

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN URBAN DESIGN: HELP OR HINDRANCE?

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1. Introduction

Until the early 1990s, most UK planners were inclined to define 'urban design' in restrictive terms focusing on townscape issues and the visual character of towns: it was not concerned with the difficult economic, social and political issues which impact on the quality of the urban environment. Recent experiences in urban regeneration and initiatives including the UK Department of the Environment's (DoE) Quality of Town and Country Initiative and its Urban Design Campaign have changed this perspective. Local authorities increasingly see urban design as a way of unlocking opportunities to regenerate parts of towns and cities; they recognise the value of engaging with people and communities; and they see the importance of creating partnerships with local and other interested parties. The UK's Urban Design Group, for example, believes that improving the quantity and quality of public involvement in urban design is one of the keys to improving the quality of the built environment. In 1996, the Group established a Public Participation Programme supported with funding from UK Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions and it is preparing a Community Planning Handbook which it hopes to publish this year.¹

This paper examines the realities of community involvement in urban design in the context of a study of the West Itchen Neighbourhood of Southampton, a diverse inner city area accommodating some 7,000 households and 18,000 people. The findings are based on a literature review of community involvement in urban design and case study research into three government supported regeneration projects all located within the study area: a Neighbourhood Renewal Area - designated in 1994; an Estate Action Scheme - implemented between 1993 and 1996; and a Single Regeneration Budget programme - following a successful bid in 1995. The research was undertaken by Helen Gregory in 1997/8 as the basis of a dissertation, supervised by Alan Rowley, submitted for the award of an MPhil in Environmental Planning and Development from The University of Reading.

The paper addresses four issues:

- the rationale behind attempts to involve local communities in urban design;
- the approaches and techniques employed in practice;
- the problems and constraints local authorities face in involving communities; and
- the outcomes of community involvement in urban design.

The paper concludes that whilst community involvement in small-scale urban design projects like estate improvement schemes can be effective and rewarding, larger and more complex programmes can raise

¹ Urban Design Quarterly, 1998, Issue 67, p. 16

issues which local authorities and the planning system may be unwilling or unable to address. As a result conflicting interests may cloud the potential for common ground and increase the risk that places will be designed and developed with insufficient regard for local interests and sensitivities. The paper makes suggestions for improving local planning and urban design practices.

2. West Itchen Neighbourhoods study area

Southampton is a major city and regional centre in the prosperous south east region of England. However there are pockets of inner city deprivation and the city is the second most deprived local authority area within the region.²

The Council has been Labour controlled for over a decade. Its expressed priorities include developing working partnerships with the community. This has taken the form of Community Action Forums (CAF) in localities around the city, promoting the involvement of citizens at the neighbourhood level in local issues by encouraging them to take action for themselves and through dialogue with the city council and other service providers. The Council has initiated other forms of community involvement, ranging from traditional consultation techniques to more innovative use of panels and citizen juries. Community involvement is not merely sanctioned; it has been actively promoted by the Council.

The West Itchen Neighbourhoods lie to the east of the city centre and are an area of 'concentrated residential decay and commercial disinvestment'.³ Evidence of social exclusion includes the high levels of unemployment and poverty in the area which is the focus of Southampton's ethnic minority population.

The West Itchen Neighbourhoods, with approximately 7,000 households and 18,000 people is a diverse area culturally, socially and physically. The area is of historic and architectural importance, the focus of 19th Century transportation, and industrial and residential development. Modern road infrastructure has created an inner city 'island'. As well as this sense of isolation the area has a reputation for prostitution and crime. Planning blight resulting from earlier planning initiatives has contributed to the area's decline. Until recently the Newtown/Nichol's Town Action Forum was the only Council supported CAF within the study area.

Newtown and Nichol's Town, suffer from decaying housing stock, disinvestment and long-term road improvement blight. To the east is Radcliffe Road, an area of 170 houses sandwiched between railway lines and the 1960s Council housing estate, Northam Estate. To the south is St Mary's, separated by major roads and the railway line. It was once a thriving shopping centre for the substantial working class population living there. It has become increasingly isolated from the city centre retail activities and is run down, with derelict sites and boarded-up shops

3. Case Study Research

Three examples of central government supported regeneration projects within the West Itchen Neighbourhood were studied, these are shown on map 1.

² SRB Challenge Funding, Southampton Bid, 1995

³ Austin Mayhead et al, 1996,7

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Neighbourhood Renewal Area

Renewal Areas were an area-based strategic approach to environmental and socio-economic regeneration and housing renewal introduced by the Local Government and Housing Act of 1989. They involved a Neighbourhood Renewal Assessment (NRA) to determine local strategies. This combines plan-making with an implementation programme through a series of stages from 'vision setting' to choosing solutions to issues identified.

Following a Government NRA pilot project in Southampton (Derby Road Area, 1989), the Council decided there were significant advantages to pursuing this type of neighbourhood-based action. To meet the selection criteria two discrete areas: Newtown and Nichol's Town and Radcliffe Road formed the one Renewal Area.⁴

The community was involved in issues concerning housing rehabilitation and redevelopment, environmental improvements to the streetscape and traffic calming measures. The NRA took place from November 1992 to November 1993 and community involvement took a variety of forms throughout the NRA stages:

- a joint working group of 15 residents, representatives of community group, Councillors, Council officers and representatives of the voluntary sector;
- community workshops comprising a wider cross-section of the community, including targeted workshops for local youths and Asian women;
- the Newtown and Nichol's Town Community Action Forum - closely involved with the NRA with regular reports and presentations made at its meetings; and
- other measures including exhibitions, leaflet drops, residents' preference survey and stakeholder consultation which extended consultation to local groups and business concerns in the area.

