

A Community Conversation Toolkit

Dr Jessica Bates and Dr Una O'Connor Bones
UNESCO Centre, School of Education
Ulster University

August 2018



Table of contents

Foreword by Ken Cathcart	2
Background and context	4
What is a Community Conversation?	6
Why have a Community Conversation?	7
What are the principles of Community Conversations?	8
Who is involved in a Community Conversation?	9
Carrying out a Community Conversation	10
Preparing the ground	
Logistics	
The Conversation	
Follow-up	
The Community Conversation Process	18
Applying and adapting the Community Conversation Toolkit	20
Appendix: Community Conversation Template	26

Foreword

The Integrated Education Fund is pleased to be associated with this Community Conversation Toolkit. We have long recognised the benefits of parents being involved in decisions regarding the education of their children. Parents provided the impetus for our integrated schools and we believe that our schools are, therefore, strengthened by having strong foundations of participation and democracy.

Our belief in the community consultation methodology transcends a wish to see a specific outcome. All stakeholders have a duty to respect the views of local communities and, indeed, it is a core principle of this approach that the process belongs to the participants and not to any organisation or educational body.

Of course, the IEF would be delighted if a local consultation showed evidence of a desire for integrated education in any particular area. This outcome wouldn't come as a surprise, since the results of successive opinion polls over the years have demonstrated this demand.

We have been impressed by the professionalism of the Ulster University staff who worked on this project. They have refined the methodology to apply to various conditions and environments and I believe that the resulting Toolkit is a valuable resource, fit for facilitating civic conversations on a wide range of issues.

Ken Cathcart
Chair of the IEF Board of Directors

“

The Education Authority regards the Community Conversation Toolkit and approach developed at Ulster University as a highly valuable non-partisan mechanism to develop a best practice model of consultation. This enables whole communities to meaningfully engage with education planning, and in particular with Area Planning, and contribute to more effective and informed policy implementation.

”

Michael McConkey

*Head of Area Planning & Community and Schools,
School Development Service, Education Authority, Northern Ireland*

“

Building Change Trust is delighted to endorse this Community Conversation Toolkit as a key resource for involving citizens in deliberation and decision-making. It is the culmination of several years' work by the Integrated Education Fund, Ulster University and others, and we were delighted to be able to support the emergence of this approach through our Civic Activism Programme. Resources such as this are particularly important in the current context in Northern Ireland where many feel excluded from decision-making and public trust in government and politicians is under serious strain. We believe that the use of creative, structured and participatory approaches, such as the Community Conversation, demonstrate that directly involving citizens in decision-making can lead to better decisions, with wider community support and ultimately result in a strengthening of our democracy from the grassroots up.

”

Paul Braithwaite

Programme Leader, Building Change Trust

Background and context

The development of this Community Conversation methodology is to enable “*communities to participate as active agents in determining the shape of the places in which they live and the services they require... a right **to participate** is a foundational principle of civic democracy*” (<https://www.dtni.org.uk/op-ed/community-right-participate>).

The approach emerged from research undertaken on local education provision in the context of area-planning¹ for schools in Northern Ireland. A research team at Ulster University was engaged by the Integrated Education Fund (IEF) to carry out non-partisan community conversations that gave local communities a voice in relation to future school provision in their area. By collecting these views, it was possible to build a robust evidence base so that statutory authorities responsible for managing school provision could incorporate community informed decision-making into education planning and policy implementation. The methodology was applied initially in a rural context where there was an over-supply of school places: it could equally be applied to urban settings and to areas where there are insufficient school places.



¹ <http://www.eani.org.uk/schools/area-planning/>

Background and context

Community Conversations provide a vehicle for effective civic engagement and recognise the importance of local, grassroots experience as distinct from policy makers and other statutory stakeholders.

Inclusive dialogue is essential at all levels of society and some issues are too important to be the sole decision of policy makers and politicians. As a methodology, the Community Conversation does not presume to have all the answers or to resolve a particular issue but, as a process, it can challenge perspectives, contribute critical insights and thereby provide a strong evidence to inform the direction of policy opinion and implementation.

