



# Healthy Placemaking in Practice - A Participatory Approach

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# Healthy place-making in practice—a participatory approach

**Sarah Spanton** and **Razieh Zandieh** explain how a participatory approach has helped the community to embrace their role as local experts in the development of a healthy place-making project in Woodhouse Park, Wythenshawe



**Part of the Woodhouse Park area in Wythenshawe, Manchester**

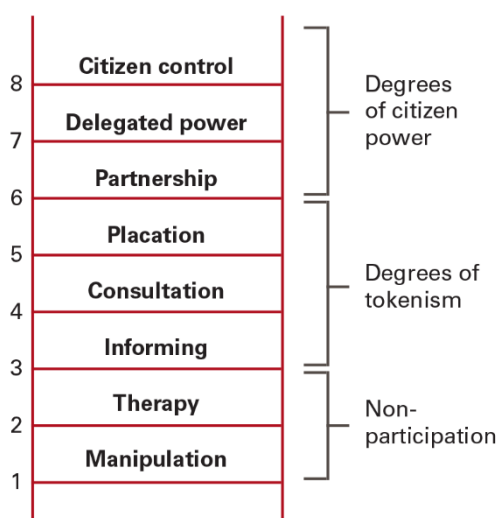
Photo credit: Waymarking C.I.C.

The question of how to improve the health of their citizens is one of the major concerns in our cities. There is now widespread recognition that the urban environment influences people's health, and urban designers and planners are encouraged to create health-supporting places. The TCPA has taken a leading role in healthy place-making since 2012, through its 'Reuniting health with planning' work. However, creating healthy places is not easy and straightforward in practice, and urban designers and planners face significant barriers in the

process—including financial issues and public and stakeholder engagement.<sup>1</sup> Public and stakeholder engagement has been one of the TCPA’s concerns in its healthy places work, and the collaboration between public and private sectors and wider stakeholders has been discussed in its reports.<sup>2</sup>

While the various public and private sector projects in England operate under a common national planning policy, their local physical and social contexts vary, increasing the complexities and challenges of public participation and often leading to tokenistic participatory approaches in healthy place-making work. Although a participatory approach applied in one project is not necessarily applicable in another project, sharing the experiences gained from in a particular location may help other practitioners devise novel participatory strategies for their projects. As previous research has found, sharing case studies is one useful strategy in overcoming barriers to healthy place-making in practice.<sup>3</sup> In addition to providing a brief introduction on public participation, this article presents a participatory approach applied in a healthy place-making project in Woodhouse Park, Wythenshawe, Manchester.

Public participation in urbanism refers to ‘any process in which members of the public are involved in the process of urban change’,<sup>4</sup> and is known as one of the pillars of healthy place-making.<sup>5</sup> It is supported by theory (such as Sherry Arnstein’s ‘ladder of participation’<sup>6</sup> see Fig. 1) and is an integral part of good urban planning.<sup>7</sup> Through this approach, people learn information, provide valuable input, offer solutions, question assumptions related to the project,<sup>8</sup> and share their local knowledge—all of which can immeasurably improve the quality of new development. Through participation in urban projects, they also communicate with their neighbours, strengthening community cohesion and social capital, which are also valuable indicators of health and wellbeing.<sup>8</sup>



**Fig. 1 Sherry Arnstein’s ladder of citizen participation**

Source: S Arnstein: ‘A ladder of citizen participation’<sup>6</sup>

Public participation is also related to community empowerment and is consistent with notions of democracy.<sup>9</sup> It has been considered as ‘the basis for a healthy democracy in which all people have a meaningful voice in shaping the places where they live, work, play and learn’.<sup>8</sup>

Public participation is increasingly viewed as an appropriate approach for reducing health inequalities and improving health among disadvantaged groups.<sup>10</sup> Evidence shows that health inequalities are increasing and that on average the health of people living in more deprived areas is falling.<sup>11</sup> It is very important to hear voices of marginalised social groups and to meet their needs in any new development. Community involvement can result in improving health among disadvantaged populations if the approach is designed properly and implemented through effective community consultation and participation.<sup>12</sup>

It is generally assumed that greater public participation improves the chances of an intervention’s success and sustainability. However, to be effective, public participation should meet some key principles. These principles have been reflected in existing literature and reports. Recently, the TCPA’s *People, Planning and Power* ‘Practical Guide for Creating Successful New Communities’<sup>13</sup> outlines 15 core practical principles that should be considered when developing and implementing an engagement strategy for the development of a new community.

