

North Norfolk District Council
Coastal Planning Workshop

Observations and Reflections



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Prepared by: Penny Walker
Dialogue by Design
Ambassador House, Brigstock Road,
Thornton Heath, Surrey CR7 7JG

Telephone: office - 0208 683 6602
Email: facilitators@dialoguebydesign.com
Website: www.dialoguebydesign.net

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1. Introduction

This report draws on the observations and reflections of the Dialogue by Design facilitation team, and has been prepared at the request of North Norfolk District Council (NNDC).

Our impression is that the Coastal Strategy Team of NNDC wanted to organise a day which would give stakeholders a chance to learn more about the process of developing the CMP, and enable them to inform the CMP at a very early stage, before the first draft is produced. The team was keen that the day should enable people to express their views and identify issues important to them, as well as discussing the overall approach to managing coastal change, and the aims and values which they would like NNDC to bear in mind when drafting the CMP.

The views of participants at the workshop (as expressed in evaluation forms and other written contributions) have helped to inform the facilitation team's perspectives, but they were not specifically invited to contribute to or review drafts of this report. A summary of the evaluation forms is included as an appendix to the workshop report.

The aim of the report is to inform NNDC's further stakeholder engagement around the Coastal Management Plan (CMP).

2. Stakeholder analysis

NNDC is keen to engage widely with residents, business people and others with an interest in the future of the North Norfolk coast and its communities. NNDC went through a process, with DbyD, of identifying the kinds of groups and organisations which might have an interest in the CMP. For those groups which had not been in touch with the Coastal Strategy Team before, contact details were sought. The team spent a lot of time tracking down the right people and ensuring that they had been invited.

This section considers who came along to the event and who was missing, their level of existing engagement and understanding, and questions of perceived legitimacy.

2.1 Spread of interest groups and communities of place

The spread of stakeholders represented was generally pretty good, with some weak areas which could be targeted for special attention during the development of the CMP.

Age profile

- Given the long-term future under discussion, it was good to have a young person there who was confident enough to take part in discussions. For this work, it is especially important to have a good spread of ages.

- We did not collect demographic information. A purely visual assessment suggests that the majority of those present were older people.
- The suggestions gathered on the day indicated that the 18 - 25 age group, the 25 - 40 age group and people from a school pupil forum or similar body should be involved.

Types of organisations

- The day was designed to give a voice to parish councils and non-statutory interest groups, rather than to larger-scale levels of local government or to bodies like the Environment Agency and Natural England. People from these latter bodies who attended were primarily there to listen, and to answer specific questions or points where appropriate.
- Of the 50 delegates who were not from these larger-scale levels of government, 22 were from parish or town councils.
- The remainder were representing conservation, heritage and environmental groups including those specifically focusing on coastal matters (8), partnership organisations (7) businesses or business groups (6), educational institutions (3) and others.
- Comments from participants on the day suggested additional local heritage groups to involve (e.g. local Victorian and Georgian societies), and that the police should be involved, given their role in flood warnings and emergency response.

Geographical spread

- Based on the names of the organisations which participants supplied:
 - Very few non-coastal parish councils were represented.
 - Most coastal parishes had someone there (either from the parish council, or from a geographically-specific interest group), but not all.
 - There were some people from parish councils and geographically-specific groups from western parishes. The bulk of participants from groups with a geographically-specific name were from the Sheringham to Cromer area and places further East and South.

2.2 Spread of knowledge and prior engagement

Some participants were very well informed about coastal issues and the various processes underway to respond to and manage them. Others were not so well informed. This sometimes led to frustrating conversations. As the process of developing the CMP continues, it will be important to help people develop their knowledge and to understand what has already happened to get things to this point.

What is a CMP and why have one?

- Some of this relates to confusion about the role of a CMP, the impact it is likely to have on other district-wide policies and plans, and individual planning decisions. This is understandable, given that CMPs are non-statutory documents and very few of them have been created, so there is little previous experience to draw on.
- There is also a lack of clarity about the weight it will carry with bodies other than NNDC, e.g. the Environment Agency, Natural England, Norfolk County Council, Go East. Since

CMPs are a new type of plan being pioneered by NNDC, this uncertainty goes with the territory.

- This 'fact of life' may lead to a lack of confidence in the usefulness of a CMP, and thus to a lower level of engagement with it. Clear information about the likely impact of the CMP may help to counter this, and should be provided to stakeholders and the public.

