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Building Sustainable Networks: A Study of Public Participation and Social Capital

NICK BAILEY AND DEBORAH PEEL

Introduction

This chapter takes the Government's (1998a) White Paper *Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People* as its starting point and draws on the theoretical literature relating to social capital and public participation. It describes the development and delivery of a public consultation strategy instigated by Brighton and Hove Council as part of the preparation of its pre-deposit draft local development plan. It evaluates the experiences of participants involved in a number of linked participation processes to do with strategic planning issues. The objective is to investigate the links between a number of current themes which contribute to the 'democratic renewal' and 'active citizenship' debates by focusing on town planning and urban regeneration. The research was prompted by a series of questions:

- Are there ways of targeting and encouraging non-joiners to participate?
- At the local level, is it just a small proportion of individuals who are actively involved in voluntary and community organisations – the 'usual suspects'?
- Is it possible to encourage and to sustain involvement?
- Are members of local organisations likely to widen their interest in community activities and local democracy on the basis of positive experiences of participation?
- Is there any evidence that the newer methods of community participation are likely to lead to greater community involvement and democratic renewal?

In this chapter we distinguish between the 'narrow' issues of the effectiveness of methods of participation, as well as the 'wider' issues of whether involvement in some local networks and organisations necessarily leads to a greater commitment to, and involvement in, local democratic

processes. In doing so, we consider both individual and collective aspects of citizen involvement.

The chapter is divided into three sections. We begin by briefly reviewing some of the terminology currently dominating social policy. We then report the findings from our case study of Brighton and Hove. The final section sets out some thoughts on lessons learned and good practice.

Theoretical Overview: Social Capital and Community Capacity Building; Public Participation and Democratic Renewal

Social Capital and Community Capacity Building

Set up in 1992 by the late John Smith, the Commission on Social Justice reported its strategies for national review in 1994. Amongst its recommendations was that of 'Responsibility: Making a Good Society'.

A good society depends not just on the economic success of the individual, but the 'social capital' of the community' (Commission on Social Justice, 1994, p.10).

The Commission on Social Justice quotes Putnam, who describes social capital as the 'networks, norms and trust that facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit' and continues that it:

consists of the institutions and relationships of a thriving civil society - from networks of neighbours to extended families, community groups to religious organisations, local businesses to local public services, youth clubs to parent-teacher associations, playgroups to police on the beat (*ibid*, pp. 307-308).

Bottom-up regeneration, building strong communities and reviving local democracy are also key themes of the Report and are closely intertwined. 'Community capacity building', linking economic, physical and social capital, now underpins the Government's urban regeneration programmes. It is 'a process for empowering a community - and all the stakeholders in that community - to plan effectively for its own future' (LRN/PLCRC, 1999). 'It can be thought of as comprising a mix of skills, knowledge, resources, power and influence' (DoE, 1995, p. 128). Thake (1999) has described how the waft and weft of civil society have been worn away as recognised institutions of the nation state, such as the trade unions, have been undermined or people simply move away from neighbourhoods. He warns, however, against the patronising colonialist mindset inherent in the notion of capacity-building and which assumes a deficit model, and,

instead, advocates capacity-building for growth, based upon an understanding and recognition of resources. He argues for trust between individuals and groups and for there to be an acknowledgment of the fact that capacity-building is not a one-way street, with reverse capacity building of institutional players also required. At the heart of stakeholder engagement is thus a learning process: learning about the views and skills of local communities, listening to the needs of local people and finding ways of jointly meeting these needs. Increasingly, it is the various arena for learning which have become the focus for attention.

Social capital is about the strength of communities and their ability to make a difference to the lives of their members. At the heart of the ability to make a difference, the ability to shape the course of one's own life, is the issue of democracy (Commission on Social Justice, 1994, p.350).

Social capital can, therefore, be seen as being of crucial importance in providing a foundation for participation and effective local democracy, linking community associations, private business and public agencies. How far do ideas of social capital relate to the functions of local government and public policy making? Are we talking in terms of 'active communities' or looser networks of active organisations and individuals?

Public Participation and Democratic Renewal

Turnout at local elections has fallen to 40 percent, or sometimes less. Since their election in May 1997, modernising local government, devolving political power and reducing the democratic deficit have been high on the current Labour Government's agenda. The objective is to tackle the old culture of paternalistic provision of services; the risk of corruption and wrong-doing by inward-looking administrations; and the associated indifference of communities to democratic processes. The aim is to overcome apathy and encourage 'active citizenship', to have 'local people taking a lively interest in their council and its affairs' (DETR, 1999: para 1.21). It is a two-way street: modern local government is to be 'in touch with the people' and local people are to have a 'bigger say':

...modern councils fit for the 21st century are built on a culture of openness and ready accountability. They have clear and effective political leadership, to catch and retain local people's interest and ensure local accountability. Public participation in debate and decision making is valued with strategies in place to inform and engage local opinion (DETR, 1999, para 1.2).

