

**INTRODUCTION TO PARTICIPATORY
LEARNING AND ACTION (PLA) TRAINING
COURSE HANDBOOK**

Contents

1. Introduction
2. The origins of Participatory Learning and Action
3. What is PLA?
4. Principles of PLA
5. Process
6. Strengths and Weaknesses
7. PLA Tools
8. Further Reading

1. Introduction

This handbook is designed to support you whilst you are the 'Introduction to Participatory Learning and Action (PLA)' training course. It includes information about what PLA is; a summary of commonly used 'tools', and further reading.

The course will be delivered by Roger Newton.

Roger is a freelance community Participation consultant with over 20 years' experience in community development, engagement and empowerment. He specialises in Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) Techniques. Roger is an Associate of Leeds Beckett University where he is a lead trainer in Participatory Learning and Action, and he has also developed PLA courses for other Universities and community groups.

I really hope you enjoy the course, meet some new friends and learn some skills that you will find useful in improving the quality of life in your neighbourhood.

2. The Origins of Participatory Learning and Action

Participatory Learning and Action originated in the southern hemisphere in the 1970s, as a method of consultation and engagement with rural communities in developing countries, Particularly in Africa. It was developed on the principle that poor and exploited people can and should be enabled to analyze their own reality, and to examine their own problems, set their own goals, and monitor their own achievements. In essence it was based on empowerment, i.e. the commitment to helping people take more control over their lives.

To ensure that people were not excluded from participation, it developed a number of methods and techniques that avoided writing wherever possible, relying instead on the tools of such as pictures, physical objects and group memory.

In the last 15 to 20 years the use of PLA techniques has become increasingly popular in the northern hemisphere, including the UK. It has been adopted as a way of allowing local people to assess and appraise their own communities, and to identify their own solutions to a range of issues within local communities.

It has also emerged as a highly effective way of meeting requirements, established under the last Government, and (to some extent) continued under the present one, on service providers (Councils, the NHS, Housing Associations, Police etc) to consult with their local communities and service users.

In the North East PLA has been used to look at a wide range of issues including drugs, crime, barriers to employment, sexual health, community facilities, graffiti, financial exclusion, and education.

It can be used by any organisation or agency that spends public money, and wants to know about what local people, service users or community groups really think about their services and/or their neighbourhood, and what the priority issues are in those neighbourhoods. In turn, any resident who wants to improve the quality of life where they live, in economic, social or environmental terms, could encourage those agencies to train and involve them in that process.

3. What is PLA?

PLA is a community-based approach to research and consultation that gives priority to the views of local people, on the basis they are the experts, and are best placed to come up with a programme of collective action. Through PLA local people can explore and share their knowledge of life and local conditions as well make decisions, and plan and carry out actions to effect change within their communities.

PLA uses a wide range of methods and techniques, and can thus adapt to which group is being consulted, or to which issue is being addressed. It is a creative learning process, which equips local people with the skills and confidence to work as an equal Partner with agencies, service providers and other stakeholders. It can be particularly effective in breaking down barriers between community representatives and professionals, and promoting a shared understanding of each other's priorities and constraints.

It can be differentiated from more conventional research methods on the basis it;

- Is always a process, never an event
- It Involves using a range of tools rather than just one, thus allowing methods to be adapted to suit the issue or audience
- Places an emphasis on using highly visual consultation tools (such as maps, spider diagrams and charts, thus allowing everyone to easily participate)
- Is an interactive, rather than extractive process
- Aims to put local people at the heart of the community planning process

It is also underpinned by a clear philosophy and set of principles, and these are set out on page 6.

4. Principles of PLA

As mentioned in the introduction, PLA is not an exact science, and precisely how and what is delivered as PLA will vary from place to place. However, PLA is based on a general philosophy of participation and ongoing involvement of all stakeholders, particularly residents. In turn this philosophy is underpinned by a set of principles which we think apply to PLA and which help distinguish it from other forms of consultation.

