



The Involvement of Access Panels In Community Planning

Report of a study funded by the Scottish Disability Equality Forum

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Introduction

Community planning is a process designed to help public agencies work together with their local communities to deliver better services. Access panels are groups of people, many of whom are disabled, who traditionally advise on physical access to the built environment in a local area. In January 2008, the Scottish Disability Equality Forum (SDEF), the national umbrella body for access panels, commissioned us to carry out a small study to find out the extent and nature of involvement of access panels in community planning in Scotland.

This report presents our findings concerning their involvement in community planning, paying particular attention to what helps and hinders the process and to the support access panels feel they need to further their participation in this relatively new area of work. The report is based on information provided by community planning contacts in local authorities and representatives of access panels. The identity of individual councils and panels referred to in the report has been kept confidential to the research team.

Background

The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 placed a duty on local authorities to set up community planning processes, bringing together statutory, voluntary and community groups. This was designed to provide a framework for making public services more responsive to, and organised around, community needs.¹

Community planning has two main aims: to involve local people in making decisions about public services and; to encourage organisations to work together to provide better services. Community planning is intended to be the 'over-arching framework' for other partnerships and initiatives at regional, local and neighbourhood levels.

¹ Scottish Executive (2003) The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 Community Planning: Statutory Guidance, <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library5localgov.cpsg-00.asp>

The Community Planning Implementation Group (Scottish Executive 2004) reported on the benefits emerging from the new process, citing examples of community engagement which had resulted in 'more joined up and accessible' services.² At the same time, the group noted that the cultural and attitudinal changes needed to ensure full participation would not take place overnight. It made no reference to the role of access panels.

There are 49 active access panels in Scotland. Research commissioned by the Scottish Executive about the needs and activities of access panels recommended, among other things, that panels should be consulted on relevant planning and building applications and be given time to formulate access solutions to identified issues, working in partnership with local authorities. In 2004-2007, the Communities Minister awarded panels £500,000, administered by their umbrella body, SDEF, to enhance capacity and effectiveness.³

SDEF sees a clear role for access panels in the types of consultation in which local authorities engage as part of community planning. They believe that local authorities, for the most part, should welcome the input of relevant stake holders and have sponsored this study in order to explore variations in approach and highlight best practice.

Study design

The study aimed to find out

- the level of involvement of access panels in the community planning process
- the views of access panels and of local council officials about what helps and hinders involvement of access panels in the process
- the impact of access panel involvement upon the outcomes of local planning.

² Scottish Executive (2004) Making a Difference - Community Planning a Year On

Report of the Community Planning Implementation Group
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2004/07/19577/39790>

³ Access Panel Steering Group (2002) A Review of Access Panels in Scotland
Edinburgh: Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations

This was approached by gathering views as above and, through identifying and investigating examples of issues in which access panels had been involved.

Two surveys were undertaken to gather information: an online questionnaire sent to community planning contacts⁴ in all 32 local councils; and a telephone interview with a sample of 20 access panel representatives. Information from both surveys was analysed thematically.

Who responded

Community planning contacts in 23 councils responded to our online survey (a healthy response rate of 72%). They included 12 people with community 'planning', 'engagement' or 'partnership' in their job title. The remainder had a range of job titles including three equalities officers, three policy officers, one access officer, two 'strategic' officers and an 'organisational manager'. One respondent did not give a job title.

SDEF provided a list of 30 access panels operating in the 23 responding council areas and we selected 20 from this list as our sample. The selection was done purposively to achieve a reasonable spread of rural and urban areas. Access panel contacts interviewed included, chairs (7), secretaries (5), treasurers (2), paid coordinators (2), vice-convenor (1), team leader (1), administrator (1) and one member who stated that the panel did not have office bearers.

Our 20 selected access panels were based in a total of 17 council areas. They included four from islands, four from cities and the remainder from areas combining rural and urban settings.

⁴ the contact list was obtained from the Scottish Government community planning website <http://www.improvementservice.org.uk/community-planning/>

Community Planning – levels of involvement

In this part of the report we consider, from our survey responses, whether panels are involved in community planning or not, how they came to be involved, the level of involvement they have, and their satisfaction with it.

What Council contacts told us

The 23 local council contacts who responded to our online survey gave the following information (also see Appendix 1).

