Community Consultation For Quality of Life in Northern Ireland

CCQOL

Acknowledgements

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Quality of Life Foundation
https://www.qolf.org/

Commonplace
https://www.commonplace.is/

Urban Symbiotics
https://urbansymbiotics.com/

Executive Summary

Research summary:
taking a connective thematic approach

A highly collaborative project, Your City Your Voice Belfast, was the final pilot urban room in the UK-wide Community Consultation for Quality of Life project. Located in a historic Belfast city centre building, 2 Royal Avenue, Your City Your Voice Belfast operated in partnership with Belfast City Council, alongside an existing community events programme and without a permanent, enclosed space. This approach encouraged the team to test how more flexible urban room arrangements and joined-up events might inform community engagement.

Your City Your Voice Belfast focused conversations on the six Quality of Life Foundation Framework themes: Control, Health, Nature, Wonder, Movement, and Belonging. During the urban room, people contributed to 'meaning maps' based on these themes, which were also used to prompt conversations about people's experiences of and aspirations for the city. This set of themes was intended to provide a more open platform to start conversations across a range of issues from future housing and shared public spaces to climate change, ageing, youth, and more broadly inclusive future development.

The team embraced arts-driven methods to engage local people in ways they may not have experienced previously. This proved highly effective, particularly in bringing younger people into conversations. The research was characterised by creating connections and finding new ways to encourage "strangers to talk to other strangers as if they knew each other" (in the words of urbanist William H. Whyte).

Community Consultation
For Quality of Life

Your City Your Voice Belfast was part of a UK-wide research project, Community Consultation for Quality of Life (CCQOL) funded by the Arts and Humanities and Research Council.

CCQOL was initiated by Professor Flora Samuel, based on the belief that creating maps of local assets - the places people value most in their communities - is a good way to involve local communities in co-creating local knowledge about their area.

Applying the Quality of Life Foundation's Framework themes of Control, Health, Nature, Wonder, Movement and Belonging in a Commonplace online mapping platform, a map-based approach aimed to test how creating local knowledge through community consultation can help inform longer-term decisions about future development and improvements in our communities.

Research questions

How can community consultation be made more useful and effective across the diverse policy contexts of the UK?

How can community consultation be made more representative and inclusive?

How can community consultation be undertaken for areas that have not yet been developed, when 'future users' are not known?

What are the relative benefits of online and physical community consultation?

How can community consultation be made into a long-term project that fosters ongoing civic debate?

How can social value mapping inform the process of community consultation?

What format could community consultation take in a pandemic?

What terminology is needed to describe inclusive, empowering 21st century community consultation?

Project methodology

The project addressed these questions using several means. The team planned, delivered, and evaluated four physical 'urban rooms' in four UK cities: Reading, Cardiff, Edinburgh and Belfast. Urban rooms are defined by the Urban Room Network as spaces 'where people can come together to help create a future for their local area'.

Alongside these urban rooms, the team used Commonplace online mapping platforms and surveys to engage with local communities. Each city had its own approach, and this approach was informed by a policy literature review specific to each nation. Additionally, we conducted interviews with local planning and community representatives and established Local Advisory Groups in each city.

Key statistics from
the Belfast urban room

81%

of respondents had never participated in planning consultation

86%

of those who responded that they had never previously participated in such a consultation noted they had "never been asked" to take part

Half the respondents learned about the urban room at the venue itself

36%

of respondents prefer face-to-face consultation compared to 21% preferring online. Although there were slightly more respondents open to online options if they are "more convenient" (43%)

43%

of respondents accessed the survey using tablets in the urban room assisted by staff, while

34%

accessed it by themselves on their own phone or tablet

Face-to-face consultation offered opportunities to 'hear about the opinions of other people'

24%

and gave people 'the ability to ask for more information and have things explained to me'

36%

Convenience **&** Speed
46% **31%**

topped the reasons to do online consultation

41%

of respondents consider their neighbourhood to be "somewhere I can get to on foot or wheelchair in twenty minutes", while 21% consider it to be "somewhere I can get to on foot or wheelchair in ten minutes", and the same percentage (21%) think of it as " I can get to on foot or wheelchair in fifteen minutes".

Recommendations from the Belfast project:

1. Acknowledge that people are central to building and maintaining interest and trust

2. Allow time for casual conversations alongside programmed activity

3. Be open to everyone (by choosing your development partners and themes carefully)

4. Avoid consultation blinkers and barriers, allowing for unexpected/expanded conversations

5. Adapt arts-driven methods for open-ended early engagement

6. Pay attention to language and local meaning: terms, tools, and technical speak

7. Create a room with more planning education and capacity focused spaces or activities

8. Develop youth leadership in planning and community settings

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Introduction

Northern Ireland's fragmented governance, planning, and participation

Planning and community consultation processes and policy across Northern Ireland, within the general context of the United Kingdom, are relatively young and particularly fragmented at regional and local levels (Black, 2017; Planner-Government06, 2021). Planning has also held a long-contested history of accentuating inequality while international measures have sought to reduce discrimination and exclusion, dating back to the start of Northern Ireland's devolved governing status within the UK since 1998 (Ellis, 2000). One of the unique impacts on planning in Northern Ireland is the on-again, off-again power-sharing nature of the devolved Northern Ireland Assembly [NIA, Stormont] and Executive (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2008; NI Direct, 2015b; NI Direct, 2015a). Other impediments to the full implementation of effective processes and consultation include the impacts of COVID-19, which are acknowledged in official reviews and are highlighted in CCQOL interviews with planning officials and academics in this national report.

Sweeping statutory reforms developed through 2011 and were enacted in 2015 while more recent local policy changes were implemented as urgent/temporary responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The implementation and future implications of these reforms and responses has been assessed since 2020 through official reviews by the Northern Ireland Audit Office [NIAO], the NI Department for Infrastructure [DfI] – The regional Planning Department - and a Planning Engagement Partnership [PEP], convened as a diverse group of professionals, academics, policy-makers, and third-sector organisations in 2022 by the then DfI Minister. DfI's review noted that while there are similarities across various UK and Republic of Ireland jurisdictions, significant differences in operation, performance measurement, and political as well as administrative contexts present difficulties in direct "functionality and performance" comparisons between Northern Ireland and other parts of Great Britain or across the island of Ireland (DfI, 2022b: 8).

> **Despite the importance of the planning system to Northern Ireland, [the Northern Ireland Audit Office] review found that [planning] is not operating effectively, not always providing the certainty that those involved wanted, and in many aspects not delivering for the economy, communities, or the environment.**
>
> *(Donnelly, Kieran and Kane, Colette in NIAO, 2022: 10)*

Given the scope of this national report and the vast complexity of processes, legislation, and national-local variations, the following sections focus on an overview of findings from CCQOL research as follows: Section 1 describes the history, key legislation, and challenges and opportunities for improved consultation frameworks; Section 2 frames lessons from the Belfast urban room (Your City Your Voice Belfast); and Section 3 sets out collective recommendations from Northern Ireland.

Context

This section provides a historical context of planning in Northern Ireland since the devolved institutions were formally established in 1998. It reviews the related history of community consultation in the region as it has developed alongside and independent of other national and international shifts from grassroots to local-regional policy. Policies, reviews, and shifts toward community consultation including community planning within government are also reviewed regarding more local authority actions – in this latter case, focusing primarily on Belfast City Council where the CCQOL pilot urban room and consultation research were held during 2021-2023.

1.1. Historical context of community consultation and planning in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland's [Stormont] Assembly, which first sat in 1999, was formed through the historic 1998 Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, internationally brokered across Northern Ireland's political parties and between the UK and Irish Governments before a public referendum (Northern Ireland Assembly Information Office, 2009; Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, 1998). Longer-standing, deeper, and contested histories of the origins of the NIA span centuries of ethno-religious and political division across the island of Ireland and all regions of the UK, including the decades-long period of civil conflict, The Troubles, from the late 1960s until the 1990s, which are well-documented (For further notes, see: NI Direct, 2015b; HM Government, 2019); these, by their complexity and depth, remain outside the scope of this report, however they contextualise contemporary challenges, progress, and debates about consultation and planning at macro and micro levels.

In this wider context, with regard to planning and inequality in Northern Ireland, a review undertaken in the immediate years following the 1998 Agreement highlighted an explicitly "technocratic neutrality" that had been adopted for planning during the Troubles through the implementation of a new Central Rule structure established in 1972 – an "intensely centralized [sic] system of policy making" - for Northern Ireland that continued to impact on how devolved processes developed (Ellis, 2000: 350). That research also found "little or no mention of social need in any of the British planning legislation, "concluding that any planning decision that broadens the concept of material considerations beyond that of 'land use' may be accused of being ultra vires" (Ellis, 2000: 348). Through CCQOL research interviews in 2021 (Planner-Academic01), another relevant inequality factor observed for Northern Ireland was how, prior to devolution, consultations happened ad-hoc "as an when necessary" without any guidelines and no wider context set as to how consultations fit to the wider planning systems. Through devolved powers since 1998, there have been numerous planning policy updates, as this report graphically represents in Figure 1, including new legislated reforms (e.g., Act of the Northern Ireland Assembly, 2011) that both decentralised many planning powers to local authorities and include explicit provisions for consultation. However, these new structures have already been independently scrutinised as not delivering effectively (NIAO, 2022) for projects or people, which is examined further in Section 1.4 below on challenges and opportunities.

The timeline presented here also includes a series of self-determined suspensions of the NI Government since 2002, with the most recent stoppage under devolved rules continuing at the time of this writing. These stoppages are additional issues, beyond the control of planners and local authorities, which impact on effective and more open decision-making across Northern Ireland. The impacts of no MLAs at Stormont include no active roles for selected MLAs as Ministers in regional Departments that direct planning and regeneration policy with local authority Councillors (DfI, 2021c; NIAO, 2022). In addition, new politically-agreed amendments are made to the original Good Friday Agreement at each time of renewed governance through subsequent 'Agreements' that affect NIA and Executive powers, how the Executive functions, the number of Government Departments – reduced from 12 to 9 in 2016, and the number of Ministers of the Local Assembly - reduced from 108 to 90 in 2017. Within the Departments, unique in Northern Ireland again for the UK, Ministers operate under "full executive authority and must achieve broad agreement from The Northern Ireland Executive, the Offices of the First and Deputy First Ministers" (Cave et al., 2013: 6).
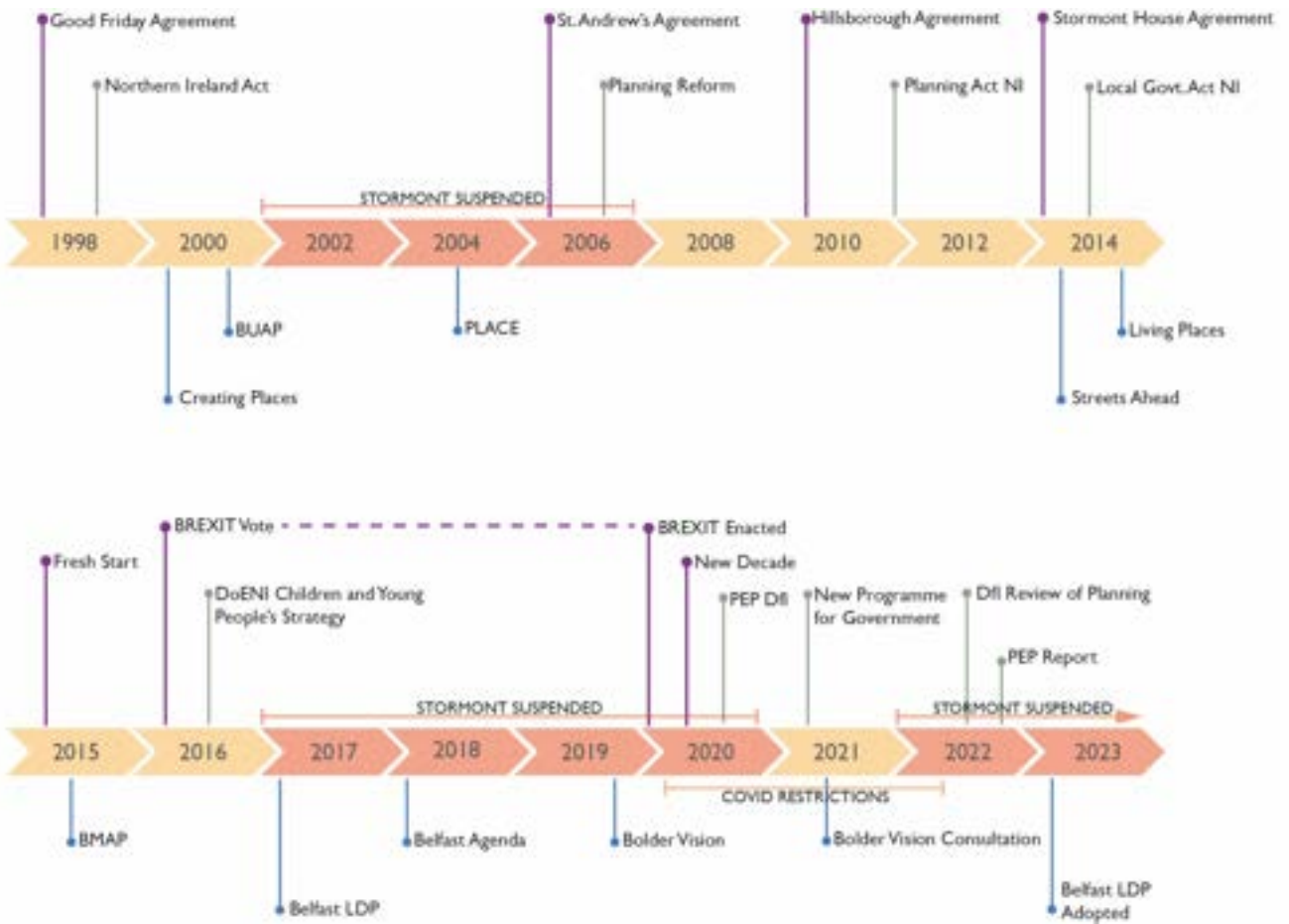
Figure 1: NI-Belfast, governance, and key policy milestones since 1998 relevant to devolution, planning, and community consultation (Golden, S and Thorogood, K; YCYVB, 2023)

1.1.1 Origins of consultation, Northern Ireland: Section 75, The Northern Ireland Act 1998

A key milestone for community consultation and engagement came with the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, which saw the implementation of The Northern Ireland Act 1998 (Act of UK Parliament, 1998), including an important provision, Section 75, also known as the Public Sector Equality and Good Relations Duties (ECNI, 2023a). While not specifically set out to be used within planning, Section 75 is seen as underpinning legislation (DfC, 2016a; UK Public General Acts, 1998b: 75.01) by requiring "public authorities, in carrying out their functions relating to Northern Ireland, to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between persons of different:

1. religious belief

2. political opinion

3. racial group

4. age

5. marital status

6. sexual orientation

7. genders (men and women generally in the original document)

8. disability and those without and

9. numbers of dependants (or those without dependants)."

Under Schedule 9 of the Act, public authorities, "unless otherwise exempt" must "have an equality scheme, approved by the statutory Equality Commission for Northern Ireland [ECNI], showing how they propose to fulfil the duties in relation to their relevant functions" (ECNI, 2023: 2; UK Public General Acts, 1998a). This latter requirement for schemes to fulfil their statutory duties led for the first time to the establishment of a long list of representative groups (under the above nine categories) for consultation purposes, the "Section 75 Consultees" (DfC, 2015).

