



European Union
European Regional Development Fund

MP4 Case study report

Place-keeping in Aarhus Municipality, Denmark: Improving green space management by engaging citizens



Andrej Christian Lindholst
Forest and Landscape
University of Copenhagen, Denmark
May 2010



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Introduction

Since 2009, Aarhus municipality has developed and implemented a new policy for the place-keeping of public green spaces. The policy is officially called the 'park development plan 2009-19' – or the 'park plan' for short. The park plan consists of three levels; an overarching *park program*, a *strategy* outlining a set of common objectives and finally separate *action plans* for each local community in the municipality. The park plan aims to provide green space services of high value for the local communities. The park plan is expected to be fully implemented between 2009 and 2019 with a total of 24 action plans. The policy formulates a range of broad objectives and strategic focal areas. The implementation of action plans for local communities is based on a high level of citizen engagement. This includes the development of local visions and setting the priorities for new investments and maintenance levels. The Aarhus case study tells the story of how community engagement with supportive policies can improve place-keeping, with reference to three pilot projects where the action plans were implemented in the communities of Hasle, Harlev-Fremlev and Lystrup-Elsted-Elev.

Context

Aarhus is the second largest city in Denmark with more than 300,000 inhabitants living in the city and the surrounding areas. Aarhus is the main city in the region of East Jutland and is a centre for higher education, industry, transport, commerce and business. The centre is surrounded by suburbs and villages which are relatively well-connected to the centre by roads, cycle and footpaths and railways. For administrative purposes, the municipality is divided into 24 local communities. The population is relatively young and growing fast. It is projected that the population of Aarhus municipality will be more than 370,000 by 2050. This puts demands on space for new residential and commercial areas as well as improving the transport infrastructure. The growth scenario is an immense challenge for current city planning efforts.

Green spaces

The city centre is located by the sea and surrounded by water and areas of nature, forest and agriculture. The green infrastructure (see Figure 1) is already made up of distinctive features, but planning efforts aim to improve the interconnections between these by establishing new forests, lakes and nature areas. A range of parks and squares constitute an 'inner green circle' that surrounds the city centre. A range of nature and landscape areas will constitute an 'outer green circle' that 'encapsulates' the city centre and the inner suburbs. A range of green wedges will make interconnections between the two circles and other recreational areas. The municipal plan supports a range of green wedges going out from the centre. New green routes and corridors are planned to improve the interconnections. The city council is currently implementing an ambitious and municipality-wide afforestation plan that will contribute both to the creation of new green spaces and improved interconnections between existing green spaces. An important objective for the city council is to maintain and strengthen a functioning integration between the urban and rural parts of the region.

Green space planning and management

As a regional growth centre, Aarhus is a striving and relatively wealthy city. However, increasing demands on public services, partly due to demographic change and limited access to revenues through taxation, require the city council to continuously prioritize its budgets. Provision of parks services is not statutory in Denmark and has had a relatively low status on the political agenda both

nationally and locally. In general, it has therefore been hard for park departments to argue against cuts in their budgets compared to budget cuts in statutory and/or politically higher profile services. For the park department in Aarhus, this has been no exception.

Planning and management of the different parts of the green infrastructure in Aarhus Municipality is internally divided between a total of seven departments. The park department is responsible for council-owned parks and green spaces. Parks and green spaces are divided into the four categories: *main parks, local parks, small parks and green space corridors and recreational landscapes.*

