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Cowley Road Matters: community transport and road design

by CLARE SYMONDS

Introduction

Cowley Road Matters is an innovative, and possibly even unique, UK public consultation project. In January 2003, Oxfordshire County Council received funding of up to £1 million from the Government to improve the safety and environment of the Cowley Road, a busy arterial route through the heart of East Oxford in the south of the UK. It is a densely populated residential area and has an extremely varied mix of mainly small local shops, pubs and restaurants. East Oxford Action (EOA), a social enterprise and community consultancy, was asked to carry out the consultation and community participation aspects of the project.

Over the course of a year in 2003-2004, East Oxford Action engaged a very large proportion of the local urban community in designing and implementing a major road improvement scheme for this busy, diverse part of Oxford. EOA grew out of a successful Single Regeneration Budget Programme in the East Oxford area.¹ Underpinning EOA's work is the conviction that communities hold the answers and that regeneration should be rigorous and **should** promote cooperation and knowledge sharing. EOA also

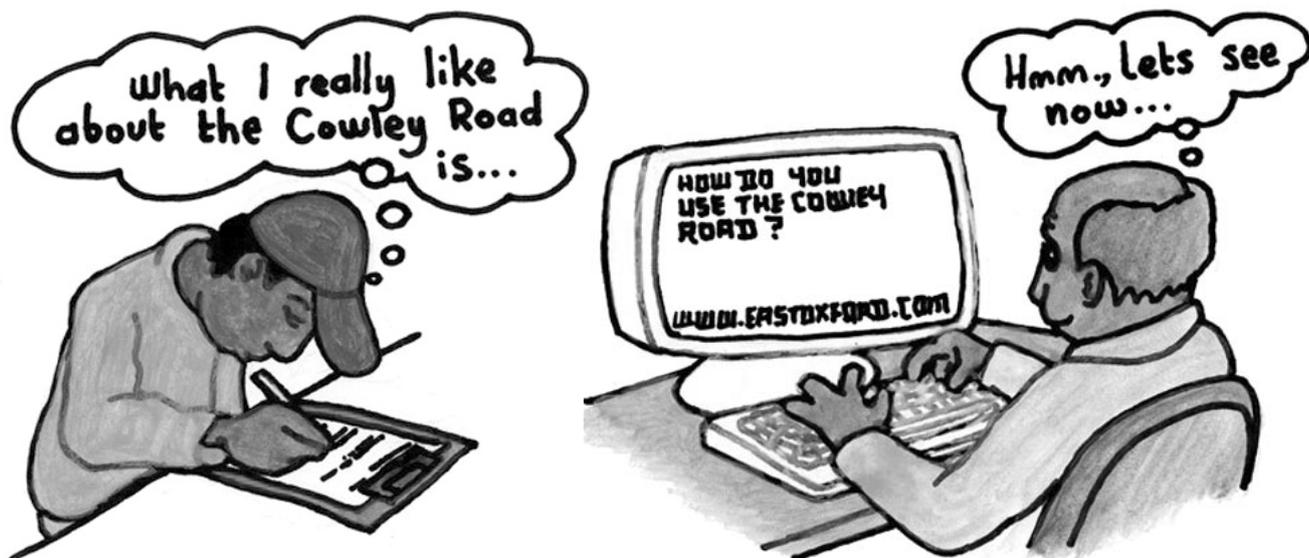
carried out Mapping Matters – a consultation process in East Oxford that aimed to find out what local people thought about the area and what it needed – and which helped to secure the bid for Cowley Road Matters.

Background

The Cowley Road is what is known as a mixed priority route. This means that there are a lot of people who use it, including buses, cyclists, car drivers and pedestrians, all jostling for space. It is a narrow, busy street with many competing interests. Cowley Road has one of the highest frequencies of bus services in the city, with many cyclists, and has one of the highest road accident rates in the county of Oxfordshire. Local businesses need parking space to load and unload their goods. Car drivers want smooth passage through the road, and bus drivers need space to drive safely. Pedestrians want to have space to walk – in particular, the nature of the Cowley Road is that people stop and chat and want space to socialise.

