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# *"Modernising Planning: Public Participation in the UK Planning System"*

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**ABSTRACT**

*In the UK the formal land-use planning system is once more at a crossroads with the unprecedented levels of public comment on the recent Governmental Green Paper on Planning. A recent international report on the planning process in Westernised countries highlighted a dearth of public participation in the UK planning system this is despite an obvious undercurrent of concern on environmental issues and the like. The paper sets out to gauge the extent of public interest in the Planning system, in the light of current proposals to revise it. The paper concentrates on the nature of public participation in Planning and to consider whether the public are more satisfied with process, seeing it as fair and robust, if they are more actively involved in the process of consultation. Other aspects to consider are the need to seek consultation from the wider public, not just individuals and special interest groups.*

*There are several forgotten frontiers of the past effort to promote public participation. Theory dating from the 1970s exposed differences between sociological approaches in Planning and solutions tended to be lost in complexity of Local Development Plans. Subsequent theory (Healey 1997) has argued for the need to reconcile plural interests across localities. What is neglected in the research is the fuller appreciation of the actual public interest by those in the Planning system. A recent international report by Heriott-Watt University, Edinburgh and DePaul University, Chicago called for the notion of 'public participation' to be turned on its head and instead encourage the practice of 'participatory planning'- the use of third parties to pre-mediate conflicts between stakeholders before and during the process of an open consultation as opposed to seeking public opinions after the plans have been drawn. This paper aims to review the modernising agenda and set out the case for shifting public participation to participatory planning within the context of the UK. Particularly pertinent due to recent recommendations to increase sustainability communities. It uses several qualitative case studies drawn from urban planning authorities and rural districts from the UK, which reveal Local Planning Authorities may be as yet unprepared to fully grasp the concepts underpinning the notion of participatory planning.*

## 1- Introduction

The aim of this project was to review the health of public participation in Town & Country Planning in England. Several occurrences have prompted this, namely the reawakening of interest in the public's participation in policy making in international literature and the shift to a consumer based approach in Local Government, and the recent passing of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill in England.

The process of the review involved the study of experiences of innovative Local Government Planning Authorities who had themselves anticipated the Bill, through studying central Government's Green Paper, *Planning: delivering a fundamental change* (DTLR, 2001).

The policy background to these changes within local government planning is multifaceted. In the UK, the formal land-use planning system can be seen once more to have reached a crossroads, with unprecedented recent levels of public comment to government on the Green Paper, partly reflecting the level of the public's increased sensitivity to environmental issues. The Paper mentions requirements for local authorities to push for the involvement of the public or their local community with the development of "*Community Strategies*" and for Certificates of Community Involvement to precede the drafting of any new Plans (officially termed *Local Development Frameworks* [LDFs]).

We must not forget several past efforts in the promotion of public participation in Planning. Theory dating from the 1970s exposed the differences between Sociological based approaches and Planning, in comprehension of to people's actual involvement in policy decision making, but any contributions tended later to be subsumed by subsequent protracted *Development Plan* inquiries. Ensuing theory from Healey (1997) has rationalised the need to reconcile plural interests across a conurbation. However, now what is neglected in both academic and government research is fuller appreciation of the actual levels and type of public interest in the Planning system, both in *Development Plan* Inquiries, and the new provision for developing and incorporating *Community Strategies* in the Planning system.

This paper is set in the context of extending public participation in the UK Government's seemingly 'corporate' process of modernising local government, and of the mounting reform of the Planning system. The main evidence comprises research data from local authorities, chosen to represent innovations in methods for engaging the public. The first stage of the work involved interviewing the Local Authorities directly to establish what processes are being adopted in developing their *Community Strategies* and to ask under what institutional arrangements was it produced, in which departments, with what consultation and what input from members of other representative bodies. For example, how many consultation meetings with the general public, community groups, voluntary bodies, special interest groups and the private sector?

Several questions presented themselves in this light. However, of particular interest are the methods that can be shown to achieve success in drawing in new levels of involvement. If involvement is accepted to have occurred, again, how much can it contribute to the remit of a *Local Development Framework*?

The structure of this paper will first present a review of views in international planning with regard to the desire to increase public participation, then will review recent practice and methods employed in consultation. The second section will portray the experiences of three Local Authorities in the North of England in their attempt to engage the public in a new manner. The last section will end with some conclusions and recommendations for Government and other Local Authorities charged with the same task of engaging the public more effectively in government.

**A Review of Past Practice**
Looking back over post-war practice, we can see that the more determined revival of interest in public participation in Planning today owes a lot to general trends in society and to concerns of government (ODPM 2004). The planning profession's history of working with communities can be traced back to the late 1960s and the publication of the Skeffington report '*People and Planning'*. That report accepted the need to involve the public in planning and made far-reaching recommendations that influenced subsequent legislation in the early 1970s. Publicity and consultation became required components of the statutory planning system providing local people with opportunities to comment on and object to development plans and planning applications. Planners in the 1970s embraced this new responsibility with some enthusiasm, and time and effort was spent preparing exhibitions and organising public meetings. This was a revelation, as the previous process of decision-making often took place behind closed doors and only involved the 'experts' in this case the planners and politicians alike.

Despite this, the initial enthusiasm had waned over the decades; in a recent review, the professional governing body for planning in the UK noted that:

> *Despite the enthusiasm, the response from the public was typically disappointing. Gradually this led many councils to reassess their commitment to public consultation and to carry out only the minimum necessary to meet the requirements of the planning acts. However, some planning authorities stayed committed to the principle of participation and devised new strategies to overcome the barriers to engagement. As a result, the planning profession today has a wealth of experience of working with communities and valuable examples of good practice to which we can refer.*

> Source: Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI), 2003

Today, however, the planning process is under increased scrutiny. Successive UK Governments have pursued a policy of modernising local government aiming to make it more accountable, There has been an increased emphasis on public participation since the 1990s, by successive UK

governments. The Thatcher government from a consumerist perspective and New Labour through its devolutionist agenda, with its aim of 'getting in touch with people'. The more recent aims of public participation is to give a sense of empowerment and increase public confidence in government.

