

Voluntary Action Merthyr Tydfil

Your local county voluntary council



3. Working with others

3.2 Community participation and engagement methods

Participation works!

Experience has shown that in order to be sustainable in the long term, local communities must have the opportunity to contribute and to be involved. 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 to maintaining community spirit and enabling people to take 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 and engagement means something much more fundamental: it encourages people to take part, have their say and be involved. Most methods of consultation are familiar – public meetings, notice boards, leaflets and newsletters, for eg. 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 which you can use.

Summary of the methods

Surveys

Surveys are widely-used techniques 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 the participation processes, and are frequently used in conjunction with other methods. Choosing the correct questions are crucial to the usefulness of this method. Websites such as 'survey monkey' are great if you wish to create an online survey and mail this to participants

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.

Focus groups

A focus group asks participants their opinion on various topics and enables them to have an open discussion. Groups tend to have 6-10 participants to enable conversations to begin, it can be useful to have a few questions to lead discussion and a facilitator to take any notes

Forums

Forums are regular or continuing local area based meetings of representatives from groups and organisations or individuals with an expression of interest. Participants come together to discuss a particular issue or concern, such as for example; environment, health and wellbeing, community safety for example. Forums have been widely established throughout the UK by local authorities, health authorities and local community voluntary organisations 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.

Process mapping

Process mapping allows you to work with a group of around 15-20 service users using a road map to record their experience. Participants are asked to write on post it notes where they are at each point of their journey of using the service with you. Any duplicate answers are grouped together which allows you to identify common issues to be addressed or looked at further. Alternative methods that can be used with this tool such as a graffiti wall or adding flip chart sheets to capture additional conversations or comments

Digital stories

Digital stories are a short film or slide show with the narrator telling a story, this uses images, animation, slides and sound and can be an alternative to paper based evidence. This is often seen as a more engaging technique which allows people to be creative

User panels

User panels are a group of people who are brought together to represent a wide demographic of a project or service. There is no maximum amount of participants

although this method would require you to drop 1/3 of members each year and to replace these; this is to ensure that regular conversations and ideas are developed. For smaller engagement activities you can use a small number of participants of the user panel to have discussions, this is then fed back to the wider group. This is useful if you have a short time scale or a more targeted subject area.

Planning for Real®

When using planning for real you use large scale maps to develop a 3D model of an area which will identify key community buildings or land for example; Playing fields, schools, community buildings and churches. Participants then have a range of subjects which they can give their view on, using pins and flags, key issues are identified. This enables people to put forward suggestions for improving their neighbourhood such as unused open space to lack of street lighting. Consensus emerges through the pattern of distribution of the flags and pins. PfR is a registered trademark.

World café

World Café provides people with the opportunity to have discussions through conversation. The room has a number of tables which are covered with paper, each table had a different discussion topic and participants are given a timescale on how long they have before they move to the next table. People are able to take part if they wish and a talking stick can be used to ensure everyone can have their say, key points are noted and participants can write on the sheets of paper covering each table to ensure anything they wish to say is recorded. Groups can be moved 2 or 3 times before feedback is fed back to the whole room.

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.participationcymru.org.uk

Interact Networks

www.interactnetworks.co.uk

Disclaimer

The information provided in this sheet is intended for guidance only. It is not a substitute for professional advice and we cannot accept any responsibility for loss occasioned as a result of any person acting or refraining from acting upon it.

For further information contact

Voluntary Action Merthyr Tydfil

Voluntary Action Centre, 89/90 High Street, Merthyr Tydfil, CF47 8UH

Registered Charity: 1060242

Tel: 01685 353900

enquiries@vamt.net

Fax: 01685 353909

www.vamt.net

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Tel: 0800 2888 329
www.wcva.org.uk