

Engaging People

Listen and learn – good practice in engaging stakeholders

"The reason why we have two ears and only one mouth is that we may listen the more and talk the less." – Zeno of Citium

The ancient Greek philosopher is a good source of advice when it comes to engaging stakeholders, says Penny Walker. It's all about listening. If you're not prepared to be influenced by what they have to say, then it's a waste of resources and time – yours and theirs. No wonder the first of the Sustainable Development Commission's (SDC's) five basic principles of effective engagement stresses being clear on what's 'up for grabs' – that is, what you're willing to listen about – and what isn't.

Stakeholder engagement is an essential component of sustainable development

Stakeholder engagement has become much more widespread as an approach, driven in part by legislative requirements and – more profoundly – by the recognition that we are not going to achieve a sustainable society until we find better ways of involving everyone in the trade-offs, dilemmas and paradigm shifts along the way. The approach of experts or – even worse – politicians trying to sell unpopular initiatives has a tendency to backfire.

Lindsey Colbourne, a pioneer of participative approaches and a skilled facilitator, is a Sustainable Development Commissioner. She says: "Sustainable measures will simply remain politically unacceptable unless we find ways to negotiate the profound transitions required with citizens."

Innovative projects

The SDC is putting its money where its mouth is. Its innovative stakeholder projects have focused on tricky topics including aviation and tidal power, and they are currently enabling stakeholders to engage with each other and Defra around the review of the carbon-

related obligations on domestic energy suppliers. This experience of working with stakeholders and using the results to influence its guidance to the Government has led the SDC to produce some very useful tools, definitions and principles. These are freely available on its website.

If you're involved with engaging stakeholders, particularly as part of decision-making in the public sector, it's well worth taking a look.

Benefits

According to the SDC, the benefits of engaging stakeholders effectively include:

- decisions which are better informed and therefore more robust;
- in the public sphere, good stakeholder engagement can aid democratic renewal, reconnecting people with their various levels of government and other public bodies. People understand the tough decisions, and the outcomes are more acceptable, even if not entirely welcomed;
- taking part in this kind of process helps everyone involved develop their skills and extend their networks – creating empowerment and ownership, and boosting everyone's capacity to face change positively; and
- the process of engaging stakeholders may lead to co-creation of solutions and even co-delivery, where other organisations or groups of people take responsibility for implementing the decisions.

And many people find that the techniques and attitudes which are a feature of good stakeholder engagement have knock-on benefits within their own organisations, as people learn to have much more effective meetings, workshops and internal consultation processes too!

Ditch the cynics

The biggest bugbear of professionals working in the field of engagement, as well as stakeholders themselves, is the suspicion

– sometimes justified – that the people who are asking for stakeholders' views are not really interested in hearing them. When the engagement processes (whether they include facilitated dialogue, on-line discussions, questionnaires or deliberative workshops) are being organised merely to comply with guidance or tick a box, this is bad enough. More frustrating and ultimately self-defeating are those which are a cynical attempt to disguise 'selling' as 'asking', then they are worse than no engagement at all.

The DTI (now BERR) found this to its cost during the nuclear consultation, when clear signs that the decision had already been made before the consultation process had begun, led to Greenpeace's successful application for a judicial review. This case caused the Guardian to comment "the pursuit of debate and consensus can disguise a deeper insistence that only one course of action is right, and what is called consultation is then nothing more than a delayed exercise in justification". There is a summary of this now infamous debacle on the SDC's website, written by stakeholder engagement specialists 3KQ.

Get it right...

So we want to avoid the ire of Mr Justice Sullivan (the judge in this case) and his colleagues. What should we do, to get it right?

The SDC's five principles of good engagement are a great place to start.

Clarity	Be clear on the aims and what's 'up for grabs'
Integration	Join up the process so it feeds into the policy decision
Independence	Leads to trust in results and unbiased approach
Tailored	Use different methods together appropriately
Follow Through	Evaluate and demonstrate how results were used

...at the right time

Integration with the decision-making process is crucial. Asking has to come before deciding!

So the right kind of engagement has to come at the right point in the policy-making cycle, with stakeholders asked for their views on relevant aspects of the issue and their preferred ways of responding to it.

Practical tips on engagement methods

The arcane mysteries of citizen's juries, participatory budgeting and deliberative workshops are distinguished and defined by SDC in another downloadable file. These definitions are complemented by the very practical guidance in the second half of a new document from the Department of Communities and Local

Government, produced by the charity Involve, which aims to promote effective citizen participation in decision-making. Called the Community Power Pack, it shows how empowerment relates to key pieces of legislation, and includes some great summaries of techniques which can be used to make meetings and engagement processes more meaningful.

And as Colbourne says, more

meaningful stakeholder engagement is an essential part of building a sustainable society.