Pressures from the public now combine with record levels of Planning applications in England and Wales resulting from the recent buoyant economic cycle and the boom in housing demand especially in London and the South East. The *Planning Inspectorate* received a record number of 26,440 Appeals against the refusal of a Planning Application in the last year alone.

**Presumptions in International Planning Theory**
A far-reaching survey by Heriott-Watt University *et al.*, (2003), also for ODPM, proposes that "participation in Planning" be replaced by "Participatory Planning". e.g. the use of third party to resolve conflicts and objections and to broker agreements with stakeholders in a 'pre-mediation' process.
It concludes that there are fundamental reasons for encouraging public discussion about an area's plans at a very early stage and possibly before. For Planning officers; this might take the form of open discussion between citizens, citizen groups and other stakeholders; their different interests might be *mediated* by independent third parties, and at such an early stage that planning disputes were resolved before reports provoked objections from the pubic. This is essentially a shift from a reactive style of planning to a more proactive one.

The report argues this is necessary because society in general and the concomitant style of governance have changed. There has been increased public distrust in government, while government itself has an increased desire to improve co-ordination between sectors, such as transport, housing, economic development and between scales, for example the regional and national. Above all it is also a recognition that for the desired goal of sustainability to be reached, a consensus must be sought and achieved. The report advocates outreach techniques such as presentations between stakeholders groups, but in conjunction recommends skills training for planners in conflict management and problem solving, with the employment also of neutral parties. Other techniques it advocates are an improvement in the types of meeting held, giving professional support to weaker parties (Planning Aid, in England) and encouraging community capacity building.

A previous approach by Healey (1997) saw the role of Planning as being essentially one of the constructive reconciliation of interest groups across the sub-region. 'Collaborative Planning' as she terms it, "presents a way forward in realising the practical meaning of participatory democracy in pluralist societies….enabling all stakeholders to have a voice" (p5). This draws on many strands: the realisation that when dealing with a shared space there is a need to search for effectiveness and accountability and to distribute a sense of ownership; and a recognition that public reasoning is legitimate and that expert opinions are no more valid than those expressed by the public. An aim must be, therefore, to integrate urban and regional change more closely with

the processes of governance. The key to this is the desire for collaborative planning to seek a 'win-win' solution rather than an 'I win-you lose' approach. A key part of collaborative planning at large is consensus-building. Consensus building is a process of searching for universal agreement. It "involves a good faith effort to meet the interests of all stakeholders" (Susskind *et al.,* 1999), where stakeholders are individuals or groups likely to be affected by a decision. They identify two types of participation: open participation and representative participation (where individuals represent a wider interest group).

In other western economies, Forester in the US (1989, 1999), like Healey, argues for a more inclusionary approach to planning, challenging current practice with its heavy investment in experts and elected representatives and encouraging the involvement of local stakeholders. This should provide transparency, comprehensibility, integrity and legitimacy to the previous Planning process of 'prepare-reveal-defend'. Bloomfield *et al.* (2001) suggest that the aim of these practices is to stimulate wider civil engagement and a means to restore trust in local government.

**Negative views**
However, there has been a recent critique of these approaches (Thomas 1996, Imrie & Thomas 1997, Stoker 1997). A study of the Aalborg region in Denmark demonstrated that in practice the approach failed due to the strength of the "systemic power" of the political regimes, which dominated the process to the exclusion of others.

> *"…..power has its own rationality that ensures those interested parties who hold economic and institutional power are always likely to lead development in a certain direction regardless of public opinion"* (Flyvbjerg 1998 p321).

Other issues with a collaborative planning approach were the legitimacy of stakeholder groups, concerns over raising expectations that planners were not equipped to fulfil often due to lack of time and resources. He felt that achieving the kind of cultural shift in thinking, commitment and transparency of conduct that collaborative planning and the government's modernizing agenda seek to promote was is likely to prove extremely demanding.

The wider question that Bedford et al (2002) set out to answer was whether these practices "release planning from forms that provoke public disempowerment". In a study of a large number of local authorities, they found that the active participants in the process were often drawn from a restricted cross section of society- the participants were primarily white, middle class and well–educated. Planners and representatives themselves, on the other hand, often described the participants as ill-informed, demanding and unrepresentative. One council saw the process of public consultation as means to economic efficiency rather than a commitment to the ideology of civic engagement. Another praised the ideology behind the process but labelled it a 'false exercise', questioning what really changed after the consultation. They argue that it remains to be seen whether inclusive

participation will address concerns about disempowerment in the new planning process. As long as the process of control favours the privileged and the influential then no amount of consultation will increase confidence in local government.

Lowndes *et al.* (2001a) found the drawbacks of increased public participation in raising expectations to unrealistic heights, slowing down the decision making process and increasing bureaucracy, adding additional costs and encouraging parochialism and conflict between communities. Lowndes *et al.* (2001b) asked why people participate? Their survey revealed a consensus that people would most often participate in issues that mattered and if their own interests were directly affected. They found the reasons for non-participation included: a negative view of the Local Authority; a lack of awareness of opportunities in which to participate; lack of council response to consultation; and a strong sense that participation was for 'other people'.

**Pathways to resolution?**
Owens (2000), however, asks who are the public and why should they be engaged? An 'information deficit' model has the underlying principle that if people had more information about, and therefore a better understanding of the issues and risks associated with, policies they would be more likely to accept them, however disagreeable. Owens (2000) though argues that is something of a myth, concluding that
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> "*it seems to me that emerging concepts of 'engaging the public' are pointing broadly in the right directions. But the signposts remain confused, because the destination is not only distant but involves a greater challenge to the status quo than has hitherto been acknowledged*" (Owens, 2000, p5).

For Rydin & Pennington (2000), like ODPM (2004), public participation provides information for the policy process and by involving parties early on in the policy development process it avoids conflict at later stages. It essentially smoothes the policy implementation process. They suggest practical strategies for improved participation of two kinds, one reducing the costs of participation by paying for childcare or keeping meetings short and increasing the direct benefits (e.g. creating an opportunity for socializing); the second approach is to make the impact of participation on the policy decisions more explicit, for example using the local media to highlight successful examples and using schools to support notions of participation.