Leach and Wingfield (1999) summarise the four key elements of the democratic renewal programme within the White Paper as:

- A set of proposals focused on improving turnout in local elections;
- A commitment and proposed legislative framework for facilitating community leadership;
- A set of proposals for transforming the internal political management structures and processes of local authorities (centred on the idea of an executive/assembly split); and, importantly for this discussion,
- Guidelines aimed at developing opportunities for citizens to participate in local government.

They state that whilst ‘the public participation proposals are so far the least prescriptive of the elements in the government’s modernisation programme [...] they are arguably the most fundamental’ (1999, p. 46). The Government wishes to see ‘consultation and participation embedded into the culture of all councils [...] Every Council will have to decide which methods are the most appropriate in their own particular circumstances’ (DETR, 1998a, paras 4.6 and 4.7).

It is beyond the remit of this paper to review public participation in planning. This has been done at length elsewhere (see, for example, Arnstein, 1969; Thornley, 1977; Thomas, 1996; Stewart, 1996). Suffice it to say, that there is a burgeoning literature on more direct, deliberative and innovative arrangements for public participation, offering practical guidance and/or developing new theoretical perspectives (Healey, 1997; DETR, 1998; Sanderson, 1999; Wates, 2000). In its evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of alternative methods for consultation of development plans, the University of Westminster reviewed a diverse range of options: newspapers; press releases; newspaper advertisements; council leaflets; posters; radio; exhibitions; public meetings; surveys; focus groups; citizens’ juries; Planning for Real and visioning (Brighton and Hove Council, 1998, pp. 4-5). Since then, the DETR has published *Planning Policy Guidance Note 12: Development Plans* (1999) (PPG12) which came into effect in January 2000 and which formalises pre-inquiry procedures and is intended to speed up the plan-making process. In terms of pre-deposit consultation, PPG12 states:

Local people and other interested bodies should have the opportunity to express their views on plan proposals before those proposals are finalised. The aim should be to encourage local people to participate actively in the preparation of plans from the earliest stages so that they can be fully involved in decisions about the pattern of development in their area. Consultation with

the general public, community groups, conservation and amenity groups, business, development and infrastructure interests helps local planning authorities secure a degree of consensus over the future development and use of land in their area (DETR, 1999, para. 2.10).

With regard to the form that consultation should take, PPG12 does not specify how pre-deposit consultation should be undertaken by local authorities, but does require them to explain how their proposals and mechanisms established for comment are 'sufficient to encourage all sectors of the community to be involved'. Where full replacement plans are concerned, they should:

aim to consult with a range of key organisations and business interests on the strategic principles that will ultimately underpin the policies in the structure plan. But different forms of consultation may be needed for the public at large (DETR, 1999, para. 2.13).

It is the public at large with whom we are concerned here.

Although the revised PPG12 was published after the adoption of the Consultation Strategy adopted by Brighton and Hove Council, it was in draft form at the time and reinforces the approach taken. In the wider sense, however, to what extent does public participation assist democratic renewal? The next section sets out our case study findings.

Case Study: Public Participation in Brighton and Hove

In April 1997 a new unitary authority was created by amalgamating the adjoining towns of Brighton and Hove into a single tier council. Considerable rationalisation was required to amalgamate the two councils, as well as incorporating those services previously provided by East Sussex County Council. One of the first decisions taken by the new Council's Land Use and Transportation Sub-Committee was to prepare a new Local Plan while ensuring that the views of the local community were fully taken into account. Rather than simply consult on the basis of a draft plan, the Council determined first to seek the input of residents in drawing up the pre-deposit policies. In April 1998 a team from the University of Westminster was commissioned to prepare a consultation strategy and, on the basis of extensive interviews with key stakeholders, to recommend a range of methods of consultation to ensure that the full range of public opinion was taken into account. The University team was retained to

monitor and observe the consultation process and to carry out a final evaluation of community involvement.

We do not discuss our evaluation of the Strategy as a whole, but instead, describe the consultation process and methods used to involve local citizens and then evaluate this by focusing on the views of the various participants, based on written sources and a series of interviews with Council officers, councillors and members of the community. This forms the basis for our conclusions about the advantages and disadvantages of the different methods employed and the wider implications for enhancing social capital and promoting democratic renewal.

The Consultation Strategy

In preparing the Consultation Strategy, the University team was aware of the Council's commitment while a shadow authority to 'listen to, identify and respond to local needs' and that the first of the Council's seven *Values* was 'putting people first'. This included the Council's commitment to be responsive 'to people's needs, giving them information and access to decision making'. The team was also aware that, within its Community Planning initiative, the Council had identified the twin goals of engaging the community in the democratic process and working with local people to set priorities. In addition, both Council members and the Planning Policy Team, based in the Environmental Services Department, were fully committed to ensuring that all sections of the community should be encouraged to participate.