The aim of the project was to involve and engage the users of the Cowley Road in redesigning it to suit their needs. East Oxford Action decided from the outset that the community's views would be heard and its priorities met wherever possible. If it were not possible, the reasons why would be made clear. The project involved a number of stages, giving people several opportunities to learn about the process, contribute their own knowledge, explore a range of options, and be involved in the final design. At every stage, genuine

¹ UK Government funded programmes that aim to improve the quality of life for people living in areas of need.



community involvement was a priority. All of this was intended to foster a sense of ownership amongst the local community: to help them feel that this was their project.

The process

Initial consultation

The Cowley Road Matters process involved several stages. A team of local people was created and trained in consultation methods. They were people from different walks of life known by East Oxford Action, who had been working in the area for five years. The team included an Asian woman, a refugee, someone who had been homeless and someone who was disabled. The team consulted widely among users of the Cowley Road, seeking out their views on the state of the Cowley Road and its environment.

This stage took more than three months. During this time, information was obtained about how people used the Cowley Road, what was working well, and people's perceptions of problems with the road. Businesses were made aware of the project in the regular East Oxford Action Business Newsletter before being approached by the consultation team. A website was also set up for people to find information online.

The team used different methods to talk to different people, including questionnaires and interviews. Interviews were carried out with groups such as taxi drivers and bus passengers. During streetwork, interviews were captured on video with people in cafés and who were literally 'on the street'.

Workshops were also held with various groups, employing a range of techniques including drawing on maps, arranging models of the Cowley Road, and participatory

video.² The groups included Asian women's groups, mental health groups, refugees and asylum seekers, as well as people with learning difficulties. Also two workshops were held with church groups who worshipped at churches on the Cowley Road and some with the police and local traffic wardens.

The shop as a drop in centre

A shop on the Cowley Road was transformed into a drop in centre where people could come in on specific days and write down or discuss their views about the Cowley Road. Originally this had not been part of the project, but we asked the owner of an empty shop if he would mind us using it and he agreed.

