

## Evolving involvement

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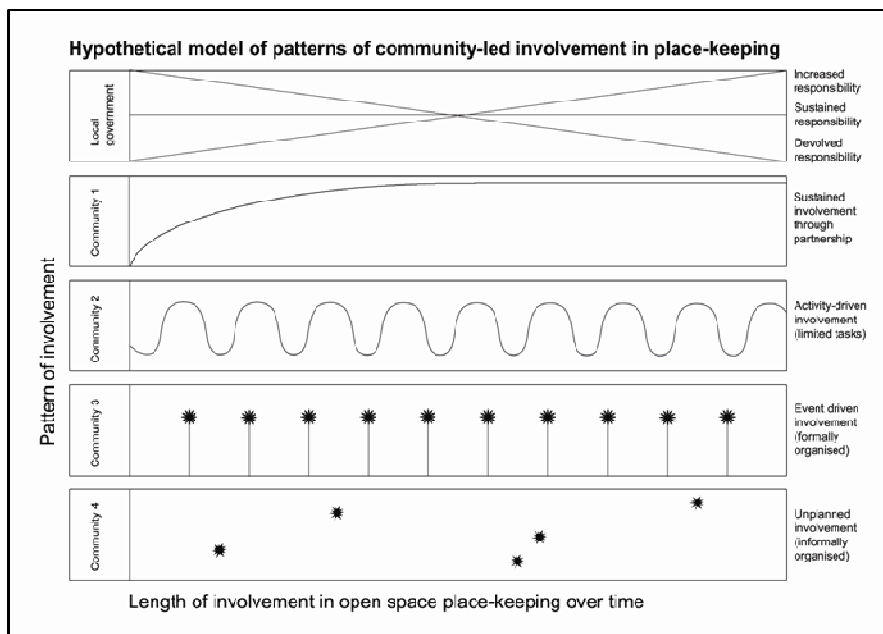
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In April 2011 Julie Molin of the University of Copenhagen joined the University of Sheffield MP4 team as part of a research exchange to work collaboratively on the role of local government and community partnerships in place keeping.

Whilst public participation has been a feature of UK planning policy for over half a century, recent years have seen renewed government momentum behind community involvement. With publication of the 2008 White Paper 'Communities in Control' the then government, called for 'ownership and control' by communities whereby 'people can own and run services for themselves either by serving on local boards and committees, or through social enterprises and cooperatives'. Mirroring this, the government's 'Big Society' manifesto in 2010, trumpeted 'a redistribution of power away from the central state to local communities'. Consequently, impact is now being felt at a local level, where a visible devolution of resources and control from traditional public service providers is placing decisive power into the hands of the community through Community Assemblies.

Our continuing work together explores the impact of increased localism upon local authority and community partnerships and seeks to evaluate the extent to which community-led open space management is truly sustainable. Through this we propose that whilst 'top down' governmental guidance continues to promote the ideal of long-term, sustained community involvement, in practice a number of alternative working models exist that demonstrate the importance of related factors such as personal motivation and capacity (from both a local authority and community perspective). As result we have produced a hypothetical model (see below) for an evolutionary approach to community involvement that this is both community and contextually responsive through the application of a two-dimensional approach recognising length (time) and patterns of involvement which may subsequently provide opportunities for consolidation of engagement.



Most recently we have explored the practical application of this model through four Sheffield case studies. In depth interviews have been undertaken with Friends (community) groups associated with specific open spaces and the local authority officers who support them. Emerging findings from this are as follows:

#### Community involvement case study 1: Firth Park



*Firth Park image: New benches lobbied for by Friends of Firth Park group. The site also displays artwork and mosaics created by the Friends group in partnership with local artists and school children.*

The Friends of Firth Park have been involved in the park's regeneration through a sustained commitment since their formation in 1999. Their involvement follows a number of modes but after the anticipated completion and launch of their latest project (Ripples in the Pond) in September 2011 they expect to be primarily event orientated. The group relies upon the local authority for support in the construction of funding bids and other expert matters, and does not want to take on further responsibility for the site. A great concern for the group is their capacity to sustain involvement as their members are generally older and it is difficult to recruit younger people.

#### Community involvement case study 2: Sheaf Valley Park



*Sheaf Valley Park image: the new gateway between the park and Sheffield train station includes important design details in handrails, lighting and stepped access which has evolved out of partnership discussions between the local authority and Friends of Sheaf Valley Park.*

The Friends of Sheaf Valley Park are a small group who feel their partnership with the local authority could have been further extended to truly reflect local interests in the planning and development of the site. The large scale nature of the site, combined with the capacity of the Friends group, has restricted the focus of Friends activities to date however they have contributed to understanding of site useability from a local perspective i.e. access issues and safety. The events space within the site is due to be launched at the end of July 2011, from which point it is anticipated (both by the local authority and Friends group) that involvement of other stakeholders may drive the site's development through an events based programme.

### Community involvement case study 3: Millhouses Park



*Millhouses Park image: the sensory garden at Millhouses Park. Here high quality signage, garden design, construction and management are testament to the involvement of the Friends of Millhouses Park and their partnership with the local authority and onsite park keeper.*

The Friends of Millhouses Park are a high capacity community group, both in terms of membership numbers and individual capabilities. They are therefore capable achieving a model of sustaining involvement in place keeping. Since their constitution as a Friend group in 1991 the Friends of Millhouses Park have attracted over £500,000 of funding to the site and in partnership with the local authority have transformed a number of areas within the site, including creation of a sensory garden, outdoor gym, water play area, fish pass and most recently a children's road way and (to be introduced in September 2011) new tree avenue planting. The Friends have many plans for the site's future development and are well networked to achieve this. The group feels strongly about public community ownership of the site (their strap line being 'Millhouses Park – a park for everyone') therefore the continuance of a positive relationship with the local authority is paramount if they are to realize this.

#### Community involvement case study 4: The Porter Valley



*Porter Valley: the Forge Dam site will be the next large partnership project for the Friends of the Porter Valley and the local authority. Partnership here has secured funding for dredging and renovation of the site.*

The Friends of the Porter Valley are an established group who were constituted in 1995. With over 470 members, many of who come from professional backgrounds, they have considerable capacity to carry out place keeping. Their focus in the regeneration of the Porter Valley has followed a number of personal interest strands, including improvement of natural, historic and archeological features. They work in partnership with many local organisations, but primarily receive and rely on support from the local authority, particularly regarding funding bids. Their sustained involvement in the site is at present secure, due to a number of highly motivated (and retired) trustees who personally commit a large percentage of personal time to the Friends work. However, some of the greatest challenges for this group come as a result of the site's popularity and Friends success. These include managing the different interests of the many stakeholders in the site, and as membership of the Friends of the Porter Valley grow, the personal capacity of a small number of trustees to carefully coordinate and handle these relationships.

This knowledge exchange project between MP4 academic partners the University of Sheffield and Copenhagen will continue with The University of Sheffield's involvement in postgraduate seminar sessions planned for Copenhagen in September 2011 and a joint submission to the European Federation for Landscape Architecture (EFLA) conference in November 2011.