
A Critical Evaluation of the Role of Public Consultation in Transport Planning, With Particular Reference to the City of York's Local Transport Plan

Mr John Humphreys
PhD Student
University College Dublin

Abstract

This paper examines the role of public participation in the planning process. It focuses in particular, on the rationale for participation and the methods used to judge its success in achieving expected outcomes. The paper describes the development of a practical evaluation framework that can be used to assess consultation schemes. This examines previous research on evaluation to create a series of criteria which can be applied to consultation processes and outcomes in order to analyse their effectiveness. The application of this framework in a case study from an example of English local transport planning allowed for these criteria to be further refined as its weaknesses were identified and a final version developed that is more attuned to the issues involved in actual consultation practice. Also through this case study, the effectiveness of current local transport planning consultation was analysed in order to identify critical issues and outline possible recommendations to improve future transport planning practice.

The paper includes a review of literature into the key participation concepts under study, drawing on experiences from a variety of fields including planning, healthcare, the environment and local governance. An overview of previous and current legislation regarding transport planning consultation was also conducted to provide context on the approaches being used at present within England. In the data collection process for the case study, semi-structured interviews were utilised to create a firm foundation of evidence with which to assess the consultation process and outcomes according to the evaluative framework.

The research described in this paper provides new insight into the role of public participation in the transport planning process and provides a coherent approach with which to evaluate consultation schemes. The implications of this are substantial for planning as through improved assessment of existing consultation practice, weaknesses and issues can be identified so that they can be remedied in the future.

1. Introduction

Public participation is used in a variety of fields and has become an established phase in the development of planning policies. In recent years, interest in participation has increased due to optimism that conducting it can lead to a wide range of benefits, such as increased quality and legitimacy of decisions [1]. Generally, the aspiration is that increased use of participation will result in a planning process that is more effective and responsive to the needs of communities [2]. Within England, national guidance by the Department for Transport (DfT) [3] ensures that participation and consultation play a significant role in the development of Local Transport Plans (LTP). However there are several issues regarding participation that need resolving; the ambiguity about its purpose, the limited evidence to prove that expected outcomes are achieved, the lack of consensus around consultation evaluation and the limited research concerning the effectiveness of consultation in English local transport planning. It is vital that these areas are explored further to increase our understanding of participation and its potential contribution to the planning process. Therefore research focuses on answering two key research questions regarding these issues:

- What is the purpose of, and rationale for, public participation in planning?
- What evidence is there that public consultation can lead to better decision-making and increased stakeholder acceptability?

2. Methodology

The methods used in this research were designed to achieve three main research objectives; (1) establish the rationale for public participation, (2) develop an evaluation framework to assess consultation schemes, (3) gather evidence to assess if an example of English consultation practice achieves expected outcomes and develop recommendations.

The study is focused on public participation in transport planning but draws on experiences from the use of participation in other fields. A literature review of these sources was used to develop an account of the rationale for participation in planning, outline effective participation and develop an evaluative framework. This critical review highlighted that “surprisingly little literature takes a critical look at what the recipients of consultation think, nor undertakes an evaluation... from the participants’ point of view” [4] (p.899). Therefore it was vital that primary data was collected to further explore the issues identified and assess if the expected outcomes of consultation are actually achieved in reality. Within an English context, this allowed for the observation of how central government guidance had been translated into local transport planning practice and the current contribution of consultation to transport planning. Primary data comes from a case study of the consultation process used in the City of York’s third (2011-2031) Local Transport Plan (LTP3). This case study involved the use of semi-structured interviews to capture unique insights into the process as well as documentary and thematic analysis to interpret the data. Qualitative analysis was completed with reference to the evaluation framework, critically evaluating the process and outcomes of consultation and to identify key issues. Through the application of the evaluation framework, its weaknesses could be identified and a refined version developed that is more attuned to practical considerations in consultation practice, while conclusions could also be reached on the effectiveness of engagement and the public’s influence on decision-making.