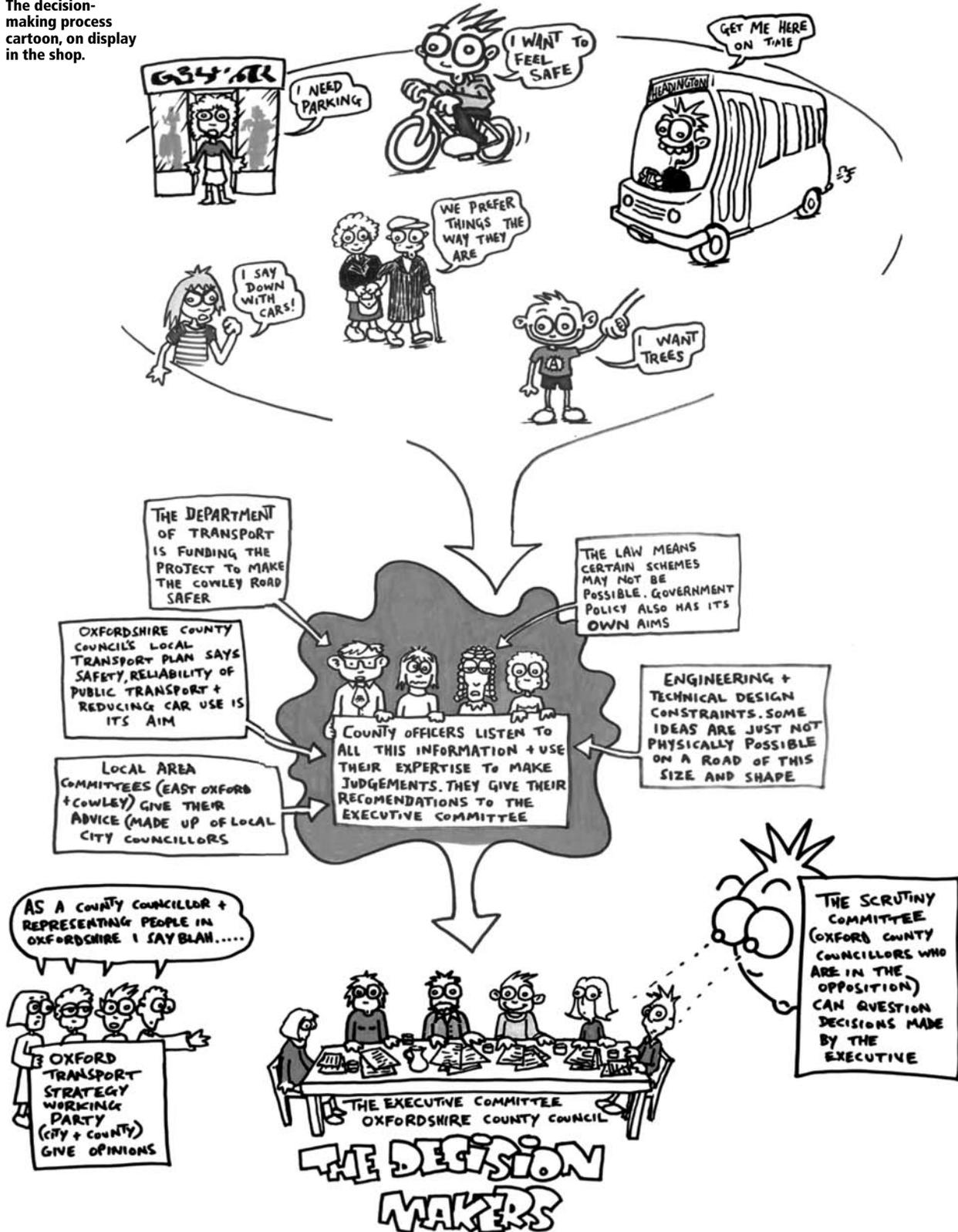
We could not miss an opportunity like this. Situated in the heart of the Cowley Road, it acted as both somewhere to display ongoing information as well as a place to drop in and talk to experts, local authority officers and community representatives. It was December and the weather was cold and damp, so we offered tea and mince pies to entice people in, as well as children's activities, a sofa to sit on, and a toilet!

During the consultation days, an average of four members of the consultation team, either in the shop and on the street outside, encouraged passers by to come into the shop, to learn about the road scheme, and to give their views. Team members explained the consultation process and why it was taking place, using prepared guidelines and showing people the decision-making cartoon, and using the questionnaire as a basis for discussion.

² Participants are trained in video techniques, so that they can interview each other using the video to record each other's opinions and views. The participants are usually more relaxed and at ease when being interviewed by peers. Participants then edit the video to ensure they have control over the process.

HOW THE DECISIONS ARE MADE

The decision-making process cartoon, on display in the shop.



GENERAL SECTION

Cartoon: Steve Brenig

A close-up of the Cowley Road model. Models created by Charles Parrack, Oxford Brookes University, UK



Photo: Al Cane

Maps and models

The team also utilised large-scale maps, using photos of the premises down the road, on which road users were able to draw out their most frequently used routes. The model was laminated so people could draw on it and blocks of wood made to scale were used to represent different modes of transport. Other large-scale maps of the Cowley Road were hand drawn with landmarks to orientate people. These were used in workshops and at the shop to show people's travel movements and to depict either in writing, symbols or drawing what people wanted. People were asked to write their comments on post-it notes and stick them in the appropriate place on the maps. These were regularly transferred to large notice boards where they were clustered into themes.

Design days

We then held two design days, during which the community and road designers took the findings from the consultation and used them to inform a basic initial design. The day involved several activities, including watching the participatory video of different people's opinions and looking at the results of the initial consultation. This meant that people could still be represented even if they didn't want to attend the workshop, which was a long day with detailed discussions, that not everyone had time for.

Afterwards participants were divided into groups and were each given specific questions to try to answer, regarding issues for different modes of transport on the road. Each group then met with each of the other groups, to consider

which elements of their design would be good for both of them, and on which areas they disagreed. A chart was drawn up with the results, which the design consultants took away with them.