At the time of its enactment, Section 75 was considered to "surpass the rest of the UK and most of the world" in establishing equality measures addressing discrimination and "concentrating on proactively advancing equality itself" (Ellis, 2000: 354-355). In research on the impacts of the 1998 legislation, Ellis argued that such provisions, in law, could influence a shift in planning in NI from previous technocratic stances toward more acknowledged-rights approaches, with a prescient caveat that any initiative would depend on departmental culture and attitudes to the additional bureaucratic burden of consultation, and that no provisions existed for capacity building in the likes of the voluntary and public sector where necessary skills were undeveloped (2000: 356-357). Some of these issues can be seen still in the challenges to deliver on the potential of Section 75 in present day reforms: in inefficiencies, skills capacity and resources issues for associations and departments dealing with planning, as discussed in the next sections and in collective recommendations from CCQOL research.

1.1.2 Early movement toward consultation within architecture and planning for Northern Ireland

Prior to the statutory shifts enacted in the Northern Ireland Act 1998, charities and housing associations played an important and directly influential role in developing processes for engagement. These roles continued into more formalised procedures and collaborations with planners, architects, and local community groups following the establishment of Section 75 requirements. Two key examples of such associations include the planning charity Community Places (formerly Community Technical Aid [CTA-NI] from 1984-2008), and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive [NIHE] with its partnering charity Supporting Communities (in operation since 1971 and 1979 respectively).

Community Places

Since 1984, charity and not for profit organisation, Community Places has been offering free planning advice and support services to community groups and individuals throughout Northern Ireland (Community Places, 2023). Their mission statements reads: "to empower disadvantaged and marginalised communities and further sustainable development and wellbeing by providing [free] planning advice and supporting and developing community engagement in spatial and community planning." In the wake of previously noted centralisation of power by the UK government during the Troubles, organisations like CTA were " in theory, if not in practice," established "to promote alternatives to direct dependency on either the state or the market by supporting 'popular planning' at local level between community groups and agencies which serve[d] their areas" – both serving and promoting this approach to planning (Blackman, 1988: 31). CTA-NI and other CTAs in the UK, which arose first in the 1970s, have been documented as part of responses by "radical community architecture" practitioners to challenge slum clearances by "setting up local advisory offices with architects, planners, and social workers" at a time when the RIBA's professional code of conduct prohibited providing free services; the initiative led to a UK-wide Association of Community Technical Aid Centres (ACTAC) being set up in 1983 until the collective model ended in the mid-80s due to a lack of funding (Schneider and Till, 2016).

CTA-NI continued and supported community involvement in the development of the Belfast Urban Area Plan in the late 1980s before developing a "full community architecture service" for local community projects in 1993, being the first in developing local community forums for Community Development Plans in 1995, and creating a Community Guide to the Planning System in 1995 (Community Places, 2020). After a name change to Community Places in 2008, the organisation established itself as a lobby for the right to be heard in person with wins to have the Statement of Community Involvement successfully included in Northern Ireland's new 2011 Planning Legislation, which underpins reforms from 2015. Community Places has ongoing expanded roles in education and guidance, including participatory budget training; it contributed initiatives with architecture and planning students and professionals during the CCQOL-Your City Your Voice Belfast Urban Room.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Supporting Communities

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive [NIHE] is "a Non-Departmental Public Body, established by the Housing Executive Act (Northern Ireland) 1971" (NIHE, 2013: 7). As part of the above noted UK Government's centralising of powers in the 1970s, the NIHE became "Northern Irelands' single comprehensive regional housing authority", taking responsibilities from 65 separate housing authorities (Ibid). During the 1980s when the NIHE's primary focus was house building it began a move to more community involvement in response to challenges from people who didn't want to live, or didn't feel safe, living in new towns built across Northern Ireland under the pre-Troubles 1968 Matthew Plan, which included major infrastructure and residential upheaval from existing cities.

In the wake of these wider consolidations and unrest with housing provision during the Troubles, a pilot Priority Estates project in 1979 led to the establishment of the first version of the charity, Supporting Communities, to work with a tenants' action group on an estate in Ballymena, NI and argue for "the need for community development in successful housing" (Supporting Communities, 2019). Following the successful pilot, the charity became known as NITAP and formally began a joint venture with NIHE in 1983, established by the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust.

This collaboration led to a Tenant Participatory Advisory Service (TPAS) with the NIHE and NI Community Voluntary Association (NICVA) in 1984, and an Estate Action Project (EAP) in 1988 to facilitate and support greater tenant involvement in over 40 estates across NI. At this stage and through the first phase of devolution, "engagement was used as a conduit to gauge opinion" - "a mechanism for the NIHE to get across what it thought was best for the community" (University of Birmingham, 2016: 3.3).

Leading up to devolution, NIHE, NITAP, and local Community Advisory Groups (CAG) are credited with co-creating TAPS (Tenant Consultation in Planned Schemes), as a first-time programme for "meaningful" consultation in NI that provided a timely template for other charities and public bodies to adapt to the statutory requirements of implementing Section 75. The programme uniquely developed a staggered level of engagement for residents from local, to regional, and then to central levels of the NIHE – comprising over 400 member groups under the coordination of Supporting Communities, as it became known in 2007. Supporting Communities still provides development expertise, training, information, and funding advice to over 600 community groups and 150 community associations (University of Birmingham, 2016: 3.7; Housing-Support09, 2021).

Such organisations can be seen in wider moves through charitable and academic associations in other international cities to help local people address issues of poverty and deteriorating qualities of urban life, for example the Pratt Institute of NY's Center for Community and Environmental Development [PICCED] and Pratt Planning and Architectural Collaborative [PACC], established in 1963 and 1979 respectively (Mannix, 1997).

1.1.3 The 'long crisis': A changing society and growing cities in Northern Ireland

A key aspect of the changing needs for planning policy and consultation in Northern Ireland has been the rapid and immense changes in investment and growth for commercial, residential, and hospitality-led development since the official end of the Troubles and the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. Due to the inconsistencies and fragmentation of governance noted in the introduction, and a lack of joined up approaches and defined local development plans discussed in the next sections, investment and regeneration proposals around regional centres (overseen by both local authority and regional Departments for Planning) have often been highly contested projects and regeneration processes that have been audited as not good value for money for councils, not always transparent, or not meeting aspirational goals for people (NIAO, 2022). Large areas of cities like Belfast have been subjected to top-down 'red-lining' of 'underperforming' neighbourhoods by government bodies with vesting and regeneration investment powers, or have been subjected to land-banking and private investor-led projects testing the limits of planning policy at regional and local levels. Despite the planning reforms in 2015, divisions and inherent tensions remain between local councils with new planning decision powers and the NI Departments for Infrastructure (The Department) and Department for Communities, who retain important regeneration powers as set out in the next report section (DfC, 2016b; DfI, 2022b).

For Belfast, political and socio-cultural divisions continue to impact development consistency and completion of larger regeneration schemes. There remains a long-standing mistrust of development processes within and across neighbourhood areas. Consultation fatigue has been highlighted by established groups in and around the city who do not feel that their voices are being heard enough in decisions that affect them (Golden, Rafferty et al., 2023: 32). Multiple, often overlapping and contrasting local vs regional masterplan proposals for similar parts of the city mean development areas can have different criteria and even names applied. A lack of coherent, holistic, and more transparent decision-making leaves large development areas stagnant and in physical states of neglect, and does not deliver on local plan aspirations to help level-up Northern Ireland's poorest council wards (BCC, 2021a). Wariness for both central and local government consultation processes, and about projects focused on property-led development - those driven by "investment vehicles" or pools of international investors and financial institutions - were important early knowledge outcomes for CCQOL when planning the Belfast Urban Room pilot (see Section 2).

1.2 Policy impacting community consultation and planning in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland's planning system is intended to be "plan-led" (NIAO, 2022: 13/22), although it has never been fully in force (Cave et al., 2013: 5). This system was to be reinforced by the enactment of sweeping reforms – "the most significant [...] in a generation" - that reset every aspect of planning from strategic to local development plans, management, consultative processes, delivery, and reviews through statutory structures (DfI, 2022b). The following sub-sections set out key aspects of the 2011 Planning Act, as enacted in 2015, including Pre-Application Community Consultation [PACC], and subsequent legislation including the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014, The Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland (2015) [SPPS], Planning (Local Development Plan) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015, and The Departments Act (Northern Ireland) 2016. Additional policy and more recent changes including through COVID-19 and local authority examples are reviewed separately.

1.2.1 The Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011

The Planning Act 2011 developed from The Planning Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 (Northern Ireland Orders in Council, 2006); it updated a pre-devolution Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 with provisions for the then Department of the Environment [DoE, now within DfI] to undertake reform with the aim of improving the planning process (Cave et al., 2013: 6). The process to commence the 2011 Act took until 2015, following a period of preparation after Royal Assent and a series of Commencement orders (No.1 in 2011, No.2 and No.3 in 2015). The significance of this process and the changes were the transfer of most of the previously centrally-regionally held planning power from NIA to each of Northern Ireland's 11 local authorities.

The aim of the reform was stated to address "a lack of Development Plan coverage in Northern Ireland, leaving many areas without an adopted plan," impacting consideration of planning applications and a lack of neighbourhood-community plans under the previous systems (Cave et al., 2013: 12; 15).

The outcomes and outworking of The Act were assessed - in line with requirements of the Act itself – by separate reviews since 2020 under DfI, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, and a community engagement focused Planning Engagement Partnership - a cross-disciplinary and cross-body platform set up by then DfI Minister (DfI, 2022b; NIAO, 2022; DfI, 2022a).

As enacted, not all the proposed powers were transferred to councils. The Department for Infrastructure [DfI, The Department] retains responsibility for regional planning policy and legislation, monitoring, and reporting on the performance of council's delivery of planning functions and making decisions for significant or major applications (NIAO, 2022). Responsibility for the Planning Appeals Commission [PAC] transferred from the Office of the First and Deputy First Ministers [OFMDFM] to the Department of Justice (DfI, 2022b: 1.3). DfC retains powers for regeneration and Neighbourhood Renewal Programmes, and power to list buildings, to designate conservation areas, and listed building enforcement powers; these were to transfer but were retained in 2016 by the then DfC Minister, citing that the "the necessary legislation did not progress within the mandate of the previous Assembly" (DfI, 2022b: 1.3; DfC, 2016b). These changes (and those not carried out) reflect the ongoing inconsistency and fragmentation of the power-sharing systems in Northern Ireland.

New powers differentiate between regionally significant, major, and local development classifications – a 3-tier system – and pre-application community consultation, pre-determination hearings, and delegations defined under the Statutory Rule, The Planning (Development Management) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015, (Northern Ireland Statutory Rules, 2021; DfI, 2015). The rule also sets the baseline of development within the major category for which applicants for planning permission must consult the community in advance under the PACC regulations (see below).

Major projects relate to important economic, social, or environmental implications while a regionally significant project would include cross-border initiatives such as the North-South (energy) Interconnector, or a large environmental project such as a regional waste incinerator or a new mine (Planner-Government06, 2021).

> **Development Management is a more positive change to what it used to be called it was called Development Control, which is deemed to be very negative.**
>
> *(Planner-Government06, 2021)*

In respect of larger applications that would require wider stakeholder and public consultation, a Proposal of Application Notice [PAN] is required at least 12 weeks before a full application with a description of the development and other specified information for either the relevant council or The Department to respond within 21 days of receipt. Such projects require additional determinations through the Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015, and - importantly for the context of this report - Pre-Application Community Consultation actions, as set out below.

Pre-Application Community Consultation [PACC]

The Planning Act defines Pre-application Community Consultation for major planning applications under Council determination, which differ from those considered as more Regionally Significant and subject to DfI review as note above. Whereas, elsewhere in the UK a Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) has been a statutory responsibility since 2004, in Northern Ireland this has only been a feature of planning functions and Local Development Planning since the application of the Planning Act in 2015 (Provision 4) along with Development Management Regulations (2015) and The Planning (General Development Procedure) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 [GDPO]. Under The Act and Management regulations for major projects, applicants have a statutory duty to consult with interested parties, the community, in advance of applying.

The Planning Engagement Partnership's review in 2022 found that the PACC "is not always meaningful or effective," and "it is not always clear how the community's comments have been taken in to consideration in the planning process" (DfI, 2022a: 23). The PEP recommended using Pre-Application Discussions [PADs] with "key community stakeholders and interest groups," to tailor engagement, and for any PACC report to "contain feedback on how issues raised by the community have either influenced the proposed development or why they have not" (DfI, 2022a: 24).

1.2.2 Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 and a Duty of Improvement

The Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 Part 12 sets out a General Duty of Improvement in that, "a council must make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of its functions," including: improving service quality and fairness with respect to disadvantages faced by particular groups; or social well-being "as a result of the provision of services; or the way in which functions are otherwise executed" (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2014: 84-1; 86-1). Each council must therefore set out and consult on their Improvement Plan every year and set out improvement actions for the year ahead – "key improvement priorities" with a period of public consultation aiming at what might be missing or what the public would like to see happen (BCC, 2022a).

Community planning

The Local Government Act also created a statutory link between community planning and the exercise of local authority functions, unique for Northern Ireland at the time, including engagement with Community Planning Partnerships (set stakeholder groups) "to ensure alignment with outcomes in the Programme for Government [PfG] (DfC, 2017). This aspect of local government is operated by the Department for Communities [DfC]. NI Community Planning, as a term and policy, is more aligned with the Scottish approach – strategic responsibility and delivery of services with a set of statutory and non-statutory partners (Scottish Government, 2015) – compared with the American typical use of the term in reference to community engagement (APA, 2023; Carney, 2023). According to the DfC, Community Plans should bring together "all those involved in delivering public services in collaboration to improve the wellbeing of everyone – making a real difference to people's lives." As applied in practice at local levels, there appears to be less consistency of approach however when comparing Community Planning to more traditional Strategic/Spatial Planning; the latter typical sits within a defined Planning Committee in council, overseen by Planning Officers and aligned to economic development, while the former can vary from departments for regeneration or economic development, within building control, and sometimes is administered under arts and culture (Planner-Government06, 2021; Planner-Council04, 2021).

