

Development Department Research Programme

Getting Involved in Planning: Summary of Evidence

Geoff Peart Consulting

This summary presents the main findings from 3 related strands of research and consultation carried out over the period November 2001 to May 2002 as part of a review of public involvement in planning. These were: a wider public research project, *Perceptions of the Wider Public*; a *Planning Issues Omnibus Survey* of just over 1000 adults and the *Getting Involved in Planning* Consultation Paper.

Main Findings

The findings from the 3 research and consultation strands indicate:

- There are high levels of general public interest in planning (70%) and views that public involvement is important (95%) but much lower levels of actual involvement (7%). Planning Officers are positive about public involvement, but recognise difficulties in reaching all sections of the population.
- Councils use a wide variety of participatory methods and techniques, beyond the statutory minimum requirements. However, there are concerns about resource implications, the potentially adverse effect upon performance indicators and the legitimacy of some community inputs.
- The main barriers to participation, or more meaningful involvement, are considered to be: lack of awareness of available opportunities; inaccessibility of documents; complex procedures and practices; lack of expertise; consultation fatigue; belief that views are not taken into account; distrust of government and personal circumstances.
- While there is considerable overlap between different group perspectives, those who have had no previous involvement in planning tend to stress personal factors such as lack of time, or other more important interests and their general lack of awareness of the opportunities to participate.
- Improving public involvement in the planning process will largely require the removal or minimisation of these barriers. Key areas for improvement are considered to be: restoring confidence in government, more user-friendly information and procedures; greater use of deliberative consultation mechanisms; targeting of particular groups; more capacity building; better use of new technology; and additional resources.
- It is recognised that there is a tension between speed and involvement in the planning system and consequently there is a need to get the right balance. The research concludes that in the absence of other measures, the proposals to improve involvement would probably lengthen timescales.
- A range of issues requiring further consideration by the Executive and local authorities are identified in the research. These include: further policy and best practice guidance; improvements to development plan and development control procedures; greater investment in training and capacity building; development of new technology to facilitate involvement and the need to examine the resource implications of any package of implementation measures.

Background

The review of public involvement in planning comprised a consultation paper *Getting Involved in Planning* issued by the Scottish Executive Development Department, and 2 strands of research commissioned by Social Research (formerly Central Research Unit) at the Scottish Executive: a wider public research project, and an omnibus survey. These 3 strands continued a programme of recent consultations on aspects of the planning system, which included the *Review of Strategic Planning* consultation exercise in 2001-2.

Project Objectives

The main purpose of the Summary of Evidence Report was to provide an analysis of the findings from each of these 3 strands and to:

- assess general **levels of stakeholder involvement** in planning,
- identify **perceived difficulties** with current arrangements,
- identify **mechanisms/good practices** which support effective involvement,
- summarise the **views on the specific proposals** for change in the consultation paper,
- highlight how **new technologies** can enhance involvement.

Conclusions were drawn for future practice from these areas of interest and matters for further consideration, by the Scottish Executive and local authorities, were identified.

Research Methods

The wider public research project was undertaken by the School of Planning & Housing, Centre for the Environment and Human Settlements, Edinburgh College of Art/Heriot Watt University, and sought the views of people who were either "involved" or "uninvolved" in planning. It consisted of:

- a **literature review** to provide a context for best practice,
- a **telephone poll** of all planning authorities to identify 6 case studies and best practice,
- **outreach fieldwork** using displays, workshops and an interactive website,
- **in-depth interviews** with planners, and "involved" and "uninvolved" people.

Six local authority areas were selected as case studies areas in which the research was conducted. In total, 70 interviews

were completed and over 100 other responses to displays and the website were received.

The omnibus survey, conducted by Scottish Opinion Limited, was a telephone poll of 1022 adults drawn from 73 Scottish parliamentary constituencies and conducted in March 2002. Results were classified according to age, sex, region of Scotland and social class.

The consultation exercised involved the distribution of 10,350 documents, comprising 3 different formats: main papers, questionnaires and easy-read booklets. In addition, the questions could be accessed through the SE website. A total of 402 responses to the 32 questions were analysed by an independent consultant, providing both quantitative and qualitative assessment of opinion.

Consequently, the 3 strands of consultation and research provided different perspectives and a good mix of quantitative and qualitative material on the issue of public involvement in planning.

Key Findings

Participation and Interest in the Planning System

The omnibus survey found that there were high levels of public interest in planning (70%) and views that public involvement in planning was important (95%).¹ However, in practice there are much lower levels of actual involvement (7%).² Most (63%) of those from the Scottish Household Survey who had been involved with the planning service were satisfied with the experience. However, it was clear that "involvement" could mean different things from, at one level, receiving information on development to actively participating in decision-making at another. Equally, different sections of the public had varying levels of knowledge and understanding of the planning system which affected their satisfaction with current arrangements.

On the whole, Planning Officers were positive about public involvement and recognised the difficulties in reaching all sectors of the population.

Current Methods of Involvement

Councils were using a wide variety of participatory methods and techniques, which went beyond the statutory minimum requirements. Public meetings were not generally favoured (except for major applications), with many authorities

1 Figures from Planning Issues Omnibus Survey, Scottish Opinion Ltd. 2002

2 Figures from Scottish Household Survey (1999/2000)

preferring workshop formats, such as Planning for Real. Other methods used included Issues Forums, focus groups, citizens' panels and questionnaire surveys. Different media types were also being used – adverts, easy-read booklets, issues papers, videos, CD ROMs and the internet were all mentioned.