Its simplicity and transferability to a range of social issues means that the Community Conversation methodology has gained wide acceptance as a model of engagement. While initially more prevalent in health settings, it has relevance to a wide range of socially sensitive issues spanning education provision, disability, community relations, and housing, amongst others.

As a means of engagement, a Community Conversation approach can be particularly valuable in conflict or post-conflict societies (such as Northern Ireland), where segregated communities continue to struggle with changes and challenges to the status quo and the range of viewpoints on local issues can be highly sensitive and contentious for the communities involved.



What is a Community Conversation?

A Community Conversation can best be described as:

- An action research methodology delivered through structured participatory dialogues around a topic of importance to a local community.
- An opportunity for a diverse range of community members and stakeholders to come together to identify, discuss and generate potential solutions to a pressing issue facing the community.
- A means to facilitate engaged conversation, mutual learning, reflection (individually and as a group) and collective thinking.
- An asset-based and capacity-building approach that can lead to increased self-determination through active and informed contribution to decision-making and policy implementation in a local context.

Community Conversations are essentially qualitative in nature, although it is useful to collect additional quantitative data such as the demographic background of participants.

Why have a Community Conversation?

Community Conversations are key to participatory governance

As a methodology it:

- Provides a feasible, do-able opportunity to gather community feedback around a given topic.
- Offers the potential to explore sensitive and/or divisive topics of local concern.
- Promotes social empowerment, enabling communities to have greater voice in issues that directly affect them.
- Broadens the ownership of a particular issue thereby helping reduce inequalities of power, as well as inform practical decision-making.
- Creates an environment of mutual respect to discuss social issues in a constructive, participatory manner.
- Helps participants to find common ground leading to insights that generate options to move forward.
- Provides policy-makers with a deeper understanding of community views.
- Offers a community-focused evidence base which can lead to meaningful, effective policy implementation and potential social change.

What are the principles of Community Conversations?

The key principles of a Community Conversation include:

- Transparency of process.
- Non-partisan leadership and co-ordination.
- A degree of structure to prevent unproductive conversation.
- Open-framed guiding questions to encourage fluid conversation.
- Acknowledgement of, and respect for, local knowledge and perspectives.
- Active listening leading to frank and open dialogue.
- Mutual recognition and respectful understanding of differing viewpoints.
- Shared discussion, reflection and negotiation rather than driven by individuals.
- Emerging rather than imposed ideas and actions.
- Identification of potential solutions that align with a community's culture, priorities and resources.
- Guided encouragement towards the development of shared group understanding.
- Solution-focused and action-oriented discussion so that participants can see its value.
- An optimistic and forward looking focus on possibilities and potential solutions.
- Participant awareness of its purpose so that potential solutions are realistically framed within context and resources of the community.
- Assurances of confidentiality and any other ethical assurances to ensure the highest standard of research ethics and gain the trust of participants.

Who is involved in a Community Conversation?

A Community Conversation involves three key actors:

Facilitator

Creates a constructive space for meaningful dialogue.

Promotes discussion and ensures all participants have an opportunity to participate.

Encourages critical thinking, open discussion and respect for all viewpoints.

Guides the direction and flow of the conversation and maintains group focus.

Note-taker

Liaises with the facilitator in advance of the conversation to agree roles and responsibilities.

Ensures key points from the conversation are recorded accurately.

Checks any points of clarity with participants.

Participants

Provide grass roots insight into local community issues.

Give voice to the potential outcome and impact of government/policy decision-making.

Offer suggestions and solutions that are meaningful and achievable in a local context.

