

(This is an extract – Chapter 7 – from “Making Plans – a Practical Guide” published by ODPM in 2002. ISBN 1 85112 575 2. It has been minimally adapted for us on the website.)

7 PARTICIPATION OR CONSULTATION

What and Why?

There are of course many definitions of ‘consultation’ and ‘participation’, and little agreement, even amongst experts, on exactly how to distinguish them. In this guide the difference lies in the extent to which there is real scope for consultees or participants to influence the outcome, ie. the policies, locations etc. in the plan.

Consultation tends to mean that most of the end product is determined by the elected members acting on officer advice, with the consultees either having only minimal impact on all issues or more significant effect but only on minor issues. Shifting towards participation requires a much more equitable or shared relationship in which there is a genuine opportunity for those involved to influence the end outcome, potentially on any aspect. What follows is directed at the ‘middle ground’ which offers many possibilities for positive approaches, so the text uses both terms almost interchangeably.

While the choice of approach is a local decision, it would clearly be inconsistent with almost all other government guidance to offer only limited influence on only minor aspects of the plan. There is now an expectation from government, elected members, professionals, private business, and local voluntary and community bodies – as well as the ‘person in the street’ – that people will be consulted on the key planning decisions that affect their lives. The plan preparation process should build in such opportunities from the very start. To close the circle, the approach adopted by the plan team also needs to be consistent with those now becoming standard practice in many other areas of local government activity (see References).

Possible Benefits

If participation is so important, what exactly could be achieved by building it into the plan preparation work? Possible benefits include the following:

- **Adding in local skills, knowledge, experience and resources**
Local people and groups know their area well and can offer valuable ideas which it would be wasteful to overlook. On initiatives such as design statements, local knowledge can also add to the team’s resource of time and skills.
- **Adding wider skills, knowledge, experience and resources**
Valuable information can also come from the involvement of others beyond just the local community such as the Regional Development Agency, adjacent authorities or national trade associations.
- **Resolving or removing conflicts between parties, perhaps up-front**
Waiting until one has a full draft plan before going public only serves to waste time and money on ‘defence’ that could have been spent better on seeking

positive approaches. If potentially resolvable issues remain as far as the Inquiry stage, the resource wasted can become excessive.

- **Reducing the overall time taken**
Looked at from decision to review right through to adoption (perhaps even on into implementation), good consultation can save time.

With these benefits under the belt during plan preparation, the end result can be:

- **More effective use of limited resources**
- **Feelings of ‘ownership’ and involvement and the growth of trust and learning of skills for the future**
These ‘added values’ really only emerge during implementation and set a different ‘climate’ for any subsequent review.
- **A better plan!**
Good consultation can generate more creative, understood or shared approaches to challenging issues, easing the process through to implementation.

This is a challenging list, probably not achievable in any single plan process. Maximising the benefits is critically dependent on the three issues raised in the section on ‘Getting Started’. They will only come when there is clear overall commitment within the authority, strong and coherent project management, and the proper use of staff time and resources.

Because consultation activity is potentially ‘as long as a piece of string’, the plan team will need to make difficult choices in order to develop an achievable and practical programme. Clear objectives for the consultation work are essential

The ‘Building Blocks’ of Effective Participation

Later sections of this guide highlight points to be aware of at specific stages of plan preparation. However, whatever the stage, experience shows that success follows from the regular and consistent use of some principles or ‘building blocks’. These are outlined here and elaborated into practical advice shortly. They are also consistent with those appearing in government guidance on other topics such as air quality management and transport planning.

There is one overarching and fundamental ‘building block’.

- **Ensure an overall approach that is properly designed and explicitly managed. Your work will need a ‘Consultation Strategy’ that illustrates a response to all the principles that follow below.**

Since consultation fails if treated as an add-on or aside, a second overall principle flows directly from the above.

- **Integrate the consultation firmly into the overall plan preparation process.**

There is also a need to link the work into its broader context, which introduces four more 'building block' principles.

