

The Science Communication Conference 24th - 25th May 2004

Session 5 – Real life tales

Elizabeth Rivers, Independent Facilitator: Bikers vs. Grannies: Conflict on the streets of Stratford Upon Avon.

Welcome to bikers versus grannies, conflict on the streets of Stratford on Avon, I don't know if you can read that sufficiently up at the back but hopefully it will be legible. This morning you got a very good introduction to the concept of deliberative processes, the role of the facilitator and some examples of some very complex high-level decision-making processes where deliberative processes were used. This afternoon I'm going to give you a relatively simple example of the deliberative process but hopefully one which will give some flesh to how that theory works in practice and take you through that process. I'd say it involves technical rather than scientific decision making, it was centred around the planning issue, but I think it does demonstrate how members of the public with no technical expert background in the subject matter can engage and actually make decisions that sometimes are far better than would be made by the technical experts left to themselves. So I am going to talk you through that.

So, the problem which presented was, I don't know how many of you know Stratford On Avon, but there's a piece of road...just outside the theatre near the river, there's a very nice part and a nice street and a very nice row of houses which is occupied by a lot of very little old ladies who like their peace and quiet, and like to spend their Sunday afternoons in the summer sitting out in their back gardens enjoying the sunshine. That stretch of road is also enjoyed by a growing number of recreational motorcyclists who enjoy getting on their bikes on a Sunday, get their nice little Harley or whatever their bike is, getting all their leathers on and riding off out into the country and all congregating somewhere quite attractive like Stratford, or Matlock in the peak district or various places like this and they like to park their bikes, go for a little walk around town, enjoy the town, go and look at each other's bikes and admire them, have other tourists coming along and admiring their bikes so they can show them off and generally enjoying a nice Sunday afternoon with their bike. So, but what happens is that people will come, park for about an hour, go off somewhere else, and although there were parking spaces for about 100 bikes, over the course of a day maybe about 1000 bikes would come and go, there was the constant too-ing and fro-ing of bikes every Sunday in the summer and every Bank Holiday, from early in the morning until late in the evening. So the old ladies over the road were getting fairly fed up with this and not really being able to enjoy their gardens on a Sunday afternoon.

So these are the groups that were squaring up against each other. The bikers and the grannies. This was turning into a bit of a local issue, and each of them then got various local councillors supporting their side, so we had

councillors who were supporting the grannies, and we have councillors supporting the bikers. So it was getting very sort of polarised within the council. So the Local Authority the Planning Authority was sort of stuck in the middle of this, and we've got the Local Authority, and they had to make a decision as to whether they allowed the bikers to continue where they were, or whether they said "no you're not going to be able to go there because the residents don't like it and we need to change things". So were they going to make a sort of a planning decision based on planning principles and technical expert-based decisions, and impose it on the public, those members of the public who were interested. That was one option. The difficulty with that is the police would then have to enforce it if they came up with something different than the existing status quo, and the police were very clear that they didn't have the resources to move 100 bikers against their will if they didn't want to go. So the Local Authority and the police had a bit of a dilemma and what they thought, they'd had some experience of deliberative processes in developing policy so they thought 'well let's try it here and see whether it would work'.

So they called myself, and a colleague and other facilitators to see whether there was something we could do to actually bring these two groups plus the various other groups that were forming around them, and the councillors that were clustering into these groups together to see if they could actually work out a solution between themselves. And initially this didn't seem too likely given that the old ladies initially didn't want to meet the bikers, they were sort of afraid of them, there'd been a few angry confrontations out on the street, so things were a bit tense really. But we thought 'well let's give it a go and let's see where we get to'. So what we started off....and just to complete the picture of the stakeholders, these were the main blocks but it's always important to think 'okay, who else is involved here?' and there were other groups, there were like the local businesses who had on the one hand appreciated defensive of the business that the bikers bought, but were the bikers frightening away the tourists? And there were different views about whether the tourists had liked this or not. The grannies said 'no it's terrible for tourism' the bikers said 'well they love it, they come to Stratford to see our bikes', you know, 'we're as much as a draw as the theatre'. I'm not sure if I quite went with that but, and so there were all sorts of different views about that, so yes, we have the [IA] and then there's the theatre, it was right near the theatre as well, so the theatre were invited to come along as well, so all sorts of groups. We've got business, we've got tourists,so we got as many different people as possible because one thing you can do, if you can broaden it out and get as many different people and as many different shades of grey, you start to reduce the polarisation somewhat, and also if one group is claiming the support of another group who is outside of the room, if you get them in and actually say 'well what do you think, is this something you like?' then that starts to bring more information into the process. So we had this whole range of different stakeholders and people who were potentially interested in this issue.

In terms of the process that we followed, we started off, in fact when the council phoned up they said 'well we're going to call a meeting and get everybody together and then you can come along and run it', and I said 'not likely', the worst possible thing you can do is just turn up at a public meeting, and which no ground has been laid, and just basically be the fall guy who is going to get ripped to pieces by all these angry people. So as the facilitator, once you have done that a few times, you don't really want to do it any more, you learn that lesson. So we said 'no, no, no, don't call a public meeting, we'll go and talk to people separately first'.