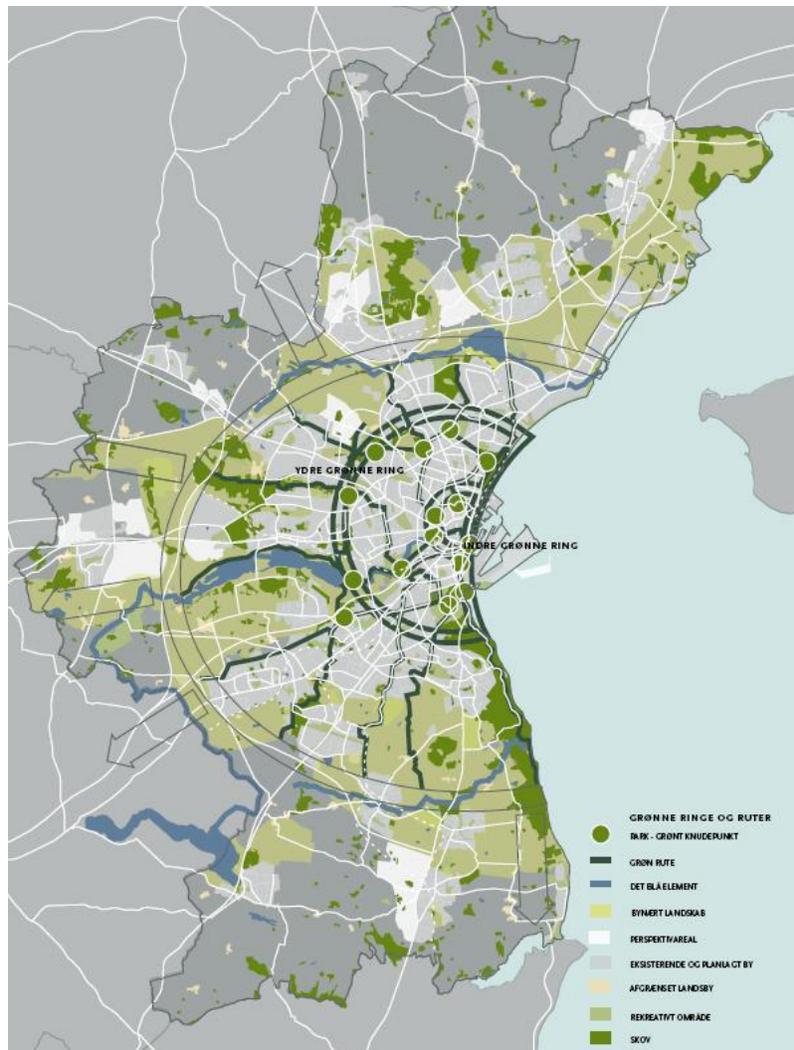


Figure 1. The green infrastructure in Aarhus Municipality.

Green space maintenance

The city council has already implemented a comprehensive inventory of their green spaces and maintenance levels are identified for all green space types. Maintenance is divided into four types or levels and each area is assigned one maintenance type. The maintenance types are: 1) 'Garden-like' where maintenance of green space function is more essential than costs, 2) 'Park-like' where function in some degree is more essential than cost, 3) 'Park-like with nature features' where cost in some degree is more essential than function, and 4) 'Nature-like' where cost is more essential than

function. Although many Danish municipalities contract out services, the city council in Aarhus has chosen to provide the bulk of maintenance services in-house through its own organization.

Over the years, the park department has experienced declining budgets for maintenance and investments. In 2006, budgets reached a level where maintenance in some areas had to be partly cancelled in the growth season. It was also necessary to drop the standards for all four maintenance types. As a consequence, some areas received only very low levels of maintenance. Grass grew high and the level of complaints increased significantly which led the park department to reallocate resources to only the most critical maintenance operations.

A ‘red’ circle

In retrospect, the prior situation of green space management in Aarhus can be characterized as a circle of decline due to self-reinforcing dynamics between politicians, green space management and citizens. The ‘red’ circle in Figure 2 illustrates the ‘vicious’ dynamics. The initial decline in budgets was firstly handled by optimizing the use of resources. However, keeping services levels within a declining budget can only be handled to a certain point through optimized use of resources. After a certain point, quality and service levels will decrease and attract more complaints from the public.

In turn, management then must focus on catching up and spend more time on addressing faults.

Management time for strategic development and focusing on service improvements effectively drops down the priority list. The consequence is a lack of policies focused on improvements and a declining awareness among all stakeholders of the potential values of green space services.

The vicious dynamics represented in the red circle is a slow incremental process that can take place over a longer time period. In the day-to-day routine, stakeholders respond in rational, but reactive ways to the given situation without an understanding of the resulting collective outcome that these individual responses.



Figure 2. The ‘red’ circle. Illustration of vicious dynamics between politicians, managers and citizens in a ‘reactive’ mode of green space management.

