

# PlanAct

## How to generate public support?

### Introduction

All major political parties in the U.K are looking for ways to make the planning system quicker, more transparent and easier for the public to become involved in. As it currently stands, the planning system for major infrastructure projects is increasingly struggling to deal with the challenges of the 21st century – balancing economic development needs against protecting the environment.

Planning is about how we plan for, and make decisions about, the future of our cities, towns and countryside. Planning has a long history, even thousands of years ago people will have discussed where to build homes and shelters!

Over the centuries, a more formal way of making these decisions was set up. So when we want to build a new house or someone wants to develop a new shopping centre, your local planning authority is responsible for deciding whether it should go ahead. 'Local planning authority' usually means the district or borough council, not the parish or town council.

Without a planning system, everyone could construct buildings anywhere, or use land in any way they wanted, no matter what effect this would have on other people who live or work in their area.

The views of local people have always been an integral part of the planning process and the case for the community's voice to be heard is clear:

- Involvement leads to outcomes that better reflect the views and aspirations and meet the needs of the wider community in all its diversity.
- Public involvement is valuable as a key element of a vibrant, open and participatory democracy.
- Involvement improves the quality and efficiency of decisions by drawing on local knowledge and minimising unnecessary and costly conflict.
- Involvement educates all participants about the needs of communities, the business sector and how local government works.
- Involvement helps promote social cohesion by making real connections with communities and offering them a tangible stake in decision-making.

Developers have a legal obligation to consult the local community and demonstrate support for their plans to the planning committee. In order to achieve this, they will be hiring communication and marketing experts that will

# PlanAct

develop a well coordinated campaign to influence local people and harness support. They will be contacting local schools, clubs and businesses and send out information for residents in the post. This is both a legal requirement and a very useful marketing tool.

As a legal requirement, they will be hosting at least one public exhibition where they will be looking to build public support for their plans. They are being proactive and you have to be too!

Developers will be keeping on file names and addresses of supporters in view of contacting them once the application is submitted and encouraging them to write in and support the planning application.

It is accepted wisdom that people are more likely to get involve in things they oppose than support and therefore a planning committee member will expect a larger number of objectors than supporters. When the time comes for a public consultation, you will want fellow objectors writing to the planning committee to register their objections. **Put simply it is a numbers game and you want to win convincingly.**

## What can I do to stop them?

Developers rely on demonstrating local support for their plans and they will promise everything under the sun to get it from increased employment to new community facilities and improved infrastructure. The only foil is to demonstrate considerably more local opposition to the plans than they have support.

This will let your elected officials on the planning committee know that this is a divisive issue and may harm them when they come to seek re-election. Local politicians usually deal with apathy from the general public so if you can show them this is a popular issue they are increasingly likely to support your position.

A simple petition or standardised letter is not enough! Planning committees do not accord the same weight to these as to individually written letters.

It is important that you set up an action committee specifically to deal with mobilising public support and ask your friends to join. This should be within the organisational structure that you have developed to campaign against the planning application. It should have a chairman and a number of volunteers and should be answerable to the campaign committee. This will be your main activity within the campaign so make sure you place someone who has the time, the energy, the determination and the enthusiasm to succeed.

The more supporters you have, the more clout you will have in the battle against developers.

# PlanAct

## How do I convince people to support us?

There is only really one-way to get people to support you: They have to hear your message.

To develop literature for everyone in the district and try to shake the hand of every potential supporter in your community is expensive. You are also wasting a lot of money and a lot of time on people who will not support you no matter what you say or do. If, on the other hand, you can identify a smaller but significant group of people who will most likely be persuaded by your campaign message. You will then be able concentrate your efforts on them and you will have more resources to repeat your message over and over again, until it seems that they have no choice but to support your campaign. You should concentrate on local residents nearest to the planning application to start with. Developers will be in touch with them I guarantee!

I always recommend to my clients to get out in the community. Use your 'home' advantage. If developers can build a support network from many miles away, imagine what you can do in your own back yard!

As a local resident and with the help of fellow residents you should have contacts with most of the local clubs and activities in the community. This is a great place to start, as the likelihood is you already know the people and they already like you. Make the most of that personable relationship to expand your captive audience by focusing your message on converting them to your position.

### Tips for increasing your support base

**Promote It:** Make your campaign visible and inclusive.  
**Timing Matters:** As deadlines approach increase your visibility and make access to information easier.

Don't forget to get out and about in your community and post on public notice boards, put posters in shops, pubs and on signs.

