

A Community Process

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Nick Wates summarises the present situation concerning action planning which is reaching the end of its pilot or experimental stage which has lasted some twenty five years. What has evolved is a core process that anyone can get involved in and that can be used in a great many different ways.

The process is capable of revolutionising the way we plan, design and manage human settlements.

Initiatives are now needed on several fronts if the full potential of the process is to be realised.

Action planning can be defined as 'an approach to planning and urban design involving the organisation of carefully structured, collaborative events at which all sections of the local community work closely with independent specialists from all relevant disciplines.'

It can be seen immediately that this is very different from conventional planning. Conventional planning processes are essentially passive, reactive, hierarchical and government based. They're based on people passing bits of paper to other people who then respond by sending more bits of paper to others and so on. The community is rarely involved in more than a consultative capacity.

Action planning on the other hand is based on the organisation of events and the interaction between people which results. It's essentially dynamic, pro-active, collaborative and community based. It is not, I should stress, an alternative to conventional planning processes but is a valuable additional tool and can short circuit some parts of them.

Process

There are four main phases to an action planning process:

Initiation which can take 1-2 months.

Preparation which can take 2-4 months.

The event which usually lasts a few days.

Follow up which often occurs a year after.

The main actors are:

- Local interests - residents, business, politicians, land owners etc -
- The Steering Group/Host/Organiser
The main enthusiasts who take responsibility for coordination and administration
- The Event Team - independent specialists who facilitate the event and produce recommendations
- Support Bodies - national institutions, universities or regeneration agencies which develop expertise in the process and provide back up.

Initiation

The first thing that happens is that people living in an area, or concerned with an area, get interested in doing something to improve it. There is a need to consider what kind of process of action planning will suit you and who can play particular roles.

A good way to focus your thinking is to try drafting a mission statement and produce a sheet of notepaper. What's the event going to be called? How long should it be? Who's going to organise and fund it? What's the end objective?

Finance will obviously be a crucial consideration. Action planning events costs a lot of money. Expenses alone for a five day event with an unpaid team of eight are likely to be around £16,000 and if you need to pay the organisers you may be talking about three times this amount. Before you allow this to put you off, just remember the astronomical costs which can result from the failure to plan creatively.

There are in fact a wide range of potential sources of finance as landowners, developers and regeneration agencies begin to realise the savings that can result from getting it right from the outset. If possible, get funding from several sources and begin to build partnerships and avoid charges of vested interests. In practice a great deal can be achieved by securing support in kind. This also has the benefit of getting local organisations committed to the idea and therefore to the outcome.

Eventually you'll need to develop an organisation structure. A Steering Group will be needed as a partnership of the main enthusiasts, key players and Local Interests. Either this partnership or an existing organisation, on behalf of the partnership, needs to become the formal host for the event.

The Host will appoint a Team Chairperson who will then be involved in assembling a Team and Advisers, appointing organisers and arranging for Technical Support.

This first phase ends when you have the organisational infrastructure, finance and mission statement in place and can make a firm decision to proceed.

Preparation

The key to successful action planning events is skilful and imaginative timetabling. However long your event, the timetable structure is likely to be the same with five phases:

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- introduction
 - problems/issues
 - solutions/options
 - synthesis
 - production

This basic framework has to be fleshed out with specific activities: presentations, workshops, visits, public meetings, working sessions and social events. And it needs to be produced in the form of a leaflet or poster to get people interested. You will have to arrange venues. An ideal venue will have a large hall with smaller spaces for workshops to be open to the public, and studio space and rooms for administration for the Team only. In practice one has to make do with premises available; a school or community centre for instance.

As well as kitting out venues you'll need to arrange catering and assemble all the equipment necessary. A complete working environment has to be created where people can function as well if not better than in their own workplaces.

There will be a great deal of background information to be collected - maps, photos, reports, statistics - so that the Team can be well briefed before they arrive. Students can often help with this but above all you have to get people motivated and start the debate rolling. Once this happens the information starts flowing. Generating a public debate before, during and after the event is an essential part of action planning, and as well as producing your own publicity there's considerable scope for using television and the press. Local media can play a very important role. Prior to a planning weekend in Northern Ireland, the local paper produced a 36 page special issue on regeneration in the area - a feat surely never achieved by any conventional planning process.

The Event

A group of specialists from a range of disciplines relevant to the problem in hand has been invited to participate as a team of anything from five to twenty five people. Significantly they usually come from outside the area being dealt with because this



provides a degree of freshness and independence. Local specialists are equally, if not more involved, but usually as Advisers rather than Team members.

The event then starts with briefings: short presentations by all the key actors: local residents, landowners, local planners, developers, politicians.

An important part of the briefing is a physical reconnaissance trip: looking at the area being dealt with. This can be from a bus or on foot and the purpose of this is to quickly get a feel for the place and the key issues.

Then there's usually a launch event. This might take the form of a public meeting and/or a dinner for hosts and guests with suitable speakers.

Next - probably the following day - come topic workshops. These are open to anyone who wishes to take part. The aim is to clarify the main problems and opportunities. Workshops are a good way of doing this, splitting people up into small groups dealing with different topics - such as employment, housing, transport or whatever. Team members act as facilitators and note takers but otherwise take a back seat and listen.