The Renewal Area was declared in 1994. The Renewal Action Plan, a ten year programme, is being implemented by the Neighbourhood Renewal Area Implementation Team which continues the involvement of residents and community representatives. There have been implementation problems despite the extensive programme of community involvement in the NRA, notably the traffic-calming scheme.

Estate Action scheme

The DoE encouraged and assisted local authorities in the development of measures for revitalising run-down estates through its Estate Action programme. Funding was allocated on a competitive basis between council housing estates. A specific policy objectives was the encouragement of residents' involvement through a staged programme.⁵

The Northam Estate was built between 1963–1969 and consists of blocks of flats and maisonettes, a tower block and parade of shops. It has suffered from a 'relatively unwelcoming environment' and heating and insulation problems.⁶ The Northam Estate submission was successful in meeting the DoE criteria and won

⁴ SCC, Report of Special Policy Committee, 1993

⁵ DoE, 1989, 3

⁶ SCC, 1997

the funding.

The established tenants' association, the Northam Tenants and Residents Association (NTRA) played a large part in this success and influenced the level of involvement in implementing the scheme. The NTRA was the first of its kind in Southampton.

The scheme involved reshaping the spaces between the blocks and improvement of the appearance and physical character of the estates public areas as well external and internal improvements to the blocks.

Two resident representatives from the NTRA provided the main link with the residents in implementing the Estate Action scheme through membership of the Estate Action Project Team. The Project Team also contacted specific groups for detailed discussions of aspects of the schemes. These were

- the Northam Neighbours - a church funded organisations mainly for single mothers;
- the Midway Group - a luncheon group mainly for retired residents;
- the Mums and Toddlers Group; and
- the Leaseholders - involved separately due to their financial contribution to the scheme.

The Estate Action scheme was seen by residents, Councillors and officers as a success, the reputation of the estate has improved and it has become one of the more attractive estates in the city.

Single Regeneration Budget II programme

The third example concerns the involvement of the community of the wider West Itchen Neighbourhoods area in the urban design aspects of the Southampton City Council's (SCC) successful Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) bid in 1995. The regeneration project is the largest in the South East of England (outside London) and one of the largest awards (£26.3 million) in the UK of that bidding year. The SRB is the most recent form of UK urban policy. Under this system, local authorities are enablers and co-ordinators of local bids which are driven by performance indicators, leverage ratios for funding and tangible output measures such as the number of new houses built. Emphasis is placed on partnership arrangements and local involvement.

A key component of Southampton's SRB bid was the social, economic and physical regeneration of St Mary's to tackle multiple deprivation through a radical vision to be implemented in a seven year programme. This included improving accessibility and security in the area as well as maximising the opportunity for redevelopment of several sites including a car park and the Kingsland Market Area.⁷ The Bid's proposal for St Mary's is shown on figure 1.

The bid was submitted without involving the area's community in its preparation. The subsequent attempts to bring the community 'on board' and engender a sense of community ownership of the SRB programme have resulted in problems, conflicts and delays for a Council trying to reconcile its vision with local interests.

⁷ SRB Challenge Funding, op cit.

The Council undertook various forms of community involvement:

- public assemblies - held at the beginning of the Regeneration Programme and directed at community/ interest groups and voluntary organisations within the area;
- a community planning weekend (CPW) run by consultants John Thompson and Partners in November 1996 involving Planning For Real sessions, workshops and surgeries. The event was open to the whole community and attracted over 1,000 people;
- The establishment of a community development association (CDA) - a structure that enables residents to elect representatives to the decision-making body of the SRB programme, which includes the other regeneration partners. Members were also involved in Issue Groups such as St Mary's and Youth and Social Aspects;⁸
- the Local Plans Department of SCC also undertook traditional consultation exercises - such as presentations and questionnaires on a regeneration plan for the West Itchen Neighbourhood (WINPLAN). This document was to provide planning certainty for the SRB Bid proposals and incorporate issues raised by the CPW; and
- community action forums - established within the area with varying degrees of stability and utilised by the Council for SRB issues.

Throughout the early years of the SRB programme (1997-1998) consultation exercise were also undertaken by other organisations:

- the *Real* 'Planning for Real' event - held in December 1997 and organised by the St Mary's Society, an umbrella society of interest groups. The event was funded partly with SRB money and the society had guidance from a national charity - the Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation - specialising in community participation. The event attracted 408 people and the report was submitted in response to WINPLAN.⁹
- an action planning surgery - organised by consultants producing a draft Urban Village Action Plan for St Mary's. The CDA decision-making board commissioned the plan. The surgery was poorly attended coming soon after the *Real* Planning for Real event.

This layering of consultation exercises across the regeneration area did not resolve divergence of views concerning the future role of St Mary's and there was a real concern that the delivery targets could not be met (resulting in a warning letter from Government Office for the South East).¹⁰

4. Case Study Analysis

Rationale for involving communities in urban design

Renewal Area

The potential benefits of Renewal Areas highlighted by the Pilot project influenced the decision to pursue a Renewal Area within Southampton's inner city. This was given further impetus by the emerging Community Action Forum arrangements. The Council believed that by linking the newly established Newtown/ Nichol's Town CAF with the NRA, working relationships with community leaders would

⁸ Southampton's Planning Weekend Report, 1996

⁹ Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation, 1997

¹⁰ GOSE

develop as part of its commitment to making service delivery more relevant to local needs.¹¹

The Council perceived that involving the community in all stages of the NRA would promote community awareness of the constraints facing Council activity and thus the development of 'realistic and acceptable solutions'. It also expected that community involvement would increase confidence about the appropriateness of the regeneration programme.¹²

Estate Action scheme

A convergence of interests led to the inclusion of the Northam Estate in the Estate Action programme: these included the DoE's commitment to resident involvement devising and implementing the scheme; the desire of the residents association (NTRA) to be involved from the outset; and SCC's commitment to partnership with the residents on this scheme. The Council had supported the establishment of the NTRA and it was an acceptable channel of communication between residents and Council.

