

People are full of ideas, but how do you listen to the right ones?

It's Friday afternoon at Mersey Vale primary school in Stockport and 32 ten-year olds are crowding round a flipchart at the front of their classroom, busily placing coloured stickers in jumbled lines on a big piece of paper.

Having been asked what they want to see on the land beside their local river, table by table, groups of pupils gather eagerly around the flipchart. Each is given three round stickers, red for girls, green for boys, which represent three 'votes'. They can choose between more play areas, better safety, wildlife areas, fishing facilities, picnic tables and cycle paths. They can also offer up their own ideas, which Sarah Wallbank of the Mersey Basin Campaign immediately writes up on a sticker before placing it in a separate category on the flipchart. Each child is then given a single glittery sticker, which they are invited to place over the 'vote' that is their favourite option.

Catherine Yates, 10, says she thinks a better bridge should be built to replace the existing one, "because when you stand on it, it wobbles. It goes over the river so it's not so good." Her classmate Connor Daley joins in, saying, "It's smelly and polluted too."

"And it's too dark with no streetlights," adds Catherine. Sophie Broad says she voted for a play area and really wants "climbing frames, swings, a roundabout and monkey bars."

The entire process of finding out what the class wants to see happening along their local riverside land takes no more than 15 minutes. The technique being used is known as participatory appraisal; fairly new to the UK, it was pioneered in developing countries to help local people feed into decision-making on community initiatives.

"The main features are that it's user friendly, accessible to everyone, and you don't have to be a confident person who is able to stand up in a room and say your point of view," says Sarah Wallbank, who designed this consultation

to discover how the people of Heaton Mersey want to regenerate the derelict land next to the River Mersey through the European funded Artery project.

"Participatory appraisal aims to reach beyond the usual suspects – the people in any community who are always active and vocal. It doesn't take up much of your time, and we go to where people are, we don't rely on them to come to us."

Asking school children to vote on ideas is just one step in an in-depth consultation process, which Sarah hopes will reach at least 10% of the local population. She has also organised consultation meetings with local resident associations, businesses, fishing and cycling clubs, and will be reaching out to a far wider audience – many of whom have never been asked their opinion before.

The principle of asking local people what they want is now a central criterion in many funding applications. This may seem to make perfect sense, but it has not always been the case. With hundreds of millions of pounds of public money already spent over several decades to regenerate derelict areas of the Northwest, the question now being asked is, how effective has this really been for the communities themselves?

The new thinking goes like this: serial regeneration that takes only nominal account of local needs and priorities is unlikely to be sustainable – for example, an undirected mass mail-out of a questionnaire may offer a nod to public consultation, but it will not explore the deeper issues, or make use of the in-depth local knowledge, that exist within communities.

Carole Parker, partnership co-ordinator of the Mersey Waterfront regional park, explains that there is growing awareness that vested interests have a valid right to be involved in public decision making.

"We believe that people must be at the heart of what the money is spent on. This work is being done because of the public; they are the whole point of what we do."

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SPEAKING

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Photographs Mersey Waterfront, Terry Mealey



OUT

Working for the Mersey Waterfront on a detailed public consultation exercise is Manchester-based consultancy, Vision 21. Helen Bidwell leads the team which has randomly selected residents in the Wirral, Liverpool, Sefton and Halton and invited them onto newly created 'people's panels'; three-day, paid workshops which are carefully constructed to

discover and engage with participants' ideas and to develop their skills as consultees for the future.

Several months on from the first set of panels and now working on follow-up sessions, Helen Bidwell explains the plus points.

"It gives people a substantial period to get the information they need, and time to digest that information, while having somebody there on hand they can ask. They will

become an expert on what is proposed in their community.

"They set their own ground rules for the way the sessions are run, and we do all sorts of exercises and activities to get people comfortable speaking in front of others. We also use different methods to suit different people. That helps us in finding out everyone's point of view."

Four panel sessions have already been completed, exploring a range of proposals that are still at an early enough stage for suggestions and criticisms to be incorporated.

One such proposal, called Pride in the Promenades, is led



by Iain Taylor of the Mersey Basin Campaign. He recalls the experience of having local residents put his project under the microscope with something of a rueful chuckle.

"No two people's panels are going to be the same. I'd been and presented to the Wirral panel, and luckily they really liked the Promenades idea and gave loads of enthusiastic feedback," he explains. "The Liverpool panel was a completely different kettle of fish and I was quizzed heavily. It was interesting as an experience, because I think it's essential to be put on the spot and for local people to ask tough questions. I worked hard in that session and gave very honest answers. You've got to be honest with people at the end of the day, and I think finally I won them over to considering the idea."

