may issue guidance on any aspect of community planning to which council and community-planning partners must have regard.
- v. Duties of departments: So far as it is reasonably practicable to do so, every NI department must: (a) in exercising any function which might affect community planning, promote and encourage community planning; (b) have regard to any implications of a community plan for the exercise of that department's functions.

The ultimate test of community planning is whether its implementation improves the quality of people's lives in local councils. We therefore need to begin with baseline information in order to assess whether improvements have happened.

Quality-of-life improvement

Given that new councils have limited functional responsibilities, what role can they play in improving the quality of lives of their inhabitants? Community planning offers the prospect of integrated service provision at the local level through an accountability mechanism in which the key delivery agents (in education, health, economic development, etc.) *must* participate. Hence, each of the councils will develop a community plan, the key elements of which will typically include:

- i. an overall vision/mission statement for the council area;
- ii. a small number of *high-level, cross-cutting themes* which require collaborative actions across community-planning partners with an identified lead organisation;
- iii. an action plan linked to the cross-cutting themes with measurable targets and outputs;
- iv. a formal commitment to the community plan by partners through their own internal planning and decision-making processes;
- v. monitoring and evaluation of progress in meeting the targets/outputs outlined in the community plan (through the community-planning partnership).

The themes and actions should be judiciously selected, few in number, high-level and cross-cutting to make the point that the community plan is *not* a composite of pre-existing internal and external commitments by partner organisations.

The key question is: what will be the impact of integrated service planning on the quality of life of council residents? If community planning is to be an effective process, then ultimately it must improve the quality of people's lives. In order to capture this, the authors pilot the adaptation of the Audit Commission's quality-of-life (QoL) indicators in the context of Northern Ireland.³ Although designed for Great Britain, we propose selecting indicators aimed at tracking progress on the themes (above) agreed in the community plan. This represents a significant challenge in a number of ways:

- a. Adapting QoL indicators to the circumstances of Northern Ireland – not all of the data are available to operationalise Audit Commission indicators in the Northern Ireland context. For example, there are no environmental data available at the eleven-council unit of analysis. Equally, good relations indicators would be an important constituent of the work of local government in Northern Ireland but do not exist at the level of the new councils.
- b. Moving out of the 'comfort zone' of service-specific targets.
- c. Greater transparency and accountability for improving things that matter to the quality of citizens' lives.

³ The Audit Commission was a statutory corporation with the primary objective to appoint auditors to a range of local public bodies in England, set the standards for auditors and oversee their work. The Audit Commission closed on 31 March 2015 and its functions were reassigned to Public Sector Audit Appointments Ltd, the National Audit Office, the Financial Reporting Council and the Cabinet Office.

Quality of life means different things to different people. The Audit Commission used it as a term to describe those things that make somewhere a good place to live, now and for generations to come. The Local Government Act, 2000, gave local authorities in England and Wales the power to promote the social, economic and environmental well-being of their community, and charged them with producing a community strategy on how to improve quality of life in their local area. In 2001/2 the commission worked with a number of national organisations, government departments and ninety local authorities to develop and pilot a set of QoL indicators. *Using Quality of Life Indicators* was published in 2002, detailing the first set of QoL indicators. Working with the pilot local authorities, in 2003 the Audit Commission published a *Good Practice Guide to Communicating Quality of Life Indicators*. In August 2005 a revised set of local QoL indicators – *Supporting Local Communities to be Sustainable* – was published as way of complementing the UK Government's *Sustainable Development Strategy*. The Audit Commission explained the background behind forty-five indicators that it argued measure the quality of life in individual localities and the effectiveness of local sustainable community strategies, which are also closely linked to national sustainable development indicators. The thematic areas covered by the forty-five indicators included people and place, community cohesion and involvement, community safety, culture and leisure, economic well-being, education and life-long learning, environment, health and social well-being, housing, and transport and access. The authors attempt to adapt these indicators for the circumstances of Northern Ireland using a case study of one new council area.

Case study in well-being

To operationalise the concept of QoL indicators as a way of capturing well-being, the authors selected one of the new local authorities – Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Council (ABC Council) – to test community planning in practice. ABC Council is the second-largest council in Northern Ireland, covering 554 square miles with 200,000+ citizens, and has 7 district electoral areas and 41 wards, with 1,195 employees and a budget of £50m+.

