

Name of Exercise: Local Agenda 21 in Croydon

Location: Croydon, South East England

Participation Exercise under which Article? *Article 7*

Purpose of Participation Exercise:

To create a Local Agenda 21 strategy in Croydon and to raise awareness of sustainability issues.

Background:

The London Borough of Croydon lies to the south of Greater London, and covers 85 square kilometers. Most of the borough is residential: around one third is open space. The town centre, which is 20 minutes by train from central London, is a major shopping and employment centre. Although several national companies have their headquarters in Croydon, the majority of the 9,000 local businesses are small, employing less than 10 people.

The population is around 330,000 people (125,000 households). One fifth of the population is from minority ethnic groups. Many residents are members of one or more of the 3,500 community organisations in the area.

The Task

In April 1993, the Council decided to prepare a Local Agenda 21 (LA21) strategy. A new Sub-Committee was created for this purpose and it decided to do this through project groups whose membership would reflect a range of interested parties in the community. The groups were to cover energy, natural environment, waste and pollution, work and economy, and transport. The Project Groups were asked to research the current position, set clear, achievable targets relevant to the Croydon area, and develop a strategy by the end of 1996 to achieve those targets.

Five very senior Council Officers were asked to set up and lead the Project Groups. Each group included a representative of local business nominated by the Chamber of Commerce, a community representative nominated by the Croydon Society, and a representative from Croydon Friends of the Earth, which was then the only active local voluntary group concerned with a range of environmental issues. Project leaders identified other suitable participants and invited them to join the group. These included academics, members of local voluntary groups, managers from utility companies (e.g. gas and water) and Councillors. The groups had 10-15 members and met every 6 –10 weeks. A member of staff was allocated to manage the project.

Participation Techniques Used:

Community Participation

The project groups could only involve a limited number of people so the Council started a programme to raise awareness of the issues among the wider community and seek people's views about what needed to be done to meet the challenge of sustainable development, and how we could go about doing it. There were several elements to this:

- **A video "Living Today with Tomorrow in Mind"** was made by a voluntary group of video enthusiasts. It explained how the issues affect Croydon and featured local people.
- **Workshops** for community groups at which volunteers who had been trained in facilitation techniques showed the video and facilitated discussion to obtain opinions about what could be done locally about the problems. Nearly 1,000 people took part.
- **A questionnaire "You and the Environment"** was sent out with 'Croydon Reports' (the Council's newspaper, delivered free four times a year to all homes in the borough) aimed at identifying priorities and discovering what prevents people from making lifestyle changes. Some 4,000 replies were received.
- **"Visioning Exercises"** at two local events where people were invited to describe their vision for the future.

Consultation Draft

Meanwhile, the project groups had researched the issues and published 'Croydon Environment Audit 1995' setting out information about the state of the environment in Croydon. Early in 1996 all the project groups took part in a one day event to agree a vision and objectives, informed by the community participation exercises. Individual project groups then drafted action plans and indicators for their areas of work. These formed the basis of the draft LA21 strategy published for consultation in May 1996.

The draft strategy was widely promoted among stakeholders. Copies were sent to local organisations and agencies, including ethnic minority groups, trade unions, School Councils, and specialist organisations identified by the Project Groups. The volunteer facilitators ran consultation workshops with community groups but there was relatively little response, possibly because people felt they had made their contribution at the earlier stage, and also because few people are interested in reading and commenting on draft documents.

Stage(s) at which public participated in the process:

The public were represented within the project groups and they were also involved in the participation exercises which were held in order to raise awareness of LA21 issues within the community and to gather their views on what could be done in the Croydon area. These views were then taken into consideration when formulating the draft LA21 strategy. Community groups were consulted on the draft strategy and invited to attend consultation exercises on specific topics, before the final LA21 document was published.

What information was made available?

The participation stage was launched by David Bellamy, a well known media personality, to an audience of 100 key local stakeholders, accompanied by publicity in the local paper and 'Croydon Reports'. The Council wrote to hundreds of local organisations offering workshops with video showings, and open sessions were also held and advertised in the press. During this stage Croydon Environment Audit was published, and publicised in the local press, with copies sent to local schools and stakeholders. Exhibitions and local events included displays in libraries and car parks, and stands at local events such as Croydon Carnival and the Selsdon Country Show.

The consultation stage opened with a free Saturday conference with presentations and topic workshops. This was publicised through advertisements in the local paper, leaflets in libraries and letters to community groups, as were the consultation workshops. Material was also carried at local events and at an exhibition in the central library.

What was the outcome of the public participation exercise?

The revised LA21 strategy, together with a set of illustrated leaflets summarising it, was agreed at the end of 1996. The strategy is being implemented and monitored under the guidance of the Croydon Local Agenda 21 Partnership set up in October 1997. Its members include committed people from business, health, voluntary sector and education backgrounds as well as 3 Councillors.

LESSONS

- **Wider representation:** The project groups got the task done, but they were dominated by the Council, partly because of the timing and style of the meetings. They were not representative of the community: for example, 75% of people attending the project groups were adult white men, who comprise only 29% of the population of Croydon.
- **Co-ordination:** Project groups would have worked better with stronger co-ordination and some joint working at the beginning. It was difficult to progress work on issues which did not fall clearly into the remit of a single project group. The structure also meant that some important local agencies, including the Health Authority and the Race Equality Council, were not formally part of the process.
- **Flexibility:** It is important to take advantage of opportunities as they arise, rather than try to work to a strict process. Both the video and the facilitators programme were possible because the co-ordinator was able to take up ideas which came from chance discussions with people in the community.
- **Activitites:** It is easier for people to get involved by attending events and contributing early in the process, rather than reading and commenting on draft documents, which appeals to very few people.
- **Feedback:** It is very important to give people "good news" feedback. It helps them to understand that they have made an important contribution and encourages them to stay involved. Every year Croydon holds a reception at its impressive Town Hall to thank those who have taken part.

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