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Technology, governance and volunteering: Bridging the Gap between People, Place and Participation

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Context

This case study explains how PAS has worked with a secondary school in a small Scottish town to involve the young people in decisions about the future development of their place. The project, called Bridging the Gap, sits within global and national policy contexts.

Globally, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child calls for young people’s participation in decisions affecting them. More specifically, Article 29 (d) is concerned with “The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin”.

The international community has also recognised the importance of giving children and youths a voice in the development of human settlements. The New Urban Agenda (NUA) was adopted at Habitat III, which was convened by UN-Habitat in 2016. The NUA recognised the need to “promote capacity development initiatives to empower and strengthen skills and abilities of women and girls, children and youth… for shaping governance processes, engaging in dialogue, and promoting and protecting human rights and anti-discrimination, to ensure their effective participation in urban and territorial development decision-making” (paragraph 155). Such statements reflect concerns for Healthy Cities, and recognition that innovation, leadership and support is needed to translate aspiration into reality.

Similarly, the Scottish Government has recently published a National Performance Framework in which the outcome for children and young people states: “We include and involve children in decisions about their lives and world, and protect their rights, dignity and wellbeing. […] Our communities are safe places where children are valued, nurtured and treated with kindness. We provide stimulating activities and encourage children to engage positively with the built and natural environment and to play their part in its care.” The National Health Service in Scotland also recognises the importance of place as part of a holistic approach to health and has been a key partner in the development of the Place Standard tool.

Rationale

PAS, a charity and social enterprise, provides independent training and advice to individuals and groups to help them have their voice heard in the planning system in Scotland. It has an office in Edinburgh staffed by a small, paid team, but its work is largely delivered through over 400 volunteers, most of whom are professional planners.
PAS has embraced citizenship and education as key concerns, recognising that young people are a group whose voices have not been heard in decisions about local development. PAS has developed the *In My Back Yard* (IMBY) and *YEP!* (Youth Engagement in Planning) youth engagement projects to bring the voice of children in primary and secondary schools into the built environment, often working with young people in less affluent areas. PAS also created a *Young Placemakers* training initiative for 16-25 year olds, which has now become part of its *Youth Volunteer* programme to foster young people’s abilities to shape the future of places.

In delivering projects that engage children and young people in understanding the places where they live and governance processes, and by helping the learners to develop their own ideas and voices, PAS has gained experience that has been recognised internationally. For example, it was invited to play a leading role in an ERASMUS+ project, *Young Eyes*, which helped teenagers in schools in small towns in peripheral parts of Sweden, Latvia and Poland to develop their own local action plans and present them to their municipal councils.

PAS was working in partnership with Galashiels Academy to develop an ambitious long-term project, *Bridging the Gap*. The rationale for this project was that to create the conditions for healthy development and wellbeing required not just the active participation of the pupils and teachers, but also the engagement of other key local agencies and the community. In this way, learning could be grounded in real world factors that determine how places are developed, and new local networks would be built, with opportunities for spillovers of ideas and skills.

**Description**

In 2016, PAS and Galashiels Academy ran a one-month Young Placemakers project in which all students in the S2 year group (12-13 year olds) were introduced to the concept of placemaking, using the Scottish Government’s Place Standard tool to assess the quality of their town and create ideas for its future. Following on from this, the *Bridging the Gap* project was conceived as a way to continue to involve young people over the longer term.

The planning system is a public service for all. Unfortunately, due to a lack of awareness many people are unable to become actively involved, especially young people. Young people will live the longest with the decisions we make today. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child asks for stronger participation by young people in decisions that will affect them; this is what *Bridging the Gap* aims achieve through the 4 year partnership in Galashiels.

The key outcomes are that students will:

- Develop the know-how to engage in discussions about planning and place;
- Learn how they can make their voices heard;
- Understand and respect of different points of views;
- Have the tools to be active citizens engaging in decision-making processes;
- Understand governance and the role of elected members.
Through the project, a team of PAS volunteers help train students to engage with elected members and council officers from the Scottish Borders Council, members of Energise Galashiels Development Trust and local Community Councils to gain first-hand experience of balancing different demands, decision-making structures and making their views heard.

The project is the first placemaking project in the UK to forge sustained intergenerational partnerships within communities through knowledge exchange between the younger and older participants, with volunteers playing an important role.

Young participants develop the tools and knowledge to engage with older persons, learn about history, local culture and gain a greater awareness of community and place. Using the Place Standard and digital tools to explore place themes, young participants pass on digital skills to the older generations, achieving greater inclusion and intergenerational cooperation and understanding.

The project is free of charge to schools and is designed around the outcomes in the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence, including health and wellbeing, literacy, social studies and technologies. The project is flexible and can be adapted to fit a particular scheme of work or group of learners.

The project has involved PAS volunteers working with on three year groups, S2, S3 and S6 (16-17 year-olds). Each academic year, students in each of these three groups take part in Bridging the Gap activities, thus allowing eventually all students to become involved.

The S2 group is introduced to the Place Standard tool, which prompts them to think openly about their local place. The students use the tool to survey and analyse their local area. Their results are developed into suggestions could be improved to make their area a better place for everyone.

The National Health Service in Scotland played a key role in developing the Place Standard tool, recognising health and wellbeing as inextricably linked to quality of place. The tool allows for holistic and interdisciplinary understanding of place and how these relate to key outcomes for communities.

The S3 year group builds upon their experience of the Place Standard tool and the knowledge gained. They participate in interactive workshops looking at the realities of planning through the use of digital technology.

The S6 pupils within the school receive additional Young Placemaker training so as to take on a mentoring role to assist the S2 year group throughout the Place Standard workshops. The S6 group also has the opportunity to engage with local decision-making bodies,
including the local community council and the local authority. S6 students are able to attend planning committee meetings within the local authority and will gain first-hand experience of learning to balance different demands, learning about decision-making structures and making their views are heard.

