

Cap-a-Pie Presents

— THE —
TOWN MEETING:
A CASE STUDY



*“An excellent experience.
I felt lucky to be part of it.”*

Audience member

*“What just happened?!
So different, interesting
and engaging. Enjoyable
& thought provoking.”*

Audience member

*“it’s like when you flip
a coin, the moment
the coin is in the air is
the moment when you
know what outcome
you actually want.”*

North East Reviews

*“a curious and
adventurous piece...
happily nothing like
your average night
out in the theatre.”*

British Theatre Guide

THE TOWN MEETING: A CASE STUDY



Winner of the Sir Peter Hall Award for Wider Engagement
The Royal Town Planning Institute

This booklet provides an introduction into using theatre as an engagement method within town planning as developed by theatre company Cap-a-Pie and a researcher at Newcastle University Dr Paul Cowie.

The method outlined here is unique and offers an opportunity to engage communities in an empowering and entertaining way. Whilst not a 'How-to' manual it provides an overview of the method, some background to its development and use and finally some help and advice should you want to use this approach yourself.



The origins of the Town Meeting

Since April 2014 Dr Paul Cowie and Cap-a-Pie theatre company have been working together on a project which investigated how theatre can be used as a means of engaging communities in planning in a way which is beneficial to both planners and the community.

The first phase of the project involved creating a theatrical play that asked audiences to play the role of a community facing a major planning decision and provoked them into thinking about the consequences of that decision. The Town Meeting sees the audience cast as residents of a

fictional town that is in crisis. Assisted only by shambolic, but well meaning, planner Benjamin Rennold (played by actor Brad McCormick) the audience must make the biggest decision in the town's history and fight for its survival. The play has been performed in many community and theatre venues all over the country.

Through the use of theatre this research project has shed light on how communities react to external pressures and represent themselves. The project is co-investigated by audiences, Cap-a-Pie and Dr Paul Cowie. Findings from the research have so far informed Dr Paul Cowie's future work, changed how planning students are taught

at Newcastle University and helped the team create a new workshop which planning officers can use to consult on local plans and build relationships with their communities.

Cap-a-Pie and Dr Paul Cowie hope this pack is a useful guide to finding out more about The Town Meeting as well as giving insights into how theatre can be useful in your own work. You can also listen to a podcast about the show and audience reactions here www.soundcloud.com/capapie

Interview with Dr Paul Cowie

Dr Paul Cowie is a researcher in the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape at Newcastle University. He has been working with Cap-a-Pie since 2014 to create, perform and research The Town Meeting.

What were your motivations to work with Cap-a-Pie?

It was a mixture of curiosity and opportunity. The invitation to work with Cap-a-Pie came just as I was finishing a project investigating how communities undertake neighbourhood planning. Most studies are based on traditional case study methodologies which consist of finding a group and interviewing the key people. Using theatre to explore these issues seemed to be a great way of trying something new. It also has the benefit of being much more fun, for both the researcher and subjects, than traditional case study methods.

What have been the main challenges of the partnership and how has the project been successful?

The main challenge has been to retain the best aspects of theatre whilst at the same time ensuring the research has remained robust and rigorous such that it would be accepted as valid social science research. This has not always been easy. The project has progressed at a much faster pace than I thought it would. This has been largely down to the enthusiasm of everyone that has been involved which is great. However this has created its own problems as the theory has often lagged the practice. Issues such as data collection and ensuring a representative sample of the community is engaged have been issues to address.

The biggest success has been the reaction of the people who have attended the performances. They have shown how enthusiastic

people are about making meaningful decisions about their communities. In personal terms the performances has generated a wealth of research material that is still being worked on. More than that, the performance has hopefully inspired a few people to take a greater role in planning for the future of their community.

What's been the most unexpected thing you've found by doing The Town Meeting?

