

# Imagine:

## A briefing from the Centre for Participation

*Identifying the root causes of success - a new approach to community participation*

### Introduction

Tony Blair called for "new ways to enable citizens to share in decision making that affects them", in his 1998 Fabian Society pamphlet on *The Third Way*. *Imagine* is one new approach. In essence, it asks people to tell stories of what works. This is fun, engaging and energising, so it can involve and connect lots of people, including the people who often get left out. It builds capacity, creates a shared vision and leads to action. Its flexibility makes it suitable in many different contexts.

### The need

The need for widespread and high quality community participation is increasingly recognised. This is illustrated by the guidance to local authorities on producing community strategies. The Department of Environment Transport and the Regions says that a community strategy must:

- "allow local communities to articulate their aspirations, needs and priorities"
- "have a long-term vision for the area focusing on the outcomes that are to be achieved"
- "have a shared commitment to implement the action plan"

### Why Imagine?

#### 1. High quality participation

- involving 'excluded groups'

As part of the Imagine Waterloo, the core group visited day centres and talked to people who were homeless about how they wanted to feel 'At home in Waterloo'

- linking people who don't normally meet

In Chicago, young people went out and interviewed business people, who rarely come to events but who were flattered to receive a young person in their office



- encouraging people to be positive. It helps them to identify and appreciate success. This is far more energising than the usual concentration on failure.

"It's easy to be negative about Thanet. With a couple of the groups we worked with we asked them to list all the things they were proud of and all the things they were sorry about in Thanet. The "Sorries" lists went on and on - but there was nothing on the "Prouds" list - some people were adamant that there was nothing to put on it!



So we changed the way we asked people what they thought about Thanet. Instead, we asked them only to be positive and appreciate the good things. What they came up with was a long list.."

From the report on an Imagine project in Thanet





## 2. Widespread community involvement

In addition to the points in the previous section, Imagine is:

- based on storytelling, which is familiar and fun

One student from the project with Age Concern reflected that "The best part was certainly meeting and listening to the older people, all of them lively, interesting and great fun....What they had to say was rooted in their own experience and eminently realistic."



- flexible enough to be used in a conference or a high street



In Thanet, Sustainability Action set up stalls on busy shopping days in Margate, Ramsgate and Broadstairs where they collected stories from passing shoppers. Altogether with a number of workshops and a one-day conference, over 500 people contributed to the resulting community vision.

## 3. Capacity Building

- Imagine's story telling format is easy to grasp and use
- Participants can learn the skills while taking part
- Its flexibility means that it can be used almost everywhere: community, school, family, voluntary group etc.

"Observing and working with Perry Walker of the New Economics Foundation was an education in itself - a real inspiration to me. I learned the necessity of, and began to develop, skills of open questioning and drawing out the positive in a situation."  
*Julia Curumtally, Thanet Local Agenda 21*

## 4. Shared vision

Imagine helps people to create a shared vision by noticing which of the stories have the widest appeal, identifying common themes and using them as a basis for a future that is both desirable and feasible. Because visions are rooted in existing success, they will have realistic outcomes, avoiding the 'motherhood and apple pie statements' warned against in the Department of Environment Transport and the Regions guidance on 'Preparing Community Strategies'.

## 5. Action

Imagine generates commitment and 'social energy' – the willingness and ability of people to act for common interest – through the quality of involvement and the shared vision to which it leads. This leads to action.

Since *Imagine* is new to Britain, action is only beginning to take place. In Thanet, for example, the report on the *Imagine* project was only published in summer 2000. Part of the vision was that 'Thanet continues to be in the forefront in tackling the waste issue'. By autumn 2000, visits had already been made to Bath and Medway to glean best practice. This is a significant act of reaching out for a very isolated part of the country.

Imagine Chicago shows the potential for action. Since 1995 it has seeded the appreciative approach by forming partnerships with over 100 community organisations, schools, communities of faith and cultural institutions. An example is the Urban Imagination Network. Six state schools and five Chicago museums are working to improve student reading comprehension.



## The six stages of Imagine

1. Define the issue and develop a set of questions to explore it.
2. Discover what is working by using the questions to draw out stories.
3. Dream how the future could be, building on existing success. Express people's ideas as "Provocative Propositions".
4. Co-create the dream by forming partnerships that in turn use the Imagine method.
5. Celebrate the project and its achievements.
6. Evaluate the approach and the achievements and use the evaluation to improve next time around.

