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Editorial

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This issue of *Municipal Engineer* is devoted to community participation. The participation concept is embraced by democracy—a social arrangement where power is vested in the people collectively, who, for practical reasons appoint officers to administer that power. People in a democratic society elect representatives who ‘govern’. One hundred and fifty years ago, Abraham Lincoln said, ‘The legitimate object of government is to do for a community of people, whatever they need to have done, but can not do, at all, or can not, so well do, for themselves—in their separate, and individual capacities’.

Much has been said and written about how democracy works, or should work. But how do the elected representatives and administrators stay in touch? How many people within the community make their views known on a particular issue? How does this work in practice? In the following pages authors will describe how community involvement was a key to enable schemes to be devised and successfully delivered, both in the UK and in developing countries.

But *is* participation vital to the success of democracy? Some argue that public participation actually benefits pressure groups! Also that it is just another tick in the box during the (lengthened) process of scheme bureaucracy and can lead to inertia in decision making. Clearly there are occasions, such as in an emergency, when it is necessary to get on with the task. If the benefits are self-evident, should the community be asked for their endorsement before proceeding? What benefit is derived when the findings from community involvement do not suggest a clear-cut solution?

Invariably media (newspapers, radio) involvement is a key element in a participatory exercise. Undoubtedly the media are a powerful force, often, it seems, with their own political agenda. So when faced with campaigns fuelled by the media, the outcomes from well-planned and executed public participation can provide decision-makers with a clearer understanding of local feelings.

Municipal engineers, broadly, are responsible for many aspects of the local physical environment. Their task is to devise and implement a wide range of improvements and maintenance regimes that will be acceptable to the majority of people who will be affected by them. It follows that success in carrying out their duties will depend upon the degree to which local opinion has been ascertained and influenced. They are at the interface

between the population they serve, their ‘customers’, and the administration!

Recent papers published in *Municipal Engineer* explore issues related to public participation. Fiona Rajé, in ‘Engineering social exclusion? Poor transport links and severance’ discusses *social exclusion*, which she defines as ‘a process which causes individuals or groups *not to participate* in the normal activities of the society in which they are residents’ (my italics).¹ She describes a district of Oxford suffering from social exclusion in the transport context. Statistics indicate a relatively poor and ‘needy’ area. For instance, nearly 20% of the residents said they had a limiting long-term illness, so, for example, one might ask how a public consultation exercise would be designed to reach these people?

In the same issue, John Barrell and Julie Whitehouse state that *active involvement* of the local community is an important aspect in the creation of Home Zones.² The paper describes the wide and on-going consultation required to create ‘ownership’ of the scheme.

The need to engage with the community is a recurring theme in this journal. Volume 156, issue ME2, June 2003, was devoted to the analysis of social exclusion. Colin Williams and Richard White’s paper ‘Conceptualising social inclusion, some lessons for action’, provides a useful insight.³

At any point in time in every individual’s life trajectory, he/she will be included in some subsystems and excluded from others. What is important is whether an individual who is not embedded in some particular subsystem actually wishes to be so at that point in their lives, and that any non-participation is therefore the result of a set of barriers being in place.

The authors concluded that there are no easy, quick fix answers, ‘rather, what is demanded is a thoroughness of approach, of engagement, and of execution . . .’.

So far the discussion has been relevant to a ‘normal’ situation of interaction in a non-emergency scenario. The Asian tsunami on 26 December 2004 and the catastrophe that ensued was yet another reminder to the world that communities can suddenly be torn apart. In a sister journal, *Civil Engineering*, a whole issue was devoted to voluntary engineering. In his paper ‘Rebuilding communities: the role of volunteers after disasters’, Robert Hodgson warns against ‘the knee-jerk reaction of a disaster

response . . . sociological factors play a particularly significant part in domestic architecture . . . the volunteer engineer planning to address reconstruction should identify these factors through *participatory engagement* with the community . . .’ (my italics).⁴

The ‘accepted’ concept of participation is that it is led by the establishment, but is this how it should happen? Some argue that a bottom-up system of engagement is required. In a workshop on community involvement and local action, at Bristol, a speaker described how it is possible to be a ‘catalyst’, to empower, to animate, and to grow communities (not institutions).⁵ He talked about self-help, ‘ownership’, trust, encouraging ordinary people to take control, and celebrating diversity. To successfully operate at this grass-roots level requires ‘people’ skills that have to be learnt by engineers.

