

Wales Planning Conference 2011
Workshop Report:
Good practice tools and techniques for effective community engagement

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JBP are specialists in stakeholder communication which looks at engaging people in a dialogue rather than simply giving information to the public.

A video was used to exemplify the point that locals can become very angry and bitter with proposals if they are not properly consulted first and listened to. In this instance the video conveyed a large group of protesters around Cardiff Bay attempting to prevent a wind farm in Powys going ahead.

The importance and benefits of engagement was made explicit. It was said that engagement can help with tackling complex and challenging issues; find new solutions to problems; use local intelligence to better understand and resolve conflict; there is less risk to a challenge of a planning decision which has consulted locals first; it can help ensure that the scheme can bring value to the local area and improve the reputation. Pre-application engagement was highlighted at avoiding delays later on for developers. The principles of engagement were highlighted as research and analysis, learning from the process, continuing to engage, monitoring and evaluating, relationship building, communications and timing. The community engagement should investigate what schemes have been controversial in the past and why this has been the case, ask locals whether they think the consultations are useful to get points across, use feedback from participants to change things, monitor in order to address gaps, and be clear and concise with information given to the public.

Engagement was linked as an important tool meeting the objectives of the new Localism Bill if it was to drive real change. There was an emphasis that people need to be more actively involved in planning for this to occur.

Case studies were given to exemplify how best to undergo community engagement. An example of a charrette in Bath was given. They were promoted as good forms of engagement as they involved a wide range of stakeholders, were easy to organise and often diffused conflicts between residents and developers. They allow for residents to be quickly shown models of different scenarios and was a clear way to show residents which parameters are set, and which they can influence.

The limitation to engagement was given. For example it does not provide all the answers. It however is a route for information sharing, getting fresh and new ideas, and promotes greater cooperation in order to achieve *better* outcomes. It does give transparency to planning decision making which is vital for residents. Even if residents do not agree with the reasons given for a development to be allowed to go ahead, there is the understanding that the outcome was based on a set of reasoning, even if it was not theirs.

Are we at a stage for new beginnings? Certainly a statement of community involvement at the pre-application stage discussions is new, as in future there will be much greater upfront dialogue and engagement than before.

In discussion after the presentation it was debated that it will be increasingly the developers that will be paying for engagement exercises, due to local authorities not being able to afford it. A developer in the room said that he believed that developers will be happy to pay for this, so long as they gain some assurance that as a result of the discussions they can work on the assumption that a plan will then be readily accepted by planners at the planning department.

The consensus among the delegates was that the earlier people are consulted on proposals, the happier people are to accept an outcome. The barriers to community engagement working properly are that those who dislike any development will always be bitter and upset when development occurs, which prevents these people wishing to participate in future exercises as they believe that local authorities did not listen to their views the previous time.

One delegate mentioned that all stakeholders should be approached, including disabled people, as there are 23 million disabled people in Britain, and 80% of Britain's will suffer a disability in their lifetime. Some developments could severely reduce their quality of life and therefore need the opportunity to contribute to discussions.

The delegates agreed that local people should be consulted on all projects, no matter what their scale.

The take home message was COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE.

This report was produced by Rhiannon Clarke, student at Cardiff University

This paper is a report of proceedings of the workshop and does not necessarily reflect the views of the author, their employer or that of any individual attending the workshop, including the facilitators, or the RTPI.