

# Having Your Say

## Participation – Your right to have your say!

Effective public participation in decision-making is simple good sense. It can save time and money, deliver better solutions to the problems under discussion and help empower people. Participation should be at the heart of any work on sustainable communities.

But it often doesn't work. Why not? There's lots of reasons but some of them are:  
Participation fails for many reasons that include:

- a lack of adequate resourcing;
- a failure to set up processes that genuinely encourage public involvement;
- a lack of time, and
- a lack of trust in the process.

Most of these can be dealt with in one way or another, but do need to be confronted and dealt with or they'll seriously damage the project and the process. For more information mail [info@suscom.org](mailto:info@suscom.org) and ask for an email copy of 'Having Your Say', but here are a couple of lists that may be helpful.

The first one is 'Ten pointers to good practice'; the second is 'Ten Questions to ask before you participate' (and don't waste your time if you don't get good answers! Finally there's some ideas on 'twelve steps to delivering better practice'.

Feedback always welcome, and feel free to use and reproduce this material but please credit Chris Church. Thank you!

### **10 pointers to good practice**

Good practice is always subjective, and there is no such thing as Best Practice when it comes to participation! Anyone who tells you otherwise is either a liar or doesn't understand the meaning of the word 'best'.

But even in a subjective world it is possible to suggest that if participation can be called 'good practice', then certain things should have happened.

The points below have all been made by community organisations when discussing this issue.

#### **1. "Everyone likely to be affected by the issue knew the process was happening".**

It's usually impossible to let 'everyone' know, but it should certainly be possible to inform the people who are clearly stakeholders. A stakeholder analysis should therefore be a first step in any good participation process.

#### **2. "The initiating body (e.g. the developers or the council) discussed and agreed the objectives with local people, as early in the process as possible. "**

There is almost always a community group, association or forum in the area where consultation is to take place. This group should be invited to plan and discuss the objectives, the participation strategy, and the stakeholder analysis.

#### **3. "Everyone had an opportunity to take part, in ways that were appropriate to their personal circumstances."**

Some people find it difficult to get to meetings: they work in the evenings or at weekends; they have child care to think about; or they are disabled in some way. Similarly there may be people in the area who do not speak or understand English very well. A good participation process should take these issues into account.

Any truly effective process will go beyond traditional 'leaflets and meetings', using a range of tools and techniques. These should be discussed with the forum and agreed as being appropriate to the circumstances. The special needs of women and older and younger people should be given specific attention, since circumstances often combine to hinder their participation.

**4. "Information and all documentation relevant to the process was freely available to participants."**

Access to information, especially on large-scale or controversial projects, is critical. There are many examples of voluntary groups being charged large fees for key documents, or of such documents not emerging into the public eye until it is too late to discuss them properly.

**Any developer or council running a consultation exercise should be aware that many stakeholders will approach the exercise from a viewpoint of distrust.** A clear statement on free access to information can help dispel that distrust if it is seen to be adhered to. More detailed criteria for measuring success in this area have been published by other bodies.

**5. "The aims and objectives were fully discussed; conflicts were made clear and resolved where possible."**

It is quite normal for people to disagree and some conflict is an integral part of the process. It is also not unknown for one party to claim that another had agreed something where they in fact had not.

The key to resolving conflicts is to identify the areas of conflict and not to let disagreement over one specific issue develop into broad hostility.

Good record-keeping, with minutes of meetings being clear, comprehensible, and agreed or amended at the start of a subsequent meeting, is one way to resolve these issues.

**6. "The process was adequately resourced and did not rely on voluntary efforts to run it."**

Lack of time and money mean that initiators are likely to settle for second (or third) best processes, and fail to reach those who already feel excluded or alienated.

Resourcing of participation always relies heavily on time donated by those attending meetings. In large exercises this donated time (assessed at even a minimal wage rate) may easily match resources put in by developers or authorities.

A clear statement about how much the consultation is expected to cost, and how that relates to the overall costs is likely to be seen as another element of an open and transparent policy.

**7. "Independent advisors helped ensure that the process was open, and this was acknowledged by the people who took part."**

The role of mediators or facilitators, who can act as 'referees', can be an important one. As well as helping resolve conflicts, they can make sure that everyone gets a chance to speak and that good ideas don't get lost.

The bottom line in almost all consultation is honesty. Cynical 'professionals' manipulating processes are one of the biggest causes of public alienation from the planning and

redevelopment processes. There is no way to assess honesty in an objective manner, but evidence of trust and respect from community groups involved is a good starting point.

#### **8. “All the inputs were taken into account”**

Inputs into a community consultation process can take many forms, from records of meetings and detailed papers from well-established voluntary groups through to questionnaire results, ‘planning for real’ maps and models, and paintings and drawings by children.

#### **9. “At the end of the process a final assessment of what had been agreed, and what had not, was presented for discussion and agreed.”**

Some processes have clear end points: others may lead to the establishment of Trusts or Forums that have an indefinite life. However, in all cases involving developments there must come a point where the developers etc. believe that they can now start work (or go forward in whatever way is appropriate). A final ‘close-out’ meeting is an important point.