Council contact response	Yes (% of 23)	No	DK
Is there an access panel in your area?	20 (87%)	1	2
Is access panel involved in community planning?	15 (65%)	4	4

Of the 15 access panels reportedly involved in community planning, we are told that six are recognised partners in the process and a further four have submitted reports, or engaged in working groups as part of the process. In five of these 15 responses, no details of the involvement were provided. Four council contacts did not know if there was a panel involved and in two of these cases they also did not know if a panel existed in the area.

Again, of the 15 Councils where access panels were involved in community planning, two said that the access panel plays a full part. In 10 cases the Council contact responded that the access panel gives valuable input, 13 said that the access panel is available for consultation when required and two did not comment on its role.

‘Transport’ and ‘built environment’ were the most commonly reported areas of involvement for the 15 panels (10 and 9 responses respectively). ‘Sport and leisure’ and ‘health and well being’ were each cited in five responses. Countryside access and website development were mentioned once each as ‘other’ areas of involvement.

In the remainder of this section we shall be referring to the access panels included in the interview survey and the 17 council areas in which they were located.

The Access Panel survey

Interviewees reported active memberships of between four and 40, with five having fewer than 10 active members (see Appendix 2). Two panels in the sample had more than 20 active members. Eleven of the panels in the sample had been in existence for longer than 10 years. Of the remainder, three were set up less than five years ago.

The 20 access panel interviewees were asked about their understanding of community planning and whether they were involved. As well as asking if the panel was a recognised community planning partner, we asked whether they were invited to meetings, submitted reports or took part in working groups. We hoped in this way to get round local variations and the different levels of understanding of community planning which we expected our informants to have.

Our analysis of information from both Council and access panel sources suggests access panels may be categorised into three distinct groupings, distinguished by their relationship with community planning. In the first group, access panels see themselves as partners in community planning and are recognised as such by the Council. In the second group, access panels are aware of community planning and involved in it to some extent, and this is acknowledged by the council (except in one case). The third group includes panels which are not involved in community planning at all, though they may be aware of it.

It is important to bear in mind that, in some Councils, the community planning partnership is composed of statutory agencies only. Three access panel representatives in Councils of this type thought that their access panel is a partner in community planning, but according to the Council contact, this is not the case. They have been included in our second group. Community planning arrangements in some other Councils use the term 'partnership' to cover community based organisations which are members of community planning forums.

Some of our access panels were partners of this type and are included in the first group.

Recognised partners (six panels)

Access panels in this group are included in multi-agency discussions on a wide range of issues and services. There is no one model of partnership which can describe how these panels are involved.

- Three are involved in community planning via community planning forums, two of which are local i.e. covering part of the council area.
- Four are linked to community planning via a broadly based disability grouping.

There were two newcomers to community planning in the group. For one of these, the council informant outlines how the panel will be involved:

“Our new arrangements for Local Community Planning will provide the opportunity for Access Panels to be involved through their involvement in the Equalities Forum and Local Community Planning Forums.” [council]

The interviewee for the panel concerned described proactive involvement in many service areas and well established relationships with local agencies. The recent invitation to become involved in community planning as a partner provided a new context for that involvement.

In one Council where the access panel reported having only recently been invited to join in, the Council contact explained that local community planning was just being introduced, giving access panels the opportunity to become involved.

Involvement in other government initiatives had in some cases been the way in to community planning. One panel informant explained how being involved in a disability equality scheme had lead to further engagement.

**“Previously the council ignored us but since the Disability Equality Duty (DED) came in they listen to us more.”
[panel]**

Another panel was represented in Social Inclusion Partnership (SIP) arrangements and ‘successfully fought’ for a place on community planning along with other groups engaged in SIP.

One of the panel interviewees in this group felt that the community planning forum provided limited opportunities to influence services and expressed frustration at the way meetings were conducted. As noted above, two of the six panels in this group had only very recently been invited to engage with community planning and therefore had no experience of the arrangements. The remaining three panels appeared to be quite satisfied with the consultative processes in their areas, judging from what was said by both panel and council informants.

“We are very much part of the community planning process. Two of the access panel members are on the local community planning group and attend all the meetings etc.... [In the past] they would come to us for specific things. ... We are more heavily involved now. We attend every meeting and are heavily involved in particular projects.” [panel]

“Our parent body is the Disability Advisory Group but we have become more independent from them... community planning is all part of one thing including the Disability Equality Scheme.” [panel]

“The access panel is part of a disability forum which works in partnership with the Council. We are kept regularly informed of meetings, members attempt to attend meetings regularly [attend about 95% of the time]. We submit quarterly reports to the community planning team and are involved in about three working groups.” [panel]

These three panels exemplify proactive engagement in the community planning process, in contrast with others which continue to operate in a more reactive way to developments in their areas.

