

27/04/2012

PRESS RELEASE

Community Planning - making everyone's voice heard

How to increase engagement between local Councils and minority and marginalised groups is the focus of a local government conference attended by Minister of the Environment, Alex Attwood today (27 April 2012), at the Lough Neagh Discovery Centre at Oxford Island, Craigavon.



“Ensuring the Voices of Minorities in the Community Planning Process” is being jointly organised by The Equality Commission, The Rainbow Project, Community Places and The Community Foundation for NI; and is being attended by representatives from local councils across Northern Ireland, from other public bodies and community groups. Giving the keynote speech at the event, Minister of the Environment Alex Atwood MLA said “We need to ensure that all communities are given proper consideration in the planning processes in Northern Ireland, now and in the future.”

“This event specifically highlights the place of minorities in Community Planning and has an important role to play,” he added. “As Environment Minister I am responsible for impending local government reforms. New councils will be given additional powers that will include the remit of Community Planning.”

“Councils will therefore have a duty to facilitate the process through working in partnership with statutory agencies and community and voluntary organisations to

address the needs of local communities. This is an immense power and a big opportunity, one that can better build communities and areas, recognising and including all.”

“A greater emphasis on quality engagement, ensuring that all members of the community have an opportunity to have their voice heard is essential,” he said, “This means input from those having a different religious belief, political opinion, or coming from a different racial group and respect age, marital status and sexual orientation, or indeed for those with a disability or for anyone who is caring for dependants.

“This is the new one. This is where we need to go, RPA, this conference, DOE, the Rainbow Project – together this can be achieved,”the Minister concluded.

Also speaking at the event, Equality Commissioner Charo Lanao-Madden said.

“The Equality Commission believes that community planning has the potential to create inclusive structures which will ensure that the voices of minority, and sometimes marginalised, groups are heard.

“Today we have an opportunity to look at how all the relationships involved in local community planning will work. Local and central government, and all public authorities will have an important role to play in developing new models of planning to deliver better public services built upon the participation of all people affected by them.” Charo Lanao-Madden said. “In helping public authorities fulfill their responsibility to have due regard the need to promote equality of opportunity and regard to the desirability of promoting good relations, we hope to see improved levels of engagement and participation throughout our local communities.”

Speaking on behalf of the organising groups, Matthew McDermott of The Rainbow Project said, “Community Planning offers a great opportunity for communities and service providers to work together to make real differences within local communities.

Councils and community / voluntary groups, along with local residents, can work together to map out plans for improving their areas through this process.

“It is essential that Councils and communities begin equipping themselves to engage with the process to ensure positive results in terms of effective plans, and to fulfil Section 75 obligations. Best practice demonstrates that those models of Community Planning which have been the most successful are those that have placed a greater emphasis on quality engagement, ensuring that all members of the community have an opportunity to have their voice heard.

“This conference will significantly help to raise awareness of Community Planning, not only across the community and voluntary sectors but with statutory agencies and local authorities also and seeks to explore how best to ensure the voices of minority and marginalised communities are seen as an integral part of the process across all local authorities.”

The outcome of the conference will be a summary of the barriers to be overcome, the potential benefits of participation and recommendations for actions to ensure the voices of minorities in the Community Planning Process are heard.

Caption for photo above: (l-r) Annie Clarke, Community Places, Matthew McDermott, The Rainbow Project, Alex Attwood MLA, Minister of the Environment, Charo Lanao-Madden, Equality Commission, Jude McCann, Community Foundations for NI

Notes to editors

1. As part of the Local Government Reforms, the number of councils will be reduced from 26 to 11 and the new councils will be given additional powers including Community Planning. The target date for this is 2015, with shadow organisations in 2014. Local councils will have a duty to facilitate the Community Planning process through working

in partnership with statutory agencies and community and voluntary organisations to address the needs of local communities.

The Partners

2. Community Foundation for Northern Ireland's mission is to drive social change by tackling social exclusion, poverty, and social injustice through funding and supporting community based action and influencing policy development.
3. Community Places is a voluntary organisation which supports disadvantaged and marginalised communities to engage in community planning. It does this by providing advice, information and training and facilitating communities, local councils and public services in working together. Through its work it has developed community plans for both urban and rural communities and will shortly be launching the first online Community Planning Toolkit.
4. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland is an independent public body established under the Northern Ireland Act 1998. It has the vision of Northern Ireland as a shared, integrated and inclusive place, a society where difference is respected and valued, based on equality and fairness for the entire community. Its mission is to advance equality, promote equality of opportunity, encourage good relations and challenge discrimination through promotion, advice and enforcement.
5. The Rainbow Project is Northern Ireland's largest lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGB&T) organisation; rights based, holistic and non-partisan. They provide services for LGB&T individuals including information and support, education and training, counselling, personal development courses, health promotion, advocacy, training, policy development as well as lobby at political and official level.