

The experience of stakeholder participation in tourism planning: operationalising ‘best practice’

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Abstract

Stakeholder participation has become widely viewed as an essential feature of sustainable policy and decision-making. As a result the provision for stakeholder participation has been included within a range of decision-making processes but without necessarily ensuring that its structure is appropriate to the context. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 legislation required the creation of Local Access Forums to advise on public access to the English countryside. However guidance on their role and structure was vague and in 2005 a government commissioned survey indicated that many Local Access Forums were experiencing a lack of empowerment.

Through observation of four Local Access Forums (LAFs) over a period of two years it was possible to compare their experiences with the findings of the government commissioned survey. One of the four LAFs studied provided indications of strategies leading to outcomes that were satisfactory for both participants and organisers. This case study has been further examined in order to develop an outline of ‘Best Practice’ that is appropriate to the formation and management of Local Access Forums within the context of stakeholder participatory groups.

Keywords: stakeholders, participation, local access forums, tourism

This paper draws heavily on fieldwork undertaken for a recently completed PhD [1]. The material has been selected and edited but at the heart of the discussion are concerns relating to empowerment in participative forms of stakeholder groups.

1 Introduction

Public participation is now largely viewed as a necessary component in policy-making and planning for tourism as it encourages ‘democratic empowerment’ and also improves the resulting ‘tourism product’ (Bramwell & Lane [2]). Similarly, Hall [3] refers to participative decision-making’s ‘potential’ to add to

increased sustainability. Consequently, when drawing up policies, or planning for sustainable outcomes, it is anticipated that involving stakeholders in decision-making and implementation produces more desirable results for an organisation. However Rowley [4] has viewed stakeholder/ organiser relationships as competitive and Lowndes and Skelcher [5] found competition between and within organisations to be usual. In their study of the Banff Bow Valley Round Table, Jamal and Eyre [6] noted that the various stakeholders were in competition for their own priorities to receive attention.

In England for most of the twentieth century there has been recurrent conflict between land owners, and users who demanded greater rights of access to the countryside (Page & Shoard, [7]). It is relevant to note that within the English land ownership structure, apparently open countryside is subject to a variety of demands upon it. For example landowners require a profit from the activities carried out upon their land, whether it is accessible to the public or not. However continued lobbying from users culminated in legislative intervention. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 [8] was passed into law in November 2000 and within this law was included the public right of increased access to 'open' countryside. Responses to the announcement of The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 were polarized and debate was emotionally charged (Hansard, [9]; Page & Shoard, [7]) but a potentially pacifying feature of this legislation was to be the creation of stakeholder participatory groups to be known as Local Access Forums. A prospect offered by participation in Local Access Forums was that of including landowners in the decision-making process since it was to be their property that the public would be able to access under the law.

2 Legislative basis of Local Access Forums

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CROW 2000) required local (access) authorities and national parks to form Local Access Forums (LAFs) that would advise them upon the implementation of the law. Guidance for LAFs was limited at this stage but a number of constraints upon them were evident. They were required to achieve 'balanced' membership of each LAF and aim for consensual decision-making (Hansard, [9]). Each member was to be appointed for a period of one to three years arranged to ensure the expiry of their terms of appointment would be staggered. Membership should comprise between 10 and 22 persons representative of users, owners and other 'relevant' interests (Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 [8]). The Chair and Vice Chair persons should be selected by members and should represent different interests to each other. At least two meetings were to be held each year and they should be open to the public (Defra, [10]). A further constraint became apparent as questions from LAFs about funding drew the response from national government that no additional funds were available for improvements to access.

