

Planning

Place based – is it as Simple as a Framework, Governance and a Map?

Angus Council

Background

Angus Council's Planning and Sustainable Growth team has been working to embed a place-based approach across the organisation and within community planning, with the aim of making place a central part of how priorities are understood and how services are planned and delivered. This developed in the context of a large rural authority with very different communities across coastal areas, towns and glens, where local identity is strong and where communities often have distinct needs and aspirations. The approach was informed by learning from earlier arrangements and by a desire to create stronger links between existing strategies, community identity and local ways of working.

The team therefore sought to move towards a model that linked people and place more effectively, created stronger connections between community priorities and council activity, and supported longer-term partnership working. This was not intended to sit only within planning functions, but to influence wider organisational practice and strengthen the relationship between local governance, service delivery and community participation. The work has also been informed by wider public service reform principles, including prevention, partnership, participation and a stronger local democratic focus.

Key activities

1. Developing a shared framework

The team developed a place framework approach to provide a clearer and more consistent way of understanding local priorities. The intention was to create a shared vision for each place by bringing together community views, local data and partner input. This approach aimed to connect spatial planning and community planning more effectively and to strengthen alignment across existing strategies through a single place-led approach. The framework was designed as a long-term partnership model rather than a short-term project.

2. Securing leadership and council support

A joint proposal was taken to the corporate leadership team to seek commitment for a whole-council approach. This led to support for taking the work forward as a whole-council commitment, recognising that corporate backing would be essential if the approach was to extend across more than one service area. A report was then produced, where agreement was given to implement the approach, establish governance arrangements, develop partnership working agreements with communities and align the work with the next Local Development Plan. This provided a formal mandate for the programme to proceed. system monitors congestion and adjusts subsequent cycles to minimise disruption and restore balance.

3. Creating flexible local governance

A key activity was the development of governance arrangements that could connect strategy with delivery while allowing communities to work in ways that suited their local context. Angus Council did not adopt a single standard structure, because communities were recognised as having distinct characteristics, priorities and preferred approaches to engagement. Instead, the intention was to agree local governance arrangements with communities and to ensure that these linked back to council and partnership structures. This created a basis for local decision-making while maintaining strategic alignment.

4. Organising baseline evidence

The team began gathering and analysing baseline data to support understanding in the two pilot areas selected to test the place-based approach. This included work to simplify how information was described and grouped, using themes that were easier for communities and services to understand. The team also worked to identify which departments held relevant information and how that evidence could be brought together more systematically. This evidence base was intended to support local discussion, sense-checking and action planning.

5. Testing the approach in two places

The two pilot areas, Montrose and Brechin, were selected because they presented very different local circumstances. Montrose had strong community activity, significant economic opportunity linked to offshore renewables and a range of established local groups and funding opportunities. Whereas Brechin had experienced major flooding impacts, housing challenges, the loss of key employers and more complex community dynamics. Selecting two contrasting places allowed the team to test whether the approach could work flexibly across different conditions.

6. Working with communities on priorities and delivery

Stakeholder mapping and early contact with community organisations were carried out to prepare for local engagement. The team planned a process of sense-checking its evidence with communities, using local knowledge to fill gaps, challenge assumptions and confirm priorities. The next stages involved developing a shared vision, aligning cross-service and partnership plans, and agreeing action plans with clear responsibilities for the council, partners, communities or joint delivery. The approach also included exploring ways to leverage funding, including support from private sector and community-based sources where appropriate.

Benefits and impact

Clearer local focus

One of the main benefits of the work has been a clearer focus on the specific circumstances of individual places rather than relying mainly on broad strategic approaches. The team has been developing a way of working that pays closer attention to the differences between communities and creates more space for local priorities to shape discussion and planning. In a rural authority where coastal settlements, towns and glens can have very different conditions and identities, this has helped strengthen understanding of place as something practical and locally distinct. The approach has also supported a shift away from seeing place as only a planning concept and towards seeing it as a wider organising principle for community planning, service delivery and partnership working.

Better joined-up working

The work has started to strengthen collaboration across services by creating a shared framework that different teams can contribute to. This has encouraged more connected thinking about local issues by bringing together information and perspectives from planning, economic development, community services, housing, climate and other service areas. Although this has taken time, it has created stronger links between evidence, priorities and delivery and has helped make the case for place as a shared corporate responsibility. The links being developed between place-based analysis, the new community plan and the next Local Development Plan also suggest a stronger basis for future partnership working and decision-making.

More meaningful community involvement

A further benefit has been the move towards a more participative approach in which communities are expected to help shape understanding of local issues and future action. Rather than presenting completed proposals, the team has been working towards a model in which information is shared with communities, checked against local experience and used as the basis for joint vision-setting and action planning. This gives greater value to community knowledge and creates more opportunity for local priorities to influence how plans are developed. It also addresses some of the limitations of earlier locality arrangements, which had not always reflected community identity or encouraged meaningful participation.

Stronger use of evidence

The work on data and mapping has provided a stronger evidence base for understanding local places and supporting discussion across services and with communities. By simplifying themes and organising information in a more accessible way, the team has made it easier to connect data with particular places and to see local patterns more clearly. Mapping has been especially useful in showing relationships between issues, such as links between housing and fuel poverty, and in helping people understand need in a more practical and visual way. This has the potential to improve prioritisation, support better informed local discussions and strengthen the quality of decision-making over time.

Learning and reflections

Embedding change takes time

A central learning point is that formal support does not automatically lead to quick implementation. The Planning and Sustainable Growth Team secured agreement from senior leadership but translating that commitment into day-to-day practice proved slower and more complex than expected. Progress depended on building shared understanding, organising evidence, involving different services and developing local arrangements in ways that could be sustained. This has reinforced that place-based working is a long-term organisational change process that requires persistence and realistic expectations as well as strategic endorsement.

Culture matters as much as structure

The experience has shown that frameworks, governance and reporting arrangements are important, but they are not enough on their own to embed a new way of working. The team found that even where there was general support for the approach, services could still face capacity pressures, competing priorities or uncertainty about what was being asked of them, particularly in relation to data and cross-service contributions. This highlighted the importance of building wider ownership

and ensuring that place is understood as a shared responsibility rather than something led by one team. This demonstrates that cultural change, practical clarity and continued internal engagement are all essential to making structural change work.

Flexibility is essential

Another important reflection is that there is no single model that will work equally well in every community. The team recognised this early and deliberately avoided imposing one fixed structure, and the two pilot areas have reinforced the value of that approach. Places start from varying positions, with their own levels of community capacity, local relationships and opportunities or challenges, so the pace and form of partnership working will not be the same everywhere. The learning is that consistency of purpose needs to be matched by flexibility in method if place-based working is to be credible and effective.

Trust and local empowerment

The work has also highlighted the importance of trust, openness and honesty in building sustainable relationships both within the council and with communities. The team recognised the importance of being clear about what can be delivered, where decisions sit and how responsibilities will be shared if confidence in the approach is to grow. This links to a wider reflection on community empowerment, as moving towards a more bottom-up model brings greater focus to how influence and decision-making can be shared in practice. The experience so far suggests that this is a positive and important area of development, and that stronger community influence depends not only on engagement but also on an ongoing willingness to work differently in practice.

Angus Council's place-based work shows a thoughtful and determined effort to build a more connected, locally responsive and collaborative way of working. The approach has already created stronger foundations for partnership, community influence and more joined-up use of evidence. The experience demonstrates that meaningful change takes time, but also that there is clear value in continuing to embed place as a shared focus for planning, delivery and local decision-making.

Contact for enquiries

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