

Involving people, changing lives: community participation in the development process

By John Thompson¹

Introduction

The 'Sustainable Communities' agenda, as set out by the present government, is predicated upon local people becoming more actively engaged in the development of their own communities. The draft Planning Policy Statement 1 (PPS1) and associated documentation (Community Involvement: The Government's Objectives) published earlier this year outlined how a reformed planning process is expected to contribute towards this goal, with local authorities and developers tasked with engaging local communities in a more meaningful way.

This new legislation is a response to widely held views, expressed in the Planning Green Paper, that the current planning system is an overly complex and bureaucratic process that is remote from everyday life, appears biased towards private finance and rarely addresses the aspirations of ordinary people. Local communities are consulted too little or too late, leaving them disenfranchised and only brought together through their collective opposition to formal proposals. In its final form, PPS1 will effectively call time on consultation as a 'tick-box' activity, compelling local authorities to create their Local Development Documents through a meaningful and clearly defined process of community participation and thereafter consulting local people on how well specific applications meet with these defined goals.

One important but entirely understated aspect of the new documentation is its very careful use of terminology and in particular the distinction that has obviously been made (although not conveyed) between the terms 'participation' and 'consultation'. In general, the word "involvement" has been used to cover all forms of community engagement, but in more specific areas "participation" has been used in relation to vision-building processes, and 'consultation' to describe involvement with formal proposals.

Often these terms are used interchangeably, when in fact they describe two very different modes of community involvement. Participation involves people taking part and sharing in a process that sets the agenda for the future development of an area. It requires an open forum in which all local stakeholder views are given equal consideration. A good participatory process will engender consensus-building, help reconcile differences, and create a dynamic, inclusive vision for the future that garners a shared sense of ownership. Participatory events are important not only for their outputs, but also because they bring communities together in a positive way, revealing shared values, mutual interests and common goals and helping to enhance social capital.

Consultation differs from participation because it is about an exchange of views. It has a more restricted scope than participation and involves a community being brought to an understanding of formal proposals and then given the opportunity to present their views on how well these measure up against the aims and objectives that have already been agreed and set in place for development within their local area.

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It is a lack of understanding of this distinction that has led many private developers (and some local authorities) to resist community involvement because it is perceived as a highly confrontational forum without positive benefits. But this hostile response almost invariably stems from the same root cause, that local communities, even though invited, have not participated in the production of their local plans. The Planning Green paper discusses the many reasons for this, but the outcome is obvious—that when local people are consulted on formal proposals, they become frustrated that discussions about alternatives are not on offer. Hostility arises because they are presented with the restricted scope of consultation, when what they really want is an open process of participation.

This persistent practice of presenting communities with what amounts to a “*fait accompli*” has seriously undermined people’s trust in the present planning system. In our own work, we repeatedly encounter communities incredulous of the fact that the formal proposals they oppose are actually in accordance with planning policies guiding development in their own neighbourhoods. As a result, planning committee members find themselves caught between the policy-based advice of the local planners and the highly emotive feelings of the communities they have been elected to represent. At this point, schemes are repeatedly deferred or rejected without material grounds, only to be lost at appeal. Whilst this may be good for the law profession it is clearly untenable for a government looking to private finance to deliver the development the country needs in order to remain prosperous and offer a better quality of life.

This is the main issue that we believe PPS1 is trying to address, but, like the current debate surrounding design codes, there appears to be some confusion over its implementation. At present there is no best practice guidance for community involvement, and, more worryingly, a distinct lack of experience, skills and resources within most local authorities.

Community Involvement: how it can be done and why it works

Community involvement is a complex field of study because there are a myriad of different approaches being undertaken by practitioners from a wide variety of disciplines including planning, urban design, architecture and landscape design. In his publication ‘The Community Planning Handbook’, Nick Wates lists over fifty of these strategies such as community planning, action planning, hands-on planning, urban design studios, and community charettes. The scale of engagement within these can also be extremely varied and range from large-scale regional planning issues down to very small scale and specific proposals for neighbourhood facilities such as children’s playgrounds or pocket parks.

What they all have in common, however, is that they provide local stakeholders, including the residents, business people, service providers, local authorities and a variety of interest groups, with an opportunity to contribute to the development process. As advocates of the process, we believe that everyone who lives or works in a particular area has something to contribute towards shaping it’s future, and we have learnt that by involving them from the outset it is far more likely that local neighbourhoods will receive the type of development and services that they really need to prosper.

At John Thompson & Partners we have been involved in what we term “Community Planning” for more than a decade and have carried out well in excess of one hundred exercises throughout the United Kingdom and across Europe. Initially our commissions tended to come either from the public sector (local authorities/regional development agencies) or from community groups backed by government money. Often these projects were located in problematic areas suffering from severe deprivation that required serious physical, social and economic regeneration such as parts of Manchester, Newcastle and Belfast. In the last few years however, private developers have begun to see the financial and other benefits that can accrue from Community Planning.

