

STREET TALK (153). John Dales

That's democracy! How does the public influence what happens in their realm?



The community' at a typical evening meeting (Note the untypically comfy chairs.)

As so often, my reason for looking at the issue I'm about to raise is that it's one I've encountered in different ways over the past few weeks. I'll refer to three 'case studies' that all reflect on the same question: how is public opinion taken into account when making decisions about the public realm? As Exhibit A, I present the edited highlights of a series of tweets from a journalist at a

classic public 'consultation' event.

*'I'm at a community meeting about whether car use should be reduced on residential streets & it's a vastly depressing experience. It's got a fair number of generally well-off people who are aghast at the idea their car use should be made any less convenient. About 60% of local households have no access to a car, and yet this noisy minority feel they have a right to drive everywhere. One man asked why Council couldn't spend £1m to strengthen a bridge to make it two-way again: "Take it from parking fines" he said. Amazing. And Council not covering themselves in glory: they duck *every* difficult decision.'*

What struck me most about his take on the event, I think, was how surprised and disappointed he was. This reminded me that, just because what he experienced may have been very familiar to practitioners, we should resist our tendency just to shrug and say, "This is normal; what can you do?" Rather, we need to approach and enact engagement with the general public in ways that ensure that public is indeed general – not specific.

Which brings me on to Exhibit B: another 'public' event about proposals to improve conditions for walking and cycling. It has a *mise en scène* that I suspect is very similar to the first case study: an evening meeting in a local hall; uncomfortable chairs; indescribable coffee; and an average age that I (at 56) would have brought crashing down.

Commenting on a tweeted picture of those present, one person asked, "Will you be organising a meeting for young people too?" The response of the organiser was blunt: "We organised one for everyone. Fair play to the people who turned up and had their say." (You'll be glad to know that the organiser wasn't a Council officer.) The first commenter then added that the timing of the meeting made it very difficult for young families and kids to attend, noting that, "Favouring a timing that only works for one group of people could make it seem like the organisers haven't really thought about inclusivity." There followed some to-ing and fro-ing about how one meeting at a different time wouldn't suit specific other groups, with the organiser trying to claim the moral high ground by saying that holding a meeting was more inclusive than not holding one.

The simple fact, of course, is that it's difficult – and more resource-intensive – to engage with different groups of people having different commitments and schedules. But it's not remotely difficult to see that classic evening meetings – the staple of far too much 'consultation' – generally attract people whose views may be representative of others in the room, but not at all of their community as a whole. We must try harder.

Meetings aren't the only means of obtaining public input, however, and my Exhibit C is a report on a major community engagement exercise about a range of optional walking, cycling and traffic management measures affecting a residential area and the high street that runs through it. Numerous options were the subject of diligent community engagement, but their very number and the inherent

complexity was an obvious challenge, especially for people who generally have not the time, the experience or patience to get a comprehensive grasp of the interaction of the multiple issues at play.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, one of the options – that which would have had the greatest positive effect on achieving stated Council policy (placing a traffic filter on a key street) – seems to have become the focus of yes/no debate. Sadly, this option was ruled out on the grounds that views on it were “extremely polarised... indicating a complete lack of the broad community support” that was a requirement of the exercise.



Classic 'folded arms of disgruntlement' from a small group with a loud voice

'The Mayor's aim for 2041 is for 80 per cent of Londoners' trips to be on foot, by cycle or by using public transport.'

'Addressing car dependency must start with a new approach to London's streets – the places where most travel happens.'

'You elected me. This is what the city needs; and this is how we need to go about it.'

The statement about polarised views plainly relates to two sizeable petitions: one submitted by people seeking to create safer, quieter and more pleasant streets; and the other by high street traders and places of worship worried about the effect of the option on their car-borne customers and congregations. Since 73% of signatories of the former live within the study area, while just 35% of signatories of the latter do so, it is not unreasonable to query whether the latter petition does actually represent the views of 'the community'. You would have expected that the proposal which did most to enact Council policy and which was most strongly supported by a broad range of local people would have been the obvious one to pursue. But no.

Reflecting on these and other case studies, it's hard not to conclude that, when it comes to proposals to create better streets, a loud enough voice objecting to restrictions on car access and parking will typically carry the day; despite the policy context and despite what other people might say or have wished to say, given the opportunity.

This is a problem. For very good reasons, almost every urban local authority in the land has clear policies to increase the amount of walking and cycling, and to exert downward pressure on car travel. What our cities, towns and streets therefore need is leadership from those elected to lead; they don't need what amount to badly-run referendums on single schemes.

I've almost never heard a politician say: "You voted us in; we adopted this policy; this is what we think that policy means here; we really want to work with you to get the best fit locally; but we won't be unduly swayed by views that are contrary to the policy." It's time we all heard it more often.