



Rural Resources

Article for **Young People Now**

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Steve has a background in natural resource management and rural development. He has a broad experience from both UK and overseas and has been involved in a wide variety of community development techniques and approaches. Currently he and his wife run a small family business, Rural Resources, supported by a wide range of associates in the UK and overseas. They specialise in offering support to rural development projects and initiatives aiming at environmentally sustainable natural resource management. Steve also runs training in participatory techniques and regularly works as a project facilitator.

YOUNG PEOPLE IN CONTROL

It all started in the spring, two years ago, when I was approached by the Leader II project Officer for the Oswestry Hills (Helen Fairweather) to help run a survey to assess the views of young people in the area. The reason for her interest was a growing concern that often in the course of her work young people were being referred to as a source of local problems rather than as part of the community. People would often make comments like 'they just hang around' or 'they are intimidating' while some would suggest, 'there is nothing for them to do'.

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We thought it would be good to balance the situation by surveying young people's views. If the survey was to really represent their views, then young people must control and survey themselves. What did they think and how did they react to the comments and accusations? This led us to the idea that we should recruit a team of young people, train them in participatory survey techniques¹ and support them in the carrying out of their own survey.

Following the interest generated by this work, I have, over the last 2 years, been involved in offering facilitatory support to 2 other surveys investigating the needs, wants and aspirations of young people in Shropshire. Based on this experience I would like to explore some of the lessons we learnt.

All of the surveys had one important emphasis; they were **carried out by the young people** themselves. The second important aspect of these surveys was that we tried to utilise **participatory techniques whenever possible**. This does not mean that the surveyors didn't use questionnaires (in fact for one of the surveys they were a core component) but we did try to use more innovative ways of collecting and analysing information also. Ones which encouraged greater participant involvement, encouraging interaction rather than merely a response.

¹ This means, that as well as using a questionnaire to gather views and information, we also tried other interactive methods that allowed the young people to discuss and develop ideas together, as a group.

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Methodology

Each of the surveys started in the same way, the recruitment of a core team. This was not always easy, especially since the need for a survey had not been identified by the young people but by others. The first survey example being initiated by adult 'concerns', in the second as part of a wider town regeneration survey (Craven Arms) and in the third by a Youth Organisation (The South Shropshire Youth Forum) trying to assess and develop its role². In the end, the first two surveys, which relied on volunteers, had teams largely composed of university students or graduates who realised an opportunity to gain experience and build up their *Curriculum vitae*. The South Shropshire survey actually had a budget and employed a team part time over a number of months. This attracted participants from a broader background though did present other difficulties which are discussed further on.

Each of the teams was trained in a range of survey techniques which included questionnaires, informal interviews, participatory mapping, transect walks, seasonal calendars and timelines³. The teams then received varying amounts of facilitatory support from myself and the project managers.

Once trained, the teams then chose the survey methods they would use and went out to gather the information. During the survey there was some facilitatory

² Reports were produced for all of these surveys for Oswestry Leader II, Craven Arms Town Council and South Shropshire Youth Forum respectively.

³ Variety of publications on Participatory Rural Appraisal. A useful source is Participatory Learning and Action – A trainer's guide, produced by the International Institute for Environment and Development.

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support. The core team, which was self selected from those involved, then helped to analyse and write up the results.

Lessons learnt

We found that whilst the young people were motivated to do something about their concerns, a survey was not always perceived by them as necessary. In addition they felt unlikely to see any benefits since the process was long and the survey only the first step. We found that the younger the participants, the shorter the time scales they tended to apply and therefore expect. Recruitment was therefore difficult from younger groups. Many young people are desperately trying to get into work and students often have huge overdrafts so this restricts the amount they feel they can commit to unpaid work.

