# "Pathways of Influence"

## Community Led Planning - Why It Matters

### March 2008

# Contents

This document and an accompanying summary report may be downloaded from www.ruralcumbria.org.uk/pathways.html

# i)   Community Led Planning – Definition and Introduction

Community led planning[1] is a process that enables local people to work together to consider their needs for the future and develop an action plan that will help them achieve their shared ambitions.

The process of community planning has developed over an extended period, becoming both more refined and more ambitious. Because its development was to a considerable extent sponsored by Defra and the Countryside Agency community led planning has been practiced most often in a rural context, however, it is a process that is equally relevant to both urban and rural communities.

The process embodies a number of important core characteristics:

- It is led by the community, driven and resourced through grass roots action.

- It is elective, in other words the people working on community plans are volunteers - usually local council members and local volunteers. Because of this there are limits to the extent that those from outside the community may dictate the issues that are explored or the way in which the plan is developed.

- It is supported by experienced independent facilitators and tool kits based upon national and local best practice. This informed advice and support makes a critical contribution to assuring external partners about the quality of the process used.

- It involves extensive community participation and engagement using questionnaires, meetings, discussions, newsletters and a range of other tools. This is both to ensure an inclusive approach and an important mechanism for validating the emerging proposals.

- It brings together a well researched evidence base, this alongside in depth consultation, underpins its conclusions.

- Throughout, the focus is on identifying actions that can be undertaken to tackle locally identified problems and issues. These actions may be for individuals, community groups, the parish council, local authority or other public agencies.

## i.i   Community Led Planning in the North West

In the North West region some 164 community plans have been completed. Almost all of these have been undertaken within the last 5 – 6 years with the financial support of Defra or the Countryside Agency and with practical advice and assistance from the Rural Community Councils. A further 91 communities have plans in various stages of development while still more are actively considering embarking on the process.

While community plans inevitably focus upon those issues of greatest interest to local people there are certain topics that surface time and again across the region. These include issues of local service provision, the lack of opportunities for young people, housing affordability and many problems relating to parking, public transport and traffic.

Clearly these concerns have a strategic relevance beyond the immediate community, and depend upon the support of a number of public agencies if they are to be tackled effectively. Here we have the question at the heart of the Pathways project - how can communities take the evidence and conclusions of their local planning activity and use this to secure the strategic actions that are necessary if the needs they identify are to be met?

As you will find reported in the following pages, to answer this question we have:

reviewed the strategic context;

- worked with action learning sets in Cheshire, Cumbria and Lancashire representative of communities, local authorities and agencies to understand the barriers that people working on community plans have encountered and to explore ways in which these barriers might be reduced or removed; and

- sought out good practice both in the North West and elsewhere that suggests ways in which communities might use community planning as a tool for achieving greater strategic influence.

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[1] Throughout this report we use the term community planning for a process that is variously called parish planning, neighbourhood planning, community led planning and community action planning.

# ii)  Summary, Findings and Calls to Action

## ii.i  The Project's context and process

Cohesive, empowered, and active communities in which people can influence the decisions that affect their locality are at the heart of the Government's vision for Britain[2]. The Local Government White Paper[3] introduced a commitment to empower communities to have greater influence over decisions that affect them. It proposed a new duty on Local Government to consult and involve local people in their policy development and encourages the implementation of local charters. These proposals have now been statutorily enacted in The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act which received Royal Assent in October 2007.

The Department for Communities and Local Government has since released a consultation draft of Statutory Guidance for Best Value Authorities and Local Strategic Partnerships – Creating Strong Safe and Prosperous Communities. This sets out Government's thinking behind the new Duty to Involve, as introduced in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act, which is designed to *'ensure that citizens can play an active role in shaping the future of the place where they live'*.

Analysis of this Guidance shows us that community planning must be at the heart this Duty to Involve. It will:

- Support and validate each Sustainable Community Strategy – contributing towards the evidence base and articulating community aspirations
- Provide a route to engage *representatives of local persons* in service delivery planning and performance management
- Help develop priorities within Local Area Agreements; act as community charters and inform local delivery plans
- Act as area plans and expressions of local intent within and alongside Local Development Frameworks
- Support Best Value Authorities in commissioning and lead to shared delivery structures and contracts

Put simply, community planning matters because you can't *shape places* without it.

