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# Evaluation of Error Placecheck

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Report  
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# Contents

1. Introduction	page 3
2. Methodology	page 5
3. Planning and delivery	page 6
4. Benchmarking	page 12
5. Outcomes	page 14
6. Conclusions	page 17
Appendix 1 Contributors	

# 1 Introduction

The corporate plan for Perth and Kinross Council, 2007-2010 sets out its vision of:

‘...a confident and ambitious Perth and Kinross with a strong identity and clear outcomes that everyone works together to achieve.

Our area will be vibrant and successful; a safe, secure and healthy environment; and a place where people and communities are nurtured and supported. ‘

In 2007, Perth and Kinross Council (PKC) launched its Community Engagement Strategy and piloted new approaches to community engagement. The strategy reflects the national standards for community engagement, introduced in 2005 to improve the quality of engagement between public bodies and communities. The strategy was built up through a process of dialogue with key stakeholders, many of whom participated in a series of workshops examining the national standards and how to harness them effectively in Perth and Kinross.

Errol Placecheck was one of the pilot initiatives and was supported by resources to take forward short timescale projects. The project was devised as a joint pilot initiative between PKC, Errol residents and businesses with the intention of being an inclusive process engaging a wide range of community participants.

Placecheck is a method of assessing the qualities of a place, showing what improvements are needed and focusing people on working together to achieve them. A Placecheck can cover a street (or part of one), a neighbourhood, a town centre, or a whole city. The setting might be urban, suburban or a village.

Placecheck involves participants walking around a defined area or sites to identify what’s good about the area, what needs improved, what opportunities are present and what the priorities are. It brings a range of perspectives together to identify what might be important but not necessarily visible to all. The Placecheck focus can be broad or narrow ranging from a complete regeneration agenda to the narrower one of

environmental improvements piloted in Errol. Placecheck is recognised as a simple and valuable tool to bring diverse and often conflicting interests in a community together.

Developed by the Urban Design Alliance in the 1990s, Placecheck is now in widespread use in communities throughout the UK and is recommended in the Council's draft Public Space Management Guide as an ideal method of engaging communities in celebrating, managing and improving their public space.

As Placecheck was a pilot initiative, PKC considered an evaluation critical to determine future useage.

This evaluation examines the Placecheck pilot in Errol and benchmarks it against the national standards for community engagement. The evaluation provides an independent assessment of the value and impact of the Placecheck for all stakeholders including those in Perth and Kinross who have not yet tested out Placecheck but wish to learn from others' practice.

## 2 Methodology

The evaluation adopted a stakeholder approach, recognising the need to capture the views and experiences of all participants and take into account the different perspectives involved. The methods used to deliver the evaluation were:

1. Desk research
2. Focus group with project team members
3. Focus group with Errol residents
4. Electronic feedback

**Desk Research** - included analysis of team meeting minutes, project plan, DVD, project priorities, web information.

A **focus group** of ten project team members discussed the purpose, added value, impact/outcomes and lessons learned from the Placecheck pilot.

**Focus group with Errol residents** - Discussion in Errol Community centre with four local participants examined expectations, experience and impact.

**Electronic feedback** - Two local participants gave feedback about the Placecheck process electronically.

# 3 Planning and delivery

Planned outcomes for the Errol Placecheck were:

- More people involved in community activity and decision making
- Local public space management issues scoped and prioritised
- Community engagement as per the National Standards for Community Engagement demonstrated
- Evidence that the Council's Public Space Management Unit can work together with other council services and stakeholders
- Placecheck viewed as a valuable tool for future implementation

## Project Team

Following agreement at corporate management level, it was considered that a joint approach from the council was necessary rather than a responsibility of one department/service. A

project team of officers from PKC was established from:

- The Environment Service (TES): Community Greenspace, Traffic and Road Safety, Street Lighting, Roads Maintenance, Public Transport and Conservation
- Education and Children's Services (ECS): Cultural & Community Services: Community Capacity, Youth Work, Performance Planning
- Housing and Community Care was also represented.