The team carried out an extensive literature review of the wide range of consultation methods currently in use in the UK. They were also aware that the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) was carrying out a review of development plan procedures and, as part of the review of PPG12, was committed to 'promote shorter, clearer plans and better targeted consultation'. The preparatory stages also included a series of interviews with key officers in different Council departments in order to identify what other consultation initiatives had been completed or were anticipated, and which groups and organisations were used for consultation purposes.

In summary, the following stages were specified in the Strategy:

- Identify and analyse examples of good practice in public consultation elsewhere, relevant to the Brighton and Hove context. Briefly review alternative methods and techniques of public consultation;

- Identify relevant public, private and community sector interests which should be encouraged to participate. In particular, review the social, community and sectoral interest groups which do not normally comment on planning matters;
- Discuss with key officers their perceptions of the purpose, expectations and likely format of the Local Plan, as well as the contribution they see public consultation making;
- Prepare a strategy for public consultation; and
- Monitor the public consultation process, provide additional advice where appropriate, and submit a final report to committee with an assessment of methodologies and outcomes (Brighton and Hove Council, 1998, p. 3).

The team identified the criteria for selecting methods of consultation as:

- Involve the widest possible range of community, business and voluntary sector interests currently represented in Brighton and Hove;
- Make contact with sections of the population which do not normally get involved in planning issues;
- Promote a non-confrontational dialogue between individuals and interests; and
- Clearly structure meetings and events so that participants are fully briefed on their purpose and are kept informed of the outcomes and subsequent stages.

The outcome was that the team recommended the use of a series of participation methods, the two primary methods being focus groups and community visioning workshops. The Consultation Strategy was adopted in full in April 1998 and a series of consultation events was held between October 1998 and January 1999. Table 9.1, below, summarises some of the main organisational aspects of the focus groups.

Table 9.1 Organisational Aspects of the Focus Groups

Composition	Between 6 and 12 members took part each attending two separate sessions. In total, 64 organisations were represented.
Selection process	Members were selected by the facilitators and the Planning Policy Team from businesses, developers, representative organisations and associations. All meetings were attended by a Planning Officer.
Topics for discussion	7 topics were selected from the SERPLAN draft policy document <i>A Sustainable Development Strategy for the South East</i> considered appropriate to Brighton and Hove: housing; sport, recreation, leisure, tourism and the arts; higher density and mixed use development; retail and town centres; sustainable development; wildlife; and employment.
Facilitation	Chris Blandford Associates, planning consultants from East Sussex.
Briefing	All members were sent briefing material on the topic and purpose of the event in advance.
Feedback	All participants were asked to complete a feedback form.

Source: Brighton and Hove Council, 'Focus Groups', (1999a)

One advantage of focus groups is that discussion can be guided to key questions which can be introduced in briefing material. Moreover, it is often easier to achieve a consensus between a small number of participants, whilst the facilitator can ensure all have a fair hearing. Interaction between different interests can lead to innovative proposals and, where members gel, the focus group can become sustainable. Nevertheless, there are disadvantages. Much depends on the quality of facilitation and discussion can become too wide-ranging or be 'highjacked' by forceful individuals; indeed, some participants may feel excluded. It is sometimes difficult to maintain the focus, for example, on planning issues, rather than a wider agenda. Notwithstanding careful planning, absence or non-attendance can bias outcomes (Brighton and Hove Council, 1998).

In this particular case, the facilitator's comments are of particular interest because they highlight the learning which is an inherent part of such deliberative participatory practices (Forester, 1999). Facilitated dialogue can bring new understanding:

One positive outcome of the focus groups is that the discussions seem to have enhanced understanding between different parties. In some cases participants

have been pleasantly surprised by the level of agreement between 'opposing' interest groups. Moreover, in many cases participants were able to contribute and air views on a much broader range of issues than they had originally thought (Brighton and Hove Council, 1999a, p.5).

Moreover, in the facilitator's view, new social relationships had indeed been formed through the process:

Particularly encouraging was the way in which the focus groups opened up opportunities for communication between participants, and it appeared that this 'networking' would continue even after the meetings had finished (*ibid*, p.6).

The second primary method used in the Strategy were community visioning workshops. These aimed to assist in establishing:

- a context and vision for the local plan;
- a set of objectives for the local plan;

and to inform:

- the preparation of land-use policies;
- the preparation of site specific land-use proposals (Brighton and Hove Council, 1999b, p.5).

The role of the facilitator is to guide the discussion and focus on key issues.

The advantages of this particular consultation method are that people with similar ages, interests and outlooks can discuss their preferences and priorities in small groups which can stimulate everyone to contribute and generate confidence in expressing opinions. Moreover, small groups can give the impression that individuals are privileged in being invited and can thus feel valued. Forester (1999) suggests that such public participation is a way to re-create social identities. An organisational advantage is that participants can be selected to be representative of a sector of the total population. Yet, as with the focus group approach, there are disadvantages. There are no guarantees in practice that views will be representative and, again, small groups can be influenced by forceful individuals. Moreover, some may resent being grouped with others in the same category, for example, pensioners. Some groups, such as non-English speakers, may be hard to contact and involve. This can often be a major obstacle and, as the facilitator pointed out, although it seemed to be a very valuable process, under-representation of some sections of the population limited the effectiveness of some of the workshops. The main organisational aspects,

such as the composition of the workshops and topics for discussion, are summarised in Table 9.2 below.

