

Review

Exploring community engagement methods and approaches, a one-day workshop for anyone in the Fife area to build their skills in this environment, Glenrothes, November 2024.

Community Engagement: we hear it a lot, particularly from politicians when talking about controversial topics and projects: “We engaged with the community, and this is what they wanted”. In tourism, it can be used to find the balance between the social impacts of development – ensuring that what we, as development practitioners, do is in the community’s best interests. Responsible tourism looks at the social, economic and environmental factors; one of these is objective – money – you can count it. Another of these is theoretically measurable on both macro and micro levels, though tough to define - environmental. The final is very subjective and nearly impossible to measure with any proper level of accuracy – social. That’s where community engagement comes in.

So how do you go about community engagement? How do you fully assess a community’s needs? How does the opinion of the people become a strategy for working? The science behind this runs deep, but for most practitioners researching this thoroughly is not viable due to time constraints and other factors. Along comes Fife Voluntary Action (FVA) with a course on “Exploring community engagement methods and approaches”, a one-day workshop for anyone in the Fife area to build their skills in this environment.

Delivered at FVA’s head office in Glenrothes by a number of different practitioners from both Fife Council and FVA, the day was a multi-strand approach to the subject featuring peer-to-peer learning, academic teaching and practical advice and approaches.

The introduction, led by academic Mae Shaw gave a macro look at what it is we're trying to achieve as practitioners – the Why, the What and just glossing on the How. This introduction lay a solid foundation for the rest of the day by addressing both what we're looking at but also how there's no one-size-fits-all approach; that there's ambiguity in the definition of community and how that relationship with the state is ruled by these definitions. How there are many words that can be used, but ultimately “figuring it out” is how to best define community engagement, however that might be.

The next part of the day looked more closely at community – trying to define it, not by definition per se, but by our own interpretation. The five-Cs: Contested, Contextual, Contingent, Contradictory and Rediscovered were discussed; again, not defining specifically what the word community means, but allowing us the tools to understand and interpret our own work into the lessons of the day. This approach allows the learning to be much more inclusive and the learners to engage with the teachings.

Moving onto the Demands of Policy vs Demands of Communities, we looked at the role of the community engagement practitioner – how do we fit into the role? By discussing in groups, we were able to determine that our influence can go both ways, and how this influence allows us to do the right thing – providing it is justifiable – and how to think about the “lens” – how we are pitching ideas and concepts both to policy makers and community members. Again, by allowing the concepts to be taught and not just the practicalities of how to literally “do” community engagement, it allowed for the teachings to be relatable. There was little about what to do, but lots on how to think – something that is underrated when teaching professionals with years of experience.

A fun activity followed:

I see

I hear

I smell

I feel

I think

I say

What do we add to this? A great tool for community engagement, but one that we all needed after the conceptual thinking of the previous topic. Going around the room, we collated our emotions and feelings at the time – inspiring and sometimes very literal. A midway ice breaker? Or a genuinely useful tool? Both, and all the better for it.

Moving on to more practical approaches, we looked at Strategic Participation and Non-participation. Still theoretical and generic, but applicable and informative, allowing us to think more deeply about specific topics within engagement and how we go about our approach: topics such as accountability, challenging tokenistic forms, building capacity, providing counter-information and developing alternative points of view. We discussed bias, building relationships, strengthening democratic processes and validity of research.

We finished the day with a group activity discussing our own approaches and theories on the *Fife Place* plan. Working in our table groups, we circled around the room making notes about what these words meant to us, and how they may be perceived by the community; how we might go about finding this out, and how we would collate that information.

Overall, the day was fantastic. Well-pitched, well-paced and well-balanced. We all learnt a lot and I would highly recommend it to anyone, even those where community engagement isn't

their key responsibility. Find the exercises we used in this free resource: *Community Engagement: A Critical Guide for Practitioners* to be found at concept.lib.ed.ac.uk

Matt Pointon, Project Manager, Levenmouth Local Tourism Association and MSc Responsible Tourism Management Candidate, Leeds Beckett University