3. Participation and its Assessment: A Critical Review of Literature

Public participation is “widely interpreted as involvement in decision-making with the purpose of influencing the choices being made” [5] (p.432). Reference [6] (p.512) provides a more detailed definition, outlining it as “the practice of involving members of the public in the agenda setting, decision-making and policy-forming activities of organisations... responsible for policy development.” Therefore participation is a broad term used to cover a wide range of public involvement approaches in planning, and is not, a specific type of engagement itself. In general, participation can occur from two perspectives; top-down where it is initiated by decision-makers or bottom-up which is instigated by interest groups [7]. The first is the traditional approach to plan development where solutions are often imposed on the public with inadequate participation, often leading to reinforced marginalisation and exclusion from the planning process [8]. In light of this, most modern approaches argue that we should move away from “an elitist model in which expert advice acts as the authoritative source for regulation to one in which citizens have a voice in framing government decisions” [6] (p.513). Yet the rationale for conducting participation is not clearly established and there needs to be greater understanding of the value added through public input [2]. Public participation is often completed because legislation requires it [9] but it can also help identify solutions, facilitate implementation, increase planning authority legitimacy and empower communities [10]. References [10, 11, 12] argue that the most important results of participation are; improved quality of decisions, improved relationships and enhanced legitimacy of decisions.

Planning decisions are of increased quality if they incorporate local knowledge [9] and are representative of the public’s preferences [13]. Incorporating lay information can reveal private and previously unarticulated information [14] which can highlight issues and improve the planner’s ability to make decisions that will better suit communities [9]. Decisions made using this knowledge provide citizens with a voice in decision-making which increases their acceptability, promotes future co-operation and reduces conflict by identifying areas of misunderstanding [15, 2]. Beyond gathering and incorporating information, participation can increase the legitimacy of decisions that in turn should result in more effective plan delivery [5]. Legitimacy is created through articulation of all views during the participation process so that reasonable agreement can be reached and appropriate decisions made [14]. In reality, “few collaborative processes result in a complete agreement” [16] (p.351) but the process of trying to reach consensus through open debate helps legitimise decisions [14] and can allow for the interests of disadvantaged groups to be heard [9, 15]. Effective participation can also improve relationships between key players in the planning process and help develop trust in each other’s competencies [2] which will foster future participation as the public see their concerns being taken seriously and leading to results [15]. Finally, participation helps to promote learning among participants as well as helping to increase awareness of planning issues and the decision-making process [16, 9, 10, 13]

Transport planning has traditionally utilised top-down decision-making that imposes solutions through participation methods that only allow for tightly constrained debate [8]. Excluding the public from decision-making undermines the legitimacy of the planning process and can lead to conflict as the public feels there is a lack of ability to question the decisions made [15, 8]. Such participation programs must be avoided as they only seek to mollify the public and may be counterproductive [6], instead there is a need for effective participation that actually involves the public in the decision-making process [15]. However, "no single prescription exists for a successful participatory process because the form and structure of any process can vary widely" [16] (p.350) and even the public have mixed opinions on what constitutes effective participation [4]. Consultation is the most common form of participation in transport planning, which is often regarded as tokenistic [8] because it involves decision-makers defining preferred solutions and asking for public comment without any commitment to acting on the responses [5]. But according to reference [17] (p.22) consultation can also assume a degree of reciprocity if policy makers accept that "those being consulted have the capacity not only to comment, but influence the final disposition of the policy proposal." Yet this is often not the case and there is a need for more effective consultation [18]. But due to the lack of specific guidelines [16] and the complex policy decisions involved in transport planning, individual circumstances still dictate what consultation approaches will be appropriate in each situation [16, 8,]. Nevertheless, arguably the most important elements are; early involvement [19, 20, 12], representativeness [20, 21] and transparency [19, 10].