Community planning is nothing new however. For the last 10 years, many rural communities have been engaged in planning processes designed to empower and increase their influence over the decisions that affect them. The form, style and outcomes of these processes have been extensively researched[4][5]. While this activity has largely taken place in a rural context, the processes and techniques are suitable for application in any community.

Experience of the impact of this activity has been mixed. Research carried out in the North West[6] found that community planning was an effective way to get communities working together to deliver local actions and improvements. However, it also found that the ability of these same communities to influence public policy and service delivery was limited. As recently as July 2007 Defra[7] found that despite a policy framework that is 'broadly supportive of neighbourhood/parish plans' (paragraph 2.32), 'there is often little recognition, by both local authorities and mainstream service providers, of the widespread benefits that parish plans can provide' (executive summary iv).

The challenge for those who support community planning is to ensure that its value as a *place shaping* tool is recognised. We must make sure that community planning is not promoted for its own sake, but because both the process and its outcomes make a significant contribution to Government's *Place Shaping* agenda.

Although the Pathways of Influence study was conceived before the publication of Defra's report, our work is directly aligned with Defra's findings. Its objective has been to increase recognition amongst policy makers and service deliverers of the role that community planning can play in *place shaping*, and to offer an improved understanding to communities of what is required from them. We have sought to achieve this through a combination of engagement and applied research. Activity connected with the study has taken place in the three shire counties of the North West over a period of 12 months, between December 2006 and December 2007.

The project has engaged with a wide range of people and organisations involved with community planning. Three groups or action learning sets were established, one in each county, each facilitated by the local Rural Community Council. These sets have brought together representatives of community planning groups, elected members and officers from all three tiers of local government, and from regional organisations[8]. Each set has considered the purpose and use of community plans from a number of different perspectives;

- its value to communities
- the role community plans can play in influencing planning decisions and policy

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[2] PSA 21, Comprehensive Spending Review 2007, HM Treasury, London
[3] Strong and Prosperous Communities White Paper, 2006, Department of Communities and Local Government, London
[4] 'Bridges', 2004, Countryside Agency, Cheltenham
[5] An Exciting Future for Community Plans, July 2006, BDOR Ltd
[6] Local Context Testing, 2006, Rural Innovation for Government Office of the North West, Preston
[7] Integration of Parish Plans into a Wider System of Government, July 2007, SQW Consulting Ltd for Defra, London
[8] E.g. Government Office for the North West

- requirements that statutory agencies have of community planning
- the contribution that community planning can make within a sustainable community strategy
- the value of community planning when seen from a regional perspective.

Each set has achieved two forms of outcomes. They have generated learning which has helped us to develop our conclusions and contributed to our analysis of wider research. They have also directly influenced the attitude of set participants towards community planning, increasing awareness of its value to principal local authorities and service delivery organisations. This has led to significant progress[9] in refining existing protocols and applying that learning to the development of new protocols addressing the way that community plans will be received and considered within local authorities, local strategic partnerships and service deliverers such as Primary Care Trusts. This work has helped to increase interest amongst local authorities and Local Strategic Partnerships around the relationship between community planning and their *locality* agenda.

The findings of our study mirror many of those identified by Defra. We do not seek to duplicate their reporting, instead we have chosen to identify the role that community planning can play in delivering Government's *Place Shaping* agenda, and to define the key elements necessary for effective influencing by communities of those strategic decisions that affect them, using community led planning as an established engagement and empowerment tool.

## ii.ii  Findings and Calls to Action

## 1.    The activity of community planning develops community capacity and cohesion.

The process of community planning is a very positive one for communities. It brings people together, often within an informal group, and offers a strong sense of focus on the *place* which the community shares and shapes. Representatives from community planning groups[10] consistently reported their enthusiasm for the process as an activity. Participants value the shared sense of purpose that it creates and the way that it brings people together to get things done. Successful implementation of actions and projects arising out of community plans contributes to well-being, and encourages people to get involved in volunteering and joint activity. Involvement of more people across local authority territories in community planning is therefore

likely to lead to higher scores being achieved in the *Place Survey*[11] and so improve the performance assessment of best value authorities.

