

Urban river corridor decision-making: does stakeholder participation really happen?

Introduction

Governance of sites, such as river corridors, which raise complex environmental issues needs to incorporate a wide range of expertise and knowledge to develop beneficial outcomes that balance the different priorities.

The UK model of governance and policy-making imposes collaboration between stakeholders with the aim of ensuring the different interests are represented in the decision making process. But is this participation effective in practice?

Research examined case studies of two flood alleviation sites where work has taken place following a decision-making process. It questioned whether effective stakeholder participation was achieved, or whether the decision-making processes in these case studies are examples of merely *apparent* collaboration, driven by a small group of dominant interests, without the wider participation intended by this type of governance process.

Different types of knowledge and expertise brought into a collaborative process will express a different balance of social, economic and environmental values. It is therefore reasonable to assume that effective participation or collaboration will tend to result in initial proposals being adapted according to the knowledge and expertise introduced, and the effect of this will be seen in the solutions implemented at the site level.



Malin Bridge before the flood alleviation works.

The case study sites

The two sites are in South Yorkshire within the Don catchment: Centenary Riverside is on the River Don on the outskirts of Rotherham and Malin Bridge is in North Sheffield on the confluence of the Rivers Rivelin and Loxley. Both cases studies involved decision-making processes in relation to flood alleviation works.

Centenary Riverside, in the Templeborough area of Rotherham, was part of the large British Steel works, closed in 1988, and known locally as the Seven Sisters because of the seven chimneys on the site. The buildings were demolished and the land sold for private development, although at the time of the Centenary Riverside flood alleviation project the land remained as a brownfield site.

Located in a heavily industrialised area suffering from decline, and bounded by a dual carriageway, railway and canal, the site had failed to attract investment. As a large empty site directly adjacent to the river it was targeted by Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council as a suitable location for flood alleviation works to address some of the water management problems faced by Rotherham. The project went ahead, led by Rotherham MBC, with the support of central government regeneration funding.

Located in a busy suburb of Sheffield, **Malin Bridge** is surrounded by residential areas, light industry and commercial properties. The area is heavily used by private and public transport, including buses and trams. The space also serves as a gateway to the Rivelin and Loxley valleys, two local sites offering access to natural environments.

The site was heavily tree covered, mostly with self-seeded trees and plants. It had been previously designated as an official Local Nature Reserve, was used by a local school for environmental education, and it has been infrequently subject to clean-ups by volunteers.

This location was identified for clearance in the interests of flood alleviation by the Environment Agency in a Defra-funded programme of clearance provoked by the flooding of June 2007.

Methodology

Interviews were held with stakeholders of the two sites, exploring the governance processes as experienced by these individuals. They explored the different influences on the decisions made, how these had come about and who was involved. The research also looked at documents produced during the governance process, that indicated the different stages in the development of the final site design.

Findings

In both cases, there was clear evidence of different values and ideas among the range of stakeholders of how best to achieve the desired outcomes. Despite this, the solutions for the identified problems were very similar to the solutions identified at the start of the process. The participation had made little difference to the outcomes, particularly in the case of Malin Bridge.

The initial solution proposed for the space at Malin Bridge was primarily of an economic focus, concerned with the costs of flooding and blockage of the channel. Despite a governance process that appeared to incorporate many social and environmental groups, the outcomes demonstrated little to reflect this input.



Malin Bridge following flood alleviation works.

Some evidence of stakeholder participation was evident in Centenary riverside outcomes. The site was initially intended to be solely a flood alleviation space but, following input from different stakeholders in the governance process, the plans were amended.

The site is now a wetland park which offers community leisure space and wildlife conservation, bringing social and environmental values to what was originally a primarily cost-focussed solution to flooding.

In both cases, technical and scientific interests perceived to be 'expert' dominated the governance process and carried more weight than lay/local knowledge (the knowledge brought by local people and others that is based on experience rather than formal learning). Generally professionals were seen to have 'expertise' rather than just knowledge.



Centenary Riverside flood alleviation wetland.

Key messages

A process of governance that appears to involve a variety of stakeholders and makes claims to collaboration does not necessarily produce outcomes that reflect the input of such a process. Technical and scientific expertise is considered to have greater legitimacy than lay knowledge.

Whilst the collaboration imposed by the UK model of governance and policy-making offers benefits in terms of working relationships and outcomes, the pressure to work in collaboration can result in a situation in which a small group of interests dominate in a relatively closed process, and the potential benefits of collaboration are not realised because collaboration is reduced to a tick-box exercise.

Unless outcomes reflect a consideration of different values within the decision-making regarding a river corridor site, the performance of collaboration is simply a performance, and the process is not truly collaborative.

Unless the governance process makes efforts to incorporate the range of knowledge and expertise when seeking the most suitable solutions to the problems identified there is little benefit to a collaborative governance process.

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