As such, we believe any true form of PLA will adhere to the following principles;

(i) It is highly participative and interactive

- It relies on conversations, and dialogue, rather than people just ticking boxes
- It allows Participants to get involved in a wide variety of ways

(ii) It is inclusive

- PLA will always involve a wide range of people taking part
- Pro-active efforts will be made to target groups that are 'hard to reach' or 'rarely heard', i.e. targeting those parts of the community that rarely participate in more conventional consultations
- PLA extensively uses visual methods, that don't exclude those who struggle to read or write

(iii) It will be a process (not just a 'one off' event)

- PLA needs to be part of a programme of consultation and engagement, with different activities at activities being focussed on different parts of the community
- It involves at least 4 distinct phases-research, feedback, review and verification

(iv) It is community led

- Agencies and service providers are key partners, but it is the residents/stroke community that should drive the process
- When the agencies have gone, the community is left to carry on the work

(v) It will be action oriented

- If substantive actions are not one of the PLA outcomes, that improve the quality of life for the local communities, the process has failed
- An ideal PLA key outcome would be an Action Plan of projects identified and verified by the community, with a commitment form key stakeholders to deliver

(vi) It is flexible and adaptable

- there are a range of techniques and methods available, designed to work in different situations, with different groups)

10 PLA Ground Rules

1. Give everyone the opportunity to participate
2. Respect what people say
3. Don't dominate
4. Be on the same level as the participants
5. Don't make assumptions
6. Don't rush
7. 'Hand over the pen'
8. Learn from mistakes
9. Be flexible
10. Make it Fun

5. Process

A robust process of Participatory Learning and Action will usually involve at least 4 distinct phases;

(i) Training, research and data collection

In PLA research is carried out by members of the local community. In many PLA projects the process begins with the delivery of PLA training to local residents, to equip them with the knowledge and confidence to undertake the community based research. The courses can vary in length from one day to 6 months, the more in depth the training the greater the level of consultation that the community researchers will be able to carry out. A section of the training will invariably be 'on the job' with participants 'learning by doing', going out into the community and using a range of PLA techniques, on the general public, or on specific parts of the community. Indeed, this is one of the great advantages to PLA, i.e. the training process is actually part of the research process.

Once residents are trained, they then go out into the community to undertake the research, using the methods learned on the course. During this time support will usually be on offer from the PLA trainers, and/or agency staff.

(ii) Analysis and action/community Planning

The next stage is to collate, analyse and assemble the data collected into a format that can be presented to stakeholders (as part of the verification stage - see below). This can be done in a variety of ways, but the outcome needs to be a report or draft plan which brings out and highlights the main issues and problems, together with priorities and potential solutions.

(iii) Verification

Once the initial findings have been collated and analysed, the resultant report or draft plan needs to be verified. This is the process whereby the main findings are presented and fed back to stakeholders, including key organisations, agencies and the local community. This is to ensure that whatever projects or plans finally emerge, the represent, as accurately as possible, the needs and aspirations of all sectors of the community, and have the support of key partner agencies (e.g. service providers).

(iv) Collective Action.

Once the verification process has been completed, the final stage will involve the development of a programme of action, or actions, to address the issues that have emerged from the research and Planning stages. Given the philosophy and principles underpinning PLA it is really important that this action is done *with* the community, rather than *to* the community. The inclusive, highly participatory nature of PLA, and the involvement of residents from day 1, through the training) should allow for residents to stay involved as plans and actions get implemented.

6. Strengths and Weaknesses

This section sets out the main strengths, and some of the weaknesses of PLA in comparison with other forms of engagement and consultation.

Strengths

- It is inclusive
- It empowers the community as Part of the process
- It can reach out to all sectors of the community, including the 'hard to reach'
- It is flexible and adaptable-e.g. different tools, can be chosen to suit specific circumstances
- It builds up capacity within the community, and leaves a legacy
- It can produce qualitative or quantitative information, and hard or soft data

Weaknesses

- It relies on volunteers to give up a substantial amount of time
- Its time consuming
- It can lead to cynicism if the results are not acted upon

7. PLA Tools

This section sets out all the various tools that can be used as Part of a PLA approach to research and consultation. They have been Placed into groups, depending on which stage of the process you are at;

