

People's Plans Conference, August 09, Julia Udall

Introductions (1 minute)

Intro to the format/ my approach to what I am going to say (Intro to the Toolkit and the Action Group)

I've been working on the Distinctive Sharrow Toolkit... our 'People's Plan'... and with the Distinctive Sharrow Action group who want to enact some of the ideas from the toolkit... put our plan into action...

I want to put a series of statements to you about what I think Peoples Plans should be about... they are based on the way we've worked... experiences we have had as a group or research I have carried out... and my own personal experiences and views... they tell you a bit about where we are at the moment...

These are really a 'starter for ten' and I'm very happy for them to be challenged... I'm also interested in how people think they relate to their experiences of planning... both their own 'people's plans' and conventional plans that have been drawn up around them.

Peoples' Plans Should... (14 minutes)

1. Understand the place in which they are situated

I want to start by telling you a bit about Sharrow...

For me... I think it changed the way I worked, because instead of working as part of an architect's office I've been working for the community forum... the people around me worked in different ways...

2. ...Be social, economic and physical... working on different scales with the temporary to the very long term...

The Distinctive Sharrow Toolkit has four strategies, 'Large Scale', 'Small Scale', 'Opportunity Sites' and 'Development Sites'.

The first, Large Scale looks at really big things that are the traditional concern of Planners and Urban Designers... Things like changing roads, creating conservation areas or resurfacing streets. The second, Small Scale includes things such as planting trees, putting in benches, using public art or cultural symbols. The third, Opportunity Sites is about using events and temporary interventions to alter the way people perceive a space... perhaps making it more prominent or linking places together.... The fourth is Development Sites... which is about working with the Council and developers to get the most out of what they are doing... so for example working to get large companies in the area to start car share schemes... or campaigning for family size housing instead of small flats for singles....

For us it was really important to have these four strategies because by thinking about the quicker, small or temporary things more strategically they don't get lost or forgotten... they can leave traces in a bigger picture... so for example, by creating an art trail or new lighting to link a new housing development to the main street... it makes a big impact...

...and the other way round... small things can support the more long term aims... Say by creating a place where people working in the little Mesters factories can sit together... it may be the beginning of campaigning together to save the old metwalworks...

3. ... Create a community around an issue of concern...

Each of these Strategies in the Toolkit is made up of Action Cards...

So, large scale, small, opportunity and development... each explaining who, how, what and how quickly the action might happen...

...and the idea is a group of people can show an interest in a particular action and get together to try to make it happen... and this is how the Distinctive Sharrow action group formed... and the process by which we got to know each other... there are shop keepers, artists, students, landscape architects, retired residents, community activists, an ex-councillor, lecturers, parents, business people... all sorts of people involved, of all ages...

This approach is important to me because I don't think there is necessarily this coherent 'community' awaiting outreach... but people can find things to bring them together... and need to make relationships to see things happen... and this helps people learn about others in their community- that they work different hours, have different commitments, politics, beliefs about how space should be used... and so the process of getting to know one another simultaneously informs us of who we are planning for, what we need to think about...

4. ... Be fluid... able to change with time, circumstance, new people and the unexpected...

The Actions described in the toolkit also begin to represent the things that people in the neighbourhood desire at that time, what is a priority for them... so rather than a fixed plan where every part of the neighbourhood is divided up and planned for the next 20 years... people can campaign for the parts that are important to them, that represent their circumstances, needs and respond to changes... be they people moving on, or the credit crunch... so areas that were under massive development pressure, now we need to think about what to do with vacant buildings... but working in this way, the plan doesn't become obsolete... we just work on different actions..

This attitude also addresses the idea of clone towns- because people have lobbied for, carried out or commissioned an action it is representative of the current character of the area... so if people want a space for markets... it expresses that they are interested in that activity... or if creating allotments is a priority again it tells you something about Sharrow at that time...

5. ...Be useful... and non- useful...