Kristina Mullins, who lives on the waterfront in New Ferry, participated in the Wirral panel and says it offered a useful opportunity to tell funders things they don't know. "It was enjoyable, informative, very democratic and a good process because it gave us the chance to feed in."

Though disappointed that her area is not part of the current regeneration plans, Mullins feels that at least her input has highlighted problems that had not been considered before and may influence future proposals. But, she says, keeping people informed who have already given their time

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and ideas is crucial to ensuring communities retain a sense of ownership.

"It matters, certainly – it's very important to me to be kept informed, to know if they've listened to our report and taken account of our views."

After all this expensive consultation though, surely it could be anticipated that children want play areas, adults want better safety and less pollution and parents with babies need clean toilets to change nappies?

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**ABOVE AND OPPOSITE:
SPECIAL PEOPLE'S PANELS
FOR YOUNG PEOPLE ON
SITE VISITS IN LIVERPOOL**



60-second expert

- Serial regeneration that takes no account of local needs is increasingly seen by major funders as unsustainable.
- Money for regeneration projects is now increasingly linked to in-depth public consultation.
- Various methods of consulting communities are being developed in the Northwest.
- People's panels on Merseyside have required groups of up to 16 local people to commit to three days of workshops on a paid basis. Sourced randomly, they aim to get beyond 'the usual suspects'. Panel members become experts on the issue in hand and develop skills that mean they can be effective consultees in the future.
- Participatory appraisal is a system in which people are consulted in the places where they naturally gather. It offers a simple, easily accessible way to give an opinion without people needing to feel confident to stand up and speak out in public.
- Stakeholder mapping identifies as many interest groups as possible with the aim of correctly targeting a carefully formulated questionnaire. This is then used to home in on groups who have particular knowledge of an issue or area.
- All involved agree that feedback and follow-up is necessary after the consultation and that when action is taken, communities must feel that their views have been taken into account.

Couldn't expert professionals get round a table and work out at least reasonably accurately what is needed?

"I'm sure they could come up with a proportion of it, but not sure they could come up with all of it," says Helen Bidwell at Vision 21. "Local people know what happens in their area; we could think that they really need a supermarket on a vacant field, but they may feel they need a sports centre. If you provide something communities don't want or need, they won't use it and it's not sustainable."

"Also," she laughs, "all these regeneration consultants may be experts but you can get too involved in something, and then just by asking someone from outside, you get an unbiased perspective."

Caroline Riley of the Mersey Basin Campaign agrees. She is working with the Environment Agency, which has committed to increase public participation in the Ribble Basin pilot project, part of the far reaching European Water Framework Directive. The method she uses is called stakeholder mapping, which brings rigour and a degree of independence to identifying all parties who might have an interest in the water environment of the Ribble.

The initial process was to canvass opinion widely on the many stakeholders who might exist. After identifying 16 broad categories of stakeholders, these were broken down into sub-categories and a great deal of research time, sometimes on the ground, was invested to find the most appropriate contact.

Could the same result have been obtained through existing knowledge?

"Well, the Environment Agency had a starting list of stakeholders, but I knew we could find more," says Riley. "I can't promise that stakeholder mapping has identified them all, but I

think we've gone a lot further than we could have without it."

However, stakeholder mapping isn't meant to reach everyone – instead it aims to identify those who are most likely to feel strongly that they have something to say.

When you do reach the right people, it should follow that the quality of their response is better.



With the Ribble pilot consultation this proved it be the case. Anticipating a 5% response rate to the questionnaire she sent out, Riley was delighted that the actual rate has been 35%. But, she warns, the research that goes into the mapping process must be backed up by careful thought in formulating the questionnaire, because once it has been sent out, people cannot be asked again.

"It creates a very informed place from which to begin, but it's only a tool to start off the dialogue," she says. "We then looked at the areas and issues that people said mattered to them, and matched various groups to a series of workshops so we could work out what their vision was for the Ribble."

That vision is now a document that will be incorporated into the plan for the Ribble.

Will it make any difference? Riley sounds a bit shocked at the question and explains firmly that ignoring public participation is not an option because it is built into the Water Framework Directive.

At the Mersey Waterfront, Carole Parker is equally adamant that the opinions that communities have taken the time to offer must be taken into account.

"We're going to be like a dog with a bone – we're making it very clear to the agencies seeking our funding that they must take what the people's panels have said on board," she says.

Making sure that people believe their input is getting results is important too, says Sarah Wallbank in Heaton Mersey. "You need to keep the people who've been involved in the loop. The idea is that we'll move very quickly, so they know that their ideas are being developed and being taken note of. By October 2006, when this consultation comes to an end, residents here will see something real has happened that they've contributed to." 