The consultation was designed to be open, because the Council realised that the final options would be unsuccessful if they did not satisfy residents' needs and to safeguard the investment in the Estate management continued involvement would be necessary.¹³

SRB programme

Central government's SRB guidance emphasises the need for partnerships between local authorities, residents and the business community to ensure effective regeneration. In the case of Southampton's SRB bid this partnership was approved of in principle. A small team of two planning officers, two local architects and the director of a local Housing Association produced the Bid. But it was prepared without involving the community of the project area to be covered by the award. The Council justified this omission because:

- the complex and radical solutions promoted in the bid;
- the limited time to complete the bid;
- concern not to unnecessarily raise expectations within the community that could not be met if the bid was unsuccessful and;
- a history of consultation within the area and therefore information available to draw on.

Even so, the bid envisaged a limited degree of community involvement: restricted to community groups and address specific elements of the programme; accommodated in the first two years of the seven year regeneration programme; and an organised campaign of discussion, negotiation and planning to achieve commitment, understanding, acceptance and financial leverage.

Despite the lack of a clear delivery programme, the bid was chosen as a 'flagship' regeneration project for the South East (beyond London). This surprised the Council, but it represented the GOSE's (the awarding body) recognition of its vision and departure from usual piecemeal regeneration projects.

¹¹ SCC, 1991, 4

¹² Ibid

¹³ Richard Eyles, Project Officer, 1998 (from interview)

Approaches and techniques

Renewal Area

In this example, community involvement was promoted by a variety of means: more traditional approaches whereby the community was kept informed of the NRA and consulted on the process with the opportunity to influence the neighbourhood strategy; and more proactive approaches including the involvement of a small number of residents and representatives from community groups assisting in the development and selection of options for the renewal strategy.

Traditional consultation techniques such as questionnaire surveys sent to all residences in the Renewal Area were utilised to obtain information about the Area's condition. 'Stakeholder Consultation' enabled the Council to extend consultation into a plethora of voluntary and community groups and business concerns. Workshops were targeted at groups not typically involved in community organisations - local youths and Asian women - to ensure wider representation.

A close working relationship developed between the officers involved in the project and the Newtown and Nichol's Town Community Action Forum (CAF). This caused initial tension between residents of the Newtown and Nichol's Town area and the residents of Radcliffe Road, the latter a discrete community, not part of the CAF. Although this relationship did improve, it highlights the problems stemming from the fragmented and complicated landscapes of community organisations that can exist in urban areas and the difficulty in ensuring that the methods to involve the community are inclusive. It also draws attention to the differing status of community groups with the local authority, the CAF having the closest relationship due to its creation by the Council.

The NRA was initially seen by the Council as a significant step forward in community involvement in project planning and development which would inform future consultation processes.¹⁴ However when it came to implementing the Action Plan, problems in the consultation process were revealed.

Estate Action scheme

The approach to involving the residents of the Northam Estate was partly dictated by the Estate Action guidance, which promotes a staged approach to design and implementation of the scheme; but also due to the assertiveness of the NTRA.

Techniques employed were mainly traditional, two resident representatives, chosen by the Association were involved continuously in the scheme, with weekly project meetings. NTRA meetings enabled representatives to feed back information and issues and consult the other residents.

There was the opportunity for detailed involvement in some decisions, such as the exterior colour of the blocks with every households targeted by the resident representatives. The involvement of the smaller groups (Northam Neighbours, the Midway Group, the Mums and Toddlers Group and the Leaseholders) enabled the collection of a comprehensive range of views.

¹⁴ SCC, 1992,2

In this instance it is clear that the notion of 'community' is firmly place-based and sharply defined (the estates tenants and residents) making it easier for the two resident representatives to relate back to the other residents.

SRB Programme

The unexpected award of the SRB grant meant there were limited arrangements in place for involving the community of the West Itchen Neighbourhoods. There were no community representatives in the bid preparation and no network of community groups/Forums with which the Council could work with. This non-involvement generated 'suspicion and conflict' in the community.¹⁵ Assemblies, the initial method of community involvement, drew wider audiences than the Council had envisaged: from vociferous residents not affiliated to community groups, people from outside the West Itchen Neighbourhood, and even certain 'criminal' elements who wanted to protect their interests.

The strength of the communities' calls for greater local influence in the way the SRB award would be spent forced the Council to rethink its approach. Although the Council was initially uncertain as to the level of empowerment they were prepared to cede to the community, a more high profile technique was chosen - a Community Planning Weekend (CPW) - to actively involve the larger community.

