

Community profiling - What to investigate

While the precise matters to be investigated will, of course, depend upon the defined aims and upon the resources available to carry out the exercise:-

- few community organisations have the resources to study what is merely interesting: they have to concentrate on what will be useful
- sometimes a wide-ranging survey is neither practical nor necessary
- concentrating on one or two aspects of a community, while it will only give a partial view, may be more useful than a superficial attempt to cover everything

Some of the things you might want to include in a Community Profile:

History

Communities change over time, and to investigate and write the story of how a community has developed and changed over the years can both describe and show both how and why it has come to be the way it is.

The people

Population size, ages, genders, occupations, countries of origin, mobility, leisure interests, skills, training and education, access to cars ... – factual demographic information about the population of an area, and about changes that are taking place, can dispel myths and provide an essential base for making sense of other aspects of community life.

National and local government

It can be important to know which authority or authorities administer the area, and - particularly where there are more than one - to know what their functions are and what services they offer. This part of a profile could also look at other government agencies such as the police, law courts, prisons, job-centres, benefits offices.

Health and welfare

Statutory services - GP and hospital services, clinics and health centres, social workers, etc. - and voluntary services such as the local Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) could be identified and, if possible, evaluated. How effective are these services? How accessible? What are the gaps in provision?

Education

Where are the schools, colleges and other education institutions? What provision is there for adult learning? How accessible are libraries? Is the provision adequate? How well is the local community achieving? Are there ways in which existing providers might co-operate to improve the education of local people?



Needs of disabled people

How well are public buildings (shops, worship places, community buildings, leisure facilities, etc.), geared to the needs of disabled people? Is suitable and accessible transport available? Which public buildings have an induction-loop system for the hard of hearing? Are there other schemes to help people with different disabilities and are people aware of them?

Work and the economy

Where are the main centres where local people work? What hours do they work? How far do people travel to work? Who are the largest employers? What is the level of unemployment? How can the organisation timetable its activities to make them available to as many people as possible, whatever their work patterns?

Housing

What forms of housing tenure are represented in the area? How old is the property? What is its condition? Who are the largest landlords in the area? Are there any proposals for development in the area?

Leisure

How do people spend their spare time? Where do they go? What facilities exist within the neighbourhood, and how well are they used? There will often be a whole network of clubs and societies already existing in the area, knowing what these are can help identify gaps and opportunities.

Religion

Where are the churches and other places of religious worship and activity? How do they contribute to the wider community life? Do they co-operate with one another? Are their premises available for hire by community groups? To what extent do they also act as cultural centres - e.g. for specific ethnic minority groups?

Reporting the findings

Once the information has been acquired, it will need to be organised and presented in ways that enable it to be used effectively.

Writing a formal report

For most purposes, a report, while it needs to be reasonably comprehensive, does not have to be a lengthy document. Where a profiling exercise has been comprehensive and detailed, a briefing paper in summary form may be the most useful way of presenting key findings and recommendations, with a full report available for inspection, but not necessarily actually published.



Informal reporting

While written reports are indispensable for some purposes, there will always be many people who will not read even the briefest of written summaries. To communicate with these people, other methods will have to be found.

If a variety of methods have been used in conducting a profiling exercise, it is likely that numerous items will have been produced along the way which may be used to interest people in the findings and stimulate thought and discussion.

These could include such things as -

- maps, charts, photographs, and other things to be exhibited;
- photographic slides, video recordings, recorded conversations, which could be shown/played to groups and individuals (being careful to observe confidentiality);
- talks by members of the profile group - say, three or four 5-minute presentations on 'What I have Learned from my involvement in the Profile'.

Information sourced from COMMUNITY MATTERS - The National Federation of Community Organisations.