A. Early stages

B. Analysis

C. Prioritisation and action Planning

A. Early stages

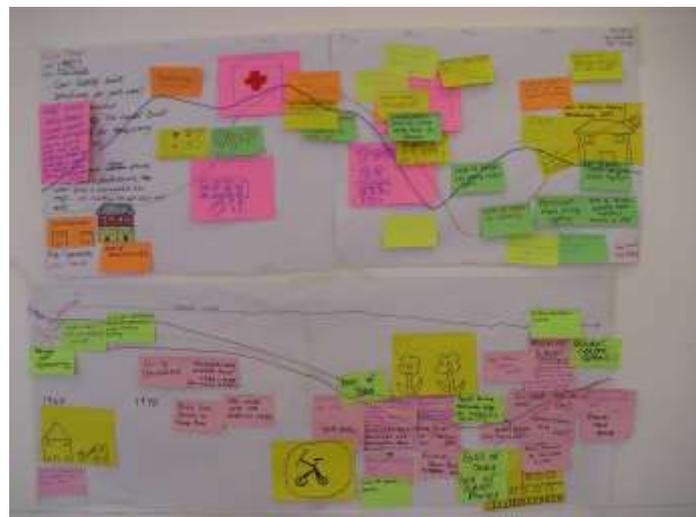
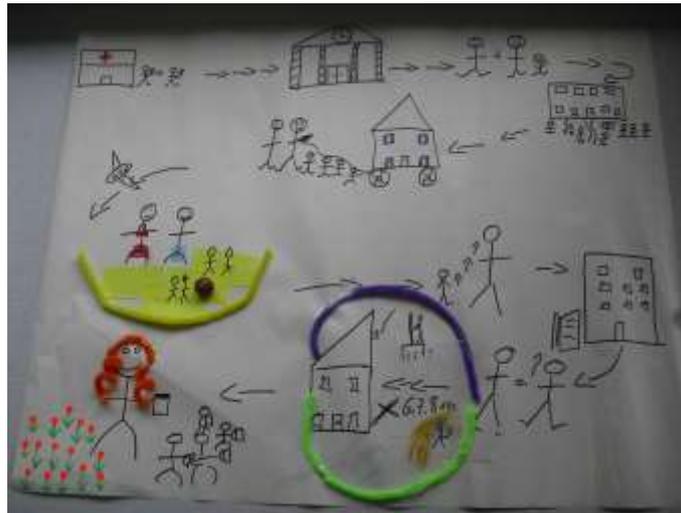
i) Mapping



Mapping can be used as an engaging and fun way to convey understanding and awareness of an area. It is a great introductory tool to generate initial data and is will attract people and create discussion. The map can use craft materials to make it 3-D.

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ii) Timeline



A timeline is a good way to encourage Participants to reflect upon their lives or upon the history of an area. It can be used as a way of introducing people in a group, although it can take a long time! Trends (highs and lows) can then be added to the line. The creator(s) of the timeline can explain the key features and issues raised to the facilitator, with the focus of attention on the drawing.

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iv) Appreciation Line



An appreciation line enables Participants to give a score to their opinion about an issue, usually on a line with the extremes of 1 and 10. Comments can be added to explain why they have given that Particular score.

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B. Analysis (good tools to start to analyse an issue)

i) H-form



An H-form considers both the positives and negatives of an issue, before focusing on possible solutions to the negative aspects. While individuals usually write or draw their views, the format allows for group discussion and further detail to be brought out.

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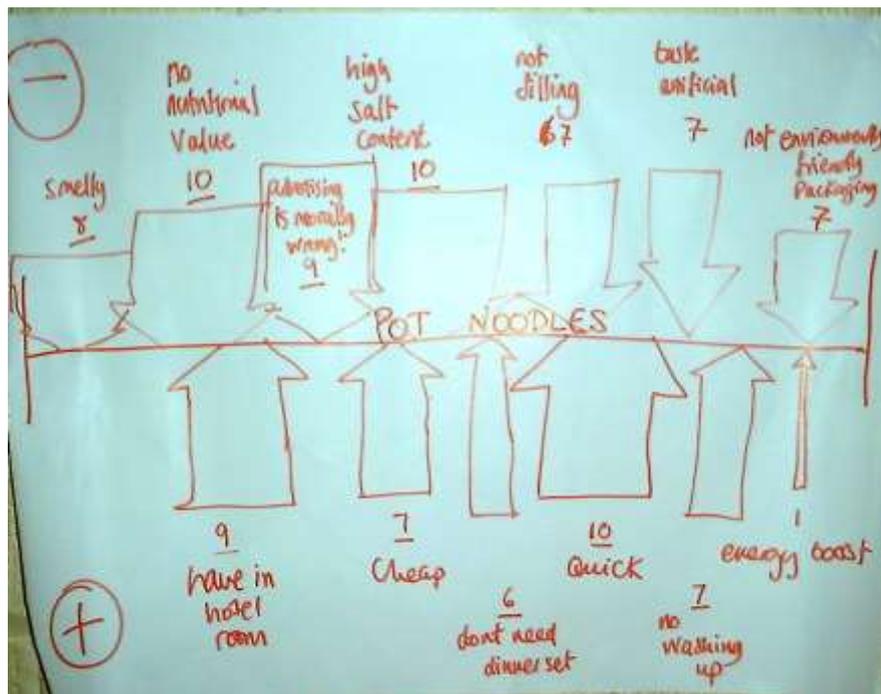
ii) Spider Diagram



