

CONSULTATION IN RURAL AREAS: WHAT'S SO DIFFERENT ABOUT THAT?

Community consultation is community consultation. Or is it? We started to ask ourselves this question recently, as we were designing another community consultation in a rural area. We seemed to be needing to think about all sorts of things that were special to rural areas, in order to put together an inclusive and potentially effective consultation. Were things really so different for designing a consultation in a rural area, as opposed to an urban area?

After some consideration, we identified a number of differences and a number of similarities between consultations in rural and urban areas. We also spent some time thinking about why there were these differences. Of course, we were also very interested in whether any of this mattered anyway, and why.

WHAT KIND OF DIFFERENCES HAVE WE NOTICED?

There were four main differences that we identified, as well as three main similarities.

DIFFERENCES	SIMILARITIES
Seasonality: In rural areas, the cycles of the seasons become important e.g. farmers can't be expected to be able to contribute to a consultation during lambing or harvest.	Involvement: There is a common need to identify the right people to involve in consultation.
Distance: The distances that consultees must travel tends to be further in rural areas, therefore requiring more effort to participate and possibly limiting more people from taking part, particularly those who are not car-drivers.	Awareness-raising: There is the same need to ensure that potential stakeholders in consultation are aware of the opportunity to take part. It is also important to use a range of media for publicity.
Community Size: Rural communities tend to be smaller, thus offering fewer potential participants, who may also have been more comprehensively consulted in the past, contributing to greater consultation fatigue.	Consultation techniques: In both rural and urban areas, it is important to choose consultation techniques appropriate to the stakeholders targeted.
Community Structures: Rural areas tend to exhibit a more varied structure than urban areas, which tend to be split into roughly homogeneous neighbourhoods.	

Seasonality: Although agriculture is becoming less important to rural areas' economies, it cannot be ignored. Farmers are a powerful lobby, who it would be unwise to alienate by excluding from a consultation if they are stakeholders in any consultation. In the past, we've been asked to time consultation events to avoid busy times in the farming year, or even busy times in the farming day. Of course, sensitivity to any stakeholder groups' other commitments is essential in any consultation (e.g. school holidays) , however, we have come across unique needs in rural communities.

Distance: Transport and access problems are very common features of rural deprivation. If a consultation is aimed at deprived sectors of the community, or is trying to be inclusive across the community, it is vital to structure the consultation in such a way that tackles the issue of difficulties of travel and access. We've had bad experiences supporting community consultation on Community Safety, where the client has booked the village halls for a public display, but there have been very few visitors. We suspected that the key potential consultees, such as the elderly or mothers, found it difficult to travel to the venue. There is also an inertia factor, even for those that have cars, if contributing to a consultation means travelling a distance and therefore giving up a considerable amount of time.

Community size: Although a bit of a generalisation, we have found that the rural communities we have worked with are smaller than those in urban areas. This has meant that community members are more likely to have been asked to participate in other consultations already. Whilst consultation fatigue is common across the board, there seem to be fewer alternative options in rural communities. We have worked in villages where passing trends for consultations have led from Village Design Statement, to Village Appraisal, to Parish Plan. As far as the potential participants are concerned, what is really different about each of these to the preceding one? Haven't they already said what they think needs doing? In these circumstances, it is difficult to gain motivation from residents and to create a belief that consultation really can make a difference.

Community structure: We've often thought that a typical village includes people of all walks of life, at all stages of their lives. We wondered if this variation was different to urban areas, which we felt can be more homogeneous, certainly in relation to levels of deprivation. Parishes we've worked in often include a spectrum of people from landed gentry (which in itself brings an interesting dimension to consultation) and high earning commuters to low-earning and seasonally employed manual workers.

WHAT ABOUT THE SIMILARITIES?

Involvement: In both urban and rural situations, it is vital to seek appropriate involvement in the consultations. Stakeholder analysis remains a key step in consultation design. Our only feeling about what was different in rural areas was the need to take into account the various elements discussed above.

Awareness-raising: Again, any successful consultation depends on whether the potential consultees know about it. We couldn't see any things that were different about how a consultation might be publicised in rural as opposed to urban areas. As ever, we'd advocate using a range of ways to let people know, on the basis that people find out about things in a number of different ways. Typically, we'd put up posters, try and get an article in the local paper, put a notice in any community papers (e.g. the parish magazine), use word of mouth, give out flyers etc. The only difference in a rural area is that the geographical area we might need to cover may be bigger, as posters may need to go up in several villages several miles away from each other.

Consultation techniques: It is always important to identify the right technique for the right audience, and this is no different in rural to urban areas. What may be different, though, is some of the techniques we may choose to use. Although it's something of a cliché about rural areas, we have come across communities or sections of the community

who are very conservative about new ways of doing things. Often, a very participative way of consultation is viewed quite suspiciously, so we would choose a more standard approach. As always, our aim is to encourage people to take part, which means making them feel comfortable with what they're doing.

SO WHY THE DIFFERENCES, AND DOES IT MATTER?

We mulled over why we thought that these differences were there. We came up with a number of ideas:

- **Community context:** In rural areas, the community has a history of a focus around natural resources. This includes agriculture in particular, but also forestry, fishing and all related industries and services, such as agricultural machinery supply or timber mills. Although these traditional sources of employment are decreasing, they are still an important feature of the rural economy. In urban areas, we could best describe the resource context as infrastructural resources. This includes things such as housing, transport or commercial and industrial land use.
- **Perceptions of the long and short-term:** In rural areas, there is a feeling of the long-term. What we mean by this is related to the natural resources linkage of rural communities – where an agricultural crop can commonly take up to a year from land preparation to harvesting, or a tree crop more than 60 years to grow, the background to decision-making is long-term. Whilst this isn't relevant to the whole community, there is an influence that can't be ignored.
- **Recent rural stresses:** Rural areas have been under considerable stress in recent months and years, in particular from foot and mouth disease, flooding, poor prices in commodity markets, the strength of the pound, flooding and last year's petrol crisis. These have all affected the way rural communities make decisions.

But does any of this matter?

We think it does, because it makes a huge difference to how we approach consultations. We cannot do the same things in rural areas that we might do in urban areas. Of course, it is the same background issue in both places – being sensitive to the issues that matter in that community.