They advocate allowing communities to find their own recourse, and to organize themselves and their own 'institutional arrangements' when tackling common dilemmas. However, Rydin (1998), while conceding that collaborative planning is an attractive proposition to planners, went on to question it theoretically and practically. She argues that while the needs of a range of interested parties must be considered so must a planner's needs.

**Consultation Practice for Development Plans**

For planning the 1990s saw a considerable shift in attitude and practice towards the public, both in day-to-day casework (Townsend, 2002) and in the preparation of Development Plans. Lowdnes *et al*'s (2001) present a "census of local government activity to enhance public participation". Their definition of public participation is based on Parry *et al* (1992) and refers to public involvement *"in the process of formulation passage and implementation of public policies"*. The aim of which is to encourage participation in local affairs beyond the traditional processes of political engagement. Lowdnes *et al* describe several different types or methods of participation (these are not confined to planning practices):

- **Traditional**- consultation documents and public meetings
- **Consumerist**- those aspects concerned with the delivery of services, i.e. satisfaction survey etc.
- **Forums**- a regular dialogue with interest groups
- **Consultative innovations**- citizens' panels, citizens' juries and web-based interaction
- **Deliberative innovations**- community based planning, needs analysis and visioning techniques.

Their survey of local authorities found that the implementation of non-traditional participatory practices occurred in nearly half of all authorities; 47 per cent employed focus groups, 45 per cent community planning and needs analysis and 25 per cent visioning exercises. As for the implementation of new technology, 24 per cent claimed to have employed interactive websites, but a recent study by the Society of Information Management revealed no authority had a truly transactional website while only 6 per cent had a good level of inter-action.

When looking at political control of local authorities and the uptake of non-traditional or innovative methods, they found little difference between them, although the Liberal Democrats were slightly ahead and coalition and independently controlled local authorities were slightly behind. Trends in the engagement of the public in participation were encouraging; many local authorities have used the new modernizing agenda to revive participation in governance in genera not just in planning:

> *"…it would appear that far from being a focus on a few fashionable innovations, the participation agenda has encouraged local authorities to renew their acquaintance with traditional forms of participation, as well as to experiment with alternatives"* (Lowdnes *et al*'s, 2001a, p210)

The authors make the observation that there has been a great appetite for and willingness to engage in new forms of participation, and that this has been reflected in rapid uptake of these methods particularly since the mid 1990s, notably focus groups and public meetings. Thomas (1996) argues that traditional standard methods like exhibitions and public meetings will attract only the middles class who are confident with them; feminist theory should be

initiated to engage women more in their own territory of the home, shops and schools

More specifically a  survey of recent Planning practice for *Development Plans* from the Local Government Association (LGA 2003) is shown in Table 1. The acronyms above the columns refer to types of Local Authority: Metropolitan (MB) and London Boroughs (LB), other Unitary Authorities (UA), and County (CC) and District Councils (DC).

**TABLE 1  METHODS USED TO INVOLVE THE LOCAL COMMUNITY IN THE PREPARATION AND REVIEW OF YOUR DEVELOPMENT PLAN IN THE PAST. % RESPONDED 'YES' TO EACH METHOD**

|  | MB | LB | UA | CC | DC | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Consultation documents | 100 | 100 | 100 | 89 | 98 | 98 |
| Exhibitions | 100 | 87 | 92 | 78 | 91 | 90 |
| Public meetings | 89 | 94 | 96 | 89 | 83 | 87 |
| Focus groups | 47 | 47 | 48 | 56 | 42 | 45 |
| Area/neighbourhood forums | 47 | 59 | 44 | 33 | 31 | 37 |
| Interactive web site | 17 | 47 | 27 | 35 | 23 | 25 |
| Visioning exercises | 17 | 12 | 31 | 17 | 15 | 17 |
| Planning for real* | 10 | 6 | 16 | 6 | 17 | 14 |
| Base: 196 authorities responding to this question | | | | | | |

*Source:  Local Government Association, 2003*
*\* "Planning for real" relates originally to the use of a village model or map on which residents can point to suggested developments*

The table shows the more innovative non-traditional methods Focus groups, websites, Planning for Real etc. to be the least used of the various consultation methods to date. Traditional methods of engagement still remain the major way to consult the public.

Reports of the UK Government's Audit Commission provided some greater depth of comment across the country. These covered the Planning function in 12 authorities visited over the period 2002-3. The general conclusion was to find little evidence to suggest that these councils were embracing public consultation under the ethos prescribed by Heriott-Watt *et al.* (2003). There is in fact more emphasis on weakness rather than strengths, with most attention to Planning application casework rather than towards the development of community involvement in strategy.


**Considerations for improved consultation: quantitative vs. qualitative**
Measuring consultation and its effectiveness is not without difficulties. When working in the setting of a body under the control of politicians, we have to be aware of a difference between the *appearance* of good consultation and the reality, as it would be seen by academics. In this context, the Audit Commission and the Improvement and Development Agency (IdeA) (2002) are among the bodies that have only recently looked at standards of community involvement in Local Government. We have to stress that

academic research in this field is often finding its deepest insights from qualitative work, from the analysis of what people say rather than exactly how many say it. Not through the traditional means of questionnaires and surveys.

Nonetheless, the authorities still prefer to the use of quantitative measures and statistics on a representative sample of 1000 people for example, which is commonly regarded as the minimum size of sample in market research. Not many researchers realise that the same size, 1000, is needed for supplying figures for sub-populations, for each sex, or for say three component areas of a district sample. (Alternatively that means that figures extracted from a District-wide survey will be much rougher if extracted for sub-populations or areas.) Many recipients of a survey will assume that it is percentage coverage that counts (which is totally erroneous until a sample exceeds ten per cent of the "target population"). Some bodies such as regional development authorities encourage individual communities to write their own surveys, "warts and all" as part of the process of self-education and involvement. But to conduct a successful survey expertise in this area is required. A skill that planners may not necessarily possess. For example, one of the major problems with questionnaire surveys is the need for experience in drawing up the "coding framework" of open-ended responses if tables are to be produced at all!

