

Public Consultation and Community Involvement In Planning

A Twenty-first Century Guide
By Penny Norton and Martin Hughes
Routledge
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Review by Dr Nigel Moor

This is a long book dealing with a simple question. How do you engage the community in the debate about future development that is truly worthwhile and helpful. This question has challenged urban and rural planning for decades since the Skeffington report in 1969 recorded the disillusionment with planning following the post-war utopian optimism for reconstruction (the late Sir John Betjeman excepted). That question is still with us.

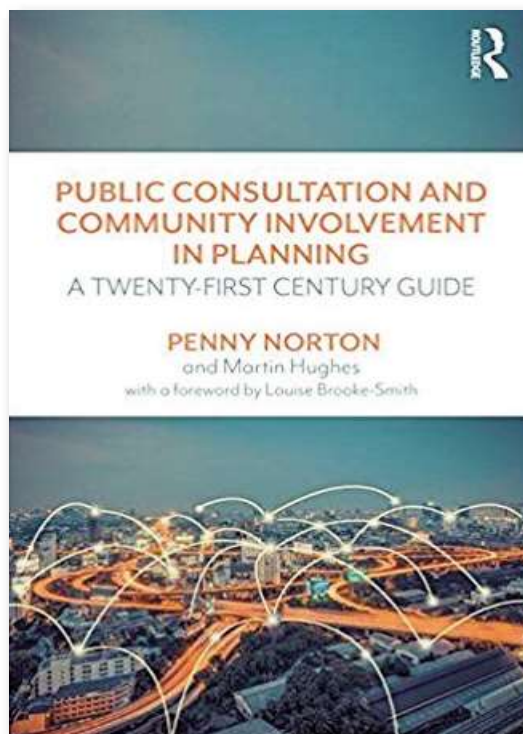
The book is divided into four parts; The context of consultation today, The planning process, Communications strategy and tactics and Post planning. This prompts the observation as to why such a basically simple proposition as consulting the community should become so complex. But that of course is the elephant in the room in relation to all the innovations since the 1947 Act that have sought to improve and clarify the planning system.

But putting my scepticism aside, the strength of this book is how it places public consultation and community involvement within the complexity of the planning system. It is unashamedly written as a text book and most practitioners will benefit from it being on their library shelves. This should guarantee sales.

The chapter on the impact of the internet on community involvement is particularly good and the author's observation "And as all demographic groups increasingly communicate online and hyperlocal websites and those of special interest groups continue to flourish, the need for developers and local authorities to have a proactive online presence will increase." demonstrates the need for practitioners to be fully aware of the techniques and strategies advocated by the author.

As a retired planner and now a county councillor much of my time is spent on working with local communities living in a series of large estates now nearing completion in my division. These new residents are now my electorate as much as those who have lived in the area for a long time.

The chapter on community involvement following construction has some useful case studies of where developers have engaged both with the new and existing residents so as to shape the new community. There is a huge problem of resource and manpower capacity within both local government and the development industry to deal with the post-



construction issues.

The Bournville Trust at their Lightmoor Village project being built at Telford New Town have invested heavily in community engagement and there is a dedicated community advice and service facility in the village centre. This would have been a useful case study as it demonstrates the scale of the commitment necessary to make a real impact in an evolving community as opposed to it being merely a marketing exercise.

I suspect that this book with its wealth of experience and best practice will become a well leafed guide with many active in large scale development.

An important innovation is the chapter on consulting on a nationally important infrastructure project. An application for an NSIP must be accompanied by a consultation report in accordance with Section 27 of the 2008 Planning Act and this provides an extensive list of the activities that must be carried out as well as some case studies. ■

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Dr Nigel Moor ran his own planning practice in London, Oxfordshire and East Anglia before it was acquired by RPS. He is now a Gloucestershire County Councillor with cabinet responsibility for Fire, Planning & Infrastructure and represents the Stow and Moreton division in the county.