Technical information

- There is a need to provide more information (either in writing, or through face-to-face communication, or using other media) before the next steps in the engagement process.
- There may be a role for more deliberative events, where stakeholders discuss evidence, options and their needs and concerns with experts who are there to help inform the deliberations.
- Stakeholder comments on the day mentioned an appreciation of the input from the technical experts on coastal engineering matters (the options for defences, and their likely impact on the coast, cliffs, beaches and low-lying areas, costs) and climate change.
- Some participants commented that more technical information needs to be more widely available, and not just electronically (as this makes it hard for people who do not have internet access).

Trust and confidence in experts

- In doing so, the challenge will be to continue to build trust in the accuracy of the information and those who are providing it. Experience with previous processes, including that used to develop the Shoreline Management Plans, has exacerbated the natural tendency for people to question the competency and objectivity of those providing expert advice and information, when they are not comfortable with the analysis and conclusions. It may be advisable to involve key stakeholders in drawing up the brief for and selecting consultants who will produce expert information provided to inform consultees - or peer reviewing it prior to publication.
- Particular topics where there is mistrust and uncertainty include:
 - ⇒ Economic information related to the cost-benefit analysis which informed the SMPs.
 - ⇒ Uncertainty arising from the long timescales under consideration, and the likely impact of climate change over those timescales.
 - ⇒ Different levels of confidence in and interpretations of the evidence, and different views about the conclusions to draw from it, in relation to dredging.
 - ⇒ Different perspectives on the desirability and effectiveness of relocating man-made and semi-natural features like particular buildings and wildlife habitats.

Engaging with different perspectives

- On the day, a number of stakeholders commented that they had benefited from hearing a range of different perspectives and views, and from recognising that not everyone sees things in the same way.

2.3 Perceived legitimacy and perceived interest

Another theme which we noticed, weaker but nonetheless present from time to time during the day, was related to questions about legitimacy (who has a legitimate voice in this conversation?) and interest (why should I be interested?). This was expressed in a number of ways:

- How far away from the coast can someone live or work, and still be considered to have a legitimate interest in the Coastal Management Plan? For some people, those who live inland were considered not to have a legitimate voice. For others, the perceived lack of national interest in people's situation was a big gap. Narratives of blame and victimhood were voiced: 'we didn't make this problem on our own, society made it, so society as a whole should take notice and help solve it'. A linked but distinct narrative was 'North Norfolk is a national and international asset, and so it should get help and support from national and international sources'. Should tourists be involved? What about businesses with roots and ownership outside the area?
- If someone does not perceive themselves to have an interest now, and NNDC perceives them to have an interest, how can they be engaged? For example, it is likely that impacts will be felt inland, whatever choices are made about sea defences and managing coastal change. Yet these were the parishes and groups who were less likely to send representatives to the event.
- How legitimate are the interests of non-human 'stakeholders' (e.g. birds), and how might they be represented?
- What is the role of agencies which are accountable at a national or international level, rather than being accountable to county, district or parish democratically elected representatives? In particular, the Environment Agency was mentioned.

3. On the day

3.1 Participation

- The facilitation team felt that levels of participation in the plenary sessions were pretty good, and we did not notice signs of people holding back or indicating that they wanted to speak and not being able to do so.
- At some points the conversations in plenary were dominated by a small number of individuals and their issues, as is often the case in events such as this. We were, on balanced, satisfied with the level of participation.
- The facilitation team felt that levels of participation were very good in the facilitated break-out sessions.
- Although some participants expressed dissatisfaction with being asked to write things on post-it notes and paper, the facilitation team was satisfied that this provided an effective alternative means to ensure that everyone had an opportunity to put their views into the conversation and have them considered by other participants and by NNDC. Although there was some discussion of the written comments, they were not all checked for clarity

- or ambiguity. So these written comments will need careful interpretation to ensure that the meaning of them is not misunderstood.
- Some participants also commented positively that they felt they were being listened to.

3.2 Practicalities

- The venue had a lovely atmosphere.
- There were no complaints about getting to it, so the map and directions must have been clear.
- Some participants were pleased to have a reason to visit a building they had heard about but not been to.
- The staff were friendly and accommodating.
- There was one comment on the lack of biscuits with morning coffee. The unusual lunch arrangements did not attract any negative comments.
- The main room was not big enough for the number of participants, given the style of event (table discussions, use of pieces of paper map out issues and responses). It was also hard to hear from one end of the room to another without amplification, and not always possible from participants to see what was being shown at the front of the room.

