Community Development and Health Network (CDHN) is a regional network organisation, consisting of over 1800 organisations. We support and engage our network to advance their knowledge and skills in community development, to influence policy and to use community development to reduce health inequalities.

Community Development and Health Network

CDHN welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation on draft statutory guidance for the operation of community planning. We believe that well implemented and resourced community planning can achieve the aim of physical, economic and social environmental wellbeing, thus improving health outcomes for local communities. Added to this it is possible that community planning to have a positive impact on health inequalities.

Overview

CDHN feels that this document provides a sound starting point for developing guidance as to the operation of community planning. However the use of weak, non-committal language dilutes its potential and further clarification of the roles and responsibilities outside council could be made. Community planning provides the opportunity for local councils, communities and businesses to shape their area, and there is little doubt that this approach can yield beneficial outcomes. However, there remains a need to balance local control with regional consistency. This consistency involves placing a firm responsibility on departments to be actively involved, strategically and financially with the community planning process. Added to this, CDHN feel that setting minimum standards for engagement would further strengthen the guidance and process. Minimum standards would ensure that communities and the community and voluntary sector would have equal opportunity for engaging across the region while allowing each locality to choose appropriate methods depending on the reason for the engagement.

Clarity of guidance, roles and responsibilities

CDHN believe that language within the guidance could be strengthened by being more descriptive on what actions, roles and responsibilities are expected of those outside the council. Examples of where changes could be made include; p 8 paragraph 3.17 states “requires departments to promote and encourage community planning, and have regard for community plans.” This has the potential to be interpreted quite differently by different departments. For example would it be sufficient for the department to simple circulate information regarding each community plan. Or would this mean each department ensuring that they appoint staff to have responsibility for liaising with the strategic partnership, with the aim of relaying information and nurturing understanding and relationships between the two bodies? Without defining what is expected may mean that each department engages with community planning differently and may lead to some departments not engaging without a high level of commitment. Another example of where a change of language has the potential to strengthen the guidance and influence positive outcomes is paragraph 3.20 “departments should seek to integrate community planning outcomes into their corporate and business planning.” It is important that we have joined up government, not only between departments but between local, regional and national government. As community plans must relate to regional frameworks and strategies it is important that regional action relates to local action. It is for this reason that CDHN would like to see the wording changed to reflect the necessity for departments to take community plans into account rather than “seek to integrate”. There are other examples throughout the document where language should be changed in order to make clear the roles and responsibilities but to also ensure that there are no loop-holes for not taking account of, responsibility for or engaging with community planning.

Engagement

It is important that the engagement with the community and voluntary sector, communities and business sector is purposeful and planned. CDHN understand the importance of matching methods of engagement to the stakeholder and purpose of the engagement. This means that different methods can and should be applied at different times and with different groups. However, CDHN feel that introducing minimum standards for engagement would strengthen the community planning process and help ensure quality engagement across the region. CDHN would argue that councils/strategic partnership should have to monitor and report on their engagement. This is vital importance if we are to move away from a culture where the provision of information is viewed as a form of engagement towards a culture where meaningful interaction is embedded within all engagement activities.

Governance and accountability.

The potential governance structures would appear to support effective community planning. The only point of note would be with regards power and decision making, as alluded to in the questions in the consultation, reaching a consensus decision may present some challenges. Clear allocation of responsibilities for short and medium term outcomes, monitoring and evaluation, and for key areas of the plan, could help identify who should take the lead on what decisions. Having different lead decision makers in different areas should help create a balance of power, generate buy-in and strengthen ownership and responsibility.

The guidance is clear on monitoring and reviewing performance but weak regarding accountability. As lead bodies councils are aware that they will be assessed, explicitly and implicitly in relation to community plans, however CDHN would argue that the strategic partnership should also be assessed and held to account in relation to the community plan. CDHN feels that the community would be a valuable asset in the assessment and review of community planning and community plans. There are many collaborative research and evaluation methods which harness community involvement. The guidance and any minimum standards for engagement should include mechanisms for community involvement in reviewing community plans and holding strategic partnerships to account.

In conclusion CDHN feel that the guidance would be strengthened by making the language regarding roles and responsibilities more descriptive and stronger in relation to actions. The guidance and the process of community planning would be strengthened by the development of minimum standards for engagement. Successful engagement will be the cornerstone to successful community planning. Setting standards at the start of the process would also contribute to future monitoring and evaluation of engagement activities.

For further information or clarification please contact:

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