The Project

The park development plan

Despite the shoe-string budget for green space maintenance reaching an all-time low in 2006, the park department has since 2007 been developing and implementing a new policy for improved long-term maintenance and investments in local communities. A vision of a ‘living park: open to the users’ is at the core of the policy. The vision posits green spaces as a vital part of the ‘good life’ for people and biodiversity. The policy (the park development plan) has three levels. The *park program* outlines general principles and objectives for park management. The *strategy* defines a set of focal areas for

action, time frames and methods. Local *action plans* identify needs and actions for green spaces in local communities. The park program and the strategy outline the overall framework and objectives. The action plans are expected to be implemented gradually by 2019, when all 24 local communities are expected to have elaborated separate action plans. The timetable for the park development plan is shown in Table 1. At the broadest scale, the policy aims to strengthen the green identity of Aarhus and contribute to the realization of the good life in green environments through collaboration between the municipality and the citizens. The involvement and support of the citizens is therefore considered vital to realize the policy.

Table 1. Timetable for the Park Development Plan

2007	Draft development plan
2008-9	Implementation of three pilots in local communities
2010	City council approved the park development plan.
2010-12	Implementation of two action plans.
2019	Implementation of action plans in all 24 local communities.

A rough guide to the park policy

Overall focal areas for action in the park development plan:

- Developing the potential
- Preservation of parks
- Multiple use of parks
- Accessibility and proximity
- Connections and paths
- Dialogue and citizen involvement
- Quality in experiences and maintenance
- Synergy, integration and collaboration

The primary means of citizen engagement and involvement are:

- E-governance through internet-based tools for sharing information and feedback
- Involvement of local boards as entry point in local communities, formulation of action plans and sustained dialogue
- Workshops and workgroups with special themes and focal points for broad involvement
- Internal and external partnerships as a means of setting up new collaborations sustaining the overall policy

The content of each action plan provides the:

- Explanation of the overall policy framework
- Explanation of the plans and framework for the local community
- Explanation of the policy processes and important decisions, events and debates
- Relating of the content of the local action plan to other municipal plans and policies
- Prioritization of a set of new actions and investment options
- Identification of partnerships and collaborations
- Overview of available green spaces in the local community

- Aims for landscape / grounds maintenance
- Set of appendices and supporting maps and data



Figure 3. A soft recreational landscape in the outskirts of Hasle.

Integrating place-making and place-keeping

Normal operational procedures for green space maintenance in the municipality were based on maintenance plans. These plans did not emphasise any 'development' of green spaces, but specified how existing green space had to be kept in the same state over time. The new action plans were to be implemented at the operational level and thus represented a new perspective where development not only became integrated in maintenance operations, but where place-making became integrated with place-keeping.

Governance and Engagement



Figure 4. The location of the 'pilot' communities.

Three pilots

During 2008-09, the park department tested the viability of the park development plan by implementing action plans as pilots for three different local communities. The action plans have been piloted in the local communities of Hasle, Harlev-Fremlev and Lystrup-Elsted-Elev (Figure 4). This pilot process of conducting the action plans meant that a high degree of the decision-making for resource allocation of the City Council budgets covering maintenance, investments and development was delegated to the participants in the local community.

Engagement processes

The processes in the three pilots were primarily organized around a workgroup especially set up for delivering the action plans as part of the park development plan. The organisation of actors and stakeholders is shown in Figure . The municipality has initiated an internal 'green forum' to ensure

internal coordination between all participating departments and managers across the individual processes in each local community. The work groups in each pilot have a central role as responsible for coordinating and managing the processes.

