

understanding places

a summary of the SPiP action learning workshop: 22 March 2007 in Plymouth



in brief

- Organisations do see benefits of being involved in local development frameworks (LDFs), but there is a need to identify and understand their motivation for this
- Involvement should be through engagement rather than consultation
- Local planning authorities need to be more sophisticated when engaging with stakeholder organisations, show more sensitivity to possible barriers and think about ways in which they can make engagement easier – this might include exploring ways to increase the capacity of a sector, using the LSP and finding ways to help organisations understand and participate in the LDF
- There are constraints to stakeholder involvement – resources, organisational structures and a lack of time are significant barriers

introduction

One of the cornerstones of the spatial planning system is that plans and strategies should reflect the aspirations of the local community. Seeking the views of the various sectors is therefore fundamental to help understand and shape the places in which people live. But do stakeholder organisations see actively engaging in the local development framework (LDF) as something that could be of benefit to them? And how can planners help this engagement?

The Spatial Planning in Practice (SPiP) project recently held a workshop to seek the views of representatives of a range of sectors – health, voluntary and community, environment, transport, regeneration and the police – to find out their views and to share these with senior planning officers. Participants were drawn from Plymouth and surrounding areas including South Hams.

getting involved in Ldfs: is it worth it?

There was broad agreement that organisations do see benefits of being involved in LDFs, although their motivations varied (see box on page 2). But the extent to which this involvement can be justified depends on the aims, *raison d'être* and, frankly, the resources of each organisation.

Different organisations are interested in different stages of the LDF. For example, the Environment Agency concentrates on informing the evidence base of LDFs to ensure that they are based on sound data. PCTs are more likely to be interested in strategic connections and potential provision of health services facilities through planning gain and developer contributions.

stakeholders in planning: the spatial dimension

Workshop participants from stakeholder organisations had a variety of interests in spatial planning:

- Churches Together in Devon (broadly representing community sector): community well-being, provision of community facilities, including Section 106 contributions
- Devon and Cornwall Constabulary: planning out crime through design and community cohesion
- Devon Primary Care Trust: provision of health services facilities and addressing determinants of health through planning
- Environment Agency: incorporating environmental management into the planning process and informing it through a sound evidence base
- Highways Agency: consequences on strategic road network of planning for growth.

Currently South Hams District Council is preparing a new community proposal for Sherford on the outskirts of Plymouth. All sector representatives saw value in being involved in new community proposals, and it is easier for planners to persuade organisations to be involved because they recognise the advantages of being engaged from the outset for planning their own service provision.

what are the challenges?

All participants agreed that a major challenge is time: as one person put it, 'people are so busy doing what they are doing that it is difficult to engage them in planning.'

They also agreed that the sheer volume of consultation generated by the LDF process created its own challenge: for organisations working in two-tier areas, or across an area with multiple local authorities, the capacity required to respond effectively is considerable.

Participants also raised a number of challenges that reflected the type of organisation they represented: broadly statutory and non-statutory organisations.

statutory organisations

Some of the workshop participants represented statutory organisations, such as the Highway Agency. These are often large organisations; however, even they can find themselves stretched when responding to all the LDF consultations being undertaken in their areas.

It may take more than one attempt to find out who is the most suitable contact within a large organisation. While this might be because different people need to be involved at different stages, it might also be (at least partly) because of the lack of internal communications processes within large organisations. One representative from a statutory consultee acknowledged that 'as a big organisation we are bad at making connections internally'.

As a consequence, involvement may rely too heavily on connections between individuals rather than being properly embedded in the relationship between statutory organisations.

non-statutory organisations

Community and voluntary organisations were poorly represented at the workshop which in itself highlights the lack of capacity within this sector to be involved in the planning process. Often their priority is to deliver a service and they are less interested in engaging at a strategic level to ensure that future provision of their service is incorporated. Businesses can also be difficult to engage in planning because they do not see this as a priority.

Even if they want to participate at a strategic level, having the resources is a significant challenge, and can mean that an organisation needs to change the way it works. An organisation might have trouble justifying involvement in strategic level discussions when it is being funded to provide a specific service or set of services to client groups, who may be people in need.

what can local planning authorities do to facilitate involvement?

An obvious place to start is the LSP which has already been through a process of identifying representatives from a range of sectors. They present an opportunity to tap into existing organisational structures and networks.

As well as drawing on the LSP as a resource, there might be opportunities for a planning service to be more proactively involved in the LSP by providing dedicated officer time to work with the LSP to build its capacity and therefore its potential to engage with the LDF. This can also work in reverse: the county constabulary has paid for a part-time post within the planning section in Plymouth which has helped to prompt planners to keep considering crime and safety issues in plan making.

Planners need to develop a thorough understanding of which other organisations operate in their area, how they are structured and function, what pressures they are working under and how they knit together. Getting engagement is challenging, and it might be necessary to accept some initial turnover in participants until outside organisations identify the right person to be involved.

Planners need to check their own assumptions, particularly around the capacity of voluntary and community organisations. One participant commented that the LDF is 'an alien system from inside and outside'. Helping consultees understand the LDF is therefore crucial, and may require local planning authorities to consider how they can build the capacity of (especially) the voluntary and community sectors to participate.

For example, Plymouth employs a community planning and partnership coordinator who is responsible for finding ways to help people understand and get involved in the LDF process.

Planners need to keep consultees informed of progress. One workshop participant complained of 'long periods of unexplained silence'; while submissions might be acknowledged there is no follow-up correspondence which explains whether comments have led to a change in a plan or strategy. This lack of communication can undermine efforts to involve organisations as there is no feedback as to whether their involvement has made a difference.

Planners may also have to sell the benefits to organisations of getting involved in the LDF process. For example, if health is improved through promoting physical activity through an LDF then this may lead to reduced financial pressures on a PCT.

Planners can consider more innovative techniques for involving stakeholder organisations in strategic planning. For example, the new community proposals at Sherford led to a three-day Inquiry by Design event led by the Prince's Foundation for the Built Environment. This involved the directors of influential organisations in the area; the intense process led to a 'step change' in co-operation between those involved including agreement about the strategic vision for the new community.

further debate

The workshop prompted questions for further debate and discussion:

- How can the LDF process be presented in ways that time-limited, financially constrained organisations can meaningfully engage with and understand?
- Do local planning authorities sufficiently understand the spatial aspirations of stakeholder organisations?

This summary has been prepared by Andrew Ross for PAS as part of the dissemination of the SPiP project. The action learning workshop was held on 22 March 2007 in Plymouth. For more information on the SPiP project please visit <http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1143238>

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Planning Advisory Service (PAS)
Improvement and Development Agency
76–86 Turnmill Street
London
EC1M 5LG

tel: 020 7296 6880 (ihelp)
email: pas@idea.gov.uk
web: www.pas.gov.uk