Payment was used in the third survey mentioned to help overcome this problem. However, this was found to change the attitude of those involved somewhat to the 'ownership' of the survey and it discouraged involvement from others apart from those on the pay roll. In addition to this, the payment system puts a budgeted time frame on the survey, such that when the money runs out, so does the survey. This works against the development of a longer-term process of which the survey forms a part. I feel that this is particularly important, since if we are to start developing more participatory survey approaches that really involve young people in their own future, then the survey should only be the start of a process. The process should then carry on as part of an attitude to participatory

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development, surveying, planning and incorporating change and then re-surveying add infinitum. Perhaps some sort of middle ground can be found here such as paying core members of the team once they have been involved for some time and taken on a greater responsibility. Thence others could help on a voluntary basis periodically under the management of a well-trained core group.

The participants needed quite a lot of support in the early stages to help develop a robust survey methodology. When this support was insufficient, instead of creating a more youth focused approach as we had hoped, instead it led to confusion and apprehension. The role of the facilitator was therefore not just supporting but in the early stages particularly, there had to be quite a lot of guidance. In addition, the teams themselves had not really developed and the facilitator took on a group team building role.

The participatory methods are not easy to facilitate well. Many of the young people would quickly revert to a questionnaire approach if left unsupported. Whilst we had worked together to ensure that these were at least based on open-ended questions, this was far from ideal. We have found it is very important that there is sufficient time for early training and support and in all three cases, and there was insufficient money budgeted for this component.

Transport in rural areas is often poor and this placed a big restraint on the amount that surveyors could get around. It is therefore important to try and

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develop methods to enable the teams to tackle all the survey areas. Centrally based teams will struggle unless transport is provided.

In addition those from the area should be involved in assessing their own issues, otherwise it simply becomes another form of 'outsider led' survey.

All three surveys showed the innovation and ability of the young people involved. Unfortunately this did not always make its way onto paper. The facilitator therefore played an important role in supporting the analysis and write up so that it truly reflected the results obtained and all the hard work.

Conclusions

The results obtained from the surveys proved that young people have a lot of ideas and are able to analyse them effectively. Often current decision making processes rely too heavily on household questionnaires being given to them for their input. Our surveys suggest this not only doesn't happen, but is also not an appropriate way to seek out young people's views. The youth-led method using a variety of approaches allows for a far more progressive approach and was found to produce useful results.

The final important point I would like to make relates to the outcomes of the survey. In all sectors of society we seem to be subject to a continual drip of consultation and appraisals. This is leading to a situation where many people

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have now just 'switch off' and believe it all to be such a waste of time that they don't answer or get involved in anything. Young people are no less appraising and unless they feel that surveys have a purpose they will soon 'clam up' and 'switch off'. It is important to try and develop methods of delivering change should important issues arise. I would suggest that this should start before the survey and continue throughout its progress, so that the time and effort is rewarded with results, rather than reports.

All three of these surveys have led to some changes benefiting young people. The Oswestry survey led to us being asked to make a presentation to the Town Council who are now taking youth related issues quite seriously. There has even been discussion over the development of a youth council. In addition the careers service noted some of the findings and have tried to improve on the service they offer in the area. Interest has also been shown by others in the area and the results have fed into a whole range of other work including a community group fighting for more informal green space for children to play, a crime prevention project and a local community support project.

The Craven Arms report has been important in helping to change the attitude of the Town Council to the needs of young people and it is hoped will actually start to lead to change though progress is quite slow.

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The South Shropshire Youth Forum report has only just been completed but has already helped to progress work on a skate area for young people and in supporting a number of projects around the Ludlow area.

Our work suggests that Youth led participatory surveys have a real role in the community planning and decision making process⁴. Young people respond to real involvement and their abilities are more than a match for the task. It is important however that the correct environments are created such that the young people can get fully involved and direct and control as well as take part. As with any survey, they must also be given the resources to do something about their concerns, not just thanked and praised for their report. Without this young people will become disillusioned and participatory youth led surveys will become just another meaningless buzz term.

⁴ A more detailed appraisal of these surveys is available from the author by e-mailing him at Rural.Resources@Farmersweekly.net