The lead officer, keen to establish if Placecheck was an appropriate tool for community engagement within the PKC practice portfolio, was the Parks Development Manager from the Public Space Management Unit of TES.

A series of planning meetings established the purpose and potential outcomes of the Placecheck. Outcomes are identified above. The purpose of Placecheck was to test out

a new approach to community engagement within the context of public space management and specifically, environmental improvements.

The pilot was also used to demonstrate a community development approach and the value of sharing practice. Workshops on community engagement, led by Cultural & Community Services, were delivered to promote familiarisation with the national standards for community engagement.

Project team roles and responsibilities were also agreed. Community profiles were used to map the area. Action minutes were produced and circulated after each meeting, with timescales and named responsible officers clearly indicated. For some officers, working and sharing resources across the Council was a relatively new experience and was viewed as one of the positive outcomes of the pilot.

**‘It was great to work with a bigger team, to have different departments working well together and knowing we were all aiming for the same thing’**

*Placecheck team member*

Tasks identified and allocated within the project team to ensure positive outcomes included:

- Identifying community organisations and briefing them in advance of the Placecheck events
- Ensuring updated knowledge about potential local issues was shared within the project team including alcohol by-law issues and planned housing developments
- Identifying minority communities who may need additional support to participate
- Arranging risk assessments
- Tracking previous engagement/consultation with the community and outcomes
- Mapping existing services and issues in the village of Errol to establish Placecheck sites and walkabout routes

- Planning publicity and practical arrangements including venue, refreshments and crèche
- Arranging production of a DVD as a record and learning tool
- Briefing elected members

Team members were involved at all stages of the Placecheck process and presented as a unified corporate body during engagement with the community.

**‘The Council people were very well organised - it looked really slick and corporate (in the community centre)’**

*Errol resident*

## **Publicity**

Effective publicity for the Placecheck was viewed as crucial to its success. Information was posted on the council’s website, leaflets were distributed from Errol Primary School via schoolbags, briefing meetings were held with local organisations and every house was sent a letter outlining the purpose of Placecheck and inviting participation. The local Community Capacity Building officer also referred to the Placecheck during any contact with local people and businesses in the lead up to the first event.

The extent and variety of publicity had the effect of generating a lot of local interest and word of mouth ‘buzz’ about the potential of Placecheck for Errol which, according to community participants, has traditionally felt on the margins of PKC priorities. The Placecheck was viewed as something unique both in its format and that it was being piloted in Errol.

**‘We were used to being a bit sidelined by the council and suddenly felt like royalty’**

*Errol resident*

## Engaging children and young people

Early in the process the Community Capacity Building officer identified the potential of engaging children and young people in the process through two distinct methods:

1. Primary school Placecheck
2. Streetwork

The children's and young people's Placecheck took place in advance of the main event and findings from both the primary school and streetwork were fed into presentations during the first Placecheck event, informing the action planning process. Local adults reported this part of the Placecheck as being particularly valuable, both in hearing the views of young people and as a vehicle to divert negative opinion about young people.

**'It was great. The teenage bashing was just starting and then the positive stuff from kids was presented - it changed everything'**

*Errol resident*

## Resources

To ensure the Placecheck was a successful event the following resources were in place at the events:

- Badged staff team in place during the Saturday walkabout, action planning and follow-up feedback events
- Community Police present at events
- Free crèche available to participants on a pre-booked basis
- Buffet lunch provided
- Sole use of community centre arranged
- Corporate pop-ups and exhibition materials prominently displayed

- Local enlarged Ordinance Survey maps available to assist walkabout and action planning phase
- Presentation linking Placecheck to corporate plan priorities produced and shown at first event
- Cameras available for walkabout participants
- Event opened by Provost

Resources to help progress priorities identified during the Placecheck were in place. However, human resource time was a requirement that did not attract additional resources, resulting in officer time being diverted from existing priority projects eg. conservation area schemes within TES and voluntary sector liaison within Cultural & Community Services.