### Call to Action One:

*a) We call upon all statutory bodies engaged in public service delivery – especially those subject to the Duty to Involve – to strengthen and work with Local Strategic Partnerships to support community planning activity and incorporate its outcomes into Sustainable Community Strategies and individual delivery plans.*

*b) We call upon those involved in the development and monitoring of Local Area Agreements to recognise the contribution that community planning is able to make towards the achievement of LAA targets, especially those National Indicators such as NI 4[12] and NI 6[13] measured in the Place Survey.*

## 2.    Failure to achieve satisfactory influence from community planning frustrates participants and acts as a disincentive to engage with statutory agencies and service deliverers in the future.

Analysis of research and the experience of participants points to an overwhelming sense of frustration experienced by communities when their plans appear to be ignored by local authorities and service deliverers. Many participants referred to the disappointment experienced when on completion of their plan, nothing much seemed to come of it. Their inability to persuade local authorities to take account of community plans when considering planning applications, and the failure of Local Plans to respond to issues raised around affordable housing and services such as shops and pubs is a common theme.

This negative experience is likely to affect the willingness of people to engage with consultation and statutory agencies in the future, and may undermine the best intentions of local authorities and service deliverers to promote their locality agendas. This could challenge their ability to deliver against their *Duty to Involve* and threaten their Comprehensive Area Assessment. Of course, a successful outcome is likely to create a positive environment for effective consultation, so increasing the number of people who feel able to influence decisions taken about the place that they live.

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[9] Cheshire Action Learning Set, Cumbria County Council; Allerdale Borough Council; Cumbria PCT
[10] In the action learning sets, the Lancashire Parish Charter Road Show, the VAC Sustainable Rural Services conference.
[11] The Place Survey will form part of the new Comprehensive Area Assessment.
[12] % of people who feel that they can influence decisions in their locality.
[13] Participation in regular volunteering.

**Call to Action Two:**

*a) We call upon local authorities to work with local service providers, preferably with or through their LSP, in order to address how they can support the implementation of actions identified within community plans. In so doing they should consider how these actions might contribute towards performance against the National Performance Indicators and so influence the outcome of the Comprehensive Area Assessment for their locality.*

*b) We call upon local authorities and local service providers, preferably with or through their Local Strategic Partnership, to incorporate the detailed evidence provided by community plans within their service planning process.*

## 3.    Councils and service providers find it challenging to respond effectively to many community plans.

Participants from statutory agencies and principal authorities in the action learning sets talked of the inconsistent quality of plans. They referred to the often daunting challenge of dealing with plans from lots of different communities and on different timescales. They raised concerns that some community planning groups did not fully and effectively represent their communities. The inability of many plans to withstand the level of scrutiny required, in terms of sustainability appraisals and formal rounds of consultation, was also cited as a barrier to community plans being formally accepted into policy and service delivery planning processes.

**Call to Action Three:**

*We call upon organisations involved in the design and facilitation of community planning processes to adopt and apply the ACRE[14] community planning toolkit or agree appropriate local guiding principles and criteria which can ensure that plans produced are based upon robust evidence and sound practice. Such guidance should highlight the importance of giving full consideration to the current and future interests of all sections of the community, thereby enhancing their validity in the eyes of statutory organisations and prescribed processes (e.g. sustainable community strategies, local development frameworks).*

## 4.    To be effective and worthwhile a Community Plan must offer quality, credibility and be soundly evidence based.

Statutory agencies cannot be expected to take account of plans and the issues that they contain simply because they are the product of activity within a community. Any plan that people wish to have taken seriously must be demonstrably fair and representative of the views of all sections of the community. Response rates to consultation are important, the greater the proportion of the community that is involved in developing views and conclusions the greater the weight that they will carry[15]. Plans should accurately portray the characteristics of the community and offer clear commentary on the issues affecting its well being. Expectations for actions should be grounded in reality and care taken to understand the appropriate allocation of responsibility. Effective community plans are often those where the majority of actions can be achieved locally and which require limited external input. Issues which are reliant upon external agencies should be clearly identified, and the relevance of the issue to strategic priorities properly tested.