The methodology employed was to adapt the Audit Commission framework under the broad thematic areas above using data which were available and disaggregated by the eleven new council areas. There was no direct read-across from the Audit Commission

indicators which constituted 'quality of life' measurement. However, using a combination of available NI data from the 2011 census, multiple deprivation statistics, Investing for Health, and population statistics (Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service; see <http://www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk>), a basket of indicators were collated to represent 'quality of life' in Northern Ireland. The empirical work is therefore limited by the availability of data for the eleven new councils as the unit of analysis. Hence, there could well be criticism of those variables selected for this study as representing in aggregate 'the quality of life'. As more data become available the basket of indicators could be refined further.

Using the methodology above, QoL indicators were collated for the case study council and similarly at the overall Northern Ireland level. This allowed the authors to test whether ABC Council was performing significantly better or worse than the Northern Ireland average, and to highlight those areas, within a community-planning framework, which needed the attention of key delivery agencies in, for example, health, education or policing. This analysis represents a baseline measurement for the case study council, against which its future performance can be judged in terms of improving the quality of life of its constituents. Moreover, if developed across all council areas, it would allow for benchmarking one council against another, with the aim of lifting public services performance across all councils.

Each of the categories (see Appendix 1 for detailed statistics) comprising the composite measure of 'quality of life' was tested for statistical significance as follows:

- a. Community safety: An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the variables which comprise community safety for ABC Council and Northern Ireland as a whole (Appendix 1). There was no significant difference in the scores for ABC Council ($M = 7.53$, $SD = 10.67$) and Northern Ireland overall ($M = 9.25$, $SD = 13.65$; $t(8) = -.22$, $p = .83$ two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = -1.72 , 95% CI: -19.59 to 16.14) was very small (eta squared = $.006$).
- b. Education and lifelong learning: An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the variables which comprise education and lifelong learning for ABC Council and Northern Ireland as a whole (Appendix 1). There was no significant difference in the scores for ABC Council ($M = 52.20$, $SD = 37.75$) and Northern Ireland overall ($M = 50.96$, $SD = 36.16$; $t(12) =$

- .06, $p = .95$ two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = 1.24, 95% CI: -41.8 to 44.3) was very small (eta squared = .0003).
- c. Economic well-being: An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the variables which comprise economic well-being for ABC Council and Northern Ireland as a whole (Appendix 1). There was no significant difference in the scores for ABC Council ($M = 80.96$, $SD = 103.77$) and Northern Ireland overall ($M = 85.55$, $SD = 108.90$; $t(20) = -.101$, $p = .92$ two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = -4.58, 95% CI: -99.19 to 90.02) was very small (eta squared = .0005).
 - d. Health and social well-being: An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the variables which comprise health and social well-being for ABC Council and Northern Ireland as a whole (Appendix 1). There was no significant difference in the scores for ABC Council ($M = 53.05$, $SD = 42.25$) and Northern Ireland overall ($M = 54.34$, $SD = 43.12$; $t(10) = -.052$, $p = .96$ two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = -1.28, 95% CI: -56.20 to 53.63) was very small (eta squared = .0003).
 - e. Housing and social well-being: An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the variables which comprise housing and social well-being for ABC Council and Northern Ireland as a whole (Appendix 1). There was no significant difference in the scores for ABC Council ($M = 26.22$, $SD = 22.56$) and Northern Ireland overall ($M = 25.43$, $SD = 22.58$; $t(10) = .06$, $p = .95$ two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = .78, 95% CI: -28.25 to 29.82) was very small (eta squared = .0003).

Overall, ABC Council has a similar well-being profile as the Northern Ireland average. However, there are specific areas of attention for community-planning partners where performance could be improved.

- ABC Council could improve its education performance for school-leavers and those enrolling at higher education institutions. There are too many young people leaving school in the council area without 5+ GCSEs (including English and Maths).
- There is also evidence of personal debt levels which are worse than the Northern Ireland average (higher number of people disposed in bankruptcy cases).

- Housing in the area requires investment. There are higher levels of ‘non-decency’ dwellings as well as greater fuel poverty than Northern Ireland overall. There are also lower levels of owner-occupancy and, in turn, higher social housing tenure, with fewer private rented houses.
- Most significant, however, is the low level of industrial investment by Invest Northern Ireland in the ABC Council area.