Carrying out a Community Conversation

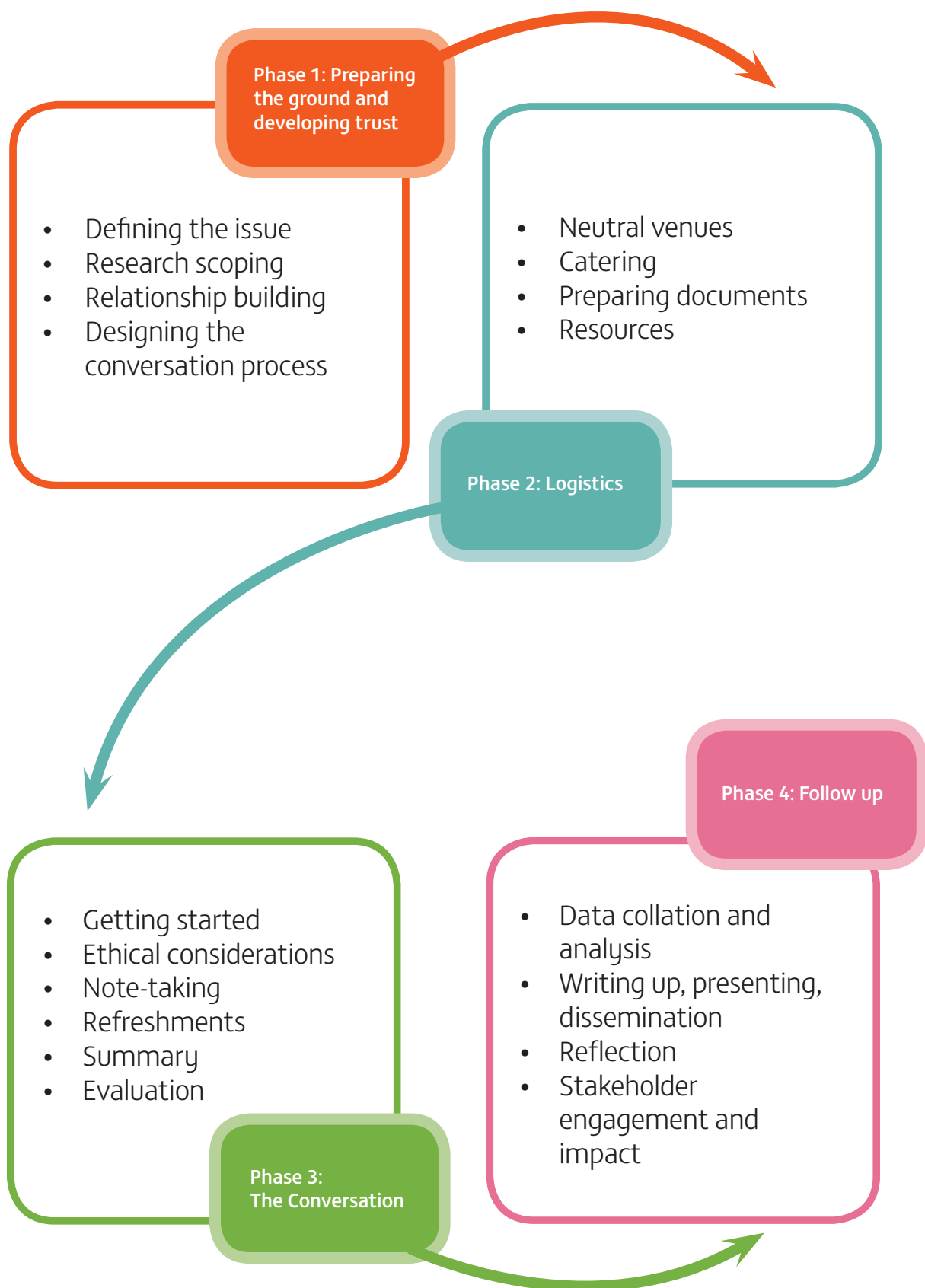
A Community Conversation follows four main phases and has a series of steps within each phase.

Phase 1: Preparing the ground and developing trust

Phase 2: Logistics

Phase 3: The Conversation

Phase 4: Follow up



Carrying out a Community Conversation

Phase 1: Preparing the ground and developing trust

Step 1:

Define the community and identify the issue and objectives

Possible objectives might include some or all of the following:

- To help stakeholders better understand...
- To engage [people]...
- To identify [issues]....
- To understand [viewpoints]....
- To consider [different views and options]....
- To develop [ways forward]....
- To identify [priorities, possible solutions]...
- To encourage [further dialogue, engagement, follow up action]...

Step 2:

Background research and scoping

- Gather data about the area, for example, maps (including boundary lines, wards etc), local population statistics and demographics, deprivation measures and indicators.
- Gather other relevant statistics and reports, for example, official school statistics, school inspection reports, employment figures, local council reports.
- Gain an understanding of the historical, political, cultural and social context of the area and how that might impact on the issue.
- Identify ethical issues relating to the implementation and delivery of the Community Conversation and, where necessary, gain relevant ethical approval.