**Call to Action Four:**

*We call upon community planning groups and those advising or supporting them to comply with authoritative national or local toolkits and guidance (see 3 above); to promote its take up, and to support other groups in its application.*

## 5.    Facilitation by neutral third parties helps communities through the process and gives principal authorities and services deliverers' confidence in the outcome.

Representatives from community planning groups consistently reported that the involvement of their local Rural Community Council had been beneficial. Rural Community Councils offer a wealth of experience in community planning, and can help local groups develop a plan which meets both their needs and those of the principal authorities. Rural Community Councils provide guidance, and seek to ensure that the views of all parties in the community are fairly reflected. Their involvement is also seen by partners as indicative of a measure of quality assurance about the process being undertaken. Representatives from statutory agencies reported that the involvement of a neutral third party in this way helped their own engagement in the process.

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[14] Action with Communities in Rural England
[15] Evidence from the West Berkshire case study and elsewhere proves this to be the case.

**Call to Action Five:**

*a) We call upon ACRE and the Rural Community Councils to ensure that funds available (e.g. in the three year contract for 2008 – 2011) are used wisely to demonstrate how involvement in, and the effective use of, community planning will deliver better outcomes for people and places.*

*b) We call upon ACRE and the Rural Community Councils to use this experience in the development of a sustainable framework for ongoing third party facilitation of community planning.*

## 6. Community planning groups which engage early with town and parish councils and local authorities tend to be more successful in securing both support and influence.

It is clearly important to involve local councillors (parish, town and ward) and council officers in the community planning process as early as possible. Groups that do so will find it easier to align their plans to the structure and processes of local authorities, strategic partnerships and service deliverers. This ensures that planning and service matters can be kept separate, and offers much greater clarity for ward councillors. Failure to involve councillors and councils at an early stage increases the risk that the final plan will be dismissed as irrelevant, inappropriate or invalid.

**Call to Action Six:**

*We call upon all groups engaged, or about to engage, in community planning to inform and seek the involvement of their parish and local councillors and council officers and to work with them to establish open communication with their local authority and LSP at the earliest possible stage.*

## 7. Involvement of Councillors is Critical.

Ward and local councillors are at the frontline of the locality agenda. They provide the only democratically valid link between statutory agencies and the - communities that they serve and inevitably will be the focus for statutory neighbourhood engagement activity in their area. The process of and outcomes from community planning can be of great use to councillors, but community plans may also be perceived as a threat. Evidence offered by participants and from research points to instances where elected representatives have acted as a barrier to the development and

dissemination of the community plan and prejudiced an effective outcome. It is critically important to make best use of councillors if community planning is to offer value to both community and statutory organisations.

**Call to Action Seven:**

*We call upon all ward, parish and town councillors and the officers that support them to make sure that they are fully informed about the role and use of community planning within the locality framework. They should understand and be ready to promote any available guidelines and protocols including the ACRE toolkit, Community Call for Action and any formal agreement between the Rural Community Council and service providers with their constituents and within their councils. They should be ready to play a positive role in developing, communicating and responding to community plans wherever possible.*

## 8. Formal Processes Help Statutory Agencies make best Use of Community Plans.

Evidence shows[16] that those local authorities that have formal protocols relating to community planning make the best use of this resource. It is therefore important that organisations subject to the *Duty to Involve* ensure that they can offer a clear *way in* for community plans. A formal route into an organisation, such as may be identified in a protocol, appears to significantly increase the likelihood that heads of service will be aware of the document, and so respond positively. Evidence from the experience of West Berkshire as a Beacon Council shows that inclusion of the outcomes of community planning within the performance management structure of an organisation ensures that they are taken seriously.

One of the successes of the Pathways of Influence project has been a significant increase in readiness amongst local authorities and some service providers to agree a protocol for dealing with community plans. This formal agreement is crucial to ensure that statutory organisations include community planning and the structures that support it within their neighbourhood engagement systems.

