

Community involvement in town and country planning

“The outcomes from planning affect everyone and everyone must therefore have the opportunity to play a role in delivering effective and inclusive planning” *Planning Policy Statement 1*

The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 requires local planning authorities to be pro-actively engaging with their many communities in the development control and plan making process and to set out in a Statement of Community Involvement how this will be achieved. Communities are to be more actively involved earlier and continuously in the plan preparation process, both at regional and local levels than has traditionally occurred. This is essential for ownership and legitimacy of planning policies. See ‘Community Involvement in Planning’ ODPM 2004.

Householders

Although town and country planning has operated in Britain for over fifty years, it is not a matter that most people have traditionally got involved in on an everyday basis. Some householders may apply for planning permission only once in their lives and the general reaction of many people is only to engage when a proposal appears to affect them directly. So, individuals or community groups are often starting from scratch, with little information on how to go about things and sometimes up against the clock. This is not the best formula for a successful engagement or outcome. Householders should now be pro-actively engaged from the earliest stages of plan making so that they can positively influence the sustainable development of their locality and local planning authorities have a duty to prepare a Statement of Community Involvement detailing how this will be achieved.

Developers

Developers, agents and consultants on the other hand are dealing with local planning authorities frequently as part of their business activities and councils are also daily involved with notification and consultation arrangements. However, many larger developments are now undertaken on a partnership basis, with complex issues of land ownership and phasing. There are also highly complex technical matters affecting certain types of developments or plan proposals which demand environmental impact assessments, traffic studies or compliance with specific national or regional policy. Even trained professionals sometimes find difficulty navigating through this and ensuring that communities are kept informed and able to participate. Developers are vital to the creation of sustainable communities and they too should be pro-actively involved throughout the plan making process.

Ten principles

It is against this background that the National Planning Forum has prepared and endorsed the following ten principles, for the guidance of everyone involved but particularly for local planning authorities and developers and their agents. For community groups, these ten principles can be a model against which the actions of local planning authorities and developers can be measured-but more positively they can form a basis on which continuing dialogue with the major players can be established. The National Planning Forum would be pleased to receive feedback from everyone about what works well and what does not. There is no single solution or a one size fits all.

Community involvement in town and country planning

A core activity and second nature

Community involvement should not be an afterthought or an adjunct to the main action. Rather it should be a permanent thread which runs through all planning and development activity. It must become second nature to the professionals involved in the use of land and the community should reasonably expect and be encouraged to be continuously involved in offering their positive views about how their locality is shaped over time.

An explicit process

Success comes from the careful, thoughtful and explicit 'design' of a coherent, overall process. 'Planning for Real'®, 'Enquiry by Design' and other models are tried and tested; there is no need to reinvent the wheel! The process needs to be transparent (ie how it works) and is most effective when conducted by an independent third party who earns and commands the respect of all participants. 'Planning Aid' was established to assist communities and individuals to better understand the process.

Common ground

Conflicts often occur because different groups start from different standpoints. Establish a common information base for the key issues from the outset. A proper community involvement process pays attention to sharing information, establishing common ground and seeking further intelligence to take things forward. Models, photo-montages and perspectives are all helpful to make places and information more intelligible to the lay person. Use new technology to simplify rather than complicate the process.

Start early and be clear about what is on offer

Nobody likes to be brought into a process halfway through, normally the earlier a consultation starts the better it will go. People will learn together as they each 'show their workings'. This is consistent with the 'front-loading' principle, which is a key element in the government's planning reforms and where all parties are encouraged to discuss proposals at the earliest stage. Where constraints limit the scope of a consultation, for example land ownership or higher level policy, be clear about them and explain them to everyone from the outset to avoid raising false expectations





Openness, honesty and trust

Commitment is an issue for all involved; it can only be secured if all parties are open and honest, and if the process builds trust through communication based on two-way listening and questioning. The process should be continuous and not a quick in-and-out. Communities will quickly become jaded and jaundiced if they feel their input has gone unheeded and then another round of consultation appears. Trust builds over time and by the patient and open commitment of individuals as well as organisations.

Inclusiveness

A good process is one which involves as many interests and groups as are likely to be affected. If the process favours a single group over, or to the exclusion, of others, it will fail to take everyone forward together and risk ambush of the consultation by those feeling disenfranchised at a later, possibly critical stage. The views of all the stakeholders should be measured and reviewed by an independent facilitator to help identify a positive way forward. This position can then be given full publicity to spread the message and improve understanding.

Build a shared responsibility for success

Whilst an independent facilitator may plan and manage the process, those involved are not passive actors waiting for 'someone else' to solve things for them; everybody must take an active role in seeking progress. Although the most difficult problems require the most attention, it is important to seek out and build on those points of agreement and common ground that nearly always exist or can be developed quite quickly. Some may be minor but 'celebrating' small steps helps to create confidence and mutual trust, providing a platform from which to move onto tougher areas.

Identify the favoured options

Few local issues have one neat, simple solution and there is now a multitude of plans, strategies and frameworks within which decisions must be taken. Though there are disadvantages when people come at things from different directions, this can bring to the debate a wide knowledge of the policy background. Sustainability appraisals and environmental assessments should also be prepared for plans and major developments which will inform the debate. So, diverse and innovative options and solutions can be assembled from those present which nest within, relate to and strengthen the overall picture.

Commitment to abide by outcomes

This is one of the 'wicked issues'. Few will want to start by trading off their own position, yet some will say there is little point in entering a process which aims to bring people closer and closer together around common solutions if one or other party retains some eventual veto over any results. This should be an aspiration of any community consultation.

Acknowledge and reward effort

Local planning authorities should encourage developers to follow the route of community involvement. Community consultation is a big commitment when it is done properly and it is only reasonable that, where developers (or any group) do it, the findings of the consultation should receive due recognition by the local planning authority. It would be reasonable for councils to consider fast-tracking applications or schemes where otherwise they may decide to undertake lengthy consultations on their own account.

The National Planning Forum is the largest cross-sectoral forum in England focusing on town and country planning.

The NPF has a membership drawn from:

- Not for profit and voluntary organisations
- Local government
- Government departments
- Government agencies
- Government regional offices
- Private sector
- Professional institutes
- Regional development agencies

The work of the Forum includes the preparation of and agreement to good practice notes to promote better outcomes for everyone seeking to develop or change the use of land or buildings in England.

For further information please visit our website at www.natplanforum.org.uk or contact the Secretary at secretary@natplanforum.org.uk

The National Planning Forum gratefully acknowledges the Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation in preparing these principles. 'Planning for Real' is a registered trademark of the Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation www.nif.co.uk 'Planning Aid' can be contacted at www.planningaid.rtpi.org.uk

© Local Government Association 2005

LGA code F/321

Designed and printed by the LGA