Table 9.2 Organisational Aspects of the Community Visioning

Composition	<p>8 workshops:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. a random sample of 17 selected from voluntary and community organisations. 2. A random sample of 10. 3. 12 older people. 4. 6 people with disabilities. 5. 4 people on low incomes. 6. 10 members of gay/lesbian organisations. 7. 5 women. 8. 5 members of black/ethnic minorities. <p>1 follow-up feedback event involving 12 of the above.</p>
Selection process	Participants were selected by the Council's Performance, Quality and Accountability Team. Contacts were made by letter and an advertisement in the local gay press.
Topics for discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'The best thing about where I live' • Priorities for the next 10 years. • Discussion • What the Council should do • Next steps for participants
Facilitation	Projects in Partnership Ltd., community facilitation specialists.
Briefing	None
Feedback	<p>Feedback forms were circulated after each session. All participants were invited to a follow-up feedback session and received a written report on the focus groups.</p> <p>Of those attending, 2 gave the session 10 out of 10; 5 gave it 8 out of 10; 4 gave it 7 out of 10. 10 each said they thought the Council was listening to individual views and the results of the workshops. Some wanted to mix different social interests groups in workshops, rather than separating them.</p>

Source: Brighton and Hove Council, 'Community Visioning Workshop Reports', (1999b).

In addition, a number of other methods were used to raise the profile of the consultation process and to seek maximum public involvement:

- A two-page insert was included in the Council's own newspaper, the *Brighton and Hove News*, which is delivered to 125,000 homes. This

resulted in 303 respondents suggesting 645 issues to be included in the Local Plan.

- One-to-one meetings were held between the Planning Policy Team and local institutions and organisations, such as the University of Sussex, Friends of the Earth and the Planning for Business Group.
- In November and December 1998 five urban design visioning workshops were held in three different neighbourhood centres. In addition, one was open to all residents and one open to architects practising in Brighton and Hove.
- A Schools event was organised in the Cardinal Newman School to encourage pupils to reflect on their likes and dislikes in the local environment and to set out their vision for the future.

A further proposal in the Consultative Strategy was that an Advisory Group should be established, composed of members of local organisations with an interest in planning. Members were drawn from disability and pensioners' groups, housing organisations, an amenity society and a local architect. This was chaired by the Chair of the Land Use and Transportation Sub-Committee with the objective of meeting four times a year in order to oversee and advise on the consultation process.

The outcome of the process was that the Planning Policy Team drew up a draft set of 'pre-deposit policies' which were themselves the subject of further consultation. The next stage was the draft plan which was then put on deposit. This constitutes the formal opportunity for residents and others to submit objections or observations on the plan before the Local Plan Inquiry.

Evaluating the Consultation Process

We do not have the space here to evaluate fully the effectiveness of the whole Consultation Strategy but, instead, simply report on our findings from a series of interviews we carried out several months after the participatory exercises. Our focus is the public. We record three perspectives: those of a member of the Land Use and Transportation Sub-Committee; a planning officer; and the feedback from the citizen participants at the visioning workshops.

The Councillor's View

The Councillor who was interviewed was the lead Councillor for the Local Plan and Chair of the Local Plan Task Group. He has been heavily involved in local politics for a number of years. He took over responsibilities for the local plan in May 1999 so was not involved in approving the Consultation Strategy or the selection of methods of participation.

His general view was that the approach adopted had been successful:

I think it was a different way of doing things and a very successful exercise. I think it's a difficult subject to get people interested in and, unless you are able to say to ordinary people that you may get a supermarket at the end of your road, the Local Plan remains very abstract. This way you get small groups of the community together and say, "This is what we want to do - so what do you think?" and it all works very well.

The most important stage is coming up when it [the local plan] goes on deposit. Despite having done all this consultation, we will get accused of not having consulted and haven't listened and that will happen even though we have the evidence that we have. In a way, the consultation will count for nothing when the plan goes on deposit because it may include controversial things, such as a community stadium [for Brighton and Hove Albion football team] at Falmer and a park and ride scheme. These issues are hot topics around the town and pressure groups will latch onto them, even though some of them have already been consulted.

An important part of the Strategy was designed to encourage the Council to operate corporately and to share information arising from public consultation. It was recognised that, in the past, consultation exercises had not always been very successful.

My view is that different bits of the Council do not share information around as they should, sometimes even within departments. We had a bad experience consulting over a new parking scheme in the town centre. We're very keen to consult, but sometimes we make a mess of it, but then I think at least we're trying.