**Call to Action Eight:**

*a) We call upon all statutory bodies subject to the Duty to Involve to develop and publish, in partnership with community groups and the third sector, protocols setting out how they will receive, review and act upon community plans.*

*In order to ensure that this happens;*
*b) We call upon Government Offices in the*

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[16] West Berkshire Case Study

*Regions, during their negotiation of improvement targets, to ask Local Area Agreement owning Local Strategic partnerships to demonstrate how they have included information and evidence gathered from community planning in the development of their Local Area Agreements. Local Strategic Partnerships should also be asked to demonstrate how they intend to work with communities to measure impact from activity designed to deliver against performance targets within their Local Area Agreement, for example by using National Indicator 4 as a key indicator.*

*c) We call upon the Audit Commission to look for evidence of the use of community plans in service planning and policy making when assessing whether statutory bodies have complied with their 'Duty to Involve' and within the Comprehensive Area Assessment*

## 9. Engagement of Leaders within Local Authorities and Service delivery Organisations is crucial.

Evidence from the Beacon Council experience, particularly West Berkshire, shows that it is vital to secure the commitment of those in a leadership role (e.g. senior managers, chief executives, senior elected members) to community planning if it is to be successfully incorporated within their processes. This commitment needs to extend beyond policy and planning officers if the necessary change in culture is to take place.

### Call to Action Nine:

*We call upon the senior management teams of local authorities and service delivery organisations to learn from the West Berkshire experience, to recognise that outcomes from community planning represent a significant contribution to their Place Shaping responsibilities and to take positive steps to support and embed community planning within their strategic, delivery and performance management processes.*

The relevance of the outcomes from community planning to local authorities, service providers and local strategic partnerships, and the critical role of councillors as communicators, is illustrated in the graphic below.
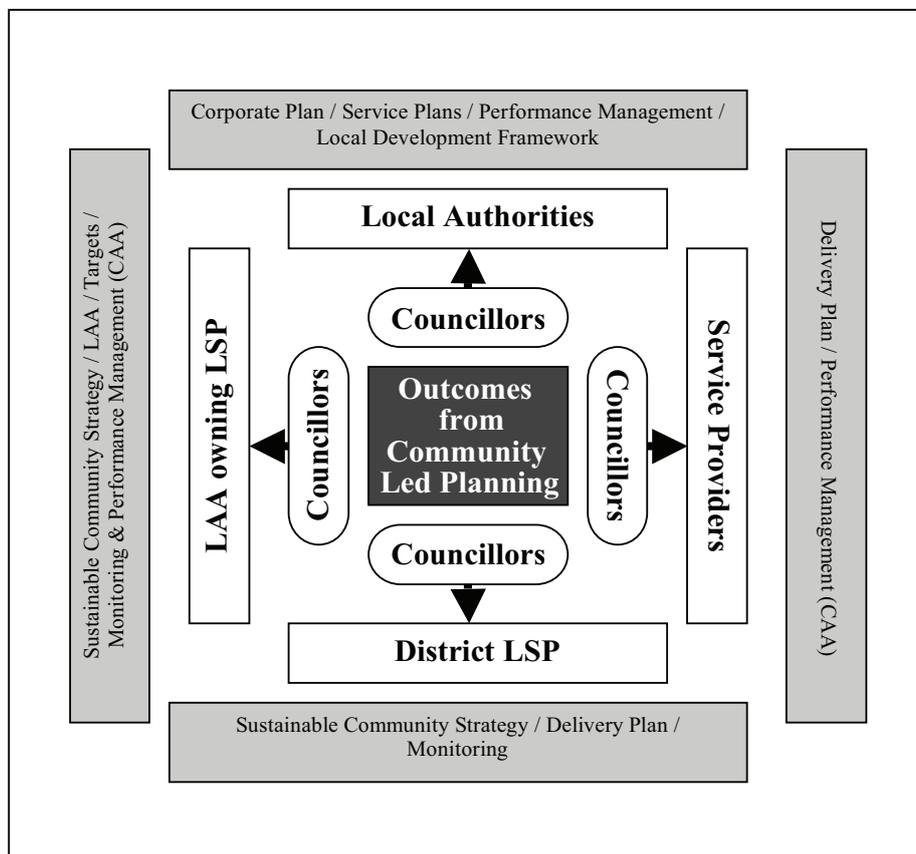
## 10. Size Does Matter – the ability of small communities to work together increases their access to the necessary skills and resources to develop an effective community plan and increases the likelihood that a statutory organisation will be able to respond.