Early involvement is critical as it dictates the level of influence the public can have on decision-making and thus their impact on the resulting plan [22]. Without this, the public will be marginalised from decision-making and result in public backlash against the planning authority [15]. Reference [15] (p.91) states that ideally, public participation should be initiated as soon as is practical and that "the outcome of stakeholder participation processes should have an impact on policy and be perceived to do so." Reference [8] proposes that effective participation should occur before and during plan preparation as well as afterwards to allow for feedback and dialogue. In order for this to be successful, it is vital that debate is "allowed on underlying assumptions and agenda setting and not just on narrow, predefined problems" as this would discredit the process [19] (p.14). Following early involvement, representativeness is a crucial issue in order to make the process inclusive, increase its credibility and to collect accurate data on the public's preferences [19, 15]. This should be focused on achieving a representative sample of affected parties (geographic, economic, political) while still allowing all interested individuals to get involved [21, 19, 18]. Regarding local issues, the unorganised general public's views will be particularly important [16] and the views of disadvantaged people should be actively sought through making participation accessible to their needs [9]. Finally, the participation process should be transparent as this will generate trust and improve the accountability of decision-making [23]. Without this, the public "lack a clear set of expectations about how their contributions will influence decisions" [15] (p.97) and can lead to civic mistrust of the planning authority [15]. Transparency relies upon the successful provision of information related to decision-making to participants so that their influence can clearly be seen [24].

While there has been extensive research into the theoretical expectations of participation and good practice approaches, the study of its evaluation has been limited in comparison [10, 4]. Evaluation is the determination of the level of merit of a participation program, yet there is no accepted definition of what evaluation involves, the methods that should be used or criteria with which to assess participation outcomes [11, 10]. This makes the comparison of findings across different evaluation studies difficult and hampers the determination of appropriate approaches [10]. Evaluation is important in order to gauge effectiveness [6], ensure vigilance that standards do not decline over time [15] and improve practice as weaknesses are identified and resolved [10]. Reference [25] also states that evaluation will help clarify the tangible benefits of conducting participation and improve the evidence base regarding participation outcomes. The majority of evaluations are undertaken by planning authorities either internally through informal discussions among staff, or externally where public input is sought [26]. Internal evaluations are the most common and are questioned due to their lack of objectivity [26, 15] but have the benefit of complete access to information and implementation of changes to future practice [27]. Reference [27] promotes the use of independent evaluators who are more impartial and can introduce new perspectives in their analysis; yet such evaluations often suffer from incomplete access to information and rely

heavily on the co-operation of others for their results to influence change [27]. Beyond this, the focus of evaluation is a contentious issue regarding whether evaluation should assess the participation process itself or its outcomes. Process evaluations focus on “what makes for an effective process rather than how to measure effective outcomes” and tend to be “more procedural rather than substantive” [19] (p.10) because they do not examine what participation accomplishes but rather how it was conducted [25]. Outcome evaluations however, analyse the actual impacts of participation and do not assume that correct participation methods will lead to desired outcomes, yet problems remain regarding their quantification and being largely subjective in nature [26]. Both forms of evaluation suggest different perspectives on what ‘successful’ participation means, but these are not mutually exclusive and instead it is argued that evaluation should be based on what results constitute ‘good’ outcomes and what participation processes are required to reach them [10].

The key challenge facing participation evaluators is the lack of a standardised evaluative framework that can be used across multiple situations [25]. Reference [25] states that such frameworks should be tailored to research objectives and so in this study, the framework created was focused on outcome analysis while still considering the process to investigate if good practice led to expected benefits [10]. This framework also considers both sides of the process, the planning authority and the public [13], but remains firmly centred on the public’s influence as the primary area of interest [10]. The framework is intended for use by an unbiased evaluator to increase the chance of impartial results and a framework of this type is considered by reference [25] to be able to determine whether a participatory program is effective and how it can be improved. However, developing this framework was complicated by the absence of specific benchmarks with which to assess the outcomes of participation [19], meaning that new simplified criteria¹ had to be created from a range of literary sources. While these were made as specific as possible, they are not definitive and instead should be used as tools to focus research onto the main areas where analysis is required [19]. Through the application of the framework² in the case study in Section 5, these criteria were further refined into the final revised framework found in *figure 1*.

