

Community Involvement

Introduction

If your Place Plan is to be adopted by your Local Planning Authority as Supplementary Planning Guidance, you will need to show that it has been the subject of really good consultation or community involvement. Unfortunately, you could hunt high and low for anything that tells you exactly what type, quality and amount of consultation is necessary to clear the adoption hurdle!

Our view is that good consultation – or community involvement - is essential to any Place Plan for three key reasons:

- As suggested above, it will make success at any formal stage far more likely.
- Getting more people aware and involved can dramatically increase the resource available to the core group preparing the Place Plan.
- The more aware your community is of the Place Plan and its role, the more engaged they will be - and more effectively – when planning applications start to come forward after the plan is made.

In other words, it is short-sighted just to think about clearing the adoption hurdle by doing as little consultation as possible. **So what might be ‘good community involvement’?**

Getting closer to ‘good community involvement’

Consultation or community involvement can cover many different things done by and with local people*. That could be a questionnaire, an exhibition, a workshop, a survey, a website, facebook, twitter, a community newsletter, posters, a stall at a community festival and so on. (* And maybe with others further afield if, for example, you are keen to see your local hall used more fully.)

Perhaps the most essential point to make is that, for any Place Plan, **it should probably be a bit of at least several of these** because different people prefer different methods. It certainly isn’t a matter of just sending out a ‘what do you want?’ questionnaire on day one or a virtually finished plan right near the end of the process.

What is needed in any good programme of consultation is a range of:

- **different methods** (workshop, questionnaire, survey, as above);
- **on different topics** (a workshop can be best for some topics, a survey for others);
- **with different people** (some love and some hate workshops, the same with all methods);
- **at different stages in the plan-making** (open-ended events are good at the start, far more focused ones best towards the end).

All of which suggests a carefully targeted approach rather than the ‘scatter-gun’ of a single questionnaire and one open day. You may need to do a short walkabout early in the process with young people to collect information on what they do and where they do it (though they won’t always tell you!), run a very detailed survey halfway through the process, put on a carefully managed priority-setting workshop near the end with elderly people and, finally, do a more formal consultation with ‘everybody’ on the draft plan.

There is also another key point, still too often missed. The assumption behind much consultation is that ‘we’ (the Steering Group) prepare ideas and proposals (the draft plan) and ‘they’ (the wider community) give us their views on it. There will always be a stage, or more than one, at which emerging principles, ideas, proposals etc. need to be open to ‘everybody’ to react to. However, community involvement can – and should – also mean trying to get as many local people as possible actively engaged directly in undertaking the necessary evidence collection work, typically some survey work.

This can add significantly to the human resource available to any Steering Group. Some of the other Toolkits are about exactly this; they are guides to how local people themselves can undertake evidence collection in a way that will stand up to checking at the plan adoption stage. In one recent example, a Steering Group of 10 or so people decided to use the Character Assessment Toolkit to survey the different Character Areas in their community. Each Steering Group member took a form, went away to find another 3 people they knew to do the survey with them. Suddenly that became another 30 people deeply involved in the plan. As well as generating the all-important evidence, such work also counts as, and should be recorded as, ‘consultation’.

Some ‘ingredients’ for your involvement ‘recipe’

Having said there is no agreed set of standards for ‘good community involvement’, it is also really important that you develop the approach – the ‘recipe’ - that is appropriate for your people, your place, your issues. That too has no standard format so what we offer here is some possible ‘ingredients’ for you to combine to create your own local ‘recipe’.

Surveys

We put this first because many people think it is ‘the answer’. Surveys can be very valuable but are far too often poorly designed and managed and do not provide the sort of genuine evidence needed to satisfy planning officers.

Doing a widely circulated, wide-ranging survey early in the Place Plan process can draw out all sorts of views and ideas but this is more about aspirations than evidence. These are sometimes called ‘wish-lists’, which suggests that great care is needed to avoid raising false expectations about what a Place Plan can cover and how much

influence it might have. That does not mean that all sorts of questions cannot be asked; they can, but it is very much about how the survey is explained to people.

Doing a survey halfway through or towards the end can be a valuable way of confirming (or not!) the emerging proposals, but again it needs to be very carefully focused.

And, of course, great care is needed in drafting the questions, targeting the appropriate people and including appropriate information to enable useful analysis of the results.

This is such a key topic that we strongly recommend developing any survey with skilled help (see later).

Exhibitions: Interactive or Presentation

At almost all stages there is real value in putting on some sort of display or exhibition potentially for everybody in your community (and you will no doubt know best where to do that, how long for and how to attract people).

In early stages or halfway through, any exhibition probably needs to be interactive, i.e. designed to allow people to add comments. That can be very direct comments, i.e. by ticking boxes on, or adding post-its to, a display board. It can also be more like a survey where people walk about, look at displays and fill in a form. Most importantly, such events need to have members of the Steering Group available throughout to chat, answer questions, clarify points and so forth. In fact, people just talking to each other at such events is remarkably effective!

Towards the end of plan preparation a presentation style exhibition can be valuable, although even then it is worth doing that before everything is 'set in stone', giving one last opportunity for, and taking account of, comments.

Workshops

This term is about offering opportunities for what will probably be fairly small groups of people to engage together, discuss, share and develop ideas rather than just give quick 'tick-box' answers to a survey.

