

# Consultation or active participation?

## Community arts and participatory appraisal workers working together to really involve local people in decision making

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### Introduction

For sometime now I have been enjoying using the metaphor of a 'tool bag' to describe my approach to how I have used Community Arts as a tool to engage local people in effective consultation work. Community Arts is a term used to embrace work, which involve groups of people doing creative activities together. These activities cross art forms, so include the visual arts and crafts and performing arts, and can be anything from a community festival to a book, from a dance to a video, from a mosaic to a mural. The list is endless; what is important is the process. Fundamental to Community Arts is the belief that we are all creative and so can all participate in arts activities. So Community Arts workers use tools and techniques which encourage participation by valuing people's creative skills and providing opportunities for people to gain confidence, find their voice and work together to create something extraordinary. I strongly believe that good Community Arts practice enables people to be fully involved in a process that values local people's existing skills and knowledge and enables them to voice their feelings, opinions and aspirations; work which enables people to see and explore visions of the future and make a creative statement or product, and which can be used to continue the debate with others.

Over the last few years I have been involved in consultation work, which has resulted in arts workers working with local people to develop ideas, visualise plans and go on to put them into practice. Recently work in Blakenall in Walsall, UK, has led me to not only review the tool bag but also the tools I use.

### The Blakenall project

I was asked to be part of a team of people involved in developing Walsall's<sup>1</sup> application for New Deal for Communities, a Government Regeneration initiative which would bring millions of pounds of new investment in to one of the most deprived areas of the town. The area within Walsall selected for the application was Blakenall and, according to official statistics, it is one of the poorest, most unhealthy and least well served areas of the town. In the past, Blakenall has missed out on many of the previous Government funded regeneration schemes. Despite

<sup>1</sup> Walsall is a town of about a quarter of a million people, 6 miles north of Birmingham, in the UK.

suffering from being labelled as having 'problems', the communities living in Blakenall have maintained a strong community spirit and identity.

The work in Blakenall had to happen in a very short time space; it was the start of a longer consultation process. An application for New Deal Status had to be submitted to the Local Government Office. If it were accepted, there would be another nine months of consultation work to develop a plan, which would then be implemented over a ten-year period.

My remit was to develop innovative ways of consulting with local people to involve them in defining a natural community (Blakenall, was in the eyes of the funders too large an area) and to identify key issues.

The first task I was expected to lead was a stakeholder event. Fine, this fitted in well with my tool bag approach as we could use lots of different ways of involving people on the day. But was the process just about consultation or was it about developing the foundations of real involvement and supporting communities to develop the skills and capacity to really make a difference?

Why should we expect local people to suddenly drop everything, say 'thanks for thinking about us' and attend an event? An event which, we soon realised, would be dominated by agencies and organisations well used to bidding for external funds in the new regeneration game. Clearly agencies were going to be crucial and they were going to have to work together to deliver services that local people needed. However, they shouldn't lead the process. We needed to go out to meet local people, value their experiences and listen to what they had to say. We needed to stop and rethink the approach.

### Reviewing the tools in the tool bag!

So if my task was to really involve local people, what tools did I need to use and how should I use them?

I had seen and used Participatory Appraisal techniques before and had seen people thriving and growing by being involved in the process. I had been impressed with the quality of the debate generated through this approach but, at times, felt frustrated at how the process and the content

of the debate could be communicated to others. I felt that Community Arts provided some answers and, as a member of Walsall Community Arts Team, I had previously worked with people to enable them to produce art products that they were proud of and which made a strong statement about a local issue. Too often, however, I have also seen the desire to gain a creative product take over and arts workers having to be directive to gain a quality end result. I felt that bringing the two tools together would enable a strong creative process to happen with the added value of gaining a visual product that could be used to continue the debate and really influence the final decision. This process would enable people to: reflect on what the key issues were; be inspired – ‘why can’t we change things?’; and so, really work together to make a difference.

Working together using both tools would not only involve local people living in the area in determining the key issues but would also take things one step further. It would enable people, not usually involved in community activities to create documentary evidence that would directly influence the final decision and enable the debates to be continued beyond the initial two-week consultation process.

## Community arts workers and participatory appraisal workers working together

In order to combine the two approaches, I decided that I needed to bring together a team of people who had a number of different skills. The new team was made up of workers from Walsall’s Participatory Appraisal Network who were also experienced detached youth workers, and arts workers from the Round Midnight Theatre Company<sup>2</sup> who had skills in video production and in recording peoples’ stories.