4. Consultation in English Local Transport Planning

Local Transport Plans (LTP) are the main statutory transport plans in English local authority areas, established by the Transport Authority Act 2000 and amended by the Local Transport Authority Act 2008. According to the Transport Act 2000, LTPs are composed of “policies for the promotion... of safe, integrated, efficient and economic transport facilities and services to, from and within” authority areas. Originally LTPs were created every five years and kept under review, but the 2008 Act now allows local authorities to act at their discretion regarding the length of third generation LTPs. The DfT [3] states that opportunities for consultation should be considered at multiple stages in plan development through a range of methods from formal written consultation to questionnaires and forums. Vially, the DfT [3] highlights that due to the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, local authorities must involve citizens in local decision-making and ensure that “local representatives are given genuine opportunities to influence decisions and delivery” (p.9). In order to be as accessible to the public as possible the LTP document should be; clear about its objectives, clear about its relationship with other documents, use plain language and be as concise as possible [3] (p.31). An important change compared to previous LTPs is that they are now “accountable to their communities rather than to the Department for both the quality of the transport strategies prepared and for ensuring effective delivery” [3] (p.6).

5. Case Study of the City of York’s Third Local Transport Plan

York is a relatively compact English city of 137,505 people [28] and has a transport network composed of national rail and road connections, an extensive cycle network, a largely pedestrianized city centre and a park & ride system [29]. Various transportation challenges face York, including; severe congestion, peak public transport overcrowding and declining regional bus use [29]. The City of York Council (COYC) has to prepare and keep under

¹ These criteria focus on the key areas of interest identified in the literature regarding the process (early involvement, representativeness and transparency) and outcomes (improved quality of decisions, enhanced legitimacy of decisions and improved relationships).

² Due to space restrictions, the original draft framework cannot be included in this paper.

review an LTP that outlines their key transport policies. According to the Council, the consultation phase of LTP3 development “played a significant role in shaping York’s transport plan” (p.6) and the details of this can be found in reference [29]. Essentially the consultation process occurred across different stages of plan development and included city-wide questionnaires, stakeholder workshops, information meetings, focus groups and public exhibitions. The purpose of this case study was to test the effectiveness of the evaluation framework and to form conclusions on York’s LTP consultation process. The majority of data came from semi-structured interviews³ with planning officials and stakeholders, which utilised a questionnaire to make the data broadly comparable [30]. While the Council’s perspective was considered, the focus was on stakeholders’ input into decision-making and their influence on the resulting plan. The analysis is focused on the ability of the LTP3 consultation to fulfil the series of evaluative criteria in the framework.

The first section of analysis covers the LTP3 consultation process to assess the ‘opportunity for public involvement’, focused on the evidence to suggest that the criteria related to early involvement, representativeness and transparency were achieved. The criteria regarding early involvement were mostly all fulfilled satisfactory but there were several deficiencies that are worthy of comment. While multiple stages of consultation were used which should have increased public influence on plan development, some stakeholders felt that this made the process overly complicated and actually discouraged people from further involvement due to their lack of understanding of how their input was being used [31]. Another issue was the Council’s apparent unbalanced approach towards stakeholder engagement, with some groups being given priority over others in the timing with which they were approached [32-35]. Criticism was also raised of the lack of public meeting for open debate and the city-wide questionnaire as it was composed of questions on predefined issues that the Council identified without public input and was considered to be an attempt to constrain the range of subjects that could be raised [31]. Points were also raised regarding the problems that can arise from unforeseen events, such as the May 2010 general election, which caused the consultation process to be delayed after the first stage had been completed [36], resulting in subsequent modifications that were disapproved of by some stakeholders [37, 31 38]. All criteria regarding representativeness were achieved through the Council’s public outreach via the city-wide questionnaire, invitation of stakeholder groups and inclusion of disadvantaged communities [29, 36] but numbers attending public LTP3 exhibitions and events was sometimes poor [36]. For instance, only three people attended the ‘young people’s’ focus group and this was considered a failure [36], an experience repeated by stakeholders who attended other representative meetings [31]. It appears that while COYC tried to ensure that there was opportunity for all of the population to be involved, many chose not to as public interest in strategic planning is considered to be low [36] unless if the participants are directly affected by the issues being discussed [31]. The criteria in relation to transparency such as according to legislation, public understanding of the process, clear design rationale and accessible format were all largely reached except for external checks to the process as LTPs are no longer formally assessed by the DfT [3]. COYC stated they made a conscious effort to improve transparency in the process [36] and this was appreciated by stakeholders [35], yet there was dissatisfaction with the lack of feedback on how public input was used in decision-making after information had been collected from stakeholders [35, 33, 31].