> **The purpose of community planning is, it's that bridge, bridging between what the community needs and those high-level outcomes that you want for the community, high-level long-term outcomes - gathering not just information, but then working with the partners in your area.**
>
> *(Planner-Government06, 2021)*

Belfast City Council: Community Planning and Community Planning Partnerships

In developing its Community Plan, and eventually it's LDP, Belfast worked with partners, including representatives from the statutory, business, higher education, and community and voluntary sectors. The council formed a Belfast Community Planning Partnership with 15 organisations from voluntary, community, and social enterprise sectors (BCC, 2021b). BCC's consultations and partnership then operated through a Voluntary, Community and Social Sector Enterprise [VCSE] model of representation and participation as shown in Figure 2 (BCC, 2019).
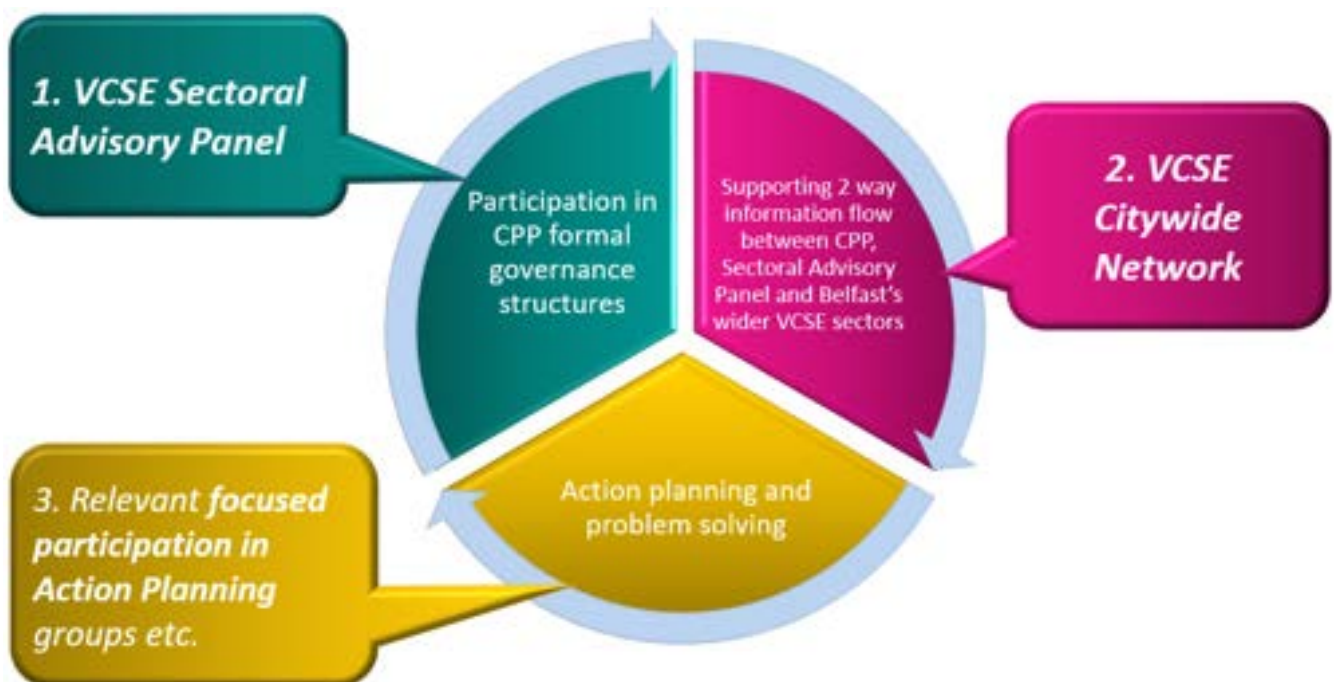
Figure 2: Belfast City Council VCSE Model for the Belfast Community Planning Partnership, 2019

The first such community plan, The Belfast Agenda, was published in November 2017; the new plan (2023-2027) represents the first formal review and recognises "challenging circumstances emerging from the pandemic and responding to a growing cost-of-living crisis" (BCC, 2023a). The overall engagement spanned two-years and the updated Agenda underwent public consultation from August to October 2023, completing at the time of this report writing (BCC, 2022b). The Council established a new website, Your Say Belfast, and partnered with an external engagement consultant, Involve, to host a new online hub and a series of face-to-face workshops under the theme, "continuing the conversation" (BCC, 2023b).
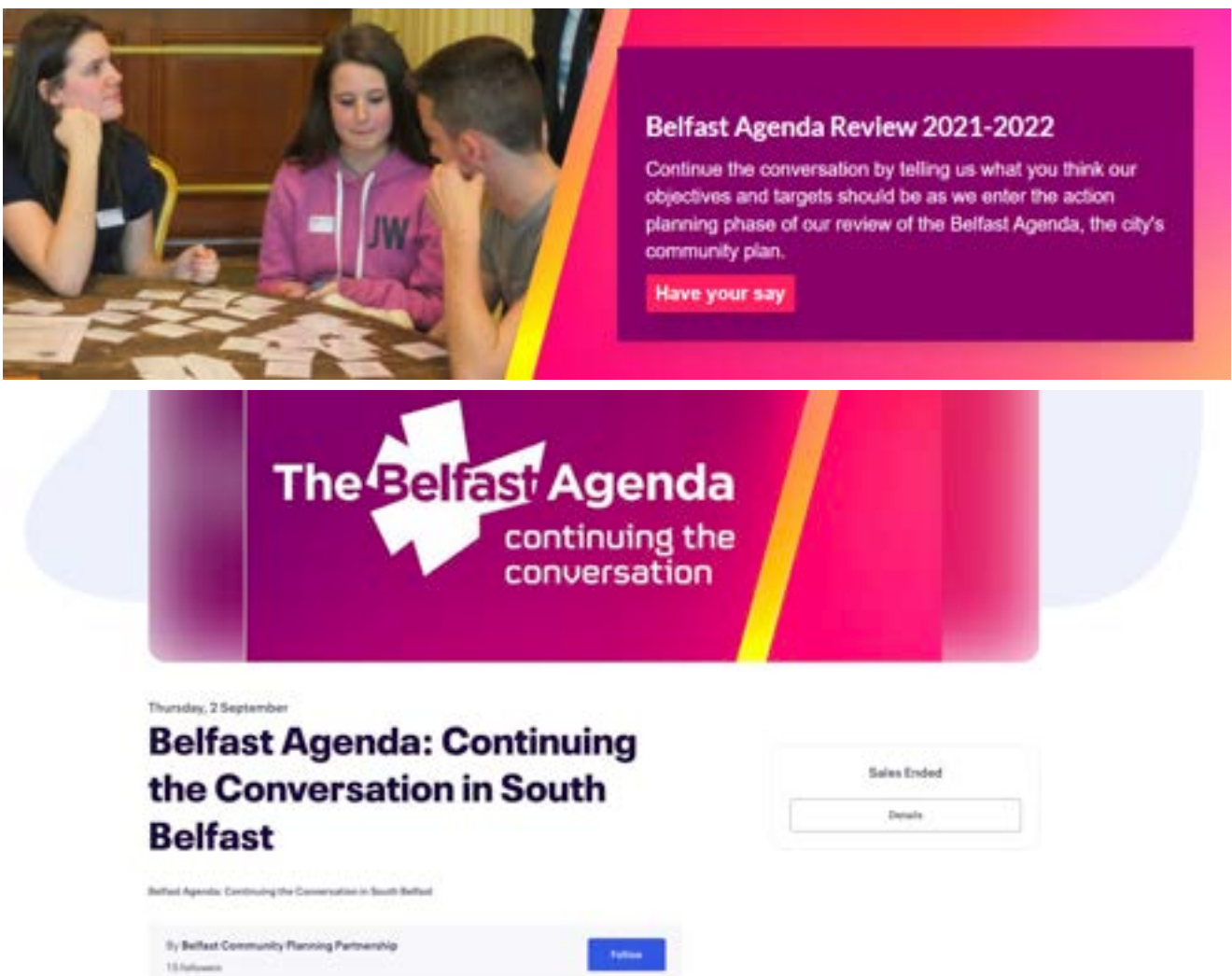
Figure 3: Belfast Agenda, online and face-to-face public consultation, 2021-2022 (BCC, 2022)

1.2.3 Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland [SPPS] (2015)

SPPS: Planning for Sustainable Development was set out by the then Department of the Environment, before restructuring within DfI (DOENI, 2015a). The DOENI document contains an overall objective "to further sustainable development and improve well-being for the people of the North" [sic]; it aligns with Regional Development Strategy 2035 [RDS] as agreed with the Northern Ireland Executive. It also includes published extensive guidance through a series of Sub-Policy Provision Statements [PPS] and Practice Notes.

For the aims and policy review of consultation regarding quality-of-life, SPPS also sets out aims to support the NIE's Sustainable Development Strategy with the public interest involved in setting environmental limits; ensuring a strong, healthy, just, and equal society; achieving a sustainable economy; using sound science responsibly; promoting opportunity and innovation; and promoting good governance" (DOENI, 2015a: 3.2). The document goes beyond economic priorities to emphasise balancing and integrating complex social, environmental, and other matters as well, in the long-term public interest, with the two-tier planning system including core principles for:

- Improving Health and Well-being

- Creating and Enhancing Shared Space

- Supporting Sustainable Economic Growth

- Supporting Good Design and Positive Place Making, and

- Preserving and Improving the Built and Natural Environment (DOENI, 2015a: 4.2).

Toward the above goals (particularly health and wellbeing as shown in Figure 4 below, from the SPPS document) the Statement promotes Place-making as a "people centred approach" with all those affected by the development process and cites Pre-Application Discussions as "an opportunity for early consideration and engagement" to "generally produce better outcomes" (DOENI, 2015b: 20-21). It also cites how "the establishments of design review arrangements [with the DfC Ministerial Group for Architecture and the Built Environment in Northern Ireland] can also prove useful in supporting high standards of design in new development, particularly for major projects."

Figure 4: Determinants of health and well-being in SPPS 2014:16 (from Barton and Grant 2010)

1.2.4 Planning (Local Development Plan) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015

The Planning Act aimed to bring Northern Ireland more in-line with the rest of the UK in terms of plan-led planning. Subsequent Local Development Plan [LDP] Regulation (Northern Ireland Statutory Rules, 2015a) further defined how new local councils should prepare LDPs to "realis[e] the vision and aspirations of local communities" in line with SPPS guidance (DOENI, 2015b: 5.3). LDPs are meant to set out the long-term spatial strategies, linked in statute to wider services delivery and quality of council functions through the community planning process. In this regard legislative guidance is for councils to set out how they will deliver the LDP for "persons who appear to a council to have an interest in the matters relating to development in its area" and – maintaining a local-regional power structure – must submit every development plan to DfI for independent examination by the Planning Appeals Commission [PAC] (Act of the Northern Ireland Assembly, 2011: Part 2). The Regulations stipulate the process by which a council must generate alternative strategies to determine a "Preferred Options Paper [POP]" for consultation with statutory bodies and the public, allowing any person to make representations about the POP within a period specified and publicised by each council - not less than 8 weeks or more than 12 weeks from publication (Northern Ireland Statutory Rules, 2015b: Part 3).

Adoption of Belfast Local Development Plan (LDP) and Plan Strategy (May 2023)

In accordance with section 12 of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, on 3 April 2023, BCC resolved to adopt the Belfast LDP – Plan Strategy from May 2023, with DfI specified modifications, following independent examination (BCC, 2023). The plan aims to "ensure that economic, social and environmental issues are holistically considered to deliver sustainable developments up to 2035" (BCC, 2023).

1.3 Digitisation and technological growth of consultation in Northern Ireland

When COVID-19 restrictions prohibited most contact between people, and between public activities and services through statutory lockdowns, there was a need to carry on with both life and – in planning terms and the regional growth strategies - with development projects. Consultation processes went online and were legislated to temporarily remove any requirement for in-person events from May 2020 - with amendments extending that suspension until the end of the 'emergency period' on 31 March 2022 (DfI, 2021a; DfI, 2020; DfI, 2021b). The legislation retained an expectation for applicants to replace PACC public events with alternative consultation measures to "enable the exchange of views that would otherwise be achieved by face-to-face interaction" (DfI, 2021a). These changes led to huge growth in online "interactive" platforms for developer and councils consultation using digitally reproduced exhibitions, films, and a plethora of online surveys.

In addition to the various platforms presented in other report sections, CCQOL projects and pilots also shifted more toward this digital realm with partners Commonplace, working to develop and test online mapping models that could help to enhance rather than replace in-person engagement; CCQOL examples are discussed in Section 2, and set out more for the Belfast pilot in the available local reports for each nation (E.g.,Golden, Skoura et al., 2023). In Belfast, BCC has partnered with several digital providers including Citizen Space, Bang the Table (for setting up Your Say Belfast), and Involve (as part of the more recent Belfast Agenda "continuing conversations" described previously).

When asked about the future of post-COVID-19 hybrid formats, a digital provider interviewed said that "the needle is going to go back just a little" (Digital-Consultant02, 2021), forecasting that most processes will stay mainly online with face to face as a part of it, noting the challenge will be in creating other ways for people who don't have technology or don't want to use the internet to participate. The debates in this area will continue with regard to the opportunities to gather digital consultation responses, potentially by the 1000s depending on methods and topics, compared to what can be seen as "limited" focus group or workshop information – from typical types of hand-written notes, flip charts and physical maps with post-it notes – a caveat being that any system needs a robust methodology for collating and analysing information in all its forms, including checks and balances for authenticity (Digital-Consultant02, 2021).

> **The internet can help people understand that there is scope for influence [...] an alternative online that encourages people to feel involved and to work, gather to talk, to share ideas, but you've got to provide the content in so many different formats and that that creates massive resource and skills issues for stretched local government.**
>
> *(Digital-Consultant02, 2021)*

From a commercial developer's perspective, for whom the use of pop-up spaces for consultation was becoming more established in different formats and with larger development projects prior to COVID-19, the switch to being fully online resulted in feedback of often "a few words, couple of sentences at best" (Commercial-Developer10, 2021). This was countered with their experience of "really interesting debates" in physical rooms, seen as an opportunity to discuss both economic-led and spatial-planning constraints and public/interested parties' concerns, acknowledging the difficulty of capturing conversations and feedback that "might be really helpful" (Commercial-Developer10, 2021).

1.4 Consultation knowledge

This section examines what is known about the impacts of consultation in Northern Ireland - the challenges and the opportunities as well as the research gaps. The report here reviews issues as highlighted through the literature and policy itself, and from interviews with representatives from government, council, arms-length bodies, professional organisations, commercial development, and charities who have experience and relevant perspectives.

1.4.1 Challenges to delivery, Northern Ireland: Effective consultation and quality of life planning

Despite the many aspirational aims and considerable work at different levels to deliver on inclusive and effective planning consultation and delivered outcomes, many challenges remain in both structures and practice.

First, due to the inherent power-sharing structures that hold sway and the new unique two-tier planning system for NI among the UK regions, long periods without the top-tier of government since 2015 still mean key lines of communication and understandings of who is responsible for - or able to make or override - key decisions are being impacted (NIAO, 2022: 27); as one Department official interviewed noted, "they are still being figured out" (Planner-Government06, 2021).

Second, resulting inefficiencies have thus been documented as leading to delays in decisions and missed targets, and uncertainty about what are the constraints and material limits for current or future applications, as well as a "low bar" for quality applications being reviewed (NIAO, 2022: 58).

Skills and capacity to engage and close the loop effectively

The challenges noted above extend to what is recognised as "both a skills and resources perspective" at Department and local council levels (BCC and Bentley, 2022: 4.8). As an example, it is reported through BCC minutes that plan-led intentions of the Planning Act 2011 (2015) for all NI councils to adopt LDPs within 3.5 years will not be met - and may not be met by 2030, which is the 15-year stop end for plans meant to be enacted in 2015 (BCC and Bentley, 2022)

At issue, from a consultation perspective in this quality and skills challenge, are that statutory consultees – many of whom are key to quality information and efficient progress of plans and applications, cannot be compelled to contribute by local authorities because they sit outside local government (NIAO, 2022: 60). The inconsistencies of the new statutory consulting system, which also includes poor results for online access to live applications for the public, impacts on capacity to process applications and capacity to adequately address wider public/non-statutory consultation responses (NIAO, 2022: 67). An example shared via interview (Professional-Director03, 2021) referred to an LDP consultation with local school children in Belfast: When questioned about what had changed or learned for the LDP, the interviewee reported council officers had no direct outcomes available and no follow-up on the workshops back to the schools. With a view on developing an inclusive future built environment - for Belfast 'probably the most important thing to happen in terms of the shaping of [the] city for the next 20 years, 25 years" (Professional-Director03, 2021) - this example highlights how consultation (speaking to people) can be held-up incorrectly as a model of good engagement (speaking with people), based on numbers attending rather than in terms of accountable contributions and outcomes. Limited resources, lacking capacity, and the challenges for professional planners feeling pressured to transform into "professional engagers, are similar to findings of the NIAO and PEP more generally.

