

Learning from using PRA in the UK: examples from Berkshire

Anneli Connold and John Rowley with a response from Alison West

Feedback is a forum for discussion in *PLA Notes*. It features articles which raise common concerns or challenges in fieldwork or training, together with a response from another PRA practitioner. Letters and articles are welcomed for this section, as are your comments on any of the issues raised by **Feedback**.

• Introduction

The Community Council for Berkshire is a small NGO based in the UK which has carried out a number of community assessments, usually at the request of local authorities, in both the rural areas and the peri-urban fringes in southern England. The most recent was in a small semi-urban area on the edge of a large town called Reading which is in the centre of the county of Berkshire.

The work was requested by the local Parish Council, the lowest tier of local government in the UK, in order to get a better understanding of local problems of the housing estates and initiatives that might be addressed in the near future. In particular, the members of the council wanted to hear the voices of local people. The Parish contains a number of housing estates which have been built on the outskirts of the town during the last thirty years. The housing is constructed along one side of one major road and is very close to a large motorway that runs from London to South Wales .

The assessment took place throughout June 1998 in two housing estates that had been identified by the Parish Council. During the work we used a range of PRA tools and we also adapted and devised new tools to make the work as effective as possible. We felt that some of our general comments about this

assessment may be typical of much of the PRA-centred work which is currently taking place in the UK. Some of the ideas may also apply to urban situations in developing countries.

• Some problems and challenges

Local people without local knowledge

We observed that a combination of factors have often led local people to live a life that is anything but local. Personal transport, greater leisure opportunities, fear of crime, longer working hours and families and friends living elsewhere are just some of the factors which have contributed to this.

It means that there are fewer and fewer opportunities for members of a household to interact with those who may be living nearby. PRA methods tend to rely on people knowing their surroundings and the people around them. Participatory approaches tend to presume that links exist between people in a local community.

Where people actually do not know much about where they live it means that there may only be limited scope for using techniques such as mapping and social mapping. However, the level of local knowledge and contacts can also vary significantly between different members of a household. The mother who works locally and has a child at playgroup or the older son who skates around the estate with his friends may be much more familiar with their local surroundings than the father who commutes to work on a daily basis.

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People without time

People appear to be very busy. As well as having little time to spare, this may be coupled with the fact that, in some cases, people do not talk to their neighbours and are therefore even less likely to talk to strangers. This poses problems for both setting up and finding local people with the time to do the interviews. In fact, the relative lack of trust may be more of a problem than the apparent lack of time. It may be that people claim not to have time when they mean that they are uneasy about getting involved with strangers.

PRA methods appear to rely upon a willingness among local people to be available to participate in the process over reasonably long periods of time. But throughout this assessment, the techniques had to be adapted to suit the circumstances of people unwilling to give much time.

People without links

Making contact with local people was more difficult in different parts of the same estate. One part of the estate has a more rapid turnover in housing and a higher proportion of commuters. There was suspicion regarding who we were and what we were doing. It could be argued that suspicion, particularly of strangers, has now become a bigger part of Britain's culture. This means that it can be difficult to approach people in the street which, in turn, made it a less comfortable experience for both the interviewer and the interviewee.

Two open meetings took place during the assessment, one on each estate. On the first estate, this meeting was widely publicised through the distribution of several hundred flyers, some through the local school and others delivered door-to-door. The publicity explained that everyone was welcome and that the purpose was to address issues of local concern. However, the meeting was very poorly attended. The experience is a common one at public and open meetings in the UK. Even specific interest groups and clubs on the estates seem to have difficulty in attracting people in large numbers.

It seems to be difficult to organise well-attended public meetings. This is especially true where the focus is very broad, as it must be, if the outsiders are not to set the agenda. Many PRA methods rely on communities being well linked internally and depend on the degree to which community leaders, or influential people within the community, are supportive of the process and can then call the meeting.

This was not the case in Berkshire. As "outsiders" we found it hard to make initial contacts in the community and the contacts that we made often did not lead us beyond the immediate group related to the contact. For example, we were able to meet a number of older people when they were meeting to play a game (Bingo) socially in the evening. However, the people did not seem to relate to each other except as players of the game and the meeting did not lead to further contacts.