The second section of analysis covers the outcomes of LTP3 consultation to assess the ‘level of public influence on decision-making where justified arguments are presented’ through assessing the criteria related to improved quality and legitimacy of decisions and improved relationships. Two of the criteria to show increased quality of decisions; consultation data being used to analyse decisions and elements of the plan being open to change, were both essentially achieved even though some issues arose. Firstly, the COYC weighted all responses equally with no heightened importance for views from disadvantaged groups [36], meaning that some representatives felt that the issues they raised were noted but not sufficiently prioritised, being overwhelmed by other points in policy creation [35]. This view was held by other stakeholders [38, 37, 33] and highlighted that while COYC used consultation data to analyse decisions and it could influence them [36], this was not consistent and the lack of feedback regarding how final decisions were reached meant that

³ 25 different groups were approached, 8 were interviewed, including COYC and a range of stakeholders

enthusiasm for future involvement was reduced [31]. A second issue was that some stakeholders [31, 32] felt that certain issues they raised were disregarded by the Council because of political influence from local Councillors who were keen to follow a particular policy approach, thus limiting the effect of consultation. The last criteria in this regard assessed the ability of consultation to generate new ideas that had not previously been considered by planners but no evidence was gathered that suggested this took place [36]. The next set of criteria dealt with enhanced legitimacy of decisions and the results were mixed. The first criteria covered whether the public felt their input had an impact on decisions and generally this was achieved as most stakeholders agreed this occurred even though they wanted more clarity on how final decisions were reached [37, 33, 32]. However, the criteria regarding acceptable justification being provided for the rejection of public input was not achieved as very little information was provided by COYC to stakeholders in this regard [34, 35]. Generally this was characterised by good communication of information during the data collection period but after this virtually no feedback was provided to any stakeholders [35], even if they were strategic transport groups or operators [37, 38]. Similarly, the criterion regarding the successful communication of the reasoning behind decisions to the public was not achieved. While some stakeholders felt that they had influenced the LTP3, this was never confirmed and Council officers could have reached these decisions independently without consultation input [37] and a national stakeholder suggested that such feedback was never provided by local authorities [38]. The last set of criteria assessed whether there was improved relationships and trust through; reduced public opposition, public feeling that their views are valued by the Council and public confidence that plans can be renegotiated over time. This were all generally achieved and several stakeholders stated that they supported COYC's approach to consultation as it helped develop a level of mutual understanding over issues even though they would still be critical of aspects of the final plan [37, 38]. Stakeholders also tended to feel valued and felt Council officers were easy to communicate with and responded to queries during consultation [35, 38] but again the main problem was that stakeholders were unconvinced that their involvement had had an effect on the outcomes of plan development [35]. There was also some uncertainty regarding when the LTP3 would be reviewed due to possible changes in political control of the Council [36] and none of the stakeholders interviewed had been made aware of the procedure for this review and raised concerns regarding how consultation would occur [32].

Interestingly, there were some issues identified that were not covered by the evaluative criteria. The first of these regarded the importance of resource constraints in consultation for both sides; COYC stated that finite resources meant they could not utilise the full range of methods they wished to use [36] while representative groups, particularly those who relied on volunteers, highlighted that they prioritised which consultations they could be involved in due to a lack of staff [31, 33]. The second issue regarded the impact on consultation from reduced national funding for LTPs (-50%) which meant that COYC excluded LTP3 measures from discussion that could not be funded [36] and this lowered stakeholder expectations of what they could get out of the process [32] or even discouraged them from involvement [37]. Arguably the most important issue regarded political influence. Council officers felt that a key reason for consultation was to ensure that Councillors would not seek to amend or reject elements of the LTP3 if they had public support [36]. This highlighted the extensive influence of Councillors [36] which was criticised by stakeholders because they questioned the rationale for going through a consultation process if the resulting plan could so easily be changed without public involvement [38]. Thus some stakeholders stated that they did not put as much emphasis on consultation involvement compared to political lobbying because they felt planning officers did not make the important decisions [33]. Also concerns were raised that tough planning decisions were ignored because of political concerns [32, 31, 37].

