

NOVEL APPROACHES TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MAPPED OUT

By Ainhoa González, Riki Therivel, Gloriana Vargas and Turlough King

A pilot project has examined new approaches to public engagement as part of the Dundalk Local Area Plan 2024-2030 SEA (Strategic Environmental Assessment) in Louth. It was part of a research project aimed at enhancing SEA public participation in Ireland, funded by the EPA and the Office of the Planning Regulator.

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) aims to not only make plans more environment-friendly, but also to increase public input into such plans, which is not always easy to do.

Even when people are given an early and effective opportunity to express their opinions on a plan, as required by the SEA Directive, they may not get involved in the plan-making process until they see that a site near their house has been put forward for development. More so, only the legal minimum plan and SEA public consultation is typically delivered.

In a bid to change this, a pilot of novel public engagement approaches involving neighbourhood walks and a mapping workshop took place in June as part of the Dundalk Local Area Plan 2024-2030 SEA in County Louth.

It was part of a research project to enhance public participation in strategic environmental assessment in Ireland, led

by UCD and funded by the EPA and the Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR).

The event was seen by Louth County Council's planners as a key part of their plan consultation process and an opportunity for the public to have a meaningful voice in the planning process.

As one planner noted: *"You read about the lack of public participation in planning. I'm seeing this as a real opportunity to get early engagement with communities. It is particularly exciting to see the consultation focus on the environmental aspects of the Local Plan and see at a high-level what sort of environmental impacts people are concerned about."*

ADVERTISING THE EVENT

The event was advertised in newspapers, posted in public places such as library, coffee shops and via social media. A StoryMap (<https://arcg.is/11rny>) supported the event dissemination.

A video outlining how the public can get involved in SEA was also developed (<https://youtu.be/9nWTbZ7wdOE>) and this can also be used to inform other SEA consultation processes. More than 7,000 social media views were recorded.

NEIGHBOURHOOD WALKS

Members of the public are invited to walk through a neighbourhood and to identify existing strengths and weaknesses: they involve a two-way discussion in open spaces and in-situ data collection.

The planning team identified four areas within Dundalk which, due to their vulnerability or development potential, are essential for the plan (see Figure 1). Although these areas were selected based on how they fit in with the pre-draft plan issues paper, the SEA public participation focused on key environmental considerations.



For each neighbourhood (Figure 1), participants were given a map of the area, including green and red stickers to mark positive and negative aspects of the areas. The project team took notes about the discussions.

This provided an opportunity for informal public interaction with the planners and the SEA team, and the exchange of concerns and ideas for the future development of the town. However, despite the apparent interest in the event reflected in the social media views, the turnout was very low with only seven participants in the event.



Figure 2. Neighbourhood Walk

COMMUNITY MAPPING

The workshop on community mapping organised member of the public into small groups and brought them together to examine large-scale maps of the areas to discuss SEA themes such as climate change, water, wildlife and transport. The exercise aimed to identify potential key issues and solutions related to future development.



Figure 3. Community Mapping Workshop

The four participants who took part in this event on 13 June, all of whom had also been on a neighbourhood walk, were provided with a table with SEA themes identified with colours, and space for annotations and dot stickers with the same colours.

They were asked to identify areas on the map where SEA themes could be impacted by the development of the plan, and to detail in the table the problems and possible solutions. Figure 4 and Table 1 give an indication of the output from the workshop participants.

