

PRESS RELEASE

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Planning Consultations: Why bother?

People spend thousands of hours responding to government consultations about the things that matter to them. Why should they bother if they think the result is a foregone conclusion?

Heritage Link's¹ research² in 2005 set out to find if those who wished to have a say in the planning process were being heard in line with the government's aspirations of community involvement and civic engagement.

The results, announced today in Heritage Link's *Making Consultation Matter*³, show mixed reactions from the local groups. Only 41% of all respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the way their organisation had been consulted.

Heritage Link believes that local groups are often the unsung heroes of the planning system. They want to be involved in decisions affecting the historic and natural environment. As representatives of local communities, their extensive local knowledge and experience makes a positive difference to the quality of local and regional planning outcomes.

Anthea Case, Chairman of Heritage Link, said 'Heritage and amenity groups provide one of the most valuable bridges between communities and 'the system'. We are committed to making the new planning system work as effectively as possible, not only in protecting the very best but in engaging communities in decision making and in ensuring that their concern for the historic environment and its contribution to the quality of everyday life are reflected in changes to the physical capital of streets and shops, buildings and their settings, both urban or rural'.

Yet evidence from questionnaires returned by nearly 200 local groups voices alarm that local authorities may go through the motions but do what they want in the end. Effective participation in the planning process is limited by:

- Voluntary groups' capacity to deal with increasing numbers and types of consultation
- Poor communication between local planning authority staff and heritage groups
- Poor quality consultation documents and off-putting language
- Unrealistic turn around times for responses

Changes in the land use planning system recognise the need for a more open and transparent approach. Government statements already advocate the importance of the community in the planning process⁴. In a wider context, the Government sees civic engagement as the key to shifting power from Whitehall to Town Halls and then on to local communities and citizens. Minister for Communities and Local Government, David Miliband's 'double devolution' would mean a major rebalancing of relationships between the state and the voluntary sector.

So how does it really work? Responses from local and national amenity groups provide clear evidence on the extent and quality of interaction. Apart from the level of general satisfaction, the responses highlight areas of concern. Only 22% of respondents were satisfied with the way they were consulted over Conservation Area Appraisals and Reviews. Highways Proposal consultations were perceived as the least satisfactory with one group commenting 'neither the civic society nor the town council are consulted by the highways department – even for development in sensitive Conservation Areas'.

Local Development Frameworks, although these were widely consulted upon, came in for criticism. 'Our first impressions of the new Local Development Frameworks processes are that they are convoluted, bureaucratic, time-consuming, resource intensive and likely to fail.' And LDF jargon won the prize for gobbledegook. Several commented on their relationship, good and bad, with the Local Planning Authority: 'On the whole we feel we are wasting our time – the planning department only listens when our views coincide with theirs'. Two civic societies commented that too much depended on the quality/goodwill of individual officers.

The survey also demonstrated positive trends: that local amenity societies becoming more proactive in demanding to be consulted. Heritage networks and the wider civic society are learning to work together. By co-operating and communicating, voluntary organisations can not only keep each other informed about important planning consultations and can work together to assert a stronger voice in the consultation process. Good practice does exist⁵.

Experiences vary but the *Making Consultation Matter* survey concluded that:

- Heritage groups are confident in their ability to play a positive role in the planning process. They know that their participation can make a real difference but they need to make their voices more effective.
- Where the consultation process works, and the contribution of heritage groups are taken on board, it brings benefits in line with wider government policies: strengthened communities, civic involvement in local government, and an improved quality of the built and natural environment.
- The potential benefits of consultation are less than they might be because the capacity and resources of heritage groups often lag behind their aspirations. Investment in these areas is critical to sustaining community involvement.

If central government wants to change the planning culture so as to deliver sustainable communities, it also needs to develop the skills and capacity of local planning authorities to deal effectively with planning consultations.

So much material has been gathered that Heritage Link intends to publish the evidence in full⁶. Heritage Link will use the evidence to raise awareness of the voluntary sector's contribution to the planning process, to illustrate good practice and to explore ways of building members' capacity to interact more effectively.

Notes to Editors

1. Heritage Link www.heritagelink.org.uk was set up in 2002 by national heritage groups in England to promote the central role of the voluntary movement in the sector and to make their voice heard collectively and coherently. Heritage Link brings together 82 voluntary organisations concerned with the heritage in England. Between them they represent some 4 million members from volunteers to owners, specialist advisers, practitioners and managers to national funding bodies and local building preservation trusts.

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Other members' websites are linked from <http://www.heritagelink.org.uk/members.asp>

2. Research Planning Consultation: Why bother

In 2005 Heritage Link surveyed the experience of its 80 strong membership and their own networks with particular focus on the Civic Trust, CPRE, and Council for British Archaeology branches. These findings were brought together in *Making Consultation Matter*, the summary based on 185 replies. The questionnaire covered the range of planning decisions consulted on from applications for listed building consent to regional spatial strategies; the preferred method of consultation for each and level of satisfaction. Respondees were asked to suggest ways to improve the process. Examples of good and bad practice also amplified the statistical evidence as did graphic examples of jargon. Most importantly they were asked to say if their contribution had 'made a difference' and if so how could they tell. Finally they were asked to list their three major concerns about the way in which consultations were handled.

3. Making Consultation Matter The summary document can be downloaded from http://www.heritagelink.org.uk/docs/HL_Consultation_06%20FINAL.pdf

4. Recent Government statements on community involvement in planning

- The planning process already offers local communities real opportunities to influence how they want their areas to develop. More effective community involvement is a key element of the Government's planning reforms. (*Planning Policy Statement 1: Delivering Sustainable Development, Section 11 (ODPM: 2005)*)

- We aim for a new way of doing things, involving the whole community, and winning the support of those who own – and those who use, enjoy or simply walk past – our important buildings and sites, whether ancient or modern' (*Better Places to Live: Government, Identity and the Value of the Historic and Built Environment (DCMS: 2005)*)

- Each authority must produce a Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) setting out how communities will be engaged in the preparation and revision of local development documents and for consulting on planning applications. The statement must ensure the active, meaningful and continuous involvement of local communities and stakeholders throughout both processes. (*Statements of Community Involvement and Planning Applications, Section 6.1.1 (ODPM: 2004)*)

- Many local amenity societies affiliated to the Civic Trust, and local branches of the national societies, work closely with their local authorities to secure conservation objectives. The Secretaries of State attach particular importance to the activities of the voluntary sector in heritage matters, and hope that local authorities will work in close co-operation with national and local amenity bodies and draw on their expertise to the full. (*Planning Policy Guidance Note 15: Planning and the Historic Environment, Annex A (1994)*)

5. Examples of good practice in community involvement

Recharging the Power of Place: valuing local significance 2004 published jointly by Heritage Link, National Trust and CPRE gives a range of examples. See <http://www.heritagelink.org.uk/docs/power.pdf> Hard copies are available from the Heritage Link Office.

6. Heritage Counts

With financial assistance from English Heritage, the full evidence will be published on Heritage Link's website www.heritagelink.org.uk It will also contribute to the next annual audit of the historic environment, Heritage Counts (see <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/heritagecounts/>), which this year focuses on heritage and communities. This will be published on 15th November 2006.