Through analysis and discussion of the evaluative criteria, it became obvious that critical elements were either missing or needed amending to capture the important issues that were occurring in consultation practice and suitable changes were made to the following revised evaluation framework shown below in *figure 1*⁴:

⁴ In the revised framework, case study amendment (CSA) refers to a criteria based on case study evidence.

Figure 1: Revised Evaluation Framework

Stage	Focus of Analysis	Key Area of Analysis	Criteria Required
Consultation Process	Opportunity for public involvement	A: Early Involvement [19, 20, 22]	1. Equal early involvement in consultation allows data to be incorporated into decision-making throughout the plan development process [39, 19, CSA]
			2. Early involvement shapes the consultation agenda with all issues open for debate i.e. not just responding to predefined problems or issues [39, CSA]
			3. Adequate time available in the consultation process for the public to consider, discuss or challenge the information presented [40]
		B: Representativeness [20, 21]	1. All groups with a legitimate interest are invited to be involved in the consultation process, including those without a formal representative group [39, 25, 19]
			2. Views from minority and excluded groups actively sought and included in the process [5, 18]
			3. Acceptable sample size of responses increases the credibility of information [19]
C: Transparency [10, 19]	1. Consultation process accords to legislation [39, 10]		
	2. Public understands decision-making process, information freely available with adequate publicity of consultation [39, 10]		
	3. Types of consultation clear, appropriate and understood by the public [39, 5, CSA]		
	4. Information provided in an accessible format [39, 40]		
	5. Process monitoring by an independent body that can instigate changes [2, 19, CSA]		
D: Improved Quality of Decisions [10, 11]	1. Consultation information consistently used to analyse and review decisions [25, CSA]		
	2. All elements of the plan open to change as a result of consultation [39, 25, 40]		
	3. Decisions based on consultation data not amended by political influence except when there is clear justification for change [CSA]		
E: Enhanced Legitimacy of Decisions [10, 12]	1. Public feels that their input had an impact on decisions [25, 10]		
	2. Reasoning behind decisions successfully communicated to the public, either when consultation input is incorporated or rejected [25, 40, CSA]		
	3. Public opposition to planning decisions reduced [25, 13]		
F: Improved Relationships and Trust [10, 11]	1. Public considers their views to be valued by the planning authority [25]		
	2. Public aware of, and confidence that, there are suitable mechanisms available for the re-negotiation of plans as the situation changes over time [25, CSA]		
	3. Public aware of, and confidence that, there are suitable mechanisms available for the re-negotiation of plans as the situation changes over time [25, CSA]		
Evaluation of Public Consultation			
Consultation Outcome	Level of public influence on decision-making where justified arguments are presented		

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The key contribution of this study was to examine and build upon previous research to develop a practical framework to assist in the analysis of consultation. The application of the draft version allowed for weaknesses in the criteria to be identified so that a revised version could be produced that was more adapted to practice. The case study also provided for an example of planning consultation to be analysed and the results of this were mixed. While some positive aspects of consultation were captured, at best the expected outcomes were only partially achieved. This was largely due to deficiencies in the process as well as issues regarding the openness of decision-making to public influence and the external political pressures exerted on planning officers. Generally, the case study showed that consultation does have a positive role to play in plan development but its full potential has not yet been realised and so it is vital that the statutory guidance is improved to mitigate these problems. Overall it can be concluded that there is a clear rationale for the use of consultation and participative methods in the development of transport plans but the evidence to suggest that all of the benefits are currently being achieved is inconclusive. However, the improvement of evaluation techniques should lead to a better quality of practice over time that in turn should increase opportunities for the outcome benefits of participation to be achieved in the future.

In response to the issues identified in LTP development, the following recommendations are suggested to improve future practice:

1. Engagement with stakeholders should occur on an equal basis
2. External monitoring of plan development should occur to ensure accountability
3. Justified public arguments should be able to influence all areas of decision-making
4. Clearer communication of how decision-makers incorporate consultation data is needed
5. Greater clarity needed regarding the relationship between political influences and decision-making as decisions being reached through consultation are being undermined

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