Access panels which are recognised partners in community planning are for the most part satisfied with their involvement, although one access panel which is well established as a partner at local level is frustrated by not having direct input at full Council level:

“But our involvement in the overarching body ... is not satisfactory and we have not been able to change this yet. The representation of disabled issues by [umbrella organisation] is something we would like to change but are not having much success in doing it.” [panel].

Access Panels involved in community planning but not as ‘partners’ (nine panels)

This group includes nine panels with varying level of involvement in community planning. In two cases the panels are apparently no less actively involved than some of those described above – but they are not recognised as partners in the community planning process. The reason lies in the formal community planning structures set up by the Councils: although panels may be attending community planning forum meetings and working groups, the formal partnership relationship is with a disability group with a broader remit than the access panel. According to the Council contact in one of the areas concerned:

“There is no barrier per se [to access panel involvement]. The main issue is one of definition I would suggest.” [council]

The access panel informant for the same area confirms this view:

“At any one time I'm on five or six committees that you should broadly describe as community planning committees. We are fairly well represented.” [panel]

In a third case, the panel is involved in a wide range of issues but does not engage in forums or working groups. Consultation is carried on at access panel meetings which are attended by a range of officials depending on the topic:

“We prefer to work with agencies individually as we have done up to now rather than be involved in a forum with all agencies together.” [panel]

Unlike these three panels, the remaining six panels in this group do not see themselves as being so directly involved in community planning. Each one gave a quite different reason for not being more involved. We looked at the reasons they gave us, alongside the comments of the Council contact who completed the online survey. This gives a fuller picture, though obviously not a complete one, of how community planning works. For two of these panels we were not given enough information about the Councils’ community planning arrangements to get an impression of how they saw access panels fitting in.

The table below summarises the position for each of the six panels partially involved in community planning and highlights the wide variation in circumstances.

Access panel	Council contact
The panel has been consulted on strategic matters by the community planning team but is not otherwise involved.	Access panels are not formally part of the community planning structure. Informally, they may be consulted by community planning partners.
Not invited to take part except in working groups. The access panel has asked Council for involvement as a community planning partner but Council has not responded.	Little access panel involvement but the access panel is available for consultation on specific issues when required. Community planning involves the Community Care Forum at a strategic level.
Receives consultation documents about community planning but does not attend meetings – access panel is very active but does not see community planning as part of its remit.	Aware that access panel is on community planning mailing list but not aware of any involvement.

<p>The access panel is new and in the process of establishing itself. Is aware that a community planning forum exists but has had very little involvement of any kind as yet.</p>	<p>The establishment of the access panel was included in the Community Plan Action Plan... It is a recognised community planning partner.... It is likely to become more involved in local planning as its members gain further experience and knowledge of partners' activities.</p>
<p>The interviewee was sceptical about the value of the community planning arrangements locally and it was not clear from the interview what involvement the panel had, beyond a presence on the community planning website.</p>	<p>The access panel is not a recognised community planning partner but it has submitted reports or engaged in working groups as part of the community planning process. The Council is in the process of reviewing its arrangements to achieve better public involvement.</p>
<p>The panel looked to the community planning team 2-3 years ago for help with local issues but there was no positive response. Since that time the access panel has become less active. Not aware of what community planning is and not invited to be involved.</p>	<p>The access panels for the area are involved in community planning but there are practical difficulties in meeting and organising given the geography of the area. The numbers of people actively participating in the access panels themselves are falling.</p>

Two themes emerge from the varied experiences outlined here:

- community planning may be organised in a way that does not facilitate direct partnership with access panels;
- where it is a Council's intention to involve the access panel as partners in community planning, there may be obstacles.

These themes will be explored further when we come to look at what helps and hinders access panel involvement in community planning.

No involvement in community planning arrangements (five panels)

The third group of panels interviewed includes those who reported no involvement in community planning. Two of these panels have been established for over 20 years and have strong links with Councils - one of them is partly composed of council officers. Here is what we were told about them.

- The access panel representative said they were not aware of any community planning arrangements for the area. The council community planning officer was not aware that an access panel existed.
- The access panel is actively involved with the Council and has heard of community planning on a general level but knows nothing about the arrangements locally. The Council official responding gives no information on how the community planning arrangements work beyond stating that the access panel is not involved.