### **Walkabout and action planning**

On a Saturday in June the first event took place over a morning-early afternoon. Despite terrible weather conditions, over 40 people participated in a walkabout of eight zones, armed with cameras to record their views about the quality of the village environment and areas for improvement. Staff had been pre - allocated to group walkabouts and to provide information where appropriate.

Group discussions to agree priorities themed around the eight sites followed with short (2-3 months), medium (within a year) and long term (year or more) priorities agreed. The dialogue that decided the priorities, including input from council officers with expertise in the implications, was viewed by local people as being particularly useful and for all participating, a first. Feedback has suggested it felt like a meaningful discussion was taking place rather than a question and answer session or council officers 'fielding' complaints /issues.

Information about likely cost, possible disruption to residents, implications for car drivers and safety for children was all discussed openly in groups and informed and influenced the priorities identified.

**'We originally concentrated on one thing then when the cost was explained, we realised there were other more important things for that amount of money to be spent on. Without that input we would have wasted time on something that wouldn't have worked'**

*Errol resident*

Priorities identified were grouped into four themes: street, park, litter and miscellaneous and ranged from improved signage, requests for dog waste bins, an extension to the community centre and diversionary activities for young people.

The event was evaluated positively by participants with **68% evaluating Placecheck as either a good or very good way of working with residents to help identify local priorities. 76% reported the time allocated to giving background information during the Placecheck was just right and 62% reported the time allocated to the walkabout was just right.**

### **August feedback event**

35 local people returned in August to the feedback event where the World Café method, successfully piloted in Perth and Kinross by Cultural & Community Services in 2006, was used to generate discussion about the priorities from the walkabout and prioritising event and feedback on the actions to date from the first event.

A crèche was arranged as per the first event.

Officers had used time to research the issues and priorities raised from the first event including traffic surveys, costings and specifications for the ball court. This was essential information to inform prioritisation from the first event.

Priorities were grouped and narrowed down to create an agenda for both the Council team and local people. The themes agreed were:

- Community support
- High Street
- Park and countryside
- Gateways and streets

Some small scale actions, already planned and implemented by the Council team from the first event, were reported on. Outline costs and the implications of progressing priorities were explained.

### **Continuing dialogue**

Following the first event, residents quickly saw some short term actions implemented eg. faded road markings repainted and dog waste bins erected.

These were followed by a newsletter to all residents from PKC to confirm the top priorities and advise of the next steps.

An exhibition of the proposals to address the community priorities took place in Errol community centre from 22 November – 19 December. The display was staffed for 3 evenings one week. This was followed up with another letter drop before Christmas advising people of progress from the Council team, referring them to copies of the drawings left at several locations in the village and that accessible on the PKC website. Community participation at this stage was low.

In addition, email contact has been ongoing with some residents about progress they were particularly interested in being involved with eg. developments in the park with parents of small children who are keen to play a role in planned improvements.

Local residents report their relationship and perception of PKC as being transformed by these relatively simple and low cost approaches to engagement. 'Putting a face to the Council' and having a direct link into the complex bureaucracy the Council can appear to be to local people, are viewed by residents as positive outcomes from the Placecheck.

Generating social capital to invest in the changes and improvements prioritised during the Placecheck is part of the Placecheck agenda. This is at an early stage in Errol. Whilst community organisations are active on the issues of immediate concern to members, a co-ordinated approach from community organisations is not yet evident.

Some individuals who participated in the Placecheck have yet to find their fit with community organisations. There is acknowledgement that the Placecheck was a catalyst for community cohesion but there is also concern that the momentum created by the Placecheck may be lost. This is partly connected to the time taken to see longer term projects developed but is also based on the absence of co-ordinated community activity growing out of the Placecheck.

The Council's Community Capacity Building officer carries significant respect in the community and is working effectively to follow up the Placecheck process. There has also been input from a design team to discuss works in the village cross area with businesses as well as the works involving the Take a Pride in Errol group and work with the local school on Cistern Green.