Representatives of principal authorities and statutory agencies engaged in the project consistently brought forward concerns around their ability to respond effectively to every single community, no matter how small or geographically distant. It seems that there is likely to be a causal link between the critical mass of a community plan, in terms of numbers of people involved or the proportion of a council's area that it covers, and the ability of principal authorities and service deliverers to address issues arising from it.

Working together offers communities access to a wider range of skills and eases the burden on individuals. It also makes it easier for ward councillors to get effectively involved in development of the plan and onward dissemination of the outcomes. Working together need not prevent a focus on 'place' when it comes to local actions, many of which will continue to be site specific.

> ### Call to Action Ten:
>
> *We call upon those involved in community planning, and those that support and facilitate it, to consider whether value can be added to the outcomes sought from the community's activity by working in partnership with or alongside other communities to achieve a larger geographic or demographic scale. This process should be carried out in a way that ensures that that the area or population covered fits the needs of the communities and residents concerned. It should also consider the needs of the local LSP **and** related community engagement, policy and service planning structures (e.g. neighbourhood forums, local development framework, service delivery areas)*

## 11. Work within the system not against it – make sure that community planning groups align to the prevailing neighbourhood engagement structures.

Principal authorities and local strategic partnerships are hugely focused on developing structures and systems to enable effective neighbourhood engagement. Groups engaged in community planning should ensure that they are aligned to, or part of, these structures. Groups which *own* community plans should

make every effort to ensure that their plans are up to date (e.g. no more than five years since publication), are subject to regular review and are made available to area forums/local committees. Officers and elected members of principal authorities should ensure that each neighbourhood engagement forum has a means to consider and review community plans as part of its standing business. Every effort should be made by all parties to communicate the agenda and outcomes of debates at these forums to local people.

> ### Call to Action Eleven:
>
> *a) We call upon those involved in community planning, and those that support and facilitate it, to ensure their activity is effectively aligned with relevant local authority and service provider engagement processes and structures. They should ensure that they are linked into, and play a pro-active role within, the appropriate thematic partnership of their local LSP. They should also ensure that completed plans are accessible to all partners.*
>
> *b) We call upon those involved in leading and managing Local Strategic Partnerships and neighbourhood engagement activity to proactively include consideration of the outcomes, revision and implementation of community plans within their strategic development and performance management activity and to facilitate the active participation of community planning groups in their activities.*

## iii  Challenge!

On 7th March 2008 the North West Rural Affairs Forum, meeting in Chester, committed a large part of its programme to considering the Pathways of Influence project and to challenging its findings and the Calls to Action. The feedback received was extremely positive with a strong welcome for both the findings and the Calls, moderated by useful suggestions for their improvement. A detailed report of the day's proceedings appears later in this report.

We have responded to the feedback we have received by amending eleven of our calls to action and the addition of Call to Action 9.

We present here our definitive findings and calls to action.

These are brought forward as part of the Carnegie UK Trust Rural Commission Rural Action Research Programme[17] . They are offered to communities, partners and stakeholders in the North West region and beyond. It is hoped that they will increase awareness of the power of effective community planning, and help all parties to understand what is required to harness that power.

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[17] http://rural.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/rarp/community_planning

# 1.  Methodology

## 1.1  Strategic Context

From its inception, the Pathways of Influence project was intended to respond to and influence the strategic context within which community planning takes place. To assist with this, Rob Hindle of Rural Innovation has contributed a strategic policy perspective to the process, a role that has involved providing a briefing for each action learning set as well as a detailed exploration of the changing national policy context.

In addition, through its engagement with Government Office for the North West, and especially the North West Rural Strategic Board, Pathways of Influence has access to key routes for the dissemination of its findings at a regional strategic level.