3.3 Timings

- It is possible that the timing of the workshop (during the working day) made it harder for some people to attend. However, we did not hear or read any comments from participants about this. If there is further face-to-face engagement, NNDC should consider having a variety of timings, so that there is more chance that everyone who wants to engage can find a meeting to suit them.
- Although the event lasted a nearly a full day, we were not able to cover all of the objectives in the depth that we had intended. In addition to our objectives, some participants commented that they would have appreciated more time for free networking, and for learning about the context, background and technical detail.

4. Did the day meet its objectives?

The agenda and objectives turned out to be more ambitious than we had anticipated. The design enabled everyone to contribute to all six headings, and to discuss two out of six headings. In the end, the final session on aims and values was squeezed, to allow for more time explaining technical points.

4.1 Foster a mutual understanding of coastal issues

There was a very effective sharing of views and perspectives.

The facilitation team got the impression that people began to get an understanding of the complexity of the issues that NNDC is dealing with, and that there is a range of different (valid) viewpoints which the CMP will need to take into account. Particularly as a result of small group discussions, there were comments showing that people had heard novel perspectives from a new set of people (particularly from other communities) which surprised them and gave them something to think about.

The timescales exercise and the conversation it prompted helped to focus attention on the tension between paying attention to short-term needs and concerns, whilst aiming to produce a plan which looks to the longer-term future. There may be conflict between responses which help in the short term, and responses which are better for the long term. People's anxiety to ensure that their short-term concerns are dealt with, may make it very hard for them to realistically consider the longer term picture. It is also hard to know what future generations will want, and how to factor in uncertainties about the impact of climate change and sea level rise. It was striking that, in the final plenary session, no-one answered the question put by the facilitator about how easy or difficult it was to keep the 50-100 year timescale in mind during the small group discussions. One interpretation of this is that the question seemed irrelevant to people at that point in the day.

The previous experiences related to the production of the Shoreline Management Plan seem to have made it more difficult to create the space for genuinely open dialogue on coastal management planning. In these circumstances, the event seems to have been as good a start as could be realistically hoped.

A number of specific points struck us as needing to be addressed, to further everyone's understanding:

- The impact of off-shore dredging.
- The experiences, expertise and approach taken in the Netherlands, and the extent to which the UK might be able to learn lessons from there.
- The role of a CMP in relation to other plans, policies and decisions.
- The technical reasons why, as NNDC says, the status quo is not on the menu.

This last point in particular remains unresolved. The technical issues were clearer to some as a result of the day, but accepting this conclusion (that change is inevitable) is a hard thing to do. Of the visions of the future as summarised by participants at their tables, some explicitly mentioned the inevitability of change (2), some noted that their table did not reach agreement about whether change is inevitable or not (1) and some explicitly mentioned rejecting the idea that change is inevitable (5). Of these, four included ambiguous, contradictory or qualifying statements e.g. one summary included both of these points:

- We don't accept that the coast as at present cannot be defended – a quality cost effective case will stand up.
- There may have to be adaptations in the future - but that may be a long way off.

One participant mentioned that people find it hard to face things which are related to climate change, and to think creatively in the face of 'such dire predictions'.

4.2 Identify themes

- The meeting provided effective mechanisms for identifying a large number of themes.
- It was partially effective in identifying those which were common to the entire area, and those which are specific to particular locations or types of location.
- There was some discussion of the contradictions and conflicts between themes, and the priorities amongst the themes, although this has not been systematically addressed.
- The transcript report contains a large number of issues and themes, which will need to be interpreted and summaries by NNDC when it produces the draft CMP, so that participants can see how their input has informed the draft.

4.3 Understand different perspectives on the possible approaches

This objective was partly met.

Participants commented on the experience of hearing a range of views, and recognising that their own view is not shared by everyone. For example, this is from one of the 'any other comments' forms:

"It was interesting to meet representatives from organisations covering different parts of North Norfolk coast to one's own. It reminds one of the very difficult job in finding a solution to cover very many points of view."