Although our approach to community involvement is constantly evolving, in recent years we have developed a four stage approach that has been widely acknowledged as delivering impressive results:

1) Project start-up and community animation

The lead-in period for a Community Planning exercise can range from a few weeks to several months, depending on the scale and nature of the project. Working alongside a commissioning body, we generally start by establishing a steering group that includes local council members, important members of the local community and business people who help to develop the scope of the project.

One of the essential aims during the first stage is to ensure that the widest possible spectrum of people attend the public event itself, which may only last two days. The importance of animating the local community; making them aware of the event and the significance of their personal contribution, cannot be underestimated. Our approach to this has become more sophisticated in recent years and goes well beyond the traditional use of mail shots and posters, and now involves our team literally “putting the word on the street” by encountering the local community in-situ, at residents associations, local interest groups, arts and cultural associations, youth clubs, business forums, and schools.

Once the message has begun to circulate on the ground, a Launch Event will be used to focus media coverage, reinforce what is being asked of local people, and emphasise the implications it will have for their quality of life in the future. In a world of intense competition for people’s attention, animation has to have both the visibility of a marketing campaign, as well as the credibility that derives from word of mouth communication.

In the draft PPS1, community animation was completely overlooked and in our response to the government we have suggested a rewording of the document to stress its importance.

2) Vision Building

The second stage has by far the highest profile for local communities and involves a large-scale participatory event. During this, people of different ages, backgrounds and cultures, with different concerns and enthusiasms, get a chance to listen to each other, to offer suggestions and to enter into a constructive dialogue. These discussions are facilitated by a neutral, multi-disciplinary team, with a range of skills and experience that are specific to the nature and particular characteristics of the project. This will include our own community planners, architects and urban designers, as well as a range of specialist collaborators that might include business analysts, funding experts, civil and traffic engineers, hydrologists, landscape designers and ecologists.

They arrive with open minds and a blank piece of paper, prepared to listen and learn before using their own professional skills to help transform the aspirations of local people into a viable vision. On the day before the public workshops the professional team familiarises itself with the site and location and receives background briefings from key people drawn from the local authority, resident groups, business associations and interest groups. The public workshops generally take place over two days including a Friday, to enable local schools to participate, and Saturday for people that are working.

The aim of the public sessions is to tap common intelligence and create value for everybody. Despite apparent differences at the outset, conventional boundaries soon break down, releasing imagination, positive thinking and collective creativity, from out of which a consensus almost always emerges.

The participatory processes we employ most frequently are “future workshops” and “hands-on planning”, with the former of these addressing specific local issues that have been identified in advance

which might include housing, education, health, business, young people, green issues, recreation and transport. Occasionally a number of local people might feel an additional issue should be addressed and impromptu workshops can quickly be organised.

In the workshops the facilitators are trained to carry out a three stage process. This begins with a “Problems” session that allows for a critical stock-taking of the present situation during which negativity is drawn out and local people are allowed to ‘get things off their chest’. This is followed by a session entitled “Dreams” in which people are then asked to use their imagination and say how they would like things to be, whether they be environmental improvements, new facilities, services or forms of employment. Finally, those taking part are asked to consider “Solutions”, how they might go about achieving their aspirations and who might fund them. This concluding part of the workshop is often a learning moment for the participants, they know what they would like—but few understand the mechanisms for delivery. At this point the professional team will use their expertise and stimulate the debate by suggesting funding streams and management possibilities as well as providing supportive anecdotal evidence of how dreams have been achieved elsewhere.

During these sessions participants contribute by jotting ideas down on post-it notes, which are then read back to them before being grouped into themes or categories. The lead facilitator may request further information or clarification and engender discussion, but the most important aspect of this is being seen to listen, to seek local knowledge, and to treat all viewpoints equally and with respect. The use of post-it notes is a subtle strategy of inclusion, which grants everyone the same voice and diffuses the potential for aggressive argumentation on single issues of dissent. In this way the loudest voices often become overwhelmed in a sea of quiet consensus. Unable to dominate the proceedings when asked to ‘write it down’, militant individuals often leave and open the way for constructive discussions.

Over the years, our approach to facilitation has gradually evolved as we have learnt to take account of more aspects of human nature. Facilitators moving amongst the participants are always on hand to put people at their ease, explain what is happening or offer advice. They act like a lubricant, easing viewpoints out of people who are initially uncomfortable with the situation or unsure of what they are being asked. They are also alert to the fact that statements such as ‘I’ve forgotten my glasses’ are euphemisms for illiteracy, and a trigger for other approaches to allow these people to make a meaningful contribution.

