

A TALE OF TWO CITIES?

This simple comparison, of how two adjacent unitary authorities handled a similar parking strategy issue, gives the lie to the old familiar claim that 'consultation wastes time and money'. Far from it. At this moment (December 2006) the properly managed scheme has been implemented for some years; the future for the other remains grey, and getting blacker!

Introduction

Both authorities were faced with almost identical problems. Each authority is focused on a city (one small, one large) and, as our story starts, each has in place a central area 'Controlled Parking Zone' (CPZ). The inevitable effect of such a zone is to displace commuter and sometimes shopping parking to the zones immediately around the centre. In both our cities, such areas are predominantly residential, so their streets are currently full of parked commuter cars, limiting easy access to those actually living there.

As part of government commitments to traffic and parking management, both authorities started to consider extending their controlled parking zones into the adjacent residential areas. Here the stories diverge.

Authority A

This authority first started considering extending its parking restrictions in the late 1990s. External consultants were appointed to undertake the necessary studies and report to the council with a recommendation for how to proceed. This work was undertaken 'at distance', with no community involvement or consultation.

The study concluded that an extension to the CPZ was needed, suggested areas to which that extension should be applied, and outlined basic elements of the proposed scheme - the number of permits per household or business, costs to households and businesses, visitors' permits, parking restrictions on residential streets and so forth. It also recommended (in a report that subsequently became public) minimal consultation because the issue was likely to be extremely contentious.

The result of the study emerged into the public arena early in 1999. This happened through a consultation leaflet sent to all residents and businesses in the suggested area, (but not to those in the zone beyond and hence likely to suffer the next wave of knock-on effects). The leaflet offered the consultants' one suggested main 'option' and sought views by return.

Public reaction was immediate and vigorous; made worse by the fact that the authority was ostensibly seeking views in a 'consultation' yet had already put in a provisional order for the parking meters! There was enormous and almost wholly negative reaction to the proposals, and to the fact that they had advanced this far without any attempt to involve local people or to offer choices. Emergency public meetings were held, new protest groups formed, judicial review was considered by some residents, and the engineers' department was flooded with letters and complaints; (far too many to then answer).

The net result was an overall rejection of the scheme in all its aspects, although the residents of one area suffering particularly badly from commuter parking voted by a reasonable majority to support the scheme. There again, the authority's leaflet had made clear that the choice for residents was all areas or none, so the suggestion that they might then implement in just one sub area caused a second flurry of extremely negative response.

At this point, considerable staff resource (supposedly saved by using consultants) had now been attributed to doing no more than explaining the current situation. No clear way forward yet existed. The elected members seriously discussed the possibility of 'shelving' the ideas until (as they imagined would happen) things became so bad that local residents started to request the originally suggested scheme.

The decision to proceed was followed by another consultation, undertaken via leaflets as before. This excluded the sub area where it had now been decided a CPZ extension would take place (with no further involvement, although the 'ground rules' had changed). The consultation was aimed at those in 2/3 adjacent areas where evidence suggested that serious problems still existed and where votes had been narrowly against a CPZ extension. No mention was made of the possible knock-on effects from the one new scheme, neither was there any further consultation at all with those in the remaining sub areas where no scheme was now proposed.

At this moment, it is still by no means certain that even the first sub area scheme will be implemented and enormous sums have been spent on nothing.

Authority B

This authority first started considering extending its CPZ in the summer of 1999. A public announcement that this was being considered caused a rush of comments and reactions, many of these as negative as those received, later in the process, in authority A. (One group even appointed its own consultants and briefed counsel!)

On this occasion, the authority managed the overall process in-house, commissioning its own technical studies but also, most importantly, deciding to move straight into consultation and appointing consultants to advise on and manage the process.

Round one of the consultation involved a series of open, neighbourhood meetings. As well as general invitations, specific invitations went to all known local groups and organisations (eg. schools) and to groups in surrounding areas likely to suffer knock-on effects. Though the boundaries of the neighbourhoods were sensible at the outset, it was made clear that any later boundaries (for any proposals) would reflect reaction from the opening meetings.

An average of almost 100 people attended each local meeting. After initial caution about being invited for their views without any scheme to react to, people became very positive about being able to be heard early enough to make a difference. The meetings were mainly interactive, with everybody contributing (though individual and group work) to generating long lists of parking and parking-related issues, and

key principles for a positive future. There was a short presentation from the council officers about the scope and limits of any CPZ scheme and an opportunity for questions – eg. 'how do we know you mean it when you say you will listen to us?'. People were also asked for their ideas on how best to come back to them (and others not present) in a second round of consultation, when proposals were ready.

Following analysis of the results of this meeting, the broad outline of some proposals began to emerge. The next stage of collaborative working was a 'stakeholder meeting' with representatives of some 70 local groups and organisations and including elected members. This evening event started to focus in on reaching agreement on the details of possible solutions (keeping choices open until the last possible moment), and on developing a clear pattern of appropriate consultation to 'everybody' at the options stage.

Following this meeting, a carefully targeted consultation process took place around the possible options of implementation – where, permit numbers, costs etc. This was done by leaflets and small, very local exhibitions.

The end result was a scheme applied to some but not all sub areas (as suggested by the consultation) and which showed clear community support. As a result, this scheme was supported enthusiastically by elected members (in mid May 2000) and was soon implemented; a total project time of less than 10 months!

Conclusions

As well as saving time and considerable amounts of money, the second approach is less likely to generate later problems, has begun to establish a new and positive relationship between authority and the public, and is consistent with all current government guidance, both specific (eg. on transport) and general (on modernising local government).

Why pay more when you can have better for less, and quicker?