

# PLANNING -Getting

By Nick Wates



Nick Wates is a community planning consultant, author of "The Community Planning Handbook" (Earthscan, 2000) and site editor of [www.communityplanning.net](http://www.communityplanning.net). His new book "The Community Planning Event Manual" is to be published by Earthscan this summer.

At the end of any community planning activity – a workshop, exhibition or town meeting for instance – it is good practice to ask participants whether they thought it worthwhile.

Mostly the results will be very positive – because practitioners have got good at making such activity enjoyable, and getting involved in planning the future of one's community is inherently interesting.

Comments such as "more such events should be held", "it showed that consultation really can work" and "it was great to have all the people involved in the issue at the same place at the same time" are typical.

But the long term picture may not be so rosy. Ask the same people the same question a year later and the activity's value may not be so apparant.

"Not heard anything more about it", "Whatever happened to that project?" and

"What a waste of time that was" are likely to be more common responses.

Most depressing, people are likely to be cynical about taking part in any future similar activities. The official jargon for this is 'consultation fatigue'. But it is really just fatigue from bad consultation; consultation

which is not part of a coherent strategy and not followed up so that people feel, probably correctly, that nothing has been achieved by their effort.

There is no longer any excuse for this. A wealth of experience and good practice material now exists. General principles have been identified which apply universally. And there is an ever-expanding menu of methods for engaging people in planning and design: new ways of people interacting; new types of event; new support frameworks.

But the key to success is to select an appropriate sequence of methods to form a coherent overall strategy for any specific situation a community faces.

**Although involving people may be seen as a 'good thing' in itself as part of a move towards more participatory democracy, the main objective will normally be something practical – creating a masterplan to guide development in an area; finding the best uses for a particular plot of land or building; making local transport more sustainable.**

It will always be difficult to work out the best approach in any particular situation. There are no blueprints and every community has to think it through for itself. But there are an increasing number of

practical tools to help with this and people with experience to advise on their use.

A growing body of case study material from successful projects demonstrates that where the process is organized well, local communities can be fully involved in even highly complex planning issues with ensuing huge benefits in terms of the quality of the end product and in citizen morale.

## Some general principles of community planning:

### Involve all sections of the community

People of different ages, gender, backgrounds and cultures almost invariably have different perspectives. Ensure that a full spectrum of the community is involved. This is usually far more important than involving large numbers.

### Work on location

Wherever possible, base community planning activities physically in the area being planned. This makes it much easier for everyone to bridge the gap from concept to reality.

### Visualise

People can participate far more effectively if information is presented visually rather than in words. A

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# the Process Right

great deal of poor development, and hostility to good development, is due to people not understanding what it will look like. Use graphics, maps, illustrations, cartoons, drawings, photomontages and models wherever possible. And make the process itself visible by using flipcharts, Post-it notes, coloured dots and banners.

## Communicate

Use all available media to let people know what you are doing and how they can get involved. Community newspapers or broadsheets and, increasingly, websites are invaluable. Information provision is a vital element of all participatory activities

## Spend money

Effective participation processes take time and energy. There are methods to suit a range of budgets and much can be achieved using only people's time and energy. But over-tight budgets usually lead to cutting corners and poor results. Remember that community planning is an important activity, the success or failure of which may have dramatic implications for future generations as well as your own resources. The costs of building the wrong thing in the wrong place can be astronomical and make the cost of proper community planning pale into insignificance. Budget generously.

## Build local capacity

Long-term community sustainability depends on developing human and social capital. Take every opportunity to develop local skills and capacity. Involve local people in surveying their own situation, running their own programmes and managing local assets. Help people to understand how planning processes work and how they can be influenced. Communications and cultural activities are particularly

effective at building capacity.

## Follow up

Lack of follow-up is the most common failing, usually due to a failure to plan and budget for it. Make sure you set aside time and resources for documenting, publicising and acting on the results of any community planning initiative.

## Mixture of methods

Use a variety of involvement methods as different people will want to take part in different ways. For instance, some will be happy to write letters, others will prefer to make comments at an exhibition or take part in workshop sessions.

## Local ownership of the process

The community planning process should be 'owned' by local people. Even though consultants or national organisations may be providing advice and taking responsibility for certain activities, the local community should take responsibility for the overall process.

## Plan your own process carefully

Careful planning of the process is vital. Avoid rushing into any one approach. Look at alternatives. Design a process to suit the circumstances. This may well involve combining a range of methods or devising new ones. Mulling is one of the most valuable tools of a process planner.

## Further information

*The Community Planning Website [www.communityplanning.net](http://www.communityplanning.net) managed by Nick Wates is a good starting point and has links to other online and offline resources.*