However, with no dedicated staff support and a lot of heightened expectations amongst residents about village improvements, adequate capacity within community organisations to work in partnership with the Council is crucial. Consideration of this should be part of any future Placecheck planning.

## 4 Benchmarking

This section benchmarks the Errol Placecheck against the ten national standards for community engagement presenting evidence of practice where available.

<b>Standard</b>	<b>Sample evidence from Placecheck</b>
<b>INVOLVEMENT</b> We will identify and involve the people and organisations who have an interest in the focus of engagement	All known community organisations contacted and briefed Marginalised communities researched Posters, leaflets and web information as publicity Contact with all residents made via invitation letter Leaflets in schoolbags to parents
<b>SUPPORT</b> We will identify and overcome any barriers to involvement	Placecheck delivered in primary school to engage young children Streetwork with young people Accessible venue used Research re. marginalised groups Free crèche provided
<b>PLANNING</b> We will gather evidence of the needs and available resources and use this evidence to agree the purpose, scope and timescale of the engagement and the actions to be taken	Evidence of need was not gathered in advance of agreeing Errol as the Placecheck pilot and there is no evidence of a strategic fit. Community profiles used for planning Purpose, scope and timescale all agreed within PKC and outlined to community organisations in advance of events
<b>METHODS</b> We will agree and use methods of engagement that are fit for	Placecheck identified by 68% of local participants as a good or very good engagement method Placecheck identified as best practice in national public

<p>purpose</p>	<p>space management guidance</p> <p>Placecheck also effective in generating corporate working and identity for PKC team</p>
<p><b>WORKING TOGETHER</b></p> <p>We will agree and use clear procedures that enable the participants to work with one another effectively and efficiently</p>	<p>Joint training on the national standards for community engagement was delivered.</p> <p>The PKC team developed the programme over a series of meetings and communicated all relevant information to community organisations.</p> <p>Roles and responsibilities were clearly identified and communicated. Key council officers were involved in the process and all were well prepared with information to present at the Placecheck events.</p> <p>Plain English was used to describe technical processes.</p> <p>The Placecheck method transparently identifies purpose, roles and expectations of all involved including expectations of community participants.</p>
<p><b>SHARING INFORMATION</b></p> <p>We will ensure that necessary information is communicated between participants</p>	<p>Having made the decision to pilot Placecheck in Errol, all subsequent information was effectively shared across participating council services and community participants.</p> <p>Leaflets, letters to every household, web information, community meetings and follow-up email dialogue is evident.</p> <p>There remains a gap in information about how and why Errol was identified as the pilot site and the strategic fit.</p>
<p><b>WORKING WITH OTHERS</b></p> <p>We will work effectively with others with an interest in the engagement</p>	<p>All relevant PKC and community services and structures were involved, researched in advance and delivered to a high standard. Community Police were involved during events.</p> <p>However, Community Planning partners were not part</p>

	of the process at all.
<p><b>IMPROVEMENT</b></p> <p>We will actively develop the skills, knowledge and confidence of all the participants</p>	<p>As a pilot, the Placecheck provided learning for all involved and a recognition of the value of engaging with communities to achieve best use of resources. Improved working arrangements between PKC services have been evidenced and an improvement in the community's image, understanding and communication with PKC is evident through community feedback and ongoing dialogue.</p> <p>A DVD was produced of the Placecheck and will be used as a learning and development tool</p> <p>Engaging with Community Planning partners is recognised as being 'the next stage' in and future Placecheck processes.</p>
<p><b>FEEDBACK</b></p> <p>We will feed back the results of the engagement to the wider community and agencies affected</p>	<p>Placecheck has a built in feedback process which was used effectively and continues to be supplemented by email contact and direct feedback from PKC staff, including ongoing dialogue from Community Capacity Building officer and design team.</p>
<p><b>MONITORING AND EVALUATION</b></p> <p>We will monitor and evaluate whether the engagement achieved its purposes and meets the national standards</p>	<p>Community experience of Placecheck events were evaluated very positively at the time. External evaluation commissioned to measure impact against national standards.</p> <p>Evidence provided on all standards.</p>

# 5 Outcomes

The Errol Placecheck is not yet complete. Whilst short term priorities have been progressed, more substantial projects, with the associated spend, are just about to start. Given this, progress and delivery against planned outcomes is progressing but cannot be fully evaluated.

