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Constructive, Collaborative, Co-Creative: What Consultation Could Look Like

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Implementation

Constructive Collaborative Co-Creative - What Consultation Could Look Like

The citizens of Dublin have in recent times become increasingly aware and motivated by their experience of living in community / distinct neighbourhoods and of the contemporary issues facing them, around progressing standards of planning and issues of equity and respect in the design and creation of sustainable communities.

It has become very apparent that people's 'sense of place' and of the collective responsibility felt to both input to and help shape the ecology of the community is now at an all-time high. There are new signs of a developing consciousness and a revived sense of community duty to make neighbourhoods – both existing and planned– places where homes of quality and a safe, welcoming and environmentally progressive spirit, is matched by appropriate access to social, cultural, recreational infrastructure and efficient transport options.

However, there is also a regrettable, growing sense of disenchantment evident within the broad community sector in Dublin (incorporating residents' associations, development agencies, local environmental, heritage and cultural, arts and sporting organisations) and a palpable frustration at the limited, inconsistent nature of the existing planning and consultative practices operating throughout the city.

This sense of disaffection is felt especially acutely by residents within the South-Central Area of Dublin 8, where changing iterations of regeneration plans, new local strategic and development plans, unprecedented large scale housing initiatives and other ambitious linked transport, tourism and local amenity developments were shaped – in the lead up to and throughout the period of the Pandemic – with scant regard for the sensibilities and circumstances of identified / designated communities.

Paradoxically - there is also a notable appetite within the community to move away from the long practiced, repetitive, and oftentimes adversarial forms of public complaint, lobbying and protest culture. It is

nowadays apparent that in their cumulative sense of learning, leadership development and emerging forms of dialogical practices – that particular communities – are surpassing the history of negative attrition attached to such practices, and particularly so in Dublin 8.

The critical and popular requirement now is for the evolution of positive forms of co-design and collaboration – whether between City Council and Communities, or the proposers of major development and communities - which should rest upon the experience of existing **‘good practice models’** and ongoing, in-depth social research that has long since provided a compelling case for a new transformative approach. Less conflict, confrontation and box ticking - more co-creation, collaboration and listening.

In recent times however the City Council Executive has persisted with a clearly flawed, arm’s length, overtly technical and poorly communicated / mediated relationship to concerned communities and citizen organisations.

The pressing issue now – for all our sakes – must surely be to reform and make ‘fit for purpose’ a new standard of consultative practices. To set out to incrementally reform the prevailing, outmoded City Council practices which are commonly referred to as: “defensive, expensive, illogical, predestined, distant, lip service, tokenistic, secretive, and often with a fixed agenda.”

The imperative therefore is to transcend this cultural cul de sac and set a standard which must then pervade all consultation within the planning framework.

To impress upon the City Council the importance of prioritising consultative and co-design measures, underpinned by a clear policy commitment and as well as required resource allocations to help catalyse new thinking, collegiality, and common endeavour - through applied research, exacting standards of training and intentional capacity building measures.

In this manner the values, principles, key features, actioning, monitoring and review of new, innovative forms of consultation, co-design, and collaboration with the community sector, would constitute a shared, disciplined and enforcing process, that all could be proud of.

Dublin both deserves and should thrive through participating in this long overdue form of innovative practice. Just as in our gradual emergence from the Covid pandemic - there are fresh, evidential shifts in critical thinking related to a range of individual, community, and societal matters. We are already in the midst of profound change and necessary adaptation – so how quickly might we summon the necessary courage and fluency to commence our collective journey?

For we are now unquestionably in a world made smaller, where issues of interconnectedness, interdependence, the responses to the fragility of our environment - and the necessity to act in increasingly more honest, directly informed, and cooperative ways - is the new reality?

Surely these signs of gradual awakening within society and emerging instincts towards forging mutually cooperative actions for the common good – makes it imperative that future shared visioning, be countenanced and engaged with by new progressive forms of leadership and governance?

In these times is it not also crucial to bring strong emphasis to the importance of both the Public Sector Duty and other Human Rights and Equality measures, with related legislation and statutory obligations, already adopted by

Dublin City and incorporated within its Corporate Strategic Plan. These measures make explicit the purpose, qualities and benefits attaching to methodically designed and enabling measures for citizens and communities - to engage centrally within urban planning and the breadth of cultural, socio-economic determinations related to the creation of sustainable communities. There is therefore a compelling set of legal, ethical, and practical operational realities incumbent upon the City – in its current drafting of the impending Dublin City Development Plan 2022-2028 – to consider making this particular outline proposal a core element of the main thrust and ambition of the Plan.