## 1.2  Evidence

In exploring pathways through which communities may exercise strategic influence, and especially the ways in which established community planning processes may be used more effectively to this end, we have drawn upon two main sources of evidence.

### 1.2.1    Action Learning Sets

During 2007, the project team facilitated three action learning sets, one in each shire county[18] in the North West region. These action learning sets brought together experienced community practitioners, and officers and elected members from local authorities, local strategic partnerships and agencies, each able to offer a different perspective on community planning.

Through the sharing of experience, information and understanding, the action learning sets were designed to explore the strengths and weaknesses of current practice. From this we asked them to identify opportunities for refinement that would enable community planning to more effectively connect communities with the agencies and authorities that serve them.

### 1.2.2    Current Practice

In the course of the study, the research team sought to identify informative examples of current practice from the region and nationally. These are presented as case studies in this report.

## 1.3  Challenge

It has been important to the project team that the conclusions presented do not rely solely upon their own views. This report and its findings have therefore been subject to scrutiny and challenge by all project participants including members of the action learning sets.

In addition, presentations and workshops at a session of the North West Rural Affairs Forum on 7th March 2008 allowed for engagement with and challenge by a wide range of stakeholders with an exceptional knowledge of both community and strategic issues.

## 1.4  Examples Materials

In addition to reporting the conclusions of the action learning sets, and presenting best practice, this report includes examples for some of the tools, advice, practice and guidance being used across the North West region. Some of those we include have been influenced in their development by or are a direct product of the Pathways of Influence project.

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[18]  Cheshire, Cumbria and Lancashire

# 2.    Strategic Context

*We would all like to be part of a safe, prosperous and healthy community. A community where everyone has the right to the same opportunities, freedom and respect. Somewhere we can be proud of.*

*www.communities.gov.uk*

## 2.1    Government policy is failing to deliver this outcome for rural communities

Government's aspiration for England's communities is described in this quotation from the Department for Communities and Local Government.

However, one of the key findings of Defra's Rural Delivery Pathfinder programme[19] was that many rural communities in the North West fail to meet this aspiration. They are unable to offer the same opportunities to everyone and are unlikely to do so in the future without intervention and external support. In order to maintain prosperity, social health and equality of opportunity – to be sustainable - communities need to evolve and react to external changes. Public policy must recognise and support this evolution.

This conclusion is supported by the outcome of an extensive consultation exercise, *Sustaining Rural Communities*, undertaken by SPARSE and its sister network, the Rural Services Partnership[20]. The consultation found that many of our rural communities do not deliver a quality of life that accords with Government's aspiration.

This reality persists, despite Government's aim in the Rural Strategy 2004, to provide "a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come . . . including thriving economies and communities in rural areas and countryside for all to enjoy".

## 2.2    *Mainstreaming* responsibility for rural communities from Defra to departments throughout Government

Until the Comprehensive Spending Review announced in October 2007, responsibility for rural communities rested with Defra. The Department includes a commitment to Strong Rural Communities in is strategic objectives, and had historically supported community development through funding administered by the Rural Development Commission, and more recently the Countryside Agency. This funding was used to promote

and deliver community planning activity (often facilitated by ACRE and the national network of 38 Rural Community Councils) and to support a variety of other local projects.

This position has changed as the recommendations from Lord Haskins 2003 review, *Modernising Rural Delivery*, have been implemented. The Countryside Agency has been dissected: part has been incorporated into the new agency responsible for natural resources, Natural England; responsibility for rural evidence and advocacy has transferred to the Commission for Rural Communities. Through this change, Defra's funding of community development work reduced substantially. Headline responsibility for the funding of socio-economic interventions in rural areas passed to the 8 Regional Development Agencies.[21] With this went the unexpired portion of the former Countryside Agency managed 'Vital Villages' funding programme[22]. A very limited scale of support was maintained during the period of transition through the two year (2006-2008) Defra-funded Rural Social and Community Programme.

Government's position on rural issues continues to move. Within the last 12 months it has become clear that rurality per se can no longer be considered as a driver of public policy. As a result, there will be much less focus on funding programmes targeted specifically at rural areas, the Rural Development Programme for England[23] apart. Government's current approach, clearly enacted in the Comprehensive Spending Review, is to mainstream rural issues across all service departments.