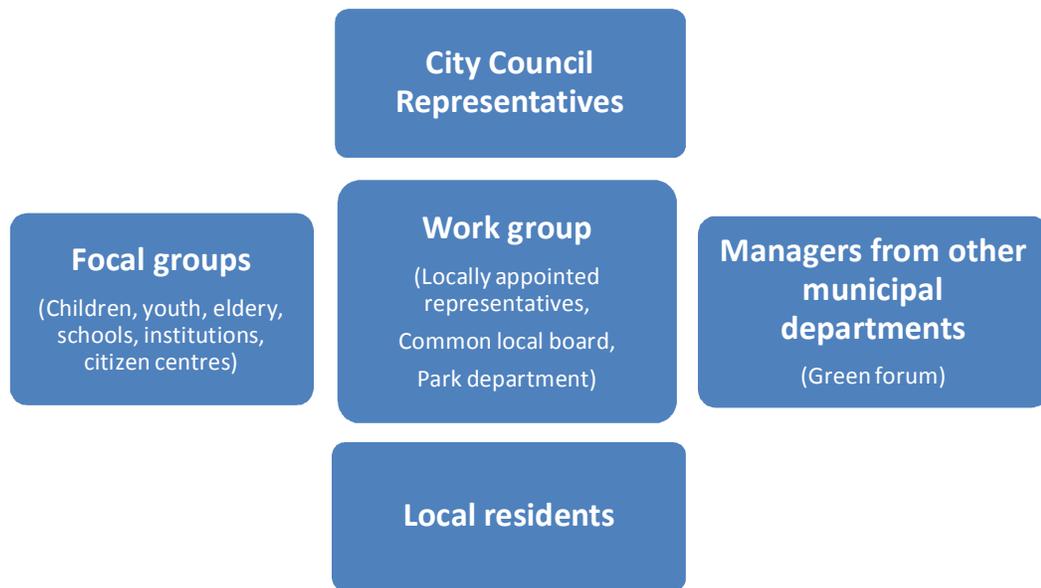


Figure 5. The organization of the main actors and stakeholders in the pilot processes.

Engagement in each pilot was organized as a series of different public meetings and workshops held locally. A part of the workshops included on-site walks, where dialogue could emerge more spontaneously and with direct access to the relevant green spaces. The starting point for the processes was the municipal vision of the 'living park' which was a theme for elaborating and discussing local ideas and visions about what could be done with green spaces in the relevant local community. Following this initial visionary work the work groups started to detail the content of the action plans through a process that included consultations with local focal groups and dialogues and discussion with local residents. The work groups were also responsible for the finalization of the action plans. The processes took about 6 months for each action plan. Based on the action plans, the City Council started to implement selected parts of the plan while at the same time offering possibilities for setting up partnerships for individual projects and actions. The overall park plan requires the action plans to be evaluated and revised annually.

The elaboration of action plans in each of the three pilots has been tailored to the needs of the local community and thus different themes emerged through the implementation of each plan. The 24 local communities in Aarhus are different regarding location, green spaces and residents. The communities range from dense inner-city areas to suburbs located on the rural-urban fringe.

The three local communities where the first three action plans were implemented had distinct characteristics regarding the composition of citizens, residential areas, green spaces and the interconnections within the overall green infrastructure. For example, the composition of housing areas in the local communities of Hasle and Lystrup-Elsted-Harlev differed in important aspects. In Hasle, some residential areas are made up of social housing with a mixed residential population including immigrants, lower income groups and groups on social welfare. This kind of housing area is a challenge for how groups in the local community engagement. The more homogenous residential

areas with one-family housing in the suburb of Lystrup-Elsted-Harlev had a more resourceful citizenry that could be more easily engaged. The process behind each action plan therefore differed substantially in the ways citizens could be engaged.

The potential for and type of green space development in each local community differed as well. In some local communities, green spaces are sparse and mainly located in dense housing areas. However, the available green space can be of a relatively high quality such as an older well-designed city park in the local district of Hasle. In the two other local communities, green spaces are more generously provided, but will at the same time represent more modest recreational values e.g. areas with few paths and facilities and vegetated mainly with grass.

Comparison of debates and actions in three local communities		
Hasle	Lystrup-Elsted-Elev	Harlev-Fremlev
Safety	Exercise and play for all	A local community with a focus on social activities in parks and open spaces
Opportunities for exercise and play	A new movement park	A strong local community
Inclusiveness	Improved connections between green spaces	New space for events and social gatherings
Better interconnections	Welcoming and clean green spaces	Special focus on the needs of children and youth
Supporting green spaces and facilities	Grazing for animals	Focus on meeting the needs for local involvement in projects and activities
Clean parks	A landmark for the local community (a watch tower)	
Prioritization of a local park as centre for play and exercises		

Figure 6. Highlights from the debates on the potentials of parks in three local districts in Aarhus Municipality.

