

Getting Set for Citizenship

Using participative approaches in regeneration

1 Background

The Deptford and New Cross area has been the subject of more than £150 million of public regeneration money in the last 12 years, through 18 different agencies and initiatives. Yet it remains a recognised deprived priority area. In 1997, GAP Research were commissioned by Deptford Community Forum and Magpie to undertake a review of the “regeneration experiences” of the community sector in Deptford and New Cross and to identify lessons that needed to be passed on. Each of those programmes was meant to ‘involve the community’ but they all failed in the sense that local people did not get to identify the priorities or develop solutions, let alone steer the strategic direction of these interventions. The report identified the critical missing factor as pre-bid community involvement, networking and project development.

Having spent some time promoting the findings of the “Regeneration Experience”, it became apparent that the local community sector would need to take the next step and find ways of putting the lessons we had learnt into practice. This led to the conception of the NX Project.

2. The NX Project

The NX Project was a partnership between a number of local organisations (Magpie, GAP Research, the Deptford Discovery Team, Milton Court Employment Resource Centre, and Goldsmiths College). The aims of the NX Project were to use a community development approach to regeneration, focusing on the process rather than outcomes. Also to use the process of involvement to provide local people with training and experience in the kinds of skills they would need in an area which would be hosting more regeneration initiatives. We hoped to involve local people at every stage of the project and decided early on to make use of participative approaches as we knew that we need to make our work open, accessible and, above all, fun! Our long term aim was to support the local community to write and lead their own SRB bid. However, from the first, the partners were agreed, if we’re not ready to do it, we won’t do it - we’d seen too many programmes fail because the bid deadline was more important than thinking through the programme.

3. Involving Local People

We began by sending out a postcard to every household in our target area, which said “NEW IDEAS FOR NEW CROSS - LETS DO IT DIFFERENTLY”. The postcard invited local people to attend an introductory meeting. From this we built a core group of trainees, plus a pool of occasional volunteers. The trainees were offered 3 hours training a week in community research and project development, over three terms, plus additional basic skills support as required. They then met together on a further day to carry out practical work.

There were a number of issues that needed to be addressed throughout the training programme :

- “Community Research” doesn’t mean a great deal to many people, and it was not immediately clear to trainees and potential trainees about the progression or relevance of the topic – this made it more difficult to recruit.
- We had designed the course to be flexible & responsive – this meant it was hard to accredit
- The trainees were immediately required to carry out “real” research – there was little opportunity for them to practice on exercises.
- The training was based in a building with no disabled access – therefore people with disabilities were excluded.
- The training programme we offered did not attract young people – we addressed this by carrying out a discrete piece of work with local youth organisations, training a group of young people to undertake their own research.
- Although we had a large childcare budget, there is a lack of childcare available locally, and this caused problems.

The greatest success of the training programme was that, early on, the trainees chose to become more involved in the NX project as a whole. They joined the Work Group (in effect the project steering group) and engaged in prioritising the work programme, and planning the training programme and other activities. The majority of those trainees and volunteers have now gone on to paid employment, either in the Get Set for Citizenship projects, or through New Cross Gate New Deal for Communities.

We also ran a series of monthly public meetings, that we called the NX Forums which aimed to reach out to local residents, schools, community groups, businesses and agencies. We aimed to make these Forums as *unlike* a public meeting as we could, as we recognised that getting local people out on a cold evening to a draughty church hall wasn’t working. The NX Forums were open events hosted by different local organisations at different venues (giving host organisations an opportunity to showcase their own work), at different times of day, days of week, and with different themes. The Forums tended to be based around a series of participative activities, and used a variety of props and tools (of which more in the next section....)

Some examples of NX Forums are :

- An evening Forum in a local motor workshop project which works with teenagers
- An after school session in the playground of a local primary school
- A number of fun days in local parks – the Friendly Gardens Fun Day included a dog show, a nature walk, and a debate in a skating circle.
- A Friday night party organised by young people, at which attendees had to complete a number of tasks before gaining entrance to the party.

We found that we were able to make each event unique by combining venues with appropriate props and activities. The attendance at Forums ranged from 20 people to over 200.

