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Planning for real: the approach of the neighbourhood initiatives foundation in the UK

Tony Gibson

In community development there is a need for all views to be accounted for, yet the 'talkers nearly always win'. Local planners have the rhetoric "what we want to do is consult you". At public meetings the outsiders sit on a platform, behind a table, maintaining their superiority; when only a few people turn up, and only a few of them speak up, they say "It's the indifference that gets me. Here we are trying to do our jobs, and they don't come". Planning for Real attempts to bridge the gap between 'us and them', to identify local needs and resources, and to do it without endless talk.

The focus is a model of the neighbourhood. Unlike an architect's model, these should be touched, played with, dropped, changed around. At the first meeting the neighbourhood model is constructed, using houses and apartment blocks made from card and paper on a polystyrene base. Generally people put in the 'grotty bits first'. The model then goes into the community, to the laundrette, the school foyer, the fish and chip shop, so that people see it and get to hear of the second consultation. At the second meeting the objective is to find out: "have we got it right?" There is no room for passivity, not many chairs, no platform, with the model in the middle of the room.

People spot the landmarks, discuss, identify problems and glimpse solutions. They move around, and can put down pieces of paper with suggested solutions written on them at particular locations (there are 150 pre-written solutions). They are permitted to put more than one on the same place - so allowing for conflicts to surface. Eyelines are now different as everyone focuses on the model, talking out of the sides of their mouths.

Often "people who put down an idea wait for others to talk first about it, and then say themselves: "I agree with you". The process permits people to have first, second and third thoughts - they can change their minds. "At a certain point, you don't need words". A large model allows people to address conflicts without needing to identify themselves. It depersonalises conflicts and introduces informality where consensus is more easily reached.

The professionals attend too. These local planners, engineers, transport officials, police, social workers, wear a badge identifying themselves, but can only talk when they are spoken to. The result is they are sucked in, and begin to like this new role. The 'us and them' barriers begin to break down, and the professionals begin to find a new role and relationship.

The priorities put on the model have disagree written on the reverse side. Anyone can turn these over, again remaining anonymous. The priorities are assessed as Now, Soon, Later and whether they can be done solely by local people, with the help of outsiders, with some money and advice, or only by outsiders. Obligations are negotiated and made explicit. People are able to negotiate compromises. People don't label and classify in academic ways.

The next stage is a local-talent survey conducted by local people. The form is pictorial and does not look like a government form. The human resources are documented, and planning can then capitalise on these hitherto hidden resources. Participation in planning processes can act as a demonstration

of local capacity, from which larger things can grow.

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NOTE

This article is drawn from a presentation made at the workshop.