There are many different ways of running workshops. One good way to start is to get everyone to write down three things wrong with the present situation and three things right. These ideas can then be categorised to form the basis for discussion.

Flip charts have become the standard way of recording workshops having the advantage that everyone can see what is being written down. At the end of the workshop, someone - preferably a local person - will be delegated to report back to

a plenary session of all participants.

At the plenary, there'll be a report from each workshop, followed by general debate. What one hopefully has by this time is a clear picture of the problems and opportunities, and no doubt solutions will have begun to emerge. Following the public sessions, the Team will probably meet alone to review the outcome and plan how to handle the next phase.

The next phase - probably the next day - will be hands-on design workshops, the aim being to start devising real proposals and options for change. People are again divided into groups and will normally work around tables with maps, tracing paper and felt tip pens.

Models can also be used, and although this involves more preparation, the process of making the models can itself be a good way to get people involved and thinking in three dimensions. People are able to think through the development of design options in the same way that professionals do in their own offices. This phase also ends with each group making a presentation of their conclusions to a plenary session, followed by general discussion.

After this phase, the Team and Advisers will probably have a brainstorm. This is the beginning of the synthesis that the Team has to do. Their job is to digest everything they've seen and heard and come up with proposals for action. This usually takes the form of a printed report and a slide show. And there's normally less than 48 hours before these have to be presented to the community.

This demands a phenomenal effort in team working but can be incredibly exciting. The atmosphere's a bit like a newspaper office

with people working on different pieces of jigsaw which has to come together in time to go to press. Usually an editorial team is established to take charge of collating information, and making sure that people produce what is needed.

The report, which is the collective responsibility of the Team, is likely to contain organisational and design proposals using a range of visual techniques. It's an important document and has to stand the test of time.

Even when the proposals aren't particularly visual a simple summary drawing can be highly effective. Often the main recommendations will relate to organisational change. But the importance of simple and clear communication remains: in essence the entire exercise is about communication.

Although the aim is often to have the report printed before the end of the event this is sometimes impossible in which case a summary broadsheet can be produced with the report printed over the next few days.

The finale is a presentation of the Team's proposals to a public meeting of all those who've participated in the event and anyone else interested. This is normally done as a slide show, using images of both the process and the product.

Follow-up

What happens after the event is vitally important and it's fair to say that this has been the main weakness in most action planning so far. Follow-up should be built in from the start, but you are unlikely to know precisely what form it should take until after the event. Sometimes a clear path, and people to implement it, will emerge during the event. In the absence of this there are several possibilities:

- Implementation workshops held on a regular basis to monitor progress.
- Team debriefing shortly afterward to assess the next moves.
- Annual evaluation meetings - organised by the Steering Group.
- Team revisits periodically to learn of progress and offer additional suggestions.
- Newsletters prepared by the steering group to provide updates.
- Report reviews - special meetings to run through the proposals with community leaders and others.

Objectives

When done successfully, the anecdotal evidence available so far suggests that action planning can achieve objectives hard to achieve in any other way. These can include:

- Creation of shared visions for a community's future, and long and short-term strategies for implementing them.
- Acting as a catalyst for action of all kinds in releasing blockages in the development system.
- Resolution of complex problems or at least clearer identification of issues and goals.
- Revitalisation of local networks for community development.
- Fostering of consensus building among different interest groups.
- Promotion of urban design capability of local agencies and improvement of environmental standards.
- Heightened public awareness of development issues.
- Boost in morale for all those involved as a result of experiencing team working.

Benefits

Action planning works, in my view, because the process combines a unique mix of ingredients which respond to the complexity of today's development issues:

- Open community involvement. There's scope for all members of the community to participate in a variety of ways. This can lead to a new sense of cohesion and consensus on goals, to the formation of new partnerships and to the development of a sense of equity.
- Creative working methods. Professionals of all disciplines work in a hands-on manner with each other and with non-professionals and creates a chemistry between people which can be magnetic; releasing spirit, humour, imagination, positive thinking and collective creativity.
- Dynamism. The carefully structured, defined timetable creates a focus of public attention and provides targets for results. A critical mass of activity is generated which is hard to ignore.
- Fresh thinking. The independent Team provides an opportunity for new ideas to be put forward which can overcome past divisions and indecision.

- Visual approach. The use of urban design techniques of drawing and model-making provide an easily accessible way for people to think about, and communicate, visions for their community's future.
- Realism. The process addresses both the physical and natural environment as they are, rather than the abstract concepts which tend to result from specialism and departmentalism. The inhabitants' own concerns are placed on the agenda.

One of the most extraordinary features of the action planning phenomenon is the way that people who have experienced it become convinced of its value - even if they might be critical about the way that it has been carried out in a particular instance. The most important thing therefore must be to give more people the opportunity to experience it for themselves - by organising more events. #

The Process of Action Planning has been described in a detailed way in the book edited by Nick Wates - Action Planning: how to use planning weekends and urban design action teams to improve your environment. Published by the Prince of Wales's Institute of Architecture (0171 916 7380). Price £10 post free.