Two others are located in Councils where community planning appears to take place at a strategic level without organised local involvement. In one, the access panel informant did not know if the panel was a partner: he said he “would hope so” but has not seen a lot of evidence of community planning. He considers the community planning arrangements to be “aspirational”, is aware of meetings taking place but is not sure what they do.

“Other access panel members may be involved but we haven’t discussed it at access panel meetings... I would like to see community planning be more prominent but the Council is resistant.” [panel]

In the other case, the access panel representative is not aware of community planning arrangements, or of any involvement in them.

The final panel in this group exemplifies a very different situation: it is located in an area where community planning is devolved to local communities and there is apparently no council-wide group for the panel to engage with. The Council respondent is unaware of any access panel involvement.

All of the access panels in this group appear to be actively involved and engaged with Council officials. Some have officials or Councillors as members of their panels. It seems that community planning arrangements in these areas are not geared to involving the panels, rather than panels not being tuned in to local involvement opportunities.

Effective involvement – some examples

Access panels gave us many examples of effective involvement in particular projects. For the most part these were building projects where they had been able to influence design, or else parking issues. Involvement in the assessment of core paths was a new topic in which some panels were getting involved, sometimes in the context of community planning but not always.

Most of the examples given were of work undertaken through direct contact with a particular agency and did not appear to have come about because of community planning arrangements – although we cannot be sure about that in all cases.

In three cases, access panels had become involved in website development as a result of community planning.

“We were also involved in the community planning website. We did a training session for them about visual impairment and so they could see how part of the website was invisible to people with visual impairment.” [panel]

“We were involved indirectly in creating a website for disabled people... This allows disabled people to look at accessibility in their particular area e.g. buildings. It gets people out into the community; they might even go for a job interview in the building. This project was successful because it received support from the local authority, as well as the access panel and health board.” [panel]

“The Community Planning Partnership has funded the development of an online disabled access guide for the area. The access panel informed these discussions prior to the proposal being developed and will be involved in the future delivery of the site.” [council]

In another case where the access panel has only very recently been invited to join in, attendance at a community planning meeting allowed the access panel to take part in a wide ranging discussion about town centre redevelopment. They felt they had a good response: they brought up the problem of narrow roads and

pavements and it was agreed that something would be done about it. The interviewee said it was too early to see results but feels optimistic that something will come out of it.

In the case example below, the access panel is actively involved in the local community planning. The council-wide partnership body in this case includes voluntary sector umbrella groups as partners. Both parties give their views on how the involvement of the panel is developing, recognising the need for greater understanding on both sides.

Case example

Council view

Since being invited to join, the access panel has participated in the meetings and is gradually integrating into the working groups. They are instrumental in the design of the recently created web page and are advising on how to make it accessible to disabled people. They are now contributing ideas on other media such as a newsletter, online forum, local blog pages etc. The panel has also given advice on accessible venues and access to venues and is working with the Council to appraise many of their premises. The panel has been asked to give a short disability awareness presentation at the next meeting and it is anticipated that this will be expanded on and an awareness programme will be rolled out across the area. At present they are seen as a valuable resource and it is anticipated that their input will expand as their knowledge of the function of the Local Community Planning Group improves.

Access panel view

We have been involved in community planning for some time. They would come to us for specific things. There have been changes in the way our access panel is involved in community planning since February 2007. We are more heavily involved now. We attend every meeting and are heavily involved in particular projects. The change in our involvement came about because at first they were not sure how much this group of disabled people would want to, or have the capacity to, become involved. They allowed us to come in and take steps forward at our own pace instead of needing to run straight away

... We had to show that we had the knowledge and capacity. We have done that now but there is still 'shock and awe' when they hear we have degrees.

One example of an effective involvement is the resource centre. We were able to ensure that access was of priority right from the start. Also design layout for wheelchair users and the installation of computer facilities for disabled people. Also colours for people with visual impairments. We try to be included at the beginning so that no money is wasted by having to revamp things that have already been done. But if we are not able to do this and something problematic has been done we try to suggest an alternative solution that is less costly than redoing all the work. We try to provide sensible ideas and not spend our time table bashing. People know we do that.

At the other end of the involvement spectrum, one interviewee recounted an unsuccessful attempt to engage with community planning. This panel had undertaken an audit of access issues in a small community, in particular, access to the doctors' surgery, the shops and the state of road surfaces. They then tried unsuccessfully to involve the community planning team in resolving some of the issues. A shortage of active members to keep up the pressure on the council and a lack of 'joined up' response from the council seem to have combined to prevent any progress.