A spider diagram encourages Participants to consider a central issue and to suggest different aspects of that issue, or relevant ideas concerning the issue. The tool can then be used to analyse barriers to the achievement of these aspects or ideas and consider solutions to the different issues that have arisen.

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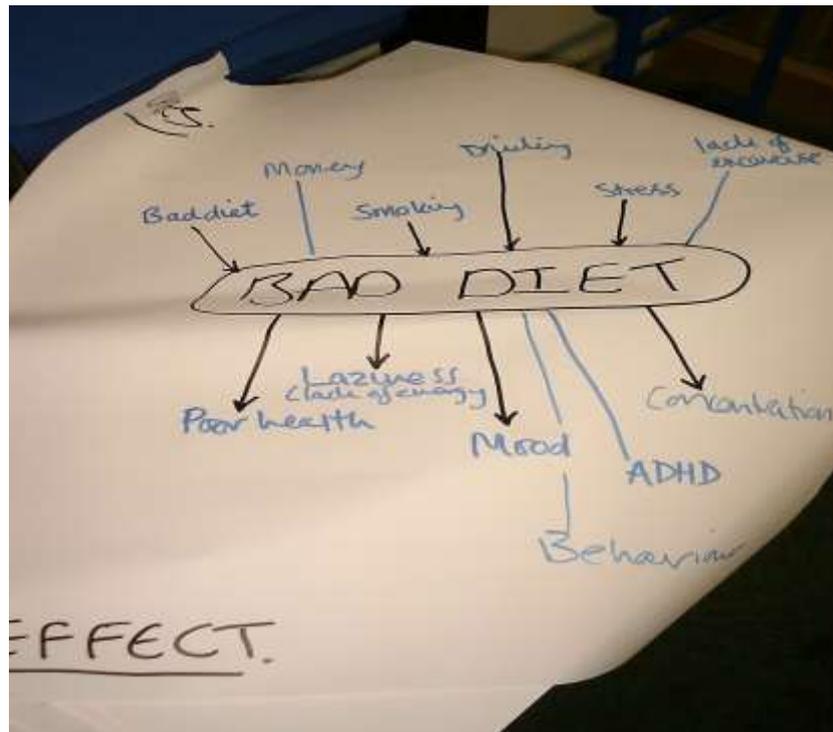
iii) Force-field Analysis



Force-field Analysis considers both the positives and negatives of an issue, before focusing on possible solutions to the negative aspects and ideas. The distance from the centre line shows how good or bad the issue is, the fatness of the arrow can be used to denote the importance of the issue. While individuals usually write or draw their views, the format allows for group discussion and further detail to be brought out.

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iv) Causal Impact Diagram



A Causal Impact Diagram is great at looking in depth at a problem to examine not only the effects of the problem, but also the causes. This is important when trying to devise solutions, as we often only consider solutions to the effects and tend to ignore the causes.