The most unexpected aspect of the project has been the power of a play to allow a group of strangers to come together and inhabit a fictional world. My biggest fear at the start of the project would be that people would not engage with the performance. Actually the problem for some of the performances has been to moderate some of the groups engagement with the fiction and remind them that it's 'just a play'. The intensity of the audience reaction to the fiction we created has been great and is one of the reasons why the project has altered the focus of the research. The play was originally designed to explore issues of representation and legitimacy in the way neighbourhood planning groups form and agree a structure. What was clear from the reaction of the audiences, was that this was not as important to the groups as was suggested in the academic literature. What was important was the issues of fairness and due process. This insight helped us greatly when it came to design the workshop engagement methods outlined in this booklet.

The Town Meeting workshop

The original play was deliberately provocative but even so the audience response was surprising. People got very emotionally invested in the fictitious town created by the play and very angry about the proposed planning decision. The show was great entertainment and generated some useful insights for Dr Paul Cowie's ongoing research on community planning but the team wondered if there was something more constructive that could be done.

Cap-a-Pie and Dr Paul Cowie began to consider whether a version of the play could be produced which would allow communities and planners to come together and co-produce a statutory plan for the community. The new version of the play therefore had a number of goals:

- To give participants a sufficient understanding of the statutory planning system;
- To highlight the limits of planning without restricting the ability of participants to think creatively of the issues affecting their community;
- To avoid the pitfalls of public consultation, dominance by those that shout loudest or by a single issue;
- Finally, to get more people from a wider variety of backgrounds involved in the process.

To develop the new workshop version of the play the team worked with Northumberland National Park Authority (NNPA). The NNPA was starting the process of renewing their local plan. The first stage of this process is to review the evidence and to produce an 'issue and options' document which set out the broad policy principles the NNPA think the local plan should include. This seemed like a perfect opportunity to test our how theatre could help generate material for a local plan.

Officers from NNPA, the team from Cap-a-Pie and Dr Paul Cowie worked together to create a new scenario - a planning application by a multi-national pharmaceutical company to locate a research and development laboratory on the outskirts of a rural market town. The town would be portrayed as suffering from classic rural problems of a declining economy, supporting an ageing population and loss of services. The new development would hold out the possibility of reinvigorating the local economy, attracting families to the town and more support for local services. The audience that came to the workshop would be placed "in role" as members of this fictitious town tasked with debating and deciding the future of their town.

In Autumn 2016 two test workshops were ran in NNPA. The response from attendees was extremely positive.

"I thought this was going to be rubbish to be honest but it was great!"
comment on the night

"We would just like to say that we thoroughly enjoyed the event in the village hall last Tuesday... it was a very thought provoking evening"
email from participant

The workshop has enabled planners from the NNPA to understand more about what is important to people in their local area, and potentially more importantly it has built bridges and understandings between planners and local communities.

Interview with Clive

Clive Coyne is the Head of Forward Planning at the Northumberland National Park Authority. In 2016 Clive hosted two The Town Meeting:Workshops.

What do you think the benefits are of using The Town Meeting: Workshop with communities?

I think the main benefit was that the interactive element helped to break down the traditional barriers between 'The Planning Authority' and the local community. The workshop encouraged positive discussions between the members of the community both amongst themselves and also with the Authority's Planners on a range of planning issues. The other benefit was that those who came along and participated said they enjoyed themselves. It was also good to get positive complimentary feedback.

Did you have expectations of how The Town Meeting: Workshop would work?

I was a bit unsure to begin with, interactive theatre was

something which we had never tried before. However, once we had held the first event it was clear that it would be a positive experience that would help boost public consultation on the Local Plan review.

What advice would you give to Planners thinking about using theatre?

I would advise them to give it a go, it is a great new positive way of consulting people about your local plan helping to break down those traditional barriers that sometimes make public consultation harder than it has to be.



