



Decision makers are going
to have to learn how to listen.

Words Ben Willis

Photographs Len Grant

THIS LAND IS OUR LAND

A small tributary of Manchester's River Irwell is an unlikely place to look for a glimpse of a waterway renaissance. Winding its way down through Oldham and Rochdale, right into the heart of central Manchester, the Irk valley is more a picture of post-industrial neglect than a vision of nature's resurgence.

But come the end of the year its abandoned cars and choked waters will fade into the background as expectant eyes turn their gaze on the valley. In December 2003 the UK government is due to adopt a new directive issued by the European Commission that could herald a new future for the nation's rivers, and the Irk valley could find itself in the limelight.

Although the very name of this latest initiative - the Water Framework Directive - is enough to send any right minded members of the public scuttling for cover, it's exactly us, the public, that it has in mind. The directive is one of the first of Europe's new environmental policies to adopt the terms of the Aarhus Convention, another piece of bureaucracy that attempts to empower the public to participate in decisions taken about the environment.

It's a noble enough goal, but the problem with it is this: no-one really knows how to 'do' public participation. Public consultation on big environmental regeneration projects is nothing new, but 'participation'? That's a whole new ball game, and one that not many people know how to play. All eyes to the Irk.

AN ABANDONED CAR IN THE IRK
VALLEY, WITH CITY CENTRE
MANCHESTER IN THE BACKGROUND

60-second expert

- as of the end of this year, the European Commission's Water Framework Directive comes into effect requiring all river basins to have a proper management plan in place
- members of the public will be asked to participate in producing these plans, but regeneration agencies are unfamiliar with how to actively involve members of the public in this way
- over the past few months, plans to regenerate Manchester's Irk valley have been used as the testing ground for a new form of public participation in which residents have produced their own vision for the area
- developed by Manchester University PhD student Joanne Tippet, the process has resulted in a series of proposals that are now being considered by local funders for financial support
- academics and consultation experts believe that because of its emphasis on developing a 'home-grown' vision this could be one way in which regeneration agencies involve members of the public in producing river basin management plans
- the scheme also has wider implications for the way in which local environmental projects are handled generally

Since the spring, residents and stakeholders in the Irk valley have been taking part in a pioneering experiment in community engagement that could be the trailblazer policy-makers are looking for. For three and a half hours a week for eight weeks, a dedicated group of them have met in a local community centre to pour out their ideas for an Irk renaissance.

It was a process instigated by the Irk Valley Project, a partnership between Manchester City Council, environmental charity Groundwork, and regeneration agency North Manchester Partnership. According to project manager Dave Barlow, although tentative steps towards regenerating the heavily degraded valley had been taken in the late 1990s, the steering group realised that there was an opportunity to try something more ambitious.

"Being involved in a full scale river regeneration project from year zero, we have the opportunity to look at the broader social and economic revival of the area," Barlow says. "We believe environmental improvement can hit all the buttons - crime and disorder, health, employment. If you've got good quality green space, you are going to attract more people to live there, and more companies want to invest in the area."

Against this backdrop, the steering group realised that public consultation was the only way of establishing how the project should take shape. And it decided to try something a bit different.

It opted to trial a new form of public participation being developed by Joanne Tippet, an ecological designer and PhD researcher with the Mersey Basin Campaign based at the University of Manchester. Known as SUNstainable DesignWays, Tippet's method was originally pioneered in southern Africa, where complex environmental problems and a shortage of skills among local people to deal with those problems demanded an entirely new way of doing things.

Unlike traditional forms of consultation, Tippet says, where "an expert", or team of experts, develops ideas that are offered to the community for comment, DesignWays works with community members, stakeholders and project officers involved in the community to develop their ideas, starting from what the community members think is important. DesignWays includes a series of practical tools that guide participants to think about their area from many different perspectives whilst learning skills of creative thinking and design.

"One of the important things about this is that people put their ideas on the table, and they quickly become part of an evolving group picture. This helps to encourage dialogue and reduce confrontation," she says. Basing the process on local input, according to Tippet, creates a sense of shared ownership of the project. It also means that the emerging vision is rooted firmly in local knowledge, a crucial factor when considering its long-term sustainability. Rather than beginning by addressing problems, Tippet's process launches straight into brainstorming ideas and identifying what assets already

exist in an area. "If you start by looking at the problems, it sets the wrong tone for the whole exercise," she explains.

Early on in the process, participants are also given a grounding in basic principles of sustainability to ensure that an understanding of it underpins the whole exercise. "When you ask people what sustainability actually is, and give them some tools to think about it, they start to develop an understanding of what it really means, rather than some vague fluffy notion," Tippet says.

After these crucial early stages the group's ideas are refined into goals and placed within the context of any problems in the area that might later prove to be limitations. They are then tested against scientific principles of sustainability to ensure they are environmentally sound. Any that pass through this stage and are identified as advancing the goals of the group are then refined into working ideas, designed, Tippet says, "like an ecosystem", so that their impact on the environment will be minimal.

The net product of the Irk valley public participation process was twofold: a vision and map for the overall area, and proposals for Moston Vale, an area of the Irk where the natural landscape has been damaged by landfilling and Moston Brook buried in concrete piping (see www.holocene.net/irk.htm for the maps and plans).

According to Brenda Collingwood, outgoing secretary of the Moston Vale Residents' Association, when residents were initially told about the participation process, their reaction was one of suspicion.

"It was a little awe-inspiring at first, and we felt it might be over our heads," she says. "But we kept at it, and really enjoyed it. There was an old lady from round the corner who kept saying she couldn't do it, but eventually she came up with the most wonderful ideas."



THIS PAGE
BRENDA COLLINGWOOD
AT MOSTON VALE
RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION

FACING PAGE
MEMBERS OF THE
IRK VALLEY PROJECT

In the end residents agreed on a series of proposals for the area ranging from a community pavilion and farmers market, to improved walkways and enhanced wetland features echoing the route of the river hidden beneath layers of rubble and household waste. Some of these are now being considered by local agencies for possible funding. "It's not black and white yet, but we're hopeful," says Collingwood.

Although very little concrete action has yet emerged from the Irk valley vision, in the light of the Water Framework Directive, there is every possibility the project could become a national benchmark for waterway regeneration. The framework states: "[EU] Member states shall encourage the active participation of all parties concerned in implementation of this directive, and particularly in the production, revision and updating of river basin management plans."

All well and good. But for most environmental regeneration agencies, 'participation' is an unfamiliar term. Consultation, yes; exhibitions at the local community centre, fine; surveys and tick boxes, no problem. But all of these are the preserve of "experts" that Joanne Tippetts warns can be the antithesis to a sustainable, locally inspired vision of long-term renewal.

According to John Handley, professor of land restoration and management at the University of Manchester, as environmental policies such as the Water Framework Directive put more and more emphasis on public participation, methods that genuinely understand how this should be done will become increasingly important. In this context, he believes Tippetts's work in the Irk valley could prove invaluable.

"Usually public participation in the design process has really been fairly tokenistic," he says. "People are often consulted at a late stage in the process, and are often not well equipped to engage. What Joanne has been doing is bringing them in much earlier and involving them much more thoroughly, and giving them a set of new skills and new understanding in the process."

The next challenge, Handley says, will be to start trying to bring techniques developed by the likes of Tippetts to a wider audience. "We need to start codifying processes like these," he says. "Joanne's is a very active, heavily engaged process with well trained people taking it through. But also, sitting behind that, we could develop a number of internet sites providing back up."

But while the good work to be found in the Irk valley might seem to promise a rosy future for the Water Framework Directive, this optimism is not universally felt. Simon Danczuk is managing director of Vision 21, a Manchester based social research firm specialising in consultation. Having attended some of the early meetings about the Water Framework Directive, he is worried that the agencies responsible for implementing it will only ever pay lip service to the concept of public participation.

"I went to a workshop run by the Mersey Basin Campaign around the directive," he explains. "I was in one group with people from the Environment Agency, from United Utilities, academics, and so on. What I gleaned from that experience as an outsider was that a good proportion of them said, 'Well of course we can't have that degree of public participation because the public won't understand it - it's too complex'." From the workshop the Campaign produced a paper detailing the kinds of research that will be needed if the Directive is to be implemented successfully.

But for Danczuk, the kind of old school thinking he



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encountered is unacceptable. "These are old arguments that I thought had died a death," he says. "I've worked in regeneration, housing, local politics, and I've heard all these arguments in years gone by. But on that day, I found they're still being rehearsed, which is worrying. As Joanne's work shows, you can involve people and enable them to understand how to tackle their problems."

Whether Danczuk's fears are ever confirmed remains to be seen. For Tippetts, though, the need to find new practices of public participation is not an option, it's an imperative - not just because failure to do so will risk rubbishing the terms of the Water Framework Directive, but because it is the only way that will guarantee any kind of future for our waterways.

"If you go beyond the letter of the law, and start to ask what it's really going to take to make this happen, to clean up our rivers, the answer is a huge collective effort on the part of every actor in the river basin," she says. "What a process like this does is help people to see their own part in that, and start coming up with realistic but often quite far reaching measures to achieving it."

"If we're to clean up our rivers, we have to come up with something that's different and creative from what we're doing now - this can be a very positive opportunity for change, but we're far from realising such changes at the moment."

MORE INFORMATION:

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To download the WFD research paper mentioned in this article visit www.merseybasin.org.uk