While supporting the idea of involving a wide range of community interests in the planning process, the Councillor felt that in the end tough political decisions are needed.

To be totally hard nosed about it, I think when it comes to the crunch there are going to be some issues where there's no consensus so judgements will need to be made based on professional advice. There are still going to be some

difficult decisions on key issues and I guess some of these will be political to the extent that there will be different views. On the other hand, officers are trying very hard to justify everything in the plan on the basis of the consultation.

The Officer's View

A leading officer in the Planning Policy Team was interviewed about the consultation process and the likely outcomes. His view was that the process had been successful in that a wide range of people had been involved. Whilst dramatic policy changes were unlikely to arise, significant suggestions had been made which would improve the quality of the plan and make it more sensitive to local needs. The results of the focus groups and community visioning exercise would also add weight to the Council's case at the Local Plan Public Inquiry.

I can't honestly say there is a whole raft of policies which has come from the visioning, but I can say they [the public] have informed a large number of policies by the addition or deletion of what we were originally thinking. A good example is care homes, since we realised through community visioning that there is a growing demand for care homes from members of the gay and lesbian communities. They often feel extremely isolated going into 'mainstream' homes. The policy will specifically address this issue.

The consultation exercise also produced evidence of how different groups identify often conflicting priorities.

The other thing which gives the vision strength is the different priorities which different groups attach to things and the contrast between the random sample and the priorities of other groups. With employment space and things like that, you get big differences between what was said by the unemployed, black and ethnic minority groups about the need for jobs and the views of the random sample and those returning leaflets with their comments.

This will strengthen our hand at the Inquiry. We can say in qualitative terms that we got this feedback and we went to this group and they said this was a real priority for them.

On the consultation process, while every attempt was made to include those not normally involved, it appears that with the second meeting on 14 December 1999, only the keener participants attended.

Most of the community visioning people have felt minded to come to the two sessions but they are going to be among the keener ones. If there'd been more

time, we would have liked to explore why some didn't come to the second meeting, on 14 December. We also need to find out why we've not been successful in getting enough people on low incomes and from black and ethnic minorities. With some groups it's been a real struggle to find people – some just got lost on the way. There was an open invitation to the meeting on 14 December but the turnout was low. It may be that many were satisfied with the letter and report on the first meeting.

The Participants' Views

The views of the participants of the community visioning and focus groups have been assessed through interviews and a review of the feedback submitted after the final visioning meeting on 14 December. The outcomes, from the participants' perspectives, can be summarised as follows:

The Process

Overall, the majority of participants welcomed the process and felt 'privileged' to be invited:

Thank you for offering me the opportunity to put forward my ideas.

While not always fully aware of the purpose of a Local Plan, they welcomed the opportunity to express opinions and felt they were genuinely being consulted:

I do really believe in what's going on and I do think it's really important that the Local Plan is coming from the local community. Before it was very much imposed upon the people, whereas this is coming up from the people and I'm prepared to invest time and energy in that.

Others were realistic. There was a degree of scepticism about who was listening and how long it would take to see results:

Of course the challenge is putting it into practice and how long it will take.

There was also the view that people felt that they had never been consulted in the past, although, of course, statutory procedures had been carried out. This would suggest that the more traditional approaches to consultation, such as newspaper advertisements or displays, do not engage people's attention. Others, however, felt extremely cross that they had not been invited to these particular events and had only found out about them

through personal contacts. They felt intentionally excluded which led to conflict and damaged the trust that had previously been established.

There were many positive comments made about the process at the feedback event on the 14 December. Many welcomed the opportunity to exchange views and debate issues with other residents, even where they disagreed. They enjoyed focusing on particular issues of local concern and felt they had learnt a lot from doing so. The facilitation was highly praised and the overwhelming feeling was that they had been listened to.

Who was involved?

Considerable effort was put into identifying participants from different community and stakeholder groups, especially targeting social groupings identified as not having the opportunity to participate in the local planning process; namely, older people; people with disabilities; people on low incomes; lesbian and gay people; women; black and minority ethnic groups. Nevertheless, a number of participants pointed to under-representation and non-attendance in some areas. When asked who should be reached out to in the future, black and ethnic minorities, young people (under 25) and those on low incomes were identified.

Questions were also asked about whether it was better to separate out or mix different groups by age, gender, ethnic minority status, income and place of residence. A minority favoured mixing interest groups; the majority appeared to favour the approach adopted in this case of running separate visioning workshops.

There were also predictable problems of group dynamics in some workshops. One participant commented:

I thought it was rather good – informal but progressive, but it was a small group of seven and some didn't turn up. Two had mental disabilities and seemed to be out of it. Although they were asked, it was not clear whether they couldn't or didn't want to participate. They felt a bit excluded. A couple of others were too vocal and some just agreed and didn't express an opinion. Perhaps they need better briefing or someone to speak on their behalf.