To help in devising novel participatory strategies, this article presents a particular participatory approach applied in the Heart & Soul Woodhouse Park project in North West England, and explains this approach in relation to three of the *People, Planning and Power* guide’s principles:

- o a ***long-term commitment*** involving open and clear communication and participation continuing for the lifetime of the project and beyond, especially ‘in the case of a new community, which, from conception to occupation, could take decades to complete, and will constantly evolve’ (the guide’s ‘principle 6’);
- o ensuring ***capacity-building among participants***, to enable them to understand the planning system and to be able to ‘collaboratively develop workable solutions’ (the guide’s ‘principle 11’); and
- o ***being responsive***, demonstrating actionable and visible results from participation activities so that community members feel they are not wasting their time (the guide’s ‘principle 13’).

This article also discusses the relationship between the applied participatory approach and Arnstein's ladder of participation.

The Heart & Soul Woodhouse Park project was not about a new development, but applied a particular participatory approach to a community-based, healthy place-making programme which took place in 2020-21 in the Woodhouse Park area of Wythenshawe, Manchester. The case study programme was commissioned by MCRactive,<sup>14</sup> and its development and delivery was led by Waymarking CIC.<sup>15</sup> It was part of MCRactive's 'Local Pilot' programme, which takes a 'test and learn' approach to tackling health issues and is about building on the strengths of existing local assets (including people), is committed to co-design processes, and aims to develop innovative partnerships. In this project, community members were recognised as local experts, with valuable knowledge about and experience of their neighbourhood. They undertook a facilitated research-based workshop process to look at what could make Woodhouse Park a healthier neighbourhood.

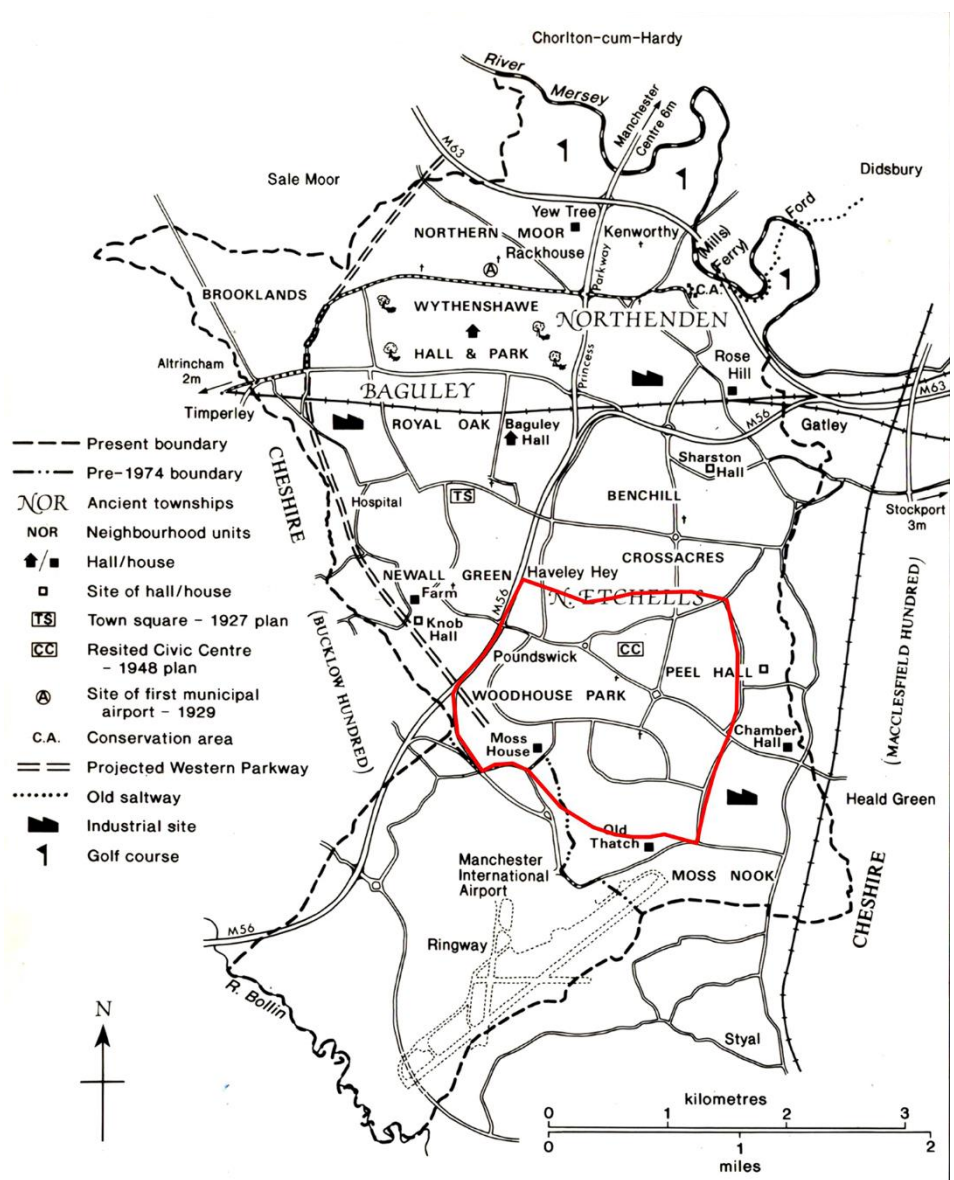
The area covered in the programme was selected to be within walking distance—for the community members taking part—from the civic centre from which the programme ran. The area was around 5 square kilometres in size and included residential areas in the electoral ward of Woodhouse Park, to the south of the civic centre and north of Manchester Airport (which lies in the southern area of the ward), and a small part of a neighbouring ward Sharston (see Fig. 2).