What helps and hinders involvement?

We have been told about many factors that help and hinder the involvement of panels in community planning. We have divided them into two broad categories. The first includes factors external to the panel and its members, such as, community planning structures, the ways that Council and other agency officials choose to consult them, the styles of communication used and the attitudes of officials. The second category covers attributes of the panels themselves: their membership, skills and experience and the financial and other resources they have.

We have tried to focus on what seems relevant in relation to community planning rather than include everything we were told regarding what helps and hinders access panel activities in general. This discussion only relates to the 15 access panels which have had some involvement with community planning.

Community planning structures and approaches

We have seen how the panels with the deepest involvement are making use of devolved structures and community based forums to engage with community planning. We have also encountered a number of councils where community planning partnerships are organised at a strategic level, apparently without local or community based partnerships or forums. This is perceived by some panels as a barrier to involvement. High level partnerships may include one or more voluntary sector organisations but, in some cases, these do not have strong links with panels and so the potential for involvement is absent. One consequence of the lack of local community planning structures seems to be that the involvement agenda is seen to be fairly well controlled by the community planning team.

Some council contacts felt that there were no real obstacles to involvement where proper structures and approaches were in place.

“There are no obstacles if you use the national standards for community engagement.” [council]

“... we will be exploring better mechanisms around the involvement of local community groups..” [council]

One council respondent took the view that the obstacles for access panels were no different from those facing any community group wanting to get involved i.e. issues are often strategic in nature and there is not enough time to brief community members on the background to discussions.

Geographical difficulties were acknowledged in one case.

Styles of consultation

One panel interviewee in a council, where community planning is not devolved locally, explained what it was like to be involved in community planning. The community planning team would offer what the panel interviewee described as ‘involvement opportunities’, usually a document to comment on. They would also offer the panel a choice of how they submitted their views.

“I have appreciated the fact that [the community planning team] has written to us to ask how we want to be involved e.g. choice of focus group, questionnaire etc. We asked to have a focus group but it didn't come off [no one to blame] so we sent in written comments. The written material they send is not bad.” [panel]

Another panel, which has some involvement in community planning via working groups, has asked the Council to include the panel as a community planning partner but ‘the Council is still considering this’.

“A meeting was held ... attended by panel representatives about devolving some aspects of community planning to community based groups. Panel representatives felt that the discussion was not very open and that they were not able to put their point of view - although the individuals involved are quite forceful.” [panel]

In this particular case, we are told by the Council contact that the local ‘community care forum’ is the body which is linked into partnership arrangements with the Council and NHS. The Council contact in this case gave the following rationale:

“Community Planning at a strategic level - where access panels would have the biggest impact - often focus on a very broad range of issues, many of which are of no interest to members of the panels.Facilitating meetings which are timely, relevant to all members and allow for meaningful participation is difficult. Inviting panels to comment or get involved in relevant discussions about transport, planning and other access issues has been more successful.” [panel]

Whilst it would be inappropriate for us to draw conclusions about this case, it does illustrate the complexities of involvement in community planning and why some access panels may not engage in the partnership.

How relevant community planning appears to be to panel members’ concerns

Respondents from the highly involved panels had no difficulty with the concept of community planning, seeing it very much as a way of furthering their interest in accessible buildings and services rather than as a separate activity.

Scepticism about the value for access panel members of new involvement arrangements was expressed by two informants, referring to community planning as ‘tokenism’ or ‘a talking shop’. Another panel informant was keen to overcome this particular challenge and hoped that a promised focus group with the community planning team would prove helpful. Describing the concept of community planning as ‘amorphous and complicated and far removed from normal daily life’, she felt that there was a danger that for access panel members this was ‘a layer of democracy which could pass them by’.

In those areas where active panels are not involved at all in community planning we can only speculate as to whether community planning is addressing access issues, and whether it is developing as the all-encompassing process which is intended.

Transparency of community planning processes

A clear understanding of how community planning operates in the local area is self-evidently helpful to involvement. However in four of the 17 Council areas in which interviewed access panels were working, there was a discrepancy between what the council contact told us about the level of access panel involvement and what the access panel representative said.

Four panel interviewees stated that the access panel was a recognised community planning partner whereas the Council said this was not the case and that the community planning partner was a different body – one with a remit related more widely to disability. In one Council where there were discrepancies of this kind, an access panel was quite unaware of community planning arrangements. However, we know from the council contact and another panel, that the community planning body, made up of statutory agencies, consulted widely on strategic plans.

