

# Spinning the wheel

The right approach to public participation could help revitalise the planning system. Scott Davidson reports on an initiative being devised in Scotland



*Cambuslang: opportunities for public participation in the preparation of the local plan and town centre forum*

Few would disagree that public involvement in the planning system is a good thing. Moreover, it is becoming apparent that community involvement in planning is an increasingly important issue.

For example, the Labour Party's Scottish manifesto, published last year, urges local authorities to work in partnership with the community. Local Agenda 21 also requires increased public involvement in the decisions of government. A Scottish Parliament could seek to use the planning system in its efforts to achieve this.

The involvement and participation of the public in the planning system dates back to the late 1960s with the publication of two influential documents. The first was the Skeffington Report and the second was Arnstein's *Ladder of citizen participation* (see diagram below).

Public participation is still seen as a crucial element of the planning system, with NPPG1 indicating that it provides a forum for public information, involvement and debate.

However, in pursuing the involvement of communities, the planning system has proved something of a disappointment. Some would point to community involvement as one of the causes of delay in the system. Others suggest that a tokenistic approach is too often taken, with real power being retained by planning officers and council members.

Another view would suggest that the promotion of public participation is a waste of resources as the response is all too often apathetic. However, it must still be concluded that public participation is worthwhile, if it can become more effective.

A planning system which truly values inclusive and progressive community empowerment could contribute to effective planning and the delivery of a system which is distinctively Scottish.

In order to fully engage local communities in the planning system a new and innovative approach must

develop which builds on and learns from past experience.

The "Wheel of Participation", developed by South Lanarkshire Council (see diagram opposite), provides a theoretical underpinning for an open and democratic planning system that encourages the right participation techniques to achieve the identified objective - be that information, consultation, participation and/or empowerment.

The use of the wheel would help to minimise the problems of the past, where expectations from participation have not materialised due to the use of inappropriate techniques and unclear objectives. The wheel

promotes a positive and responsive approach, in which a dialogue and partnership can really develop.

In applying such an approach, new techniques which go beyond the limitations of the traditional public meetings, exhibitions, press articles and leaflets need to be adopted. These new techniques include the use of opinionmeters, software such as Prioritysearch, modelling techniques like Planning for Real, focus groups, networking and workshops. The selection of appropriate techniques should reflect the aims at any particular point in the participation process with reference to the position on the wheel.

In addition, by using the wheel as a model for consultation and participation rather than the ladder (as promoted by Arnstein and, more recently, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities), problems of aiming for inappropriate levels of community empowerment can be overcome.

This is because the wheel promotes the appropriate level of community involvement to achieve clear objectives, without suggesting that the aim is always to climb to the top of the ladder.

The practicalities of promoting participatory democracy need to be addressed to allow the planning system to be transparent, inclusive and empowering. Some approaches being developing in South Lanarkshire that could be introduced include:

- Involving key stakeholders in the community.
- Applying innovative techniques such as Prioritysearch, opinionmeters and Planning for Real.
- Promoting discussion at inquiries.
- Involving schools in developing awareness and participation.

