

Making sense of the place in which we live: *more than a feeling!*

Making sense of the place in which we live, is complex. It is certainly not simply about fixed, quantifiable, geographical parameters but it is multidimensional and feelings about a place, about its community and what is valued in that place, are highly significant [1,2,3]. Communities will comprise homogeneous and heterogeneous groups, [4] and so multiple meanings and values will likely be conveyed from amongst the community. Consequently the ability to capture the breadth and depth of local views is warranted and invariably, this will require a highly interdisciplinary approach to be taken to make sense of these views.

If we are able to improve our understanding of place and inform spatial planning strategies and management accordingly, as previous blogs also report, numerous advantages, especially where natural environments are concerned, are expected in enhancing health and wellbeing, [5, 6] even the social and psychological development of children, [7]. Moreover, through the community's engagement and through changes they have been able to affect, their empowerment and abilities to convey views can be enhanced [8] and a greater sense of value in their area and in their community is argued to be developed [9,10,11,12,13].

However, consultations may appear to communities disingenuous or simply a tick-box exercise [14, 15, 16, and 17]. Operational doors need to be opened for planners to not only genuinely consult with the broadest range of local people but also for the consultees' opinions to be seen to influence decision making. In our view, as previously blogged by Professor Healey [18], place based planning policies are required.

The Case of *Broadly Engaging with Tranquillity: A Sense of a Special Place* in Dorset

A genuine belief that local people are best placed to comment on their *sense of place*, on their community and in shaping the area, in which they live, underpinned the design of the *Broadly Engaging with Tranquillity* Project (BETP).

Undertaken in the Purbecks, Dorset from March 2014 to June 2015, the case study comprises an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) so designated for its wealth of both natural and cultural heritage. It is a key tourist destination in the south of England encompassing numerous historical, archaeological and environmental features and presents strong cultural associations with the rural and coastal landscape.

The Purbecks was selected specifically for the *sense of community* and of *special place* with which it is labelled as part of the AONB, and inclusive of its World Heritage Jurassic Coastline, is managed under themes of *special qualities*. At the heart of these, *tranquillity* is a key quality promoted as representing the quintessential image perceived of the English countryside.

Perhaps, unsurprisingly tranquillity tends to be a term used synonymously with 'calm', 'solitude', 'peace and quiet' to describe a *sense of place*, as much as the quality of experiencing a rural or protected area such as an AONB. Given the highly subjective nature of these terms, tranquillity, as a

sense of this place, is a concept that is in the eye, or indeed ear, nose, hands and mind, of the beholder. So, it would not be unreasonable to assume that rather than taking purely institutional interpretations on tranquillity, that the far deeper notion of consulting broadly with local communities, if not also visitors to the area, should/could, be pursued by local authorities.



Fig 1: Broadly Engaging with Tranquillity: Case Study area of Purbecks, Dorset.

BETP was designed specifically to capture the broadest and deepest range of views possible on the *sense of place* experienced, expected and assumed in this area. This meant that representatives of local governing authorities, parish councils, management agencies, community and user groups, residents in the area and visitors' views were equally included through a number of intensive consultations progressed in the area.



Figure 2: Identifying key features of place: Group F Workshop III.



Figure 3: Prioritising Participants' Views: Group G Workshop III.

Some 45,000 pieces of data resulted from analysing the 9,500 views collated. Of these 65% were able to be modelled in a Geographical Information System (GIS). All other views, primarily comprising descriptions of a state of mind or as abstract nouns, i.e. 'serenity', 'solitude' or 'peace and quiet', whilst not able to be modelled, were still incorporated in the overall interpretations of the models and maps that resulted.

To ensure the research team and local government officers remained as true as possible to the views originally conveyed, a series of road shows were scheduled. These enabled the BETP team to confirm with the wider public and project participants that the models and maps created, conveyed what they originally wanted to express in terms of their views on tranquillity, and ultimately that the *sense of special place* they believed most closely depicted their views, was being modelled.

Endorsement for the study

The BETP was led by two academics from the University of Winchester. The Principal Researcher specialised in community engagement in the planning and management of rural, protected areas and her colleague, in GIS. The project was funded through the Economic and Social Science Research Council, (ESRC) and supported by more than ten references from internationally renowned academics practicing in this field. The project was hosted by the University of Winchester and progressed in partnership with the GIS team of Dorset County Council and the team of the Dorset AONB. Our partners provided the most recent and local data possible to inform the base line models of the area on which participants' views were depicted as models and maps of tranquillity. The entire approach was founded on the principle that *every view counts*.

Since the project was completed in June 2015, a series of academic papers and practitioner reports are in preparation. These together with the robust nature of the study and its findings have been considered to contribute to 'material considerations' in the planning process. Recognition of these points has been demonstrated through a sheer number of national governing bodies approaching the BETP team as to how the project might be adapted to their area or in the implementation of their statutory duties. However the full use of the participants' views, in determining the *sense of place* in their area, is proving to be a challenge.

Quite simply, local consultations can lack *influence*!

Community planning policies endorse public consultation and in rural areas, are commonly considered to be broad in scope. There is also a view that there is an almost inherent sense of community in rural areas [19], suggesting that more residents could want to convey their views on their *special place* to local authorities who in turn, are enabled to consider the community's views in decisions taken. Where this is the case, an extensive body of knowledge in the practice of protected area management demonstrates that the formulation of policies and their implementation can be enhanced and are more likely to be effective [20,21,22,23,24,25,26].

The BETP is the largest consultation of its type in Dorset, perhaps in the South of England. It clearly was demonstrated to have resulted in academic terms, in a robust and rigorous study, building on equally robust work previously conducted in the north of England [27]. Inclusive of the publications being produced, a potential exists to use the work as a 'material consideration' in more general planning frameworks.

Such is considered the value of the BETP that many authorities have already shown interest in using its consultative framework and its findings to support their decisions on implementing their duties. However, in other cases, we have identified authorities who have pursued a cherry picking exercise of locals' views in order to support or amend their decisions taken for example, in the creation of their Local Plans. Having investigated a rationale for this selection process, it is clear that a dilemma can exist for local authorities. Namely, on the one hand they are charged to encourage local citizenship and community engagement in favour of supporting political drives towards localism. On the other hand, they are equally responsible for progressing at the local level, central government objectives in relation to for examples, housing targets or on renewable energy developments. Such objectives require space, and the *sense of place* revered by local people may not reconcile itself easily with such developments.

Such activities are an issue and difficult if not impossible to equate with authorities being able to demonstrate their understanding for what local communities consider to be their *sense of place*, comprising what can be seen, heard, felt, experienced and recalled. To take purely, for example, what can be heard as pejoratively affecting a sense of place, wholly ignores other features discovered in the BETP, that are considered more positively to enhance the community's views on their area in terms of what can be seen: a prime example concerns 'landscape' which is fundamentally a visual concept [28]. This could bring into question just how representative decisions taken by some authorities, can actually be when taken in the name of the local community who they serve.

Much has already been written on the traditional rational comprehensive planning approach and requirements for planners to take a far more collaborative approach, engaging in meaningful discussions with their public. We contend this thought process is at present, proving in some areas to be just that, a notion albeit admirable. As others have already reported, much more needs to be done in terms of place based policy making to provide some sense of freedom for local planners to perhaps feel able to genuinely engage with communities, allow them a degree of influence over decisions taken, in turn, genuinely empower local people to have their say in what they see and sense as their *special place*.

Total words 1,500

For more information on the *Broadly Engaging with Tranquillity Project* contact Dr Denise Hewlett 01962 826360 or visit www.winchester.ac.uk/tranquillity.

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