Responsiveness

“Involvement policies of agencies – can be a hindrance if not sufficiently open.” [panel]

In the case example described earlier, the panel referred to being allowed to engage in community planning at its own pace. This seemed to relate as much to groups getting to know each other as to any need for concessions to be made. The need for agencies to accommodate constraints on access panel involvement was implicit in what many panels said. Being for the most part volunteers, some active members were clearly heavily committed and reluctant to take on any further rounds of meetings.

Several panels are clearly proud of the fact that they have been involved at the earliest stage of projects when plans are being developed: proposing changes at a later stage could meet with resistance. One panel which had been involved early in a project also stressed the importance of being involved in follow up. In this way they could see if their suggestions had been incorporated in the final outcome and how successful this had been. One panel which has only recently been formed was finding that council officials were not open enough with them and inclined to ‘pass the buck’.

Only two panels expressed dissatisfaction with the response to their input at meetings, feeling that they were not listened to, or that others present lacked understanding. As one put it:

“I’m not happy that they don’t take on board points we make about disability issues. We’ve raised several issues about disabilities but were getting ignored. It’s a bit like lip service.” [panel]

This same panel was also critical of local processes, particularly in relation to notice and timing of meetings. According to this interviewee, not having enough warning about meetings means that members do not have time to communicate with each other before the meeting and read material. Working groups are held during working hours thereby excluding volunteer participants who have jobs.

The influence of the Disability Equality Duty (DED)

We have already seen how involvement in drawing up Disability Equality Schemes played a part in involving some access panels more closely with local agencies. The influence of the DED was evident also in references to equality officers and forums with which panels are actively involved.

“Previously the council ignored us but since the DED came in on 4/11/07 they listen to us more. Our main contact used to be the Depute Director of Roads but now is the Equalities Officer. ... The access panel has been invited to join the Disability Equality Steering Group (DESG) which is chaired by the NHS Board. The DESG supports the access panel in applying for Council funding.” [panel]

“The DED has helped. Mutual respect with Council departments has grown as a result.” [panel]

“... community planning and work around the DED are all part of the same thing. The access panel has played a part in establishing disabled people as a community of interest for consultation purposes within the Council area.” [panel]

Council officials' and elected members' regular attendance at panel meetings

Eight of the panels represented in the study have councillors or officials attending panel meetings regularly. Two panels include several officers of the council as members. In two other cases every meeting was attended by the access officer of the Council, and in a third case by a 'liaison officer'. Elected councillors regularly attended four of the panels. Only one of these eight cases was in the group of 'partners' identified earlier.

Having council officials and councillors as panel members regularly attending was seen to be an advantage by some other panels

“It would help to have officials or councillors attending the access panel meetings. Used to have a Building Control Officer but it petered out.” [panel]

In one area the council contact reported this was the main way for the council to engage with the panel:

“Consultation takes the form of attendance of the council's Corporate Access Officer and Lead Officer for the council's Disability Equality Scheme at regular monthly meetings of [the access panel].” [council]

One access panel representative described wide, and apparently effective, involvement across a number of agencies:

“The access panel works very closely with the Council in many ways and with different departments. This has always been the case. The access panel was set up by a regional councillor so always had good relations with the Council. There have been no changes in this as a result of community planning arrangements.” [panel]

Access panel experience and resources

The main resource access panels rely on is the time and expertise given by their active members. Some panels that have been around for many years have built experience and networks which have made it easier for them to engage with new arrangements such as community planning.

“Our past record helps: getting to know the decision makers in different organisations and demonstrating that we can do useful work and they come back to us again.”
[panel]

“[What helps involvement?] Having good links with all the relevant voluntary sector and public involvement forums.”
[panel]

Others find it harder to keep up with the increased levels of involvement on offer, stressing that members are volunteers with other commitments and some are not in the best of health. One panel, newly involved in a community planning partnership, said they ‘struggle to cover all the meetings involved’.

“...not attended a meeting yet – we were invited to one very recently for the first time. We received a document setting out where the access panel would be involved in community planning... keen to be involved but volunteer members are stretched.” [panel]

Other important resources referred to are the ‘enthusiasm’ of members and their ‘frustration’ which motivates them to fight for improvements.

