

AHRC Creative Communities

Community Innovation Practitioner Pilot
Policy Paper

Northern Ireland Civic Identity

October 2024



Commissioned by:



Policy Context

In the context of Portrush, local government-level policy has not answered community appeals for a skatepark in the town for almost 30 years.

Sustained lobbying campaigns, [data gathering](#), expressions of support from the local community, and some support from Councillors voting in the chamber of Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council have not succeeded to address the aim of the campaign slogan to ‘Get Portrush a Skatepark!’.

Skateboarding as a creative practice has come up against wider redevelopment moves [to ‘resortify’ the seaside town](#). As a result, skateboarders’ appeals for space have been marginalised and there has been no consideration of skateboarding (nor any other urban sports) in the Council’s sports development and tourism/leisure strategies to date. This contrasts with numerous skateparks built by other Borough Councils across Northern Ireland since 2011 and is now at odds with the wider social legitimisation of skateboarding, including its recent addition to the [Physical Education GCSE curriculum in Northern Ireland](#).

The skateboarding community has developed a strong Do-It-Yourself approach to infrastructure provision, both out of necessity and as an expression of autonomous cultural production. This self-directed, grassroots action is an important source of [community empowerment](#), understood as small ‘p’ policy-making.

Recommendations

Grassroots policy for community empowerment

'Policy' should be reclaimed as community self-management

Contexts of 'policy-failure', such as those experienced by the skateboarders in Portrush, lead communities to feel disempowered. To (re-)empower communities with a sense of [civic agency](#), policy, both its terminology and practice, can be reframed as small 'p' policy: policy built from the ground up, rather than imposed from the top down (which we term big 'P' Policy).

Communities need support to organise and assert their agency

Small 'p' policy is already happening on the ground. The task is to distinguish this grassroots, self-directed organising from the [top-down norms of big 'P' Policy](#). The experience of a community organising to meet their needs independently can be empowering in terms of building relationships and developing collective consciousness, as opposed to being funnelled into bureaucratic governance channels.

The case for community empowerment is made in action

When grassroots communities put their collective agency into practice, it shows self-respect and empowerment. This

communicates to other stakeholders that this community demands respect – as has recently been the case for the skateboarding community in Portrush and their insistence that they be taken seriously as legitimate users of public space. This is Do-It-Yourself [policymaking](#).

To break 'Do-It-Yourself' down into its constituent components: the 'doing' is crucial, since the community recognises its own agency through action; 'it' is small 'p' policy – collectively negotiated management among people with shared material interests; 'yourself' is the expression of self-directed autonomy that underpins community empowerment – to which we would add a shift in emphasis to 'Do-It-Together'.

From Do-It-Yourself to Do-It-Together (loose coalitions of tactical diversity within multi-modal strategy)

Continue lobbying and protest alongside grassroots policy action

Historically in the case of the Portrush skateboarding community, DIY (and DIT) activity has persisted as everyday cultural practice, but at a remove from the lobbying and protest campaigns appealing to 'Get Portrush a Skatepark!'. Our recommendation to recognise this everyday activity as a source of empowerment (when reframed as

small 'p' policy) is not to the exclusion of ongoing lobbying and protest. Rather, we recommend that this be incorporated into a loose coalition of tactical diversity. Different modes of activity by diverse sub-constituents within the skateboarding community have a stronger combined impact. But 'looseness' is essential, so that no single voice dominates the strategic direction and diversity is meaningfully maintained in dialogue.

Change the terrain of contestation through multi-pronged strategy

This diversity of approaches creates a multi-modal strategy that effectively transforms the terrain of contestation around the skatepark issue. The power imbalance between lobbying campaigners - as primarily represented by [Causeway Association of Urban Sports](#) (CAUS) - and the local Borough Council engendered significant frustration. But that relationship has been reframed in light of a widened spectrum of tactical approaches - the power imbalance is no longer the focal point of the terrain of contestation. As long as these new autonomous initiatives can remain beyond the reach of top-down governance institutions, this repositions CAUS as moderates in their ongoing mediation with the Borough Council.

Think seriously about non-governmental and horizontalist solutions

Community organising is often viewed as something to be co-opted into top-down

government functioning, via '[community engagement](#)' or 'listening exercises'. While getting community voices into decision-making scenarios is an improvement, it falls short of genuine grassroots community empowerment. By taking non-governmental solutions seriously, the repertoire of community action is expanded. A series of successful non-governmental/grassroots community initiatives could begin to give people the confidence to rely instead on their own collective agency. This is beginning to become a reality for the skateboarding community in Portrush.

We ask creative communities, like skateboarders, to:

- Think strategically about how their various sub-constituencies can take different approaches that complement their overall goals;
- Recognise the value in tactical diversity and preserve difference through ongoing movement dialogue;
- Consider the value of community action on its own terms, rather than as a contribution to top-down governance.

These recommendations must be actioned by the (creative) community themselves

This can be achieved in practical terms through horizontal coalition building and shared involvement in collective action. Working together towards a shared goal, even while diverging on tactical approach, develops meaningful connections within and across the community.

Devolved Context

In contrast to the Northern Ireland Assembly and local government, the skateboarding community in Portrush cuts across ethno-religious lines – its cultural expression is not associated with one or other ‘side’. Grassroots policy in this context provides an opportunity for non-sectarian political agency – devolving power away from inherently sectarian political institutions opens the space for shared community action.

However, [funding is an immediate challenge](#) for community initiatives that are not supported by (or that seek to avoid the influence of) government bodies. A self-funded skatepark in Portrush could be feasible, turning the significant community support garnered by the ‘Get Portrush a Skatepark!’ campaign towards fundraising. While this might protect the community’s cultural autonomy, it would represent a considerable burden and might necessitate a paid access model of skatepark provision (which has been shown to be unsustainable in other parts of Northern Ireland).

A suggested next step for research would be to evaluate (and ‘stress test’) different funding and operating models for a skatepark in Portrush. If self-funding is not sustainable in the long term, then consideration could be given to community asset transfer as well as the potential compromises to community autonomy that may entail.

Further Information:

For more information on AHRC Creative Communities visit <https://creativecommunities.uk/>

Contact the CIP

Jim Donaghey, Ulster University
jim.donaghey@ulster.ac.uk

Creative Communities is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council UK (Grant Agreement No AH/X001555/1) and hosted at Northumbria University, Newcastle.

Commissioned by:

