Engaging the community with town centre regeneration strategies

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Whose town centre is it anyway?

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What needs to be done and how should we do it?

To do effective town centre regeneration, the LGA says…

"This will involve a mixture of the right baseline surveys to understand the issues: engagement with business, community groups and other local stakeholders; agreement on and resourcing of a collective action plan to tackle issues; development of a suitable partnership to energise, communicate and coordinate delivery; and the routine monitoring of impacts to measure success."

Local Government Association *'Revitalising Town Centres: a handbook for council leadership'*, May 2018

Engagement sounds easy, but it's not.

One recent review, concluded why this is so:

- Lack of trust, respect and confidence in the system
- System not considered to be fair and equitable
- Gap between the rhetoric of community empowerment and communities' experience of trying to influence the planning system
- Lack of clarity about the purpose of engagement
- Experience suggests that engagement rarely changes planning outcomes
- Planning is complex and tensions are inevitable

'Barriers to community engagement in planning: a research study'. **Scottish Government 2017**

Whether community engagement is easy or not, history shows that attitudes and behaviours about how we use towns changes

Social fashions change, people's needs and wants vary, opinions differ about the needs of 'others'

- Young people
- Singles
- Families
- Older people
- Newcomers and locals
- Ethnic diversity and difference
- The affluent and the poor

Why is community engagement difficult?

'Real' community engagement is not easy to do

- Who will say what they think and who do they claim to represent?
- Whose voices can easily be heard?
- Whose voices are hard to hear?
- Whose voices should be ignored?!
- What about those people who don't know, exactly, what they want?

It's hard to find out what people 'really' want. They might say they want something but don't really mean it.

For example, people go to other places to do some things they want to do, but don't want it to be that way at home?

As Mary Douglas, the anthropologist, has argued, people might not know what they want, but they're often very clear about what they <u>don't</u> want *(for now, at least).*

So when plans are presented there is often a kick back rather than a welcome. Change in attitudes and behaviour happens – but often in unpredictable ways.

Assessing the desire for & prospect for change in new ways

Maybe the emphasis should shift to an assessment of underlying 'values' and 'behaviours' rather than relying solely on 'voices' which respond to plans?

We can look at three types of value…

Economic value

Probably the easiest to measure, although what counts as 'value' is hard to define.

- Higher levels of consumer spending?

- Higher quality employment?

- Good return on financial investment?

- Re-investment in the social fabric of a locality?

- Higher levels of earning from local rates, taxation, car parking, etc?

Social value

Hard to define, harder still to measure, 'social value is in the eye of the beholder'?

- The value of social inclusion?

- The value of social interaction?

- The value of diversity, tolerance, difference?

- The value of social wellbeing (as opposed to the costs of social problems)

Existence value

Why is a town valued by the people who live there, whether they use its facilities or not?

- The value of local landmarks, industries, famous people, myths and legends

- The value of a 'sense of place' and 'who we are'

- Existence value is necessarily comparative… where 'we' sit in comparison with 'others'.

- Existence value can 'live on' even when the 'object' of what is valued has gone.

Policies are based on 'judgements' that weigh up the available opinion & evidence on the advantages and risks of taking a course of action.

Plans do need to have vision – which means that some people will need time to catch up even if it is a good plan.

Policies which focus on 'localities' are framed by comparison or competition with 'other' localities.

Strategists are people too – so master-plans can raise the stakes and demand 'transformational change' when that might not always be desired or realistic?

The vision thing?

Is the best way forward to 'work with what we have' in value terms and use our imagination about what might appeal?

Should our starting point be <u>here</u>, not in the mirror of somewhere else?