Government commissioned surveys were carried out in 2005 in order to report on the progress of LAFs in their first two years, as there was no automatic reporting mechanism in place. The 2005 report indicated a number of issues

that concerned members and organisers of LAFs (access authorities). Issues highlighted included:

- many LAFs feel “uncertainty over the role they (LAF) have to play” (Short et al, [11])
- “In some areas it seems that the side effect of the statutory basis for forming LAFs is a response by the AA to undertake the ‘bare minimum’.” (Short et al, [11])
- there is a “perceived lack of resources (staff resources to run the LAF and financial resources to implement work ...)” (Short et al, [11])
- “a significant number from each survey feel that the AA (access authorities) do not take account of the advice and recommendations received from the LAF” (Short et al, [11])
- “Good leadership from the Chair is essential for a successful LAF. However, whilst all LAFs recognised this most selected the Chair from the existing members and then ‘hoped for the best’.” (Short et al, [11])

Following on from this report the government issued revised guidance to the LAFs in 2007 – four years after the initial formation of the forums. However the revised guidance remained vague in its requirements from the LAF membership, for example:

“3.4 Influencing decision-makers

3.4.1 In giving advice, forums should aim to influence section 94(4) bodies and thereby contribute effectively to the quality and robustness of decision-making. Influence will be enhanced where a forum provides independent, constructive, relevant, inclusive, incisive and informed advice which takes account of a broad range and balance of local interests and which assists section 94(4) bodies in carrying out their functions. Forums should consider other ways to maximise the usefulness (and therefore impact) of their advice. For example, advice should be delivered at the optimum point in the decision-making cycle and in ways which recognise and take account of the decision-maker’s needs, objectives, constraints and role.” (Defra, [12])

The lack of specificity in the initial guidance meant that access authorities were able to interpret and implement the law with a certain amount of flexibility. In some cases this was perceived as an opportunity to perform the ‘bare minimum’ by the access authority. However in the selected case study this flexibility was taken as an opportunity to enhance the provision of rural access and improve its competitive position amongst facilities supported by the local authority. This case study’s efforts to redress the perceived failings of its LAF are examined for their contribution towards arriving at a version of ‘best practice’ that satisfies the requirements of the members, the access authorities and the government’s guidance to LAFs.

3 Summary of Case Study

The case study discussed here was researched as part of a wider project that included four Local Access Forums between July 2004 and July 2006. Five

meetings were observed in each of the LAFs and in this case study in-depth interviews were carried out with nine members and both access officers. In addition conversations took place with three members of the public at forum meetings. The district affected by this Local Access Forum (LAF) is a county that offers recreational access to the countryside and also to the coast. The LAF advises the county council whose main responsibility is to the local community and so the council is responsible for prioritising the distribution of funding amongst the various services they provide. A primary resource for access to the countryside in England is the Rights of Way (ROWs) network. Since this network is maintained by the Highways Department in this environment, the officers responsible for ROWs experience competition from their colleagues in the Highways Department as they try to gain a significant portion of funding for their projects. Part of the task undertaken by LAFs is the formation of a plan identifying improvements to ROWs recognising current needs of recreational users of the countryside.

Prior to this research being carried out, the Local Access Forum had already experienced low attendance at meetings to the extent that they could not achieve a quorum and so were unable to function. A new access officer had been employed with the specific intention of revitalizing the forum. The meeting at which he was introduced to the members was also the first meeting to be observed for this study in July 2004. Over the period of data collection he repeatedly stated that he required feedback from the forum but it was notable that it took two years before the members participated in an energetic way. Over the greater part of the data collection period, decision-making in this forum focused on administrative matters. Uncertainty over the role of the LAF led this forum to ask the Countryside Agency for advice on what was expected from LAFs, during the November 2004 meeting.

The Local Access Forum held five meetings each year that were open to the public. One access officer was responsible for the Local Access Forum and he attended all meetings – usually accompanied by his direct superior. Both of these access officers appeared to have had a clear idea of what they wanted to achieve from CROW 2000 and the LAF. Their enthusiasm for CROW 2000 was clear and their vision of increasing the funding available for maintenance and joining up the network was a priority in their implementation of the legislation. In effect the access officers provided the guidance for the LAF's role that was not present in the legislation. In the early meetings it was noticeable that the access officers were doing most of the talking and delivering information to the members. Important issues to them appeared to be assessment of the driving forces behind the legislation and then including their personal aims within that agenda. Despite misgivings regarding the opportunities missed by the legislation, the officers' overall opinions favoured the improvement of access for the public.

The problems relating to funding of improvements to ROWs was raised at the meeting held in June 2005 and a member noted that it was 'leading people astray asking them what they want, knowing there is no money!'. This constraint affected the outcomes of decision-making. Consequently the element of

competition with the Highways Department to get more funding was one of the most constantly revisited aspects in meetings. The access officers explicitly recommended that the forum should try to gain increased funding for Rights of Way. This perspective was expressed in the meeting held in September 2004, as the following excerpt shows:

‘Access officer B: Funding goes to highways mainly and ROWs need to get in there as they are part of the highways network and should have funds for basic maintenance as it should be the same in principle. The LAF needs to persuade government that their ROWs should be eligible for some of that funding.’

It appears that the external constraint placed upon the forum through restricted financial resources was contested by the access officers who were not members of the forum. Although they were receiving advice from the LAF rather than forming part of it, they allied themselves with the aims of the forum members and rather than undertaking the ‘bare minimum’ required by the legislation the access officers actively engaged with the LAF.

Most membership interviewees had joined to see access improved, either from the viewpoint of their own interest group or in general and safety terms. Landowners tended to join to ‘ensure that the farm and landowning community had a spokesman’. The majority of members did not meet outside of meetings, but the number of meetings was increased by the access officer so that delays were reduced when consultations were received from national government. Those members that met outside were people who had jobs that brought them into contact.

In general, the work of the forum was viewed as slow starting by members. During the period of data collection members were usually diffident in their behaviour at meetings, whereas in interview they were forthcoming. This lack of engagement with the issues appears to have been internally imposed during the first eighteen months of data collection. A number of members did not speak at all during the meetings of that period and there were frequent references to time-keeping in meetings. The meeting held in November 2004 was only just quorate but during the evening two of the members did not speak at all, effectively reducing even further the number of people in the participation process. The observation notes from September 2004 indicate another example of this disinterest:

‘Item 8b. Another member spoke for the first time about farming (3 people still have not spoken at all 5.40pm. - Thirteen members present in total. Meeting began 4pm.)

Item 8c Chair: ‘must move on, time is pressing’.

However in the observation notes of the same meeting an access officer had explicitly requested active participation from members:

‘Item 8a. Access Officer A says he needs full and frank viewpoints of forum – he wants them to challenge him in what he does.’

Nonetheless at this stage members did *not* challenge the access officers and this may have reflected either support of their actions or lack of engagement with the process.

Throughout the period of data collection this forum took part in more field trips than observed in other LAFs. This activity appears to require co-operation between the external and internal participants in the process. In this case there were members who were able to provide venues for meetings and field trips. This resulted in members participating in the process of organising meetings and also providing themselves with opportunities for increasing interaction. Meetings always began at 4pm and were often held at different locations that allowed for a two hour field trip for the membership prior to the meeting. Three of the five meetings observed were held in field trip locations. The time spent on these field trips assisted members to become more familiar with each other and this enabled them to become aware of the suitability of potential Chair and Vice Chair persons.

At the final meeting observed, there was a change of Chairperson and the style of discussion was relaxed and finally vociferous in relation to joining up a bridleway that had been dissected by a new road, to ensure safe crossing of the new dual carriageway. The road improvements that had been planned required horse riders to make a long detour to the nearest roundabout in order to continue their ride from one side of the road to the other. This issue was not just championed by the horse riding member, it was strongly supported as a matter of importance by the general membership.

In order to achieve 'balanced' membership, LAFs usually have a single representative from many interest areas. In this LAF the interests of Motor Vehicle users, Disabled users, Horse riders, 'Access for All', Business and Cycling each had only one member to represent them. This can lead to such interests being overwhelmed if the majority of members oppose their access for recreation. For example in this LAF there were several opponents to motorised recreation in the countryside, but generally the members had a broad view of access to the countryside as a resource that they wished to use and improve. They also saw it as a resource that they might lose in the future if it were not tended. Their support of the access officer and his enthusiasm was universal. But he spent a great deal of time in the early stages, encouraging them to actively engage in the process: "We must make a robust Rights Of Way Improvement Plan: it is vitally important and you must hammer me if I have got it wrong" (LAF Meeting in June 2005). None of the interviewees expressed disenchantment with the process or the management of the forum.

