

## REDISCOVERING THE CIVIC AND ACHIEVING BETTER OUTCOMES IN PUBLIC POLICY

### Policy Briefing Number 3

**Title:** Building resilient communities

#### Brief Description of the Project:

- The move to a new unitary council covering the whole of the former County Council area led to concerns about the need for more localised opportunities for decision-making. A response to these challenges is to establish Area Boards with a capacity to reach out to all sections of the community. The Wiltshire Council design experiment focussed on the 'quality' aspect of deliberation and discussion outputs within the Area Boards.
- The aim of the design experiment was to construct an environment within the Boards where informed, considered deliberations and judgements could be achieved more inclusively. The main focus was whether moderation could be aided by the production of an audio-visual 'issue book' which would serve as a stimulus for discussion.
- A 20 minute film was created which was used together with a facilitator to engage Area Board participants in a deliberation on a key county-wide issue: 'How can the Council best engage local communities in decision-making?'
- The production aims that guided the construction of the DVD issue book were that (i) it facilitated deliberation on a key issue across Wiltshire's community areas and (ii) tested out if and how a sustainable model could be developed in Wiltshire
- People who were selected for inclusion on the DVD were 'those who do not normally engage in formal Council mechanisms'. including those from ethnic minority groups, young people, the military, people with disabilities, and other people who might find it difficult to engage
- The issue book was introduced into one round of Area Board discussions. It was planned that six Area Boards worked through the issue with the book six without.

## Key Findings:

- The process of creating the DVD issue book engendered discussion about the issues amongst those involved in its production and this important dimension should not be overlooked. The community managers were faced with new challenges as a result of having to create the DVD tool that they would not otherwise have encountered.
- The effectiveness of any tool designed to stimulate debate is dependent on both the environmental context and the practical skills to employ that tool; these factors provide the conditions which support or undermine good facilitation and discussion.
- Having the DVD as a timed Agenda item enabled space for participants to challenge and affirm each others viewpoints as well as those on the DVD. In general, discussions within the time seemed less strategically oriented than the remainder of the meetings. The DVD created the conditions for a more open discussion forum where positions had not been established before-hand. However, on some occasions this lack of preview opportunity closed off opportunities for open discussion and instead provoked defensive reactions or even reluctance to allow space to play.
- The issue book provided a common focus around which different Area Boards could orientate. Employment of the DVD format around issues such as new housing and development in the county or anti-social behaviour, which affect all Areas differently, would provide the Authority with a valuable, flexible communication tool.

## Policy Relevance and Implications:

- The DVD issue book proved a novel way to bring in the voices of those who would not normally be present at organised decision-making forums. Both the process of its making and the product itself encouraged deeper engagement around the issue. However, it must be remembered that the individuals on the DVD are relatively powerless as the people in the room had the power to either listen and take the views expressed seriously or dismiss

them as 'uninformed' nonsense. That power of 'dismissal' is the power of exclusion of the alternative view.

- The effectiveness of the DVD in stimulating discussion was determined by an array of factors including the quality of the facilitation, the nature of the physical environment and the sound system used as well as the social and political dynamics of the context for the presentations. To improve impact in the future it is suggested that a standardised high quality presentation and facilitation format is developed. The DVD also has a potential life beyond its original purpose in terms of providing a focus for discussion about issues of engagement in other settings.

**Further information available from: Dr Corinne Wales, Research Fellow, School of Social Sciences, University of Southampton**

**Email: [C.A.Wales@southampton.ac.uk](mailto:C.A.Wales@southampton.ac.uk)**

**Telephone: +44 (0) 1722 338246**

**Date of Publication: September 2009**