It may be useful to try to understand why general meetings are easy for outsiders to call in rural situations in the South and difficult for outsiders to do the same in urban or Northern situations. Clearly, the underlying levels of trust within communities may be important but it may also be that the perceived status of the outsiders is also important. If insiders perceive the meeting to be of high status and likely to lead to some positive results for themselves or the community, then they might be more likely to attend.

• Some solutions

The alternative 'open' meeting

Our second attempt at an 'open' meeting was better attended than the first. This was because a different approach was used to make contact with local individuals and groups: time was spent interviewing a variety of community groups and local people. This served to raise the profile of the work that was taking place on the estate. It was helped by the fact there were stronger links between local people themselves.

Two weeks were spent getting to know and building up the level of trust between us, as the

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“outsiders”, and the local people. The meeting that took place was not really an open meeting in the sense of everyone being invited, but was more of a collection of groups that we had got to know and wanted to meet together to discuss the issues.

There were also many local issues which were of immediate concern to local people. This gave some people an obvious starting point for speaking out. In particular, we worked with a group of older people and a group of young people. Our earlier work had suggested that young people were perceived as a threat by the wider community and many people, older ones in particular, felt vulnerable. What was clear was the fact that these two groups often do not have the opportunity to have a constructive dialogue with one another. Young peoples’ voices are rarely heard in an open meeting and even less commonly those of older people and young people speaking together. This prevents there being an appreciation of one another’s viewpoint. In fact, during the second open meeting, the discussions showed that there was common ground between both groups, such as concern for the deteriorating physical environment and a recognition that more facilities were needed for young people.

Using disposable cameras

Disposable cameras were used as a way of working with both the young and older people. The main attraction about the cameras was that they could be used to record what local people thought of their environment. This was particularly effective with the group of young people as it can be difficult to capture their interest and find an effective medium for expressing their ideas.

The work with the cameras also presented the opportunity for setting up a series of meetings with each group and therefore being able to explore their ideas in more depth. There was the initial contact to discuss using the cameras, another contact to hand them out and then another to arrange their collection. Once the photos were developed, we met the group again and asked them to explain in their own words what each photo showed about what was important to them about the local area. Their comments were captured in captions for

each photo. Each group then agreed to display a selection of the photos accompanied by the captions at the Open meeting. The older people and the young people both welcomed the opportunity to attend the meeting and share their thoughts about the estate with others. It is an effective tool for starting a dialogue.

Other types of meeting

Given the poor attendance at public meetings, it may be possible to make use of a larger number of sequential interviews instead of using a group approach. In fact this appears to be the basis of other community development techniques such as, for example, the Neighbourhood Initiative Foundation’s Planning for Real¹.

We had to adapt some of our PRA tools to use sequential interviews - a sequence of short interviews with small numbers of people, or sometimes individuals, covering the same issue. The use of sequential interviews means that one major strength of participatory interviews is lost: that of allowing ‘insiders’ to learn from one another. However, it does present the views of a larger number of local people which the ‘outsider’ will then draw together to give an insight into the broader picture.

For example, a typical pattern of sequential interviews is meeting people as they go shopping or go to or leave a social event. The outsiders stop individuals or form a small group of three or four and rapidly share ideas and information on a map. After a few minutes the individuals move on, to be replaced by another small *ad hoc* group who would repeat the same interview. After a number of such interviews the outsiders would have a lot of ideas on the views of the insiders but the insiders themselves cannot meet each other through these sequential interviews and cannot know more of the views of those they live nearby.

¹ In Planning for Real a detailed three-dimensional model of an area is built. This is displayed in a public place and insiders are invited to study the model and to add comments using flags and cards to represent their ideas and views on problems and potential solutions.

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It may, however, be possible to incorporate this way of working into the preparation for an “alternative” open meeting where local people can come together and the learning exchange between “insiders” will be able to take place. See the final section for more ideas on this.