People use space creatively... there are places in Sharrow that during the day are used to make tools... and sell them to people from the nearby housing estate... and at night time the place for gigs... and in holidays become part of open up Sheffield, an art gallery, welcome people come to visit from all over the city... and then again a place of pilgrimage for Japanese Def Leopard fans... this unprepossessing Lansdowne stairwell has become informal swap shops for unwanted goods...

Unlike traditional plans that often define space for use... Peoples Plans have an opportunity to do something different.....it became clear from talking to people of Sharrow that it was felt that as more and more public space becomes commercialised we should create undefined spaces for people to use creatively... for the unexpected to happen.. For enjoying free time.... spaces that were stimulating, but that didn't impose ideas of the lifestyles that should be lived within them or who would be welcome there...

6. ... Make room for conflict... and understand it as useful and necessary...

This point is a bit of a confession about getting something wrong...

... one of the actions I described in the toolkit was for using noticeboards throughout the neighbourhood for more exciting things... for a treasure hunt... or for art... or to signpost people around... and some people wanted to try to carry this out... on the Lansdowne estate... and despite it being popular with lots of the residents it got short shrift with the small, and not necessarily representative, but very stubborn TARA.... and they got frustrated... but this was really a problem with the toolkit... I had represented this action, using this 'public space' as being neutral... but actually there were lines of ownership felt by the people who would go out to put their notices there on a rainy winter night... or get the glass replaced if it got smashed by drunks... and it is really important to represent these histories, these memories and the importance of something event to a small group which to outsiders could seem insignificant or marginal... and so also, on masterplans or maps... or in the flashy graphics of a visualisation for a site... how do you represent and acknowledge these memories... all the things that aren't visible to the naked eye?

Another project where conflict was relevant was a project to create a new small public space in the district centre...the site was controversial because

being outside of a late night chemists there were methadone users and street drinkers gathering... and there had been some incidents of anti social behaviour... some aggression and lewd acts on the part of the drinkers and violence against them... People living locally and the businesses had quite different views on what should happen to this space... and attitude to the drinkers...and perhaps that we were never going to have agreement, but that a space needed to be created that allowed for everyone to talk about this... so how these concerns were represented became critical to the future of the space...

7. **... Use many different forms of representation to represent many people, things and matters of concern...**

The group decided they wanted to speak to as many people as possible about what might happen... and if we met in a hall or office somewhere there were lots of groups of people that would never take part... and there was also the problem that people had been going over the same arguments from the same perspectives endlessly... (One man saying we should take off all the seats and fill the site with spikes to stick up the drinkers bum and others saying they had as much right to the space as us...)

so initially planned an event where we would all meet on the space and show people lots of possible ideas for the site... examples of other exciting places to get people talking... We hung pictures on a washing line... they told us stories... about this place and others they had loved... and what was great is we could talk to street drinkers... and also shop keepers who never came to business forum meetings came out onto the street and told us about all their wishes... and were more positive... before it had just been what they didn't want...

People were curious about what we were doing...and wanted to join in... and felt confident in discussing things in this informal way that perhaps a series of meetings, flash images and plans held by experts and professionals wouldn't have put them at ease... ... and we all got chatting together... and even though we might not all agree we'd gone a little way to understanding more about each other and the impact of this site...

People even consulted on our behalf... this is the folder one of the action group members who worked at the chemist put together... asking people coming in for prescriptions...

Our next step was to 'mock up' stage set like some of the popular ideas on the site by creating another event... these were a green space, a place for games, a new surface on the ground and a place for art... again this got people talking and coming to see what was happening... people who didn't even live in the area remarked on it as they could see it from the top of the bus..... and gave the group more of an understanding too- of the size of the space, what impact

our ideas had on the way the space was used... we mapped these... where people were excluded, what drew people in... and what kinds of people were drawn to each idea... this gave us some really rich information to put in a brief for the site... plenty to inspire an architect or landscape architect... and something which we could say represented lots of people living in the area...

8. ...Sometimes benefit from there being no money...

