

Reflections on being a community representative



JANET BOLITHO and ANNE GARROW

We have to admit to pondering our motives when we think of the number of committees we've been on as community representatives. Perhaps we should get a life or put the time into improving our tennis game. So why do we do it?

We guess our primary motivation is that we are interested in our community. We like knowing what is going on in areas that affect us. We like getting access to policy documents and practice. It is valuable to learn about different decision-making and reporting styles, and to be exposed to the latest thinking on the issues that the committee addresses. We like having a say on behalf of our community, and sometimes it is possible to offer an insight or observation from our grounding in the community that has not previously been considered.

But it is not all plain sailing. In some situations we feel our contribution is meaningful, and at other times it feels more tokenistic. While we like being on committees because of what we can contribute, we have found that, paradoxically, we can feel at times that our knowledge and contribution are not seen as being as legitimate, professional, expert or well founded as that of the service provider representatives.

While there are many ways to be an active participant in a project, one common way is to be a member of a committee. In this article we draw on our individual experiences as community representatives over the years, and our shared experience as the *only* community representatives on a local government committee for a large geographical area.

While we may have a relevant professional identity outside the committee, on becoming a community representative we often find that this expertise is not acknowledged and we can then not readily draw on it to support our position. Conversely, service provider representatives act within a more structured framework. As such, they can be perceived as having a clearer role and idea of who they are representing. They can refer to their organisation's position or policy on issues that arise at meetings, and legitimate their stance on this basis.

As community representatives we believe that our contributions are informed both by our lived experience and community knowledge, *as well as* our professional background and identity.

We would like to share with you some of the issues and difficulties that we have encountered along the way, and some ideas on how to address them.

The first issue is the thorny question – which community do we represent? The community might be a geographic community, a special interest group, or the service users. Often community representatives lack the direct authority of an elected or nominated representative, which is the case for us. Although our tenure is unlimited, we represent a large inner-city municipality made up of many suburbs, yet we really only know the part of the neighbourhood we live in. Our solution has been to be upfront about that and not to attempt to speak on behalf of other areas. We have also resolved to resign after two years with the recommendation that residents from other parts of the municipality be seconded on to the committee.

While advertising for potential community candidates in newsletters, local papers and on websites provides broad coverage, our experience is that people will often not respond and a ▶



direct invitation is the most successful approach. We have found also that a minimum of two community representatives provides strength to the individuals and greater certainty of representation should one of the members be unable to attend.

Getting going – starting out

The committee meeting is not the place to find out the business of the committee for the first time. We suggest service providers who are inviting com-

munity representatives on to a committee make initial contact in our space, not theirs. For example, they could visit us at home and talk to us there or meet somewhere for a coffee. We would encourage them to be unhurried in talking about what the committee is about and how we can contribute, and then to be available to talk it through further if need be.

It is strongly advised that service providers seeking community

representation be upfront about the commitment and responsibilities required. We have found that good preparation and introduction to committees is essential. Yet it is not uncommon that very poor attempts are made to bring the community representatives up to speed with what the committee has been doing. This results in these members being ill-informed, ill-prepared and having to learn on the run. It also contributes to feelings of frustration, disempowerment and, not infrequently, embarrassment.

Similarly, service providers concerned with overburdening a community representative with information or tasks should check with them to see if this is the case. Assumptions about a member's capacity to contribute to a committee can be experienced as patronising and need to be avoided. A further consideration for these committees is the generosity of community members in volunteering their

time and resources. Consideration might be given to the provision of a sitting fee and/or reimbursement of expenses for community members as recognition of the costs incurred in taking time out from other activities, and as partial compensation for any additional costs such as childcare, transport and so forth.

An equitable collaboration

There are a number of steps service providers can take to acknowledge the contribution of community representatives. A skilful chairperson can play a valuable role in providing a forum in which all members are able to present their opinions and ideas equitably in a safe and respectful environment. Similarly, it is important that the physical environment appropriately engages the community representatives. A marginalised seating position and limits on time or type of input, relative to other members, will negatively influence how their presence on the committee is broadly viewed or defined both by themselves and by others. Likewise, it is important that community representatives be provided with specific tasks or roles, in order that they can contribute effectively to the committee's work. In the absence of any defined purpose, they can be left with a commentary role and a passive, rather than proactive, voice, again undermining their efficacy.

We have found it useful to develop a specific role on the committee to enable us to participate more actively, be more constructive and to avoid finding ourselves in these positions. In recent times, we have asked for the agenda to be allocated a time for 'citizens' observations and reflections' related to the committee's purpose – in our case, that of community well-being and safety. We meet several days before the meeting to select a subject and do some thinking and planning about what we will discuss. We feel a responsibility to make a meaningful contribution. In our case, the committee chair has been supportive in ensuring that even when the meeting schedule is tight, we have both our time and our voice. Our task is to ensure that we uphold it.

Reporting back to the community

Thus far we have been talking about having a voice on the committee. As big a challenge is finding ways to meaningfully report back to the community. In our case, there are neither formal mechanisms nor allocated resources to do this, although the committee does it via newsletters, websites and so on. Ultimately, we are each members of our own community and must use our own networks to speak with people directly. For us, this includes people in our local neighbourhood – friends, neighbours, parents at schools and so on – and members of other committees on which we have representation.

We have also decided to meet immediately after the monthly committee meeting to think about what has made the strongest impression on us, and what might be important to tell others. We hope this will strengthen the dialogue between policy and practice, and help us to think about how we can better connect the business of the committee with the people in our community whose combined voices we represent.

A community voice

Not everyone wants to be on a committee and be heard by this means. It is necessary to provide different ways of obtaining community input involving other spaces, times and formats in which people can convey their views. And it is essential then to find ways by which the input and experiences shared in these other settings can be channelled into decision-making and practice.

Obviously we think it is important to take the opportunity to be a 'community voice'. However, if others should feel confused or believe they lack the expertise to be on a committee, then they are certainly not alone. We hope our experience and suggestions might help demystify the important and unique contribution people can make as community representatives, and encourage others to do the same.

Anne Garrow is a member of the SFLEX Training and Support Team at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Janet Bolitho is a resident of Port Melbourne with strong interests in the environment, the local/global interplay and community participation.

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