## 2- Local Planning Areas: evidence from the North of England

The search for three case studies was confined to two Regions, the North East and Yorkshire and the Humber and to those Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) that had demonstrated innovation in consultation methods. However, it was soon discovered the relevant Authorities were thin on the ground, as planning staff experienced in developing consultation methods were in strong demand elsewhere in the private sector. The eventual choice of areas (defined in Table 2) includes a Yorkshire rural area that has already experienced marked population growth (it has now been placed in ODPM's Northern Growth Corridor), and two Authorities of the North East. These areas combines to raise the debates around historic
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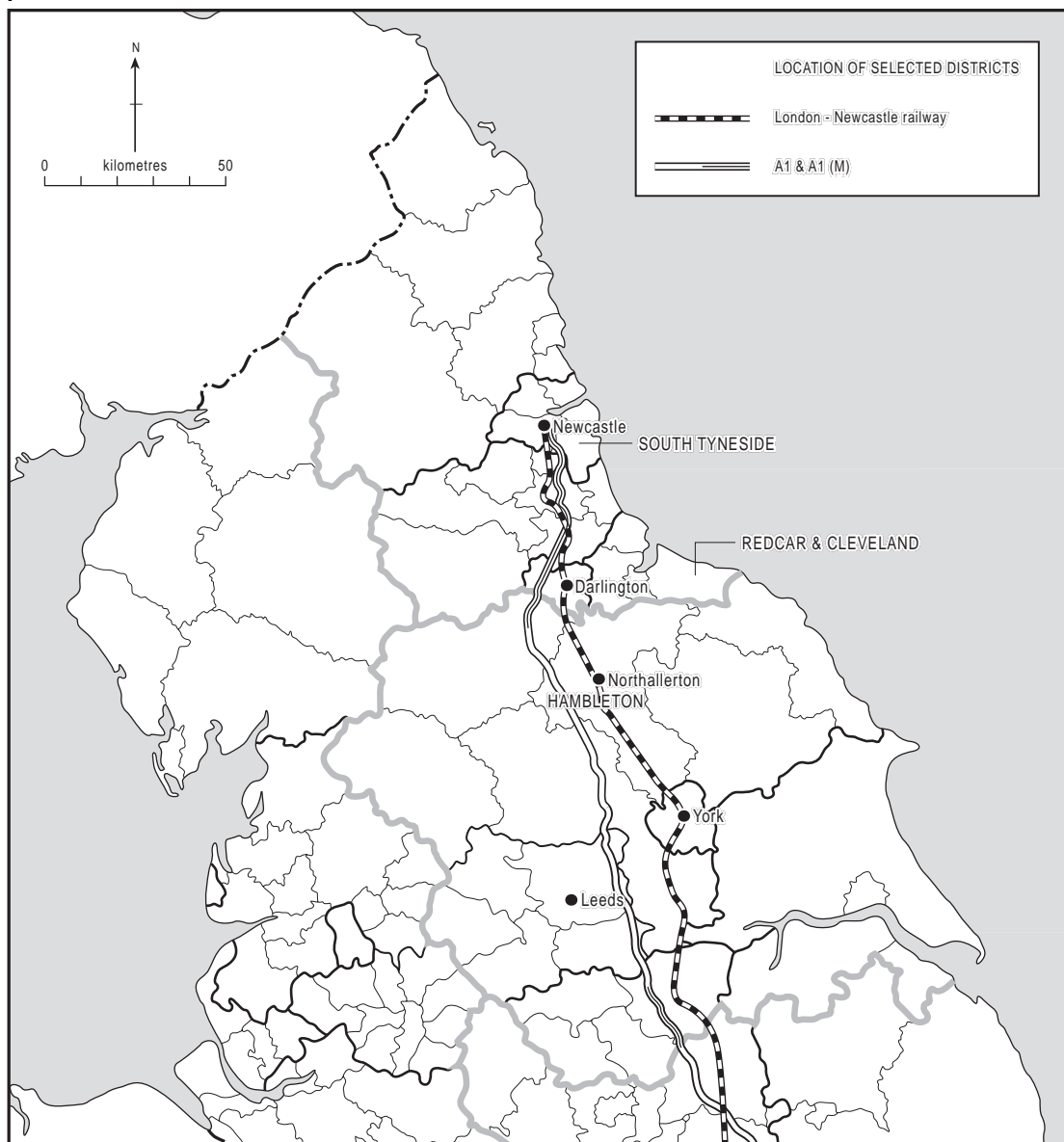


commuting areas as well as regeneration issues. This produces a balance of one second-tier District (Conservative control), one Unitary Authority (non-Labour coalition since May, 2003) and one Metropolitan Borough (Labour). All

were "front-loading" (to use the Government's term) their *Development Plan*[1] consultations from their primary *Community Plan (Strategy)*.[2]

On review, the selection of *Hambleton, Redcar & Cleveland* and *South Tyneside* was seen to provide sufficient case studies. Hambleton's population growth and house values represent the great English trend of urban-rural growth pressures. While, controversies surrounding middle class reactions to use of green land and the conservation of historic settlements are certainly present in Redcar & Cleveland and South Tyneside, but they also involve community consultation in areas of housing decline. They also provide examples of major technical strides in methodology. As can be seen from the following table, they represent not only a range of types and size of Local Authority, but also of political control.

