

CITIZENSHIP AND THE ROLE OF PUBLIC SPACE

Summary for GreenSpace North West

Full Report: http://www.cles.org.uk/module_images/Ac%20report%20final%20pdf.pdf

Published in June 2005 by the Centre for Local Economic Strategies and supported by GroundWork North West, this research paper investigates how involvement in public space increases an individual's knowledge of politics and understanding of citizenship.

What is citizenship?

The paper takes a broad view of citizenship, including, but going beyond community involvement, consultation and voting. It is defined as meaningful and regular debate and dialogue through which citizens engage in decision making with regard to civic life and public services. This is often outside of more formal routes such as party meetings.

Why is citizenship important?

Citizenship is high on the government agenda in response to concern about voter apathy and low involvement by the population in political structures. Both the Home Office and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister have been initiating strategies to tackle this problem and also to generate a more cohesive society. More active citizens are more able to direct local public services towards the needs of the community and in doing so help to create truly sustainable communities.

According to previous research, levels of active citizenship have dropped dramatically in recent years. Active citizenship is also lower in more deprived communities, where the need for state intervention and services is at its highest; compounding economic poverty with poverty of representation.

Public space and active citizenship

The research paper considers if community development work focused in and around public space can assist in the development of active citizens. The question is tackled by taking eight individuals each working in one of three community spaces and looking in detail at their experiences. The case studies will be very familiar to those working with voluntary groups.

The paper concludes that public space is a good vehicle for Active Citizenship. It is an everyday aspect of people's lives; its visibility and wide use allow people to have opinions without specialist expertise. Thus it can be used to involve sectors of society that otherwise are unlikely to engage such as young people, elderly people and long term sick. This is particularly important as most people develop citizenship skills in the workplace rather than through civil society and more development is needed in this area.

Based on the case studies, the paper proposes a model of routes to active citizenship through involvement with public space. It also identifies the citizenship skills that the volunteers developed, giving a different perspective on the value of public space community involvement. For example discord and debate is identified as a strong motivating factor and the raw material from which active citizenship skills can emerge.

Skills and knowledge which active citizens develop in one domain (political, work etc..) can be, and frequently are, transferred into other domains. The paper provides evidence that involvement in public space is a valid way to increase citizenship skills. The skills developed through public spaces will then benefit society as a whole.