In 2020 the electoral ward of Woodhouse Park had a population of 14,646.<sup>16</sup> Socio-economic inequalities are evident across Woodhouse Park. In February 2022, 63.5% of the population were of working age and 48.5% of this working population were claiming benefits,<sup>16</sup> the highest level in all the wards across Manchester. Moreover, based on Index of Multiple Deprivation data (2019), a large part of the area is among the 10% most deprived neighbourhoods in the country.<sup>17</sup>

The Woodhouse Park neighbourhood was built after the Second World War, with work beginning in 1946.<sup>18</sup> It is the southernmost residential area of Wythenshawe, which is Manchester's Garden City/Suburb style development. Wythenshawe's development began in the 1930s and continued into the early 1970s. The homes built there are described as utilitarian,<sup>19</sup> and there was a lack of community infrastructure and facilities such as shops—for example, the civic centre did not open until 1963 (commenced in 1962<sup>18</sup>). Residents experienced a lack of local employment and poor connectivity to surrounding areas for many years.<sup>20</sup>

Wythenshawe is as a whole considered by some to be the most comprehensive 'most comprehensive municipal undertaking on garden city principles'<sup>19</sup>. However, it is not considered to have achieved Barry Parker's original vision (dating from 1928) as a fully fledged

Garden City, following Garden City principles in order to achieve all the requisite health benefits for residents.



**Fig. 2 Wythenshawe and, within the red border, the Heart & Soul project area,** Base map taken from D Deakin (Ed.): Wythenshawe: The Story of a Garden City. Phillimore, 1989

Waymarking CIC developed and delivered the project using a participatory facilitation method which takes an approach prioritising:

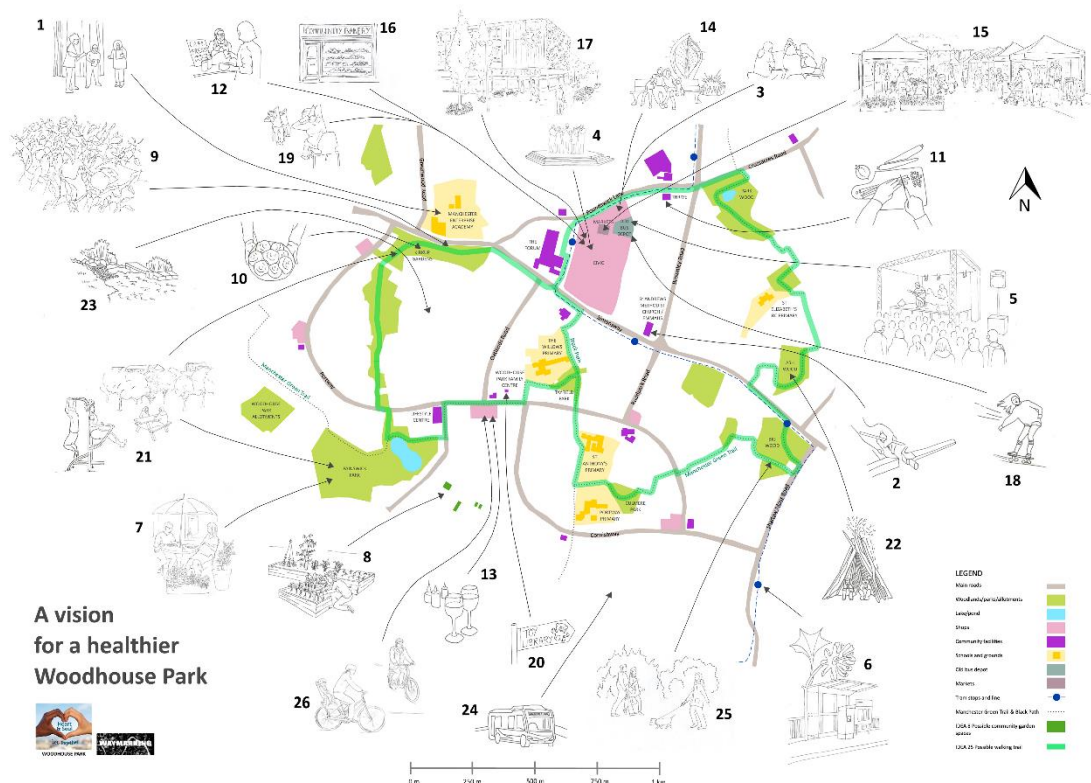
- o community members being recognised as local experts in their neighbourhood;
- o capacity-building;
- o supporting participants in listening to each other—leading to them finding common ground, meaning, and purpose;
- o using accessible language; and
- o the collective and equitable discovery of solutions.

The approach aims to develop agency among participants to enable them to lead on taking practical action together.

A Healthier Neighbourhood Framework, developed by Waymarking, was used to structure workshops, which enabled community members to undertake focused discussion on healthy places and take part in research activities organised in eight themed groups: community; beauty and design; nature and environment; healthy food; high street and jobs; play and fitness; ease of movement; and connectedness.

The framework has been devised by distilling the essence out of a range of research and reporting from a cross-section of fields, including the planning, urban design, place-making, community development, health, environment, economics, food, sport, play, and sustainable transport sectors. In particular, the framework makes key urban design concepts comprehensible to community members. This supports the *People, Planning and Power* guide's 'principle 11' on capacity-building in relation to the planning system, so that community members are able to work collaboratively to develop practical healthy place-making actions, with the resulting research findings and recommendations valuable to both community members and place-making professionals.

In June 2021 the Heart & Soul Woodhouse Park process began with participants undertaking conversations to find common understandings on each of the themes, and then gathering evidence for the research by going on local walks and answering theme-focused questions in situ. They were then helped to collectively analyse the evidence. They devised solutions to issues that they had identified in each theme area, by building on known positive assets. Finally, they generated 72 ideas to make Woodhouse Park a healthier neighbourhood. An illustrated 'Vision Map' was produced by Waymarking, presenting a final 26 condensed place-based ideas (see Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3 Vision Map produced under the Heart & Soul Woodhouse Park process**

Image credit: Waymarking C.I.C.

This community-based healthy place-making programme re-introduced the TCPA’s *People, Planning and Power’s* ‘principle 6’ to the Woodhouse Park neighbourhood, by embedding listening closely to community members in the approach taken (in recognition of their role as local experts) and encouraging a culture of listening to each other, so as to develop open and clear communication between all stakeholders. This approach enables community members to be part of the evolution of Woodhouse Park, nearly 80 years on from its first development, developing agency to revisit healthy place-making from a community-led perspective.