Carrying out a Community Conversation

Step 3:

Relationship building

- Identify and arrange initial meetings with local organisations and stakeholders, including business owners and local representatives, to offset any initial resistance and to promote the Community Conversation as an effective means for local engagement.
- Distribute information, for example, posters displayed in local amenities (shops, community centres, libraries), advertorials in local newspapers, postings on relevant websites and local social media pages (for example, Facebook groups or pages for the area), direct letters and emails where appropriate.
- Provide contact details to respond to any queries and/or further detail if requested.

Step 4:

Create and design multiple methods for engagement

- Distribute all information on the Community Conversation in an accessible and transparent format to ensure participants clearly understand its purpose and the nature of their involvement.
- Offer flexibility and ease of communication to suit the differing needs of the target population, for example, daytime, evening time meetings as well as online opportunities to engage
- Provide clear guidance on participation in terms of duration, format of the Conversation, expectations for behaviour and potential outcomes.

Carrying out a Community Conversation

Phase 2: Logistics

Step 5: *Identify and book a neutral venue/location*

Venues can include:

- Community centre
- Community playgroup
- Leisure centre
- Town Hall
- Library
- Museum
- Hotel

Step 6: *Organise access, catering*

- Organise alternative access if requested
- Provide tea/coffee and biscuits on arrival
- Provide water and glasses on all tables
- Signpost venue facilities eg car parking, reception area, rest rooms
- Signpost venue procedures in the event of an emergency eg fire alarm, emergency exits

Step 7: *Prepare paperwork*

- Agenda
- Attendance sheets
- Questions and prompts
- Participant information sheets and consent forms

Step 8: *Organise resources*

- Pens
- Paper
- Post-its
- Coloured markers
- Poster paper
- Flip charts
- IT (eg laptop, projector, hand-held voting devices, facilitator microphones)

Carrying out a Community Conversation

Phase 3: The Conversation

Step 9:

Getting started

- Introductions:
 - o facilitator
 - o note-taker(s)
 - o participant groups eg parents, local community representatives, teachers, governors, local politicians, local businesses, policy planners.
- Provide reminder on nature and purpose of, and format for, the Community Conversation.
- Provide sufficient context and data to enable a focused conversation on the issue that is to be addressed.

Step 10:

Ethical considerations

- Ensure all participants have read and fully understood the information sheet provided in advance of the Community Conversation.
- Remind participants that their participation is voluntary and that individuals can withdraw from the Conversation at any time and without giving a reason why.
- Obtain signed, informed consent from all participants.

Step 11:

Conduct the Community Conversation

- Facilitator navigates a sequential and progressive conversation using a series of questions and prompts.
- For smaller groups, the format can take the form of a facilitated conversation. For a larger group we would recommend the ‘world café’ approach of having several tables working through the questions together. These tables can be led by a facilitator, or self-facilitated. The latter can be effective as agreement about the main points to record are determined by the group themselves.

Carrying out a Community Conversation

Step 12: *Note-taking*

- Note-taking will take place in parallel with the Community Conversation.
- For larger groups using the world café approach, an appointed note-taker will provide feedback to individual questions for each table.

Step 13: *Provide refreshments*

- On concluding the Community Conversation, further refreshments are provided.

Step 14: *Summary*

- Identify main points to emerge from the Community Conversation.
- Ensure there is agreement on the main points (what were the main messages that stood out from the conversation today?).
- Thank everyone for their participation.
- Ensure that everyone has been able to make the contributions they wanted to.
- Provide details on how participants, if they wish, can make a further contribution (eg online response form).
- Manage expectations of the process, for example, in terms of review of, and response to, the Conversation by statutory bodies in relation to policy decision-making.

Step 15: *Evaluation*

- Distribution of evaluation sheets to obtain feedback from those present.