The fact that ABC Council is not significantly different from the Northern Ireland average should not be grounds for complacency but rather a benchmark against which overall public services could be improved.

Conclusions

In the absence of key functional responsibilities, the eleven new councils in Northern Ireland have been charged (alongside other community-planning partners) with the legal brief to improve the social, economic and environmental well-being of their areas, and in so doing to contribute to achieving sustainable development. This is a huge challenge for the new councils but also a significant opportunity. In terms of challenges, there is the question as to whether councils will be given the respect of their community-planning partners, whose budgets are likely to dwarf those of the councils. Key stakeholders in education, health, housing and economic investment, for example, may feel less compelled to be ‘directed’ by a local council in the development of a community plan. Will the new councils assume the role of *primus inter pares* and gain this standing from planning partners? Equally the seniority of those participating at the community-planning table is paramount – they need to be able to take decisions on behalf of their organisations, including committing resources. There could well be a capacity issue here – will senior officials have the time available and professional inclination to ‘service’ eleven community-planning partnerships? The Local Government Act (Northern Ireland), 2014 [Part 10, Section 66.4], is clear on this point: ‘every community planning partner of a council must participate in community planning for the district to the extent that such planning is connected with the partner’s functions, and must assist the council in the discharge of its duties’.

However, in practical terms there may well be a conflict of accountabilities for community-planning partners. Each will have

vertical accountability to their parent government department, which, in turn, is responsible to their minister, the Northern Ireland Executive and the wider Assembly. The expectation is that senior officials will also have *horizontal* accountability to each community-planning partnership. Which accountability takes priority where there are conflicting demands on resources? One example could be that, because there is currently an excess of school places across Northern Ireland, the Department of Education's priority is to close unsustainable (small) schools. A community-planning partnership in a rural area such as Fermanagh and Omagh Council may well decide that closing such schools would decimate rural communities. How does a senior education official on the Fermanagh and Omagh Council community partnership reconcile these differences? In short, there could well be a disconnect between *Programme for Government* regional priorities and those of community-planning partnerships. There is also an issue in terms of accountability to community stakeholders. The legislation requires that the council and its community-planning partners 'must seek the participation of and encourage' community involvement (residents, voluntary bodies, business, etc.). Thus far, there is a concern about the extent to which this can or will happen, framed as a criticism by the question: where is the 'community' in community planning (McAlister, 2010)?

Although the original intention of the Review of Public Administration was to create coterminous administrative boundaries, this has not happened, meaning that community planners are faced with different functional jurisdictions overlapping within and between the eleven new council areas. This is likely to cause problems in the operationalisation of a community plan. In addition, one of the key government departments, the Department of Social Development, has delayed the transfer of its functions (urban regeneration and community development) to councils until April 2016. Without these, community planning can only be a partial exercise.

Notwithstanding the challenges outlined above, community planning and the power of general competence offers significant opportunities for local government in Northern Ireland. Councils will work with key statutory bodies and the wider community to promote the well-being of their areas and improve the quality of life of their citizens. This is the first time local government can exercise leverage on key statutory partners who deliver services in their areas. It represents a real opportunity for local accountability and responsiveness to local service-provision needs. Moreover, one of the

consequences of power-sharing in Northern Ireland is fragmented government. The twelve government departments were a product of the consociational model of political consensus, which made little administrative sense and disaggregated public-service provision. Community planning offers a way in which integrated service provision can take place through the eleven new councils. If implemented as intended in the legislation, community planning could be a huge achievement for local government, for so long seen as the poor relation of central government.

