

# Public participation success needs tailor-made approach

**Nick Wates** argues that the planning and development system needs changing if local communities are to become properly involved in urban design.

"Even well managed public participation methods may be ineffective if the statutory framework mitigates against the outcome being taken forward."

**T**here is now an enormous demand by local communities for involvement in the planning and management of the built environment. It is also widely accepted and understood by government departments, regeneration agencies, local authorities and the development industry that such involvement can lead to more appropriate and sustainable development solutions and stronger citizen groups and communities.

But although there is this widespread desire to involve communities, there is almost universal uncertainty as to the best way of doing it.

Two years ago the Urban Design Group established a Public Participation Programme (PPP) to find the best ways of involving the public in urban design. With funding from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 12 public participation events in England were assisted and evaluated and ten workshops held on a variety of themes. Experience was also drawn from other activities, research programmes and literature.

One of the conclusions of that study which has just been completed, is that many planning, development and management systems are not conducive to participatory approaches. As a result, public participation activity is all too often unrelated to real development timetables. This leads to frustration and wasted effort.

Whether community planning initiatives achieve their long term potential depends on the extent to which they are integrated with the overall planning and development context. Even methods well managed may be ineffective if the statutory framework mitigates against the outcome being taken forward.

The UDG's study recommends that a comprehensive review of



A range of methods for involving people in the planning process is now available with one project in Hackney focusing particularly on explaining urban design to children.

planning, development and management procedures is urgently needed to ensure they incorporate the best participatory practice now available. This should cover preparing local plans and development briefs as well as planning application, public inquiry and urban management procedures.

To achieve the benefits that are possible when local communities are properly involved in urban design, the statutory planning and development system needs to be adjusted to incorporate the growing experience of participatory practice and the variety of methods and process options now available.

Currently the choice of approach is largely ad hoc, depending on the experience and knowledge of those initiating activity. There is a shortage of adequate good practice guidance and little knowledge of what does exist. Consequently most practitioners have experience of only a small range of the options available. As a result, inappropriate approaches are all too often adopted.

A vast range of methods is now available, all with different uses and characteristics. They range in scale from visual display techniques to national support programmes. Some are specific to participation in urban design, while some have other uses as well. Examples include design workshops, community planning forums, elevation montages (display techniques for helping people understand and make changes to streetscapes), street stalls and table scheme displays.

All these methods – which include activities, events, places and organisations – are still evolving and being refined and new ones continue to emerge. The most effective tend to be

universal in character and good practice can be fairly precisely outlined. The UDG study came up with 22 general principles including the importance of securing local ownership of the process and being visual with the presentation of information.

But it is essential for any particular situation for practitioners to design a tailor-made process incorporating one or more methods. The nature of this process will depend on local circumstances and timescales, on energy levels and resources. Sample processes covering a range of development scenarios can be identified but a unique process has to be designed for each locality.

Effectiveness in the short term depends largely on paying attention to detail. Methods can be carried out well or badly and relatively minor omissions can significantly reduce effectiveness. Using good practice guidance can help dramatically.

A new centre or network of centres on community planning should be established to disseminate good practice, provide advice, and evaluate and follow up events and activities.

An index of experienced practitioners should also be drawn up to help local authorities, developers and community groups to obtain the best expertise available.

But more good practice guidance such as toolkits of sample documents and formats for organisers and how-to-do-it information needs to be produced, made available and kept up to date.

Multi-agency co-ordination, resources and leadership are also needed if progress is to be made. A systematic programme of lobbying is required to secure the resources necessary to bring

about increased participatory urban design activity at the local level.

The UDG intends to continue working with the government and others to ensure that good practice in this vital area is further developed and adopted more widely.

The group is convinced that improving the quality and quantity of public involvement in urban design is one of the keys to improving the quality of the built environment.

In particular, work will be continuing over the coming year on a *Community Planning Handbook* to be published in 1999. Funding from the Department for International Development will allow material from other countries to be gathered so that a comprehensive and international guide to the most effective approaches can be produced.

Feedback on the UDG study and its recommendations and findings would therefore be most helpful. We are particularly keen to hear from anyone with photos, sample documents or other material on methods and processes. We would also like to hear from any individual, group or organisation wanting to help the UDG in securing the implementation of the study's recommendations.

■ Copies of a special report on the study are available from the UDG at £8 per copy incl p&p. Tel 01235 851 415 or fax 01235 851 410.

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There is a shortage of good practice guidance on public participation, the UDG study concludes.