That's what we did, so we got a meeting of what I'm calling slightly jokingly 'the grannies' but they were mostly old ladies that lived in this street. We met them just said 'okay just tell us about the issues' and very much listening, hearing from them, giving them a chance to unload, and be listened to. And then we got the bikers together as well, and had a meeting with them. It was harder to get them involved, in a sense the status quo was favouring them at that stage, in that they had what they wanted, and in fact what they wanted was more space where they were, and they weren't the ones so much who were advocating the change as the grannies who wanted to get them moved. We managed to get some to come along, so we had some private meetings with them. After the first meeting the grannies still weren't willing to meet the bikers, they were still too scared of them, so we said 'okay well we'll have some time to think about this and then we'll come back and have another meeting'. At the end of the second meeting they were then....and we were able to tell them some of the things that the bikers had said and stuff, and to communicate information back and forth, and by the end of the second round of meetings they were willing to come face-to-face.

And we also had another meeting for the officials and all the other sort of people in the middle, so the theatre company, local businesses, chamber of commerce, anybody else who might have an interest, the police, the traffic wardens, got all of those together, the councillors, planners and heard about it from their perspective, and the very clear message that came out of that from the police was 'people have got to agree on something because we can't enforce something against their will', so that was quite important.

Then we got to the stage where it seemed like people were ready to come together, so we had a meeting, probably about 30 people at that meeting, very carefully structured, not a sort of free for all, people were allowed to speak for a couple of minutes, then pause and then move on, lots of ground rules about people speaking just one at a time, and that went very well actually, and what we did was we started to talk about what possible alternative sites there might be for the bikers and also looked at also the option of the status quo of them staying where they were. And we got them each to come up with a list of criteria for what the site needed to meet. So for the bikers it was things like walking distance from town, security, somewhere they could lock their bikes up, a place that was easy, not too far to walk into town, somewhere reasonably pleasant. For the residents it was

very much not near peoples houses, safety considerations that bikes would not be too closely crammed together, things like that. They came up with a joint list together, which was very important, so they started to see where in some ways they had common ground and the biker's began to see 'well actually our lives would be easier if we weren't right next to somebody's houses', so the common ground started to build up. And then we looked at different options and there were five possible places the bikers could be located including where they were already, plus four other places, and we drew up a matrix and compared one against the other and saw which options came out most strongly and it was surprising the ones that came out strongly, it wasn't the ones we would have thought at the outset.

And then there was some information needs like so the possible new sites, could the council get access to them? There were things that needed to be found out, so there was a gap while various people went off and gathered some information, and also the people who had come to the meetings were able to sort of then go out and consult more widely, so the group of bikers who came could go off and talk to the others bikers together.

And then they came back and had another session and at that stage a decision was made to move to a different site and the bikers saw that actually it would probably be better for them and they could get more space to expand by moving to a different site and the Local Authority was willing to fund that, that was something they thought was worthwhile, so basically they all came to a consensual decision at this stage, and it was then over to the council to implement it. So a purpose-built motorbike park was built down the road, still walking distance to the town, but outside the multi storey car parks that wasn't near anybody's houses and it took a while for that to come through but a couple of years later it was actually inaugurated and opened and the bikers were moved away from where they were previously outside their house, and pretty much they went. I think there were a few little straddlers but basically they all moved.

So that whole process took about 8 months in total, but when it got to implementation there wasn't really any opposition it went through smoothly, whereas has there been any sort of imposed decision by the officials, then I don't think they ever would have come up with that solution of moving to that other site, it wouldn't have been possible to have worked that out just as sort of a desk-based exercise even maybe going off and talking to a few people and I think a better solution came out as a result of involving people.

So I guess some of the key points coming out of that is the thinking that in terms of why its useful to involve the public as opposed to simply making technical decisions.

Then I think the process educated the participants about the technical constraints and some of the things that people were asking for weren't really possible and through the process they were able to hear from the Local

Authority, the police, why that wouldn't work and it got them thinking in different directions. The support local knowledge, was a point that was made this morning, you know the bikers said 'well this is what we want from a bike park' and points came out that I wouldn't have thought of, so that was really helpful, and people knew about different possible sites around the town that might be useful, and I think the building of relationships, the fact that the two parties started to sort of see each other as humans with concerns rather than people who were just getting in the way of them enjoying their lives the way that they wanted to enjoy their lives, and at that point they were willing to make concessions. I think if the bikers had just been told "you've got to move" I think there would have been a lot of opposition, but having heard from the residents about what was important to them and thought about it, they realised actually it was probably in their best interests to move. And finally I think ownership of outcomes the fact that because they'd worked it through together they basically supported what came out of it at the end, so the police weren't then involved in having to use resources to enforce something against people's will. So that's bikers and grannies.