Appendix 1: Quality of life indicators

<i>Quality of life variables</i>	<i>ABC Council</i>	<i>Northern Ireland overall</i>	<i>Difference between ABC and NI</i>	<i>Better than NI stats</i>	<i>Worse than NI stats</i>	<i>Z-score difference between ABC and NI</i>
Community safety						
Anti-social behaviour per 1,000 pop. (2013)	26.14	33.18	7.04	Better		0.9362
Domestic burglaries per 1,000 pop. (2013)	3.01	3.14	0.13	Better		0.2591
Violent offences with injury per 1,000 pop. (2013)	6.71	7.74	1.03	Better		0.10341
Sexual offences per 1,000 pop. (2013)	1.14	1.22	0.08	Better		0.26774
Hate crime per 1,000 pop. (2013)	0.66	1	0.34	Better		0.22277
Education and lifelong learning						
Free school meals per 1,000 pop. (2013) – post-primary	12.42	14.57	2.15	Better		0.09032
Further education professional and technical qualifications per 1,000 pop. (2012)	69.96	55.3	-14.66	Better		2.81747
% attendance rates post-primary schools (2012)	93.18	92.9	-0.28	Better		0.33002
% attendance rates primary school (2012)	95.11	94.93	-0.18	Better		0.31272
Enrolments at higher education institutions per 1,000 pop. (2012)	32.44	35.2	2.76		Worse	-0.19584
% school-leavers with 5+ GCSE (E+M) (2012)	61.6	62.2	0.6		Worse	-0.1778
% school-leavers with no GCSEs (2012)	0.7	1.6	0.9	Better		0.1259

Appendix 1: Quality of life indicators (contd.)

<i>Quality of life variables</i>	<i>ABC Council</i>	<i>Northern Ireland overall</i>	<i>Difference between ABC and NI</i>	<i>Better than NI stats</i>	<i>Worse than NI stats</i>	<i>Z-score difference between ABC and NI</i>
Economic well-being						
Multiple disability benefit recipients per 1,000 pop. (2014)	131.38	137.45	6.07	Better		0.76841
Employment and support allowance claimants per 1,000 pop. (2014)	48.64	52.38	3.74	Better		0.36536
Job Seekers Allowance (age 16–64) per 1,000 pop. (2014)	27.34	30.89	3.55	Better		0.3325
Participants disposed in bankruptcy cases per 1,000 pop. (2013)	0.95	0.95	0	Same	Same	–0.28158
Mortgage cases received per 1,000 pop. (2013)	2.07	2.02	–0.05		Worse	–0.29023
Invest NI start-ups from regional start initiative per 1,000 pop. (2012)	0.72	0.86	0.14		Worse	–0.25737
Invest NI investment offers per 1,000 pop. (2012)	2.72	2.73	0.01		Worse	–0.27985
Invest NI assistance £ per head pop. (2012)	68.71	69.48	0.77		Worse	–0.14839
Invest NI investment £ per head pop. (2012)	321.46	328.01	6.55		Worse	–0.85144
Income deprived per 1,000 pop. (2010)	214.96	242	27.04	Better		4.3958
Employment deprived (18–59/64) per 1,000 pop. (2010)	71.65	74.27	2.62	Better		0.17162

Appendix 1: Quality of life indicators (contd.)

<i>Quality of life variables</i>	<i>ABC Council</i>	<i>Northern Ireland overall</i>	<i>Difference between ABC and NI</i>	<i>Better than NI stats</i>	<i>Worse than NI stats</i>	<i>Z-score difference between ABC and NI</i>
Health and social well-being						
Heart disease raw prevalence per 1,000 patients (2014)	37.36	38.81	1.45	Better		0.03076
Mental health raw prevalence per 1,000 patients (2014)	7.56	8.54	0.98	Better		0.11206
Dementia raw prevalence per 1,000 patients (2014)	6.14	6.67	0.53	Better		0.1899
Obesity raw prevalence per 1,000 patients age 16+ (2014)	107.38	112.5	5.12	Better		0.60407
Life expectancy male 2009–11	77.39	77.5	0.11		Worse	–0.26256
Life expectancy female 2009–11	82.49	82	–0.49	Better		0.36634
Housing and social well-being						
% non-decency rates dwellings (2009)	21.5	15.1	–6.4		Worse	–1.38866
% households in fuel poverty (2009)	46.3	43.7	–2.6		Worse	–0.73133
% households without central heating (2009)	0.6	1	0.4	Better		0.21239
% dwelling tenure: owner occupied (2011)	59.5	61.7	2.2		Lower	–0.09897
% dwelling tenure: social housing (2011)	21.4	16.5	–4.9		Higher	–1.12919
% dwelling tenure: private rented (2011)	8	14.6	6.6	Lower		0.86008
Road safety						
Collisions per 10,000 pop (2013)	29.64	31.81	2.17	Better		0.09378
Casualties per 10,000 pop (2013)	45.5	50.21	4.71	Better		0.53315

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