The meeting was not dominated by questions around coastal defence, but also touched on how to develop and maintain resilient communities with robust economies in a healthy environment. The role of North Norfolk as an exemplar to others and as part of a wider movement of coastal areas was also discussed.

The main choices facing NNDC in terms of sea defences, and the implications of these, were not set out explicitly and unambiguously, but emerged during the day in response to the unfolding conversation. Some people will have left without a clear idea of the kinds of options which are on the table, and this will need to be addressed in the next steps of the engagement.

The facilitation team had the sense that many participants remain unwilling to face up to the reality of climate change and its likely impacts. As noted above, this is a common phenomenon and has very understandable causes.

There was a contradiction between the strong 'hold the line' statement from the two small groups which discussed heading E (planning for coastal change and coastal protection) and the lack of consensus around this in the visions earlier in the day. This contradiction was not raised by participants in the final plenary session, and there was not time to discuss it. Other perspectives were present in the room, and given time and ongoing dialogue with objective, trusted information, there may be a development of understanding and response.

The possibility for this was illustrated by a participant who spoke in plenary, describing how over time having worked closely with the subject, their acceptance of change had grown. They had developed more hope that responses to change could be positive, and had developed confidence in NNDC. They noted that the wider community remains unreceptive.

Some people have come some way along this journey of understanding. For others, there is a big gap between NNDC's perspective and approach, and their own primary concerns. For these people, the identification of current problems is the limit of their interest in engagement.

There was also the beginnings of an interesting conversation around approaches to managing change successfully. At one point there was discussion around what can move and what can't. The view was expressed that birds can move and buildings can't (with the implication that if you can move or can contemplate change, you can be expected to move). Aside from the technical discussion about habitat (re)creation and the feasibility of moving buildings, this gives a glimpse of the distinction between things that some people are willing to contemplate changing, and those things where change would be seen as wholly negative. The more positive conversation was around the possibilities for being pioneers, showing leadership and working with other coastal district councils to find ways to respond and to support each other.

4.4 Work towards identifying a common set of aims and values

As noted above, we were not able to devote as much time to this aspect of the agenda as we had anticipated.

When given the opportunity to talk about this explicitly, participants chose to raise other current concerns instead. It appeared that aims and values are concepts which people could not or did not want to address separately.

From the discussions at different points in the day, some related themes were raised

- trust,
- social justice (particularly as manifested in compensation and a 'polluter pays' approach),
- community cohesion and self-reliance,
- maintaining a distinctive character (including landscape and wildlife),
- listening and democratic accountability

These themes should be treated with caution, as the group did not scrutinise them specifically.

There remained a wide range of views about the overall aim, illustrated in the transcript report:

Diii Group discussions - How want CMP to end up

- To keep everything as it is
- Can't live with status quo – have to move forward in the right way

4.5 Building working relationships

In addition to the specific objectives, NNDC hoped that working relationships with stakeholders would be improved, as a by product of running the day.

Our impression is that this objective was met - although it is important that the perception of being listened to is reinforced through NNDC's actions from now on. The workshop report notes that there is a concern about being listened to, with the day being seen as a good move forward.

Ensuring that the workshop report is distributed before Christmas as promised, seeking out opportunities to explain the CMP development process, the thinking so far, gathering responses and using them to inform further iterations will be important. It is also important to set out how the feedback from stakeholders has informed the initial draft and subsequent versions of the CMP, including explaining why particular points have not been taken on board.

5. What next?

There was a desire for more meetings and engagement at a community level, on the basis that responses will be different on different parts of the coast, and that it is better to hear directly from a large number of people. It would be interesting to explore the extent to which this can be informed by the range of perspectives (so that more people hear from others with different needs and concerns) and the range of knowledge and understanding (so that people who have moved some way along the journey can help others to see that this is possible). The role of parish councils in facilitating this wider engagement was raised.

There was also a suggestion that working groups on different topics be established. If this were to happen, it would be important to have a range of interests represented, so that any conflicts could be discussed within the group.

Participants commented on the day in their 'any other comments' forms:

- A well organised event that will have a definite impact on future decisions
- Very good day but will be totally wasted if the views expressed during the day are ignored

Our impression is the NNDC is genuinely keen to engage with and listen to stakeholders and through discussion with them, ensure that everyone better understands the challenges that the area faces, and the different ways it might choose to respond to these challenges.