The Council viewed this as a 'more genuine community based approach' which would allow local people at the earliest possible stage to have 'a say in the future planning of the area'.¹⁶ It was also seen as a way for the Council to step back from community tension/hostility through the use of independent consultants. It was envisaged by the Council as an opportunity for the communities to comment on the proposals for achieving SRB outputs and inform the policies and proposals of the draft inner city regeneration plan - WINPLAN. The Council's consultants, John Thompson and Partners, described the occasion as the largest community planning event ever seen in the UK, with a level of attendance which surprised both the organisers and SCC. It generated a large volume of suggestions and proposals. To this extent it was a success, participants who attended were able to put their views across and as one Council officer said it was an opportunity to forget the bid and 'dream dreams'.¹⁷

However even with such an apparently successful event there were several problems. It failed to embrace the whole community and the output was disappointing for the Council. Although conceived as a way of promoting lateral thinking and coalescence of thought, the CPW failed to achieve a consensus on the future planning of the West Itchen Neighbourhoods. In particular the retail role of St Mary's Street and Kingsland Market and opportunities for development. The masterplan for the future of the West Itchen Neighbourhoods which was developed at the CPW is reproduced in figure 2.

The event generated a raft of often conflicting ideas. The Council believed that the consultants' final report should have addressed such conflicts and offered some synthesis and weighting of ideas, particularly as the Council confronted constraints which they felt were 'non-negotiable' (for example the downgrading of the Kingsland Dual Carriageway, seen as a vital route into the city despite its severance effect). However, although these may have been legitimate constraints, they were inadequately explained at the weekend and some community representatives felt that the event took a certain 'direction'; a perception from community representatives that decisions had already been made and were unchangeable. The technique of Planning Weekends is more usually used before SRB bids have been submitted and may not be appropriate later in

¹⁵ Janet Rees, Community Action Manager, 1998 (from interview)

¹⁶ SCC, 1996, 9

¹⁷ Janet Rees, op cit.

the regeneration process.

As a catalyst for action, therefore, the weekend was unsuccessful. Although a purported strength of the technique is its ability to produce a large amount of information in a short time, material generated alone took two years of processing. The participatory process is meant to continue after the event as the development process moves forward. The delay in the response to the event led to problems of sustaining enthusiasm, and while the weekend empowered the community through involvement and raised expectations, this empowerment was not necessarily in a way the Council was comfortable with.

Problems and constraints

Renewal Area

Although the Council recognised that the NRA would be a detailed and lengthy process, which could raise expectations to the point that it would be difficult to withdraw, they felt had to declare the Renewal Area. Indeed towards the end of the NRA the Council was aware of growing frustration from within the community at the length of the process and the lack of action.¹⁸ The Council itself became critical of the Government expectations of the NRA process: despite the time and effort that went into the consultation process, members of the community had become bored and disillusioned.¹⁹

The lack of commitment was evident in the low turnout at various consultation meetings. Whilst there was intensive consultation with a small group of residents - who understood the issues and accepted the compromises - there was little real knowledge of the NRA process in the wide community. This suggests that the representatives lacked the skills and resources that would enable them to discover and express the views of the community they were supposed to represent, becoming isolated from them.

Anxious not to antagonise the community further, the Council decided to approve the action plan for the Renewal Area without detailed programme of works for its implementation. This was criticised by consultants Austin Mayhead et al who were assessing the Government's NRA process.²⁰ Although they were complimentary about the way the community had been involved they felt SCC had been unable to 'manage expectations effectively and deliver against agreed plans'. The study accepted the worth of community involvement, but the consultants stressed its pointlessness in the absence of apparatus of delivery or in the absence of commitment to implementing the resulting strategies.

It became apparent though implementation of the traffic calming and environmental improvement scheme - a core feature of the Action Plan - that the NRA had failed to resolve key differences of opinion. Following declaration of the Renewal Area further extensive consultation was carried out with the community to develop the outline of the traffic calming scheme. During this period several residents and local business interest raised concerns about some aspects of the proposals; further discussions were undertaken in a further attempt to reach a consensus but again these proved inconclusive.

The Council was close to abandoning the scheme. The traffic calming scheme elicited a typically NIMBY ('not in my back yard') reaction, the larger community were only interested or aware of what was happening when it directly affected them. However conflicts of interests had not been resolved through community involvement. Traffic calming involves commercial interests as much as residential yet these interests were not included in the Joint Working Group. The Council did acknowledge that the delay between initial consultation for the traffic calming scheme and its implementation was a factor in creating dissatisfaction.

¹⁸ Report of the Neighbourhood Steering Group, 1993, 7

¹⁹ Leader of the Council, 1998 (from interview)

²⁰ 1996, 28

This highlights the need for visible results following involvement to ensure awareness and a sense of ownership of schemes.

A rescue operation was necessary to keep to the implementation timetable and to put a gloss on what had been a prominent part of the Action Plan. To progress the modified plan proposals, the consultation process returned to the standard 'non-consultation' of advertising that the proposal could be viewed in the Council offices.

There was minimum feedback (one local resident) and the proposed scheme was passed with the audacious comment that 'in view of the number of objections received, it seems clear that the proposed scheme meets with the approval of the majority of the people in the area'.²¹

Estate Action scheme

To the City Council, the Northam Estate was a successful example of community involvement. While traffic calming scheme in the Renewal Area shows the community uncertain of their role in the scheme; in the Estate Action scheme the residents were clear about their priorities. They wanted to improve their living environment and could see direct benefits to becoming involved.

One important factor was the NTRA, a well-organised and informed association. Crucial to its success was the commitment and energy of the two resident representatives acting as efficient and trusted links between the Council and the residents.

