Public participation in green space decision making

Engaging local communities in green space design, management and maintenance decisions is thought to promote public acceptability, stewardship and the long-term social sustainability of these settings (Dempsey et al., 2016). This is particularly important in the face of shifts to less intensive maintenance regimes intended to promote biodiversity since ecological quality can conflict with aesthetic preference (Filibeck et al., 2016).

In this brief report, we present: (a) examples of public participation tools that could be adapted for use with communities with regards to green space decision-making; (b) the value of involving charismatic individuals in such engagement efforts; (c) the importance of timely and continued public engagement; (d) the need to identify and involve commonly overlooked individuals within community decision-making; and (e) practical examples of efforts made to involve diverse community members in decision-making, management and/or maintenance of urban green spaces.

Tools for public participation

A range of public participation tools and toolkits are available online, many of which stem from the large and growing body of work around engaging the public in health care settings and health care-related decision making. These include (but are not limited to):

- Participation Compass: http://participationcompass.org/
- Community Planning Toolkit: http://www.communityplanningtoolkit.org/

The tools used depend on the resources available for the process in terms of time, funds, facilities, partner organisations, experience (e.g. of the issues, methods), and engaged stakeholders. The Engage 2020 Action Catalogue offers a useful approach for tailoring the choice of tools to specific decision making contexts: http://actioncatalogue.eu/search

A range of additional approaches could be used, drawing on methods used by researchers, community development teams and built environment professionals to understand how and why people use and value (or otherwise) their local public open spaces. These include:

- The Design Council/CABE Spaceshaper toolkit (http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/resources/guide/spaceshaper-users-guide), combining in-situ workshops, discussions and photo-based methods to understand how and why diverse local groups engage with their public open spaces, and how this might change with future environmental and social change.
- Participatory mapping approaches; these use hard copy cartographic maps - e.g. Ordnance Survey maps - placed within communities themselves (for example, in local shops, libraries, cafes...
and in more formal focus group/interview settings) to give community members the opportunity to draw policy attention to places of personal importance or value to them within the community. Increasingly, online mapping interfaces are also being developed, potentially broadening participation beyond those with access to the hard copy maps (e.g. https://communitymaps.org.uk/welcome, https://maptionnaire.com/). This allows people’s place values and meanings to be mapped and incorporated in policy decision-making alongside more tangible, physical features of the communities.

- **PhotoVoice approaches**, using participatory photography and storytelling methods to enable diverse individuals to represent their priorities and values (e.g. http://steps-centre.org/methods/pathways-methods/vignettes/photovoice/, https://photovoice.org/vision-and-mission/); although more resource-intensive, the opportunity to photograph and then discuss places of personal importance (and places invoking negative reactions) can provide valuable insights into more subtle aspects of experience that may be missed through text-based surveys or traditional forms of consultation.

- **Mobile applications**, such as the ‘Ramblr’ app (http://www.ramblr.com/web/main), enabling smart phone users to record and geotag audio-visual data about their perceptions and use of different local green and blue spaces. When mapped with GIS, this data can provide contextualised insights into the relative contributions of varied public open spaces to residents’ sense of wellbeing.

**Role of charismatic community leads**

A growing body of studies exploring the success of community-based initiatives (nature-related and otherwise) have noted the importance of finding and working with what have variously been termed ‘community champions’, ‘community pioneers’, ‘mavens’ and ‘catalytic individuals’. These individuals tend to be highly personable with the necessary enthusiasm and community knowledge to recognise local environmental or social issues, develop novel ideas, forge strategic partnerships, mobilise local pools of social capital and encourage diverse community members to participate in pro-active, constructive community responses (Bell and Vanner, 2011). As discussed by Fell et al. (2009), these individuals occur in all walks of life and are usually sociable, outgoing and positive. Importantly, such individuals tend to share an overwhelming commitment to **altruism**, working hard to promote change and community action that they believe will benefit the people around them. Their influence is enhanced through their internal consistency, in terms of saying what they mean, meaning what they say, and then doing what they say.

**Importance of timely and long-standing engagement**

Engaging the public in green space decision-making at an early stage is particularly valuable to facilitate positive forms of engagement; long-term dialogue is deemed more effective than discreet stand-alone engagement events (Emery et al., 2015). It is important to recognise that all communities will have a specific history, which can both help and hinder subsequent engagement efforts; whilst this history cannot be changed, efforts to acknowledge it – together with any related tensions – are important. Overall, approaches are needed that emphasise participation as a process with clear objectives, committed to empowerment, equity, trust and learning (Reed, 2008).

Discussions with representatives from the Cornwall Wildlife Trust and Groundwork South emphasised the **time required to build meaningful and enabling relationships** with different community members. Based on their work with both coastal and inland communities, they suggested value in:
Initially identifying (e.g. via town forum websites) **a range of active local groups and actors to work with**, such as Head Teachers of local schools, Women’s Institute groups, University of the Third Age, Youth Groups, Parish and Town councillors, Friends of Groups etc. By framing proposed green space changes as flexible rather than finalised, positively framed discussions can be held with these groups about how the proposed changes align with (or otherwise) their priorities regarding these areas.

Organising discussion events in **relaxed local social venues that people enjoy going to**, such as local pubs, cafes etc. The initial discussions noted above will help to secure a core group of attendees but efforts should also be made to advertise the events more widely (in person, via posters, leaflets and through social media) and to arrive early on the day – a few informal conversations beforehand can help to ‘scoop up’ others in the venue who had not otherwise heard of the event or thought about coming. Inviting an engaging speaker on a related topic that will interest and hook people in can also be beneficial at these types of events.