Another respondent said:

Most of the community visioning people who came are among the keen ones because they have already attended two events. We must find out why we were not successful in getting people on low incomes and from ethnic minorities. The process is inevitably self-selecting.

Others suggested more people would be involved if meetings were held at more convenient times or were based in different locations to reduce the need to travel.

Who was listening?

A number of comments were made suggesting that the officers seemed sincere in taking on board conflicting views. One participant said:

At this stage this means Council Officers - who always do listen - the problem is the councillors.

Table 9.3 presents the results of a survey of the 12 participants at the feedback event on 14 December which shows that the majority felt that the Council listened ‘quite a lot’ to individual views and the results of the workshops, and that these comments and views were listened to more than the more traditional consultation methods.

Table 9.3 Comments from Participants at the Feedback Event

To what extent do you think the Council has listened to?

	Not at all	A little	Quite a lot	Not sure
Individual views	-	2	10	-
Results of the workshops	-	-	10	1
Results of all Local Plan Consultation	-	2	7	1

Source: Projects in Partnership, ‘Report on Feedback Event’ (1999)

Was anyone encouraged to get more involved in community activities?

The participants who were interviewed appeared to be strongly committed to the principle of public participation and involvement and welcomed this series of initiatives as a genuine improvement on the past.

The move from consultation (simply being asked for views) to **participation** (enabling people to be part of the solution) was welcomed by participants. There was also a willingness to work closely with the council in the future (Brighton and Hove Council, 1999b, p. 4).

Again most found that officers in particular were listening to them, but some remained sceptical about whether the Council as a whole would act on their views and how long this would take. There was strong support for the way the workshops were organised and facilitated, although some of the workshops were not always fully representative because of difficulties in identifying participants and non-attendance on the day.

An integral part of the community visioning exercise was to identify personal responsibility and next steps for the participants. At the time, they were keen to be an 'active part of the solution' (*ibid*, p. 9). Actions pledged by participants included: finding out more, closer links with the council, action with others, changes in lifestyle and spreading the word (*ibid*). Yet when asked some twelve months later whether their involvement had generated a greater interest in community affairs or a desire to get more involved, almost all said it had not. This may be because most of the participants came from a particular 'constituency' – the environment, gay/lesbian rights, disability groups, community fora or, in one case, was practising as an architect and wanted to know more about local planning policies. Most claimed to vote regularly. One had recently become a councillor, but she had accepted the invitation to stand because she had been a member of the Labour Party for twenty years and had been active in her community long before the consultation process began.

Lessons Learned and Good Practice

This section returns to try to answer some of the questions raised by the White Paper and the current emphasis upon public participation which we set out at the beginning of this chapter. We examine the narrow and wider aspects of democratic renewal and, drawing on theory, we attempt to extract some pointers for good practice.

Are there ways of targeting and encouraging non-joiners to participate?

Evidence from the Brighton and Hove case study certainly indicates that the focus groups and visioning sessions were successful in bringing new people into the local plan consultation process. From the point of view of the officers and members, there was a degree of satisfaction that certain stakeholder groupings were identified, invited and engaged and that this legitimised the process and would add weight to the Council's case at the Local Plan Public Inquiry. Nonetheless, the difficulty of attracting new publics must not be underestimated. Although the Council sought specifically to involve people other than the 'usual suspects', it was clear that, in some instances, it was again the experienced, vocal citizens, the 'leading players' who attended the sessions. Interviewees commented upon the ways that they became involved - reading an advertisement in the local gay newspaper; opening a letter addressed to someone else who had left the organisation two years previously; being phoned by a friend who worked at the Council. Some highlighted the low turnout, whilst another queried the Council's (poor) organisation in attempting to recruit participants. An officer and a community member also questioned the 'representativeness' of those invited. Despite the good intentions, is there evidence that this is still a self-selecting process? Does all this weaken the outcomes?

By targeting older people; people with disabilities; people on low incomes; lesbian and gay people; women; black and minority ethnic groups, the Council was able to ensure that a form of 'representation' (in the statistical sense) was given to these groups. In his discussion of the power of professionals, Sanderson has questioned whether the images of particular groups (such as those targeted here) 'reinforces assumptions of helplessness and dependency, of a lack of capacity to give an opinion, which constitutes a major barrier to participation' (1999, p. 332). In this case, the use of high quality facilitators with no stake in the process was clearly an important aspect in redressing the power balance and there was considerable praise for the running of the workshops. The Final Report noted:

That it is possible to involve disenfranchised groups in strategic policy making, but there **MUST** be consideration of their needs (eg translation services for minority ethnic groups, timing of meetings) (Brighton and Hove Council, 1999c, p. 19).

