

Local government using participatory methods to facilitate stakeholder dialogue and conflict resolution

by JOANNA HUMPHRIES

Introduction

Newcastle is a city of 270,500 people in the north east of England. In November 2000 Newcastle City Council began joint work with the two Universities in the City to research issues that surround student communities. The recent trend in Newcastle as with most British 'university cities' is for student housing to dominate some communities, particularly in areas where old, large houses are common and significant numbers of students can be accommodated in one household. This concentration of young people in communities impacts on existing residents through increased noise, parked cars and a general perception of anti-social behaviour.

In Newcastle we found that a number of communities appeared to be under significant stress due to high local levels of student occupancy, and resident complaints were increasing to a point where some action was necessary. We (my Community Services colleagues) needed to find a way of facilitating dialogue between Local Authority officials (ourselves and those of other departments), University staff, students and local residents. Our first step was to bring Local Authority and University staff together to analyse the issues and find a practical way of dealing with them. There was also some misconception from the community about student behaviour, suggesting that all students are bad and we felt

that it was essential to quickly and effectively find a way of assessing this.

Commissioning process

As a first step we agreed that a number of staff from the Authority as well as the two Universities should meet together to commission the research. We had already decided that we would use participatory techniques in student communities and we used a number of participatory tools at this first commissioning meeting. This was of enormous benefit as it broke down some of the barriers between the agencies, and it also enabled them to see how we would carry out the research. Through this process the sense of perceived ownership of the research by all the individual participants from each agency became high. At the same meeting, having seen the effectiveness of the methods themselves, it also became clear to all sides how the research would be conducted and results used. This was vital if we were to move on to action planning - a great deal of research had already been undertaken around students but any tangible action or improvement was hard to identify.

The results of this meeting were written up and distributed widely amongst staff at a number of different levels. In the Local Authority we were able to gain support from the Director of Community and Housing who endorsed the

research and the participatory approach. We also had the support of local councillors who represented the areas where there are large numbers of students. This senior officer and political support was further credited by the fact that in common with all other Authorities, Newcastle City Council were trying out new ways of engaging with people. Funding for the project was awarded from the Authority's Community Consultation Fund that seeks to fund new methods of participation.

Training and resource implications

The research was to take place over a four month period and we were keen to access as many residents and students as possible. There was limited knowledge of participatory approaches within the Authority so we commissioned an external trainer to run a five-day course to equip fifteen people to use these techniques. We felt that there was some value in training a range of staff from the Authority and the University. This gave us a head start in being able to identify suitable locations and venues where we could talk to students. We also trained a number of students who again helped us to access their own peer group. Training across agencies reinforced the ownership of the participatory process in that staff became enthusiastic about the approach and took this message back to their own organisations.

Over four months we spoke to over 1500 residents and students in University and community settings. Much of the data was gained on a one-to-one street work basis, however a number of formal resident meetings were held. At these formal meetings we made sure that locally elected councillors and Local Authority staff were present. It was immediately clear to us that the participatory style was difficult for some staff to adopt and they tried to dominate each session. As these meetings went on we had to bring in additional trained colleagues to act as 'anti-saboteurs' (i.e. to stop invited, untrained officials' dominating behaviour).

It was also clear that some residents were used to traditional meetings and being able to dominate because they were highly articulate; this new approach was clearly frustrating for some and they initially refused to participate. However when faced with seeing other people giving enormous amounts of information they inevitably put pen to paper. As the months progressed this consistent approach became popular with the staff who were initially reluctant to work in this way. The relief of not having to listen to the same resident repeating things at every meeting was a distinct advantage! This gradually built credibility amongst staff and a high level of interest in the approach became apparent. Over the next few months we were often asked by other staff

Methods used at initial agency meeting:

We used timelines, seasonal impact calendars, mapping, H-diagrams and Venn diagrams at this meeting¹. The ownership process was helped by using a spider diagram to identify who we should be talking to, what each agency wanted to know and how the research would be used by them.

not involved in this specific piece of work to sit in on sessions to observe. As such this was felt to be a positive interest.