How to create a Town Meeting to use with your own community

The next few sections give you some ideas the nuts and bolts of The Town Meeting: Workshop and what to bear in mind if you'd like to create your own version. If you have any questions or queries at any point please do get in touch with Cap-a-Pie on admin@cap-a-pie.co.uk

Synopsis of the workshop

Intro

We start with an introduction explaining what is about to happen, ie. that the audience is about to engage with a fictional scenario with an actor who will be in role. Timescales are mentioned here also.

The beginning

The actor enters in character and endows the audience with their role as townspeople of Little Rikjord. Throughout this section exercises that require the audience to join in are introduced such as drawing a picture of their favourite place in their fictional hometown. In Cap-a-Pie's experience these gentle exercises make audiences more comfortable about interacting with each other and participating.

Presentation

The actor then explains the details of the situation that is facing the town. In this instance, that a major pharmaceutical company wants to build a new research facility near the town. The presentation goes into more detail about the town (population, history etc) and talks about costs, timescales and the size of the new development.

Fish-bowling

Once they've received all the information about the situation, the audience are

asked to express their opinions on the new development. This is self-regulated and is done through the technique of 'fish-bowling' whereby only 3 people are in conversation at one time, but the make-up of those 3 people is constantly changing throughout the designated time period.

The situation from different angles

The workshop then moves away from soliciting opinions and asks the audience to work in groups to look at the situation objectively and from different angles. Each group is given a topic of concern for example, the economy, health, social or environment, and lists the positives and negatives of the development as it relates to their topic. These positives and negatives are then shared with the wider group.

Ranking

As one large group, the audience takes the positives and negatives shared earlier and creates two lists, one of positives, the other of negatives. At the top of the lists are the biggest positive of the development and the biggest negative of the development. This is about the group deciding what is most important to them. The discussion that group engages in at this point is often as important as the final list.

Voting

After the above exploration we ask the audience to make their

(secret) vote as to whether they want the development to go ahead. The result is shared with them and the workshop comes to a close.

Post show discussion

After the fictional part of the workshop is over the facilitator works with the group to apply what they have generated in the fictional town into their own localisty. This can be done, for instance, by re-ordering/ re-generating the lists of positives and negatives.

Some things to bear in mind....

At the crux of a workshop like this is devising a workable scenario to present to an audience. What is a situation that has clear positives and clear negatives and can be succinctly explained? There also has to be something at stake for the participants - in the pharmaceutical scenario the future economic survival of the town could be at stake.

One thing to remember is that you are creating fiction,

- The size or location of the made-up village, town or city does not have to exactly match that of the locations where the workshop is delivered.
- Having something slightly unusual or absurd as the scenario allows people to relax and enjoy the exercise, as they are clearly not in their 'real life'.

- Don't feel that your fictional scenario has to obviously reflect the local concerns or environment. You'll be surprised at how people make links from the most unbelievable of scenarios to their own lives.

The participatory exercises are very important, especially in the beginning. In this example we begin by asking the audience to give something a rating between 1 and 10, then they're asked to draw a couple of pictures and work together to draw a map of the centre of their town. The whole process is laddered for them so by the time they're asked to fully participate of their own accord they're ready to get stuck in.

Cap-a-Pie use a trained actor in their workshops, but a facilitator who simply asks the audience to imagine the scenario can deliver the session and then lead the audience through the exercises as normal.

Other resources

Mantle of the expert is an educational tool where participants approach a scenario as if they are experts: www.mantleoftheexpert.com/about-moe/introduction/what-is-moe

Philosophy 4 Children does have 'children' in the title but it can apply to all age groups and is way for participants to talk about things that matter to them:

www.p4c.com

Theatre companies in your area may be well placed to provide support to create a workshop such as this as well as performers/facilitators to deliver it.

Cap-a-Pie have extensive experience collaborating with researchers and external organisations to create bespoke workshops. Please get in touch if you'd like more information or to discuss a project.

Get in touch with Cap-a-Pie:

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Show and workshop credits

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the company in collaboration with Dr Paul Cowie from Newcastle University, as part of an ongoing research project.

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