It seems that the skills, motivation and experience of the individuals involved may be more important in helping access panels’ involvement than material support – although the need for resources is clearly felt (see below). The three panels identified earlier as being the most integrated into community planning processes in their areas include one panel receiving no financial or ‘in kind’ support. Of the other two, one has received substantial donations from agencies in recognition of their work on access and both receive material support

from their Councils. However this support is not substantially more, and, in some cases, is less than the amounts received by other panels in the survey.

Council contacts expressed a wide range of views about obstacles to access panel involvement in community planning, some of which mirror the panel views described above. Of the 16 responses to the question, eight felt that the capacity of panels and their members could be an obstacle. There are two references to the limited numbers involved in the panels, including the view that the few individuals involved may not be able adequately to represent the concerns of disabled people.

“Some of the panel are elderly and there has been encouragement with some success for new membership to be built up. This will continue to be an issue and it is important that public bodies continue to support the work of the access panel. It is also vital that their input remains independent and actually based on the real feedback and involvement of disabled people with real-life issues. This helps to empower disabled people and provides real life experiences.” [council]

One respondent felt that where panel members lack specialist knowledge about building and construction there is a risk of conflict with the council. On the other hand, as we have seen in the case example, there is also the possibility of council officials underestimating the capacity of panel members (and this is acknowledged by the council respondent).

Lack of time and funding difficulties for panel members were also referred to. One council contact, without giving any details, felt that the attitude and approach of the panel itself was an obstacle to involvement.

Almost a third of the 15 panels have some kind of office of their own. One panel said that this means they can respond very quickly to requests for involvement.

One access panel which was successful in its involvement in community planning thought that other panels in the same Council area would be encouraged to join in if the Government said that

access panels **should** be given the opportunity to be involved at the local level if they wanted to.

“Access panels are different and some might not want to do this... All access panels should have the opportunity to be involved in community planning [if they want].” [panel]

We heard of alliances of access panels organised in the more remote rural areas of Scotland. Panels involved in these networks and also individual panels found contact with other panels helpful. They could learn from each others' experience and gauge how well they were doing in relation to new areas of work such as community planning.

What Access Panels need in order to facilitate community planning

Funding – direct and indirect

About half of the access panel interviewees felt they needed more funding for travel expenses, training or running costs. For one of the 'partner' panels which receives no grants:

“Funding is the major issue. We get as much consultation as we like.” [panel]

Administrative support in kind from the Council was greatly appreciated by those who had it and a few mentioned this as a need, in preference to employing their own staff. Two panels with salaried staff (who were the interviewees) wanted more secure funding so that they could spend less of their time negotiating for grants. One panel had been unsuccessful in trying to raise money to employ a coordinator.

Other 'in kind' support which panels find beneficial is free use of premises for meetings and, in one case, office space.

Training

Four panels talked about the need for training for their members in community planning and in relevant legislation. One of them felt that other voluntary sector partners also needed training as their attitudes on disability issues were old fashioned.

“...community planning have to carry out the Disability Equality Scheme and comply with it. ... They don't seem to recognise our need for training - we've been asking for it unsuccessfully. There's funding for training but it's been used for other things. We don't know what training is available or what training we need. It's a two way street.” [panel]

“Training in specific issues would be helpful e.g. in planning matters and the DDA: maybe an induction course for new members. We tend to use the library or the internet to find things out.” [panel]

Status

Two panel representatives thought that access panels would work better in general if they had more status. One idea was that they should have recognition as a ‘professional body’, another that they should have a statutory role and be funded by central or local government “because nine tenths of the work is providing input to government bodies”. Two further representatives thought that access panels should apply a common set of access standards - a suggestion that also implies a more formal role for access panels.

Access to independent legal advice was advocated by one panel representative.

Discussion and Conclusion

Key Findings

This small study suggests that community planning has not had a major impact on the work of most access panels. From references made to developing disability equality schemes it is possible that this legislative change may have had a more powerful influence on the way Councils involve access panels than the introduction of community planning.

In some Council areas it seems that community planning arrangements are not geared to involving the panels, rather than panels not being tuned in to local involvement opportunities. It may be that for these areas it is still early days for community planning.

Six out of our sample of 20 access panels are recognised partners in community planning in their local areas but only half of those are fully engaged to their, and the councils', satisfaction. A further nine panels are involved in community planning to some extent.

The main resource access panels rely on is the time and expertise given by their active members. Some panels feel the need for 'new blood' to help meet demands on them. Panels that have been around for many years have built experience and networks which have made it easier for them to engage with new arrangements such as community planning. Others find it harder to keep up with the increased levels of involvement on offer, or else feel sceptical about the value for their members of getting involved in community planning.