In exploring people's experiences, perceptions and aspirations with regard to the places where they live, work and play over the next ten years, the Council was compiling qualitative data for use mainly by the local plan

team, but which could also be fed into other relevant organisations and departments. Mechanisms for ensuring that information, regarding both process and content, need to be developed if data and experiential learning are to be shared between departments - both to optimise the effectiveness and efficiency of the Council's service delivery and broader consultation strategy, but also to avoid consultation fatigue. Whilst the Council is not claiming that the participants had any particular mandate to speak on behalf of their social grouping, it was clear from the interviews that officers will use evidence from the consultation process in support of its policies at the Local Plan Inquiry. Sanderson (1999) has argued that much is made by professionals of the 'unrepresentativeness' of such qualitative methods, but he points out that this provides yet another institutional barrier to participation. Ironically, it can lead to the systematic use of established networks which may well not speak for the local community and simply reinforces the *status quo*. In this example, Brighton and Hove Council specifically targeted typical non-joiners in order to redress the balance. The objective was to seek out new and different viewpoints.

At the local level, is it just a small proportion of individuals who are actively involved in voluntary and community organisations – the 'usual suspects'?

The interviews showed that, on the whole, the people involved were already actively engaged in community networks, such as pensioner or residents' associations or school governors boards. Most had had previous experience of local government, either as members or officers; some had worked in planning. There was evidence of the event being fed back into the organisation/group by those with experience of being part of a formal network (the 'usual suspects'?), but none that those who had participated on an individual basis 'shared' their experience. Thus, for example, although two members of the women's session are parents of children at the same school, they have never once discussed the visioning event. For them it was more of a personal learning experience. This does not, however, devalue the genuine interest in giving views on the future of Brighton and Hove as a community.

A particularly interesting insight related to the fact that interviewees said they valued the face-to-face nature of the exercise and opportunity to share their views and debate issues - '*Voting isn't the same as having your say*'. There was evidence of norms and shared values; indeed, one interviewee expressed considerable surprise at how quickly and easily a consensus of important issues was generated. But clearly for some the exercise was a one-off, contributing to self-development, whilst for the

more committed community member it was part of a wider social *engagement*. This highlights the individual and collective aspects of citizen involvement. Furthermore, it emphasises the challenge of ensuring that the other quarter of a million local residents each has access to appropriate mechanisms to become involved and to put their views and ideas forward.

Are we right to be wary of the 'usual suspects'? Quoting Campbell (1990), Sanderson (1999) suggests that those with power should provide the structures and resources to build representative mechanisms, rather than simply to dismiss self-advocacy. 'Leading players' are often the bedrock of a community's social capital. Yet, the visioning workshops explicitly sought to invite participants who do not usually engage in such processes. This rationale was criticised by one particular individual who made the point that it is often the disenfranchised groups who are the very people who do not have the capacity to maximise the potential of such processes. Might there not be a role for the 'citizen expert', for example, from the gay/lesbian group, who has, perhaps, built up an individual capacity to articulate the needs of a specific group? There was certainly evidence from the interviews that the Council will need to invest much more in building its own capacity as an institution and that of local people to participate if they want a broader base and a more active citizenship.

A move towards more effective community engagement will require new skills and competencies in local government - for both members and officers - and in the community at large. The local capacity for community involvement - from the point of view of the consulting, the consulted and the facilitators of that consultation should be developed earlier rather than later (Brighton and Hove Council, 1999c, p. 19).

Whilst local government can tap into existing networks, if councils are to cultivate a more politically active community, then they need to nurture the social capital and grow networks to replace the apparently weakened civil society. They will also need to invest heavily in the disenfranchised groups.

Is it possible to encourage and to sustain involvement?

Of the 69 participants in the community visioning, only 12 attended the feedback event. Interviewees remarked on the low turnout at the second session. Possible explanations given were that individuals considered that their views were well encapsulated in the written report and/or that the timing was difficult, being just before Christmas. Nevertheless,

To ensure continued willingness to be involved in local decisionmaking, consultation of the public must start to encourage participation and involvement. Community Planning will further require this process (Brighton and Hove Council, 1999c, p. 19).

Moreover, it might be argued that the mix of individuals at the sessions, that is members and non-members of groups, blurred the 'role' played by participants. It is not clear whether they were invited as delegates or representatives or simply as residents of Brighton and Hove with no requirement to share the experience with others. Whilst the primary objective of the exercise was to seek the views of local people, it is interesting to reflect on how the Council might wish to 'encourage participation and involvement', perhaps, by promoting the event more widely. Integrating results into the decisionmaking process and keeping participants involved are clearly the minimum administrative requirements if a commitment to the process is to be maintained by those directly engaged. There was certainly considerable favourable comment about the officers and their commitment to listen. There was not a similar belief that members would do the same. How officers and members respond to people's problems and priorities is crucial. It was evident that the concerns of the lesbian and gay community needed to be 'interpreted' in the planning context. The Planning Department converted problems articulated by the group into land-use solutions which the group itself was unable to define. Local planning authorities therefore need to be able to offer creative solutions.

Are members of local organisations likely to widen their interest in community activities and local democracy on the basis of positive experiences of participation?