## **Outcome 1: More people involved in community activity and decision making**

During the Placecheck process more people than have been involved before in community activity participated. Community participants reported a previously unknown 'feel good factor' and a high degree of 'community spirit'. Some participants have remained part of the Placecheck progress and intend to continue to progress the priorities identified through existing community organisations whilst others have yet to find a fit between their interests generated through Placecheck and current community structures.

Others from existing community organisations report a boost to their agendas from the focus given to Errol via Placecheck.

Some participants' priorities have been progressed on the Council's part as far as is likely eg. placing of dog waste bins. However, given the resource climate councils are in, continued monitoring of dog waste is unlikely to be a priority for PKC and is an example of where local people can build on progress made. This is not fully appreciated within Errol with some local people expecting continued council intervention rather than harnessing a community response. A process of capacity building will assist in overcoming this gap in the positive outcomes delivered through Placecheck.

## **Outcome 2: Local public space management issues scoped and prioritised**

Short, medium and longer term priorities have been identified, scoped and costed through the Placecheck process. PKC is committed to delivering these priorities over the next 1+ years. The Placecheck process has ensured priorities have been developed

in dialogue with local people which should contribute to more cost effective and sustainable impacts.

### **Outcome 3: Community engagement as per the national standards for community engagement demonstrated**

Errol Placecheck has been benchmarked against the national standards for community engagement with evidence provided against all the standards. Particular highlights relate to the **involvement, support, methods, improvement** and **feedback** standards. It should be noted that the feedback standard is often challenging for councils so progress on this is very significant and positive.

The absence of a clear strategic fit and involvement of Community Planning Partners indicate room for improvement on the working with others and sharing information standards (though information was shared effectively between those involved.)

### **Outcome 4: Evidence that the Council's Public Space Management Unit can work together with other council services and stakeholders**

The Council's Public Space Management Unit demonstrated sound leadership and effective support and co-ordination of the events was led by Cultural & Community Services. The collaborative approach recognised, valued and harnessed the contribution from other services and demonstrated the value and impact of Placecheck for the first time in Perth and Kinross.

The Unit also demonstrated to council colleagues the value of engaging directly with a community about resource allocation, ensuring monies are allocated according to community knowledge of need and interest.

### **Outcome 5: Placecheck viewed as a valuable tool for future implementation**

Errol Placecheck was unique. It was a first for Perth and Kinross which attracted both optimism about testing a new approach and scepticism about the potential for impact and change.

Some of the scepticism was based on the absence of environmental improvements in Errol meeting strategic priorities. None of the relevant strategic plans or planning structures had identified Errol as demonstrating a particular need so services' initial perceptions about the Placecheck were that it had come 'from left field'. Equally, local people in Errol, though delighted to be prioritised, expressed some surprise that Errol had been identified as the pilot site.

The revenue resources allocated to support the process went some way to offset these initial questions and once the Placecheck was confirmed as going ahead, all involved embraced both the principles and practice and delivered a successful pilot.

Lessons have been learned from the pilot. The key issues raised for PKC include:

- The value of **engaging with a wider community**, rather than specific interest groups, has been recognised. The diversity of community input, from children through young people and to older adults, including those not normally involved in community activity and decision-making, was unique both for some community members and council officers. The added value and sense of cohesion from the process was welcomed and appreciated by all participants.
- **Community engagement is not a quick fix.** There is an interest within PKC about developing the community trust model locally. Whilst this is recognised as being a long term aspiration, the process of getting to the stage of communities identifying the need for, and investing the time and energy, in developing a community trust, is recognised as being challenging. Some of the feedback from Errol residents suggests a continued expectation that the council will provide indefinitely. This does not indicate an appetite for community ownership of local development and improvement.
- The added value of **council services working together** with a shared vision, goals and co-ordinated practice, is one of the most positive outcomes from

Placecheck. The challenge is to maintain this momentum which officers already report is dissipating eg. not all officers are aware of the communication arrangements in place with local people on progressing priorities or of fortnightly minuted meetings circulated to team members.

