

Community spirit

As Head of Community Planning at Broadway Malyan Planning plc, **Richard Harris** is closely involved with community consultation on major destination developments. Here, he argues that addressing the concerns of individual stakeholders and community interest groups is not merely an optional extra for destination managers: it is an official Government priority and, more significantly, a real step towards long-term sustainability for well-conceived projects.

Most large destination projects require, at some point in their planning, a stage where some form of public consultation or community involvement is required. This can range from a statutory requirement to consult on a planning application to the development of a comprehensive process to engage both the local community and potential customers. The latter approach is particularly important when the project aims to assist the regeneration of an area.

The main stakeholders in a project are normally the developer or promoter of the scheme, the local authority and the community, each of whom may have individual objectives and concerns in relation to the project. Nevertheless, there is often a greater identity of interest than is initially apparent, particularly where there has been a genuine attempt to engage local people.

The approach adopted will vary depending on the nature of the project, its size and its location. A heritage project, for example, which restores a listed building, is unlikely to be as controversial as the establishment of a theme park. A local museum will probably be more acceptable than, say, a go-kart track. Development in an area of high unemployment is likely to receive a more favourable response, particularly from a local authority, than a similar proposal in a congested part of the South East.

Approaches to consultation

There are a number of ways of approaching consultation. The most successful involve establishing a process that engages stakeholders over the period of the development. Within this process, a number of techniques can be used, some of which, such as 'Planning for Real' are well known and have a high degree of credibility in the regeneration industry. However, to achieve a successful consultation exercise, consultation needs to be sustained over the life of the development and not be limited to individual techniques, which are only likely to generate interest for a short period.

There is evidence that the destination industry is beginning to appreciate the need for community involvement. In his book on the development of the Eden Project, Tim Smit writes that 'if your local community won't back you, everyone else has an exit!'

Lottery applications have to demonstrate that those interests affected by the proposal have been consulted. However, the need to develop the approach further has been boosted by the increasing importance of destination planning in regenerating

communities, the widening of the definition of sustainability to include acceptability to local residents, and the recently published Planning Green Paper, *Planning: Delivering a Fundamental Change* (DTLR, 2001), which emphasises community engagement.

Broadway Malyan has worked on a number of major projects which have an element of heritage, recreation, leisure and community development. Several of these have involved extensive consultation and community involvement, including the following.

- **Epsom Hospital Cluster:** development of 1,500 houses on redundant hospital sites in Epsom, Surrey. As well as residential buildings, new recreation and cultural facilities were put in place: a new park was developed, and two listed buildings were converted, one into a health club and tennis centre, the other into a community centre. In the case of the park, an extensive consultation was carried out by the local authority on the design, facilities to be provided, links with the adjacent residential areas, and a competition to find a name.
- **Norfolk and Norwich Hospital:** development here incorporated retained listed buildings and buildings of local historical interest.
- **Roundshaw Estate LB Sutton:** a major regeneration project, which involved the redevelopment and refurbishment of approximately 2,000 residential dwellings with attendant social facilities.

With all these projects there has been community involvement over a considerable period, involvement which has varied according to the nature of the individual project, the views of individual stakeholders, and the effect of the development on the local community.

The main stakeholders involved in the Epsom Hospital Cluster development, for instance, have been the local authority, the NHS, housing associations and developers, all of whom have been represented on a steering group responsible for the consultation process. Reporting to this group there are a number of focus groups, comprising local residents and representatives of the various agencies concerned with different aspects of the development - recreation, community facilities and the environment.

It is important to stage certain types of focus group events during the consultation process, which are capable of stimulating

interest and generating new ideas. These include visioning days, planning weekends, and 'Planning for Real' sessions. The results of these sessions are then reported to the steering group and ultimately to the sponsoring agencies. In Epsom, such a process has been running for approximately three years, an exceptionally lengthy period due to the scheme's complexity, but one which demonstrates that there needs to be a considerable commitment from all the stakeholders to sustain consultation over a long period.

Stakeholder objectives and aspirations

In any consultation exercise, each of the stakeholders is likely to have a different starting point. The following is not meant to be an exhaustive list but illustrates examples of issues that are likely to be of concern to different groups in relation to a cultural or heritage project. The principal stakeholders are likely to be the community, the local authority and the developer.

The community immediately affected by a scheme is likely to have concerns about the following

- Traffic and related congestion.
- The impact of features such as car parks, visitor centres and infrastructure improvements.
- Whether the scheme is viable in the long term.

They may, however, welcome other aspects of the scheme.

- The possibility of additional jobs.
- The opportunities for regenerating their area.
- The promotion of their locality.
- The possibility of related infrastructure benefits.

A local authority may have similar concerns but will need to take a wider view. A major heritage or cultural development should relate to its community plan and cultural strategy, on both of which it should have consulted its residents. It will be particularly interested in the following.