The resident representatives became experts and much of the work was done informally. Yet there were difficulties in engaging residents' interests in related aspects to the scheme, many had other concerns such as rubbish collection. More importantly community involvement was, measured by meeting attendance levels and audience composition, low and predominantly female. Further the officers involved doubted whether reliance on just two people adequately reflected the concerns and requirements of residents. For instance, it was acknowledged that after changing some pathways on the Estate access for disabled residents had been worsened.

Not all initial expectations were met and there was a problem of continued commitment when it came to the detailed landscaping plans. This was due in part to lack of energy to continue with the project; its perceived lower priority compared with heating and window improvements and a lack of finance to implement some of the more radical proposals.

SRB programme

The CPW failed to engender a 'shared vision' of how the area and St Mary's in particular would be developed. Indeed the experience raises the issue of what happens 'after the event' when the consultants have left. The CPW was not fully integrated into the SRB programme and the weight the Council attached to the proposals generated was not fully articulated. This led to a perception from some in the community that decisions had been made and were unchangeable.

The Council has also found it difficult to develop the capacity of the community to become involved in the short time scale allotted in the SRB programme. The creation of a Community Development Association (CDA) and the use of community representatives as a means of involving the community have been surrounded by confusion.

²¹ Report to the Environmental Services Committee, 1996, 8

Community representatives were uncertain as to their role and influence with a perceived gulf between them and the other regeneration partners. The Council felt the CDA was in danger of becoming 'hijacked' by vested/ marginal political interest rather than ordinary tenants/ residents of the area, while consultants have questioned the decision-making ability of the CDA to deliver the regeneration programme. CAF have only recently been established for the whole of the regeneration area, with Hamwic Forum covering St Mary's in a precarious embryonic state.

Dissatisfaction with the quality and effectiveness of community involvement initiated by SCC led to the establishment of the St Mary's Society. Their consultation exercise - the *Real* 'Planning for Real' event challenged the validity and cost of the official CPW. While the Council questioned whether the society was truly representative and the realism of their proposals for the future of St Mary's, the society proved to be an articulate and organised group. They felt their concerns were inadequately represented at the CPW and that proposals within WINPLAN were counter to their suggestions. Preservation of the market, St Mary's Street and the Church were the key issues arising from their event.

Many people in the St Mary's area now distrust the Council and fear that regeneration money will by-pass the community and will not benefit them. There is a feeling of having been ignored in the past by the Council, in particular over the issue, not addressed since the mid-1980s, of the relative role of St Mary's retailing with the city centre. There is also a view that the Council is more concerned with commercial developments to the west of the city centre.

This raises the wider difficulty of trying to reconnect the inner city with the surrounding area. A core feature of SRB, is the leverage of private sector investment. WINPLAN was criticised openly by consultants working on the Action Plan for St Mary's who felt it lacked a clear and dynamic vision to help revitalise St Mary's; it was in their view a 'low risk, do the minimum strategy'.²²

Such divergence of views does not create the climate of confidence necessary to lever private sector investment and enable sustainable regeneration. The draft Action Plan which promoted a bold vision for St Mary's with a specialist, niche shopping role was not accepted by the Council. Although the idea caught the imagination of the members of the community, the consultants became trapped between their client and the community they were trying to consult. Subsequently, the Council appointed other consultants, the Stratford Development Partnership, to translate 'some of the policy recommendations put forward in the draft plan into a coherent delivery programme and action plan'.²³

Consultation fatigue has developed following the CPW, as the various Council-employed consultants have undertaken their own consultation exercise with few tangible results. The lack of momentum to sustain commitment and dialogue between the community and the Council has caused disillusionment with community involvement. Subsequent attempts to involve the community have been criticised for being ill-planned, and 'not strategic, not comprehensive, not well-resourced and not proactive'.²⁴

The Council's reputation has suffered from negative media coverage, its motives and leadership skills questioned publicly. The Council's use and management of consultants have not helped the situation. The legitimisation of proposals seems to have depended on the use of outside experts creating a wall of consultants, rather than dialogue between the local authority and the community.

²² cited in the Report to the Special Joint Strategy and Resource Committee, 1998

²³ Stratford Development Partnership, 1998

²⁴ John Grayland, Director of Hyde Housing Association, 1998 (from interview)

Outcomes of community involvement

Renewal Area

While small scale environmental changes have been achieved in the Renewal Area, the ten year programme has largely been superseded by the SRB programme (the Renewal Area is in the heart of the SRB area) and some of the more ambitious aims may now to be implemented through the SRB programme.

Despite an extensive programme of community involvement, there is little sense of local ownership of the Action Plan and thus also not a shared vision of the area's future. Council staffing resources and management issues have hampered progress; as Austin Mayhead et al noted there was no 'champion' for the Renewal Area within the Council. Internal commitment within the local authority is important in continuing the process of community involvement and to ensure resources are available to support and manage such involvement.

The NRA consultation had mixed 'outcomes' for the community. The Council actively sought to encompass 'excluded' groups in the NRA. While members of the CAF and residents on the Joint Working Group developed a close working relationship with the Council; residents of Radcliffe Road initially did not have this relationship and commercial interest were neglected in the process. The assessment was a detailed process and the lack of early visible results did not encourage energy and commitment from the whole community.

The City Council went beyond DoE consultation guidance, keen to make use of the emerging CAF to 'empower' the community. Community representatives from the Newton and Nichol's Town CAF were well integrated into the NRA policy-making process with a shift in power and decision-making. But this shift had definite limits; decisions taken were subject to approval by a NRA Members Panel of Councillors.

