

Voluntary Action Merthyr Tydfil

Your local county voluntary council



3. Working with others

3.2 Community participation and engagement methods

Participation works!

Sustainability is one of the key words of the 21st Century. Experience has shown that little development is sustainable in the long term unless the local community take part, are involved and contribute. It is at the interface between social, environmental and economic sustainability that some of the most exciting developments in Wales are happening. Community participation and involvement are the foundation stones of this revival of community spirit in action.

What's so special about participation?

Consultation is a familiar concept to most local authorities, voluntary and community groups and development agencies. It means inviting comments on plans which are already taking shape. Participation means something much more fundamental: encouraging people to take an active part in shaping those plans. Most methods of consultation are familiar – public meetings, notices, newsletters, etc. Community engagement and participation, on the other hand, is a new field to many, and may appear to be dominated by unfamiliar terminology and outside consultants. The following summarises some of the most popular and innovative methods.

Summary of the methods

Questionnaire surveys

Surveys are a widely-used technique which involve the collection of information, usually from a large number of people, in the form of a standard structured questionnaire. They are often the starting point for participation processes, and are frequently used in conjunction with other methods. Choosing the correct questions are crucial to the usefulness of this method.

Community appraisals

Community appraisals are a technique which allows local people to undertake a detailed survey to take stock of community life. The heart of the appraisal is usually a self-completion questionnaire which is normally delivered to every household in the community, or a sample of the population. However, an appraisal is not simply a questionnaire survey, but should be seen as a broader process which often involves other methods, such as forums and workshops.

Small group discussions

Small group discussions cover a range of similar approaches, all of which are based on people working together in small groups. This type of approach emphasises interaction between people and the exchange of information, views and opinions. Workshops and focus groups are familiar examples.

Community visioning

Community visioning is a process which is based on the development of a shared future 'vision' for a community. The approach has been adopted by a number of local authorities in the UK as part of their Local Agenda 21 processes. Visioning seeks to involve all elements of a community, focuses on common ground and concentrates on the future. A variety of techniques can be used within the visioning process, including Future Search, focus groups and workshops.

Future Search

The Future Search technique forms a key component of the community visioning approach described above. It is based on a large group event, normally a conference, the purpose of which is to create a shared vision for a community with common goals, and to develop actions to achieve these goals. The technique aims to involve all of the interests in a community in a way that regards all participants as equals and where the event is self-managed by all.

Open Space Technology

Open Space Technology is an adaptation of the 'traditional' public meeting approach to community participation, which shares some similarities with Future Search events. Open Space meetings attempt to involve all those people who hold a 'stake' in a community in the organisation and management of the event and the issues considered. The process is very flexible and 'open', with no fixed agenda, little formal structure and no 'experts', and much of the work is undertaken in small topic-based groups. Popular in the private sector it is now becoming a more established method in the voluntary sector.

Community planning weekends

Community planning weekends are large-scale events which primarily address community-based planning issues. They are generally convened and organised by professionals and statutory authorities in an attempt to involve local people in formulating proposals for the development of their community.

Forums

Forums are regular or continuing area-based meetings of representatives from local groups and organisations, along with interested individuals, which normally come

together to discuss a particular issue or concern, such as the environment. Forums have been widely established throughout the UK by local authorities and health authorities to address the development and implementation of various strategies. Forums are also recognised as being an appropriate mechanism for involving groups who have been excluded from decision-making processes, such as ethnic minorities, patients and young people.

Roundtables/consensus building

Roundtables are devices for consensus building between possibly previously antagonistic parties. Usually made up of between 16 and 24 members, Roundtables have mainly focused on sustainability: environmentalists and industrialists, local authority employees and members of the public have met on an equal basis to build consensus by abandoning an adversarial approach and aiming to understand each other's point of view.

Citizens' Juries

Citizens' Juries are made of between 12 and 25 members, representing a cross-section of the community, who meet for (usually) 4 days, are given as much information as possible about an issue, hear evidence, cross-examine witnesses, discuss the issue amongst themselves and with witnesses, facilitated by moderators. Their findings are published in a Report, which sets out disagreements as well as agreements.

Planning for Real®

Planning for Real is a technique which uses a 3D model to enable people to put forward suggestions for improving their neighbourhood. Cut out cards representing users, problems or other issues are put on the model. Consensus emerges through the pattern of distribution of the option cards. PfR is a registered trademark.

Village Design statements

Village Design statements are produced by communities to identify local character and set out design guidance to help guide new development. The Countryside Commission devised the process which culminates in a Village Design statement in order to influence the operation of the statutory planning system. Local people identify the distinction and diversity of their area in a Statement. The aim is that Village Design statements be taken on as Supplementary Planning Guidance so that future developments and changes are undertaken sympathetically.

Parish maps

The Parish Map scheme was devised by Common Ground: the aim is to celebrate local distinctiveness and to help people to come together to chart what they value

locally. A Parish Map demonstrates what people claim as their own locality and what they value in it - wild life, history, work, landmarks, buildings, people, festivals.

It does not have to be precise or cartographically correct, but by illustrating locally distinctive activities and features, it helps you to focus on the everyday things that make your place significant to you and different from the next. It can include the elusive responses which cannot be measured or counted and also the invisible - the stories, dialect, names and fragments of everyone's history.

Participation Cymru

Since its inception in November 2001, Participation Cymru is a national project whose focus is primarily community participation and engagement. Participation Cymru was formed to meet the needs of those working in the area of public and community participation in Wales.

Participation Cymru is a unique project in Wales, which provides innovative training, support, information and policy direction in participatory approaches to public and community engagement, development and regeneration.

Further information

Participation Cymru

Tel: 0800 2888 329

www.wcva.org.uk

Community Development Cymru

www.cdc.cymru.org

Interact Networks

www.interactnetworks.co.uk

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