At the end of a morning or afternoon session all the topic groups that have taken place meet together for a plenary session. One or two participants in each group will work with the facilitators to create a flip-chart summary of the points of consensus including a list of the most important issues, and a series of ‘action points’ that combine aspirations with methods of delivery. The report back sessions ensure that everyone attending the event is aware of the range of ideas and options that are emerging, and further comments and ideas from the floor are added to those already generated. The presentations are invariably by topic group participants to reinforce the fact that these are local people’s ideas, and engender a greater sense of collective ownership.

The second type of workshop that produces valuable material is ‘hands-on-planning’. The themes for these sessions often emerge out of the topic groups, and are then developed into a more physical form, working in small groups around large scale plans of the area. Architects, urban designers and other professionals are present to assist and facilitate these sessions, but participants are encouraged to work out potential solutions along with others who may or may not be in agreement. Responsibility is passed to the participants to try and reach consensus amongst themselves.

The result of these “hands-on planning” sessions is a number of visually stimulating plans which have

been designed on a collaborative basis, combining community aspirations with commercial realities. Where appropriate these exercises sometimes develop into walkabouts, when professional team members will accompany participants to areas of particular concern. These are particularly powerful techniques of community involvement in which local people literally 'lead the way', and data is collected in a variety of forms by mapping, photography or records of conversations. Walkabouts are highly visual affairs and frequently gather up participants as they progress and engage with people where they feel most comfortable—in their own neighbourhoods. Once again plenary sessions help to communicate the range of ideas coming forward and the professional team assist in highlighting areas of consensus, facilitating discussions around issues or proposals that require further consideration and mediated solutions.

Towards the end of the two public days a "Way Forward" workshop is held to discuss how the development process can be taken forward. For community involvement to be successful it is vital to maintain momentum and ensure that there is an ongoing role for the energy and sense of common ownership built up over the course of the participatory event.

At the close of the public sessions the huge task of assimilating all the information begins. In addition to the material from the workshops, other team members will have been carrying out urban design, economic and landscape assessments of the area under scrutiny. Over the following days the professional team works in private, analysing and evaluating the output from the public sessions, and building a deliverable 'vision' for the area that meets with the aspirations of the local community.

This vision is reported back to the participants within a week of the start of the event. Speed is of the essence as most communities have grown weary of endless, drawn out bureaucratic processes that rarely reach meaningful conclusions. This presentation prepares local stakeholders for the vision by recounting the process they have just participated in, with images of topic groups, hands-on planning, plenary sessions and walkabouts together with summaries of all the workshops. These are intercut with verbatim quotes from local people that illustrate the major points of consensus. Finally, the vision is unveiled with a conceptual masterplan illustrated with sketches and vignettes that give an impression of how things could be in the future if the public, private and community sectors work towards a common goal. A delivery mechanism is illustrated using approachable metaphors and illustrated with cartoons rather than abstract diagrams. An associated exhibition provides the focus for further discussion later in the evening, a broadsheet publication provides a brief synopsis of the vision for people to take away, and briefing packs are made immediately available for the media.

3) Focus Groups and Project Development

In the early years of Community Planning, many projects faltered after the vision stage, often this was due to a lack of continuity or commitment at a higher political level that meant funding streams could not be put in place to carry out the proposals or even take them forward to the point where local plans could be altered to better reflect community aspirations.

In recent years this has begun to change as private developers have begun to recognise the benefits that can accrue from involving the local community, particularly on contentious sites. Once private finance began to drive participatory processes, remarkable results were achieved and an entirely new set of techniques had to be devised to carry projects forward.

For this third stage of community involvement we tend to favour the use of focus groups. These are generally set up at a community forum held soon after the presentation of the vision and vary in nature according to the type of project and the interests of the participants. Typically these might address

Agenda 21 issues, recreation and sport issues, cultural issues, approaches to heritage, health and education, employment concerns, local business or tourism opportunities. These groups meet at frequent intervals with the design team to advance thinking in specific areas and to share their ideas and viewpoints. These are fed back into the masterplanning process and frequently affect the development of the project. This iterative process ensures that by the time formal proposals are submitted for planning consent, local stakeholders feel a strong collective sense of ownership, and objections are far less frequent.

At Caterham Barracks in Surrey we ran a large-scale participatory process involving over 1000 participants including local residents, businesses, schools, the planning authority and various interest groups. The consensus vision that emerged overturned the local authority's brief for the site, which had essentially rendered the development of the former Ministry of Defence site economically unviable for private finance. During the community planning event local people accepted that, in order to deliver the level of benefits they required, additional enabling development would be necessary and opened the way for an additional 300 residential units to be built on the site. Following the event a number of specialist focus groups were set up to continue the dialogue, and involved over 100 local people meeting up on more than fifty occasions.

