

*“We have never experienced such levels of interest before (albeit that many were in response to the candidate sites) particularly before firm proposals have been identified. It means that when we finally present clear options for public consultation in 2007, we can truly claim to have given the community a genuine opportunity to engage early in the process and taken people’s views fully into account at the very beginning. Front end participation in practice.”* Mike Pender, Planning Officer, Denbighshire County Council

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This case study supports RTPI GPN1: Guidelines on Effective Community Involvement and Consultation available at [www.rtpi.org.uk/item/325/23/5/3](http://www.rtpi.org.uk/item/325/23/5/3)

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# Effective Community Involvement and Consultation Case Study 3 Denbighshire County Council

**How to secure the interest and involvement of record numbers of people and organisations in long term spatial planning**

## Key Learning Points

- 1 Analyse the stakeholder base thoroughly
- 2 Publicise the process
- 3 Secure top level leadership

This case study supports RTPI GPN1: Guidelines on Effective Community Involvement and Consultation. <http://www.rtpi.org.uk/item/593/23/5/3>

## Background

Like many local authorities, Denbighshire (population 98,000) has in the past struggled to involve the public adequately in long-term spatial planning. Despite a reputation for active citizenship and a good track record, elected members and officers alike faced an uphill task to convince local organisations and individuals to participate meaningfully in the development plan process.

The 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act requires local authorities in England to prepare a statement of community involvement (SCI). In Wales there is a similar process called a community involvement scheme (CIS). Denbighshire's CIS envisaged a participation phase as an initial step in the preparation of a local development plan (LDP). Its objective was to engage genuinely with all varieties of local opinion on key issues before preparing options and a preferred strategy that could be subsequently presented to the community in a formal consultation.

## Project Description

The LDP team consisted of four officers, some with considerable experience, but who were conscious that they had not previously succeeded in attracting the levels of participation now required. An external review of their capabilities was carried out, and identified the need to plan the participation phase. Working with the Consultation Institute they undertook several preparatory steps to prepare the ground properly for significantly enhanced public involvement. These involved:

- A review of existing lists of stakeholder groups and interested parties;
- Selection of over forty organisations for a full stakeholder mapping exercise. This enabled the LDP team to identify key stakeholders, and those who needed special help to become involved;
- Formation of a key stakeholder group. Their meetings considered emerging key issues and approved various elements of the participation phase;
- Presentations to the elected members working group, with special endorsement from the chief executive. The main thrust was to convince elected members that unlike previous practice where public views were only sought when there were firm proposals as part of a thoroughly prepared plan, opinions would be sought right at the beginning, before proposals were fully developed;
- Identification of initial key strategic issues or challenges facing the county which needed to be addressed in the plan.



# Denbighshire

## The Role of Community Involvement

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The key decision was to organise high profile launch events in three Denbighshire towns, selected to provide a good geographical coverage. This was felt necessary in order to convince people that the local authority still had an open mind. This involved:

- To distinguish these events from other public meetings, 631 organisations received letters inviting them to reserve places. (This proved sensible as space became very tight at all three venues);
- To ensure that residents with different circumstances were all given an opportunity to attend, each launch meeting took place at a different time of day (morning, afternoon and evening) and on successive days for maximum local impact;
- A bilingual, professionally published leaflet described the forthcoming process and invited the public to contact the LDP team, send in their views or attend the launch meetings. The county council newspaper promoted the meetings, and encouraged people to telephone the team to book places. A delegates pack was prepared and given out both at the meetings and on request;
- Organisations deemed critical as a result of the stakeholder mapping exercise received follow up letters and telephone calls to encourage attendance;
- 65 stakeholder organisations booked a total of 97 places. Along with those who did not book a place, a total of 231 people attended and 36 different organisations were represented;
- The leader of the council opened every meeting. The chief executive, corporate directors and planning officers gave presentations on housing and population, regeneration and environmental issues. An independent facilitator led a general discussion, and over the three meetings a total of 36 comments from the floor were made and recorded;
- One feature that generated considerable interest and debate was the publication (hard copy and online) of candidate sites submitted as expressions of interest by developers and landowners;
- In the weeks that followed the LDP team received over 346 letters and suggestions and attended over 45 meetings with town or community councils and local organisations.