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C. Prioritisation (good tools for prioritising and action Planning)

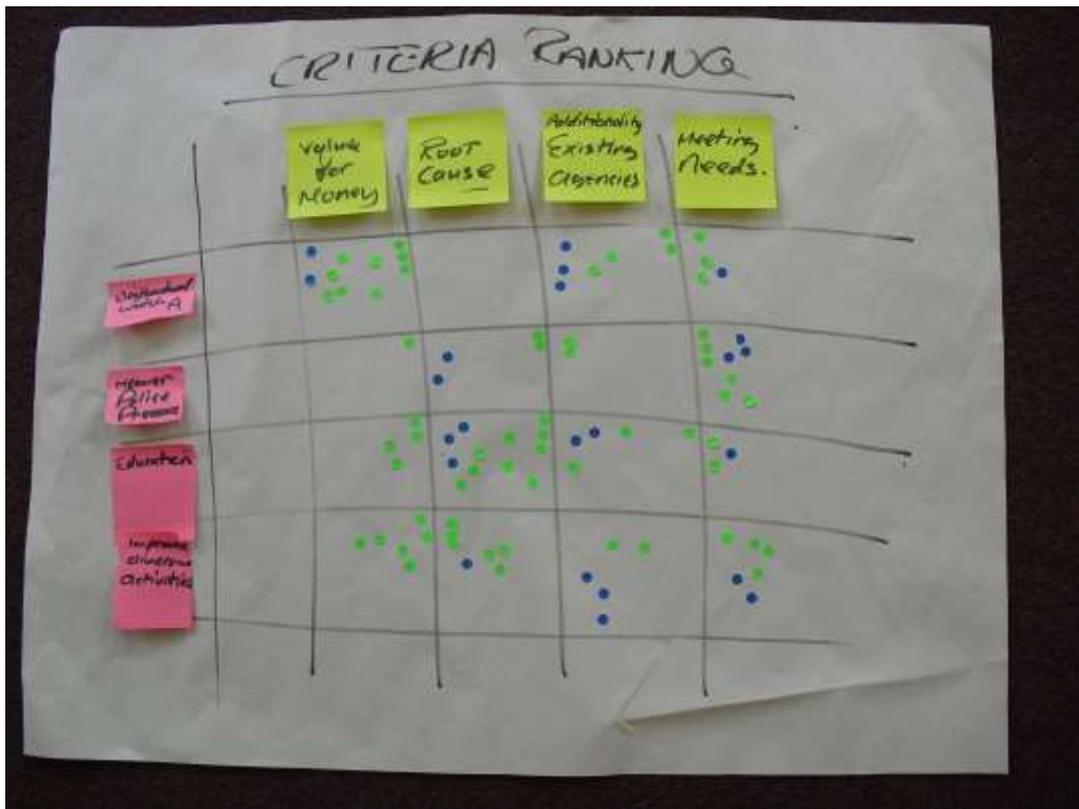
i) Bean Counter



A Bean Counter prioritises suggestions and comments made by the group. Each Participant uses a specific number of dots to vote for their priorities from a list generated from their previous comments.

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ii) Criteria Ranking Matrix



A Criteria Ranking Matrix helps Participants prioritise from lists or options identified through other tools during earlier exercises in the Participatory process. After identifying things which they want to rank or prioritise, normally by using one of the earlier tools, Participants have to come up with criteria by which all of the options can be ranked.

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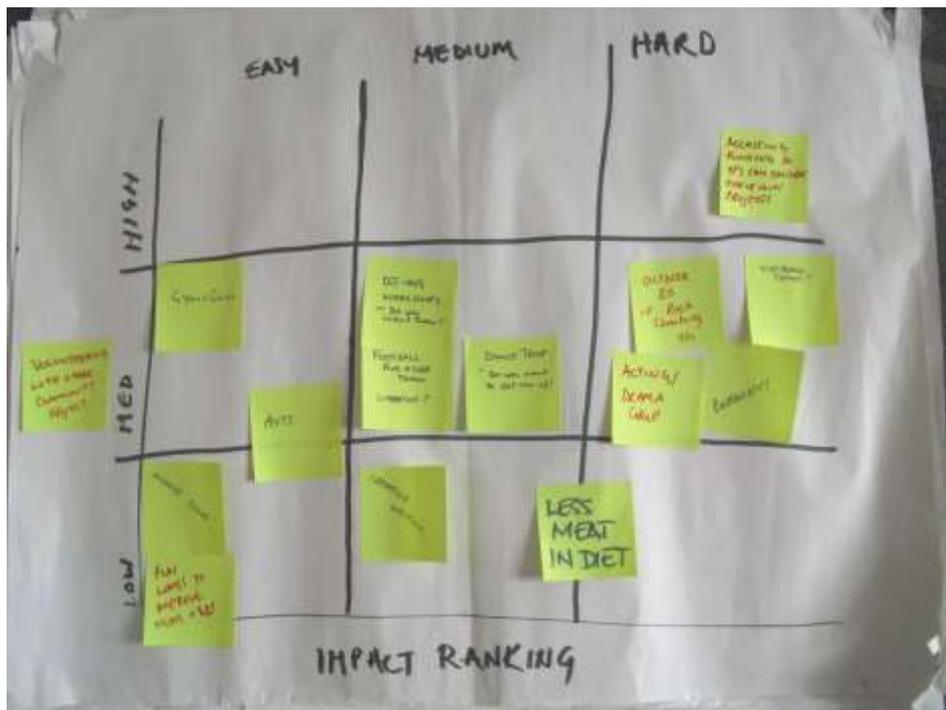
iii) Pair-wise Ranking