### 1. Define the issue and develop questions

The aim of the Age Concern London project was to help a group of young people draw on the experience of older people in order to develop their vision of how they want to grow old. Below are four of the questions that young people put to older people:

1. What do you enjoy most about living in London?
2. What's the best thing about being the person you are now?
3. What advice would you give me to prepare for an enjoyable retirement?
4. What three messages would you like to give to the Mayor of London?

### 2. Discover – an example of using questions to spotlight success

One of the appreciative questions in Imagine Thanet was designed to search out stories about an occasion when people worked together. A woman in Ramsgate was desperately unhappy about the state of the block of flats facing her kitchen window. The council rubbish collection happened once a week, but residents left rubbish out every day, so it looked like a permanent fly tip. She complained bitterly that nothing was done about it.

During the discussion she was asked what was different about her block of flats that meant there was never rubbish lying around during the week. It was with a visible note of pride that she began to tell a story about a routine amongst the residents whereby they reminded each other when the collection was, and those who were unable to carry their rubbish down had it taken for them by one of their neighbours. She knew more than she thought about people working together – the question helped her to realise it.



### 3. Dream – an example of a Provocative Proposition from Imagine Waterloo and some of its stories.

'Today's Waterloo is an interdependent community where everyone is valued, accepted, listened to and recognised as having a special contribution to make. People accept the responsibility to treat others, especially those who are normally excluded, in this way. The wider community's activities seek to include the excluded.'

*'Here you can live. Some places you can't. Whether you are white, Chinese, black or Asian, everyone gets on. It's known for it round here'*

*'Being on the streets means that there is often nobody for homeless people to talk to as 'normal' people ignored them or were frightened of them. When someone out of a crowd says 'Hello' and asks them how they feel then that makes them feel normal again'*

**'One Christmas Eve waiters from a banquet in the South Bank brought large turkeys and trifles on silver salvers to the Bull Ring.**

**That was a great day!'**





## What they say about Imagine

**"With European Social Fund money we used Imagine as a capacity building exercise for the regeneration of Thanet. It succeeded in giving a voice to those local people who do not normally take an active part in the planning process."**

*Vera Elliott, Project Manager, Sustainability Action, Thanet*

**"We used Imagine as part of the Debate of the Age. Students and older people looked at the future together through new eyes. It was exciting, demanding and full of learning."**

*Paula Jones, Director, Age Concern London*

### Who we are and where to find us

The New Economics Foundation (NEF) works to construct a new economy centred on people and the environment. Founded in 1986, NEF is an independent think tank that combines research, policy, training and practical action at national and international levels. For more information on NEF please visit our website at: [www.neweconomics.org](http://www.neweconomics.org)

NEF's Centre for Participation develops and promotes innovative techniques of participation, particularly for excluded groups. All the UK examples above come from projects we have facilitated. We are also working with **The Imagine Network**, a group of facilitators who use Imagine in their work. This enables us to offer consultancy and training all over the UK.



### Where can Imagine be used?

Imagine is based on an approach called 'appreciative inquiry', developed in the US. Our inspiration comes from Imagine Chicago. Ten years ago Bliss Browne, a priest and banker, started a project to discover what gave life to the city of Chicago.

The range of uses in Britain so far shows Imagine's flexibility. As well as the regeneration and community projects described above, other cases include improving communication between the trustees of a housing association, and structuring a school's environmental awareness day.

Imagine can work beautifully for:

- Community strategies
- Health Improvement Programmes
- Best Value
- Single Regeneration Budgets

For more details on *Imagine*, contact Richard Murray at NEF Tel: 44 (020) 7407 7447 x 250, email: [richard.murray@neweconomics.org](mailto:richard.murray@neweconomics.org)

Or photocopy and return the form below.

The development of *Imagine* and the *Imagine Network* are part of a project funded by the National Lottery Charities Board in conjunction with the New Economics Foundation.

For The Imagine Network, contact:

Name:

Organisation (if applicable):

Address:

Tel:  Fax:

E-mail:

- Please include me on your Imagine mailing list
- I am interested in training and how Imagine works
- Please send me a 'tools for participation' folder with information on other participatory methods
- Please send me details on joining the New Economics Foundation

Please return to **NEF, (TB) Cinnamon House, 6-8 Cole Street, London SE1 4YH. Or fax 020 7407 6473**