As a local resident, you are in a position to make a difference and influence fellow residents. Attend local sporting events, churches, and community groups and bring information with you. Most campaigns fail because they don't reach out to enough of segments of the community.

Ask fellow committee members, volunteers and supporters to reach out to other organisations. Don't hesitate to bring up issues at meetings of other groups you belong to, and enlist others' support in letter writing and grassroots lobbying campaigns. Get creative in your approach. Involve local and national charities, environmental, historical and social groups such as Friends of the Earth, English Heritage, English Nature, the Countryside Alliance and the Environmental Agency. If you don't ask you don't get! By approaching these groups, you are also adding weight and credibility to your opposition to the planning application.

# PlanAct

## **When?**

The earlier you start developing your support base the better your campaign will be.

Committee members expect a larger number of objectors than supporters. It is accepted wisdom that people are more likely to get involved in things they oppose than support.

Don't let the developers use that argument! It's a numbers game and put simply, you have to outscore the developers by around 3 to 1 to have a chance of showing popular opposition to a scheme.

## **How do I reach people?**

With all of these things in mind, it is important to ask the following questions as you consider the various types of communication tools.

1. How much does it cost in time, money and people?
2. Do you know who is being reached?
3. Are they being persuaded?
4. Can you find out if they support your campaign and make sure that they write in support of your campaign to the planning committee?

## **Literature drop**

A literature drop is when volunteers go door-to-door leaving a piece of literature about the campaign at each household. A large number of volunteers can cover a large area relatively quickly. The volunteers rarely will talk with members of the public, so they do not identify supporters, but they can leave a reminder to write to the planning committee at the supporters' homes as the committee date approaches.

## **Literature handouts**

Your campaign can also hand out literature wherever people gather in large numbers. This could be at sporting events, markets, factory gates, train stations, metro stops, etc. While this may be a lot easier or quicker than the literature drop at the voters' homes, it is less targeted because you are not certain that the people who take your literature live in the district or will be affected by the planning application.

## **Mail**

Sending campaign literature to voters through the mail can be very effective at delivering your message and persuading them to support you. Depending on

# PlanAct

what type of list you have, you may be able to target potential supporters either by geography or demographics (age, gender, etc.). For example, you could send something outlining your stand on one issue to senior citizens and send a different piece outlining your stand on a different issue to young women. Again, you will know that those who receive your mail live in the district. Developers use a programme called 'datamap' to get all the addresses around a planned planning application. Bear in mind that this is very expensive.

## Door to door

One of the most effective ways to persuade voters is to go from house to house, apartment to apartment, door to door, talking to individual members of the public one at a time. You are able to hear the problems they face, tailor your message to meet their individual concerns and gauge the level of support. Often potential supporters are impressed that a campaign would bother to come meet them and you can gain their support just by making the effort. Obviously this is going to be very time consuming but it is a great way to foster community spirit.

## Phoning

The telephone can be used to persuade potential supporters to support your campaign, identify supporters and remind those supporters to write in response to the public consultation. Each of these should be a separate phone call. Most often the phone is used to identify supporters and to remind people to answer the planning authorities public consultation. Both of these can be relatively short calls but may be expensive if you have a large number of residents affected by the planning application.

## Visibility

Visibility is anything the campaign does to catch the voters' eye. This can be billboards by the side of the road, signs at supporters houses, posters on poles, stickers on cars, volunteers waving to traffic, car caravans with decorated cars driving through key neighbourhoods, etc. While this may raise the voter awareness about the campaign and the name recognition of the campaign, it can only reinforce the campaign message. It is a very poor method of persuading potential supporters. It also reaches a broad audience rather than a targeted audience.

### Useful Tip:

Prepare a simple response briefing for people to consult as their writing their objection letters outlining all the reasons for objecting and the address details of the planning officer. Make it simple and you will increase your response rate!

# PlanAct

## **Created events**

The campaign can also create events to gain exposure. These may be rallies to motivate supporters or press conferences to highlight the campaigns stand on an issue. The advantage of created events is that the campaign can control the situation and often deliver a clear message. The disadvantage is that created events often take up a lot of time, money and people to organize. You must make sure that the message is persuasive and reaches enough of the targeted audience to be effective.

## **What should I take from this briefing?**

- You need to be able to demonstrate popular opposition for the proposed planning application.
- If developers can create support from miles away you can do even better locally!
- The earlier you start harnessing support the better.
- Use a variety of approaches to get your message heard.