Moving from analysis to action

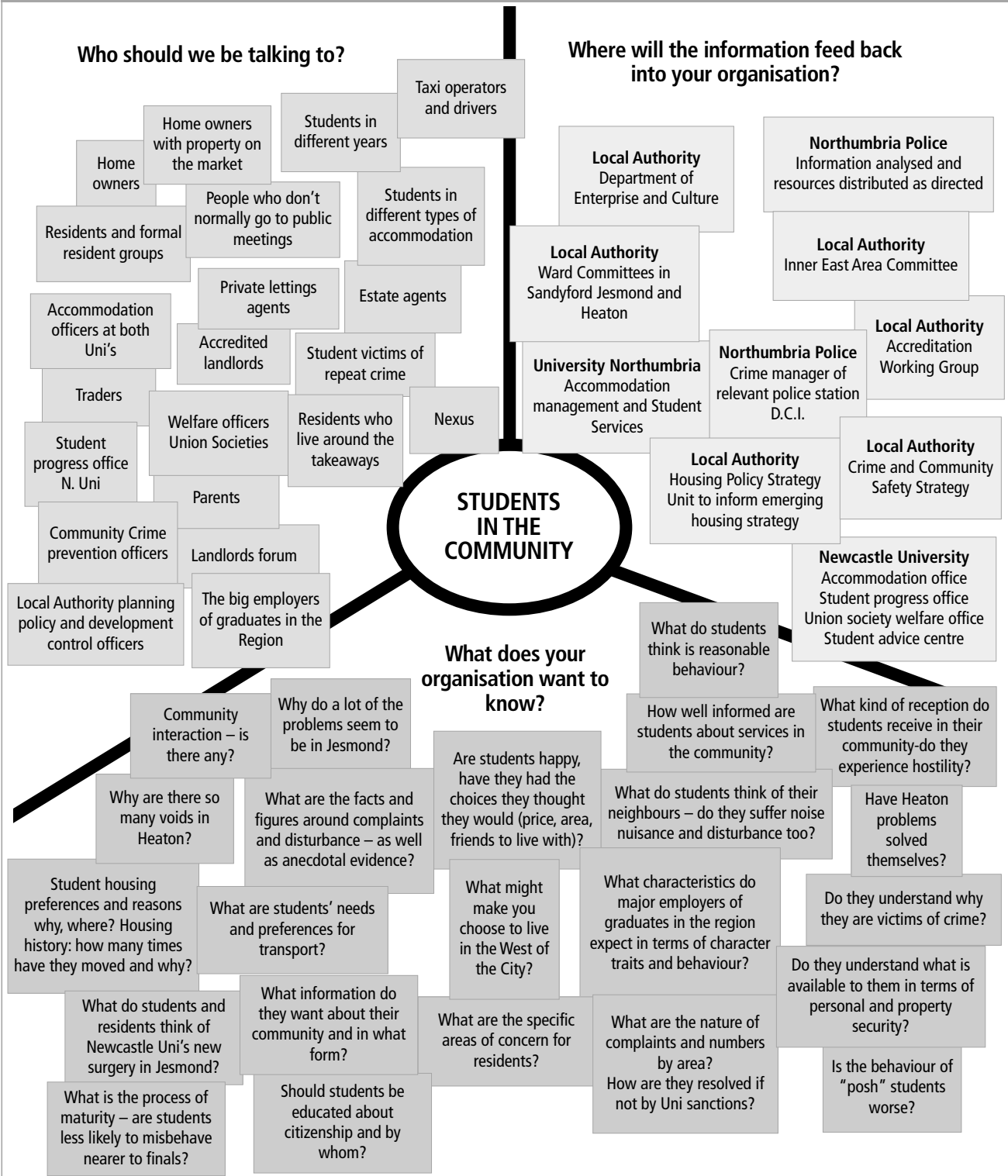
There was a desire by some staff and councillors to take the initial data and make their own analysis. There was a general feeling that unpicking the data and coming to a conclusion was the role of the Local Authority. However, they did support the continued approach and attended public verification meetings where respondents were able to analyse the information and suggest achievable solutions. These were very positive meetings where students and residents often generated the same comments and suggestions, which surprised many people involved, but helped to break down the misconception that students and residents have wildly different aspirations for their communities. The staff involved agreed that the suggested actions were nearly always achievable and realistic and often included very small-scale improvements that would be more effective than the existing programme of work.

At this point we felt that we could begin producing an action plan and there was support from both senior staff in the Authority and councillors for this to happen. A formal action-planning meeting was held and residents, students and representatives from the original team who commissioned the research were invited. This was a large meeting with over 70 people in attendance. People worked in small groups to prioritise the recommendations that had come from the work in the community and as a result a 16-page action plan was generated.

The action plan has provided an operational document that has been worked through since its production in May 2001. It has been received by the Local Authority's Housing Select Committee that feeds in to the Cabinet system and it continues to provide a framework for the Authority to work jointly with the two Universities and other agencies. Regular updates on progress are provided to communities through a newsletter and formal public meetings where a participatory style is used.

¹For details see articles by Reid, Wieslawa, this issue and Guy, S and Inglis AS (1999) 'Introducing the 'H-form' - a method for monitoring and evaluation.' *PLA Notes 34*. IIED, London.

Specification from each Agency for the participation and consultation exercise



Lasting benefits and future projects

In addition to the positive benefits that are described, there have been a number of constructive changes to the way we are able to engage with people at a local level. The community meetings or committees, which are held on a quarterly basis as a means of keeping local people up to date, are far less formal and have moved away from a conference style to round table workshops. Special issue meetings are held in the manner of walk around market stalls with information clearly displayed for people to view and plenty of opportunity for people to comment in writing.

Some officers are still reluctant to go out and about on the street to engage with people but this is largely due to the need for training and opportunities to practice. They are however much more likely to accept blank paper consultation and are less inclined to use structured questionnaires. There is now also a greater honesty amongst staff that consulting with the regular meeting attendee is often easier and quicker, and thought is being given to how they can resource a more participatory approach to overcome this reliance.

The approach has been recognised at a senior level as worthy, and support has been given to extending greater participation through funding the creation of a local network of residents who will be trained in participatory methods. The objective of this will be to hand over a

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number of district issues for consideration and consultation by local people with residents in their own neighbourhood. Local Authority staff will assist with the process, and training in participatory appraisal will be given and supported by a local training agency. The handing over of local issues in this way is seen as a first step to letting residents set neighbourhood priorities and agendas. There is support and trust from senior staff to let this process take place without too much direction, and the results will be received through a formal route of committees back into the Authority. Whilst this might seem unnecessarily bureaucratic, it recognises the fact that Local Authorities need to have a formal process of endorsing consultation to ensure that action then follows. This is seen as a positive way of influencing local agendas and there is already potential to replicate this network across the City.

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