- **Link into and draw benefit from any other recent or concurrent consultation.**
- **Be sure that any stages or consultation outcomes are linked into democratic processes.**
- **Ensure that there are appropriate resources to deliver the strategy, and manage them over time.**
- **Check the appropriate skill base within the team, and top-up as needed from other in-house or external support.**

Before the consultation starts, and once it is underway, there are a number of aspects that must be planned and managed with great care, yet also be treated flexibly as work proceeds.

- **Start consultation from 'day one' and keep it going throughout.**
- **Define and manage (ie. agree with key parties) the 'scope' of the plan and the consultation.**
- **Have a clear, two-way process of information management and exchange.**
- **Develop a way of ensuring, as far as possible, that the consultation is widely inclusive, in particular with traditionally 'hard to reach' groups.**
- **Include in your programme opportunities for some people to engage in depth with your work and for others to 'touch' it briefly**
- **Use, across time, a diversity of methods and techniques.**
- **Whatever methods are used, ensure that they can build towards a consensus-based result.**

Practical Advice

This section includes practical advice for each of the above 'building blocks', with the exception of the first, summary one - the need for a Consultation Strategy. However, the box below outlines an example of a very carefully planned overall process and, in general, picks up many of the points raised below.

In launching into its Local Plan Review, the Kennet District Council plan team were keen to avoid what they saw as the wasted time, effort and cost of dealing with the previous enquiry. They worked closely with a consultant, though initial skills training provided a core of people (not just planners) who were then able to undertake a number of the activities on their own. The aim was to reach as much agreement as possible on the initial strategic issues to go into an 'Issues and Options' report.

At the outset, it was essential to agree the process with key elected members and make links with other parallel initiatives such as those on economic development and transport.

The first event was then a 'Core Group' workshop with the key members plus other major stakeholders. This developed the process design, agreed the scope of the exercise, suggested further consultees and established briefs for the next stage 'Topic Groups'.

As Topic Group work started, opportunities were taken to raise wider public awareness of and interest in the plan, prior to later open events.

Four Topic Groups met on three occasions, each moving from a general understanding of the issues through options to agreeing a range of directions that the draft plan might take. An 'Action Pack' was produced to enable many others to engage actively with the emerging issues. This was used by many local organisations, including some without representatives on any main group. As it became obvious that certain key groups or sectors were inadequately represented, a programme of 'outreach' activities was developed to involve them.

Following a further Core Group meeting to assemble and evaluate outcomes, there was a large, open public event on a Friday and Saturday. Though exhibition based, the material, was still open and interactive. During the event there were further sessions for specific groups and about specific sites. The final Core Group meeting agreed all outcomes and these soon became the 'Issues and Options' paper.

Integrate consultation into plan preparation

As the preparation process is being developed and outlined, make sure that the 'consultation line' is included. Ensure that it is carefully linked so that any stage in consultation starts at a relevant time and with a clear remit, and so that results and feedback inform an appropriate stage of 'desk work'. This is a crucial way to create participant confidence that their input is going to be valued.

Link to other consultation

Before starting any consultation work of your own, find out what else has happened recently from which you could draw useful 'results'; a classic case being the Community Strategy, another might be the Local Transport Plan. Avoid repetition and overlap for your own (resource) benefit and to help minimise 'consultation fatigue'.

For similar reasons, find out also what other consultation is planned at the same time as yours. At worst just liaise; at best work together. This is 'joined-up' consultation and authorities are being pressed more and more to think and manage this way. Some authorities, for example, are now running first stage plan review and Community Strategy consultation in one process. Slowly also, more and more authorities are now employing someone in the role of overall 'consultation coordinator' – a key contact if your authority has one.