Initiating these conversations with **a clear but simple message about the aim of the proposed project and why it is or could be meaningful for local people** i.e. ‘this is the scope of the project given our time/resources, how do you feel about it, what would you like to see happening – at best and as a minimum?’ Expectations can be managed by making the scope of the project clear at the outset and by framing what can be done with current funds as a stepping stone to further improvements in the future. It may be useful to share a short-term plan (e.g. 1 year), coupled with a summary 5-year plan and a vision for the longer-term benefits anticipated as a result of the changes proposed. Elements of these conversations can then be fed back into the proposed work-plan and longer-term project vision so that people can see tangible evidence of their contributions.

**Launching the project with a community festival**, and setting out plans for a series of smaller subsequent events to **celebrate key milestones and community achievements**. Each event can include informal opportunities for community members to give feedback e.g. via interactive poster boards, anonymous thought boxes, social media hashtags etc. Where negative comments are received, they should be approached in a positive open-minded way, giving people opportunities to fully explain their concerns, and encouraging them to get more involved in order to find creative and tailored solutions to the issues raised i.e. try to dissipate resentment by creating avenues for them to engage more pro-actively. As noted by discussions with Burnley Borough Council, which is working closely with volunteers (named ‘VIPS’ – volunteers in parks) to implement a number of changes in the management of their local heritage parks, these efforts are important to ensure that community participants do not feel taken for granted or their contributions overlooked (see: https://www.nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/rethinkingparksburnley_0.pdf).

**Moving beyond the ‘usual suspects’**

The risk of focusing engagement efforts solely on citizens who are already relatively ‘active’ within their communities (e.g. those identified through contacts with local councillors, vocal membership and participation in existing groups etc.) is the tendency to overlook more isolated individuals who are less connected to existing social networks and community activities. As noted by Marcus et al. (2011), many people face a range of structural barriers to forging community connections, particularly those who are unemployed, retired or who live in areas that generally have thinner social networks. Conversely, individuals with denser and more varied connections tend to perceive better access to information, opportunities and resources, and therefore feel better equipped to collaborate and act on issues that matter to them. As such, a period of social network building might be needed, alongside efforts to address structural causes of disconnection, before more isolated community members will feel able or
inclined to engage in discussions about their local green spaces. The ‘Connected Communities’ programme (http://www.climateaccess.org/sites/default/files/Rowson_Connected%20Communities.pdf), initiated by the Royal Society of Arts, recommends the use of social network mapping to identify typically overlooked community members (https://www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/reports/power-lines - Rowson et al., 2010).

Reaching out through green space – case studies

Despite the challenges of reaching out beyond the usual suspects, efforts to do so have been made by civil society organisations around the country. Links to case study examples are provided here.

- Groundwork’s ‘Green Teams’ in Cornwall, engaging with the long-term unemployed: https://www.groundwork.org.uk/Sites/south/pages/green-teams-in-cornwall Notably, discussions with Groundwork suggested this scheme was successful with a commitment of two days per week for six weeks, but less so when this was changed to four days per week for a month. The intensity of commitment, together with the provision of meaningful opportunities to connect with others and learn from personable, enthusiastic and respectful practitioners (e.g. Eden Project, National Trust gardeners etc), influenced the potential for scheme success.
- London Wildlife Trust’s ‘A cool place to live project’, working with social housing residents and landlords to identify and implement green space solutions to address the impacts of climate change: http://www.wildlondon.org.uk/a-cool-place-to-live
- The ‘Neighbourhoods Green’ initiative, aimed at supporting the engagement of social housing residents in the design and management of shared green spaces within their living environments: http://www.neighbourhoodsgreen.org.uk/home
- London Wildlife Trust’s ‘New Roots’ project with ex-offenders, promoting and enabling their involvement in practical horticulture and conservation activities to improve their employment prospects: http://www.wildlondon.org.uk/new-roots
- Groundwork’s ‘Saltmill Park’ transformation, involving intensive and long-term community collaboration to convert a former municipal refuse tip into a multifunctional community green space catering for both wildlife and amenity needs: http://www.groundwork.org.uk/Sites/south/pages/saltmill-park-south
- London Wildlife Trust’s ‘Potted History’ gardening project that draws on reminiscence and horticultural therapy to improve the self-confidence of socially isolated older adults in South London: http://www.wildlondon.org.uk/potted-history
- Thrive’s therapeutic use of gardens and gardening as a means of engaging and bringing about positive changes in the lives of people living with disabilities, ill health and social isolation: http://www.thrive.org.uk/who-we-help.aspx
- Global Generation’s use of land-based activities, food growing and creative writing to support nature-based engagement amongst inner city young people, businesses and families in central London: http://www.globalgeneration.org.uk/about-us/
- The Hidden Gardens, a public green space and community development organisation located in the socio-culturally diverse area of Pollokshields, Glasgow, to promote understanding and the sharing of stories between people of all cultures, faiths and backgrounds: http://thehiddengardens.org.uk/about-the-hidden-gardens.php
References


About these cards

This series of evidence report cards has been brought together by a partnership of the University of Exeter and Cornwall Council, funded by the University of Exeter ESRC Impact Acceleration Account. The cards bring together the latest social science and related natural scientific research from the University of Exeter and the international research community. A resource listing detailed citations and web links is available as part of the series.

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