The new team was brought together. We decided that we wanted to give local people an opportunity to draw their community. This would mean not only drawing the boundary to their natural community, but also would provide them with an opportunity to be recorded and have their say about anything: the good things, the things they wanted to keep and the things they wanted to change.

We needed a starting point: we had limited time and couldn’t talk to everyone who lived in the proposed area. The general way to get people together is to hold open-access public meetings. These are fine for people who have an interest in the issue being discussed or see the possibilities, but would they be really accessible to everyone? Thus, to engage as many local people as possible, we decided that, as well as holding public meetings; we would go to local people. Therefore, we worked with local community activists to identify popular

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<sup>2</sup> Round Midnight Theatre Company, made up of associate workers from Walsall Community Arts Team, specialises in using drama techniques to encourage and support people to tell their own story.

community events or activities. Places where people would be, activities run by local people who would be willing to invite us to go along and to start off the debate. A bingo night and a very popular youth night at a local community centre were chosen.

The process started well. We went to each event and local people were pleased to make their mark, draw a map of their community and have their say on camera! We were told moving stories about life in Blakenall, particularly about how people had worked together to make a real difference. Local people then told the team where else to go, who else to talk to. This was very important, as local people were leading and directing the consultation process. The team went to the pubs, the shops, street corners, schools, community groups etc., and repeated the exercise.

However, the process wasn’t easy. It was essential that the workers were used to working in unusual places and that most of them had worked in the area before. We were concerned that local people would feel uncomfortable and threatened. But no-one wanted to talk and were pleased to be involved.

At the end of two weeks, we had a very clear picture of local people’s views. The geographic boundary, identified by local people wasn’t a neat one that followed ward boundaries or existing Local Committee or Resident Group boundaries. The maps, people’s comments and a video of the process were presented to a group of local representatives who had been tasked to make the final decision and identify the geographic boundary. The information gave them the confidence to propose a truly natural neighbourhood and the determination to continue involving local people in the on-going participatory consultation process.

## Conclusion

The Blakenall project was developed in partnership with local people; a new team was put together and work with local people was carried out, recorded and presented within a two-month period. We would have liked longer time to involve local people in how we presented the key issues and over a longer time period local people could have gained new skills, particularly in the video element of the project.

Both tools, Participatory Appraisal and Community Arts have their inherent value. Clearly Participatory Appraisal enables people to participate in an open debate, to have their say and actively determine key issues. Community Arts also attempts to give people the tools to be confident participants and then go on to help communities discover, develop and use their creative abilities, through the arts, to express themselves and to find their voice. It is the interplay between the two which enables both workers and participants to see things differently, to think laterally and to come up with new answers and discover new solutions.

As Edward de Bono states, *"It is not possible to look in a different direction by looking harder in the same direction"* (The Use of Lateral Thinking, Edward De Bono).

In my opinion, combining the two tools resulted in an additional injection of creativity. Working together and producing a visual end product meant that workers looked at things with fresh eyes and were more critical about the process of involving people, more determined to be inclusive and to be transparent, and more prepared to go to places to meet people rather than expecting people to go to them.

The video proved to be a more powerful statement than a written report. It was a visual statement which people couldn't, and didn't want to, ignore it. People did use it, to reflect on the key issues and I saw it being used straight away to literally take the debates raised in the pubs and on the street corners to other forums. For example local people used the video to raise some critical issues about access to community facilities. I saw these were listened to, taken seriously and acted upon in order to change things.

The issues raised were not all doom and gloom. One of the most important things that came out of the work was local people's strong sense of pride and identity, a key factor for workers from outside the area to hear.

Walsall Community Arts Team and Walsall Participatory Appraisal Network are now working together to continue this work. They are developing new and innovative approaches to participatory decision making, finding ways that enable local people to take the lead, voice their opinions, gain new skills and produce an arts product that can be used to continue the debate.

This is important work and confirms that it is the way you combine and use the tools in your tool bag that gets results!

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## Notes

Workers involved in the Blakenall project were from Walsall Participatory Appraisal Network (contact Eleanor Chell, Tel: + 44 (0) 1922 477 499); Round Midnight Theatre Company (Tel: + 44 (0) 121 440 8188); and Walsall Community Arts Team (Tel: +44 (0) 1922 653114).