

Name of Exercise: The Communication Plan: a Technique to Guide Public Involvement in Flood Defence and River Management through the E.I.A. Process

Location: Cone Pill site, Severn River Estuary, Midlands Region of the UK

Participation Exercise under which Article? *Article 6*

Purpose of Participation Exercise:

To describe the flood defence need, explain the options for solving the problem and involve the local population as well as all other stakeholders in the decision making process.

Background:

In the Midlands Region of the UK Environment Agency, a standard approach has been developed for EIA procedures which enables us to formalise the participation process into a Communication Plan. It serves as a file record throughout the project and can be reviewed and amended throughout the life of the project. The Agency can also review the process and learn from it after it has finished.

Participation Techniques Used:

The case study describes the Communication Plan; it also demonstrates how it was used to gain clear and accurate responses from stakeholders during the EIA process at Cone Pill.

Creating a Communication Plan:

Set up a Communication Plan *very* early in the project life (in an EIA, at the scoping stage) as a framework for public involvement throughout the project. It is very important for risk assessment and for *managing that risk to the project*.

- The plan lists who should participate in the process (i.e. all stakeholders – everyone with an interest – government, local authorities, NGOs, landowners, local interest groups, schools, press, and any interested individual).
- It defines the most appropriate way of communicating with these groups.
- It identifies the best *times or stages* for participation (too early and people are not interested, too late and changes become a threat to the project).

Making Contact:

The Communication Plan helps to identify the best ways of contacting interested people (the 'stakeholders') which may include:

- Postal (letters, leaflets, mailshots) wide contact but may achieve poor returns;
- Visits – dialogue often takes longer and more staff time needed but feedback is better;
- Site boards – suitable for information bulletins, progress notes where information is factual and not controversial;
- Exhibitions – information is managed by the Agency, it engages people, but must actively record feedback;
- Press – releases, features, radio, television – wide coverage, but the outcome is not always predictable;
- Public meetings – need careful management as they can be very risky (local orators, pressure groups, politics);
- Projects with others – excellent way of involving community at all levels, schools, local interest groups, business, residents, etc.

Involvement = support, interest and the opportunity to inform and influence.

Communicating Ideas Simply

The third part of the process is to think about how to communicate effectively with the people identified in the Communication Plan.

Define the purpose, content and target audience: are they farmers, scientists or local people? Use simple, clear and familiar language. Provide a summary of the information in the leaflet. Do you need to translate anything into other languages? Attract attention with clear, colourful illustrations and present construction plans in a simple way. Use visual material. Give clear contact details for feedback and identify an individual who is friendly and receptive to answer further questions or clarify points.

Practical Application – Example of Cone Pill:

The case study at Cone Pill on the River Severn Estuary in England demonstrates techniques used to involve stakeholders at one stage of a complex project. The site was extremely sensitive having national and international wetland designations (SSSI, SPA pSAC and Ramsar). To rebuild an earth flood defence would have created serious negative impacts to the estuarine sedimentation processes and English Nature (the UK Government's independent expert advisors on nature conservation) advised against doing this.

Farmers all had different views on what should be done and different ideas of what the Agency wanted to do. There were many complex issues related to infrastructure and land use. Meanwhile, the existing flood defence was eroding at a rate of one metre per month. Farmers were so alarmed that they were prepared to stop the scheme going ahead. In order to enter into a dialogue with them and to form a clear and balanced view of the facts, we added in an extra stage into the Communication Plan for the project.

Method of Communication:

We created an informal verbal questionnaire asking for landowners' views related to each option for the scheme. For example, questions included "What if we were not able to defend your land from flooding; would you manage it for conservation? Would you sell it? Would you accept suitable land elsewhere? What do you consider is the value of the land?" Eight multiple choice questions were asked in a 30 or 40 minute interview with each family, around the kitchen table. It was explained that inevitably there would be some losers and that there would be a need for compromise.

Who participated:

The key stakeholders (participants) were 8 landowners (farmers) whose livelihoods were threatened if the land could not be defended from flooding. For EIA, a fair assessment of their views and expectations was needed. These views were recorded enabling the project team to choose the least damaging option and maximise benefits and /or mitigation for individuals.

Stage(s) at which public participated in the process:

During the appraisal of options and as part of the final drafting of the Environmental Statement.

What information was made available:

An EIA specialist explained the background and asked the questions and an engineer was present to answer questions relating to the project engineering. Simple coloured plans of the various options were explained. Within a few days, a report of all of the views recorded was sent to each farmer for information.

What was the outcome of the public participation exercise?

It was a very useful result. The public and the landowners were all grateful for the explanations and personal contact, our relationship with them improved. We also obtained an accurate assessment of their opinions for the EIA process. The process was thought to have been appropriate and successful.

Overall Lessons for Public Participation:

- The content and timing of public participation in EIA must be well planned.
- Techniques must be appropriate and the feedback recorded accurately.
- Public participation must be capable of contributing to a reasoned and transparent environmental appraisal of the project

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