Link to democratic processes

Good consultation work can inform not challenge 'ballot box' democratic processes. Elected members are, for you, the key link with those beyond the council office and many members now relish that role. Members should be involved in developing the

'Consultation Strategy' and should take part at many levels as work proceeds – including as participants in stakeholder or local community events.

Above all, plan the programme so that important results from key stages relate well to committee and working groups timetables; a further way to convince people that their effort is valued.

Ensure appropriate resources

This is a key theme within this guide. However, coherent consultation work is still relatively new and it is inevitably rather open-ended and difficult to cost fully and accurately (even in retrospect!).

Resources here are not just the time of any team member delegated to manage the consultation; (which is nevertheless a good idea). That person will often need to call on time from the core team, and probably from others beyond the team – in different planning teams or even departments. That time is also not just 'out there' at events; it can be in the office in the careful preparation that underpins all successful consultation. There are direct costs involved with consultation: venues, catering, exhibitions, leaflets, videos, support staff, analysis, interactive websites, media work facilitation and so forth.

It is all too easy to 'lose' some of this time in looking back, especially if consultants have been used and the team time to support them somehow fails to be accounted. At the same time, lessons can be learned from previous experience (talking to colleagues in other departments can help) if care is taken to account for all items. In general, however, consultation is unarguably becoming more important and proportionately more costly and this pressure cannot be avoided.

Ensure an appropriate skill base

Few plan teams as yet have staff with consistent, in-depth experience of, and skills in, consultation. It might therefore be thought that this is a role for others, whether from other departments or via consultants. (As practice develops, and because many principles apply regardless of topic, it can be surprising how many people there are within almost any authority with good participation skill and experience; so use them.)

Using 'others' is not entirely wrong (an 'independent' person can be essential at certain stages) but if consultation is to be fully appreciated by the team and integrated into other work, there is no substitute for forms of training to enhance in-house team skills. At the very least, enhanced team skills can ensure that any external people work properly 'with' not just 'for' your team; crucial if you are to build up lasting relationships with local stakeholders. Now that many authorities are parts of formal or informal regional networks, there is considerable scope for shared training, which adds value and reduces costs.

Start from 'day one' and keep it going

Waiting until a draft plan exists before starting consultation is often called 'decide-announce-defend' and is the single biggest cause of dissatisfaction (amongst planners as well as participants) with traditional approaches to consultation. Although there are occasions on which it will still be statutorily necessary to 'announce' outcomes to all,

consultation work should start from the earliest possible moment. The result can be a positive 'championing' of key strategic points (eg. basic housing location choices) by local consultees, rather than the waste of 'defending' those coming solely from the team.

By adopting a properly sequential and collaborative approach (see the box below and section 11 on Issues and Options) it can be possible to virtually 'sign off' key points stage by stage rather than reserving debate for one later, and invariably overloaded stage. By offering participants a clear sequence, it helps them to see what is relevant at what stage, and to build confidence that their voice is being heard. (Village Design Statements, being based as a matter of principle in community participation, are an excellent example of how this can work successfully.)

Cotswold District Council, as part of its Local Plan Review, developed a carefully planned sequence of consultation events to enable the team to move from agreement on strategic site selection options right through to agreement on specific sites in villages; a highly challenging task in this particular area and community.

The initial high profile event was a one day Workshop for around 75 key people representing a wide range of groups and interests across the district – including young people (and members). The outcome of that day was a broad (if not final) level of agreement about strategic housing locations, even naming specific towns and villages.

After a large amount of further in-house work, and member endorsement, the next stage involved two workshops. One was for the North of the District, one for the South, with a smaller number of representatives from Parish Councils, Civic Societies and others from towns and villages where development might be possible within the now agreed strategy. The groups examined and shortlisted a number of sites, including those put forward by landowners and developers. The groups also offered advice on how best to take the shortlisted choices out to their particular local communities for an almost final selection.

