

Editorial

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It is generally accepted that participation in decision-making is a good thing (NEF, 1998) and, in recent years, wide-ranging and managed engagement has become the hallmark of good project management. With the Localism Act 2011 (HMG, 2012) now firmly on the statute books, the need to engage stakeholders and local people in all forms of decision-making comes even more strongly to the fore.

Participatory planning belongs to a family of consultation and decision-making techniques that have origins in international development and extension work (UN-Habitat, 2001). Evolving most notably in the town and country planning system since the Skeffington report (Skeffington, 1969), participatory planning has evolved over decades to embrace a number of techniques including stakeholder engagement, enquiry by design, planning for real and community engagement (Participation Compass, 2012). *The Community Planning Event Manual* (Wates, 2008), helpfully summarises these techniques and acts as a handbook for the professional team. But are these things all the same and how do we all participate to achieve the best outcomes?

Major civil engineering projects, particularly those that may have significant impacts and involve public money (Ng *et al.*, 2012), are also encouraged to use appropriate consultation techniques to inform the design process and shape project outcomes. Successful outcomes highlight the value of participation as a means of consensus building as we move from increasingly outdated modes of decision-making based on the principle of ‘decide, announce, defend’ to collaboratively derive outcomes. Neither has this aspect of project delivery escaped the attention of risk managers because managing risk in a project inevitably means managing outcomes and expectations (Muro, 2012).

This themed issue of *Engineering Sustainability* brings together five papers from recent projects where a participatory planning approach was adopted within a multidisciplinary perspective. It highlights key issues in selecting preferred methodologies, the limitations of certain techniques and the advantages of a well-designed and implemented participation strategy.

Providing some useful context, Brookfield *et al.* (2013) helpfully review the history of participation in planning in

the UK and, in exploring the dynamics of focus groups, highlight issues for the practitioner navigating their way through a participatory process to a useful conclusion. In the fields of scenario planning and modelling, often difficult to describe to the non-specialist, Garrod *et al.* (2013) investigate the potential for stakeholders to engage with modellers and describe a participatory workshop approach across three European countries. The conclusions provide an insight into the future design, conduct and application of such exercises.

In a statutory plan-making context, Siddall *et al.* (2013) present a case study of stakeholder engagement aimed at developing a shared vision for Dublin (Eire) using sustainable development indicators (SDIs) as an important tool in the management of cities and regions. In doing so the authors review the range and context of SDIs, consider the effects of consultation fatigue and the importance of framing activities if cohesive outcomes are to be achieved.

By way of contrast, the briefing at the start of this issue (Stafford, 2013) focuses on a single major engineering project and uses the example of the A3 Hindhead tunnel under the Devil’s Punchbowl in Surrey to describe an approach to design and delivery in a major civil engineering project that is noted for its engineering excellence. Effective participation ultimately secured a high level of local support and allowed potential problems to be identified and resolved at an early stage. Finally, Walsh *et al.* (2013) tackle a subject that goes to the heart of engineering sustainability, the impact of climate change on our infrastructure systems and the built environment. Presenting the concept of the decision theatre, the paper explores how organisations with different priorities and motivations can work in a collaborative environment to deliver a long term vision for surface water drainage in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK.

These papers demonstrate that the term ‘participation’ is undoubtedly elastic (Arnstein, 1969) taking a variety of forms and meanings. It is also notable that the practice of facilitating participation has evolved to justify professional networks and standards (National Charrette Institute see www.charretteinstitute.org), encompassing a broad church of interpretations and levels of complexity. The activity of ‘planning’ is also widely interpreted, ranging from a statutory process to

mechanisms by which decisions are formulated and transcribed into frameworks or actions representing an agreed way forward at a range of scales. Familiar as a *modus operandi* in some sectors, good practice in participatory planning in engineering projects is not yet widespread, but with the sustainability agenda driving a need for multidisciplinary team working, the need for effective engagement becomes all the more important. This in turn will drive a need for consistency of understanding if desired outcomes are to be achieved.

Perhaps a concluding observation is that one of the challenges of any participatory process, (in terms of achieving a cost efficient process that effectively satisfies both project and participant needs), is that of establishing a process-enabling level of understanding within the group. Perhaps this is an intergenerational issue? Recent work in citizen science may help here (Roy *et al.*, 2012; Tweddle *et al.*, 2012) and this, coupled with the power of the smartphone, not only as a reference source but as a mechanism to record and report, places the average citizen in an informed position to participate if a civic-ecology is to be widely achieved.

Engineering Sustainability will continue to explore this interesting topic. If you are interested in becoming a member of the editorial panel please send your CV to sarah.walker@icepublishing.com.

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