The majority of the 26 ideas to make Woodhouse Park a healthier place were land and building based, focusing on green space, the temporary or permanent use of empty buildings, active travel and connectivity, sustainability, the local economy and social business development, and uses of public space. Examples include community-led regeneration of a local park, a walking and running trail, a community bike-hire club, re-purposing vacant civic centre units to social enterprise use, and enhancing the civic centre green space. In September 2021, a core group of eight participants formed the Heart & Soul Community Research Team, sharing the ‘Vision Map’ and gathering feedback in public spaces from 150 local residents and holding a celebratory community event in October 2021.



In relation to Arnstein’s participatory ladder,<sup>6</sup> in order to enhance participant agency in community-led healthy place-making the case study facilitation approach aims to blend the top three ‘citizen power’ rungs of the ladder: partnership (step 6), where community members have direct involvement in decision-making; delegated power (step 7), where community members work with facilitators and other stakeholders to identify priorities and resources for change; and citizen control (step 8), where community members have an idea and set up a project themselves. This led to the Community Research Team continuing to be part of a further workshop programme in 2022, taking one of the vision ideas—the walking and running trail—and setting up a permanent 8.4 kilometre (5 mile) Wellbeing Walking Trail in Woodhouse Park.<sup>21</sup>

In 2021 feedback from participants revealed that they felt they had been given a voice, been valued, and been part of a meaningful process:

*‘Being a resident I have identified several things lacking in the area and surrounding areas; and felt heard and valued’;*

*‘... new ideas on how my community could be healthier’; and*

*‘I’ve learnt the process it takes to make projects come to life’.*

Such feedback demonstrates *People, Planning and Power’s* ‘principle 13’ in action: the participatory process has produced actionable, practical and visible results, thus ensuring that participants have not felt that they had been wasting their time. Heart & Soul Woodhouse Park has seen participants embrace their role as local experts, learn participatory research techniques, enthusiastically collect valuable evidence, and equitably devise healthy place-based solutions.



**Some of the participants in a Heart & Soul workshop**

Photo credit: Waymarking C.I.C.

In conclusion, an in-depth participatory method was applied in the Heart & Soul Woodhouse Park project, with a view to supporting planning practitioners in considering ways to overcome barriers to engaging community members in healthy place-making. The approach applied in this project enabled participants to engage deeply and be actively involved in a healthy place-making process of urban change. Participants have felt empowered and have taken a lead in researching how to make Woodhouse Park a healthier place in which to live and work—as is evident in their feedback on the process. They are now beginning to take forward land- and building-based actions in partnership with local organisations, influencing and shaping the continued evolution of Woodhouse Park into a healthier neighbourhood.

o **Sarah Spanton** is Director of Waymarking CIC, which supports local residents, organisations and businesses in undertaking community-led planning and regeneration in their neighbourhoods. **Dr Razieh Zandieh** is a Lecturer in Urban Design and Planning at the University of Manchester (<https://research.manchester.ac.uk/en/persons/raziieh.zandieh>). The views expressed are personal.

## Notes

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2 Reports produced under the TCPA's 'Reuniting Health with Planning' project are available at

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- 14 See ‘Local pilot in Manchester’. Webpage. MCRactive. [www.mcractive.com/activity/local-pilot-in-manchester](http://www.mcractive.com/activity/local-pilot-in-manchester)
- 15 See the Waymarking CIC website, at [www.waymarking.org.uk/about](http://www.waymarking.org.uk/about)
- 16 See Manchester City Council’s Area Profile Intelligence Hub (Manchester Statistics) (using Ordnance Survey and Office for National Statistics data), at [www.manchester.gov.uk/info/200088/statistics\\_and\\_intelligence/7611/intelligence\\_hub](http://www.manchester.gov.uk/info/200088/statistics_and_intelligence/7611/intelligence_hub)
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[www.mcractive.com/news/heartandsoul](http://www.mcractive.com/news/heartandsoul)