> People who are trained to be experts in planning, and they feel like they are - they know the legal processes, they understand place, and they understand how to do to do planning stuff - don't see themselves as professionals in school engagement or engagement at large.
>
> Bring in people who are specialists in engagement, and perhaps even better people who are specialists in engagement around the built environment. And if that's not planners. Okay. Maybe it's not architects. Maybe it's maybe it's with those professions with support.
>
> *(Professional-Director03, 2021)*

> There were a couple of Councils in the early years of community planning, like in 2014-2015, [that] did manage to get spatial planners involved in the early stage of consultation and engagement on the Community Plans. But only a couple of them; that wasn't entirely embraced by the spatial planners. Probably wouldn't have happened at all but for the fact that there's a statutory link between the two.
>
> *(Planning-Adviser08, 2021)*

> People are really sort of disjointed from the process and don't understand where to start. And then once it becomes real in terms of sites they really, really engage and want to participate, but actually, they're making inferences on the opposite curve going down the way. And you want to try and get those things closer together because the more plans progress through that process, the harder it is to change elements of it without drastic action. And or a lot of mitigatory or abortive work is the other side of it.
>
> *(Planner-Council04, 2021)*

> It's very technical, and it can be very complex process, and an awful lot of evidence and volumes of documents, and all that sort of thing. It can be very off putting, even for planners, never mind people who are involved in the planning process regularly; it can be difficult, and it's very time consuming.
>
> *(Planner-Government06, 2021)*

> In engagement or involvement people would help come up with proposals, rather than, "This is what we think. Do you agree or not?"
>
> *(Planner-Housing07, 2021)*

The perspective of commercial developers

Through interviews with a commercial developer with larger projects in Belfast, the view expressed was one of a misconception of private property developers themselves as "the endpoint of financial resource and financial gain" and how there is "a political overlay and a dynamic of the different communities [in Northern Ireland] that you don't find elsewhere"(Commercial-Developer10, 2021).

> **"**
> I think there's a sense from the developer side that, you know, often the sorts of aspirations that local communities might express are not commercially viable, or achievable. So, you know, overall, it feels like an experience of a classic kind of silo experience, where there is a kind of a moment of engagement, but neither side really listens terribly hard to the other's point of view and find it quite difficult to meet in any kind of common ground space. **"**
>
> *(Commercial-Developer10, 2021)*

Challenges for diversity and including changing populations in communities:

The research during the urban room, set out in Section 2, includes a review of changes to Northern Ireland society through 2010 and 2021 census data, which reflects both how much Northern Ireland and cities like Belfast continue to change through natural immigration patterns and through asylum processes. CCQOL research with BCC and charities who have experience with immigration and asylum seekers noted the potential for skills and contributions from rich cultures that could be better identified.

A charity adviser noted challenges for many marginalised groups including BAME persons, despite various stakeholder support, and proposed a number of areas needing more action (Migrant-Adviser05, 2021; Golden, Skoura et al., 2023):

- Addresses cultural norms and bias that might avoid engagement

- Councils and Department engaging beyond organisations, with minority ethnic groups – "to get to know more about them, that doesn't usually happen" (Migrant-Adviser05, 2021)

- Increase council/Department resources for interpreters, signage, and leaflets in different languages to help people understand and engage better

- Address limited resources within stakeholder organisations who, like planners, don't have the capacity to provide for all language interpretation or signage

1.4.2 Opportunities and changing paradigms

There were surprising positive perspectives taken from the inherent fragmentation and challenges of Northern Ireland's still-young two-tier plan system, raised in interviews, which include the potential for more collaboration and conversations between government and local councils in Northern Ireland than is typical in the rest of the UK (Planner-Government06, 2021). There are inextricably unique ties through NI legislation between all councils to "The Department" [DfI] and DfC as well as the built-in statutory mechanisms for required periodic reviews. This means – while currently frustrated by the hiatus in government – that there is scope for ongoing conversations about decision-making boundaries and power-sharing between people who might otherwise not have any planning related interaction. This can also be attributed to the spread of organisations and the overall framework of the original Section 75 networks. There is furthermore, as Planning Engagement Partnership findings show, a greater effort toward "enhancing the quality and depth of community engagement in the planning process" with more conversations across government levels, academics, industry, and third-sector contributors (DfI, 2021c; DfI, 2022b; DfI, 2022a).

Co-production and co-design

Co-production is an increasingly recognised method of consultation as engagement (Rosen and Painter, 2019; Ross et al., 2016; Brownill and Parker, 2010), which is finding traction within the Northern Ireland Community Planning process across local authorities, tiers of regional government, and service partnerships with a noted focus on delivering wellbeing outcomes for citizens and communities (Bradley et al., 2021). These processes and updated models recognise a shift approach to established participation frameworks like "Arnstein's Ladder" (1969), where "Citizen Control" was the top tier, to new versions such as that shown in Figure 5, adapted by the YCYVB researchers, developed by the National Economic Foundation, as promoted by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NCVO, 2021). The latter model promotes Co-Design and Co-Production differently from Arnstein's top-tier, which can arguably over-simplify complex legal and professional knowledge that lies behind planning processes, in favour of the NEF model of "Doing with, in an equal and reciprocal partnership" where knowledge and action can be more mutually beneficial, and recognise the strength of flatter power structures.
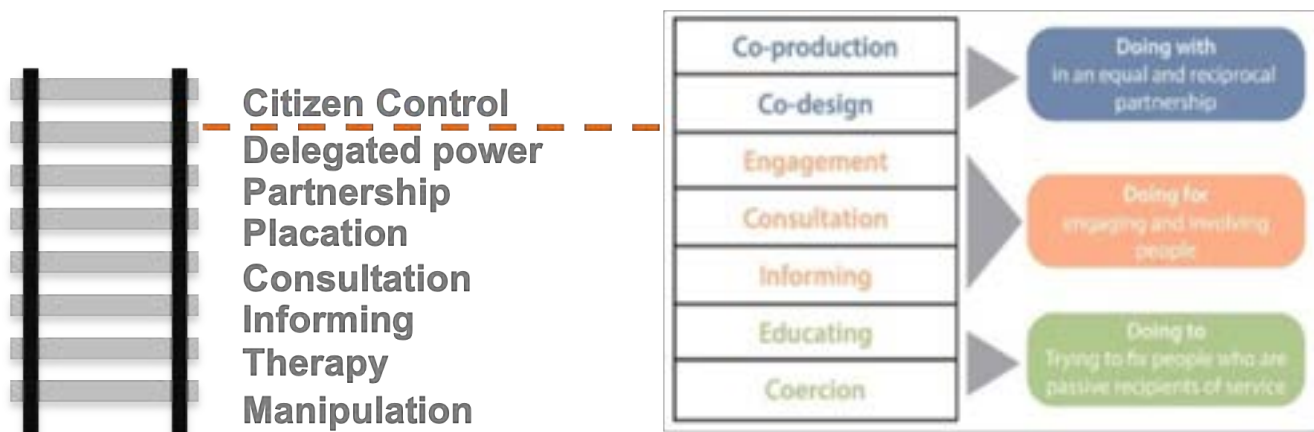
Figure 5: Arnstein's Ladder, right (1969) linked to NEF Co-Production model (NCVO, 2021)

Other approaches promoted in Northern Ireland through DfI's reviews (DfI, 2022a) build on models developed in Scotland, e.g., the Scottish National Standards for Community Engagement, as illustrated in Figure 6, and the International Association of Public Participation's 3 Pillars of Public Participation which promote 1) A Spectrum of Public Participation that defines the public role in any process, 2) Core Values that define expectations and processes themselves, and 3) a Code of Ethics to guide actions and enhance the integrity of processes undertaken (IAP2, 2023).

Figure 6: Scottish National Community Engagement Standards (Voices Scotland, 2023)

Co-production in Belfast: Tactical regeneration and social value

Research through Ulster University with Belfast City Council suggests how community planning and LDP preparation can involve earlier engagement with local people and throughout all stages of delivery, rather than asking 'what do you think' at the end of key stages (Golden, Saul et al., 2023). BCC has, in some areas, experimented with processes that aspire toward greater co-production, though these operate technically outside Spatial Planning processes and Planning Committees. The new approaches developed as "Tactical Regeneration" through the Council's City Growth & Regeneration Committee [CGRC] promote new ways of working and partnering across business and voluntary sectors in response to key threats to the city centre's livelihood from a major fire in 2018 and the lockdowns throughout COVID-19. Tactical Regeneration can be read as an amalgamation of grass-roots informed terms including "tactical-" and "guerrilla-urbanism" (Dean, 2018; Lydon and Garcia, 2015; Hou, 2020)

As one of "six cross-cutting pillars" in the Council's Future City Centre [FCC] Programme, linked to longer-term ambitions of the Belfast Agenda (see above) and Belfast City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy (Reynolds and BCC, 6 April 2022; BCC, 2023a; BCC, 2015), Tactical Regeneration offers opportunities for connections between the city's LDP focused growth & regeneration teams and established spatial planning processes or formal Planning Committee decision making. There are evidenced positive outcomes (and lessons from less successful experiments too) in the balance of how these informal tools for changes-in-use and improved civic activity can produce "proactive, simple and creative interventions that are relatively quick and low cost" and which "can inform long term change" beyond traditional statutory consulting, "including more traders, craftspeople, professional/academic partners, and local neighbourhood groups" (Reynolds and BCC, 6 April 2022: 3.6; Golden, Rafferty et al., 2023).

Children and young people as future leaders and collaborators in Northern Ireland

Since 2015, there are more examples of child-friendly statements at macro level planning policy and in individual micro-scale projects. Northern Ireland's Children's Services Cooperation Act [CSCA] (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2015), set out requirements "designed to improve co-operation amongst Departments and Agencies as they deliver services aimed at improving the well-being of children and young people" (CYPSP, 2022). In terms of health and wellbeing, from a high level, the CSCA defines 8 parameters including economic, environmental, and well-being outcomes reflected in a "Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People" for 2017-2027 Figure 7, that offer areas to target such cooperation.

Figure 7: CSCA 2015- 8 parameters for child friendly wellbeing outcomes (CYPSP, 2022)

In other areas of Northern Ireland government these values and opportunities can contribute to the New Programme for Government [PfG], which promotes principles for "an equal and inclusive society where everyone is valued and treated with respect' (Northern Ireland Executive, 2021), and the draft NIE Children's and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030 for Northern Ireland, which recognises the "contribution which children and young people make to society" (NIE, 2021).

A UK example of initiatives that focus on capacity building within local authorities through greater roles for younger persons – albeit those at a later stage of mid-career in the built environment - is Public Practice, a social enterprise established in 2017 to provide placement programmes with local authorities in England. Public Practice aims to "help build the public sector's capability for placemaking – in its broadest sense" and to help those with built environment skills (young planners, architects and so forth) to "influence every aspect of our everyday environment and to work for society as a whole, not just those that can afford it" (Public Practice, 2023). As a growing model, this route has been proven to help planning and community capacity and resourcing; it could apply in Northern Ireland as well through similar intergenerational co-working and co-learning processes linked to early years education and more effective involvement in local community and LDP process.

Lessons from Your City Voice Belfast

Figure 8: Belfast Urban Room activities at 2 Royal Avenue, a Council-owned venue (YCYVB, 2023)

2.1 Aim and development of the Belfast urban room

The urban room in Belfast, called Your City Your Voice Belfast (YCYVB), was delivered as the final month-long Community Consultation for Quality of Life [CCQOL] pilot during September 2022. Three overarching aims, part of the UK-wide CCQOL research, underpin the collaborative Belfast delivery:

1. To develop new interactive map-based models of community consultation (as more effective, early engagement) through which all people could feel able and comfortable to share their views about what they value in their local areas, to help improve quality-of-life, more easily and safely

2. To provide a publicly accessible and welcoming space in the Belfast City Centre where - working with partners including Belfast City Council and local charitable organisations

3. To host different activities framed around quality-of-life might to open local conversations about Belfast as a changing city with awareness of bespoke local histories and cultures, as well as contemporary aspirations for a diverse sustainable city and wider Northern Ireland region

The CCQOL-YCYVB team has continued to gather feedback and mapping data from its partners and members of the public since September 2022, which form the basis for the following overview, review of outcomes, and recommendations. Analysis provided in the national report is an extract of the more in-depth Belfast Urban Room Local Report, published in June 2023, which includes extensive background, venue, and partnering lessons along with further analysis and graph-based presentations of all survey responses (Golden, Saul, Skoura et al.).

Figure 9: YCYVB Local Urban Room Report, 2023

The CCQOL-YCYVB Room approach therefore also took explicit and early steps to acknowledge and include local issues on history and diversity, and development. The aims of the room, and thus its development, took account – through local engagement - of both existing as well as changing demographics, and challenges remaining from Belfast' ethno-national conflict (The Troubles), and post-conflict urban developments. Part of this process was working with the personal experiences and insights from local network support and using desktop information to establish more current knowledge about 'who' lives, works, and visits Belfast, and the key present-day issues to address.
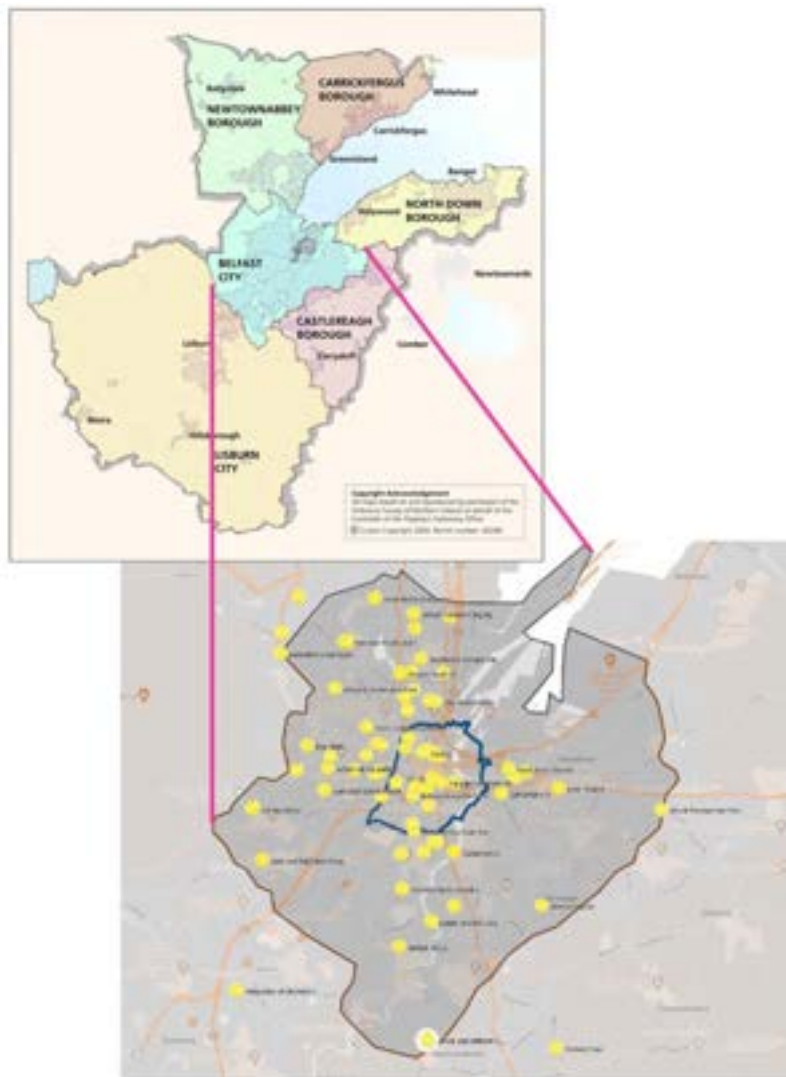

Figure 10: Belfast s and Networks (YCYB, OSNI, Permit 40248, 2023)

2.1.1 Recognising a divided city

An important starting point was the recognition that Belfast's Troubles legacy includes the outworking of the decades long conflict between mainly Catholic-Nationalist and Protestant-Unionist communities, with complex dynamics within these existing populations and a resulting large number of highly segregated neighbourhoods and contested spaces around the city. The extent of conflict also left a city-centre with a much smaller residential population (particularly within the core area highlighted in blue on the map, Figure 10) compared to other UK region cities.