However, some Councillors remain concerned that too much power had been ceded to the community. Experience with the traffic-calming scheme suggested that the NRA process was not the model for community involvement that elected members initially anticipated. Some of their key aims including confidence building, local appreciation of the constraints on the Council, and the implementation of 'acceptable' schemes have not been fully realised.

Estate Action scheme

Community involvement on the Northam Estate produced a number of 'outcomes'. It enhanced the quality of the scheme, through open dialogue between the residents and the officers, priorities for improvements to the environment within the flats and maisonettes were achieved.

For residents, involvement gave a sense of ownership to the scheme, with a high percentage of satisfaction. They were able to influence decisions at all stages in the scheme and the results were more responsive to their concerns. Community involvement fostered new skills and awareness and helped enhance the sense of community and pride in the estate.

Community involvement also informed officers by providing useful and practical ideas. It also reinforced the role of the NTRA in the eyes of the residents due to their ability to influence Council decision-making. The two representatives worked closely with council officers in the Project Team and the Association was taken more seriously, developing new relationships between the Council and the Association. For the Council the purpose for involving the residents had been achieved: residents needs were met, the community was strengthened and thus the investment likely to be safeguarded. Northam has become the lead estate in the city and the experience has led to a culture change in the way the Council works with

other estates.

SRB programme

Involving the community in the regeneration area has not lead to enhanced or effective programme delivery/ assisted in achieving the objectives of the regeneration programme. There have been delays in the SRB programme and a real concern that major capital projects will not emerge. The delays/ difficulties can not be solely attributable to involvement of the community. The research shows SCC did not have sufficient experience to deliver regeneration on such a scale and complexity and had not ensured that delivery structures were in place from the outset.

Community involvement has not lead to a consensus, or shared vision concerning the reshaping of St Mary's. Some community members view the idea of an 'urban village' as a way of returning to the past vitality and role of the areas. The Council views it as a way of creating a separate local identity for the area, distinct to the city centre and provide new housing to meet wider city needs, while consultants see it as an opportunity to apply urban design concepts in practice.

The real test of community feeling towards proposals for the area and satisfaction with involvement that has taken place will be as the projects come forward, such as the recently submitted Bellway Urban Renewal mixed use redevelopment scheme for St Mary's Street. While some such as the St Mary's Society feel the proposals ignore the community consultation that has taken place, the local newspaper suggests that '...many are glad that the time has come to shelve discussion and get on with the hard facts of regeneration.'²⁵ However there has been visible protest at the ongoing discussions about the potential development on St Mary's church land.

Community involvement has not lead to a new relationship with the Council or the private sector. There is demoralisation and anger in the community rather than partnership and dialogue. Support for the CDA is also withdrawing, many of the community representatives were considering not standing for re-election due to its uncertain role and also the time and energy required of the individual. CAF have been established but Hamwic Forum, covering St Mary's has a strained relationship with the Council. The emergence of St Mary's Society highlights an active concern from some members of the community to be more involved in planning and design.

Understanding and education of the SRB programme has not been successful. There is confusion concerning the Council's role in the SRB programme. Expectations of the local community have been greater that in the regeneration programme can deliver.

For the Council, the experience of involving the community has been cautionary, having taken the decision to move away from traditional consultation methods, the experience of the CPW suggests that they will be more circumspect in their choice in the future. Doubts were also raised about the value of outside experts. As a 'flagship' regeneration programme, the Council has found it difficult to match its radical visionary bid with the local concerns and as the accountable body for the SRB programme there was a real concern that they would lose central government funding.

5. Conclusions

The Table overleaf provides a summary of the key aspects of the scheme, highlighting the principle characteristics.

²⁵ Paveley, The Daily Echo, 1 July, 1998

Rationale for involving communities in urban design

Government urban regeneration programmes require community involvement as a component of the bids. But if it is approved of in principle it is marginal in practice left to the discretion of the local authority. SCC has since the 1990s promoted and developed a working partnership with the community through a Community Action programme which encourages citizen involvement at neighbourhood level and it initiated community involvement in all examples.

Education about, and raised awareness of the programmes; and obtaining information were the explicit objectives. It was expected that such involvement would lead to acceptance and confidence in the outcomes. The activism of the NTRA in the Estate Action scheme bid helped influence the Council's subsequent commitment to community involvement but this was very much an 'add on' exercise in the SRB programme and demand for a greater say forced the Council to alter its approach.

Approaches and techniques

Government guidance for the Renewal Area and Estate Action schemes advocated a staged approach to project planning and development enabling the community to be involved at all stages, and this was adopted by SCC. SRB guidance promotes a partnership approach to community involvement. Partnership arrangements were not fully in place in the West Itchen Neighbourhood and there was no preparation to involve the communities.

Appreciating that there is no single form of participation enabling different voices to be heard, Southampton has employed a range of techniques to involve the community. Traditional techniques such as questionnaire surveys, public meetings and exhibitions were used. Workshops in the NRA targeted specific groups or sections of the community. The use of the CPW technique run by outside experts in the SRB sub-case study was an attempt by SCC to actively involve the community. Yet some of the CPW's purported aims or benefits were not achieved. The technique is more usually held before a SRB Bid is submitted and Southampton's failure to involve the community in the bid's formulation and lack of capacity building made its utilisation inappropriate.

However the SRB sub-case study was unusual since the Council was not alone in undertaking community involvement. Consultants and developers working for the SRB programme undertook their own consultation. Further dissatisfaction with the way they had been consulted led a local community group to run its own consultation exercise. This suggests awareness amongst the community of the value of such techniques and also a perception that such exercises will legitimate their views on planning and design.