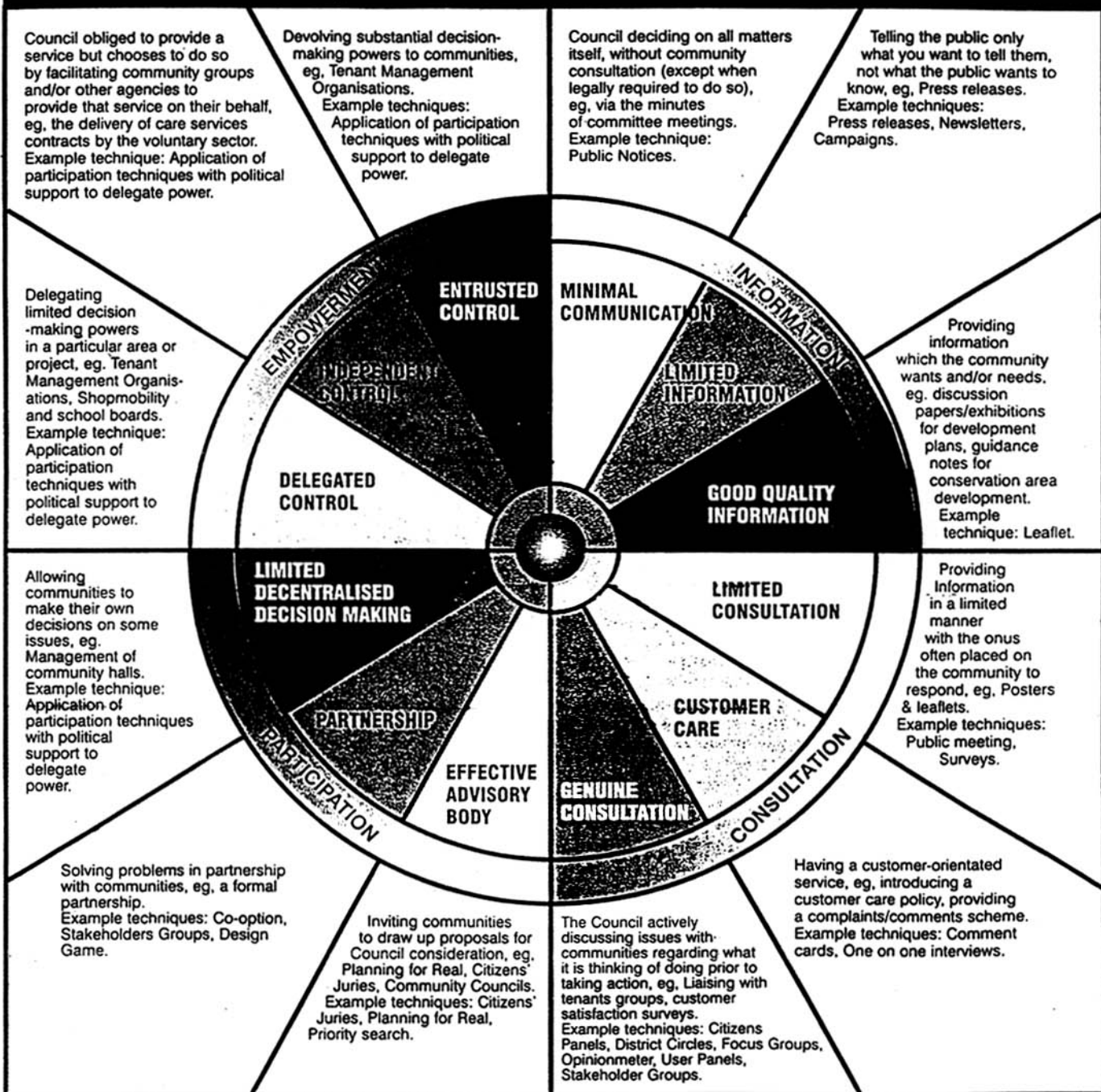
Although it is early days, it seems that these approaches are producing qualitative and quantitative results. This inclusive approach has mainly affected development plan preparation and project implementation. However, the implication for development control should not be

## Ladder of citizen participation

8. Citizen Control	▶	Degrees of citizen power
7. Delegated Power		
6. Partnership		
5. Placation	▶	Degrees of tokenism
4. Consultation		
3. Informing		
2. Therapy	▶	No power
1. Manipulation		

# of empowerment

## The Wheel of Participation



underestimated. In particular, the issue of third-party appeals has arisen. These would need to become an integral part of the planning system in Scotland, if an inclusive approach is to develop which is truly plan-led. Consideration also needs to be given to the appropriateness of third-party appeals.

The development of an inclusive planning system in Scotland has been poor. However, internal and external pressures are emerging to change this. The opportunities presented by a Scottish Parliament to formalise an inclusive, open and democratic planning system should be grasped. This will offer great

challenges to the profession and elected representatives and provide a productive environment for their skills and leadership qualities. Such an approach would assist in creating a distinctively Scottish planning system that can produce locally developed methods to help with community involvement and participation.

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