

Articulating what your community wants allows you to participate in, and influence the future. A Community Needs Assessment, with wide ranging consultation to identify the needs, concerns and opportunities in your community, can help you do this.

The results of a basic Community Needs Assessment can then be used to inform the development of a range of community plans, which can be used to influence the actions of external agencies.

Further guidance about Community Led Planning, including Neighbourhood Plans, and Community Emergency Plans is available on the ACT website.

### Community Needs Assessment

Evidence gathered in a Community Needs Assessment will form the basis of any further locally led plans.

By consulting widely and in a variety of ways you will build up a comprehensive picture of the community's interests and needs. This is a hugely valuable resource which can be refined and put into context by cross referencing with other information about the community.

There are many ways to consult your community such as a questionnaire, visiting local groups, and talking with people at the church, pub, or school gate. We always advise using at least three different methods, as well as taking every opportunity to discuss and explore others' views about your community. Find out more in ACT's 'Consultation and Participation' guidance sheet.

### Existing evidence

'Consultation Fatigue' is always a concern, so remember that recent work, carried out for different purposes, may already articulate needs, concerns and aspirations from around the community:

- Current Community Led Plan
- Parish Council Plan
- Recent Housing Needs Survey
- Public Health consultation

Also look at the Parish Profile for your area on the ACT website. Having reviewed all existing evidence you may decide that there is no need for something new.

Be realistic about your time and energy resources and avoid duplication.

#### Use existing information to assess how much new consultation is needed

- Information must be locally relevant and 'in date' (under 5 years old).
- Don't reinvent the wheel, consider what activity has engaged people previously.
- Bigger isn't always better - you can decide that smaller more targeted consultation is okay.

#### Responding to a particular local opportunity / threat

- Emotive topics can generate temporary peaks of community engagement.
- Capitalise on this energy to help plan for the future.
- Allow room for 'venting' but try to move towards constructive conversation

#### Tips for effective Consultation

- Be open to different points of view, actively seek views which may offer a new perspective.
- Try to engage all elements of the community
- Talking to people and having fun is the most successful way to gather people's views

## Opportunities and Challenges

Your community may be keen to express views on, for example:

- An anticipated housing development.
- Changes in local employment.
- A threat to local services like shops, buses or healthcare facilities.
- A local incident may have highlighted the need for a co-ordinated community response in an emergency.

These reactive moments can gather a good deal of interest in the short-term. However there is significant value in engaging people in an on-going dialogue to be better prepared for future opportunities and challenges. Using information gathered through your Community Needs Assessment and on-going dialogue can inform a range of community plans.

This then may result in a practical response to an emergency situation - a Community Emergency Plan, or a well structured vision setting out future development needs, with a list of actions to address issues of local concern - A Community Led Plan.

## Identify the issues - choose the plan

Consultation often reveals lots of different priorities for a community. How you organise these to make a difference is by drawing up a plan.

Community Led Plans encourage people to take responsibility for action which can be carried out locally, as well as identifying where further help is needed. They can include a series of themed action points across a range of topics such as:

- Health and wellbeing
- Local shops and services
- Public transport
- Environmental issues
- Community safety

Neighbourhood Plans come from the policy world of Spatial Planning. They are concerned with how communities wish to influence the implementation of relevant planning regulation locally.

Unless the community's concerns relate to things which can be addressed through land use planning, then a Neighbourhood Plan is probably not for you.

Planning for emergencies can be included as part of a broader Community Led Planning process, but may also be a single issue to focus on.

If being prepared for, and working together to respond to, emergency situations is a priority for your community then a Community Emergency Plan is the tool to use.

## Community Needs Assessment

Community Needs Assessment is a simple process of gathering people's views and a valuable use of limited resources and community energy.

Once you have the information, you can decide what to do next. This can include using the evidence to:

- Produce one of the Plans mentioned above
- Inform agencies of your community's views
- Lobby for improved services
- Write funding bids for projects
- Galvanise community activity

## Contacts & Additional Resources

Further guidance on Community Led Plans, Neighbourhood Plans, Community Emergency Plans, and a range of ACT guidance sheets are available on the ACT website here:

[www.cumbriaaction.org.uk](http://www.cumbriaaction.org.uk)

**For more information please contact ACTion with Communities in Cumbria on Tel: 01228 817224 or visit our website: [www.cumbriaaction.org.uk](http://www.cumbriaaction.org.uk)**

## *ACT champions community and rural issues*

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