

PARTICIPATORY PRACTITIONERS FOR CHANGE

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

A GUIDE FOR THOSE PLANNING AND COMMISSIONING PARTICIPATORY PROJECTS

Most organisations have had experiences where a new development or change has not been welcomed by those affected by it. It is clear that it is more effective to involve the people affected by the change from the beginning. Many organisations are now required, more than ever before, to have conducted a consultation with their stakeholders before a new project or action plan is designed.

Concerns arise: will it take much longer? Does it cost much more? How will conflicts between groups be resolved?

The concerns don't have to become real.

Experienced members of the Participatory Practitioners for Change have drawn up a checklist and some guidance notes to make it easier to commission good community involvement projects.

The notes are arranged in four parts: principles, process, rewards and resources. There are ten questions in boxes. The more often you can answer Yes to the questions the more likely it is that the participatory process will be successful.

Some principles of good participatory work.

All participatory work should respect a few key principles. First, local people are experts in their own lives and others should expect to learn from them. Second, everyone should expect to learn during genuine participatory work. The first mistake an outsider can make is to start community level work thinking they know what they will find. Third, those engaged in participatory processes have to work actively to include people, especially those who are often missed out.

Following the principles leads to designing a good process.

A good process

A participatory process has to be designed to make it easy for those involved to learn. This means arranging a number of steps where those involved can stop and decide on the next steps; the whole process cannot be designed from the start.

Flexibility

This means that the process needs to include some flexibility so that work can be adjusted as the situation becomes clearer and new things are learned.

Time to think

There has to be time to reflect and check on findings and explore more deeply some of the issues that emerge.

1. Does the consultation process contain time to think and flexibility so that work can be modified as it goes along?

Ways of sharing the learning

There has to be time to share the results with participants and key stakeholders so that everyone is informed about what is going on and what the important issues are. Some results will need to be interpreted by those who were present and some

discussions or meetings may be necessary and a better way of explaining the work than a written report.

Consultation fatigue

Most complaints of consultation fatigue are not actually about being consulted but about not knowing what happened as a result of the consultation. In a good process it is very clear how people's views are to be used, how they will influence decision making and how the results will be fed back to the participants and stakeholders.

2. Does the consultation process contain methods for feeding back to participants and for sharing the findings with key stakeholders?

Managing the process

A genuinely participatory initiative normally works well when there is someone that will guide the process within the organisation. This person may already have witnessed a good participatory process and can help others to adjust to the ways of working and making use of the findings.

3. Is there someone who will support and promote the consultation process?

Allowing for greater scope

Participatory consultations may raise issues that are outside the area that are covered by the organisers or outside their expectations. A good process can make use of these unexpected ideas and link expressed issues to potential service providers.

For example; a consultation originally focussed on health identified transport as key barrier preventing people from reaching good food outlets and exercise centres.

4. Will it be possible to involve people in different areas outside the initial brief of the process?

Designing a good process leads to the rewards of good participation.

The Rewards of good participation

Leading to action

Good participatory processes lead to action and the people involved can move on from assessment to doing something practical.

5. Does the process include the intention of promoting action and change at community level?

Raised skills and confidence bring lasting change

Involving local people in a consultation can involve training and raising skills. Being involved improves confidence and people often continue to be involved in other initiatives. There can be lasting changes in engagement. Future consultations become easier because of the training and empowerment.

6. Does the process involve local people and help to build their skills?

Fewer complaints

If people are effectively engaged in a consultation process there are far fewer complaints both during the process and when decisions are implemented. This saves time and money in not having to deal with protests and grievances.

Greater ownership

People who are properly involved in a participatory process feel far higher levels of ownership in projects that emerge from the consultation even where the work is carried out by others.

More inclusive

A good participatory process will identify and include people who are usually excluded from consultations. The wider participation will ensure that the needs of more people are included in the assessment.

Who is hard to reach?

People who have been involved in a good participatory process tend to stop saying that some people are Hard to Reach and start to say that some assistance and services are hard to reach for some people.

New ideas, new information

A good participatory consultation identifies new ideas and unearths new issues that are important to people in the community. The openness of the people leading the consultation and the methods used allow more ideas to be heard and more people to be taken notice of.

7. Does the consultation have the capacity to cope with unexpected findings?

Easier to deal with difficulties earlier.

More sensitive information and more differences of opinion are collected in a participatory process that pays attention to more people. The process allows difficult ideas and differences of opinion to be dealt with at an early stage rather than finding them an obstacle much later in the project.

Resources

A good process requires skilled and experienced facilitation. It is worth taking time to identify good trainers and facilitators. More consultancy days may be required for a good participatory process than for a more conventional consultant-driven survey. The results are likely to be delivered at the same time but a participatory process will save time and money later because it has been more thorough and engaged the people who are affected and those who will be necessary to support further action.

8. Can you find good facilitators for this process, including sources to search, clear criteria and methods for selection?

The most important resource is likely to be the time and attention of participants and senior staff.

9. Are the key stakeholders informed about this initiative and have they got time allocated to learning about the process and about the findings?

It is important to check with other initiatives in the area in order to avoid duplication of effort and to build on other community level work done. .

10. Can you identify similar participatory initiatives that have happened recently in the same area or may be planned in the near future?