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**Barriers to community  
engagement in planning:  
a research study  
Executive Summary**

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The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors.

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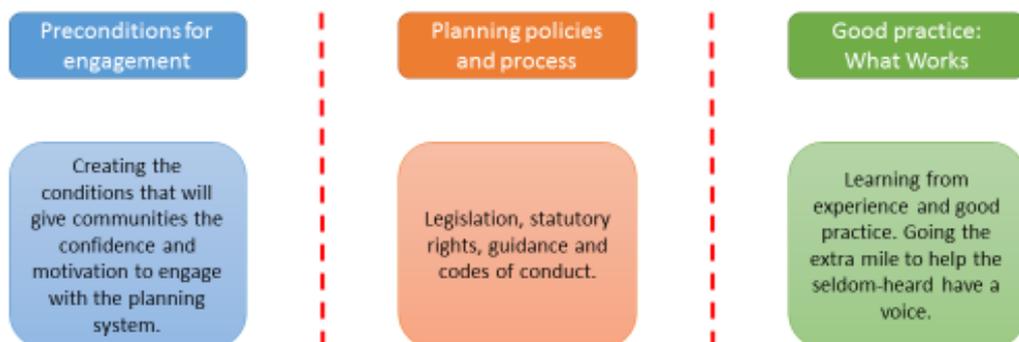
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# Executive Summary

1. This report records the results of a research study into the barriers to community engagement in the planning system. The report was commissioned by the Scottish Government and the research was conducted by a consultant team led by yellow book ltd.
2. The independent review of the Scottish planning system reported in May 2016. The review panel's findings and recommendations on inclusion and empowerment formed the background to this study. The panel wanted the planning system to be "fairer and more inclusive". Its stated aim was "to achieve real and positive culture change and significantly improve public trust in the system".
3. The key elements of our work programme were:
  - a literature review on community engagement in planning
  - consultations with community and third sector representatives, planners and built environment professionals
  - a series of workshops, and
  - an online survey to test emerging conclusions and potential actions.
4. There is an extensive UK and international literature on community engagement. The review reveals a broad consensus that community engagement is beneficial, although empirical evidence of the benefits is hard to come by. Experts warn that engagement is not a cure-all: planning will always be a domain of hard and sometimes controversial decisions, but engagement can produce a better informed and less adversarial process.
5. The concept of "community" is difficult. The conventional assumption is that community is defined by place of residence, but we also need to take account of communities based on heritage, the environment, walking, cycling and other interests, and identities based on ethnicity, faith, culture or national origin. People may identify with multiple communities. Planning also needs to strike a balance between local needs and public goods such as new homes, employment space and infrastructure.
6. Our review included sources of good practice guidance, and advice on engaging with seldom-heard groups. The causes of exclusion from the planning process include official attitudes towards disadvantaged and

minority groups, as well as the skills, capacity and motivation of those groups.

7. We conducted a small number of in-depth interviews with community representatives, leaders of third sector bodies, local authority planners and developers. These were exploratory meetings designed to identify issues for discussion and set the agenda for workshops. We designed and facilitated 4 workshops which were attended by a total of more than 90 people. The workshops generated a number of key messages, including the following:
- there is a lack of trust, respect and confidence in the system
  - the system is not considered to be fair and equitable
  - there is a gap between the rhetoric of community empowerment and communities' experience of trying to influence the planning system
  - there is a lack of clarity about the purpose of engagement
  - experience suggests that engagement rarely changes planning outcomes
  - planning is complex and some tensions are inevitable
  - the planning system should recognise the rights of all parties but also their responsibilities.
8. The report proposes a framework for action based on three pathways to effective engagement:



9. Ideas emerging from the consultations and workshops were tested in an online survey, which generated 1,640 substantive responses. Of these, 1,200 identified themselves as either community/third sector representatives (72%) or built environment professionals (28%). Most of the rest described themselves as “interested citizens”, “concerned residents” or something similar.
10. Respondents were invited to answer a total of 40 multiple-choice responses. Generally, community/third sector respondents were highly critical of the status quo and strongly supportive of most of the ideas for

change and improvement generated by the study. Opinion among built environment professionals tended to be more evenly divided, although there was still strong support for many of the proposed changes.