**TABLE 2  SELECTED CASE STUDY AUTHORITIES**

|  | **HAMBLETON** | **REDCAR & CLEVELAND** | **SOUTH TYNESIDE** |
|---|---|---|---|
|  | SECOND TIER CONSERVATIVE | UNITARY COALITION | METROPOLITAN LABOUR |
| Population estimate (2002) | 84,900 | 139,400 | 152,300 |
| Area (sq. km.) | 1311 | 245 | 64 |
| Current Local Plan Adopted | 1996 | 1999 | 1999 |
| Community Plan | 2002 | 2001 | 2001* & 2003 |
| Issues Report | January, 2003 | March, 2002 | - |
| Consultation | January – November, 2003 | March – April, 2002 | - |

*The first Community plan was seen as inadequate*

## Case Study I: an extensive County District, Hambleton

The North of England contains some highly prosperous commuting areas, Hambleton[3] is part of such a belt extending from the Lake District to the East Riding of Yorkshire. Consequently, Hambleton's average price for a detached house is £235,000 and for a semi- £131,000, above average for the North and on a par with London. It is a largely rural area bordering a national park, containing no large metropolitan areas. Its urban areas are confined to 5 market towns; the largest Northallerton is just 17,500 in population. But

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[1] A Development Plan is a strategy to deal with mainly traditional planning areas, e.g. Land use and development issues

[2] A Community Plan is a new development in UK planning, encouraging planners to think more holistically about their communities, it is developed before a Development Plan and is a strategy to deal with a range of social, environmental and economic issues, such as pollution, crime, social exclusion etc.

[3] It is worth noting at this point that Hambleton District is of course a compromise name, using the name of the Hambleton Hills which front the Vale of York to the east. The Authority was established in 1974 by the merger of five former Rural Districts surrounding five respective towns, including Northallerton, the only Urban District.

populations have been rapidly rising since 1991; one market town's population leapt 25% between 1991 and 2001. The largest Planning issue concerns housing, i.e. the distribution of building between the five main market towns, the question of affordable housing for those on lower incomes and the sustainability of village life in the 135 villages of the District as more local leave to find work and more commuters arrive from the cities to live the rural idyll.

The *Community Plan* and *Development Plan* for the district have been jointly inspired and driven as a Council priority which has been contingent on the influence of individual innovation and recruitment. This was encouraged by the arrival of an experienced Community Planning officer from Bradford, an area renowned for with its high need for community awareness. It proved to be a catalyst in bringing a fresh approach, fresh ideas and experience in working with the community. She went out and attended meetings to get people involved in existing and new groups, embracing existing Town and Parish Councils and innovation in previous practice.

It was under the Director of Planning and Environmental Services' auspices that a *Community Planning* Steering group was set up in April 2001. Local consultation led fairly rapidly to entrusting most activity to five devolved area based groups (see Fig. 1).

## Figure 1  Hambleton Strategic Partnership
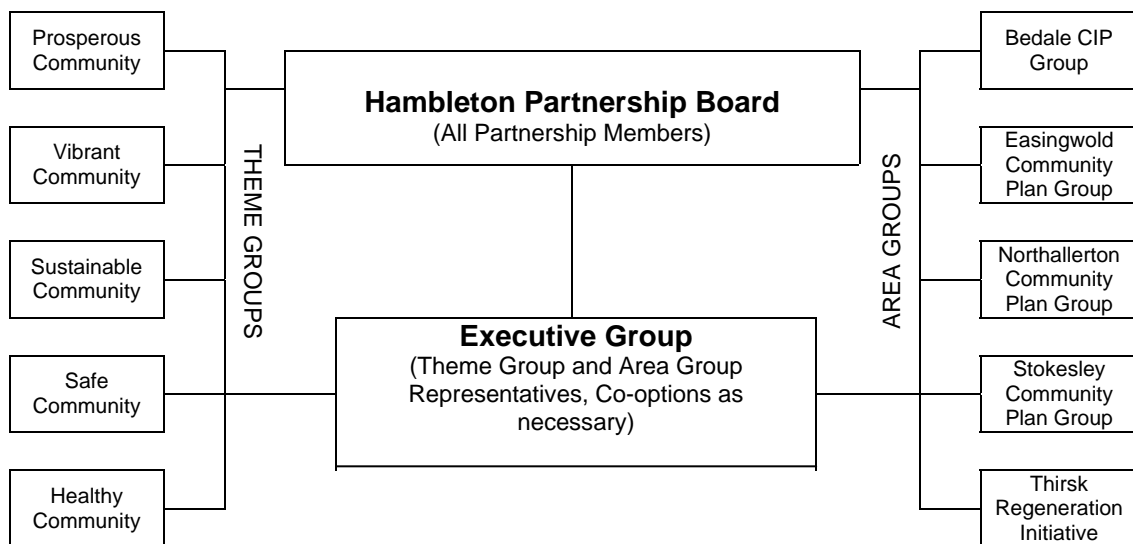


The five Area Groups (to the right of the fig.) of this definitive diagram played an important role throughout consultations before and after the Key Issues Report (a report on the Key issues flagged by the public after and during consultation for the Development Plan). An important catalyst lay in the argument for regenerating market towns that flowed from the establishment of the Countryside Agency and the Yorkshire Regional Development Agency,

which required writing  "Community Prospectuses" in each of the five market towns.

**The Process of Consultation**
All the 178 parishes in Hambleton district are grouped under these five units including about 80 joint or single active Parish Councils. At the start of these consultations, the District Council wrote to each Parish asking about their concerns and issues, and undertook meetings in principal villages, at least 10 public meetings in each of the five areas. District Councillors proved amenable to this and later stages of the process, perhaps because of a tradition of leaving staff to make arrangements and proposals, a point of immense importance in allowing volunteer members of the Area Groups to constitute much of the Groups' political "legitimacy". Great efforts were made to contact "hard-to-reach" elements and to make inroads in engaging church and youth groups, the Authority expressed some regret that connections have not yet been made, for instance with the small ethnic minority population of the area. However, the affluence of the predominantly middle class population of the area supports electronic communication, including a website for the monthly routine minutes of each of the five Areas.

The *Key Issues Report* was circulated to all town and parish councils, service providers, amenity organisations and interest groups, consultants and developers, a cross section of local businesses and residents who have expressed a wish to be informed of the local plan review. In addition, officers attended meetings of other strategic partnership groups to explain to members of each partnership group the role of the Local Development Framework with respect to the work of their partnership and to encourage the partnerships and their constituent groups to respond to the consultation. A period of six weeks was set for the consultation but this was extended for a further two weeks.

However, the main process of consultation was by questionnaire. It was available to download from the Council's website and it could be completed electronically.  A Discussion Forum was set up on the website covering key issues; this received over 400 hits on several topics.  Over 600 questionnaires were circulated and 275 returned and in addition, there were 45 letters.  Many respondents included detailed comments on points of concern.   The responses have been analysed and collated into a report of consultation on the LDF Key Issues Paper.