Carrying out a Community Conversation

Phase 4: Follow up

Step 16: *Data collation and analysis*

- Synthesis of all note-taking and transcripts into a single document, with participant responses clearly organised and categorised to reflect the original questions.
- Read and review qualitative data to identify emerging themes that accurately reflect the various perspectives of participants.
- Inter-rater checking of thematic analysis and agreement on final themes.
- Quantitative analysis of demographic data and online survey data (if used) using appropriate software, for example, SPSS or Microsoft Excel.

Step 17: *Write up and presentation*

- Completion of full report that contextualises the Conversation, outlines the methodology, presents comprehensive findings and identifies recommendations.
- Presentation of findings to relevant agencies, highlighting key messages to emerge from the Community Conversation.

Step 18: *Reflection*

- What worked well and why?
- What were the main challenges or obstacles (if any) to the Conversation?
- Were there any unexpected incidents? How were these addressed?
- What could be done differently next time?

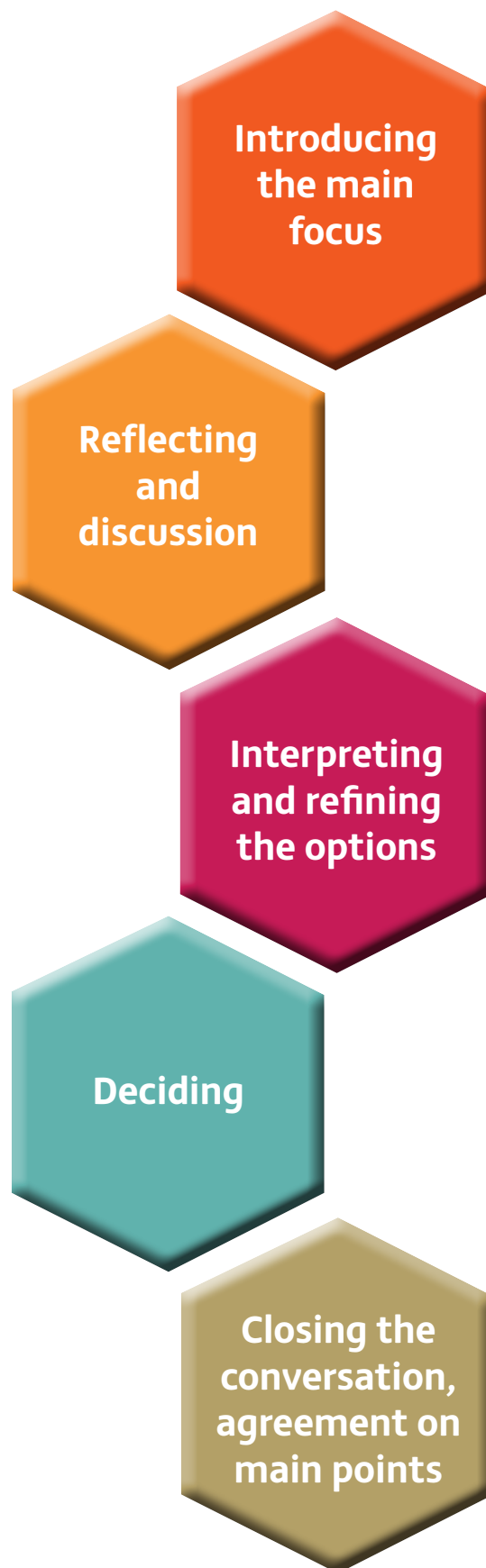
Step 19: *Follow up with stakeholders*

- Identify how and if the outcomes from participants informed, influenced and/or shaped policy development and implementation.
- Document short, medium and longer-term impacts of the Community Conversation.
- Agree process for dissemination of findings: to participants, to statutory bodies, to policy-makers and other relevant authorities.

The Community Conversation Process

Facilitating a Community Conversation is a sequential process that conforms to an agreed and manageable timescale. Within this process, the Conversation itself can be broken down further into a series of discrete steps that enable open, constructive and respectful dialogue. Whilst timings are not definitive, the suggested sequence is representative of a commonly used approach. A template for the process is included as an Appendix.