Mapping from prepared maps

We used a large number of photocopies of maps for insiders to put down ideas of where they go and what they know about the area. We found that people responded much more readily to street maps than to more detailed maps such as those based on Ordnance Survey data (see Figure 1). Most people could react very quickly to a street map of the local area and put a whole range of different sites and events on it.

This is not such an open-ended technique as a more general mapping exercise where people would create their own map. One advantage is that it is quick which allows a larger number of people to contribute their views. Most of the people that we interviewed would simply not be able to give us the time necessary for them to construct their own map of the area. The method is clearly also more open than specific questioning might be. We were introduced to a range of ideas through the maps; for example, where traffic problems are, where young people cause problems, etc. These were clearly openings for further discussion which were followed up at other times.

Quick scoring

Later in the process when a number of local issues were appearing from a range of interviews, we developed a bright sheet of paper showing a range of local topics in a few words and a small graphic design. Each diagram included a scoring device which allowed the interviewees to allocate a value of between one and five for each topic. We were able to present the sheet to people and allow them to suggest which of the topics was the most important and which required the most action to improve things. As usual, the dialogue that the diagrams provoked was more important and informative than the scores allocated to the different topics.

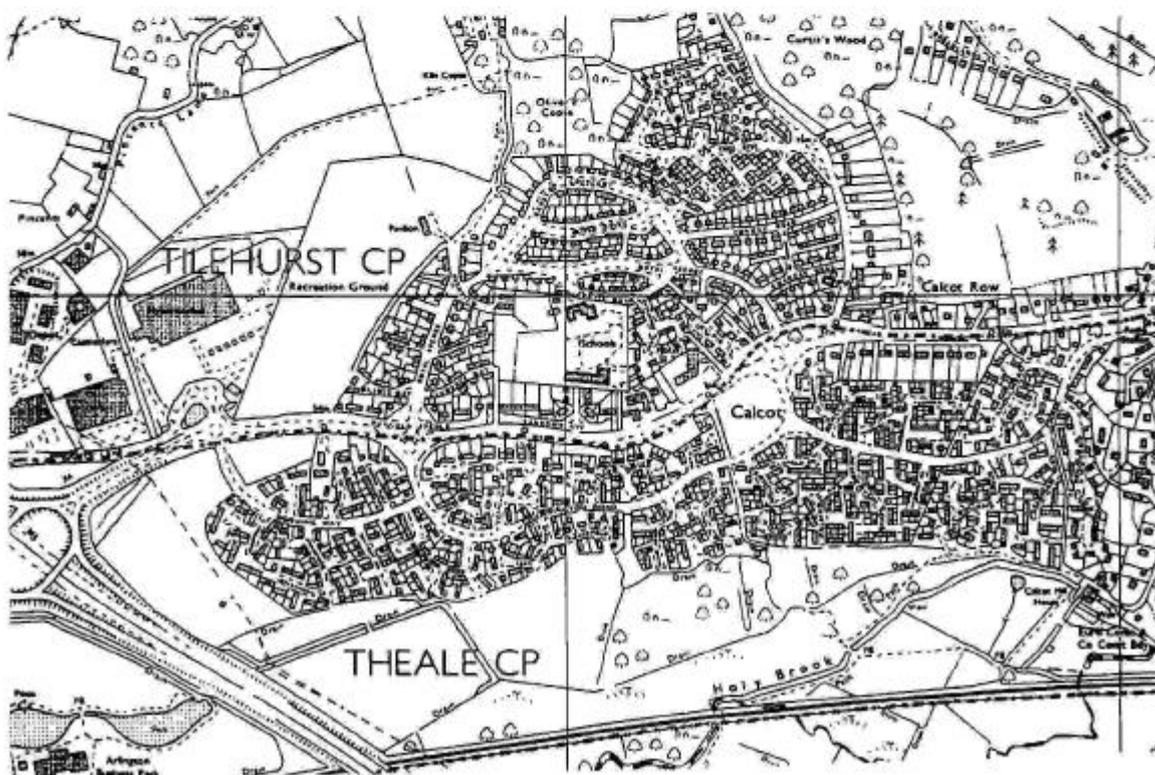
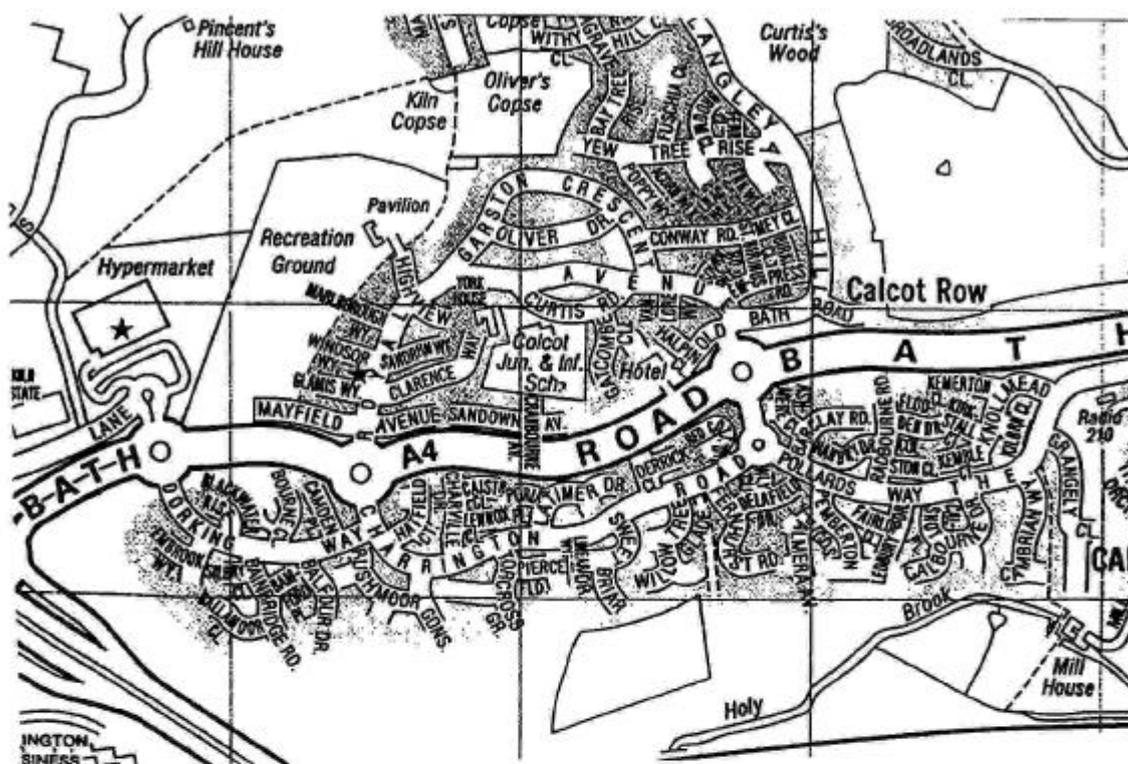
Such rapid solo interviews seem to collect good information and the views expressed do corroborate the ideas and issues raised in other interviews and with topics chosen in the open meeting.

The need for good corroboration

The use of very rapid small interviews poses serious questions on the representative nature of the ideas being shared with outsiders. The method needs to be considered as only one of a number of techniques being used in contact with particular communities.

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Figure 1. Street maps (above) help people to locate themselves more easily than the more detailed ordnance survey maps (below)



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However, the methods also throw critical light on the representative nature of the large community meetings that might take place in rural contexts in developing countries which have been the main breeding grounds for PRA ideas for some time past.

• **The process becomes the purpose**

The ideas expressed here lead towards a more general observation that the whole purpose of the community assessment is changed, where it is difficult or impossible to organise effective group meetings. As we suggest above, a number of PRA exercises seem to take the organisation of community meetings for granted. There is often no mention at all in the reports of how the original community meetings were called or organised; the PRA activities seem to start once the meetings are already under way.