2.1.2 Addressing governance divisions and planning challenges

Another key aspect of setting up the urban room in the city centre was how -since the official end of the Troubles and the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, as set in Section 1 - so many projects and processes of engagement have been fraught with multiple failed attempts at delivering on different masterplans and international developer investment proposals, and the impact that red-lining - identifying entire neighbourhoods for renewal - has on local business and resident confidence in regional or local processes to deliver on their behalf. A wariness influenced lessons that inform the Belfast Urban Room and recommendations arising from the CCQOL research.

> **"**
> **So, if your one experience of consultation is very negative. And then another one, another one, another one, the likelihood of actually engaging in the process in a constructive way, gets less and less each time, until eventually, people just stop engaging. And that's one of the biggest dangers about years, years, and years of sort of problems. "**
>
> *(Professional-Director03, 2021)*

2.2 Background and urban room delivery

"Your City Your Voice Belfast" developed as the theme through several months of pre-discussion with our Local Advisory Group from local and regional government, and from charitable/community organisations. The 2 Royal Avenue venue was a key feature of the rooms organization, design, and ultimate success, including an important role played by Belfast City Council's appointed venue managers MayWe Events Ltd and the local café operators Yallaa CIC , a social enterprise supporting Arab culture in Northern Ireland; both became de facto team members and ambassadors for CCQOL and YCYVB, helping us increase the number of people in our space and who completed our online surveys and quality-of-life mapping.

Figure 11: Right - Location of 2 Royal Avenue in Belfast city centre. Left - 2 Royal Avenue, Listed exterior and interior domed arcade. (Golden, 2022; Google maps annotated by Golden, 2023)

[1] https://www.maywe.co.uk/

[2] https://www.communityni.org/organisation/yallaa-cic

2.2.1 Quality of Life Foundation Framework as a connective thematic approach

Taking on local feedback, Your City Your Voice Belfast incorporated six quality-of-life related themes from a Framework developed by project partner, The Quality of Life Foundation: Control, Health, Nature, Wonder, Movement, and Belonging. The themes formed the core of "Meaning Maps" that became the basis of structured conversations across all of the YCYVB hosted activities, and were also linked to the CCQOL-Commonplaces digital platform for mapping physical locations visitors associated with each theme. The Meaning Maps were also used to gather local perspectives on how the six themes might be interpreted in the Belfast-Northern Ireland context for UK-wide comparison.

Each in-room event (set out below by thematic connection) began with a starter activity to present the CCQOL project and introduce a QOLF Meaning Map along with time for participants to complete the YCYVB-CCQOL website mapping and consultation surveys.

Figure 12: Co-hosted activities and contributions to a QOLF Meaning Map wall (YCYVB, 2023)

Figure 13: YCYVB bespoke banners for Quality of Life Themes (YCYVB, adapted from QOLF, 2022)

2.2.2 Overview and key outtakes

Through a deliberately collaborative and flexible approach, to both its physical space and programme of activities, the YCYVB urban room engaged with over 2000 people within the urban room spaces and activities hosted at 2 Royal Avenue – a listed Belfast City Council owned building, purchased during the COVID-19 pandemic and opened to the public as an experimental meanwhile-use cultural venue. During the YCYVB residency, 2 Royal Avenue itself had over 6,500 visitors through the doors for YCYVB and parallel events hosted by Belfast City Council, or visiting a public café run by a local community enterprise. The urban room itself hosted 16 events in 23 days, working directly with 284 people and over 50 partnering groups from across and beyond the city, and 2383 unique online visitors resulting in 274 survey returns and a total of 460 Quality-of-Life digital mapping pins about Belfast. Events and in-person conversations broached subjects from future housing and shared public spaces to climate change, ageing, youth, and more broadly inclusive and sustainable future development in a rapidly changing city and global society.

2.3   Main events breakdown (05.09.2022-27.09.2022)

Figure 14: Calendar of YCYVBelfast hosted activities, 5-27 September 2022 (YCYVB 2023)

The events hosted within the Belfast Urban Room were curated under a series of themes as follows:

- Culture and arts-focused activities
- Education, professions, and improving planning processes
- Accessibility and diversity
- Local activism - cultural and environmental sustainability
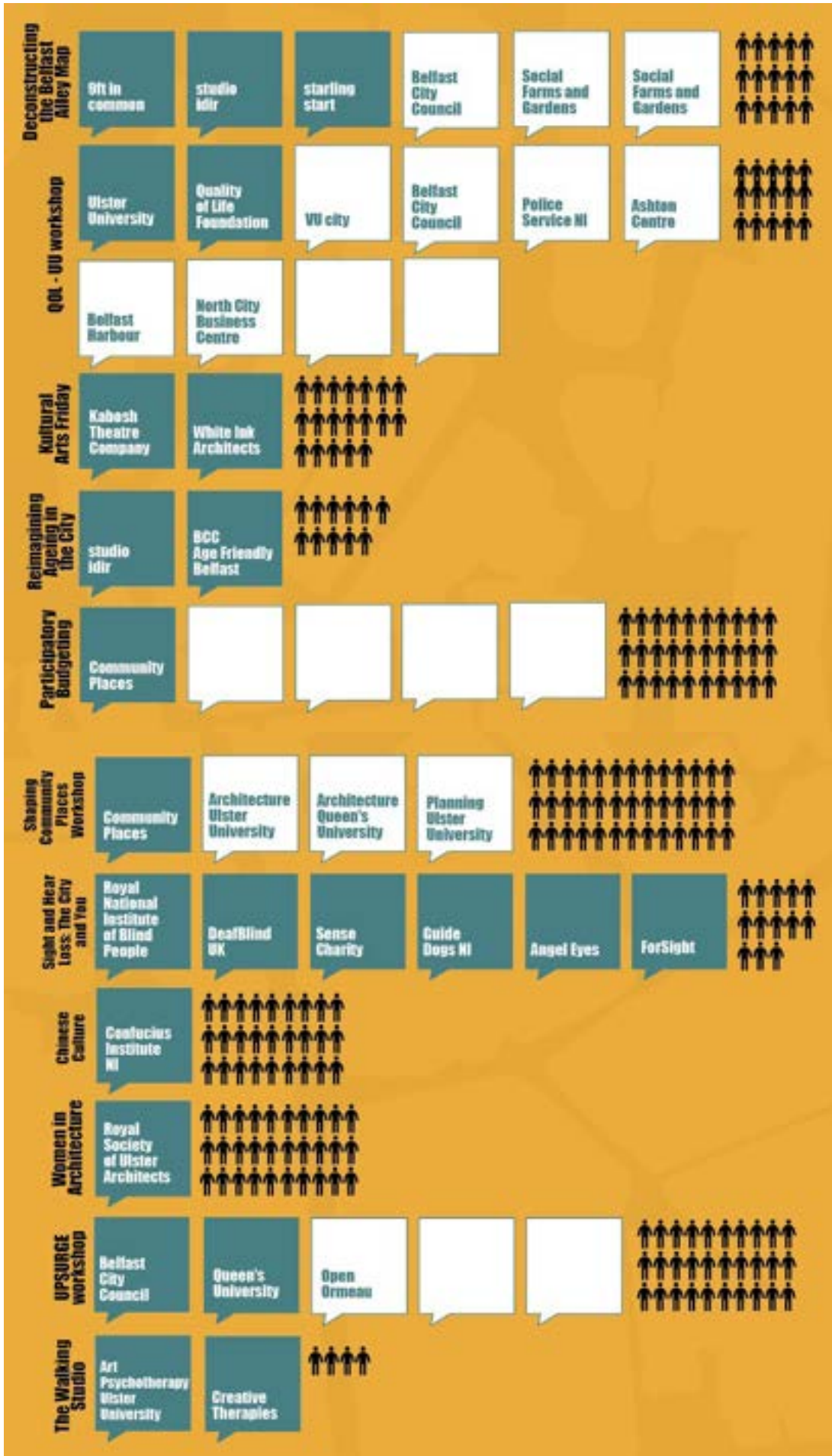
Figure 15: YCYVB engagement activities and participating organisations/attendance (YCYVB, 2023)

2.4 Quality of Life Foundation - Ulster University collaborative workshop

In addition to the topic-related collaborative events with the public and community groups, the Belfast programme included a joint ½-day workshop with Ulster University, focused on the university's role/responsibility to help improve quality of life in the city centre, surrounding neighbourhoods, and beyond - using a new £250million pound Belfast campus extension opened in September 2022 as a case study. The focused application of QOL mapping across events and platforms helped create a unique series of outcomes (examples below, which are examine further for local lessons in the Your City Your Voice Belfast Local Report) and gathered survey data, presented in further sections.

Figure 16: Top-left - QOLF Director M. Morgan; Top-right - PSNI participation; Bottom left-right - QOLF discussion led by UU Prof D. Morrow and UU-QOL focused workshop (YCYVB, 2023)
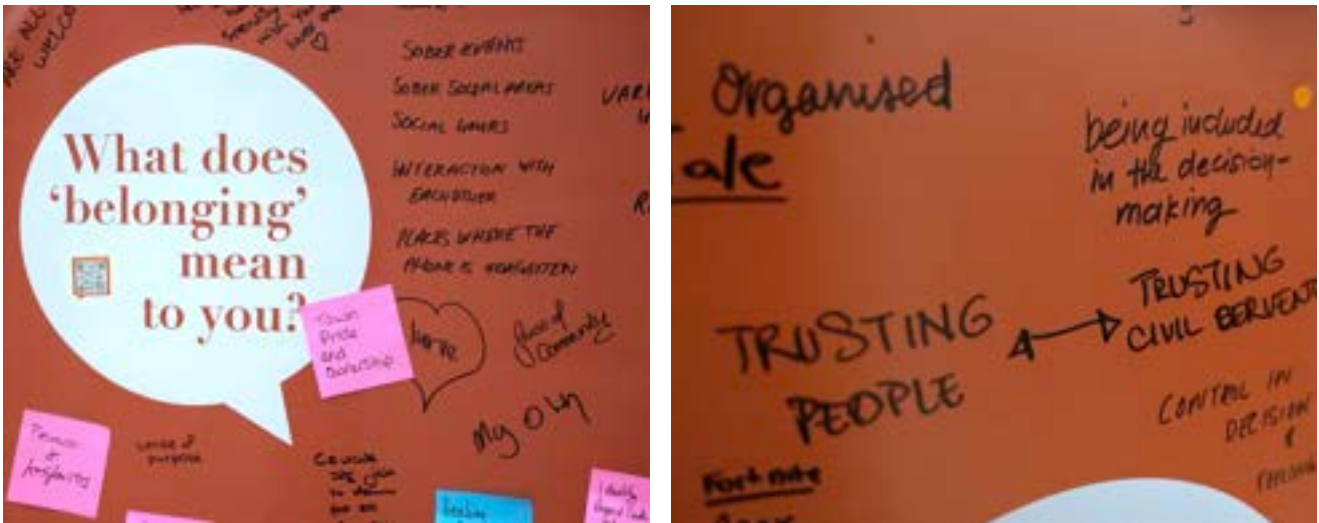
Figure 17: Outtake of YCYVB participant contributions, in-person, on QOLF themes (YCYVB, 2023)

Figure 18: QOL MAP Outtake, YCYVB participant contributions (CCQOL, COMMONPLACE 2023)