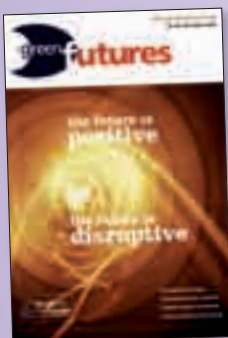
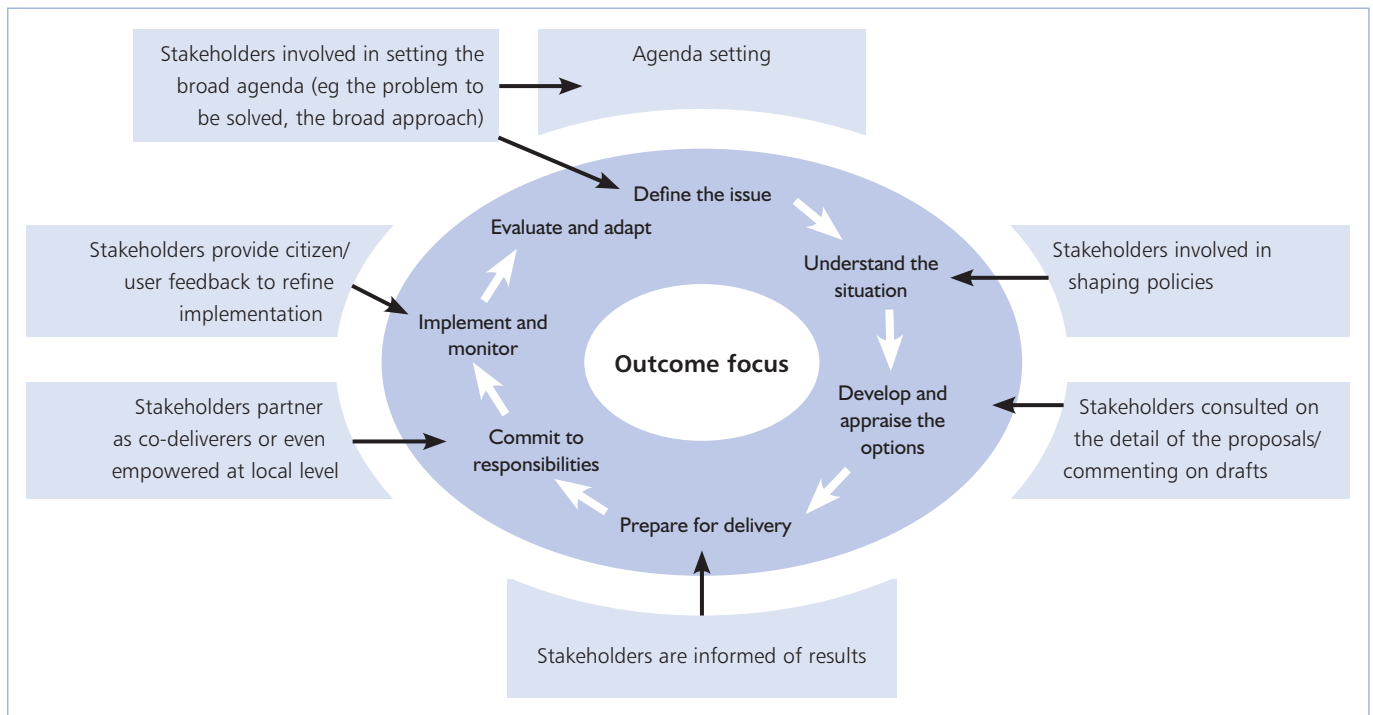
So let's get on with it!

Penny Walker is an independent consultant and facilitator, specialising in change for sustainable development. In the interests of transparency: she has worked on some of the projects mentioned in this article
www.penny-walker.co.uk

More information

Sustainable Development Commission's engagement pages
www.sd-commission.org.uk/pages/engagement_overview.html
Community Power Pack
www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/powerpack
Involve: www.involve.org.uk
3KQ: www.3kq.co.uk
3KQ is running training on stakeholder engagement with the construction industry body CIRIA. See www.ciria.org/workshop_170908.htm

This is a simplified version of the SDC's diagram 'Engagement and the policy-making cycle'



IEMA Member offer

Reduced rate subscription to Green Futures

As an IEMA Member you can subscribe to Green Futures magazine at reduced rates – from £19 per year for a personal subscription.

For further details, and to subscribe to Green Futures, please call +44 (0)1223 564334, and quote your IEMA membership number.

www.greenfutures.org.uk

Green Futures is published by Forum for the Future, registered charity no. 1040519

iema
INSTITUTE OF ENVIRONMENTAL
MANAGEMENT & ASSESSMENT