4. Using Participative Approaches

We made a decision at an early stage to provide training in participative tools and techniques, as well as the more formal research methodologies. The trainees wholeheartedly agreed with the principle that the research we would carry out in our local area should be interesting and fun for those who take part in it, rather than draining information from them.

Participative Appraisal is an approach to research that has been used in developing countries to enable local people to obtain, share and analyse knowledge of their life and conditions in order to plan and act according to that knowledge. PRA recognises that *“people have a greater capacity to map, model, quantify, estimate, rank, score and diagram than outsiders have generally supposed them capable of”*¹.

The skills underpinning effective participatory appraisal are good facilitation and communication skills, listening, asking open-ended questions, encouraging and enabling people to express themselves. Participative Appraisal also uses methods which anyone can do, and encourages people to innovate and invent their own techniques. This is what we focused our training programme on.

The use of participative approaches really engaged the interest of local people. Once we took the NX Project “on the road” through a series of monthly public events (the NX Forums), the use of participative approaches helped us to overcome “meeting” issues (hierarchies, whose agenda?, talking shops etc) and enabled a wide diversity of people to contribute. Participation also addressed the “fear of research” (is this representative, is our sample right, the tendency to keep data to oneself until the end of a project) and, in a number of circumstances, led to local people and organisations being inspired to take action.

The participative tools that we found particularly useful were :

- ❑ **Problem wall / solution tree** : one of the trainees was inspired by a picture in a textbook to build an 8’ x 8’ wooden tree. This is now in the Museum of London Collecting 2000 exhibition, and we have built a new one, plus a series of smaller desk top trees (bonsais!)
- ❑ **Drawing and building maps of our area**: what it’s like now, future maps, mobility maps etc. For one event, local nurseries brought along a large model made of cardboard boxes of what the children valued in the area and what they would like to see in the future (a zoo, so that they could wave to the giraffes!)
- ❑ **Walking, talking and taking photos**: the trainees and volunteers spent a great deal of time walking around New Cross and Deptford with local people, and mounted exhibitions of photographs of “problems and opportunities”. We got through large amounts of coloured dots and post it notes when we took these exhibitions out.
- ❑ **New tools**: recognising the value of the visual and the innovative, the trainees constantly invented and built new tools, and we now have a library of props including the Snakes and Ladders Game, the Pathways Prop, the Mood-o-meter, and the ...

¹ White L et al 1998, Participatory Appraisal Methods, South Bank University Resource Materials no. 2

We found that one of the main challenges of using participative approaches was that the mass of data that is gathered can be difficult to manage and to analyse. We needed to refine how we collected and reflected on information.

5. The Get Set for Citizenship SRB Bid

During the last third of the NX Project, we took the decision to proceed with the development of an SRB6 bid. The bid was written through a series of practical workshops, with hands on involvement from trainees and volunteers.

At the beginning of the NX Project, we had envisaged (naively) that we might create an SRB programme which would address the key local issues – transport, environment, crime, employment & training and health. And indeed, these were the issues that local people prioritised when the NX Research Team undertook surveys and formal research. However, the use of participative techniques provided the opportunities for much deeper debate which began to identify that the real issues were about the power of the “**big players**” to decide the future of our area, and the **lack of control by local communities over decision making**.

The SRB6 programme that resulted from the NX Project is a £1.4 million programme over 2.5 years, which will:

- ❑ Fund a range of **involvement projects** supporting local communities and individuals, making sure their voices are heard
- ❑ Build on these to develop a **community council** for New Cross and Deptford
- ❑ House it in a new **civic centre** and arm it with a **regeneration charity**
- ❑ Fund a number of **investigations** – finding local solutions for the issues that local people have identified as important (e.g. transport, environment, employment & training) and develop long term strategies to address these

The fact that local communities have been empowered to come together and reach consensus on this issue has been the real benefit of using participative approaches in community regeneration. The Get Set for Citizenship Programme continues to use participative approaches throughout the programme to involve and inspire local people.

For more information on either the NX Project or the Get Set for Citizenship SRB Programme, please contact:

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