A PLAIN PROPOSITION TO DUBLIN CITY COUNCIL

Our proposal to the Council is to lead out on the development of a best practice model of meaningful model of collaborative, co-creative consultation.

It is recognised from the outset that a fundamental shift in attitude and cooperative practices, will take a considerable time investment, fit for purpose structures and adept guidance. It follows that this outline proposal to the City Council has a set of seven incremental features:

1. To establish a Pilot Project in Dublin 8 – taking full countenance of the specific planning processes underway in the constituent communities and adjoining areas that impact on same
2. That an appropriate convening body or consortium be charged to operate within the Community Sector (including residents associations) and interface with City Council (e.g.: the Dublin South City Partnership, KIN – the Kilmainham Inchicore Network, Dublin South City Coop, or equivalents) and that the unique professional expertise of CAN – Community Action Network – and their long-established practices in Dublin 8 related to progressive consultative processes and the development of sustainable communities be engaged with from the outset.
3. That relevant section(s) within Dublin City Council (including planning, architecture housing, environment, culture – arts, community – recreation, tourism – heritage, local economic development, equality, and social inclusion) be configured into suitably constituted research and development entity, in which to consider the rationale, primary features and characteristics of this proposal.
4. To be followed by establishing a clear working protocol and shared terms of reference with whatever convening body is determined to be the optimum within the community sector to initiate and coordinate a local Dublin 8 engagement with City Council.
5. Establishing a clearly defined partnership approach to -timeframe; independent and linked interdisciplinary roles; appropriate resource levels; co-designed research and learning initiatives; a commitment to crafting an initial model of City / Community consultation and co-design; to implement same; establish an independent review and evaluative process; and record, publish and disseminate the findings of the pilot project.
6. The design and operation of a sequence of both Civic Offices and community-based workshops – within a broader set of designated areas in Dublin – in which to introduce and illustrate the nature of the evolving model. This step would ideally link to related education and training experiences for City Council councillors, staff, and community sector representatives – on a consistent ongoing basis.
7. Thereafter the replication and testing of key learnings and resulting organisational frameworks, within which to deepen and consolidate the emerging, contemporary consultative and co- design practices.

In conclusion, the zeitgeist and mood within the city is unquestionably disturbed. People are experiencing this as an aberrant and depressing flux – yet it is also beginning to drive a compelling momentum towards re-examining the recognisable democratic deficits within our urban lives and to actively seek practical and effective redress.

For the majority of Dubliners this communal disenchantment is most clearly reflected in the harshness of the housing crisis, with its ever-increasing dimensions of needs and apparent poor handling by the relevant government departments, related statutory bodies and local authorities. This is felt most acutely in those communities officially designated as disadvantaged and awaiting properly realised regeneration plans; to rent strapped students; young workers who continue to live with their family of origin; couples with children who cannot afford the inflated market rates to secure a home, and in particular, the acutely vulnerable and homeless people of our city – when examined holistically is an alarming vista, within which people are often left questioning - who in fact the city is for.

Latterly, the spectre and suspicion of what presents as developer led planning, speculative international investment fund practices and recent Central Government expediency in establishing the LDA – Land Development Agency, with unprecedented powers of coercing land / housing dynamics, has caused a further level of anxiety and stress within ordinary families, young people, and particularly less affluent communities.

So, notwithstanding extant consultations - at various levels within the Council - there is a view that the system is excessively complex and impenetrable to the ordinary citizen.

There is an ever widening disconnect, compounded by the sense that commercial interests or third parties are being prioritised ahead of local community concerns- and whereas engaged with in a perfunctory manner - more often citizens now sense that the major planning and development decisions have invariably been pre-determined. Whether true or not, the perception is real and widespread.

In contrast, consider how vitalising and uplifting for all stakeholders if - within the City Development Plan 2022-2028 - there was an unequivocal guarantee to actively redress the currently unbalanced, inefficient and effectively redundant mode of consultation.

For is it not incumbent on Dublin City Council -in view of these self-evident circumstances - to lead out and demonstrate a renewed regard for its own citizens. To acknowledge communities' innate intelligence and the potential for collegiality and creative possibilities that arise when people are engaged with on an explicit basis of trust and common purpose.

And doubly so at a time when the adversity everyone is facing in a turbulent world order, with climate imperatives, deepening inequality, systemic rigidities and the regular inefficiency and waste of public resources often visible within our State and Civic armature.

Drafted in collaboration with:

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All of us have experience of community activism, engagement and consultation with Council and other agencies and it is from this that our proposal is drawn.

Documents Attached: Níl