Parallel with the completion of the draft at end-2002, there has been fairly continuous consultation occurring in one area or another. In particular, the Regional Development Agency, Yorkshire Forward, has awarded money to Market town which enabled them to buy in expertise in public consultation methods and funded the employment of consultants in the two Renaissance Market Towns, Northallerton and Bedale. In Northallerton, consultants from London held an innovative 'Planning for Real' event in the Town Hall of Northallerton was advertised on local BBC radio as well as by the town crier. People were encouraged to add "post-it" notes to the map display boards of the town planning proposals, and it was thus easy to identify the burning issues.   While in Bedale consultants from Leeds used more traditional open evening meetings in the town.

Some of the problems and merits of running satisfactory evening meetings were evident. They showed the possibilities emerging from the use of independent outside consultants, the value of specially prepared displays, the use of new techniques (including a camera booth), the elicitation of a range of issues, the use of both daytime and evening venues and the possibility (in the Bedale cases) of building consensus. However, the three evening meetings demonstrated deficiencies of advertising, signposting to the room itself, poor disabled access, and cold or poorly laid out rooms as well as a slowness to comment, a bias to limited or very parochial views and inability of the public to engage and visualise the longer term. The evening meetings tended to attract mainly older middle class men, where the main issues tended, street cleanliness and parking. It also raises issues over the legitimacy of the representativeness of public feedback.

Hambleton was deemed successful in its consultation. It has the advantage of a dedicated staff with the necessary skills and the funding to be able to buy in expertise, which in turn enabled then to be innovative in how they consulted with the public. Overall consultation has achieved much wider engagement, raised aspirations, and emphasised the importance of feedback to the people, recognised perhaps a little late in the next case study.

## Case Study II: A Unitary Authority, Redcar & Cleveland

Redcar and Cleveland if also borders a national park, but in contrast it contains both a mix of some very wealthy areas as well as some of the most deprived in the Country. It is combination of rural and urban and also is the site of the former British Steel plant once the largest steel plant in Europe, much of this is now derelict. Partly as a result of the closure its population has been steadily falling since the late 1980s. It is predicted to drop to 132,000 by 2016. In some areas the housing market has been described as failing with some houses fetching below £20,000.

In preparing to look at all the issues involved in what was the Local Plan's first Review in 2001, the Planning policy staff of Redcar and Cleveland took the initiative in looking to innovate in their approach both to the Plan itself and how to consult on it. Previous work showed the importance of consulting painful social problems in this area. The Council originally brought in consultants to cope with a large run down area whose population fell by 15 percent between 1991 and 2001. This study, by a Planning consultancy, addressed a number of issues including overall housing levels. A second study, was commissioned, and was undertaken by Community and Social Regeneration specialists. They highlighted what had been seen as a failure, that the Council had failed to provide feedback from previous consultation, and suffered public criticism.

This difference of the methodological origin between two consultants in the same area can be seen as significant. For a principal aim of the second study was to consolidate the public's view of the area, involving a four-stage process: information gathering, consultation of key stakeholders, and full

community and agency consultation; the latter comprised a series of seven public consultation sessions, three agency consultation sessions organised by theme, and outreach sessions with five specific groups – all supplemented by written questionnaires:

"*A general point that seemed to run through the consultations was that the first report was limited in focussing on the physical environment while a lot of the problems were caused through anti-social behaviour, drugs, drink and youth crime*" (BOW, 2002, p.5)

Therefore the consultants from a sociological perspective were seemingly more successful in engaging the public and gaining a wider community's perspective on the issue of planning.

Yet there was anger and cynicism expressed at many of the public consultation sessions, connected with a perceived lack of information, commitment, vision and leadership principally from the local authority. There were concerns from a range of stakeholders that the local authority needed to develop its capacity to work in partnership and on a multi-departmental and multi-agency basis.

The Redcar & Cleveland's Community Plan claims that "The Partnership and our member organizations have carried out a wide range of consultations and surveys listening to the views of many people throughout Redcar & Cleveland" (Redcar & Cleveland Partnership, 2001). Several of these consultations where not specifically built for this purpose, however, and in fact refer to efforts by other service providers, and survey work from the Health service. A traditional Annual Survey from the Council is capable of carrying different topics in different years, and this was utilised, It is a postal survey with a normal response of 1,000 to 1,500 out of 2,500 forms issued, undertaken by a market research firm.

Nevertheless a range of consultation events did take place throughout 2001/2002 to listen to people's views and to hear what issues were important to people for the future. The period of consultation ran for six weeks of 2002 although late responses were accepted up to the end of May. The consultation exercise comprised the following elements:-

- **Key Issues Report**
  Copies of the report were issued to a wide range of consultees. The report could be viewed at council offices, libraries and on the web (only 160 hits were recorded due to some difficulties being experienced with accessing the site).
- **Response forms**
  Comments forms were placed in the Key Issues documents and sent to over 500 organisations on the Local Plan data base; they were also available at libraries, council offices and at all the exhibitions (see below), returnable by all modes.

- **Leaflets**
  A leaflet, introducing the consultation exercise and giving exhibition details, was delivered to every household and business in the Borough and distributed to public buildings
- **Posters**
  Posters advertising the consultation exercise were delivered to many public buildings and displayed inside all buses leaving two bus depots.
- **Exhibitions**
  Exhibitions were held throughout the consultation period, together with mobile exhibitions staged for a week each in ten branch libraries and village halls.
- **Publicity**
  The consultation exercise was publicised through a press release that forms Appendix 1 of this report. Over 500 letters were also sent to people and organisations on the Local Plan data base.
- **Meetings**
  Five meetings were attended by Planning Services staff

A total of 257 responses were received by form, letter, telephone, fax, email and at meetings, many of which contained comments on a range of key issues. All the responses were meticulously logged and catalogued, and listed by chapter heading in the report. With a few "yes/no" questions as an exception, the format for this response was of open-ended questions, providing written answers to a wide variety of questions. In fact, such was the diversity that most of the answers given were unique to one person each, and they would not be easy to place into classificatory groupings and individual questions from the Issues Report received up to 33 codes or answers (i.e. after amalgamating those answers which *were* the same from different people).