The third stage involved day events, each in two parts, in each of the settlement locations. During the afternoon and early evening, a 'call-in' exhibition allowed anybody in the community to come in and comment. This was followed by an evening workshop with representatives of several local groups and organisations, and the local members. They considered the results from the afternoon sessions and used these to debate and agree sites in their specific village.

Define and manage the 'scope'

Unsuccessful consultation is often a result not of poor implementation but of a failure to make clear or agree what is and is not appropriate for the plan to include or the consultation process to influence. Many people (including some other professionals) are unclear about what a development plan can and cannot include or achieve, and the boundaries are constantly changing.

There is a clear need here for an 'educational' role during plan preparation work. That can be done as 'drip-feed' through leaflets, documents, publicity and so forth, and need not come across as being in any way patronising. What you are doing is helping participants to maximise the effectiveness of their input; (and if they do not like the legal scope, there are plenty of ways for them to make their point other than on that particular plan or policy).

If your initial focus in consultation is with a relatively small group of what are now called 'stakeholders', it can also be very valuable to include time with them to discuss the scope of the plan and of their involvement in its preparation. There are areas of discretion, even within statutory limits, and these are far better agreed (and understood) with others than determined by the team alone.

Two-way information management

Another regular cause of dissent within consultation results from two or more parties disagreeing about even the basic facts and figures on a specific issue; the perennial classic of course being amenity groups, house builders and the plan team in terms of house building figures! Assuming that 'the planner is always right', and failing to address and resolve this issue early in the process is certain to build up conflict and confusion (and expense) for later.

Careful information management is of course a core foundation of all plan preparation activity; probably also something delegated to a specific team member to lead. Since information is never neutral, that management role needs to include not just the assembly of information from others. There need to be opportunities within the consultation when participants do not just offer information but can also share with the team what is needed and how information will be valued and used. If necessary, that can involve discussing and agreeing 'briefs' for key studies (eg. on traffic growth implications), sharing responsibility for data collection (many groups undertake their own surveys) and ensuring that all key participants hear back from the team the results of work undertaken. If handled carefully, and despite the fact that time is needed, this is an important way to save costs.

Be inclusive

A development plan is, by definition, for 'everybody' in an area. Those responsible for participation work are increasingly being required to demonstrate (eg. through Best Value, perhaps in the future via Human Rights legislation) that their approach has genuinely offered an opportunity for 'everybody' to contribute. At the same time, engaging 'everybody' is probably an impossibility and pragmatic tests will have to begin to be developed.

Despite the value of engaging with key, probably selected, stakeholders, any Consultation Strategy will need to show that it has not just offered a voice to these 'usual suspects' or been dominated by them. That can be handled by careful management of stakeholder events in a way that balances and moderates input to avoid only the 'loudest' being heard.

Such invited activity needs to be complemented by work that is truly open and public. There are many ways to achieve this; for example through exhibitions, road shows, leaflets/questionnaires, use of the local media and other more recent, innovative methods such as internet dialogue.

Taking this further, however, there is now a requirement on authorities – and certainly on planners – to show that they have made efforts to access the socially excluded, so-called 'hard to reach' groups such as young people, the elderly and disabled, ethnic minorities or those on low incomes. There are no clever tricks to achieve this; it is a long,

slow process. It is best undertaken with the support of others, not least because they (eg. a probation officer or community worker) can reach parts a traditional local government officer cannot reach. It needs creativity with methods and a careful build-up of confidence. In all cases, however, inclusiveness is not something that can be settled on day one; it can only be created over time, and again demands a proper strategy and programme.

The box below illustrates a very good overall programme but also one that paid real attention to accessing those not usually involved in planning discussions.

As a recently designated unitary district, the process for Brighton and Hove District was for their 'first' UDP. The planning department has a good history of innovation, including previous work on consultation. At the time, the whole authority had made a strong commitment to "listening, identifying and responding to local needs" and other initiatives were underway and linked in.

