2. Representing your local community

Everyone in a community should be able to get their voices heard, not just those who shout loudest. As community representatives, community and town councils (or 'local councils') must make their best efforts to represent all of their constituents in the planning process.

Some examples of the role of a community representative in planning are:

- asking people what they think about local planning issues or developments.
- explaining options for possible development and discussing what they might mean.
- working with people to decide which options will benefit the community.
- asking people what they think should happen in the future, and working with the planning authority to try to make this happen.

Engaging with communities

These suggestions can help in engage people in both planning application and development plan issues.

- Advertising. Let people know about planning consultations and encourage them to make their views known. Advertisements in community newsletters, website articles, public notices and word-of-mouth all raise awareness of planning issues.
- Questionnaires and surveys. Questionnaires can be posted, delivered by hand or published online. They can get a broad snapshot of community feeling about a planning issue. Questionnaires should be objective and not ask leading questions.
- Drop-in sessions. Well-advertised drop-in sessions can allow people to air their views on a one-to-one basis. They can give a deeper understanding of the range of local concerns about an issue.
- Public meetings. Well-attended public meetings are a useful way of sharing information and gauging local opinion quickly. Unbiased information (such as plans) can be made available for everyone to see. Invited speakers can clarify issues or represent different views. Meetings can allow local people to voice their opinion or fill out a questionnaire on the spot. Speaker's views and the results of any public votes should be recorded in minutes of the meeting. Minutes should be made available afterwards.
- Stakeholder workshops. These allow depth of opinion on issues to be explored in detail. If a range of stakeholders from different groups are invited, solutions can often be found and consensus can be reached. Workshops are excellent for engaging hard-to-reach groups or their representatives.
Making representative decisions

Any decisions on planning issues will be more representative if:

- local councils participate consistently in all aspects of the planning process and encourage their communities to do the same;
- local opinion is canvassed as widely and as regularly as possible;
- hard-to-reach members of the community and their representatives are involved;
- the diversity of views and opinions in communities are taken into account;
- the concerns of one individual or group are not prioritised over another; and,
- it is clear how and why each decision is made.

Planning decisions should balance ‘material considerations’. Public opinion is one of these considerations, but planning authorities also need to take account of a wide variety of other factors. A good understanding of the planning process is critical to being an effective community representative.

Further information

Fact sheet 1: The role of Community and Town Councils in Planning Aid Wales
Fact sheet 13: Notification of relevant planning applications
Fact sheet 15: Protecting community facilities, open spaces and play areas
Action pack 3: How to be effective in the Local Development Plan process

All fact sheets and action packs are available to download from:
www.planningaidwales.org.uk/community-and-town-councils

Finding out more about planning

You can find out more about the planning system at:
www.planningaidwales.org.uk/about-planning

The Planning Aid Wales **Helpline service** (02920 625 000) helps communities to engage effectively with planning issues.