At the second design day the design consultants showed how they had taken the design briefs from the first design day and turned them into one road design. The participants asked questions and discussed the designs and made their comments using post-it notes. The design team took away the comments and made changes to it.

From community scrutiny to finalising the design

The latest design was then shown at a 'community scrutiny' exhibition, held at the shop. Over 1,000 people attended it. The shop was open for a total of 21 hours over 6 days. People were able to drop in and examine the proposals that had been developed further by the design consultants, as a result of the comments made at the last design day.

On display was an explanation of the consultation process, a summary of the initial consultation results, a summary of the thinking behind the proposals and a five-metre long map of the Cowley Road with a detailed explanation of what was being done and why. It showed every aspect of the new road design and explained every decision. One person said having the model was 'like having the Cowley Road in the room with you' and made it much easier to think and talk about the issues. The different sections of the display were colour coded to enable people to navigate around the exhibition. Comments, suggestions and criticisms of the design received during the exhibition were then used to amend the plan.

The final basic plan was then exhibited widely at a local community carnival. This is an annual event run by East Oxford Action attended by 20,000 people. Further detailed design workshops were held to inform the detailed plan, which included features such as furniture and cycle racks, as well as the materials to be used. Local artists attended these workshops and also people who had come to the previous events and who had expressed an interest in the detailed design workshops. The County Council's executive committee then approved the final design in January 2005, and work started on the final agreed scheme in April 2005.

What was successful about CRM?

An indication of how well informed the community had been was the level of interest in the public scrutiny of the plans for the road, which were viewed in the shop by over 1000 people over four days. The evaluation report describes this

The model helped participants to visualise the design of the road. Models created by Charles Parrack, Oxford Brookes University, UK



Photo: Al Cane

level of interest as 'unprecedented'. Participants also noted the unusual level of interest:

The Cowley Road community is buzzing with this scheme, their interest and enthusiasm has to be seen to be believed.

This was partly because the consultation process was multistage and took place over a long period of time. People were able to get involved at different levels and in different ways. Some people filled in a questionnaire on the website, others took part in workshops, some people were interviewed as they journeyed on the bus while others spent two days working with the design team to work out the basic design.

Transparency in decision-making

It was clear that not everyone's ideas, priorities and desires could be included in the one scheme, but we had to tell people why theirs had or had not been included. This meant making sure that the decision-making process was clear and

The shop was particularly successful in getting people involved. Models created by Charles Parrack, Oxford Brookes University, UK