	AREA CHARACTERISTICS	DATES OF OPERATION OF SCHEME/PROGRAMME	PRINCIPLE METHOD OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT	KEY ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED	COMMENTS
THE NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL AREA	Two discrete areas, Newtown and Nichol's Town and Radcliffe (community of 170 households) Road formed the one Renewal Area	Pilot project in 1989 (Derby Road area). The Neighbourhood Renewal Assessment (NRA) between 1992-1993. Declaration of the area in 1994 (the start of a 10 year implementation programme)	15 Residents and representatives of community groups involved in a joint working group at all stages of the NRA. Workshops targeted at groups such as Asian women and local youths Consulting the Newtown and Nichol's Town Community Action Forum	Decaying housing stock, disinvestment and long term road improvement blight	Lengthy consultation process Difficulties in implementing the traffic calming scheme
ESTATE ACTION SCHEME	A 1960s Council housing estate. Northam Estate consists of 502 flats, maisonettes a parade of shops and tower block.	The Estate Action Scheme was devised in 1993 and implemented between 1993-1996	Two resident representatives of the Northam Tennants and Residents Association working weekly in the Estate Action Project Team and liaising with the Association and other residential groups on the estate.	Unwelcoming environment and insulation and heating problems	A successful scheme with residents' needs met
THE SRB II PROGRAMME	An inner city area to the east of the city centre called the West Itchen Neighbourhoods . A diverse area with 18,000 people and approximately 7,000 households	The SRB II Bid was submitted in 1995. The seven year programme began in 1995/1996	Several Public Assemblies A Community Planning Weekend Establishing a Community Development Association Establishing Community Action Forums Traditional consultation on the regeneration plan	Social, economic and physical regeneration of the area.	Difficulties in involving the community Lack of a shared vision for the area Consultation fatigue

There is a danger that in trying to 'market' specific community involvement techniques, practitioners claim too much. Events and outside experts are expensive and time consuming. Outcomes are not necessarily different from established methods. An industry of consultants and agencies supporting and undertaking community involvement in urban design issues has developed, bringing the risk of 'crowded space', over competing experts and events.

The array of techniques from which local planning authorities can choose is bewildering. It is important that those chosen are part of a continual, coherent and co-ordinated approach; part of a strategy for involvement in the overall planning and development process rather than used in an episodic fashion. The approach and technique need to match the local circumstances, in the SRB sub-case study the community was too fragmented and diverse to be drawn together in a weekend event. The choice of technique needs to match clearly stated objectives of those holding the consultation exercise. There is little point in enabling the community to 'dream dreams' if resource and delivery constraints are not made explicit.

Problems and constraints

Communities are not homogenous entities waiting to participate²⁶; the Council had difficulties in identifying the 'community' to involve in the Renewal Area and the larger SRB regeneration area. While the establishment of the Community Action Forums has in some sense created 'communities' for Southampton to more easily identify and involve, they do not, as the Renewal Area example shows, incorporate all range of interests. The boundaries of the Forums can be exclusive. With a complex landscape of issue or place-specific community groups within the case study area there is also the problem of the varying status and degree of Council support each has. The Estate Action scheme shows the benefit of an established channel of communication between the Council and the NTRA, while the SRB highlights the difficulty of establishing such channels in short timescales.

The use of community/ resident representatives has enabled a close, often informal working relationship to develop between such individuals and the Council. While undoubtedly a convenient method of working, these individuals cannot represent a full range of opinions, as the traffic calming scheme highlighted, and can become isolated from the wider community.

The Renewal Area and the Estate Action examples show, through attendance levels, a minority actually participating in community involvement exercises. As Pratt notes there is often an 'ebb and flow' of commitment.²⁷ This is unsurprising given the time and energy demanded of the individual for sustained involvement. It is naïve to think that such involvement is a priority in deprived inner city areas. While the SRB and Estate Action sub-case studies have shown the real concern that regeneration programmes do not by-pass the community, expectations are often too high, leading to disillusionment with community involvement.

Management of the process of community involvement process is crucial. The timing of consultation is important; to be meaningful it must take place at the right time. The benefit is lost if it is too lengthy, detailed, and with little visible results, as the Renewal Area showed. Delays and bureaucratic working practices do not sit well with the community's desire for immediate action.

In the SRB example the City Council had a multi-faceted role: as a partner in delivering the programme; as

²⁶ Atkinson and Cope, 1997

²⁷ 1996

the accountable body for the programme; and as the local planning authority with the responsibility for approving the planning and design aspects of the programme.

These roles did not always appear compatible and caused confusion.

The SRB example highlights the danger of over-consultation and resultant consultation fatigue. The use of outside experts with their own consultation exercises complicated the situation and created a barrier in communication between the community and the Council, especially when the findings of the St Mary's Urban Village Action Plan were not accepted by the Council. It needs to be clearly articulated at the outset how such exercises and their outcomes will be integrated into the regeneration programme.

Community involvement in urban design is, as Pratt noted, not an exact science.²⁸ The three sub-case studies have shown that with an increase in size of area or community involved and an increase in the range of issues to be tackled by involvement, the process and management of such involvement becomes more difficult. Community involvement can create its own problems, raising wider issues than the local planning authority is perhaps prepared to tackle and leading to 'do-it-ourselves' approaches from the local community.