A steering group was formed, comprising: students from Galashiels Academy, PAS, Scottish Government, Creative Scotland, Education Scotland, Energise Galashiels, Scottish Borders Council and Eildon Housing Association. The steering group’s role is to provide a strategic overview of the development, implementation and execution of the programme, and advice, support and assistance throughout the partnership. An external performance monitoring and evaluation is also being undertaken.

*Bridging the Gap* is structured in two phases, first introducing students to concepts of placemaking and decision-making, then involving students in local projects and live issues relating to place, to put their skills and knowledge into action in meaningful contexts. During the first two years of the project, the steering group has identified six placemaking projects and live issues for participants to engage with:

- Place Standard digital app
- Patrick Geddes Learning Festival
- Town centre masterplan
- Planning Bill – legislation currently in the Scottish Parliament
- School estates project
- European youth camp

*Place Standard digital app*

Having made use of the Scottish Government’s Place Standard toolkit to explore their place, students from S2 took part in a series of workshops with an app developer to help design and test a digital app version of the Place Standard. The aim of this project was to make the Place Standard a more accessible and inclusive tool by enabling people to use it on their smartphones. The app is available to download for Apple and Android phones [here](#).

The Scottish Government’s Planning Minister, Kevin Stewart, MSP, took part in some of the digital app workshops, and commented:

“Planning affects everyone’s lives, so I’m delighted those involved in the Bridging Gap project are providing a platform for young people to get involved. The project supports the ambitions outlined in our consultation on the current planning review, to encourage more people to get involved in planning, and give young people a stronger voice in the decisions about the future of the place they live in.”

*Patrick Geddes Learning Festival*

Participants from Galashiels Academy took part in the Patrick Geddes Learning Festival in both [August 2016](#) and [September 2017](#). The Festival explores and champions the work of Sir Patrick Geddes, polymath and father of modern town planning. In particular, Geddes’ work focused on the mantra ‘place, work, folk’ – that to be successful, a place must involve its people.
Bridging the Gap participants took part to present the story of their learning and their aspirations for the future of their town. It was an opportunity to share points of view with a varied audience, including the Minister from the Scottish Government, as well as international speakers from Japan and India, to highlight the importance of young people’s participation in decision-making in places.

**Town centre masterplan**

Relatively early in the project, participants had an opportunity to take part in the process to develop a new masterplan for the town centre. Following engagement with the wider community and local businesses, students took part in workshops to share their views on the future of the town centre, as well as explore and discuss different views put forward by others in the community. The students’ views were then fed back to the masterplan team, including Scottish Borders Council and the Scottish Government.

**Planning Bill**

The Scottish Government submitted the Planning (Scotland) Bill to the Scottish Parliament in December 2017. During the first stage of legislative scrutiny, the parliamentary committee sought the views of young people on the future of the planning system and the steering group identified this as an opportunity for Bridging the Gap.

The Committee held an evidence session in the Scottish Parliament with 20 Bridging the Gap students from Galashiels Academy. MSPs (Members of the Scottish Parliament) on the committee sought their views on specific issues relating to the future of the planning system and encouraged students to share their aspirations for the role of young people in the planning system.

**School estates project**

In early 2018 an opportunity arose for Bridging the Gap participants to influence the proposed development of a new school campus in the Scottish Borders. Three towns were in the running to receive the new campus which will also include a range of amenities for the community. Through a series of workshops to explore issues (including potential impacts on quality of life and health and wellbeing) at the regional, local and school levels, students shared their views and helped to inform Galashiels Academy’s bid to receive the new school campus. The outcome is expected later this year.

**European youth camp**

PAS is a member of the Innovation Circle Network (ICN), an association of small, mainly rural municipalities mainly from peripheral regions around the Baltic Sea and northern Europe seeking to find solutions to common problems – not least the challenge of retaining their young people. In addition to joint projects on issues such as rural economic development and transport, ICN runs youth engagement projects such as the Erasmus+ Young Eyes project, including youth summits involving participants from different countries so as to foster international understanding and shared learning about young people’s role in placemaking and decision-making.
As part of the *Bridging the Gap* project, Galashiels Academy will host a week-long European youth summit in September 2018, with over 20 young participants attending from Latvia, Poland, Norway and Germany.

The youth summit is titled *My Town – Past, Present and Future* and will enable *Bridging the Gap* students to explore placemaking with their peers from other countries, including issues of governance and decision-making, resulting in participants returning to their home municipalities with new ideas for action and youth participation.

**Conclusion**

The *Bridging the Gap* project in Galashiels has proved an innovative partnership between the school (teachers and young people), the local authority (councillors and officials), the community (local organisations) and the third sector (PAS) with its volunteers. The range of organisations involved in the steering group, including young participants, has proved particularly effective in phase two, successfully identifying opportunities for young participants to put their skills into action in real world situations – helping to inform and influence the local planning and infrastructure decisions, Scottish Government legislation and hosting a European youth summit about young people’s role in shaping the future of places.

The role of volunteers has been significant in the delivery of this project. PAS volunteers, professionals in spatial planning, design and architecture have delivered all the workshops and engagement activities in the project, contributing not just their time but also their professional expertise.

In the Scottish and international context, *Bridging the Gap* represents an innovative approach to involving significant numbers of young people over an extended period in decision-making in their place and is a project that appears highly transferable to other locations. While the project continues in Galashiels it has already attracted funding from the Scottish Government to roll the project out in four additional locations. These projects locations will focus on less affluent communities in east, central and west Scotland.

*Bridging the Gap* is an investment in the long-term health and wellbeing of a generation.