- The potential for economic development and regeneration.
- How the proposal fits into its overall policies.
- Whether there is a conflict between the views of local people and the needs of the wider community.
- The ability of the development to attract grant and other forms of funding.

- Whether there are sustainability considerations - is the proposal viable in the long term or will it fail to attract its target audience?
- Whether there are environmental considerations. This will include the usual concerns such as traffic generation, waste disposal and noise impact, and be particularly important in, for example, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and other particularly sensitive areas.

The developer will have a different set of considerations again.

- The profitability of the scheme and the strength of competition from other attractions in the area.
- The investment required and to what extent grants and other incentives may be available.
- Concerns about the capacity and quality of the local infrastructure - roads and public transport.
- The availability and quality of the local workforce.
- Training opportunities.
- Promoting and marketing the scheme.

Some of these objectives may be in conflict. The consultation process should explore these issues and, while it is unlikely to be able to resolve all of them, would be expected to deliver a solution that meets most stakeholders' aspirations.

Lessons learnt

From the experience of Broadway Malyan in relation to the projects already mentioned, a number of points emerge. Some of them appear obvious but can be easily overlooked.

- The community tends not to want to get involved until concrete proposals are on the table. However, key decisions are often taken at an early stage which means that many aspects of a scheme are not open to challenge or debate later on. This gives the impression that the consultation is a charade and that the process is simply a case of going through the motions. Techniques such as visioning days used at an early stage can help overcome this problem.
- A few key issues, if not dealt with promptly, can blight the whole project. They may not necessarily be the most important but may be high profile. It is particularly important that where commitments are made to provide



gains from the development, they are delivered when promised.

- Maintaining community interest involves a considerable effort to support focus groups and other forms of participation. Although community groups will resent public agencies *taking over* the process, they expect involvement and support, particularly with arranging meetings, providing venues and assisting with administration.
- Participants in the process need to see that they are influencing it. At Epsom, community involvement raised a number of issues that changed the initial perceptions of the agencies involved – and the subsequent form of development
- There is sometimes difficulty in achieving a balanced range of participants. Special efforts need to be made to involve hard-to-reach, peripheral groups. The process can be easily hijacked by a few activists unless approaches are tried that appeal to particular sections of society.
- It is easy to arouse enthusiasm and expectations but these can turn to disappointment if nothing happens. If this is not managed, disillusion may result, making it harder to engage the community again. If possible, some easy wins need to be identified which can be implemented quickly.
- Finally, to stress once again, community involvement is a long-term activity. The whole process needs to be monitored carefully and frequent evaluation of progress made. The approach has to be flexible enough to adjust to issues which arise unexpectedly.

The Government view

The present Government is keen to see much more widespread public consultation in a number of areas of public policy. The Green Paper on Planning, already mentioned, proposes the introduction of numerous measures to strengthen community involvement. Local Plans will be replaced by Local Development Frameworks, which will be broad-brush documents setting out what a local authority is seeking to achieve in terms of the development and improvement of the physical environment of its area. The objectives set out in the Framework and the strategy of how to achieve them must be shared and endorsed by the local community. The Green Paper proposes that this will be achieved by a Statement of Community Involvement, which will also provide a benchmark for developers about what is expected of them in terms of consultation when submitting a planning application. It states that with larger and more complex proposals, developers should be engaging with local residents before submitting a planning application.

The DCMS paper, *Tomorrows Tourism* (1998), stressed the need for partnerships between the public, private and voluntary sectors and a requirement to address planning issues associated with tourism. It states that there should be, a dialogue between planners and developers and that, 'planners need to be aware of the benefits of tourism and of the potential of well-planned tourism developments to bring substantial economic, employment and social benefits to local communities! The paper also recognised the need for multi-stakeholder consultation groups,



which could build consensus, enable the exchange of good practice and particularly encourage private sector input in the planning of tourism developments.

This is consistent with local authorities being required to prepare Community Plans, which are overarching documents pulling together all its plans and strategies such as the Local Development Framework and cultural strategy. These also have to contain evidence of consultation and partnership with major stakeholders. Indeed it is likely that all local authority policy documents will require such evidence, particularly where they are required to support funding bids.

The way forward

Community involvement is clearly something the destination industry needs to take seriously when developing new projects. In many respects, it should be well equipped to do so, since presentation and marketing are well-established activities in the business. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that such approaches can be transferred wholesale to community planning and development. Engagement is more than a public relations gloss. As already seen, it involves listening, compromise and a willingness to adapt when necessary. Poorly conducted consultation, in contrast, which disregards these core principles, can damage a good project, sometimes irreparably. By the same token, poorly *conceived* projects will not benefit from even the best public consultation process.

Properly conducted consultation and community involvement is not just good practice; it is also central to the current Government's agenda. Practitioners in the destination industry will need to be aware of, and understand the interrelationships between, cultural and community strategies and Local Development Frameworks when contemplating development projects and the requirement to engage the public. The industry will need to equip itself to meet this challenge.