At the very outset, consultants prepared a "Local Plan Consultation Strategy" which had to be discussed and agreed by members at committee. This did not specify resource requirements, though that was also discussed openly and agreed. Over a period of 6 months, a variety of different consultative approaches were used, all 'issues-based'. These were overseen by a 'Local Plan Advisory Group' of public, private and voluntary sector representatives. That group were also used to help to engage others in the activities.

Early on a series of 'Community Visioning Workshops' was held with small groups. Invitations were a mix of targeted and random but focused particularly on traditionally hard to reach groups. 7 widely constituted 'Focus Groups' were also set up around specific issues. Each met twice in highly active events. Similarly active workshops were also held specifically on 'Urban Design Visioning'. Three of these were held at neighbourhood level, another focused on district-wide concerns, a fifth was aimed mainly at local architects etc. Many one-to-one meetings were held with local groups and organisations, as well as with members.

More widespread, open activities included a feature and questionnaire in the local paper and the authority's own 'paper'. Consultation leaflets were used for specific issues, supported by internet access and a 'hotline'. All outcomes were assembled, described and summarised in a formal 'Report of Consultation'. This went not just to committee but also to all main event participants.

Include work in depth and breadth

What follows from attention to inclusiveness is a need to offer different people different levels of opportunity to input. Many of the key stakeholders – the residents' groups, amenity societies and so forth – will be more than willing to send along people who are not only able but positively want to understand and comment in real depth; (and in some case know more about their subject than anyone in your team!). If there is any problem at all with such a level of interest, it is about making clear (again through good event management) that more input does not automatically mean a greater weighting when decisions need to be made.

For many others, for whom the plan (even once they understand it) is of marginal interest, or for those whose interest is highly specific (the future of the land at the end of their garden) there need to be opportunities to engage and comment briefly. At the same

time – the inverse of the earlier comment – they need to be shown that the brevity of their involvement in no way implies any lesser significance for their comments. That requires clear, strong feedback procedures.

Diversity of methods and techniques.

As well as offering a variety of depths of engagement, experience shows that different people respond best to different types of method or technique. The person who fights shy of any involvement in a facilitated workshop may well talk endlessly in a one-to-one interview. What is more, this applies even to those willing to engage in great depth; they too contribute best when offered a variety of methods and styles. A focus on diversity of methods can therefore of course also help in terms of inclusiveness.

A small warning is however needed at this point. Too much traditional consultation focused on just one method. That is clearly inappropriate. What is also inappropriate is to imagine that a sensible programme of consultation can be built up simply by choosing a medley of exciting techniques. Buying a random selection of ingredients, however good in their own right, is unlikely to lead to a tasty recipe. The key, once again, lies in a focus on the overall strategy and the careful and cumulative selection of methods to serve clear and distinctive purposes at specific times.

Build towards a consensus-based result

Having responded to all of the above and run a whole range of events and activities over an extended period, everything can fail if all the results sit on the planning team's desks, someone shuts the door and the inevitable differences and conflicts between all the results are decided by the planning team alone.

Another reason for planning and consciously managing the programme of activities and methods is to ensure that they are all part of a cumulative process focused on enabling participants to share with the plan team the key issues of weighting and balance that can shift gratuitous consultation into meaningful consultation.

At various stages during the preparation process, and mainly with the stakeholder groups, there need to be opportunities to debate, discuss and hopefully reach consensus on a whole range of strategic and then detailed issues. It is at this point that a particularly high level of skill and experience are needed, and perhaps an independent person to manage debate. A number of approaches exist to help complex groups to reach agreement even on highly challenging issues and these should be used more than once.

Signposting

The breadth and variety of approaches now inherent in any coherent and good quality consultation process place great demands on planners generally unprepared for such work. At the same time, this complexity means that there are almost no obvious sources of further practical guidance for planners on 'participation in plan preparation'. The sources that do exist cover many areas of work other than just planning and still tend to be focused very much on method selection rather than overall processes.

(References added in the overall list in the book.)