2.5 Findings from the urban room - surveys

Findings developed from continuing engagement throughout the research – both during and since the pilot residency in 2022. Digital contributions were gathered and tracked through the Commonplace hosted YCYVB website: https://yourcityyourvoicebelfast. commonplace.is/. This section sets out the results from data collection about the YCYVB urban room itself, and from separated responses to the wider CCQOL consultation survey.
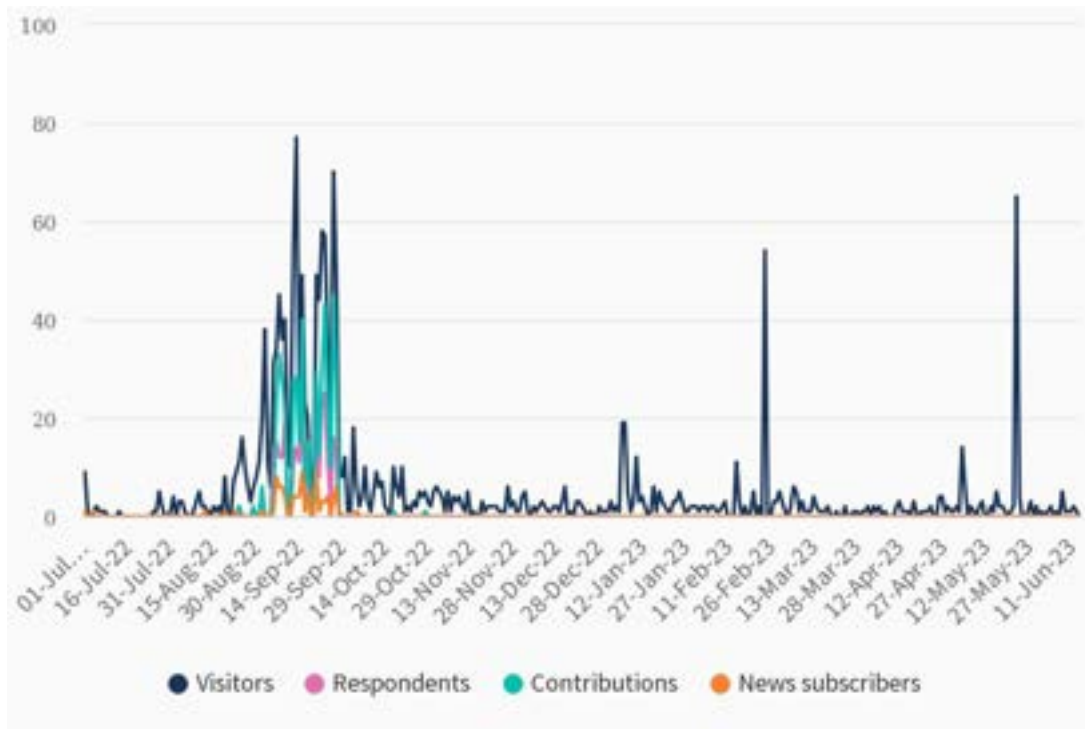
Figure 19: Digital visitors, respondents, and YCYVB contributors (CCQOL, 2023)
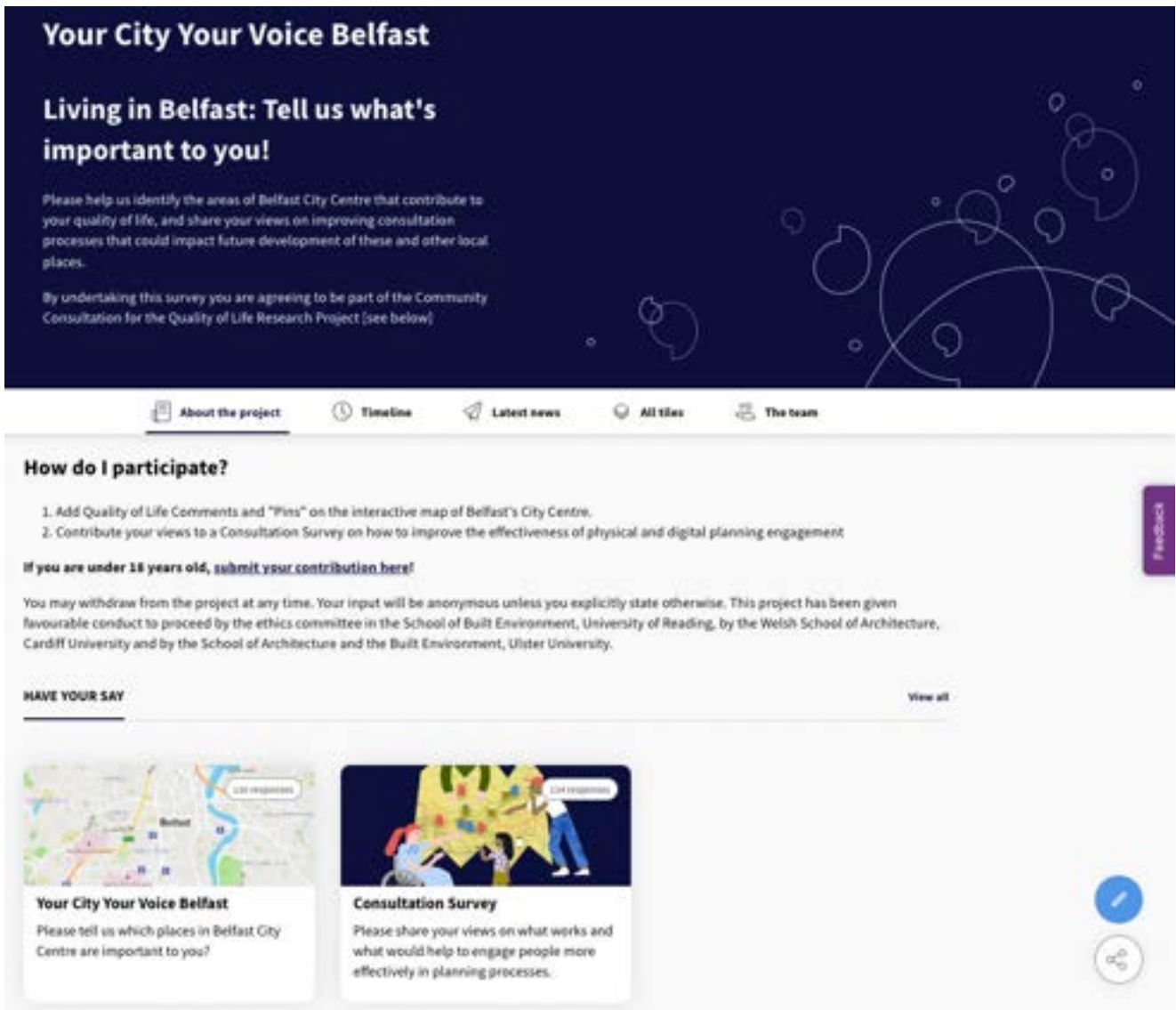
Figure 20: Your City Your Voice website landing page, Commonplace platform (CCQOL, 2023)

A total of 274 survey results were received from people who visited the urban room and engaged with team members or responded directly to the online platform. 25% of respondents stated their reason for visiting was "the people running the urban room", followed by "the events and activities" at 21%, with other factors such as atmosphere and exhibitions tied at 13%, with signage outside at similar numbers; other people visiting the room and signage inside accounted only for 5% each. This public feedback corresponds with reflections from co-hosts and anecdotal feedback about the importance of interactions over purely visual content. From question about visitors connections to Belfast, the highest numbers of respondents stated they lived, studied, or worked in Belfast (21%, 19%, and 16% respectively) ; closely followed by those who shop and use services (tied at 15%); fewer commute through the city (8%), and very few respondents were people on holiday or who own a business (less than 2% each).

2.5.1 NI Census 2021 comparisons:

Northern Ireland undertook an updated census in 2021, published after the close of the Belfast urban room, which contains data compared below with that collected from visitors.

Figure 21: NI Census 2021, Belfast focused population data (NISRA, 2022)

Comparing visitor responses for those who provided age ranges with the previous tables on age for Belfast, which vary slightly in grouping used, there were rough equivalents in a number of areas: 25-44 year olds collectively represented the most urban room visitors at 43%; younger groups (18-24) were highly represented on their own at 33%; older groups 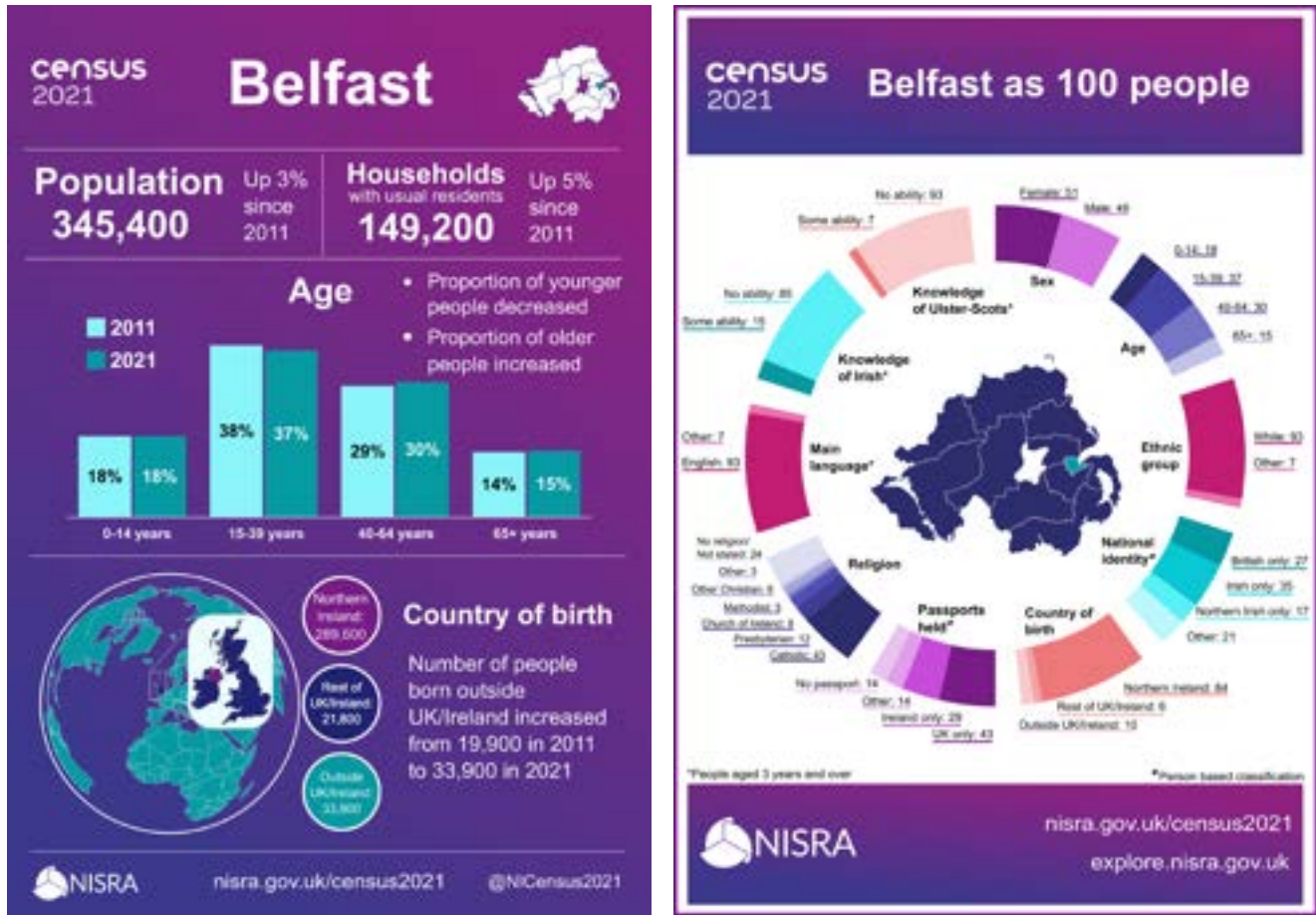were roughly equivalent to the Belfast average at 14% with 45-55 year olds under represented (9%). Under 18 figures were not collected in this research due to data protection arrangements. The average working age visitors is perhaps expected given the very central location of the 2Royal Avenue venue in the central core business and retail areas; this could also help account for younger groups who were regular visitors to the free shared social areas within 2RA, and who most often took advantage of a piano and study alcoves provided by the Council – these latter observations underpin the importance of the partnering arrangement for the Belfast urban room.

In terms of gender, from those who identified themselves, there were a higher proportion of female respondents at 58% compared to 41% for those identifying as male. The higher number of female participants equates to anecdotal numbers taking part in the urban room community/public event, those leading projects, and our partnerships in Northern Ireland, and attributable to focused in-room events such as the Women-in-Architecture night. In other areas, from more limited responses/data, the diversity figures for visitors to the site are above the census average, with more data required to assess actual figures. Additional breakdowns of visitors and responses are detailed further in the Your City Your Voice Belfast Local Report.

2.5.2 Survey results on consultation and the urban room experience:

Findings in this section, and figures below - also extracted from the Local Report - correlate with other room findings about the lack of inclusion most respondents feel in planning consultation, with over 80% of respondents in Belfast stating they had never participated in a planning consultation before and 85% of those persons stating the reason as "I have never been asked". From the earlier pre-urban room outreach to local neighbourhood groups around the city centre, this extremely high number of 'consultees' contrast strongly with anecdotal feedback about people living in the city centre and surrounding neighbourhoods being over consulted. Findings also highlight the importance of face-face places to find out about consultations, and to seek help if needed to access digital platforms.
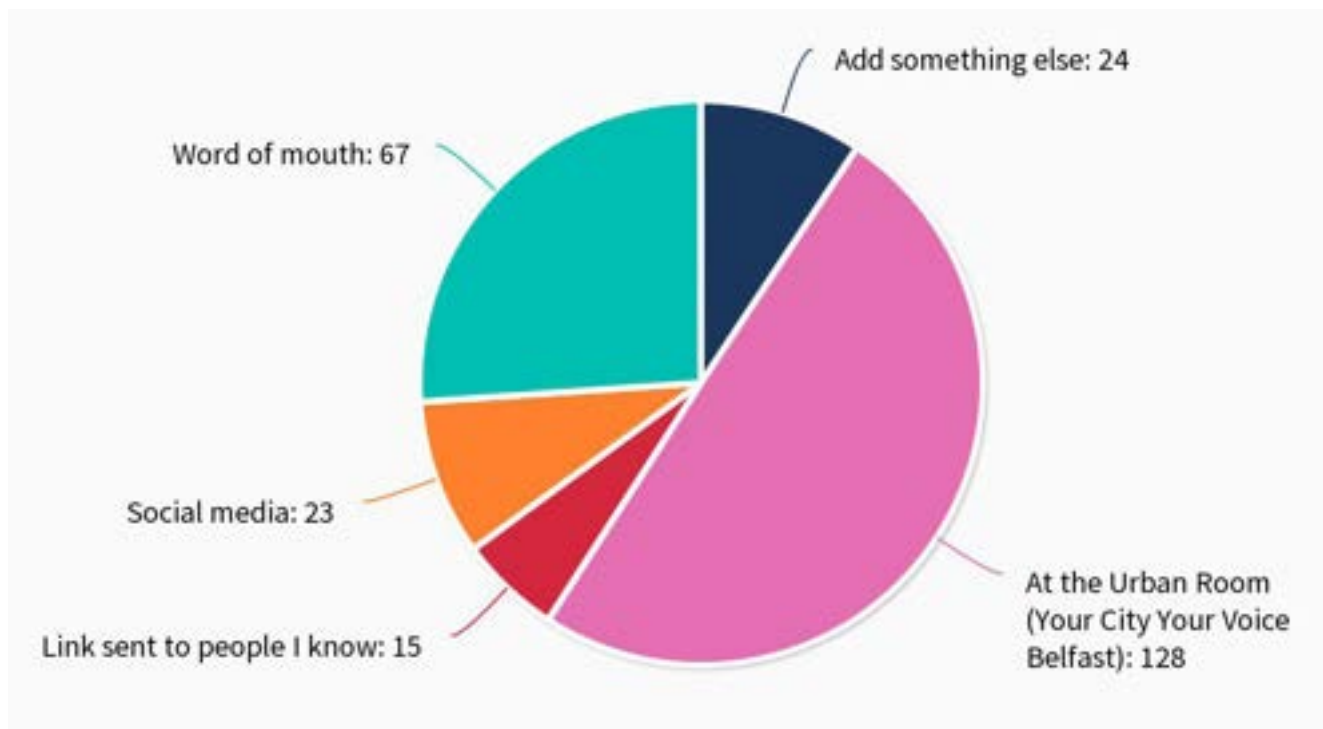
Figure 22: NI: How did you hear about the Quality of Life consultation? (CCQOL, 2023)
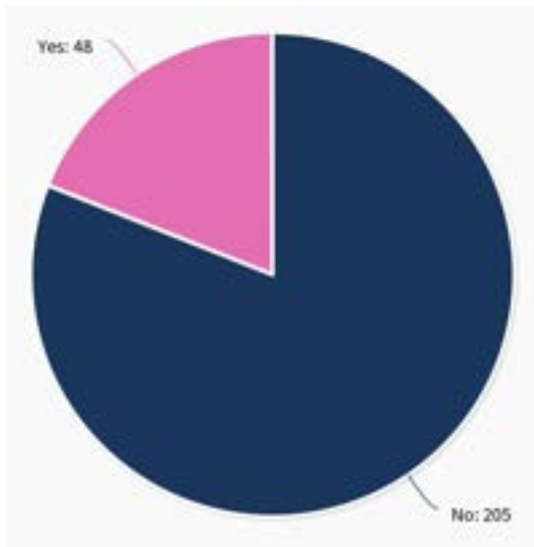
Figure 23: NI: Have you participated in a planning consultation? (CCQOL, 2023)
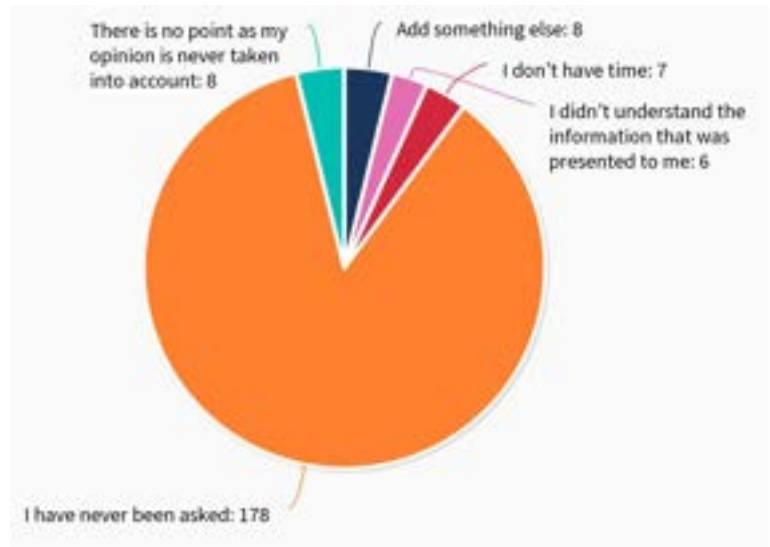
Figure 24: NI: If you answer 'no' [to participating in consultation before], why? (CCQOL, 2023)
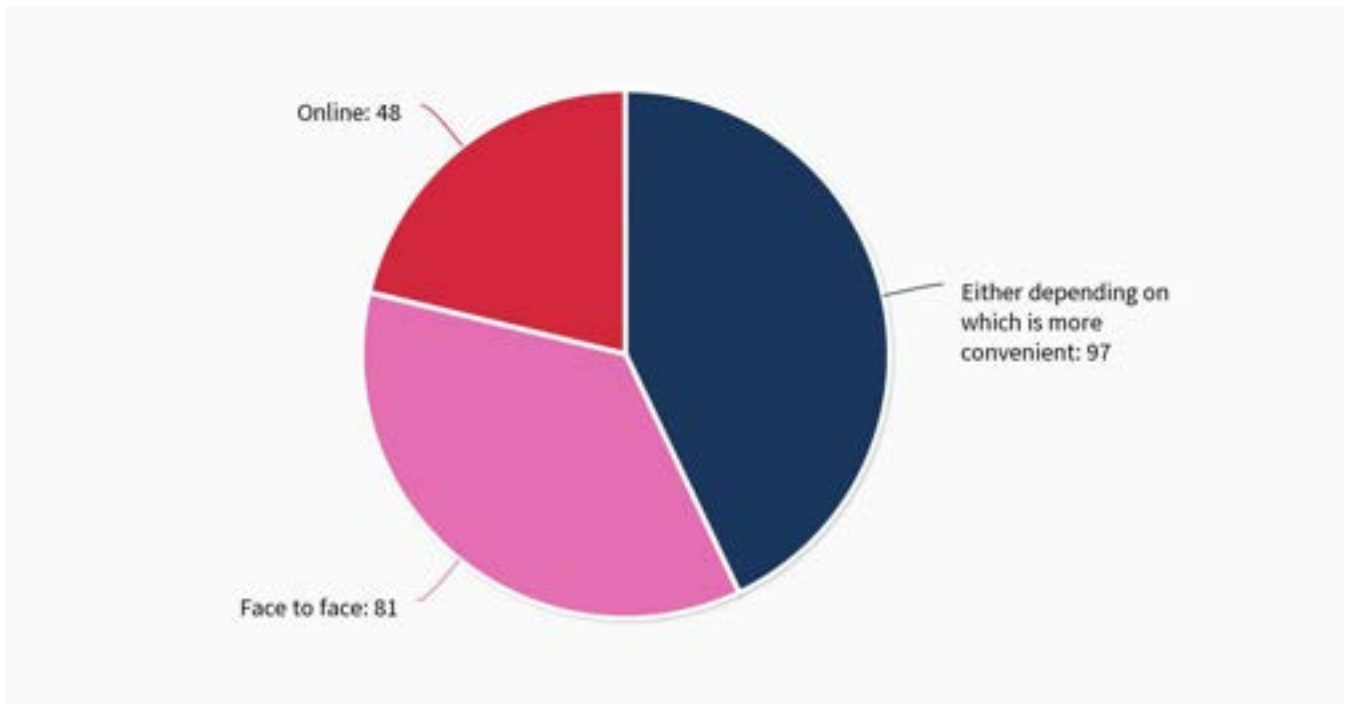
Figure 25: NI: How would you prefer us to consult you on planning decisions? (CCQOL, 2023)