There was no evidence of people intending to take a more active role in community life as a result of the experience; indeed, one 'leading player' commented that, at a recent local meeting, the need for consultation was inferred and there was a cry of 'Oh no!' Consultation fatigue is a threat. Nevertheless, there was considerable evidence of pride and pleasure at 'being asked', as well as anger at 'not being asked'. The more experienced participants were complimentary of the process and the service and courtesy of officers. The representatives of the disenfranchised groups expressed surprise at being consulted and declared a willingness to be involved again - with the proviso that it should not take up too much time. People are willing to contribute, but this willingness needs to be respected.

Is there any evidence that the newer methods of community participation are likely to lead to greater community involvement and democratic renewal?

We sought to investigate whether the use of innovative consultation in the preparation of Brighton and Hove Council's development plan strengthened community involvement and/or contributed to democratic renewal. We wanted to examine the extent to which the current ideas of social capital relate to the functions of local government at the micro level, particularly with regards to the local plan. It was evident from the interviews that local people are interested and deeply concerned about aspects of their environment - 'hot local issues' such as pedestrian-traffic conflict, waste or town centre decline - and that they have a view. They recognise stakeholder conflict and the need to develop consensus. Nevertheless, as the councillor pointed out, ultimately decisions will have to be made, based upon professional opinion and political argument. There was also evidence that people feel more strongly about local politics '*...because they have more of an effect on my life.... and because of the children*'. For those individuals unaware of the existence of a local plan, it was clear that they felt that they had never previously been consulted. Confront people with a draft consultation document of tens of pages and they may well not engage in the process. The community visioning exercise to bring new people together to define a context for, build a 'vision' for, the local plan and to help set the overall objectives, illustrates that non-professionals can determine issues at a 'strategic level'.

It is simply not true that the public don't want to become involved in difficult issues and strategic thinking. Strategic input comes from bringing together people to discuss issues and take responsibility for change (Brighton and Hove Council, 1999c, p.19).

At the community visioning event a number of actions were pledged by participants, for example:

- 'take more interest in council activities'
- 'contacting other organisations'
- 'share findings with colleagues'
- 'encourage more people to participate in this process'

(Brighton and Hove Council, 1999b).

There was commitment on the day. Despite this, there was, however, no evidence of the process directly influencing an intention to vote or inspiring more active engagement in community life. We cannot therefore speak of a single 'active community'; rather, it would appear that there is a web of

looser networks of active organisations and individuals with an interest. As Wilson has suggested:

Using a participatory methodology does not by itself ensure the formation of productive social capital (Wilson, 1997, p. 747).

Public participation is thus only one strand of the Government's attempts to get 'in touch with the people'. Alongside this, councils need to address issues of leadership, councillor contact with local people and more accountable and open decisionmaking procedures.

Conclusions

Despite the intention to engage non-joiners, this consultation process largely involved those with previous experience of pressure groups, community organisations and party politics, people who are already engaging, directly or indirectly, with the local council. These are probably the people more likely to vote than the general population and certainly those interviewed all claimed to exercise this right. Their involvement in the participation process appears to have *reinforced* previous interests, commitments and degree of involvement in local politics, not changed them. Their involvement is also largely instrumental, in that they wish to promote changes in policy, based on previously acquired values and interests, rather than new values acquired through a deliberative process.

Brighton and Hove Council considers that this form of consultation added value and enhanced the evolution of the local plan. Clearly, the interviewees believed in the operation of democracy and have an interest in local politics. If by 'democratic deficit' we mean that people are not voting, then electoral turnout figures show that is true, but our research indicates that there is a real and genuine interest in local politics. The challenge for 'modern local government' is to learn how to be in touch with this valuable resource and how to nurture it. If the Council wishes to strengthen local social capital, then it needs to nurture new networks and build the capacity of officers and members to engage and support local people, giving residents mechanisms to voice their opinions and ideas. Important research questions for the future are: What motivates people to get involved and to stay involved? Are those who are generally involved those with established networks in the community? How can we build and sustain new networks of active citizens?

The informal and deliberative participatory methods described here appear to be a useful way to discuss public issues and to make people feel valued. Such processes of social learning can strengthen individuals and

groups for their own sake and thus they become more than an instrument to fulfill a council's statutory obligations. This is one way of building the capacity of the community, but such face-to-face contact is costly and resource intensive. Meaningful participation can strengthen relations and has the potential to stimulate new networks. It can encourage and support individuals to become part of an informed and active community, but we need to find ways of sustaining such potential social capital, perhaps, by building on common interests and commitment.

A move towards more effective community engagement will require new skills and competencies in local government – for both members and officers – and in the community at large (Brighton and Hove, 1999b).

In its narrowest form, participation risks being of purely instrumental value, legitimising the process or strengthening the council's hand at appeal or inquiry, but it needs to engender popular support and commitment if it is to meet the wider agenda of reviving and renewing local democracy.

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