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Using participatory consultation to help improve local government performance and services

by **GARY TURNER**

Introduction

Edinburgh is the capital city of Scotland and has a population of about 800,000. Clean Edinburgh 2000 is a major strategy of the City of Edinburgh Council designed to make the city a cleaner and more pleasant place to live, work and play. Prior to introducing new working practices to try to achieve this, a consultation exercise was carried out by the Council's Environment and Consumer Services Department in order to establish a baseline position and identify priorities.

Having heard about the success of other City of Edinburgh Council departments in using Participatory Appraisal (PA) methods to conduct consultation, the department decided to use similar methods. This decision was taken because it was felt that the PA approach has methods that are about making people feel able and confident enough to offer their opinions; about removing barriers to participation, both physical and perceived; and about hearing what people want to say rather than what they think you want to hear. Department officials were aware from previous consultation exercises that they had failed to connect with 'Jo Public' – those citizens who just get on with their daily life, and who are, to an extent, disenfranchised from the activist-based decision-influencing processes operating throughout the Council. In particular they hoped to engage with those people who do not:

- fill in questionnaires
- attend public meetings
- write letters to newspapers
- engage with officialdom.

Prior to the consultation, 75 staff (who included street cleaners, project managers, administrators and receptionists) underwent two days of intensive training – predominantly geared to making each person aware of their own prejudices, assumptions and the barriers to positive engagement with citizens. The training also addressed good and bad practice in dealing with people face to face and in developing techniques to make people feel at ease and confident enough to offer their honest opinions. Participants discussed with the trainers the possible methodologies and they felt it was not a good idea to use the more traditional consultation methods (like questionnaires or public meetings), which tend to take up a lot of people's time to address an issue that is not usually of primary importance to citizens. It was decided to make things as easy as possible for members of the public to engage with officials by having the officials go out and about, with a simple and quick method. This method was successfully used to engage with about 150 people each day in 70 areas.

Methodology

For the purpose of this consultation, maps were produced of

Analysing the master maps



Local residents complete the survey



the area in question – with as little ‘map dressing’ as possible. People were asked to indicate (using a menu of letter symbols) on an individual map where there were problems:

- Litter
- Dog fouling
- Overflowing rubbish from bins
- Weeds
- Graffiti
- Dumping of large items (old furniture, etc.)
- Uncut grass
- Any other cleanliness/visual amenity related problem.

This menu was generated from a list of the Council’s statutory responsibilities with regard to keeping the city clean, and a list which had been used in an earlier postal questionnaire survey (although it was still decided to have the ‘any other problem’ category just in case – and it was actually used by a few consultees).

Furnished with a clipboard each, eager members of staff went out onto the streets of Edinburgh to start a comprehensive programme of consultation... face to face interviews using the map and menu were carried out in places such as church halls, betting shops, pubs, libraries, supermarkets and on the street.

During the course of the consultation, babies were held, along with bags and dog leads; shopping was carried to cars, life stories and tales of long ago were heard, secrets of marital

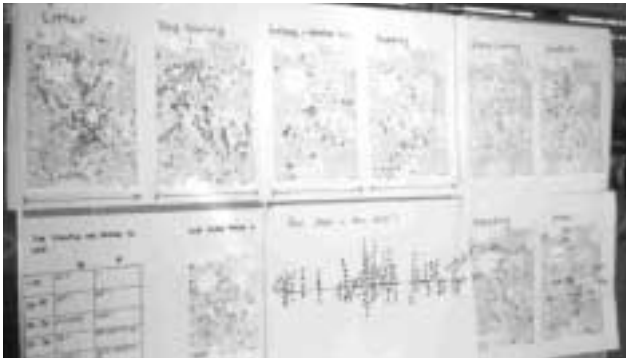
tribulations and births of grandchildren were revealed. All of this has added to the (initially unexpected) fun of carrying out the consultation but was also contrived to make the people being interviewed feel relaxed, comfortable, and confident enough to share their views, using their own language in their own environment – a very privileged position for the team of council officials.

From the individual maps all the information was transferred onto a ‘master’ (composite) map for each ‘Clean Edinburgh’ topic, which immediately and clearly illustrated where the most densely marked, and hence the most problematic, locations were. Copies of these master maps were given to council officials and workers (including street cleaners) after each area consultation, so that priority and extra attention and resources could be given to the worst problem areas just days after citizens had indicated them on a map.

Benefits and outcomes

- Cost effective – despite the use of council officials’ work time there was no apparent detriment in the provision of core functions. We engaged with approximately 9,000 people – at a cost of less than £1 per person, including the full analysis and interpretation of the information given (as opposed to estimated per person costs of £4 - £15 for questionnaire-based surveys);
- We used an inclusive technique and we reached people

The master maps for each Clean Edinburgh topic



who wouldn't normally air their views or opinions;

- We did not raise unrealistic expectations;
- Opinions were expressed in a non-judgmental environment;
- We maintained a belief in the capacity of people of all ages to analyse their situation and come up with good, new original ideas;
- By undertaking outreach work we made it easy for people to participate and easy for us to engage with them in a positive way;
- By speaking to the people who know their area we can prioritise our resources and focus on the problems that matter to people.

The results were not earth shattering; it is quite clear that dog fouling and litter are the areas of most concern to those who live and work in each area. This confirms what we also found out from a postal questionnaire, but it is invaluable information – we know that we are now dealing with issues that are of relevance across the community and not just for those who are more able and motivated to offer their views in the conventional ways.

This particular way of doing consultation brought the Council many positive outcomes, including some that we did not envisage. The team that was trained in Participatory Appraisal was made up of groups of staff of different levels, and from different sites within the department. During the training they were able to mix, be themselves and share their individual insights and experiences in a comfortable environment. This was invaluable to the whole process. Staff were empowered and felt involved. Most of them were consulting on the issues that would have a definite, direct impact on their work.

The Council officials have found these consultation

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methods so easy to use that they have applied them to other projects. With members of a community group, some of them carried out a consultation day to find out if the public would support the introduction of a dog free zone on the beach during the summer months. They used a simple method and the results were very clear; the resounding 'yes' to a dog free zone will allow a pilot scheme to commence next summer.

Conclusions

Listening to local people will continue to be a mainstay of the Clean Edinburgh campaign. It provides primary information that allows us to plan the use of our resources to tackle issues of most concern to the local community.

What we have at our disposal is a complete analysis of the cleanliness issues throughout the city and a baseline measurement of how clean the city is perceived to be. The whole purpose of our department's function is to make the city a cleaner place to live and work in. It is therefore essential that we now remeasure each area, after a period of one year, and after new working practices based on the initial consultation have been implemented. How are we going to do this? By resurveying the whole city again using PA methodology. This is now underway. The information from this repeat exercise, in conjunction with an ongoing Cleanliness Index Monitoring System carried out by Keep Scotland Beautiful will provide powerful evidence of change, both to the absolute cleanliness of the city and also in the perceptions of cleanliness for those who live and work in this unique capital.

Using these techniques and our new skills we are confident that we can effectively track the needs and aspirations of the citizens of Edinburgh to provide a service that mirrors their needs and expectations.

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