Barriers to Involvement

The main barriers to greater public involvement appear from both the consultation and wider public research evidence to be:

- Lack of information about opportunities to participate – inadequate publicity/notification or difficult locations and timing,
- Lack of sufficient detail about proposed development – poor applications and plans etc,
- Accessibility of information – large complicated plans, lack of plain English, cost of documents, differential access to information in files etc,
- Complex procedures and practices – timescales too short for responding, inability to speak at committees, Public Local Inquiries too legalistic and confrontational – settings and timings not very user friendly,
- Lack of expertise, poor understanding of processes, procedures and the relevant factors in making decisions etc,
- Confusion as to how consultation fits into the bigger local authority picture – consultation fatigue etc,
- Belief that views are not taken into account and do not change decisions – poor feedback and updating on progress etc,
- Distrust of local government generally – alienation from political processes,
- Personal factors – lack of time – other more important interests – no relevance for self.

There was considerable overlap between different group perspectives, but uninvolved people tended to stress the latter 2 factors and their general lack of awareness about planning.

Factors Facilitating Involvement

Key factors identified in this context were:

- Restoring confidence in government – more openness, transparency and accountability, more 'joining up' between initiatives and building on important local issues,
- Provision of better and more user-friendly information – more extensive publicity using a variety of means

(adverts, internet, notices etc) – easy read plans – clearer applications etc,

- Introduction of simpler and more standard procedures – well designed forms, simple to understand guides, more time to respond, times and locations of meetings more suitable for people, more direct assistance for third parties,
- More effective and varied mechanisms to promote dialogue rather than one way communication – early involvement – interactive displays, workshops, forums etc,
- Use of targeted mechanisms for particular groups, e.g. schoolchildren, businesses, etc,
- Greater investment in training and capacity building – for local authority staff, local organisations and for particular groups,
- More use of new technology – with a need to sort out legal and technical problems and promote good practice,
- Additional resources to support new and extended activities.

Impact on the Efficiency of the Process

It was recognised that there was tension between speed and involvement in the planning system and consequently there was a need to get the right balance. The research concluded that in the absence of other measures, the proposals to improve involvement would probably lengthen timescales. In this context, additional resources would help reduce or eliminate adverse efficiency effects. Some opportunities to speed procedures were identified which would also help in achieving a proper balance.

Matters for Further Consideration

General Approach

It was suggested the Executive consider creating a small pilot project fund to support innovative practice. A new NPPG setting out public involvement policy together with a PAN identifying good practices was thought to be useful. There was support for setting up a national consultative group and for investigating the feasibility of integrating local and national helpline services. It was felt that local authorities should be encouraged to establish planning policy forums as part of wider corporate arrangements. The role of community councils in the planning process could also be further developed

Development Plan Procedures

Further consideration of ways in which to speed up the local plan preparation and approval process was supported. The proposed neighbour notification of major plan changes,

however, requires further clarification. There was support for measures to strengthen the independence of Reporters. Many thought that local authorities should also consider employing a wider range of user-friendly methods of information provision, more deliberative methods of engagement and more accessible settings to encourage greater involvement in plan preparation.

Development Control Procedures

There was substantial support for all of the proposed changes to development control procedures set out in the consultation document, with the exception of those affecting non-domestic lessees. There were also significant concerns from local authorities regarding the resource implications of assuming neighbour notification duties. It was suggested that Public Local Inquiries should be more user-friendly. For some, measures (such as mediation) required further clarification and guidance from the Executive, or the consideration of pilot exercises. It was also suggested that further consideration be given to the introduction of third party rights of appeal, in limited and specified circumstances.

Training and Capacity Building

The development of appropriate training materials and programmes (1) on the planning system for schools and community groups, and (2) on appropriate facilitation and customer care skills for planning authorities, should be encouraged by the relevant stakeholder interests.

New Technology

There was support for establishment of a formal e-planning working group with representation from users and providers. It was also considered useful to set a deadline by when all authorities should have their weekly list of planning applications and development plans online. In this context, local authorities should be encouraged to develop the e-capability of their community councils.

Resources

A review of the resources needed for the proper delivery of the planning function would be advantageous in the context of the proposals for change set out in recent SEDD consultation documents. In particular, there was support for the funding of Planning Aid Scotland to be put on a more secure footing.

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: Perceptions of the Wider Public

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

Scottish Executive Development Department
Planning Division
Area 2-H
Victoria Quay
EDINBURGH EH6 6QQ
Tel: 08457 741 741
Email: planningdivision@scotland.gsi.gov.uk
Web site: www.scotland.gov.uk/planning

More information about social and policy research commissioned and published by Social Research on behalf of the Scottish Executive can be found at www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch. Subjects covered include: transport, housing, social inclusion, rural affairs, children and young people, education, social work, community care, local government, civil justice, crime and criminal justice, regeneration, planning and women's issues. The site also allows access to information about the Scottish Household Survey.

I S B N 0 - 7 5 5 9 - 3 4 4 6 - 6