#### **10. “People taking part agreed that it had been worth their time and effort. There was no evidence that any groups felt that they had been excluded from the process.”**

You won’t find the answers to this one if you don’t ask! Some evaluation is essential if any process is claiming to be ‘good practice’. This must include a survey of those taking part.

#### **Towards ‘best practice’?**

The ten points above aim to set out the key parts of the process. Any process that satisfied all the above requirements would be long and expensive. **If it was claimed that such a process had actually happened, the next question would be: ‘how could we assess these claims and can they be measured?’**

It’s questionable whether there is such a thing as ‘best’ practice: this is a dynamic process, and what seems good to one group may be very bad to another. But from the points above it is possible to develop a checklist that suggests that a ‘good (not best) practice’ participation process at any level should include:

- An initial stakeholder analysis that is open to discussion and amendment, carried out by the initiator;
- A representative body that can work with the initiator on the objectives and on developing and monitoring the process;
- A published budget for the agreed participation process;
- Acceptance of the need to use independent facilitators as relevant;
- A full, clear and agreed record of all discussions being made available to the public, along with all key documentation;
- A final document that lists the relevant areas of agreement and disagreement arrived at during the process and that is agreed by the representative forum.
- A final independent review that measures the satisfaction of participants

It’s very unlikely that all these will happen. But if some of them happen, is that ‘good’ practice? How many of them are essential? Communities need to discuss these questions in their own context.. Community groups may also wish to consider when and how they participate, using the questions below.

#### **10 Questions you may wish to ask before you participate**

Next time you hear about a participative process that would like your involvement, you may wish to ask the organiser some of these questions:

1. Why has this participative process been set up?
2. What does it concern, and how will the ideas that emerge from the participative process affect the outcomes?
3. How long will this participative process last (what is expected of me)?
4. Is there any funding to cover my / our expenses (e.g. bus fares)?
5. Why do you want us to get involved?
6. What techniques will be used during this process, & do you have material that explains these techniques and shows where they have been successful elsewhere?
7. What provision has been made for young people / older people / poorer people / people who do not speak English / people with access difficulties / to take part?
8. Who will manage or facilitate the process?
9. What happens after the meetings / workshops / surveys etc. (where are the final decisions taken, if they are not taken here)?
10. How will you evaluate the process, and will we be invited to give our views?

## **Towards better practice**

Many organisations are taking public participation very seriously, yet very few have clear policies. A first step for any agency wishing to be seen to take this seriously would be to develop a draft policy and consult with their communities on agreeing a final policy.

Two central features of any participation policy for local authorities should be:

- All participation programmes should be adequately financed (for new developments I would advocate a figure of 1% of the development cost as a guideline)
- All staff involved in community involvement should be adequately trained.

Councils can lead by example by producing a Public Participation Statement (as above) for all new developments and regeneration programmes. Annual reports from the council should include a 'review of participation', showing which major participative programmes they have run or supported, and how these were evaluated. Many local authorities are developing local indicators, for service delivery, economic development, and sustainable development. A set of indicators for participation should be developed and measured annually or as appropriate.

### **Making participation work - 12 steps to a successful process.**

The guidelines below are for anyone launching and running a participative process.

1. Good participation takes time and money. Plan well in advance: work out what resources are needed (staff time, printed materials, room hire, expenses etc.) and produce a clear budget. Take this to the relevant decision-makers or include it, clearly identified, in any tender document. If you can't get the budget you want, review your plans and scale them down – don't start something you can't finish.
2. Work out what techniques may be most appropriate. Don't just use the one you've been trained in, unless it's appropriate for the circumstances. Seek advice from other people or organisations.
3. If you need to, do an initial stake-holder analysis to work out who the key groups to involve are. Work with a key group or network to do a fuller analysis, and make sure that all the identified stakeholders are invited.
4. Identify groups with special needs in the area (e.g. young people who may use a proposed community centre, or black communities who have little history of involvement in the issues you are working on, and plan ways to encourage them to take part.
5. Send out the information / invitations well in advance, and include enough relevant information so that people can see why what you're planning is important. Remember that many groups only meet once a month. Circulate publicity material widely (libraries, colleges, churches, etc.) especially where you think stakeholders will see it

6. Meet with community leaders in advance of the first public event. Take notice of their concerns and involve them in planning that event.
7. If this is a major development make sure that the key people involved come to the first public event (architects, planners, heads of regeneration agencies, senior concillors etc. Make sure that all relevant documentation is available
8. Invite interested groups and individuals to help form an advisory group or steering committee for the process if appropriate.
9. Be open and frank at all times. If there are problems explain them as fully as possible. People are far more likely to help solve problems if they think people are being open and honest.
10. Make sure that all events are well publicised, that good clear minutes are taken and are circulated to everyone involved (not just those who attend that meeting).
11. Be clear about what happens after the end of the public participation phase, and make it clear when it does end. Use the last meeting to review the process and agree the key issues that have arisen.
12. If there is a decision to be made afterwards' make sure that participants know when and by who that decision is being made. Let everyone who gave their time and energy know what decision was made and why.