4) Transferring Ownership

The final stage in a participatory process is possibly the most important in terms of the long term sustainability of a project, and involves the establishment of one or more legal entities that assume control of the community assets. These can vary and might include Community Development Trusts that own and manage community facilities, Social Enterprise Trusts that look after business initiatives or Environmental Trusts that might be responsible for parks or recreational facilities. At Caterham Barracks over £5 million of assets have been transferred into the ownership and management of these vehicles, set up with a financial contribution from the developer. They include a nursery, bar/restaurant, dance studio, health and fitness centre, meeting rooms and Skaterham, a highly successful indoor skateboard and BMX centre for young people, with over 6000 members and hosting international competitions.

Concluding Remarks

We are advocates of community involvement, because in our experience it works. At a professional level it delivers benefits to local authorities, developers and local communities alike. But it also works for us on an ethical level—because we believe that everyone has a right to play a meaningful part in development processes that affect their everyday life.

In summary:

- Community involvement can turn criticism into a constructive dialogue. This allows local people to understand each others concerns within a broader context, and thereby make decisions that are based on collective aspirations rather than narrow personal desires.
- Community involvement can quickly establish a consensus vision for an area. It can also help identify appropriate mechanisms for the delivery of this vision including potential development partners and funding streams.
- Community involvement creates joined-up thinking and joined-up action. Currently development practices often proceed in a piecemeal fashion, in accordance with

Local Plans that are frequently outdated within months of being published. Such schemes serve their own ends and often close down other more exciting or beneficial possibilities.

- Community involvement can save time and money.
Contrary to popular belief, engaging in community involvement is not like opening Pandora's Box. By creating a consensus view amongst stakeholders, development often proceeds through the planning system essentially unhindered by opposition, and achieving results that traditional methods may take many months or even years to produce.
- Community involvement provides a fast track learning process for all the participants.
This helps ordinary people helping them understand the development process, and the issues that face their local community and the barriers that stand in the way of fulfilling their aspirations such as economic viability and funding logistics.
- Community involvement unlocks the energy and enthusiasm of people in the local community.
This provides projects with strong advocates who help carry the vision of the project because they feel collective ownership of the proposals that will have a beneficial effect on their quality of life.
- Community involvement can inspire local people to take on new responsibilities.
In this respect it supports community capacity building and local democracy and encourages good citizenship.

Whilst we have great hopes for the success of PPS1 we remain concerned about the ability of local authorities to carry out large scale participatory processes. When our team arrives in an area they have no history of involvement, no hidden agenda, and no personal attachment. We are able to empathise and criticise in equal measures, and usually gain the trust of the event participants within a matter of hours. This is only possible because of our perceived neutrality, a status that in our experience is rarely conferred on local authorities by the communities they represent. It is appropriate, therefore, that the opening statement in *Community Involvement in Planning: The Governments' objectives'*, states that changing the way people think and feel about the planning system is a vital part of the planning reform agenda. There is no simple answer to this problem, which is undoubtedly a social consequence of the very planning system that the government is seeking to reform.

A second potential threat to the success of the reforms proposed under PPS1 will be "consultation fatigue", where communities become disenfranchised by overly complex or bureaucratic processes, in which their ideas and aspirations become lost in a sea of professional jargon and abstract diagrams. The ability to retain momentum and create exciting and inclusive visions is critical to maintaining community interest and involvement. In our experience, properly focussed, short-term processes of engagement can tap common intelligence and inspire and inform the long haul processes that the Local Planning Authorities must then deliver. If the £350 million Planning Delivery Grant that has been earmarked is to create real added value, we believe that it should be invested as a catalyst for imagination, facilitating front loaded vision building processes, identifying real community needs and setting the agenda for the new Local Development Frameworks. If the grant is spread too far and too thinly in an attempt to shadow the whole planning process, community disenchantment will soon set in.

Participation, the act of people being involved, working together, discovering shared values, interests, and common goals, is a process that can assist in creating a collective vision for the future, but it also helps to forge new friendships and unlikely alliances that overcome social status, ethnicity and age

difference. In our experience community planning engenders respect, tolerance and a better understanding of each other's aspirations, in short, the process itself enhances social capital and in so doing creates the ideal conditions for a project to succeed. At Caterham Barracks things worked out because everyone willed them to.

It doesn't seem so very long ago that community planning, like organic food or waste recycling, was of marginal interest to policymakers, the market and the general public. Today this is certainly no longer the case. At the beginning of 2004, The Deputy Prime Minister deemed our project at Caterham worthy of a commendation in his inaugural Sustainable Communities Awards 2004. If PPS1 is implemented in the true spirit in which we believe it was intended, then our approach to development could very soon become the rule rather than exception.