1. Introduction (5 minutes)
2. Overview (5 minutes)
3. Ground rules (5 minutes)
4. Identify roles: facilitator, note-taker, participants (5 minutes)
5. Community Conversation (60-75 minutes)
 - I. *introducing and informing*: providing the participants with information, explaining the context (5 minutes)
 - II. *reflecting*: letting the participants reflect on the information and context and formulate their views (15 minutes)
 - III. *interpreting*: enabling participants to process and discuss different views and options to begin to consider the best way forward (20-25 minutes)
 - IV. *deciding*: participants should move on to articulate what they see as the best way forward, identify possible solutions, clarify priorities, compromises and non-negotiables, identify next steps (20-25 minutes)
 - V. *closing* the conversation (5 minutes)
6. Next steps (eg online survey) (10 minutes)
7. Close (5 minutes)



Applying and Adapting the Community Conversation Toolkit

Exemplar: School provision in Northern Ireland

The research team at Ulster University carried out two community audits commissioned by the Integrated Education Fund:

1. Augher, Clogher and Fivemiletown, Spring 2017
2. Carnlough and Glenarm, Autumn 2017

The team developed and refined a methodology of Community Conversation for effective engagement with local communities (parents, school governors, principals, teachers, other school staff, community representatives and members of the wider community) in relation to school provision in those areas.

Northern Ireland remains a divided society and this is most notable in a largely segregated school system. Any review of school provision is an emotive and contested issue, particularly when choice of school appears compromised. A Community Conversation model of engagement is therefore particularly suited to address this challenging and difficult topic at a local level. In the case of the two community audits, the Conversation centred around the question: ‘what is the best way forward for sustainable primary school provision in the area?’

The Community Conversation approach that the researchers developed enabled these communities to contribute their views on sustainable education provision in their area in a way that was academically rigorous and ethically sound, whilst remaining independent of the statutory process and sectoral bodies, both of whom shape education provision in Northern Ireland and have their own specific priorities.

The data obtained from these projects can be used by both sectoral and statutory bodies to inform educational policy and delivery at a local level in terms of area-based planning.

Applying and adapting the Community Conversation Toolkit

An example of the Community Conversation approach in practice is presented below. This is based on previous work undertaken by the researchers in relation to sustainable school provision in a rural community in Northern Ireland.

Exemplar: School provision in Northern Ireland

Phase 1: Preparing the ground and developing trust

Step 1: Define the community and identify the issue and objectives

Define the geographic area, the community members we wanted to engage with (school principals and school governors, teachers, parents, community development workers, local politicians, local business owners), and the core issue (what to do about the over-supply of school places in the area).

Step 2: Background scoping and research

Local area census data, maps, deprivation measures, Department of Education school and pupil statistics and relevant inspection reports.

Application for ethical approval to carry out the project

Step 3: Relationship building

Meetings with school principals and governors, letters home to all parents, advertorials in local newspapers, notices in local shops and amenities, information on Facebook groups / pages for the local area.

Step 4: Creating and designing multiple methods for engagement

Providing multiple opportunities for community engagement can ensure everyone who wishes to participate is able to do so. This was the approach taken in the Community Conversation about the provision of primary schools in the local area. Methods of engagement included individual and group meetings with school principals and school governors, a series of face-to-face facilitated conversations with parents (multiple day time meetings), an open meeting in a local hotel (evening event), and an online response form (open for the duration of the fieldwork).

Phase 2: Logistics

Step 5:

Identify and book a neutral venue/location

Neutral community spaces identified and booked (community centres and a hotel).

Step 6:

Organise access and catering

Arrangements to access the venues and catering, co-ordinated by the facilitators or with the venue manager.

Step 7:

Preparation

Photocopying of documents for each event (agenda, list of questions and prompts, information sheets and consent forms, demographic survey).

Step 8:

Resources

Gather audio digital recording device, pens and paper, hand-held voting devices for open meeting (hotel event), laptop / projector for open meeting (hotel event).

Phase 3: The Conversation

Step 9:

Getting started

The type of conversation and who is present will determine the introductions. In the case of a small group facilitated conversation, it would start with introductions from the project leaders / facilitators and note-takers, and there should also be an opportunity for participants to introduce themselves. In the case of a larger event, where there are multiple tables of participants and other stakeholders present it may be more appropriate for participants to introduce themselves to others at their table and any stakeholders who are present should also introduce themselves and outline their interest in the project.

