

## Development Department Research Programme

### Getting Involved in Planning: Perceptions of the Wider Public

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This summary presents the main findings of a research study exploring the perceptions of the wider public towards involvement in the planning process in Scotland. In particular, the study was designed to focus on how members of the public view their role in planning, and what mechanisms they consider necessary to become more effectively involved.

#### Main Findings

- Many planning authorities have been involved in, and have expended a great deal of effort on, a variety of activities over and above their statutory responsibilities concerning public involvement in planning. They have tended to do so because they feel that it leads to improved decision-making.
- Planning officers tended to have a positive view of these initiatives, which covered a wide range of strategies to involve the public. However, they also highlighted the existence of significant barriers, which prevent the public participating in planning.
- Those members of the public who had been 'involved' in planning tended to be more critical about these initiatives. Their concerns covered: the public itself (apathy/alienation); planning officers and the local authority (negative views of these); consultation ("shallow"); the planning system (centralised, complicated and intimidating); and Community Councils (not well supported by planning authorities).
- Participants who had not been involved in planning (the 'uninvolved') were concerned about their lack of awareness of the planning process. In addition, they felt that there was a lack of information available to the public and public consultation was sometimes 'tokenistic'. Despite this perception, many thought it would be difficult to engage with the planning process due to lifestyle, personal choices and cynicism, among other factors.
- The public's 'apathy' or 'alienation' was a strong theme throughout the research. This problem is not limited to planning; it is related to governance history and structure in Scotland. Addressing this would require different interfaces between government and civic society.
- A wide range of interfaces is developing, but further capacity building in statutory planning authorities and in the community is needed.
- Planning needs to establish areas of common ground with the broader public, both in the sense of physical places and in the nature of ideas and issues that are focused on.
- Adequate resources are needed to make participation work better, taking into account inputs over and above those of planning authorities, as well as less "time-bound" accounting.

## Background

Public participation has been an important feature of the planning process for more than 50 years. However, in practice there are factors that may restrict participation. The Scottish Executive is resolved to make public involvement in planning more accessible and inclusive, and has sought to determine how best to do this through consultation and research. In November 2001, the Scottish Executive Development Department launched a consultation paper, *Getting Involved in Planning*, reviewing the arrangements for involving people in the Scottish planning system. This consultation was complemented with a general telephone 'omnibus survey' of public attitudes to involvement, which was implemented in March 2002.

As part of this parallel review, the research summarised in this report was commissioned by Social Research (formerly Central Research Unit) at the Scottish Executive, to target a sample of Scottish communities to provide more in depth information on public perceptions of the planning system and of their role within it. The objectives of the study were to highlight:

- best practice in involving the public in the planning process,
- reasons for non-involvement and perceived difficulties with current arrangements for public involvement in planning,
- determining mechanisms which support accessible and inclusive public involvement.

## Methods

The research methods aimed to understand the experience of the 'involved' and 'uninvolved'<sup>1</sup> within specific contexts through a case study approach. In addition, the research team proposed an 'action research' approach, making the research process itself an integral part of encouraging participation in the planning system. The research methods were designed as a process, with the following steps:

- a *literature review* to provide a context for best practice in public involvement in planning,
- a *telephone poll* of planning authorities, to identify case study areas and best practice,
- *outreach field work* using participatory research methods to engage the public; interactive displays and community workshops in the case study areas, and a web-based questionnaire to engage the broader public,

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<sup>1</sup> 'Involved' being members of the public who had taken part in consultation on planning issues, and 'uninvolved' people who had not.

- *in-depth interviews* with planning officers, 'involved' and 'uninvolved', identified through the preceding methods.

## Key Findings

### Introduction

The literature review identified key themes concerning UK citizens' perspectives on participation in planning, grouped into factors that inhibit and factors that promote public involvement. The relevance of these key themes to the Scottish case was confirmed by the findings from the fieldwork.

### Perceptions of Best Practice

Many planning authorities have been involved in, and have expended considerable effort on, a variety of activities involving public participation over and above their statutory responsibilities. They considered that these lead to improved decision-making. Planning officers tended to have a positive view of such initiatives, which included: decentralised and devolved decision-making mechanisms; a corporate approach to participation; phased programmes of consultation; links to the democratic process; innovations in development planning; innovative methods for raising awareness and decision-making in development control; capacity-building and community-led consultation; and the use of ICT. Planning officers noted, however, the existence of a range of barriers to participation. These included: scarce staff resources; the scope for political manipulation; and logistical problems related to geographic dispersion in rural areas.

People who had been involved in a variety of initiatives aimed at engaging the public were more critical. However, in many instances the 'involved' valued initiatives undertaken by the planning authority and were positive about planning officers' involvement. Nevertheless, concerns were raised about: public apathy/alienation; negative views of planning officers and of the local authority; consultation as sometimes being "shallow" or "cosmetic"; the centralised control of planning; and the planning system being perceived as complicated and intimidating. To address these concerns, the 'involved' called for better publicity and awareness-raising; training for planning officers and community volunteers; and more continuous dialogue between planning authorities and the public, leading to decentralisation, transparency and shared decision-making.