11. The independent review panel was highly critical of the quality and effectiveness of community engagement in the Scottish planning system. Our research has vindicated their judgement: community and third sector leaders have an overwhelmingly negative perception of the system.
12. We framed and tested a number of preconditions for successful engagement. Most of these commanded strong support across the board, including from built environment professionals, although the latter were more likely to believe that the planning system is fair, or that planners and developers are committed to community engagement. Tellingly, communities and built environment professionals agree that community engagement only rarely influences planning outcomes.
13. Opinion was split on the concept of a “community right to plan”. Community/ third sector respondents were very strongly in favour, but professional opinion was evenly divided. This may reflect concerns about the practical implications, including the number, content and scope of local place plans and the challenge of embedding them in statutory development plans.
14. The report discusses the evidence of demand for engagement. At present, only a small minority appears to be motivated to engage in planning. More people may be encouraged to get involved if there is evidence that engagement can make a difference, but we conclude that engagement in planning is unlikely to develop into a mass movement.
15. The study confirms the review panel’s finding that, too often, engagement activity is about managing expectations and securing consent for development proposals rather than a serious effort to work with communities to achieve better planning outcomes.
16. The brief also called for the identification and appraisal of ideas which, “either through changes in policy, practice or legislation, [might] support a more collaborative and inclusive planning system”. The following ideas are organised using the three pathways framework described above:

### Preconditions for effective engagement

The Scottish Government should confirm that **the core purpose of planning is to create great places** that will promote the five strategic objectives for Scotland.

All parties should be clear about **the purpose of community engagement** and the benefits it can offer. Engagement should make a positive difference and deliver better planning outcomes.

The Scottish Government should give local communities and communities of interest the **right to plan** by leading the development of local place plans and engaging in the production of development plans.

There needs to be a climate of **mutual trust, respect and confidence** between the key players in the planning system: communities, planning authorities, landowners and developers.

The planning system must be **open, transparent and accessible to all**. Clear communications in plain English should ensure that everyone knows what is happening and how they can get involved.

Planners and developers must be **fully committed to engaging with communities**. They should actively encourage communities to get involved at the earliest possible stage, and to listen carefully and respond constructively.

The planning system must be **fair and equitable**, and it should be based on a clear understanding of the rights and responsibilities of all the interested parties.

The engagement process should involve communities in thinking about national and regional **public goods** such as housing, employment land, infrastructure and built/ natural heritage as well as local agendas.

### Planning policy and process

The Scottish Government should consider the case for **integrating spatial planning into the community planning process**. This innovative move would encourage joined-up policy thinking, reduce costs and place planning at the heart of the policy agenda.

Every planning authority should be required to produce a **community engagement plan** to support the integrated community/spatial planning process. Guidance may need to be published on the development of these plans.

The plan should reflect the guiding principle of **early engagement** with communities, focusing on the production of local place/locality plans, development plans and master plans.

The community engagement plan should include specific proposals for **increasing diversity in engagement and reaching seldom-heard groups**.

The community engagement plan should include an appraisal of the **demand and capacity** for engagement, and proposals for capacity building, training and staff development.

The Scottish Government should **assess the resources implications** of a drive to increase community engagement, and consider the case for a ring-fenced fund to support training and capacity building.

The Scottish Government should consider the case for commissioning a **code of practice** setting out the rights and responsibilities of communities, developers, landowners and planners engaging in the planning process.

## **What Works – opportunities for practical action**

### **Make the most of existing guidance and good practice**

The theory and practice of community engagement has been thoroughly examined and documented. For practitioners in Scotland there are two key sources:

- The National Standards for Community Engagement, and
- SP=EED Successful Planning = Effective Engagement and Delivery (PAS)

The national standards and SP=EED can be used in conjunction with the Government's Place Standard.

### **Connecting with the seldom-heard**

The independent review reported that there was “little evidence that disabled people, young people, minority ethnic groups, or disadvantaged groups are being effectively and routinely involved in the planning system”. The consultations confirmed this view and we also encountered concerns that remote communities were poorly served. Some groups find it particularly difficult to get involved because of language barriers, disability, poverty or discrimination. The report describes ways in which practitioners can “go the extra mile” to reach out to the seldom-heard.:

### **Using plain English, effective communications and feedback**

The language of planning is a serious barrier to community engagement. The profession's enthusiasm for jargon – much of it entirely unnecessary – is seen as a means of excluding and intimidating ordinary members of the public. People understand the need for some technical language but they are frustrated when it is used to dress up arguments that should be expressed in plain English.

People were very critical of official notices, advertisements and confusing online portals, all of which are seen as ways in which local authorities ration participation in planning rather than actively promote it.

Communities are frustrated by a lack of feedback from engagement events.

They want a clear and accurate record of what was said, a statement of what was done with their ideas and suggestions, and a record of the decision reached.