The overall lessons learnt from the consultation were that people were involved enough to understand the local planning system, and realized this document could affect their futures and a lot more people get involved. However, there are problems in progressing the work. Firstly, the technical question of survey research left this work difficult to analyse, because there was a great volume of diverse text: it would have been better to have pre-coded the questionnaires. Secondly, the work may not be considered to have been offering options enough to qualify under the government's recent Act, and longer than usual delays in processing a Development Plan might be expected due to staff changes. But the value added of the consultation exercise was called into question when the Planners felt that, having written the Issues Report document, they could have identified what the main issues would be and predicted the main responses.

## Case Study III: A Metropolitan Borough, South Tyneside

South Tyneside comprises a quarter of the metropolitan area making up Tyne and Wear. Being on the coast and on the mouth of the River Tyne it grew prosperous on shipbuilding and port facilities. Shipbuilding has long since disappeared, leaving vacant land, endemic high unemployment levels and their associated social issues. Like Redcar & Cleveland the population is in decline, losing 4,000 people or 2.5% between, 1991 and 2001.

Consultations for its future Local Development Framework, intended to meet the need for its Statement of Community Involvement, were an *integral* part of the *Community Strategy* launched in November, 2003 (the second strategy after the first in 2001 was deemed lacking). A preceding Citizen's Panel Survey carried a majority of land-use planning questions, this stands in contrast with the previous pattern in which community planning or public engagement had not necessarily linked to land-use planning.

An independent view from outside the Borough was firmly sought (triggered by "yet another" industrial closure) in the introduction of consultants from London to produce a "Transformational Plan" (Comedia, 2002), which among its radical innovations introduced a cultural aspect to development. Thus placing urban design, the (Tyne) riverside, the main town centres, green and sustainable development, alongside the issues of young people, the retired and social enterprise.

The consultants, Comedia, claim to have spoken with 500 people during their visits including 77 organisations and businesses. Of these 27 were private sector firms operating in the Borough ranging from engineering firms in the North Sea oil sector to local newspapers and night clubs; the balance included voluntary bodies, ethnic minority groups, sub-regional bodies, trades unions and regional and national government bodies. Following the interim report, a "Transformational Commission" held a series of hearings on priority issues, taking evidence from many local actors as well as drawing in national expertise. The consultants admit that they do not go in to detailed evidence on every topic; however,

> *"The Commission hearings focussed upon complex, cross-cutting issues which it felt required multi-agency attention and which, if not given focus, risked falling down the cracks between established priorities" (Comedia p.8).*

The view of experienced Planners was that the Transformational Plan was a valid experience. Its ideas had travelled well, and were being developed with separate consultants on industrial land, town centres and the riverside. However, the consultants were only present for a relatively short period and the consultation of 500 people was not quite what it seemed; the representativeness of the 500 is called into question. Some were specialists in the field of planning, while at wider public meetings there were a limited amount of attendees.

Despite the previous misfortune of the first Community Plan, preparing two versions of the Community Strategy accumulated a range of consultation. The researchers of this paper attended one of the "neighbourhood events", the innovative event for young people in Local Democracy Week, and the final launch of the Strategy with a day-event for 250 organisational leaders of the area. The basic form of consultation, whether with Community Area Forums or the young people's event, comprised a short politician's introduction followed by a video of the Transformational Plan and a summary of the substantive content of possible proposals. At this point the room was divided into workshop groups that were facilitated well by relevant staff, community sector workers in the case of the neighbourhood of Jarrow. Both cases confirmed of course that lay people make no distinction between Planning and non-Planning issues (and subsequently confirms that a holistic approach to planning and that public consultation is valid).

That leaves the Citizen's Panel postal questionnaire of 1000 as the main source of cross-sectional opinion across the Borough. In this case, the August 2003 survey was designed to combine general Community Strategy issues in the first part with land use and the built environment in the second, arguably a textbook solution to the central issues with which we began this report. "The second part of the questionnaire asks what you think of some of the options that we have to build new buildings and structures in the Borough" and was introduced by stating that *the next set of questions will help us decide:*

- *What gets built (and what is unlikely to get built)*
- *Where things should be built*
- *How new developments should appear*
- *What land should be use for*

Some 17 pages consider number of Planning topics, which are illustrated by colour maps and photographic illustrations. Respondents are asked to respond to each of four or five propositions on each topic by applying one of five codes from "essential" to "very undesirable". The overall response to this design was good for a postal survey, one of 50.2 per cent of the Panel of 1,068.

South Tyneside's attempt at public participation through a *Community Strategy* and the accompanying postal survey, with planning questions initiated by Planners, must contain merits. The new *Key Issues Report* will contain a wider remit than it would otherwise. However, in the light of the last comments, some issues still remain:

- Some issues of the area have been already solved or committed by past Plans
- On past precedent, much of the debate surrounding the next Plan will concern larger sites at the site-specific later stage. There was really little scope for the public in the last Inquiry as the battle lines were drawn before it started.

The revised *Community Strategy* is larger and more thorough than in other areas, and was distinctive for the overall use of consultants. However, much of the consultation and research concluded last year was too late to alter the new version of the Strategy.

## 3- Conclusions & Recommendations

The work reported here took place in advance of the passing of a Governmental Act designed to achieve major improvements does report major change in Planning. Yet our examples show Planning being "brought out of the closet" of backroom work solely confined to land-use, and reaching out more to the wider community and addressing those issues that affect the public such as crime, education, unemployment etc. In this process the public have been actively encouraged to participate more fully in the policy making process. In our three case studies, how this was done methodically speaking was varied; often outside expertise was bought in to cope with such a large and demanding task.

However, there were persistent problems with the process of consultation and the drive towards 'participatory planning':

- Meetings tended to attract a certain group of "self-selected people" with time to spare, i.e. the retired and some and a previous knowledge of the issues i.e. ex-professionals. This meant those consulted were not very representative of the area in question.