The 'uninvolved' identified key barriers to involvement including: the view that public consultation is 'tokenistic'; lack of awareness and available information; lifestyle and

personal choice; and public apathy. Priorities identified by this group were: enhanced publicity and information; continuous dialogue between planning officers and communities; 'joined-up' government; and training and education, including the incorporation of component on planning in the school curriculum. Many 'uninvolved' reported that they would not engage with the planning system even if they were aware of opportunities, due to personal circumstances, choice and cynicism, among other factors.

The views of planning officers and the public participating in the fieldwork, and the findings from the literature review, led to the identification of 4 key themes, as follows.

## Civic Participation

A strong theme throughout the research is the public's 'apathy' or 'alienation'. It can be argued that this is a legacy of how government has evolved, and is structured in a relatively 'top-down' way in the UK and Scotland, a characteristic which is reflected in the planning system's procedures and scope for action.

Attempts to structure and operate the planning system differently are unlikely to have any significant effect if the relations of governance between the public and the government do not change. Promotion of civic participation in governance would require:

- integration across various forms of government and service provision,
- localised mobilisation and issues,
- decentralised decision-making,
- structuring in coherent ways with 'communities of interest'.

However, participatory initiatives in planning tend to be isolated from other key strategic and local issues and services, instigated by planning officers around specific mechanisms they identify, and within time frames set by the planning system. Addressing this would require different interfaces between the government and civic society.

## The Government – Civic Society Interface in Planning

The research shows that a wide variety of interfaces is developing, including different forms of:

- *information provision*, such as through alternative media, the internet, mail-shots of 'easy-read' material, and interactive displays,
- *consultation*, such as workshops, planning surgeries, seminars/meetings with key focus groups, joint

consultation on strategic and local plans and through other initiatives such as Social Inclusion Partnerships,

- *participation in decision-making*, including delegation to area/community committees/fora, community meetings on plans, participation in site visits, 'Planning for Real',
- *participation in monitoring*, including Best Value, review of customer charters, telephone polls and questionnaire surveys.

There is a need for clarity of purpose in terms of the nature of the interface and the participatory technique(s) appropriate for this, and there is a need to deliberately create different forms of interface. This requires building on the strengths of 'both sides' through:

- strengthening planners' interests and initiatives in participatory action through training, experience-sharing and resources;
- drawing in other actors in local government who work with the public;
- building on community understanding and organisational structures in planning, such as through community councils and others;
- specifically encouraging individuals to become more active and permitting them mechanisms to bring their own skills and interests to bear on planning.

All of this requires building capacity both in statutory planning agencies and in the community, including for example:

- participation/liaison skills for planning officers and other key actors,
- organisational capacity of community-based associations,
- planning skills enhancement in the wider public.

## Providing Common Ground

Planning needs to move out of the office, council committee room and boardroom to be nearer the wider public. It also needs to clearly relate to common issues which people can understand, and behind which lie more strategic ones. There is therefore a need to provide common ground, both in the sense of physical places and in the nature of ideas and issues that are focused on.

In addition, planning needs to reconsider its current 'time-bound' processes. If public participation was established as an ongoing process and less tied to specific planning system objectives, some of the increasingly confusing overlap of participation initiatives would be avoided. Establishing local structures for ongoing participation in governance, however, is tied to broader governance objectives.

## Resources

The research has demonstrated the need for adequate resources to make participation work better, and who can supply these. There is also a need to take into account wider and longer 'accounting' processes for use of resources, including not only planning officers' inputs but also those from all participants, as well as indirect social effects. The 'accounting process' should be seen as part of the broader promotion of civic engagement in governance, without expecting a direct and causal relation between investment in participation and 'efficiency gains'.

## Recommendations

This research contributes to a wider understanding of the potential of wider and deeper participation in planning as part of improved governance and not in isolation. The

research has several implications for the Executive for promoting public involvement in planning:

- there is scope for *national policy guidance* in this area, which could focus on best practice, but should set this within the evidence-based and broader context permitted by this research,
- a *training programme* operating interactively at various levels would help promote changes in attitude and provide for capacity building,
- a *pilot project* support fund that local authorities and voluntary/community groups could buy into in partnership would promote the creation of new forms of interface and decision-making,
- the outreach aspect of this research has established a basis for *initial partnerships* that could be built on to implement feedback, follow-up and future developments in this area of governance.

This research summary and associated documents on *Getting Involved in Planning* may be viewed on the Internet at:  
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/planning>

The other related publications include:

- *Getting Involved in Planning: Analysis of Consultation Responses*
- *Getting Involved in Planning: Summary of Evidence*

If you wish further copies of this research summary or the report on which this is based, *Getting Involved in Planning: Perceptions of the Wider Public*, please contact us at:

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