Findings in the tables below show that while face-to-face consultation appears to be preferable, there are slightly more respondents open to online options if they are "more convenient," which is by far the most chosen answer about the benefits of online consultation. However, it is also important to note the importance of both assistive technology and speed as combined factors that suggest there is scope for improved platforms to bridge a gap – especially in a post-COVID19 environment – for greater accessibility to balance the noted benefits of face-to-face engagement. The question of other areas to analyse further are highlighted by responses about what people consider to be their neighbourhood and where they feel they should have an opportunity to comment on planning proposals, especially in the fractured context of Belfast City Centre.

Hear about the opinions of other people: 120

Ability to ask for more information and have things explained to me: 178

Feel part of a community: 102

Add something else: 10

Doesn't require access to a computer or internet: 80
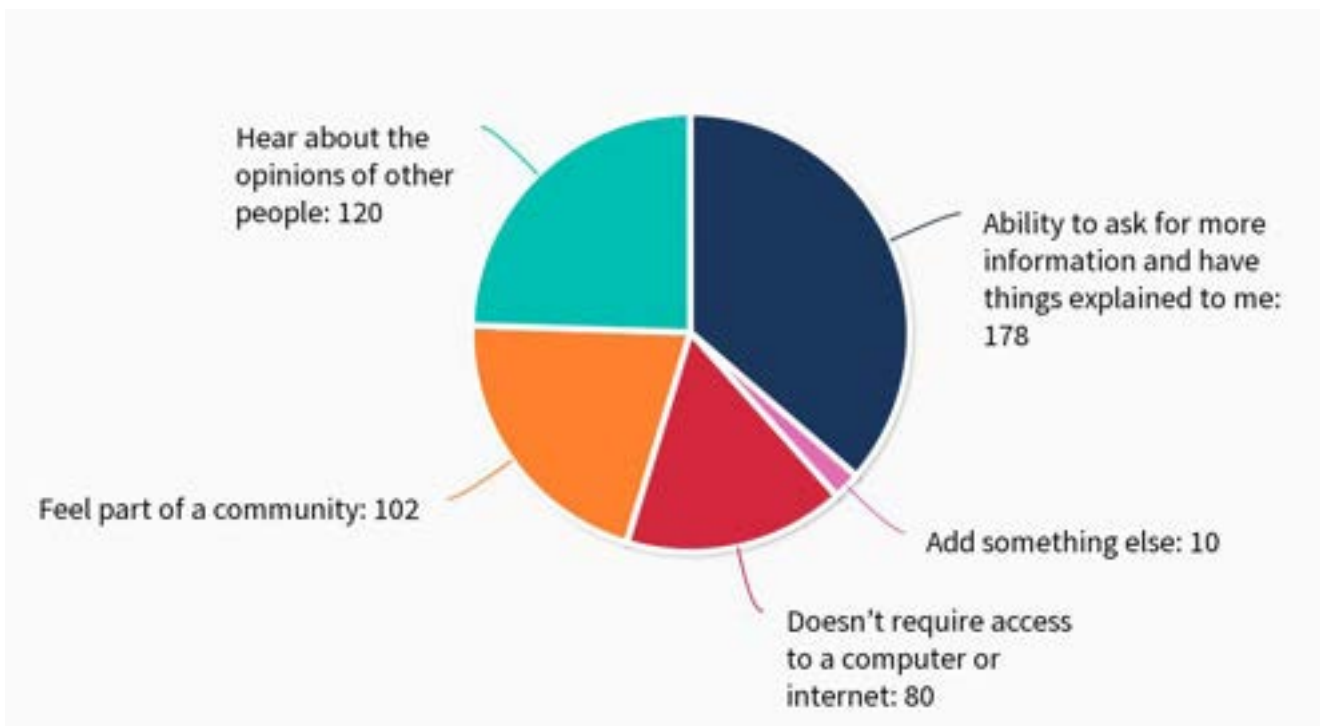
Figure 26: NI: What do you think are the benefits of face-to-face consultation? (CCQOL, 2023)
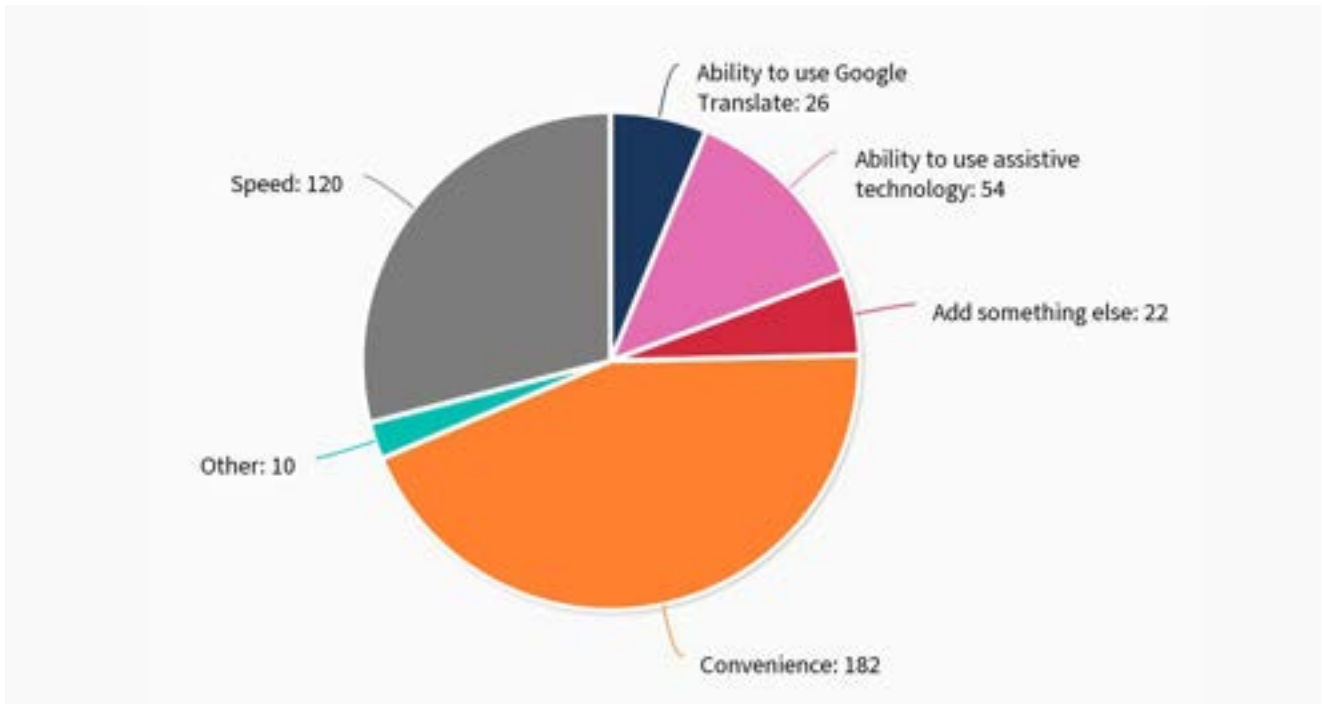
Figure 27: NI: What do you think are the benefits of online consultation? (CCQOL, 2023)
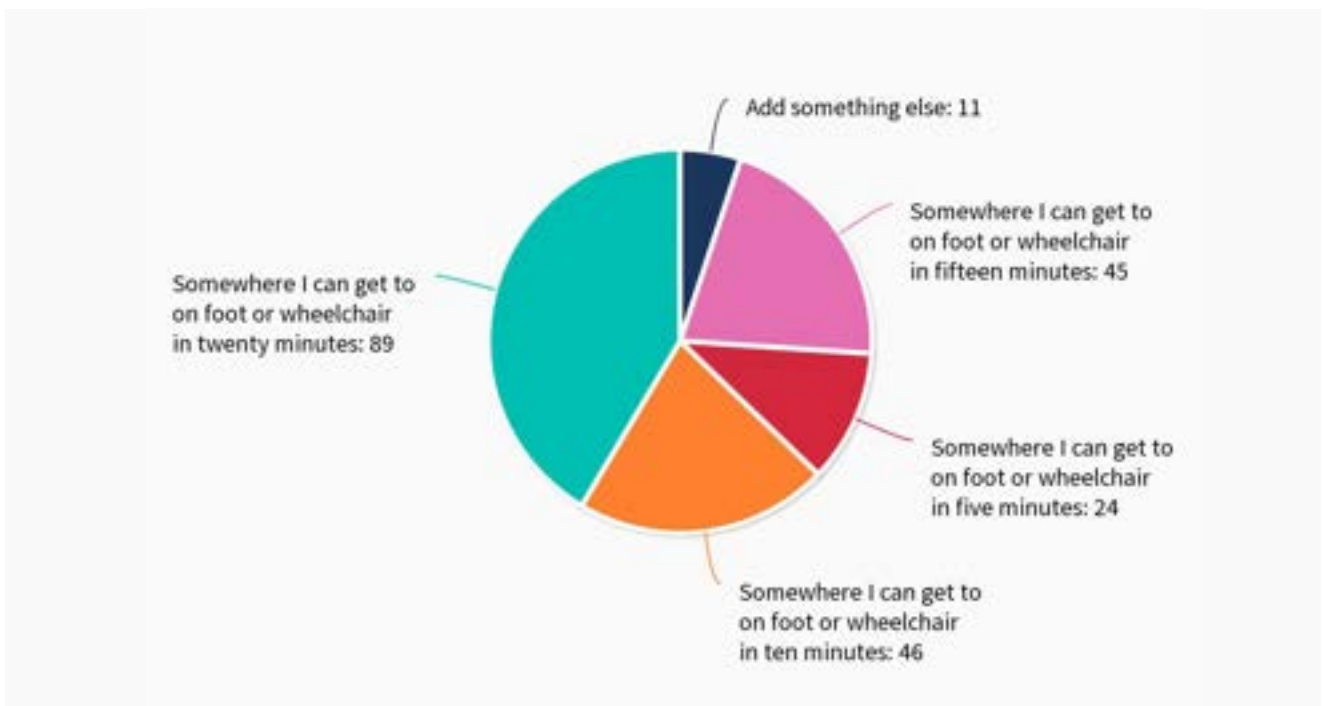
Figure 28: NI: What do you consider to be your neighbourhood? (CCQOL, 2023)
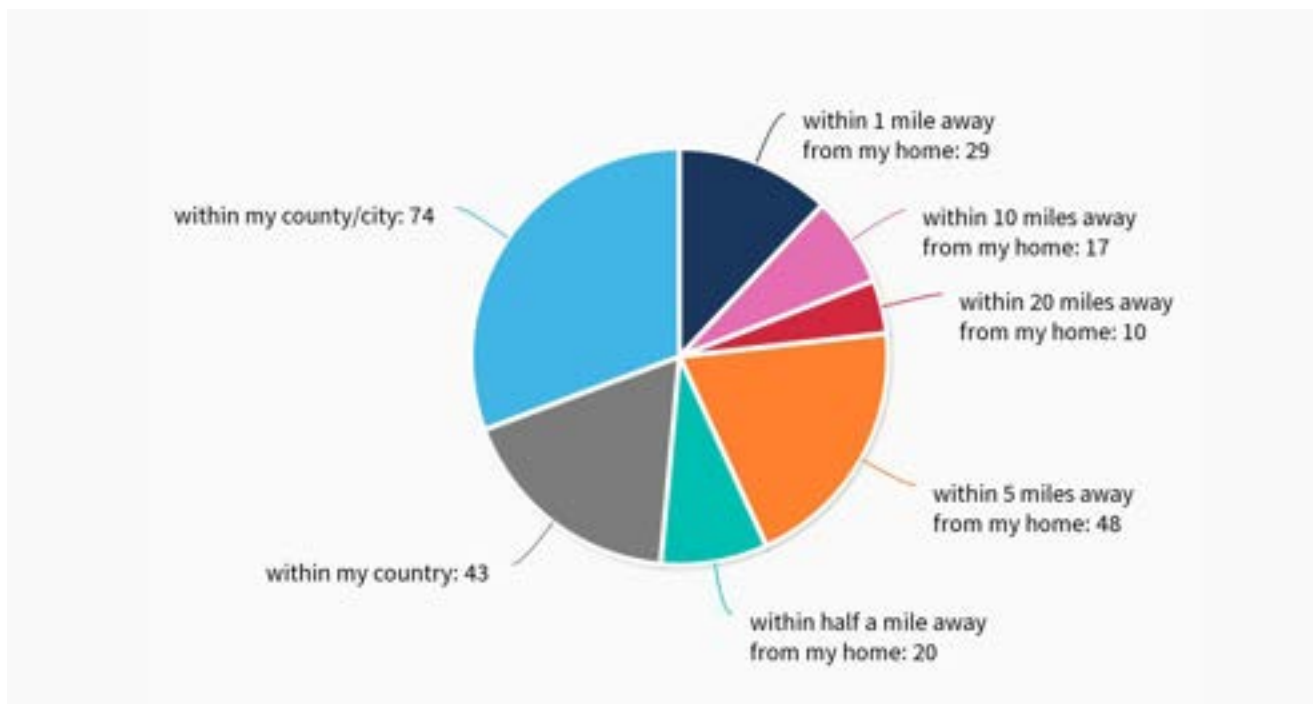
Figure 29: NI: Where do you think you should be able to comment on planning proposals? (CCQOL, 2023)