The resulting debates and actions for the three local communities were similar in some respects, but noteworthy differences emerged as well (Figure 6). The possibility for improved outdoor activities such as exercise and play were sought after in all three local communities. However, safety issues and anti-social behaviour were only high on the agenda in the inner-city district of Hasle. In the district of Harlev-Fremlev, located at a good distance from the city centre, actions and facilities supporting a sense of local identity and socializing were high on the agenda. The sense of local identity was also strong in the local district of Lystrup-Elsted-Elev where a landmark was requested in the form of a watch tower.

Community building

The debates and actions not only revealed the unique identity of each local community; they also created a medium for unfolding and building a sense of community identity. In the engagement processes where common objectives were identified and agreed upon, a sense of identity and belonging to the community were reported to evolve among participants. This also included more proactive aspects. In one local community the participants started their own initiative to set up new visions for what they wanted from their future green spaces.

Changing the agenda

It was of importance for park managers to change the dialogue in the engagement processes from the usual focus on standard complaints (e.g. low maintenance levels for grass-cutting) to broader issues about the visions for services and priorities for future investments and maintenance e.g. the dialogue raised questions about what the community could and would do with and in their green spaces. Through this change a new understanding was reported to emerge among citizens in local communities of the park department’s financial and organizational circumstances for providing services. For example, in the pilot of Lystrup-Elsted-Elev, the first public meeting was well-attended by people who expressed dissatisfaction with maintenance levels i.e. standard complaints on grass-cutting standards. Although this issue was high on the initial agenda, the agenda was changed in the process from negative ‘complaints outlets’ toward more positive dialogues about services themselves and the potentials for change and development. The focus for discussion and agenda that was offered by the park department was ‘limited’ to how the municipal-wide vision of the living park could be realized in the local district. The trick was ‘simply’ to exclude standard complaints from the discussion at organized meetings and workshops and focus on the potentials. This created some initial conflicts and opposition, but at the same time laid out the framework for a creative and constructive process.

Changing dynamics: from ‘red’ to ‘green’

In the course of implementing the park development plan at the level of elaborating action plans in the local communities, the park department experienced positive dynamics between the policymakers, the local administration and the citizens. The ‘green’ circle in Figure 7 illustrates this positive dynamic. The visible results from poor maintenance levels

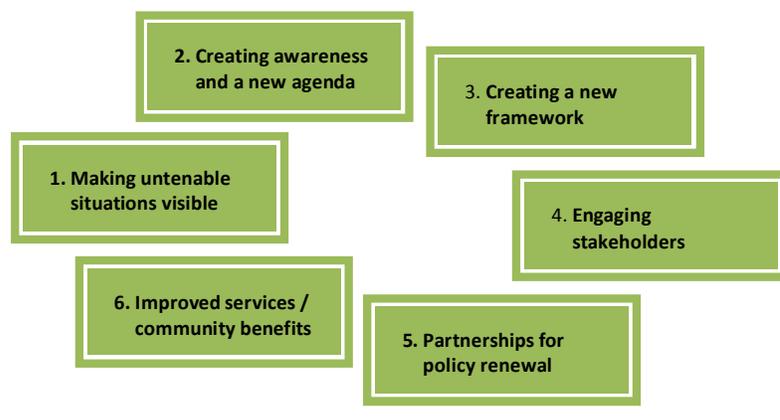


Figure 7. Illustration of the positive dynamics between politicians, managers and citizens in a ‘proactive’ mode of green space management.

due to restricted budgets have initially increased public awareness of the situation for providing park services. The involvement and engagement of local communities through action plans focusing on positive change and a closer fit between user preferences and maintenance efforts have transformed citizen responses from complaints to constructive inputs. City councillors have in turn responded positively to the increased engagement in the local communities by reinforcing their support to the park development plan. The changing dynamics have from a wider perspective also opened up the debate for other green space objectives, such as environmental sustainability, health, outdoor-education, climate adaptation and mitigation alongside provision of more traditional recreational facilities and services. The department has only started to implement policies and methods for these ‘new’ services.

The department in Aarhus has successfully initiated a break away from the dynamics highlighted in the red circle and a move towards the positive dynamics in the green circle. However, there still remain substantial challenges to avoid a return to the red circle dynamics. In particular, the municipality still needs to deliver sustained improvements in service levels and community benefits on the ground (Figure 7, box 6). The new policy framework and its implementation were also only in an experimental stage and could be improved. These improvements include better integration and coordination of green space planning with other municipal plans and urban policies within a more comprehensive model for place-making and place-keeping.