Being a recognised partner in community planning is not necessarily the only route to meaningful involvement in community planning – it depends on local arrangements. Some panels which are well established and have formed close working relationships with Council departments are not directly involved in community planning partnerships as such. Most of the examples of activity we were given were of traditional access panel work.

Eight panels in our sample had direct involvement of council officials and councillors attending meetings routinely. Panels found this involvement helpful in their work; however only one of these panels was in the group identified as community planning partners.

Involvement can be helped or hindered by the way community planning is conducted and by the capacities of the panels themselves. Community planning arrangements seem to play a crucial role in whether panels are involved or not. As well as the structures themselves, important factors are: styles of consultation; how relevant community planning appears to be to panel members; the transparency of processes; and responsiveness to the methods and approaches of access panel members.

Half of the panel representatives interviewed want more funding and support for involvement. Help with administration and travel expenses were the items most commonly mentioned. A few mentioned training and some suggested that the role of access panels should be formalised.

Discussion

The concept of community planning implies local determination – we would not want to argue that one model of partnership working should be adopted in all council areas. A different interpretation of terms such as ‘community planning’ between vastly different council areas is to be expected. But within any one local area a common understanding of the arrangements and the words used to describe them is helpful for all parties involved. However, the real issue is whether access panels, with their particular perspective and expertise, are involved in community planning in a meaningful way, regardless of the terminology used.

Our findings indicate that there is wide variation in community planning arrangements across the country. This has a bearing on the meaning of the term ‘partner’. In one model, the community planning partnership is a high level group of statutory agencies, with or without co-opted voluntary sector representatives drawn from a broad based or umbrella organisation. In another model, community based groups become partners through participation in a forum. In a few cases

there were discrepancies in understanding between our council and access panel informants about how community planning operated.

These findings suggest there is a need for local awareness raising for panel members in how community planning operates and how they can become engaged. There may also be a need for discussion with community planning teams in some areas about how to facilitate involvement of access panels and how to ensure that access panel activity is included within the community planning context.

Many of the panel representatives we spoke to felt under pressure. Although there was enthusiasm for the work there was also frustration at the demands on their limited time. There is a clear need for new recruits to meet the demands of community planning. Panels need people with a range of skills and experience and also training for willing volunteers.

Appendix 1 Summary of responses from Council contacts (n=23)

Responses to open ended questions are referred to in the report

	Yes	% of 23 responses
Is there an Access Panel covering your council area	20	87
Has an Access Panel been involved in the community planning process for your local council area?	15	65

Please tick all statements which are true of Access Panel involvement in community planning for your council area	Yes	% of 15 responses
Representatives attend meetings regularly	4	27
Representatives have attended regularly in the past but have discontinued attending	0	0
Representatives attend irregularly or occasionally	1	7
Access panel has submitted reports or engaged in working groups as part of the community planning process	7	47
Access panel is currently a recognised partner in the community planning process	6	40
Access panel has been a recognised partner in the community planning process but has discontinued involvement	0	0

Here are some areas covered by community planning. Please tick where Access panels have been involved	Yes	% of 15 responses
Education	2	13
Transport	11	73
Community learning	2	13
Built environment	10	67
Sport and leisure	5	33

Health and wellbeing	5	33
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Please tick any of the following comments that apply to the community planning process in your area.	Yes	% of 17 responses
Access panel plays a full part	2	12
Access panel provides input which is valuable	10	59
Access panel is available for consultation when required	13	76
There is little contact with any access panel	4	24

Appendix 2 Selected details of access panels included in study

	No. of active members	Current financial support or 'in kind'
1	8	No
2	5	No
3	7-8	Paid staff funded via local voluntary organisation
4	12	Free use of council meeting rooms
5	4 plus extra people we can call in for particular jobs	Office space, admin support and council grant for running costs plus donations from agencies for specific work
6	10 come to meetings and another 10 feed in on issues	Council grant plus donations from agencies for specific work
7	10	Annual grant from charitable trust
8	12	Council grant
9	8	no
10	8	Service level agreement
11	10	Council grant
12	22	Service level agreement
13	16	Start up council grant
14	12-15 including 2-3 Council officials	Free use of council meeting rooms and admin support
15	8-10 attend meetings regularly but meetings have lapsed for 5 months	no
16	9-10 of whom half are council officials	No
17	15-20	Council grant
18	30-40	Paid staff funded by council and charitable grants
19	10-12	Service level agreement
20	12	Service level agreement