

Putting the community into community planning

With the Government's recent enthusiasm for community planning, one could be forgiven for thinking this is a new idea. But communities have always attempted to plan and shape the world in which they live. Here, DIANE WARBURTON reviews a recent book by Nick Wates that attempts to draw this experience into a useable handbook.

"At the heart of my beliefs is the idea of community. I don't just mean the local villages, towns and cities in which we live. I mean that our fulfilment as individuals lies in a decent society of others. My argument to you today is that the renewal of community is the answer to the challenges of a changing world."

Tony Blair to the Women's Institute conference,
7 June 2000

WHAT WAS LOST in the furore over Tony Blair's speech to the WI conference recently was its actual content. In his first public appearance since his paternity leave, the prime minister chose to return to a theme on which he has been relatively quiet recently: the importance of community. Hopefully the less than rousing response he received on this occasion will not put him and the Government off further pronouncements on this subject. It has certainly been a strong strand in much government policy on environmental and planning matters in recent months – including consultation on best value, a potential expansion of the New Deal for Communities programme, proposals on neighbourhood management from the Social Exclusion Unit and, of course, community planning.

Community means many things to many people: it certainly includes a way of doing things (the 'community approach' – meaning bottom up and participatory); a location (often neighbourhood or village); and a group of people ('the community') which may be geographical or simply share interests. It is also used to imply a particular quality of relationship – closer than society,

different from friends and family, but which still implies common interests and shared values. All of these nuances are reflected in the most practical terms in the recently published *Community planning handbook* by Nick Wates.¹

Nick Wates takes a wide view of community planning. His book is designed to respond to the increasing demand from all sides for more local involvement in the planning and management of the environment as 'the only way that people will get the surroundings they want' and 'the best way of ensuring that communities become safer, stronger, wealthier and more sustainable'. The breadth of his approach will allow the book to be used in many contexts including those appearing with increasing frequency in government policy initiatives.

This is a marvellous book, and much needed. It sets out clearly and straightforwardly how professionals and communities can work together in a whole range of different circumstances. The tone is just right, neither jargon nor patronising – it actually makes you want to go out and do some of these things.

The structure throughout is A-Z, so sections on principles run from Accept Different Agendas to Work on Location, and on methods from Action Planning Event to Video Soapbox. It is not a new approach to presenting information (David Wilcox's *Guide to effective participation* used a similar model²), but it works really well.

The book begins with a short section on Getting Started,

which rightly stresses the importance, first of all, of defining the goal or purpose of the exercise and then devising a strategy to achieve it. It seems obvious, but so many consultative or participatory exercises are carried out without this simple first step – beyond a vague feeling that something is needed, or it is a requirement for funding. The steps to designing a community planning strategy are clearly outlined, with methods carefully placed *after* the need to think about general principles and the philosophy of community planning. When they are outlined in the following section, the principles are clear, concise and practical.

The Methods section is the largest element of the book, although the author makes it clear that relying on only one of these is not the answer – ‘it is when they [various methods] are combined together creatively that community planning becomes a truly powerful force for positive and sustainable change’. Nevertheless, methods are important, and having this catalogue should give many people the confidence to start working in this way. There is everything here from activity weeks to microplanning workshops, from open houses to newspaper supplements, from future search to risk assessment.

It has been suggested elsewhere that it is confusing to include support centres and organisations (such as architecture centres and development trusts) as methods but it keeps the structure of the book simple to cover them here. For each topic, there is a basic description, examples (including photos and diagrams) and activities, model documents, room layouts, timetables, and links to further information within the book and elsewhere.

The following section on scenarios helps place the methods into the contexts which are appropriate. Following the A-Z structure, these include examples such as derelict site reuse, housing development, inner city regeneration and disaster management. Many of these overlap, which is entirely the point – it is possible to find a scenario which rings some bells and then see how the different methods might fit together into an overall strategy. While scenarios lack the entertainment value of case studies, they have the great advantage of having a wider appeal – we all look at case studies and think how different it is in our case but with scenarios we are more able to recognise the bits which do match and can focus on them.

The book then provides formats which can be used as models in planning these processes, numerous

checklists, a useful glossary, publications and films available, contacts and an index.

As a practical handbook on ways of working with communities on environmental and planning matters, this is a real winner. It is extremely well-written and designed so that the reader never gets lost. It will certainly continue to be valuable over time, and there are plans to keep it updated regularly so that new techniques can be added and experience incorporated.

Nick Wates has been working in this field for many years as a highly successful practitioner, activist and writer, and it must have been tempting for him to just pour out his own knowledge and experience. But here too he has followed his own advice and produced the book according to its own principles: drafts were circulated and many people made inputs, there is a feedback form included to encourage further involvement and there is even a page describing a method for running an editing workshop.

There are many aspects of participatory working that this handbook does not cover, particularly the more theoretical or academic analyses and, a key issue for me personally, the links between participatory initiatives and more mainstream policy development, traditional democratic processes and institutions. But that is not what is aimed for here. By keeping to a strict and very clear set of parameters, the book is going to be much more valuable than if it wandered off into whole different areas of contention. Above all, this book is designed to be *useful* to readers and users, and to give them the confidence to start working in these new ways, and at that it succeeds brilliantly.

Notes

- 1 *The community planning handbook: how people can shape their cities, towns and villages in any part of the world* by Nick Wates (2000), Earthscan: London (ISBN 0-415-16477-X, £14.95)
- 2 *Guide to effective participation* by David Wilcox (1994) Partnership Books: Brighton

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