Citizen engagement as a 'selling point'

Citizen engagement has become a major part of the 'story' in the park development plan. Citizen engagement has in general a broad appeal and support for the city council and the council has a set of comprehensive guidelines for citizen involvement. The guidelines are defined in a so-called 'Aarhus model' and have been in operation in the municipality since 2004. The guidelines aim to provide opportunities for public participation and dialogue in the planning process, providing citizens with necessary information to achieve greater mutual understanding and acceptance of decisions. The park development plan followed the general guidelines but took the level of citizen engagement a step further. This step has included a more interactive model of citizen involvement. The novelty in this context is a step away from the traditional council-led approach towards the adoption of more collaborative partnership approaches. This has been successfully demonstrated and further development of the Aarhus model has contributed to positive awareness about the needs for green space services among city councillors.

Finance

Finance for both maintenance and investment was allocated through traditional public sources i.e. tax-financed budgets allocated by the city council. The park development plan envisioned new sources of funding as a part of the action plans. Potential sources for alternative funding for investments were identified as a part of the plans including alternative sources of private funding. This opened up opportunities for active citizens seeking to promote projects in their local parks. Involvement of volunteer work was also a part of the overall park plan, however volunteer work had only become integrated in maintenance operation to a minor degree in the three pilots.

Future model innovations

After completing the three pilots, the park department expected that new action plans vary slightly. This is partly due to: a) the different needs and requirements in each local community; b) the learning the involved staffs get from each experience; c) the need to optimise and coordinate the use of resources across administrative borders; and, d) the needs and potential for innovating further the policy framework and engagement processes. Future model innovations are therefore envisioned to include improved coordination and collaboration both internally and externally that can secure the positive dynamics of the green circle and thereby reach and sustain a new level of service standards.

Evaluation

By the end of 2009, the park development plan was still at an early stage of the overall process. Three pilots were implemented and, based on these experiences, the city council is expected to

approve the continuation of the implementation of the park development plan. In 2010-12, further two actions plans are expected to be implemented.

Issues, challenges and lessons learnt

The implementation of the park development plan has revealed a range of issues and challenges that must be addressed and taken into account in the future.

Legal matters can limit the scope for delegation of decision to local communities and may bureaucratize collaboration with citizen groups. One example of this can be seen in the first three action plans where the challenge arose of addressing safety and liability issues in a skate park proposed by the local community. The local community alone would not be able to carry out a project through volunteer work designed to construct their 'own' new skate park in compliance with legal requirements. However, a joint project between local residents and the relevant departments (mainly the legal office and planning department within the municipality) would result in slow progress and potentially halt the enthusiasm and engagement that normally underlie volunteer work.

Addressing habits and entrenched norms was another key challenge. Citizens are typically not fully aware of what they are allowed to do in – or can do with their parks. For example, the possibility of gaining permission to have private parties in public parks was not known by citizens in the pilots. The park planners are also not fully aware of what they can do with green spaces. For the plan planners, this was not a question of imagery about the potential but more about the perceived limitations of what the planning system may accommodate within well-known organizational and resource limitations. A fixed understanding for both sets of stakeholders of what a green space or park can or should be may limit the potential for what these areas could be. One important lesson learnt from the engagement process was the experience of an increased mutual awareness of all participants in the process. New horizons for the potentials of parks emerged among participants.

The limited budgets for maintenance and investment formed another key challenge. The action plans helped identify a set of potential investment projects. However, if these – or some of these – are not realized, the positive benefits from the process may be lost and the overall positive momentum may come to a halt. The engagement of citizens in a positive way and the improved awareness from city councillors made support for maintenance and investments more likely, but no guarantee can be made in a political system where the provision of green spaces is not statutory. In this situation, the allocation of city council budgets is highly dependent on the political capital (i.e. votes) that alternative decisions and actions may generate. The action plans created a good platform where such capital may be secured and service of real value could be created for both local communities and the democratically elected representatives.

