

Book review

PARTICIPATORY PLANNING FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES: INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2003. ISBN 1 851 12 658 9, £15, 102 pp.

1. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

This report welcomes the evolving changes in the planning system in England, but argues that they will only work if a 'participatory planning' process is used to establish new relationships between those who make plans and the public and other stakeholders in the system. It concludes that engagement and negotiation are fundamental to the participatory planning process.

This process may involve using third-party mediation to resolve conflicts and objections to a plan, or to 'pre-mediate' the preparation of plans through brokering agreements between a range of stakeholders. The report proposes the skills and attitudes that are required in the process, drawing on examples of participatory planning from around the world.

2. THE PAPER

Participatory Planning for Sustainable Communities: International Experience is a research paper published for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (OPDM) in September 2003. It draws upon an extensive review of academic and professional literature. Case studies provide an impressive and interesting international perspective on participation in the planning process, drawing on experience from different continents. The research is geared to plan making.

The research report makes wide-ranging recommendations, including to the ODPM, regional planning bodies, local government, the Royal Town Planning Institute and other professional bodies. It welcomes the reforms to the planning system proposed recently by the Government but argues that changes in attitude are required to make the reforms work and to deliver effective public involvement. The ethos of the research is summed up in the call for 'participatory planning' rather than 'public participation'. Engagement and negotiation are seen as fundamental to this.

The current planning system includes opportunities for public participation at both the planning application stage and through the development plan process. The participatory planning

process would require new relationships to be established between those who make plans and the public and other stakeholders. A fundamental suggestion is the call for third-party mediation to resolve objections and conflicts—in effect to broker agreements. Rather than just be consulted, organisations and agencies would seek to exchange information, explore common ground and negotiate. The momentum to achieve such change is being driven by a public distrust for planning, the sustainable development agenda (which requires consensus building) and the desire of Government to coordinate spatially between different policy sectors. Poverty and ethnicity are seen as the major barriers to achieving a more inclusive planning process.

The report draws on examples and methods of how the general public and hard-to-reach groups have been engaged effectively in the planning process. In the long term the planning system has the scope to be more accessible and widely understood. In South Africa there are good examples of elected representatives being empowered to assist in the engagement of communities. In China, planners from other cities have been brought in to evaluate and negotiate over plans. Community organisations in the USA are drawn out as examples of facilitators. Overall, the report concludes that the ideas and approaches used in mediation are significantly different to the practices that have characterised public participation.

Mediation and negotiation can be seen as a threat to the rationalism and expertise of professionals. Such approaches, however, need to be seen as a way forward, rather than a means to identify flaws. Different personal and interpersonal qualities are required, such as making people feel comfortable, increased cultural awareness, a greater understanding of group dynamics and the ability to zoom in on people's state of mind and emotions. Music, stories, citizens' conferences, toys, videos and inquiry by design workshops are just some of the means available.

Time, costs, resources and skills are recognised in the report as key factors that will enable participatory planning. The report sees the onus of responsibility falling on local government but funded centrally. A wider focus on innovative funding approaches or some form of cost-benefit/savings analysis could have added value to the research, beyond just adding to the many competing resource pressures on local and central government (this is seen as an area for subsequent research).

Whether participatory planning is applied to plans or planning applications, it requires the thinking to involve the public and stakeholders early in the planning process. Planning guidance,

such as on telecommunications, does already call for early discussion on applications. Mediation has largely been focused on the development control stage of planning. Participatory planning, if applied at a project level, will require more time early in the strategy and design stages of schemes, but the overall time and controversy surrounding these schemes could be much less.

Through both the existing application and the plan preparation stages, public consultation is included, but often targeted at certain interested parties and for a limited time period only. For planning applications, owners/tenants of land need to be notified about proposals in writing. The local planning authority must also publicise an application, usually by site notices and adverts. Whether it is for a project or a plan, participatory approaches require an emphasis on a series of phases of involvement, rather than just at one time.

The new tools of plan making—Regional Spatial Strategies and Local Development Frameworks—are intended to deliver more joined-up government. Planning will need to coordinate effectively across environmental and social inclusion and

regeneration agendas, for example. Community involvement is a key aspect of sustainable development. Local Agenda 21 and Community Strategies are providing a mechanism for a greater public say.

Overseas experience suggests that to get more effective public involvement in planning, there needs to be a new emphasis on negotiation and informal mediation with institutions and agencies, alongside new participatory approaches to engage with local communities. Whether you are preparing a plan or progressing a scheme through a plan and/or planning application stage, this research report signposts what the future may well bring. There are time, cost and resource implications arising from participatory planning—but the message is that the end result can be better, and more widely understood and accepted. The onus on achieving participatory planning requires everyone in the development industry—engineers, architects, designers, surveyors and many others—to move beyond the traditional concept of public participation.

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