Workshops can be held at any stage in plan preparation but are particularly valuable when initial proposals are beginning to emerge and shared discussion is needed about details, possible conflicts, priorities, further ideas and so forth – all things best considered by a group beyond just the Steering Group. And, with that point in mind, workshops can be targeted at specific groups, e.g. neighbours to a site being considered for change or young people when considering future community facilities.

Once again, successfully planning, and running effective workshops (enabling everybody to contribute, focusing the subject, avoiding arguments etc.) needs some level of experience and skill.

(You can, of course, run small workshops during an exhibition.)

Newsletters

Newsletters, leaflets, websites etc. are mainly for awareness raising and information giving (and very good for that), although they can also be used for more informal surveys. You can, for example, include a question about a potential development site in a newsletter and invite comments, or ask people to take photos of key examples of locally distinctive buildings. Even though informal, good records still need to be kept.

Competitions

There is no doubt that including some opportunity for people to win prizes increases the response to any consultation! For example, surveys can link to a prize draw: top three completed questionnaires randomly selected win some sort of prize*. There can be random prizes for those signing in to an exhibition or commenting via a website or newsletter. (* Such prizes are a classic way of getting a form of funding: local shops or employers provide the prizes.)

You can also run things that are specifically competitions. One way is to devise clues such as photographs for a trail around a town or village, with a key added element: whenever someone finds a clue they are asked a key question about safety, a new building, a possible green space etc. But now a small caution. It is important to get the balance right, in order to be sure that you are getting genuine consultation results, not just a quick completion of a form in the hope of winning something!

Walkabouts

One really effective way of getting people interested, and to get some 'results', is to arrange a walkabout; effectively an enjoyable social event because people love being directed to things in their place that they've probably never noticed before. And, of course, the carefully arranged walk takes them past places and buildings that prompt responses in terms of the key things in the emerging Place Plan.

Work with Schools

Good teachers, in both primary and secondary schools (and colleges), are always looking for projects or exercises for their students to engage with that are based on real life local situations. Sharing the agenda of an emerging Place Plan with local teachers will almost certainly trigger a response that X or Y would make a really good subject for a project. The teachers will, of course, know best exactly how to prepare sessions, worksheets etc. but information about your Place Plan can be crucial and, if

the aim is to get the children out and about some 'helpers' can be essential. What is more, well-managed tasks undertaken even by children can provide genuine, useable evidence for your plan.

There is, however, another key advantage of working with schools. Busy parents very often do not fill in forms or, in particular, come to exhibitions. However, if their children's work is on display alongside your exhibition, they will certainly come along and are a key audience to catch!

Piggy-backing Other Events

All of the above has been described as if you are running your own, Place Plan focused events. The other really effective method is to 'piggy-back' some other or somebody else's event: a village fair, another exhibition (e.g. about local history) or something in the local school. With a bit of persuasion, you can have a 'stall' or small display at that other event, probably accessing people who would otherwise never come to your own events.

Visits

All of the above has also been described as things to do within your own community. One of the most effective things you can do, although probably only for small groups, is to visit some other town or village where they have a Place Plan already agreed and/or where there is a particularly interesting new development or community initiative. If you do that, try to be taken round by local people because they will tell you the really important story – the ups and downs, problems and benefits – of making their plan or their project happen.

And

Don't forget what has been touched on elsewhere: getting as many local people as possible actively engaged in the practical tasks covered in some of the other Toolkits counts as consultation and it gives you really solid evidence!

Formal Consultation

Once your Place Plan is finished, your local authority will either take the lead on the formal consultation stage or guide you to do it. That's because there are some important aspects to address, for example, consulting certain statutory agencies (water authority etc.) and being sure you have included all those within your own area.

Help!

Consultation and community involvement are aspects on which it can be very valuable to seek help from others. That can be nearby communities who have already done a survey or tried a school project. It can also be from your local authority planning officers, for example on survey questions, although they may also suggest others in other professional departments or a local voluntary organisations with skills and experience. Shop around!

If you are really keen and want to find out about all sorts of other methods, a really good and very practical book is the 'Community Planning Handbook' by Nick Wates, from Earthscan, available via your library or press your local authority to get a copy.

Reporting your consultation

We said at the start that, to secure SPG status for your Place Plan, you will need to show that you have managed good community involvement. When you submit your final Place Plan to the local authority, you will need to accompany that with a thorough report.

Once again, there is no standard format for such a report but one fairly easy way to do it is to simply include a note of each event and activity topped with an overall summary. Each event or activity note should include basic but key information such as:

- How any event was advertised.
- Where it was held. (Which can include 'via website'.)
- When it was held. (For any survey that would include how long and over what dates people were able to respond.)
- How many people got involved or commented. (For a drop-in that might be X people who came along but only Y completed any form.)
- A full record of comments made and a summary.
- A note of how results were used in your plan and, if not used, why not.

But, bitter experience offers a key lesson for this which then pays dividends later. Be sure to write a note about each event as soon as possible after it takes place, otherwise you will find it almost impossible to go back much later to all the details about what you did, who you did it with etc.

And then, of course, with all the detailed event notes in front of you as your plan is being finalised, all you need to do is the overall, summary (and hence brief) report.