We suspect that in urban situations in developing countries and certainly in the peri-urban situation that we worked in, there may be no possibility of the community itself organising a general and open meeting that might be the starting point of the relationship between the in- and outsiders. For this reason, the process of bringing together sufficient numbers of interested people becomes the objective of a lot of the outsiders' activities. These activities may clearly use a lot of PRA tools and derivatives of the tools. However, the real direction of the work at this stage is the building of sufficient trust to allow and encourage the different sub-groups of insiders that one is working with to come to meet the others.

Only when this trust-building process has got far enough to allow the general meeting to take place can the insiders then start to learn from each other, a key purpose of PRA, but which may not happen in communities where the internal linkages are weak. Clearly the need to start with smaller groups and develop a level of interest and a level of trust so that larger meetings can be held implies a much longer and slower process than one which can start with well-attended general meetings.

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• **Learning from using PRA in the UK: a response from Alison West**

When it comes to assessing community needs, there are plenty of methods in use in the UK already, most sharing the same underlying principles and adapting these to the area, the time and the budget in question. Some lay more stress on one approach rather than another, some package themselves perhaps too much but on the whole, there is no shortage for the professional to choose from.

Into this established picture comes an import from workers in developing countries, using techniques such as Participatory Rural Appraisal which have been applied to rural areas. From its use to assess health and social needs in North Derbyshire to the current example of Berkshire, the question is does it transfer well, does it add anything to the range already available?

The authors of this assessment show some of the difficulties: modern UK life just does not fit a rural or village model and considerable adaptation has to take place, with sub-categorisation of the community into local and non-local players.

The authors note an unwillingness to commit time and this shows up one of the contradictions of PRA: it is a process not in the control of local people. Community assessments carried out by an external agency, even one as close to the community as a Parish Council, inevitably raise the issue of resistance. There is a world of difference between a local community collectively engaged in solving a clear and agreed problem (such as the parents against drugs initiatives in

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Merseyside) and the more abstract process of a helping agency seeking views. Time constraints vanish, as do many of the other obstacles of non-joining, not knowing one's neighbours etc., when there is a common purpose.

The non-attendance at public meetings is predictable and it is surprising that a meeting of this sort was considered worth having at all. The issue may be less one of resistance to outsiders than one of common sense: why should people attend such meetings?

No community is without its own internal links and these operate at a surprisingly high level, even in apparently alienated communities. As the workers found, their task is made easier by using these existing structures.

What is interesting is that the Parish Council felt it had to bring in people who spent some time getting to know the area and its networks: conducting participatory planning is best done by those who are already well known in the local structures.

As with Planning for Real, visualisation methods are reliably effective for a particular sort of issue, often the more environmentally-oriented. Mapping techniques do give good basic information, for example about pedestrian patterns, but it is debatable if these go much beyond predictable issues.

The overall impression given by this description of process is one of experimentation, where methods are tried and discarded, or tried and adapted. The underlying principles are not clear.

In conclusion, the emphasis in the paper on the unwillingness of local people to organise themselves into group meetings seems bizarre. With an emphasis on group methods, rather than shared principles and concern for process, PRA could become a reincarnation of the community consultation of twenty years ago, rather than the best of current practice, which works on a long-term basis with local people, which operates with a high degree of local assent and control, which seeks such assent before consulting on anything, which is linked

to imminent action and is not an abstract exercise, which engages in a slow dialogue that gets beyond the obvious. Attention to the process rather than the methods may be the better lesson to apply from PRA to community development in the UK.

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• **Authors' response: Anneli Connold and John Rowley**

In this article, we have not described the whole process in which we are involved and which is still in-going, but only our wrestling with PRA tools which we thought would be interesting to the readership of *PLA Notes*. In many situations, open public meetings can be used as a starting point for community initiatives and many people try to do this. Where this is not possible, the process of engaging with people and helping to make links and reinforce the links between people becomes part of the development process itself. We do not believe that all communities have strong internal linkages. Some have more and stronger linkages and some have fewer and weaker linkages. It is harder to work in the latter.