2.6 Reflections on the urban room

Learning from other rooms and extending the options for the final pilot, YCYVB kept its focus of 'engagement research' (considered different to engaging about a particular topic or development) to the 2RA venue and its immediate surroundings; there were no satellite locations or project ambassadors working further into the city centre than just outside 2RA. This choice was more about gauging, for Belfast, how the research could contribute to Urban Room understandings in this context, contrasting/comparing with examples of consultation/outreach projects across and outside Belfast. As collective effort to gather lessons, the following final outtakes from the Local Report focus on reflections from supporting staff (Ambassadors), lessons from adapting to the physical 2RA space provided by Belfast City Council, and the use of physical tools to gauge meaning on the CCQOL themes during the month-long urban room residency along with external feedback and section on important processes in place to continue conversations throughout the research – with opportunities to keep learning and developing impacts in future activities.

2.6.1 Project ambassadors

YCYVB Ambassadors were vital to the success of both the urban room and digital data collection. Working in shifts with the project Research Associates and Community Partnership Specialist as well as the academic co-investigator/Belfast lead, the Ambassadors spent their time primarily interacting with the public – whether during organised events or impromptu conversations with people viewing our exhibits, maps, or other activities. As both the 'face of the project' and operators of our digital tablets, their knowledge, patience, and support for visitors to engage with our Quality of Life maps and consultation surveys ensured our returns provide a robust snapshot of views for our findings.

2.6.2 Flexibility: A non-enclosed approach to urban 'rooms'

Findings from Belfast pilot research suggest that the central location, dynamic and shared space of our Urban Room at 2 Royal Avenue succeeding in extending the reach of our project to people who would not otherwise engage in a consultation as presented in the previous survey results. These findings and important additional feedback below contribute to collective understandings and recommendations in Section 3.

Sharing 2RA brought significant benefits to the urban room model. MayWe Events Ltd, partners and the 2RA venue managers on behalf of Belfast City Council, facilitated a safe space with a diverse programme of events that ensured a regular footfall separate to our YCYVB-CCQOL hosted activities. The 2RA building staff, security, and volunteers, effectively became ambassadors for the urban room signposting people to our exhibition and surveys.

Key to this aspect working was having one fixed area as a minimum constant for the urban room within the building – a daily 'staff' area and display space for our project information, especially our Quality-of-Life Meaning Map and project information; a small area for admin that could be easily concealed behind lightweight banners/screens was particularly helpful to facilitate having an Ambassador/Co-Investigator base during each day. Additional wall-floor space was also important for more 'permanent' exhibitions (collaborations with local artists, craftspersons, university programmes, and community groups); this aspect should be considered early when agreeing urban room allocation with property owners/manager and with external individuals and organisations who can lend content and may seek assurances for secure display that can be value to everyone. Finally, in such circumstances where there is no 'front door' or defined room with shutters, access to a secure storage area for the urban room duration is required (provided by MayWe in 2RA); the size should suit the types of equipment that a given urban room needs that might be left out of hours, including tablets and chargers or anything with monetary, personal or project research value/data.

2.6.3 Meaning maps – Physical language tools compared with geographic mapping

As set out in Section 2.2, YCYVB employed the Quality of Life Foundation's Framework as a central tool for visitor to add their thoughts in person about each of the six QOL themes. This approach was untested in the urban room and chosen due to the specific nature of early feedback on setting up the project in Belfast. Surprisingly at first, more contributions were applied to our 6 posters than to the physical map, despite being in the same adjacent space. The analysis of this outcome from the first few live activities led the project team to increasingly focus on this area of the Urban Room as the feedback was that language, the terms that can often get taken for granted (including "consultation" and "community" themselves) need an explicit space (in both process and display) to highlight nuances that might be regional, cultural, and personal. The Meaning Maps as they came to be known provided a return in knowledge for future iterations and in recommendations herein.

Taking a sample of the themes: Control had contributions showing interpretations ranged from very specific physical development issues to individuals being able to trust others and being trusted by others in decision-making, and to the consequences of control and ownership on other QOL aspects. Nature, as another example from written feedback, had comments ranging from the physical aspects of the city to people focusing on "the nature of other people" as most important.

> *Having people there to engage and chat to people, especially in that setting where it wasn't necessarily people who were interested in planning... to build that kind of Community ownership, you need to have that kind of inter-activeness, you need to have the workshops...that programme of events and activity, and associate it with the urban room to build trust with communities and then to be able to build those relationships. If they are only viewed as information points, with visuals, it's just not enough.*

2.7 Closing the loop and keeping conversations continuing

Figure 30: YCYVB QR Code (2023)

Closing the loop is a vital part of improving how consultation evolves toward more effective, and longer-term engagement, helping avoid issues raised with consultation fatigue and repeatedly contributing to policy and project developments without further information. As part of the Belfast approach, a variety of online means helped to keep both the public and those who signed up with email permission informed of progress and project outcomes.

Recommendations from Belfast

Introduction

The following sub-sections set out recommendations from Belfast for local and national consideration. The lessons from each of the four regions contributes to the outlined proposals, benefitting from the successive and collaborative nature of sharing experiences between the research teams about urban rooms, online surveys, mapping exercises, and process of collecting feedback to shape each iteration and local reporting. As Section 1 also highlights, delivering more effective community engagement is widely recognized across numerous research and policy resources at local to international levels. There will therefore be many aspects of the local lessons and context specific recommendations that apply nationally, even internationally, and which benefit from collective efforts to help improve the way people in all geographic contexts, cultures, ages, varied experiences with planning and development can have more effective roles in shaping environments across all scales of rural to urban settlements.

> **In most functions of government and decision making, consultation tends to be the method that's predominantly used. That, for me, is a method where someone triggers an opportunity for others, usually the public, to respond. And so that dynamic for me raises questions around the power structures, who's framing the conversations and designing the arrangements that shape that consultation.**
>
> *(Planner-Academic01, 2021)*

3.1 Local remmendations and adaptations

3.1.1 Location, Location, Location(s): Consider urban rooms as pop-in vs pop-up places

An urban room as a hub or a dispersed asset is a choice that has no right or wrong, and will vary according to the size and geographic/ community diversity that an urban room is intended to serve. However, whether stand-alone or part of a larger venue/institution, an urban room that provides a centrally accessible location can evolve over time and become a recognised place to access help, advice, and referrals to other resources in addition to hosting community activities. A fixed location might also help connect across neighbourhoods and allow different – perhaps even separated and changing – communities to share lessons over-time that can (re)affirm common quality-of-life perspectives. When alongside satellite pop-up rooms, YCYVB findings suggest benefits from links to a fixed location with a long-term overview of city/region-wide projects and networks, along with the benefit of archives of past projects/lessons to help reflect on/prepare for future operations.

3.1.2 Adapt to permanence and flexibility to deliver successful consultative spaces

Stand-alone urban rooms often face challenges of sustaining long-term physical premises (allowing for rents, utilities, staffing, project management, and so forth); challenges reflected in the history of peripatetic premises and urban room variations that have struggled to remain in operation UK-wide. 2 Royal Avenue lessons suggest a shared venue can relieve pressures for daily operations and costs; without lying empty due to associated activities, a shared 'room' with a small permanent display can benefit from ongoing cultural and community uses while supporting effective use of resources for specific planning engagement directed activities on set-days or as important issues for development arise. Such an arrangement requires partnerships with venue operators including councils, charities, and academic institutions with overlapping interests and other means of covering major overheads.

3.2 National recommendations

3.2.1 People are central to building and then maintaining interest and trust

This may seem obvious, but socially-distancing and changing methods of hybrid engagement highlight how important it is to keep a focus on people as key to successful consultation spaces - those viewed as more than information points with visuals or digital hubs on their own (noting the benefits of hybrid online and physical spaces). People are also important in building community ownership and trust in an urban room as an honest broker of information; co-production and training through workshops and events can also contribute to maintaining trust and closing the loop.

3.2.2 Allow time for casual conversations (alongside programmed activity)

Lessons applied to YCYVB about programming fewer activities each day opened conversation time (different to continuous programming or project-focused workshop discussions). When researchers and supporting ambassadors engaged more informally with visitors, it often turned out those persons were interested in contributing to local decision-making but might have found more traditional development consultation spaces intimidating, were not sure how to approach those in the room, or might not initially have thought they had an interest or enough experience in planning.

3.2.3 Be open to everyone (by choosing your development partners and themes carefully)

From previous urban rooms and our networking in Belfast, YCYVB research found that consultation spaces associated with specific building projects and council policy/regeneration proposals in Belfast contributed to wariness of new spaces perceived as 'yet another pop-up' or survey project; the lesson being that local people might not engage in an urban room if the consensus (word of mouth being key to trust-building) was that such a space represented/gathered data for developers and/or government Departments. Early local networking, vital to any project, is especially important for urban rooms seeking to establish a welcoming shared space (different from a neutral space) to become aware of context-specific challenges (explicit or implicit histories) for venues and sponsors.

3.2.4 Contingency planning: Allow for unexpected/expanded conversations

Contingency planning for urban rooms means avoiding consultation blinkers and barriers; remembering people are the core focus. Being open to everyone also means explicitly seeing networks beyond in addition to groups most willing to engage or who most typically speak out on development issues. Some will also not wish to engage, however, with trust building over time, new voices, or groups of interested parties and partnerships can emerge or be heard. For true widening participation to occur and be sustained, it is important to be prepared to seek out unexpected insights or challenges with people who might mistrust existing processes as well as those who are new to or are rarely asked to take part in planning consultations. Be prepared to adapt physically and programmatically to such circumstances (new events, different layouts, lighting, support measures, etc), and adapt feedback measures to connect keep new voices in the loop.

3.2.5 Adapt arts-driven methods for open-ended early engagement

Cultural and arts-based methods are not new to consultation, nor to the challenges of being co-opted (or perceived as such) within commercial or government development; they can be questioned by funders/partners for 'value for money' compared to traditional forums or workshops. This recommendation is therefore based on both YCYVB urban room lessons and prior research promoting arts-based engagement (performative and interactive) methods referred to as "activentions" - early stage engagement tools using low-cost, short-term, and often 'less polished' interventions (installations, performances) in public spaces. Findings suggest such approaches can be rigorously programmed while promoting less choreographed interactions with the public; excellent value in opening-up opportunities to talk with wider/harder to reach audiences (Golden, S., 2014).

3.2.6 Pay attention to language and local meaning: terms, tools, and technical speak

Experience with Quality of Life Meaning maps, word clouds in surveys, and many conversations during the CCQOL project pilots, revealed how language – vernacular and professionally derived terms are not universally understood or transferable. This aspect of consultation and research can often get taken for granted; working through meaning needs an explicit space (in both process and displays) to highlight and capture nuances that might be regional, cultural, and/or personal, and which can be returned as knowledge for future iterations. Paying attention to language is, importantly, not a top-down recommendation; it recognises co-learning and capacity building within and in-between all public, professional, academic, and policy levels.

3.2.7 Create room with more planning education and capacity focused spaces/activities

From the research, different types of urban rooms and consultation processes are typically set up around specific themes, projects, and aspirations to unpick or discuss set themes. This YCYVB finding from the pilot stage feedback and observed interactions, suggests that an important function of more permanent urban rooms would be to help others learn (build their capacity) about the unfamiliar technical language, processes, and tools that are important to understand and to comment effectively on development proposals or policy. These tools are already employed, and have been for decades, by groups such as CTA (Community Places in Northern Ireland); the urban room can provide a nexus for such activity – linking groups more directly with resources of government and academic institutions.

3.2.8 Develop youth leadership in planning and community settings

Create more youth-focused pathways to gain exposure, knowledge, and confidence in planning processes, whether such exposure is linked to a career path or not. Move from consulting younger people to engaging their valuable lived experience in a rapidly changing globally connected context. Integrate early engagement to later training or placement programmes (building on existing social enterprise models) that connect younger people, people at university, and those at other stages of their 'career' or life trajectory to planning processes across public, private, and voluntary sectors. Develop these programmes with more support from and resources to local academic, voluntary, and other civic institutions. Diversify youth outreach and promote deeper skills returning to local communities, thereby driving more long-term effective community engagement. New roles and best practice should emerge to support intergenerational capacity-building, sustainable leadership, and long-term partnerships (aligning with UN SDGs) toward all of the above inclusive quality-of-life goals.

> "There's just a lot, there are skilled people, those who understand communities, you know, who work with those communities, some of them are quite good at facilitating community engagement. Some of whom we've worked with over the years, in the community planning context, you know, but there's no connection between that expertise and the expertise that spatial planners have.
>
> *(Planning-Adviser08, 2021)*

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Interview, Planner-Academic01 (2021) Interview-CCQOL-01: Planner-Academic

Interview, Planner-Council04 (2021) Interview-CCQOL-04: Planner-Council

Interview, Planner-Government06 (2021) Interview-CCQOL-06: Planner-Government Department.

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Abbreviations:

BCC	Belfast City Council
DAERA	Department of Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs
DfC	Department for Communities
DfI	Department for Infrastructure
EU	European Union
LDP	Local Development Plan
NI	Northern Ireland
NICS	Northern Ireland Civil Service
NIEA	Northern Ireland Environment Agency
OFMDFM	Office of the First and Deputy First Ministers
PAC	Planning Appeals Commission
PACC	Pre-Application Community Consultation
PAD	Pre-Application Discussion
PAN	Planning Advice Note
PfG	Programme for Government
PPS	Planning Policy Statement
RDS	Regional Development Strategy
SPPS	Strategic Planning Policy Statement