As in all other case studies, the LAF meetings spent a high proportion of time on information delivery by access officers. However this forum exposed the fact that the access officer attended all meetings documented for this case study. Research in other LAFs indicated they did not have this level of continuity. Two years after the completion of data collection a follow up interview took place with the access officer in this forum. The purpose was to discover if the findings reflected the continuing experience of participants in the process. The external influences upon the members were clarified by this interviewee. He indicated that the forum members had been 'empowered' to the extent that they could promote the requirements of the county council. In other words 'empowerment' was bestowed upon the LAF members by the county council.

Access officers had been proactive in anticipating the topics that would be raised by national government as well as leaving matters out of agendas if they were considered to be irrelevant to the county. The minutes of that period indicated that members had continued to engage with the process, in contrast to the earlier meetings in which a lack of engagement was observed.

In this follow-up interview it was stated that the forum was portrayed as influential to third parties by the access officers. This was achieved through promptly meeting requests by the members and obtaining assistance from whichever sources that they select. The interviewee was asked whether a decision of the forum had ever been ignored and the response was that it was “not the county council’s right to overturn a LAF’s decision when they did make one.” From the perspective of the county council their relationship with the forum was “less about empowerment than leadership.” Their explicit target was to use the forum to develop the Rights of Way Improvement Plan into a tool that would help the council to raise additional funding. Ultimately it is estimated that this approach led to the rights of way funding having trebled in this county. A final point is that in this forum the annual changeover of one third of members (to comply with ‘staggered’ terms of membership) was found to adversely affect the development of the forum so the access officer removed that requirement.

4 Conclusion

In this LAF the enthusiasm of the access officers was observable and contributed to members’ ultimate engagement with the process. In the early stages members were dependent upon the access officers and followed their direction, but towards the end of the period of data collection members became energised and surprised the officers with their capacity for decision-making. Members finally exhibited independence of the officers and the officers’ role became that of facilitators as they followed the instructions of the forum, rather than the forum ‘rubber stamping’ the predetermined conclusions of the officers. It would be an over simplification to require all access officers to be as committed to the process as those in this case study. However it appears that these access officers approached the LAF as an ‘opportunity’ rather than a burden, leading to the receipt of increased funding.

The process of stakeholder participation has been applied in a distinctive fashion by this LAF. Rather than being employed as a device to reduce conflict between land owners and users, the LAF has been utilised by the access authority to increase their competitiveness when raising funds. This has led to county council officers allying themselves with the forum instead of regarding them simply as a legal obligation. If this occurs with the consent and knowledge of the members then it can be seen as an alternative route to empowerment for the forum. Since members have expressed the desire to ‘make a difference’ then participating in improving access by these means may provide them with the opportunity to achieve that. However it is noted that this did not occur through strictly following the legislation but by expanding on its requirements until a desirable outcome was achieved. Ultimately the LAF has been subject to

external impositions in the same way as other forums, since it was the vision of the county council officers that created an environment in which desirable outcomes would be achievable internally. Because the access authority perceived the existence of the LAF as an opportunity, members were encouraged to become more militant in their demands. This increase in group confidence did not occur immediately and was the result of several strategies. The access authority and the members jointly organised opportunities to become more familiar with each other informally. They became aware of each others' environments through holding meetings at members' places of work and through having informal conversations during long walks on site visits. Consequently members were less competitive towards each others' interests and able to support each other without perceiving a threat to their own interest area.

These findings have implications for the formation of stakeholder groups in governance. When forecasting how groups will function the organisers should assume that individuals may be in competition with each other even if their interest area designation appears to coincide. Also the political 'will' of the organisers is central to the groups' achievement of empowerment.

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