Why?

Currently there seems to be a parallel interest from both the voluntary sector and the government, in engaging citizens in strengthening local democracy, and encouraging community participation and engagement in decision making.

Sustainable development in Wales compels us to consider issues, in both the short and long terms, such as quality of life, consumption and waste, pollution, social equity, employment, health, crime, wildlife and nature, 'access for all', culture, information, local distinctiveness and local democracy.

The principles of community participation and engagement are therefore, concerned with empowerment - offering people power, and strengthening of local democracy. But as there is only limited 'power' to go around, this means the presently powerful relinquishing some control – whether in business or politics.

Obviously, there will be resistance, especially in areas where power has been wielded for generations by particular political and social groupings. But if we are to move towards more genuinely participatory systems, this rearrangement of power must be achieved.

In Wales at present, the consensus approach might be employed in any of the following ways: transport policy; action plans for the Health Service; crime and safety, asylum seekers, community strategies; climate change, food miles; wind farms.

How?

Our traditional adversarial approach to political decision-making excludes rather than includes; encourages conflict and suspicion; often imposes solutions; is seen as alienating, off-putting and failing to meet people's expectations of democratic participation. Reactive statutory procedures such as the public inquiry system are seen by many to have become inadequate in fulfilling democratic expectations.

The new more participatory strategies such as the Welsh Government's *Making the Connections* suggests a new way of working for elected council members and citizens. Roundtables, citizen's juries and discussion groups are all ways to bring citizens and their representatives together.

Meetings, seminars, conferences, etc.

The above are inescapable features of social democratic life. They are just as important for the commercial world and large corporations as for the worlds of local politics, third sector organisations and community groups.

The structure of meetings is vital to their success. This is where consensus building plays its crucial role. Take a meeting of a group of diverse people with dissimilar interests, or similar objectives but with differing methods of attainment, as an example.

Ground rules

Establishing the group's ground rules concerning the style or emphasis of the meeting at the onset of discussion is important, use of jargon, for example. Concern might focus on the present, but the importance of evaluating the past must also be remembered. Undoubtedly there should be brevity of contributions, involvement of everyone present and ultimately consensus-built decisions.

Timescale

Consensus building is a process used to plan or design whether something should proceed and then how it should proceed. It is a process for obtaining agreement on decisions made, whilst being a highly useful approach in handling meetings where there is a possibility of conflict. It can also be employed regarding the need to establish ownership on the ideas and outcomes of a discussion or project.

The length of the consensus process depends on the complexity of the issue/s involved. Agreement could thus take a matter of hours or a matter of weeks to attain. Once attained, however, the result is far more permanent and satisfactory than a decision arrived at without consensus.

The role of the facilitator

An independent mediator/facilitator is often used to manage the consensus-building process. The facilitator is responsible for designing this process and ensuring a democracy of opportunity to contribute to debate. The facilitator must help the contributors listen carefully to each other, help people clarify, express their views or even accept responsibility.

The overall thrust is to separate out fact from feelings, thereby managing to defuse emotions and maintaining a positive focus. The facilitator helps all parties prioritise and find creative and mutually acceptable solutions. Facilitators should have no strongly held views on the issue in question – being concerned with structure not content. Although the consensus process often means there is a shared responsibility for implementation, the outcome should not be viewed as a compromise. Rather, it is one in which all stakeholders become winners.

Methods

There are a number of methods that can be used to achieve consensus. These include Open Space Technology, Future Search, Round Table discussions and visioning. The key to success is in the planning of events and the ethos in which they are delivered.

Further information

Participation Cymru
Tel: 0800 2888 329
www.participation.cymru

Disclaimer
The information provided in this sheet is intended for guidance only. It is not a substitute for professional advice and we cannot accept any responsibility for loss occasioned as a result of any person acting or refraining from acting upon it.

For further information contact

WcVA CGGC

Tel: 0300 111 0124
www.wcva.cymru