There may also be limits to the willingness among citizens to be engaged. One salient question that became visible in especially the Hasle pilot was the challenge of engaging diverse and marginalized residents living in social housing areas. In such areas there may be a lack of interest and tradition for involvement with authorities and this increases the 'engagement challenge' in such areas. From the viewpoint of providing equitable public service provisions (i.e. accessible to all members of society), this constitutes a problem if the authorities are only able to support some local groups to represent other local groups due to their differences in both resources and willingness to engage. Another question is the need to increase citizens' knowledge if they are to make competent decisions as part

of a model of governance characterized by a high degree of delegation of decision-making to the resident.

Supportive factors

A range of supportive factors for citizen engagement for improved place-keeping was identified in the Aarhus. First, the drive for improved citizen engagement was in accordance with the city councils general policies and beliefs. Second, the team of park planners possessed a mix of expertise and talent including both process management and more traditional expert knowledge. Third, the set-up of the process created awareness on the overall situation for the scope of service provision in both the local communities and among city councillors.

A trade-off: alternative mixes of outcome and process values

The case of Aarhus shows that the processes of involving citizens can involve benefits such as:

- increased interest and awareness about services among internal and external stakeholders, especially regarding political support and citizen expectations
- sharing of information and potential to develop a new understanding of services
- the potential of green spaces, sustained local identity and community building
- decrease in citizen complaints
- a better match between local preferences and maintenance and investment decisions.
- prospects for getting access to new resources e.g. volunteer work or alternative funding for investments.

There are however disadvantages associated with community engagement. It is a time-consuming and costly process. The benefits and costs of citizen engagement may be evaluated against alternative uses of organizational resources. In this case resources could alternatively be allocated directly to investments and maintenance budgets through the normal planning system.

This example illustrates a broader dilemma in public sector management between a focus on so-called 'process' values e.g. legitimacy and acceptance and 'output' values e.g. provision of services. The 'right' mix of output and process values cannot be decided upon independent of the situational context. It must be dealt with by management within the specific context of each situation. In an output-based perspective centred on efficient service provision e.g. lowering costs, citizen engagement is often considered to be an added cost.

The case study of Aarhus demonstrates a successful example of organizing improvements in place-keeping through community engagement. The case study shows how positive dynamics at the local level may emerge in bottom-up processes framed through a supporting policy. A crucial factor in this movement is the need for management to understand the thinking, actions and needs of other actors in the system i.e. the need to accommodate a more holistic view on the interplay between management, the local community and the political level.

Format of this report

This report is based on the findings from a series of face-to-face in-depth interviews carried out with the Landscape architect/ project manager and the Architect/ Consultant Landscape Architect at Aarhus Municipality, who granted permission for MP4 members to use their responses in this report. These interviews were semi-structured and conducted using the question schedule used in the data collection for all the case studies. In addition, the sources of secondary data which provided the contextual information are referenced in the footnotes. The photographs are reproduced with permission.

Glossary

Place-making: creating high quality places that people want to visit, experience and enjoy. It implies a people-centred approach which emphasises designing spaces that promote health, wellbeing and happiness. Such spaces engender a sense of belonging and connection for those who use them.

Place-keeping: relates to maintaining the qualities and benefits – social, environmental and economic – of places through long-term management. The management required to maintain these qualities and benefits, the approach adopted and the timescale will depend on the ‘place-making’ aims, the available resources and the life span of the ‘place’.

Partnership: is defined as agreed shared responsibility between public, private and community sectors. It is a relationship which, in this context, is normally formed between governmental and non-governmental sectors – i.e. it is a manifestation of governance relationships.

Engagement: is a cross-cutting issue which describes successful models of working with communities and encouraging appropriate use. Engagement is an aspect of governance particularly relevant in forms of participatory governance and is intrinsic to the concept of ‘governance’ as defined below.

Governance: relates to the relationship between and within government and non-governmental forces. The term implies wider participation in decision-making than representative democracy or other forms of government, recognising a wider range of actors other than the state, and allowing for varying governance contexts and processes.

Finance: describes financial models for efficient long-term management.

Policy: is discussed within the context of embedding best practice into spatial planning and other policy.

Valuation: describes the economic impacts of improvements to open spaces, but also relates to wider socio-economic and environmental benefits.

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More information

For more information about this case study, contact Christian on CHLI@life.ku.dk