A few years ago, it was often the practice to carry out a public consultation, offering the public limited choice, and after a scheme had been devised. It is now generally accepted that this has led to a low expectation from the community towards such consultations, which are seen as merely ‘going through the motions’. Certainly a lack of political backing for a policy or scheme is likely to mean there is insufficient funding to follow up on the expectations raised by a comprehensive consultation. There are considerable resources needed to guide public opinion, to reach equitable solutions, to listen, but not be hijacked by a vocal minority, to keep the public informed during the process. A lack of resources, and time, was given by over 80% of the local authorities as the most important problem to implementing participation.⁶

Figures from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister indicate that about 14 million people participated in local authority initiatives in 2001.⁶ This works out at an average of 10.5 consultations per authority per year.

Techniques to engage the public are developing, though. The government has produced numerous documents setting out its policies and guidance on community participation, which apply to many aspects of local government. In particular, the methods and considerations in the table of potential methods of community involvement in *Creating Local Development Frameworks* could be used to design many types of public engagement exercises.⁷

Tom Cohen discusses Local Development Frameworks and transport planning in his paper ‘Community involvement in planning: finding a happy medium’. He guides us from consultation to participation and explains how professionals have to change their role. If one only has time to read one of the papers in this issue—this is the one!

Mike Batheram gives the outcomes from a Local Transport Plan benchmarking exercise by several local authorities. The methods of consultation and market research they used are listed, with comments about the disadvantages as well. They have devised tips for public involvement, as well as useful comments to aid practitioners.

In their paper ‘Community involvement in coast protection at Lyme Regis, UK’, Geoff Davis and Keith Cole describe the process

used to devise a scheme acceptable to local residents. Unfortunately the first scheme put to the local people was not developed with much consultation and at planning stage was rejected. This setback required a second approach, as the need for the coastal protection work became more urgent. A Voluntary Advisory Panel was set up to work with the District Council. This time, local people, aided by persons with technical expertise, were instrumental in developing an award-winning first phase, followed by further elements of the scheme. They discuss the mechanism of participation which they admit was not always easy, but conclude that the large input to the process from the District Council has, in the end, led to a high level of satisfaction within the town.

Gary Fitch and David Thomas ask ‘Are highway engineers fighting a losing battle with the public to gain their respect and improve satisfaction with the highway that they use on a daily basis?’ In answer to this and other questions they outline how Kent County Council undertakes consultations. A ‘customer satisfaction’ survey revealed a number of issues, including a need to improve marketing and communications, and better information about the highway service. Their new approach to service delivery led to the development of 12 ‘Commitments to the Public’. They conclude: ‘It is clear from the ‘listening’ exercises . . . that we are only part way along our journey to improve public satisfaction’. They go on to list their thoughts on how more ‘customer-orientated’ they must become. That they are moving in that direction is evident from one of their closing remarks: ‘We recognise that the way government measures improvement on a national basis may not represent all the needs of the users. We must therefore continue to engage with our local communities and elected members to keep a sensible balance between the two’.

Municipal Development Plans are the subject of Pieter Wiekeraad’s paper. He explains why transparency and reliability are necessary prerequisites to attracting investment in communities and gives examples from Albania and Bulgaria. Permeating the process is the involvement of the community. He describes how plans were developed and the essential part played by public participation.

‘Two participatory projects in South Asia’, by Kevin Tayler, examines the issues arising from urban upgrading in Faisalabad, Pakistan and the Andhra Pradesh district of India. He reports that it was difficult to blend the ‘informal’ efforts by citizens with the paternalistic attitudes of the authorities. He gives an informative introduction to participation as a concept, quoting from Chambers and Moser and ends with important lessons learnt.

Road safety in India and proposals for gaining community support are given in the paper by Vishrut Landge *et al.* The problem is evident from the statement ‘India is a traditional society where the role of fate reduces the will to try and change things through human volition—if it is your time to die, you will die’. They conclude that a holistic solution is required.

K. A. Jayaratne and M. Sohail draw on a four year research programme in Sri Lanka to give a comprehensive view of urban upgrading projects. They have produced guidance notes that will be of immense value to those involved in community action

planning. Their conclusion that urban upgrading in Sri Lanka is still not recognised by the authorities has remarkable similarity with the findings reported by Tayler. They urge that existing patterns of livelihoods and socio-economic aspirations are recognised when incorporated into regulatory frameworks and that a real partnership should exist between the community and local authority throughout the planning/development process.

The London Borough of Bromley, along with Rossiter & Co., have produced and distributed an interactive CD-Rom as part of a campaign to promote the 'Walking Bus' to their inhabitants. This innovative use of multimedia has already been acknowledged with the award of the Europrix Quality Seal 2002. Gareth Davies describes the project, and reports that the campaign has achieved significant modal shift: 63% of the parents participating in the Walking Bus have switched from the car for the journey to school and over 1000 children have participated in the Walking Bus during the last five years.

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