The facilitators should also provide background information and the context and rationale for the Community Conversation.

Step 10:

Ethical considerations

Ethics of recording and collecting responses from participants explained, and voluntary and confidential nature of participation emphasised. Signed consent forms completed by participants. Any questions answered.

Step 11:

Conducting the conversation

Working through a series of questions and prompts to enable a conversation about the key issue of over-supply of school places and possible solutions to address this. The starting point was a recognition that current provision was not sustainable.

The facilitated conversations with parents enabled each parent to contribute their views. Due to the large number of participants, the open event took the form of a ‘world café’ conversation, with each table working through a series of questions when prompted by the host, and recording the responses from the table in writing. At both the facilitated conversations with parents and the open event demographic data on all participants was collected through either a paper survey or hand-held voting devices. An online response form was open in parallel to the face-to-face meetings to enable those who were unable to attend to provide their views, or to enable those who had attended to add further comment.

Step 12:

Note-taking

Designated note-taker at all facilitated conversations with parents and at the open event.

Step 13: *Provide refreshments*

Refreshments were provided at the end of each event. This provided an opportunity for participants to talk informally with each other or to ask any questions of the research team.

Step 14: *Summary*

Report back to the participants the main points from the conversation and check that their views have been accurately reflected. Thank everyone for taking the time to contribute their views. Provide details of the online response form if participants have something further to add or that they did not wish to articulate during the conversation. Outline what the research team will do with the data and how it will be presented to the funder who will share it with wider stakeholders. Manage expectations in terms of how the Conversation might inform the statutory consultation process.

Step 15: *Evaluation*

Feedback from participants on their experience of the Community Conversation.

Phase 4: Follow up

Step 16: *Data collation and analysis*

Collate and analyse the qualitative data from the different Community Conversation events and quantitative data from the online response form.

Step 17: *Writing up, presentation and dissemination*

Write up the final report, present the report to the funder and engage in dissemination events to share the report findings with key stakeholders.

Step 18: *Reflection*

Individual and group reflections by the research team to identify what worked particularly well and any adjustments for future Community Conversations.

Step 19: *Stakeholder engagement and impact*

Follow up with key stakeholders to identify any implications of the Community Conversation and possible longer term impacts in terms of shaping and informing policy implementation, statutory consultation and decision-making regarding school provision in the area.

See:

Carnlough and Glenarm Community Conversation: Gathering views on local primary school provision. Dr Jessica Bates and Dr Una O'Connor-Bones with Mr Matthew Milliken and Dr Christine McKeever, January 2018.

ief.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/UU_CARNLOUGHGLENARM-REPORT-2018.pdf

Appendix: Community Conversation Template

Date of Community Conversation:		Location:
Facilitator:		Note-taker:
No. of participants:		Group:
Introduction	5 mins	
Context	5 mins	
Ground rules	5 mins	
Roles	5 mins	
Community Conversation	60-75 mins	
Introducing	5 mins	Provide the participants with information, explaining the context for the Conversation.
Reflecting	15 mins	Let the participants reflect on the information and context and formulate their views.
Interpreting	20-25 mins	Enable participants to process and discuss different views and options to begin to consider the best way forward while considering their responses to a series of questions.
Deciding	20-25 mins	Participants move on to articulate what they see as the best way forward, identify possible solutions, clarify priorities, compromises and non-negotiables, identify next steps.
Closing	5 mins	Summary of key messages and opportunity to reflect on the Conversation.
Next steps	10 mins	
Close	5 mins	
Other information:		

NOTES

Author contact details:

Dr Jessica Bates

E: j.bates@ulster.ac.uk

W: ulster.ac.uk/staff/j-bates

Dr Una O'Connor Bones

E: ub.oconnor@ulster.ac.uk,

W: ulster.ac.uk/staff/ub-oconnor

UNESCO Centre

School of Education

Ulster University

Coleraine Campus

BT52 1SA.

[ulster.ac.uk/faculties/arts-humanities-and-social-sciences/
schools/education/research/unesco-centre](http://ulster.ac.uk/faculties/arts-humanities-and-social-sciences/schools/education/research/unesco-centre)