- **Is this a sustainable process?** The pilot was successful but without ringfenced resources there is concern about how the council can fund the priorities identified through a Placecheck process? With this in mind, planning for any future Placecheck is vital and should address at an early stage the need for community buy-in to priorities identified. This increases the potential to generate external funding for priority actions. Critical questions to be asked prior to a further Placecheck/Placecheck rollout include:

- What is the purpose of Placecheck?
- What are the planned outcomes?
- Does the planned 'spend' timescale allow for adequate engagement of communities?
- What will happen after the Placecheck?
- How will issues raised and priorities identified be resourced/resolved?
- Is there capacity within the community to contribute to resourcing priorities/seek solutions to issues?
- Who will help build capacity where there are gaps?
- What will happen about unresolved issues? Who will be responsible for maintaining dialogue with the community about them?

The issues raised for the Errol community include:

- How do we **maintain a profile with the council** that will continue to improve our village? Having had the level of investment the Placecheck pilot brought, Errol residents now want to maintain the interest of and dialogue with the council.

- How do we **build on the sense of cohesion** evident during the Placecheck? Suggestions have been made about launching a community newsletter but who does this remains unclear.
- How do we **maintain momentum** in improving our village? Whilst groups and individuals have maintained an interest in being involved in the implementation stage of Placecheck, there is a recognition that the time lapse between a summer 2007 event and implementation of projects, will result in some local people losing focus, if not interest.

## 6 Conclusions

The Errol Placecheck was a successful pilot that engaged well with a community, promoted joined-up working across council services and projected an image of corporate effectiveness.

A diverse range of community voices were heard and priorities developed based on a broad view about the needs and aspirations of Errol, whose residents were delighted to have such a high profile with the council.

The planning and presentation of the two Placecheck events were well executed and received, and the sound work of the PKC team was both evident and acknowledged very positively in Errol.

The availability of ring-fenced monies to support priorities identified contributed to a well motivated PKC team and to an extent, to community interest. However, the availability of a crèche, use of cameras, good refreshments and the pilot nature of the Placecheck all contributed to a 'feel good factor' in the village. Though unlikely to be sustained without financial investment, the immediate success of the two events were not wholly dependent on financial resources.

The Placecheck benchmarked well against the national standards for community engagement, including on the feedback standard which can be challenging for councils, as complex bureaucracies, to deliver.

Since the Placecheck communication within the community and between the community and PKC team, has been mixed. Dialogue with local residents and community organisations has been ongoing and has included positive developmental contact through the newsletter, letters and exhibition in the community centre. There have also been complaints about lack of progress. Whilst this is of course legitimate, some community feedback has highlighted the continued dependency on council services to

address local community issues which might be more effectively addressed within and by the community itself.

Issues of sustainability have been identified. For the council, rolling out the Placecheck approach without ring-fenced or top-sliced monies, presents a challenge: officers' apprehension about raising community expectations through an exciting process with little financial investment to resource expectations. Identifying where a planned Placecheck fits with strategic priorities and clarifying expectations of both Community Planning partners and communities in generating funding for priorities would help overcome this.

Effective and concentrated capacity building within communities in advance of Placecheck rollout is recommended. This will contribute to creating community structures and processes that can work in partnership with the council to deliver priorities identified and be more involved in organising a Placecheck from the start. Without this, PKC risks creating cynicism about the purpose and value of the Placecheck process within communities.

## ***Appendix 1***

### **Contributors**

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