- The simple errors over publicity, heating and layout of rooms were persistent. Provisions of simple amenities, such as parking, refreshments were lacking.

- When it came to the analysis of the results, there were repeated errors with questionnaire surveys; failure to consider "pre-coding", inadequate consideration of the need for random samples; insufficient time and resources to analyse and digest results

- The pattern of response clearly varies by social class of area. This distinction is quantitatively apparent in questionnaire responses within Redcar & Cleveland, with much higher responses to the Issues Report in commuting areas, and very little from manual workers. South Tyneside has adequate provision for consulting its longstanding ethnic minority; Hambleton are aware of failing to reach their very small ethnic minority group, but feel they are doing a bit better now with less wealthy residents.

Nevertheless, we can say that the whole range of innovations in consultation and publicity was in evidence across the three areas. South Tyneside was most notable for their flair in staging major events including the launch of the "Transformational Plan". Redcar & Cleveland attracted sufficient publicity to get a rich set of questionnaire responses. Hambleton were notable for varied and sometimes large efforts in many small towns and large villages, and were good exponents of E-governance

Success in Hambleton arose from persistent commitment to community groups, culminating in area groups making explicit strategic choices of a spatial kind for the Local Development Framework (LDF). It was helped by the area's prosperity, and by regeneration funds and regional assistance. In

Redcar & Cleveland, strict commitment to the Community Plan was employed in the drafting of questions for the Issues Report, which was well answered on area topics. South Tyneside has completed only the pre-Planning stages, but the ground had been thoroughly prepared for the land use Planning elements at the point of launching its Community Plan.

As indicated by the Audit Commission, there is considerable ambiguity over the reality of consultation, even where appearances are satisfactory. Hambleton's Consultation Audit records some disappointment over publicity for events and response. Redcar & Cleveland's spontaneous answers to "open" questions are difficult to group together, contrasted with South Tyneside's pre-coding of the final draft of the relevant Citizen's Panel enquiry. However, the Audit Commission have argued elsewhere that merely extending a Panel enquiry to Planning questions is insufficient without probing reasons for the answers.

The Commission's criteria for an honest and successful consultation are very difficult to attain. It would be difficult to say that the questions raised for consultation in these three areas were *freshly elicited* from people. (The Planners may have learnt the topics through hard experience last time.) It is difficult to say that results are all being given full weight in the next stage of Planning going on in these offices at the moment. There is concern over residents' self-selection in making a consultation response. What is the relative weight to be given to activists who turn up to meetings when we all know that they vary in their capacity to represent the community? What is the value of questionnaires collected at the end of a meeting?

As regards our wider literature review, it is difficult to find evidence pointing to a Heriott-Watt *et al.* (2003) view, that stakeholders and residents could get together over an area's future without official instigation. Stakeholders only got together when they had to in the days before the existence of what are termed Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP)[4]. Many of the Planning issues had been fought out before, and have changed because of extraneous factors, for example national and local acceptance that redundant industrial land in South Tyneside could pass to residential use.

Even the "Collaborative School" has its limitations. Although the "Environment" (rather than Planning as such) has benefited from gaining a place in the LSP remit, it appears that much of the intellectual traffic in the preparation of LSPs has been between local authority staff and their separate specialist groups (for Health, Crime etc.) rather than among groups at the plenary board or even at meetings of group chairs. Nonetheless, consultations in all three areas show support for the Planning system, through for example the use of brownfield rather than green field land.

However, an independent factor emerges from the introduction from 2000 of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs). In LSPs, all the interest groups involved

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[4] The latest innovation in local authority community regeneration. LSPs provides the framework for organisations to work together to tackle issues which are important to community life including crime, jobs, education, health and housing.

in servicing, running and developing an area, public, private, voluntary and community, are brought together for the first time in a systematic and organised way. In particular, the structure of LSPs clearly allows and encourages the member interest groups to interface, talk and negotiate about the development of their area *independently of Planning staff and committees.*

They may yet provide another vehicle to enhance public participation; a balanced view may be supported from a UK based planning consultancy Entec:

> *Whilst LSPs may not be genuinely representative, they do provide greater scope for community involvement than traditional Development Plan public consultation mechanisms. Where they exist, they can be beneficially used to secure an inclusive approach towards LDF preparation. Even where they cannot, experience…..has shown that the use of forums or focus groups can raise the quality of local debate and reduce local opposition and conflict with national planning policy* (Entec, 2003. p. 37).

These results unfortunately add to a considerable volume of work in what are relatively small Development Plan sections in most Authorities. We have therefore to ask whether loading consultation "upfront" will reduce work at later stages. Most of the evidence in this report predates the identification of site-specific elements in the respective Plans, with their specific externalities. We were repeatedly advised that institutional interests, the major housebuilders, would be holding their fire to this later stage, which they would dominate. Thus, the concept of a shortening of Inquiries on these grounds alone might be missing the main point.

There was general agreement that running Development Plan consultations off the back of Community Plan work would enhance the end-product and produce a deeper and more satisfying result. However it involves considerable investment in advice, training and staff time. Longer term trust is cultivated when the authority is seen to act on feedback from a consultation. It was felt worthwhile for Planners to reach out to the community, in achieving a more broadly based Plan, when they had often been inward-looking within a mechanistic world Development Control

In conclusion the following recommendations can be made:

- The Audit Commission's criteria for an honest and successful consultation are very difficult to attain. We recommend that professional academic and market researchers be employed in preparing a technical manual to be used in connection with Statements of Community Involvement, including "do's and don'ts" in running meetings and in questionnaire preparation, sampling, analysis and feeding back of results.  Use of this by Inspectors would go some way to indicating the quality of consultation opportunities being promised

rather than just a list of those bodies that would get letters and invitations.

- In conjunction with that, Local Authorities would be well-advised to check that their arrangements for staff "Time Off In Lieu" (TOIL) was suitable for extensive rounds of evening meetings.

- Some further attention needs to be given to standards of representativeness and consultation in Community Strategies. This would make for better harmonisation with Planning consultations.

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