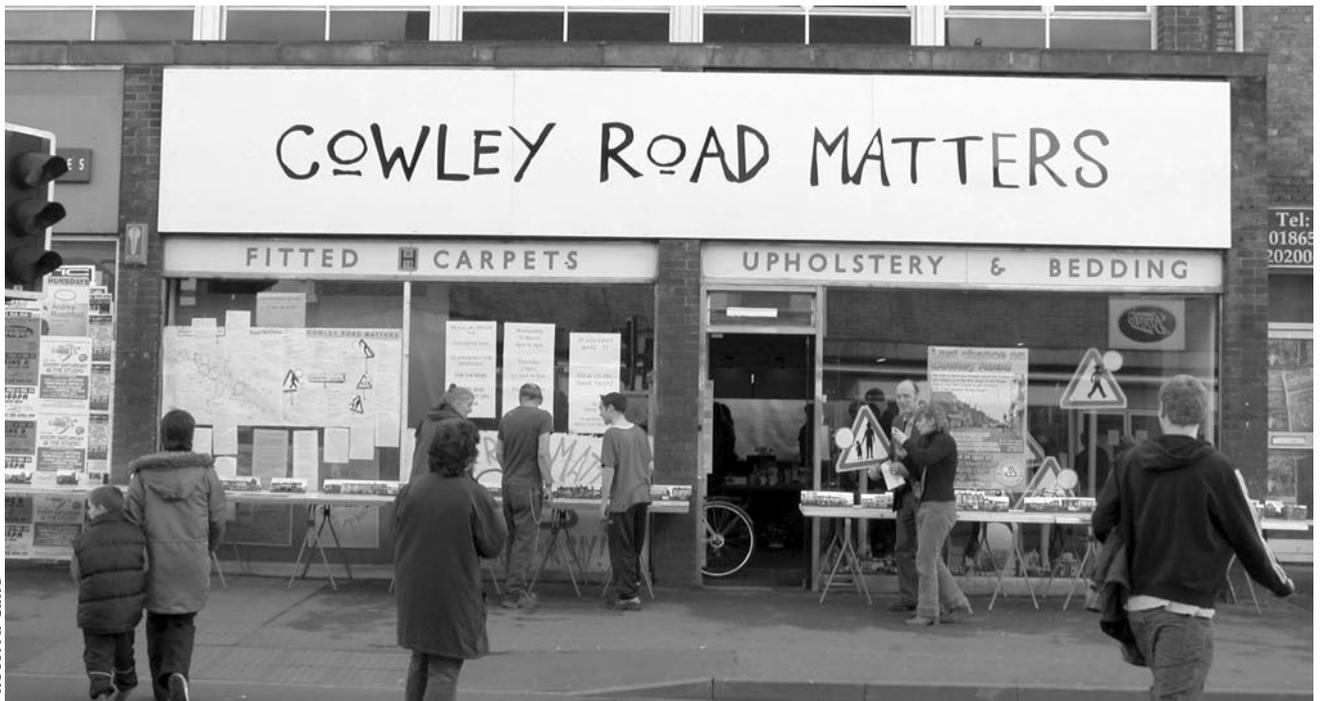


Photo: Al Cane

justifiable. The way we did this was to draw up a list of guidelines, which were displayed at every consultation event. They enabled people to understand what parameters the County Council were working within, and made it easier to explain why some ideas could not be taken forward if they did not fit in with the guidelines. Participants were shown these guidelines and asked to specify their own and these were added to the list.

One of the most successful aspects of the project was the decision-making cartoon. This showed who was making the decisions and what affected their choices. Together with the guidelines that were established at the beginning of the consultation this helped the consultation team to better manage the expectations of participants, which helped to contribute to transparency. Participants were clear about the scope of their involvement. It seemed that by being transparent about the process of decision-making, people were more ready to accept difficult decisions, which needed to be explained.

Designs have been based on the results of previous consultation and rationale have been explained well.

Excellent consultation process, great that everyone can be involved in the decisions and understand the difficulties due to conflicting priorities of people using/ working in the area.

I can see how hard it is to reconcile users' needs.

Time and space to stop and think: the success of the shop

One of the most successful means of informing the community was using the empty shop. An evaluation report prepared by the Oxford Brookes University Planning Department notes that many participants thought that this aspect of the consultation process was extremely successful (Brownhill, 2004). The shop was a neutral space where many people felt comfortable. In fact, during the drop in sessions many people came in out of curiosity thinking it was a new shop. Some of these people would not have come to a consultation exhibition had it been held in a community centre or Council building.

For example, a homeless man came in to the shop for warmth and a cup of tea. He got involved with the project and spent many hours outside handing out leaflets out and telling people what was happening inside. He managed to attract a different kind of person into the shop than we did, people that perhaps would not have come in if he hadn't been there. We don't know exactly what he gained from being involved but he felt comfortable enough to stay with us for a number of days and volunteer. This was the type of atmosphere we tried to promote in the shop to make people feel comfortable about coming inside and talking. This is what one participant thought:

Advertising and having a shop front has meant people



Cartoon : Steve Brenig

have had time and space (designated area) to stop and think. It has shown its fruition in the plans.

Using participatory video

Using participatory video was not only a successful way of engaging people but also a powerful way of showing others what they thought and felt. Combined with the use of maps and models it made the complex and rather dry topic of road safety come alive.

After the initial consultation and design days when the plans for the road were being shown at the community scrutiny exhibition, the groups we had worked with using participatory video came to the shop to look at the plans and see how their views had been listened to. First, we watched the video to remind them of what they had said then we looked at the plans. This had an immensely powerful effect and was commented on by one group leader³:

They have really gained in confidence and self esteem, speaking up about things that are important in their own lives. Seeing that their views have been heard helped them to feel safer and more a part of their own community. They felt empowered.

