

Name of Exercise: Preparation of a Biodiversity Action Plan for Newcastle City

Location: Newcastle upon Tyne, North East England

**Participation Exercise
under which Article?** *Article 7*

Purpose of Participation Exercise:
To involve the community in creating a Biodiversity action plan.

Background:

A Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) is an action plan designed to protect and enhance wildlife. Newcastle City Council, in partnership with a number of statutory and non-statutory agencies, are developing a BAP for the city. Due to the rarity or inaccessibility of some of the species and habitats, the plan needs to be carefully prepared to make it relevant to the community. The issue of what is important to the local community can only be resolved through public involvement at an early stage.

The objective of involving the community at the preliminary stage was:

- to understand public perception of wildlife and open spaces;
- to identify the public's priority species and habitats;
- to raise awareness of biodiversity within the community;
- to encourage community ownership of the plan.

Public Participation Techniques used:

A number of issues had to be addressed in designing an appropriate consultation programme.

Who to consult

It was important that any consultation involved ordinary people rather than people with specific interests in the subject. Participants should be people either working or living in the city. It is a government requirement for public participation in the preparation of a BAP. Public involvement will, therefore, be a constant element throughout its preparation and implementation, employing different methods at different stages. This exercise focuses on the preliminary consultation.

Plan:

Formation of Steering Group



Preliminary Consultation



Draft Action Plan



Consultation



Final Draft Document



Implementation

Resources

The restriction of finances and other resources influenced the level of consultation that took place.

How to interest the public

The experience of other authorities in consulting the general public about biodiversity indicated that it was going to be difficult to encourage people to take part. If the consultation was too technical, people would not take part and if it was too simplistic, it may fail to provide enough information for the BAP. We needed to know, therefore, at what level the public would deal with these issues. It seemed inappropriate to simply ask the public to complete a questionnaire representing the agenda of the Steering Group so it was decided to explore the public's perception of biodiversity issues by holding a series of focus groups and use the information collected to design a questionnaire for wider consultation.

Focus Groups

Ten focus groups were held, distributed widely throughout the city. Invitations tried to include working, non-working and young people. The facilitator, who was a professional research services officer of the City Council and experienced in leading focus groups, encouraged discussion and ensured relevance to the subject. The groups were informed about what a BAP is and why the consultation was being held. The aim of the focus groups was to explore the extent to which respondents would engage the idea of biodiversity and the prioritisation of species and habitats.

The Questionnaire

The results of the focus groups were used to design a questionnaire. Four types of questions were used:

1. The opportunity to express strength of agreement or disagreement with a statement;
2. The opportunity to develop an alternative thesis where statements were disagreed with;
3. The opportunity to indicate importance or unimportance of a subject to the participant;
4. The opportunity to indicate other preferences.

What information was made available?

Distribution of the questionnaire aimed to target as many people as possible throughout the city from all socio-economic sectors. Distribution through public buildings, other community venues and festivals was not accompanied by any additional information other than posters in libraries and a press article. Distribution to community groups was accompanied by a five minute introductory talk or a thirty minute slideshow and opportunities for questions and open discussion were provided. The questionnaire was available for completion over a thirteen week period.

Following the focus groups a summary information sheet was sent to all participants indicating the results. On completion of the questionnaire analysis, a detailed report of the results will be displayed in the main libraries and on the Internet. Summary sheets will be sent to all community groups who took part and a press article will be produced for city-wide information.

Outcome of the public participation exercise:

Overall, there was a poor response rate to focus groups invitations. This may be explained by the nature of the subject not attracting enough people, even though the technical term 'biodiversity' was avoided. Attendance was, however, sufficient to generate meaningful discussion and the opinions and level of discussion were far greater than expected.

- Participants emphasised the importance of appropriate management practices to balance the needs of people and wildlife;
- The need for education and interpretation to encourage wide acceptance of wildlife management in some areas such as parks was emphasised;
- The groups identified a wide range of species and habitats they would like to encourage in the city.

These ideas were used to generate the questionnaire which was used for wider consultation. To date we have received almost 1000 completed questionnaires and analysed the results of over 500. This analysis reveals a positive endorsement of the ideas which came from the focus groups. Some 90% of respondents lived in Newcastle and were widely distributed across the city. The majority of respondents (54%) were aged over 50, around a third were between 26 and 49 and 10% were under the age of 25.

Comments of participants:

Participants indicated a wide appreciation of the opportunity to take part in shaping a strategic document for the city. A lot of interest was generated in the community, with people requesting further information and volunteering to become actively involved in nature conservation activities.

Newcastle City Council view of the exercise

The consultation significantly increased our understanding of the public's perception and ability to engage the issue of biodiversity. The results give a clear indication of the public's preferences of species and habitats, and their understanding of the interdependence of the two. The City Council considers the exercise to have been successful in achieving its objectives. Such a positive response gives confidence to the process and encouragement that the community will become involved in the plan's implementation, providing that interest is maintained.

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