The Toolkit came about because we weren't an HMR area didn't have the money to make massive changes to the roads, or houses...or build new public spaces..... we didn't own any land... so had to plan with people as our resource... either to carry out some of the actions themselves, or to lobby for things to happen... and being in this position means you really have to understand what people want... so people are willing to put the time and effort in to make it happen- it has to be coming from them, so that they are willing to stand out in the cold at 11pm at night surveying a site whilst a fight goes on around them...

9. ...Make the need to develop: networks, skills, relationships, knowledge, representation, political awareness...

The first project the action group commissioned was for a series of community workshops designed flags to be placed on shops along London Road, the main shopping street... and by doing this we got to know each other better, had to get to know the business people where we wanted to put the flags... people had to learn about planning... and running workshops... and people began to get to know us... the project was small, easily achievable... so it was a quick win...

The second project the group commissioned was for a welcome to Sharrow signpost... the group were passionate that this should be one of the first things we do collectively... The group discussed what they wanted to achieve and I wrote up a brief... and advertised the commission... and we got over 80 expressions of interest... this is some of the work of the shortlisted artists... ..And so the group then shortlisted, interviewed and appointed an artist... ..and once an artist was commissioned... the group worked as the client team... and through this process we learned from each other... the artists explaining what the person we commissioned might need to know, others explain about shortlisting and interview process..., others again about the technical constraints... we also defined a series of principles we all agreed on, or aims for the project that we struggled to decide on when we discussed them at meetings- the process helped us clarify... so the artist we commissioned was interested in creating events before a final design- his were these lanterns... and this is the final design which is currently in planning...

For the third project, Lloyds Corner, the group researched and wrote the brief independently... and this meant they needed to develop skills and confidence... how to take surveys of the site... learn about consulting the public, and about exciting projects in other places that may inspire people... work with Sheffield City council to make things happen... understand their processes... but this is two way learning... This project led to the council writing up the Distinctive Sharrow Toolkit as Good Practice and using it to think about improving their other district and local centres in the Thriving Centres Project...

Our fourth project was to create an arts festival in empty shops along London Road... and this was the most ambitious yet, both in terms of scale... and the skills/ knowledge we would require...building regulations, insurance, arts council funding, government policy, curating, you name it... and this brought everyone to a bit of a standstill... it was daunting to try to take on another project (numbers at Action Group meetings were dwindling and we seemed to be making slow progress... and we realised that we needed to encourage new people to join us... and to develop our knowledge and skills from other places... and this led to the need to have a HQ for the group...

We wanted to have a space so we could meet and chat about all the projects, show ourselves and others our projects so far, plan new projects... (Perhaps more ad-hoc, quick projects as we seemed to be getting bigger and bigger in scale and this was putting some people off...) and to be a place where local people could find things out- say about the new community centre/ library development, or a recent planning application... or learn skills or have training... and a place where we could meet and work with other local groups such as "Grow Sheffield" or the "Community Artists Network" or "Sheffield Civic Trust"... invite councillors to plan protests... or invite SCC to talk about their Thriving Centres project so we can be involved in the really big things...So, we have managed to get ourselves a temporary space... and we have our housewarming next month... we are going to map all the built environment projects going on in the area on a giant map on the wall... and people can add to it, either with proposed projects or things they know about...

...so we now have stronger relationships, more technical and local knowledge... and more of an understanding about how agencies and developers work... and this isn't something people would have necessarily chosen to have done without the need to achieve something they desired... and there are all these people sharing their skills and knowledge, more able to help other people learn and become involved because they understand the process you need to go through...

10....Create richer architecture and urban environments...

So why plan in this way...? All of the reasons I've mentioned in my earlier points... but also because it makes better architecture, cities...design... People's Plans shouldn't just be a bland consensus where no one is really happy with the outcome... Or not be ambitious in terms of their aesthetic and execution... They should be a way of bringing in the most exciting ideas, skills and knowledges from the people living within the plan... they could be critical of what has gone before, but they should also propose new things that can't be achieved through conventional ways of working...