Outcomes of community involvement

The urban design process is gradual, often involving long-term changes in the image of an area and its ongoing management. Whether community involvement can match this time dimension is an under researched and open question. Neither in the consideration of techniques is the outcome of involvement dealt with in any depth; there is an assumption that the technique will lead to continuing involvement. The question of whether in all cases it is appropriate is rarely raised.

The Northam Estate was a successful example of community involvement. Priorities were met with satisfaction and estate pride was enhanced. With the Renewal Area the 'product' outcome remains uncertain: the traffic-calming scheme proved to be highly contentious and a lacklustre, watered-down scheme was implemented.

The SRB example highlights the difficulty of attempting to mesh local concerns with those of the Council and the other partners concerned with urban regeneration: especially since the implementation of strategies and visions is currently dependent on meeting central government timetables, output and leverage targets.

The quality of outcome is partially related to the nature of community involvement. Problems associated with the Renewal Area and the SRB regeneration programme can partly be attributable to management and administrative problems rather than community involvement per se.

Community involvement has resulted in mixed outcomes for the community. Education and raised awareness of planning and design issues occurred, but this has been for a minority. The experiences have not led to 'empowerment' or higher levels of involvement although the usefulness of the NTRA and the CAF for achieving action has been reinforced and there has been enhanced dialogue between these groups and the Council. Education and informing the community in the SRB sub-case study led to the empowerment of the local community.

While accepting and committed to continued involvement of the community in planning and design matters, SCC has doubts about its merits. Northam Estate was seen as a success, while the SRB programme has

²⁸ Ibid

been an uncomfortable experience with the Council's judgements and motives challenged and questioned publicly.

Co-ordination is important. The West Itchen Neighbourhoods have seen several consultation exercises within the last decade; these must not be treated as isolated 'events'. The results must be integrated as part of an ongoing process of developing capacity and skills for involvement. The notion of 'multi-level planning' is important for future regeneration projects and for the integration of the Renewal Area action plan with the SRB programme.²⁹

The local planning authority has clearly to listen to the needs of present users to benefit from their knowledge and experience; to understand where past planning and design decisions have not worked; and to be aware of buildings, spaces and uses that the communities are attached too. However it is important to ensure that the decisions about the future form and use of the built environment encompass future users and those who are unable to be involved.

Key lessons

The research highlights some lessons for local authorities, central government, and the built environment professions.

The statutory planning system has shown itself to be an inadequate mechanism for involving the community.³⁰ Several consultation approaches and techniques are directed at complex planning problems and managing urban change, or in response to more pressing needs. These take place outside the statutory planning process, and are consequently difficult to incorporate into the formal planning and development process. These exercises need to be *incorporated at an early stage within the planning process* when policy or strategy is being devised for a site or area.

There is a caveat to this recommendation. The results of community involvement are not always tidy or harmonious. While a degree of flexibility is required to accommodate the often 'non-linear' experience of community involvement, there are occasions when such involvement is inappropriate; such as when greater/future 'public' interest overrides the often short-term local interests. This decision is best left to the local planning authority but there may be circumstances where central government guidance is beneficial.

Local authorities

- Management of community involvement should be seen as a crucial aspect in the process. Key issues such as the timing and duration of involvement, and staffing and resource commitment need to be clearly delineated.
- A co-ordinated approach to community involvement taking full account of other consultation exercises is essential. This will ensure the integration of activity, and the benefits of multi-level planning will be better realised. Such co-ordination includes attention to the past experience of consultation exercises.
- The choice of approach and techniques for community involvement in urban design should reflect the scale and nature of the community involved; the local circumstances; and the aims of those holding the consultation exercise.

²⁹ Austin Mayhead et al, op cit.

³⁰ Cowan, 1998

- The use of outside experts/consultants should be accompanied with an understanding of why they are being employed, the role the subsequent report will play, and a clearly stated brief.

Central government

- When awarding SRB bids, Central Government should satisfy itself not only that the community was involved in the formulation of the bid but also that structures and strategies are in place to ensure continuing and effective involvement during implementation.

Built environment professions

- In devising and applying techniques to involve the community in urban design there needs to be a greater awareness of the local contingent factors that mediate such involvement.
- Community interest in the quality of their built environment cuts across the planning, urban design and architectural professional divides, techniques need to avoid creating artificial boundaries.
- More rigorous evaluation of the techniques promoted.

Overall conclusion

Improving the quantity and quality of public involvement in urban design is increasingly seen as one of the keys to improving the quality of the built environment. The Southampton example and experience, however, highlights some of the problems and issues that can arise in practice notwithstanding a clear commitment by both central and local government agencies to the principle of community planning and urban design. Whilst community involvement in small-scale urban design projects like estate improvement schemes can be effective and rewarding, larger and more complex programmes can raise issues which local authorities and the planning system may be unwilling or unable to address. As a result conflicting interests may cloud the potential for common ground and increase the risk that places will be designed and developed with insufficient regard for local interests and sensitivities.

The West Itchen Neighbourhoods is still being regenerated, a long-term process which will continue beyond the time frame of the current regeneration programmes. Major built environment projects are still to be delivered in the SRB example, however despite early concerns about meeting delivery targets the programme is moving forward, this has been facilitated by the appointment of a SRB project officer.

The Council has learnt valuable lessons from engaging with communities in the larger and more complex regeneration area. The Council's bid submission for the most recent round of SRB is a smaller and more focused regeneration programme which has involved the targeted community in the Bid formulation stage.

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For full references and details of the interviews that were undertaken as part of the research findings please refer to the full MPhil dissertation which is available to view at the University of Reading.

The views expressed in this Paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of Southampton City Council.