



Welcome to our Future (Local Agenda 21)

Welcome to our Future (WTOF) is a community owned charity and company limited by guarantee. It was set up in 1998 as a result of the Local Agenda 21 forum in Herefordshire and Worcestershire after calls for an independent organisation to take forward LA21 in the counties. It's board is made up of representatives from the environmental and community/ voluntary sectors, local authorities, and from business. Due to the eclectic make-up of the membership and the board, WTOF is in a position to bridge the gap between the different sectors. It has one foot in the 'top-down local authority camp' and one foot in the 'more lateral grass-roots camp'. This provides WTOF with an opportunity to play a linking role in local strategic partnerships.

Due to the number of partners involved with WTOF and the early high expectations for the charity there are both positive and negative aspects to WTOF's progress to date. From their experience of LSPs and community planning to date, they draw the following points:

- **Challenging power:** If the processes are really to be working towards a *community* strategy, community and voluntary sectors need to have genuine responsibility. Many LSP boards have very tokenistic involvement from these sectors. Effective working relationships will be dependant on the capacity of those 'at the top' to understand and work with community groups and to manage a participative process. This will involve moving beyond practices for listening and responding, to some devolution of power.
- **Valuing involvement:** WTOF works towards more involvement of stakeholders at all levels of decision making. However their experience is that community representation (by groups and individuals) tends to trail off as the process goes on. All except those experienced in partnership and strategy work tend to get frustrated and feel undervalued. They feel that there is still much to be done to encourage people to get involved, and make it easy for them to do. However, much needs to be done to make sure that their involvement is worthwhile to them, and valued by other organisations.
- **Independent facilitation and recording:** WTOF stresses the importance of running effective meetings, where genuine involvement from all sectors is encouraged and valued, where challenging views are welcomed, and where participants feel that there is no bias to the outcomes of the meeting. They strongly recommend employing external and professional facilitators to manage and record meetings.
- **Holistic approaches?** WTOF feel that many community strategy processes have got off to a very good start by recognising the importance of holistic thinking and sustainability. However they feel that processes have floundered when it has come to putting this into practice – evolving strategies seem to be taking a more traditional 'economic' perspective.

- **Funding for community involvement:** The WTOF model of working seems to be valuable within LSPs and community strategy processes, as it forms the link between the formalised sectors, and the community sector. However there are questions about future funding. WTOF received pump-prime funding for 3 years from the local authorities. It does have an independent income stream through its management and distribution of landfill tax credits on behalf of Severn Waste Services, however it has found that this has served to take staff time away from its core work.
- **Ongoing learning:** Much time has been invested developing the organisational structure and in networking and creating partnerships, although to the outside observer there appears to have been little action. This behind the scenes work has developed WTOF into a viable tool to be used by anybody or group with an agenda of sustainable development. To test this idea WTOF is beginning a series of working groups (Creativity Groups). These groups now meet about once a month and provide WTOF with the community representation and integrity to justifiably participate in LSPs, either as a partner or as a tool to engage communities in the planning process.

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