³ Comment made by the coordinator of a group of people with learning difficulties from ethnic minorities. The group participated in two video workshops for the consultation.

“The shop was a neutral space where many people felt comfortable... Some of these people would not have come to a consultation exhibition had it been held in a community centre or Council building”

Lessons learnt

The assessment of the project's success was confirmed by the independent evaluation, which showed that people had been more deeply involved in the consultation process, and had a greater input into the final design, than would have been achieved by more conventional approaches. In doing so, the project helped to rejuvenate both the area and the workings of local democracy.

But despite the good feedback there were still others we had to convince. One trader on the Cowley Road commented that, despite having been involved in the consultation process from the start and having attended all events apart from the design days, she felt she had not been consulted enough. When probed as to how the process could have been improved, she responded, 'you didn't tell me how important it was'.

This was an important learning point. Unless members of the community feel that the subject of the consultation is relevant to them, they may not become fully engaged. A matter that is high priority for a local authority may not at first seem relevant to a local resident. It may take some time before an issue becomes personally resonant – hence the need for sufficient time to engage the community fully.

In addition, often the term 'hard to reach' is used to describe certain sectors of the local community who do not traditionally get involved with consultation. However we feel that using this term may guarantee that they become just that. The consultation process for the Cowley Road scheme demonstrated that with clear planning, flexible thinking, and the use of appropriate and innovative consultation techniques, sectors of the community that are traditionally labelled as 'hard to reach' can become accessible, and their voices heard. Perhaps 'different' rather than the implied 'difficult' to reach would be a more useful definition. Perhaps the definition should be turned on its head, and consultation processes should be labelled as being 'hard to engage with' if they do not involve all sectors of a community.

What we would do differently

Hindsight is a marvellous thing and there are aspects of the

project we would do better. One issue that we thought about a lot afterwards was that of recording people's ethnic backgrounds. Recording ethnicity of participants is a sensitive issue. EOA used the census data classification system to identify the different ethnic groups. However discussions with participants raised awareness that this classification system may not be satisfactory (e.g., 'Asian' groups were identified according to country of origin, whereas 'white' groups were merely described as 'other'). Some participants did not wish to be classified in terms of their ethnicity, and some felt it difficult to decide, particularly those of mixed race.

When carrying out any project that involves participants from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, is important to give full consideration to how useful it would be to collect information on ethnic origin, rather than to collect this information as a matter of course. If it is deemed useful, then it must be collected with considerable sensitivity.

Conclusions

We believe that the project was successful for a number of reasons:

- The number of people involved exceeded expectations: over 2000 local people were engaged in designing the

scheme – a far greater number than is often achieved in any consultation.

- Sectors of the community whose voices usually go unheard were consulted and engaged.
- The overwhelming majority of those involved felt positive about the project. As a result, pride and engagement in the local area has been boosted.
- The project raised the profile of the area and provided employment for 20 local people.
- The project improved the relationship between the public and the local authority. Many residents felt it was the first time that attention had been paid to their views.

The benefits of engaging the community to such an extent have been broad and varied. It is clear that the process has had a significant impact on the final road safety scheme and helped its implementation, but has also resulted in greater community cohesion, better relations with local authorities and raising the profile of the Cowley Road. In addition, the sense of community ownership of the road that has increased as a result of the consultation may lead to safer behaviour on the road, and the understanding of other people's needs and difficulties may reduce conflict, and ultimately reduce accidents.

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REFERENCES

Brownhill, S. (2004) 'Evaluation of the public consultation for the Cowley Road Safety Demonstration Project.' Interim report, September 2004. Oxford Brookes University: UK

NOTES

For more information on the project or any of the issues raised please get in touch.



Details of the project can be found on our website, there is also a video available in DVD or VHS form and a 70 page report on the process available as a portable document file (PDF).

EOA also offers training and advice in consultation and community participation. For more details please see our website www.eastOxford.com