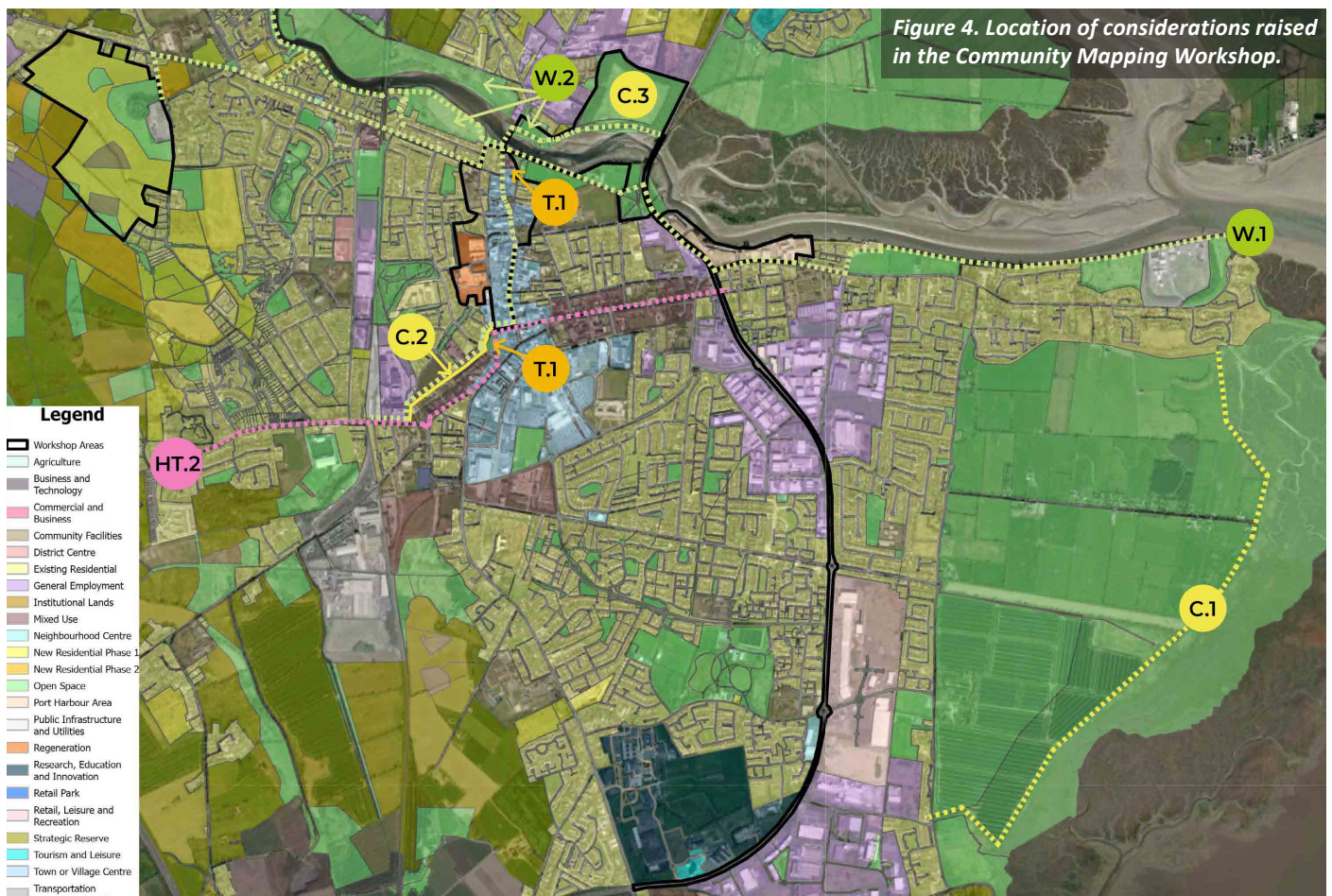


Figure 4. Location of considerations raised in the Community Mapping Workshop.

Table 1. Examples of observations raised in the Community Mapping Workshop

SEA Theme	Considerations	Observations
Climate Change	C1. Flood Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The town is at serious risk of flooding. There is a need to enhance and develop the Lord Limerick Embankment to help against flooding. • Good cycling and pedestrian infrastructure are needed throughout the town including cycle lanes on main streets. Dundalk is a small town, so it should be entirely pedestrian and bicycle friendly. • Consider informal popular cycling routes such as the one between St Malachy's Infants' School and Market Square.
	C2. Active Transport	
Wildlife, Nature, Soil and Land Cover	W1. Green Parks and greenways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a park/nature reserve with pedestrian access from the existing river walk and residential areas off Castletown Road. • Create a greenway/linear park from Point Road to Cú Chulainn's Castle.
Health and Transport	HT2. Risk to pedestrian safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are very few 'proper', clear pedestrian crossings. There are lots of 'hybrid' crossings where it's not clear who has the right of way.

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

Despite extensive publicity, the low number of participants was disappointing. This may have been due to the time of day (4:30-7pm), the unusually excellent weather or, most likely, that consultation on the early stages of a local plan is too distant from people's day-to-day concerns.

However, those people who participated were enthusiastic about the event:

"I really liked this open approach to highlighting good and bad things about Dundalk and learning from each other."

"It was interesting to have the opportunity to look at the maps as a starting point for local area planning."

"This was a very good opportunity for brainstorming and developing joint solutions to improve the town. It is a shame no more people have turned up."

The planning team, who was very active in advertising and running the event, also held the view that despite the low turnout, useful information nonetheless has been gained:

"At the end of the day, it's the community's plan and it's important that they feel they have the opportunity to say what they want. Hopefully, they'll get the outcomes that they want, and the plan supports the overarching theme of sustainable development."

SUMMARY OF LESSONS LEARNED

- The planning process for such events requires time and resources.
- Good teamwork is needed between the SEA and plan-making teams. The active and early involvement of the plan-makers and the SEA team in this pilot helped to ensure a positive approach towards public engagement and integration.
- Local knowledge is needed to identify the best communication strategy to reach a full range of the public.
- The combination of neighbourhood walks to encourage people think about the area, and community mapping workshop to document people's thinking meant that the resulting comments were location-specific and of high quality.

- It is important to maintain a degree of flexibility to adapt activities according to the characteristics of the location (e.g. distance of meeting places) and the audience (e.g. people with disabilities).

The results of this pilot will be used, among other things, to develop tools that enhance Irish public participation practice, including the preparation of 'Guidance on SEA Public Participation'.

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