	LEEDS VOICE OFFICE	Eastern Towers	CRAMMER POINT	This Room	Shore
LEEDS VOICE OFFICE	+				
Eastern Towers	LV0	+			
CRAMMER POINT	CM	CM	+		
This Room	TR	TR	CM	+	
Shore	S KVB	S	S	S	X

Pair-wise Ranking can be used to make a final choice, especially if only one action needs to be found. Participants choose between the options on the matrix. This can either be done by group consensus (especially if the group is an odd number!) or individual voting.

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(iv) Impact Ranking



Impact ranking helps participants to judge between the difficulties of doing something again the impact. This can be a very helpful first step when trying to prioritise projects.

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Semi-structured interviewing

Semi-structured interviews are, in effect, the cornerstone for all other PLA techniques. Nearly all PLA methods and techniques require an ability to interview, or communicate with, members of the community. As such it is vital that PLA practitioners learn, refine and practice these skills.

Do's and Don'ts for semi-structured interviewing...

Do	Don't
-Introduce yourself	-Misrepresent your purpose,
-Show respect	-Rush,
-Choose an acceptable time	-Force an interview on someone
-Sit at the same level	-Reject hospitality,
-Have a checklist of questions	-Be late
-Choose an appropriate location	-Lecture
-Listen	-Interrupt
-Probe	-Use Jargon
-Be flexible	-Ask leading questions
-Use open ended questions	-Make false promises
-Use the six helpers (who, what, why, when, where, how),	-Contradict
-Thank Participants,	-Criticise
-Enjoy!	

Remember to use the tools only as part of a project that is underpinned by the principles of PLA, and is part of process, i.e. programme of consultation and engagement.

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8. Further Reading

Publications

Pretty, J., Guijt, I., and Scoones, I. (1995) Participatory Learning and Action - a Trainer's Guide. International Institute for Environment and Development.

Chambers, R. (2002) Participatory Workshops - a Sourcebook of 21 sets of Ideas and Activities. London, Earthscan.

Save the Children Publication (2002) Participation - Spice it Up! Practical tools for engaging children and young people in Planning and consultations.

VSO Publication Participatory Approaches: a Facilitators Guide (2004) Participatory principles methods and tools.

Buhaenko, H., Butler, V., Flower, C., and Smith, S. (2004) What men and women want: a practical guide to gender and Participation. Copy available from <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/ukpoverty/resources.html>

Caldwell, C., McCann, G, and Flower, C. (2003) Have you been PLA-d? Using Participatory Learning and Action to shape local services. Oxfam, Glasgow. Copy available from: <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/ukpoverty/resources.html>

Jones, P. S., Awate, E. and Zgambo, G. (2004) Making Waves in Walsall: Learning from the success of the Walsall Participatory Learning and Action Network. Copy available from: <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/ukpoverty/resources.html>

Journals

Participatory learning and action, mainly in the developing world, available via: <http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/PLArticip/index.html>

Web Links

<http://www.participationworks.org.uk>

<http://participationcompass.org>

<http://www.participatorymethods.org>

<http://www.communityplanningtoolkit.org>

<http://www.planningforreal.org.uk>

<http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/entry/community-empowerment-discussion-toolkit>

<http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/entry/participation-works>

<http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/resources/online-library/diy-toolkit-improving-your-community-%E2%80%94-getting-children-and-young-people>

http://www.manchester.gov.uk/downloads/download/172/community_engagement_to_olkit

<http://www.involve.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/People-and-Participation.pdf>

<http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/2010/power---a-practical-guide-for-facilitating-social->

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