Government sets out the policy that it wants it departments to deliver alongside funding settlements in the tri-annual Comprehensive Spending Review. It does this in documents called Public Service Agreements (PSAs). Of the 30 PSAs introduced by the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review, none relate specifically to rural England. Defra takes the lead on PSA 27 (Dangerous Climate Change) and PSA 29 (Healthy Natural Environment); these embody clear agendas that cover much of the work of Natural England and the Environment Agency.

Defra also has an interest in a number of other PSAs, notably relating to Economic Performance in the Regions (PSA7), Housing (PSA20) and Cohesive, Empowered and Active Communities (PSA21). It is not clear how, if at all, Defra will influence the way that delivery against these PSAs takes place or what impact on rural people, places and businesses this change of ownership within Government will have.

Defra's focus for the next three years is clearly set out in its Departmental Strategic Objectives; these lead with Climate Change in an international and national context and natural environmental protection; they also include Governmental responsibility for

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[19] Lancashire Rural Delivery Pathfinder, Outcome Manifesto, April 2007
[20] A collective of public service providers, made up of over 80 local authorities (first tier, second tier and unitary) and 150 organisations mainly engaged in the management, planning procurement and delivery of public services across rural England.
[21] Excluding London
[22] This programme expires March 2009
[23] The implementation in England of the European Rural Development Regulation

Sustainable Development. There is no mention of rural economies although references to sustainable food and farming and strong rural communities are retained.

## 2.3   *Place Shaping*

We expect, therefore, that Government policy will be applied in rural areas through mainstream routes such as Local Authorities and service providers like Primary Care Trusts, Police and Ambulance Services. One such emerging policy is the Government's *Place Shaping* agenda introduced in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act (2007). This will significantly influence the way that public policy and services are applied. It will also directly influence the impact that they will, or will not, have on the quality of life in rural areas.

> "Future approaches to rural proofing and "mainstreaming" should take account of the place shaping agenda. Good mainstreaming takes into account local issues and delivery with locally empowered people. Local solutions to local issues are the heart of place shaping and mainstreaming."[24]

The Act introduces a new framework for partnership working amongst local government and public service providers across local authority areas. This is based around Local Strategic Partnerships, Local Area Agreements and the new Comprehensive Area Assessment.

## 2.4   Local Strategic Partnerships

All statutory organisations with responsibilities for delivering against PSAs are now subject to a 'Duty to Cooperate'[25] within a Local Strategic Partnership. The Local Strategic Partnership is responsible for setting out a vision for its area in the form of a Sustainable Community Strategy. It must also set out a framework to achieve that vision via planning policy and service delivery. Its tools for achieving this are the Local Development Framework and the Local Area Agreement respectively.

This ability for the Sustainable Community Strategy to set the context, in terms of *place shaping*, for the Local Development Framework is particularly important, especially in areas where there are two-tier local government structures.

## 2.5   Local Area Agreements

Local Area Agreements have been introduced to bring service delivery organisations together at local authority level in order to improve co-operation, and to guide their activity against national and local priorities.

Each Local Area Agreement *owning* Local Strategic Partnership is expected to develop its Local Area Agreement in collaboration with its communities and partners including, in second tier areas, district level Local Strategic Partnerships. It will also need to negotiate its Local Area Agreement with Government, represented via Government Offices in the Regions, to ensure that there is an appropriate balance between local and national priorities, and that the targets and monitoring frameworks put in place are robust, realistic and appropriate.

Local Area Agreements do not control all service delivery, far from it, but they do define a set of agreed priorities for the area and contain up to 35 Improvement Targets jointly developed with partners. They also help to focus the minds of a range of service providers to work together to address them. Local Area Agreement priorities can be both thematic (e.g. alcohol abuse) and geographic (e.g. alcohol abuse in Workington).

This collective focus makes Local Area Agreements especially important for communities as they will directly influence the way that service deliverers and policy makers go about their business.

## 2.6   Local government performance management

A strong influence on the decisions taken by policy makers and service delivery organisations in developing and delivering their Local Area Agreement is external performance assessment.

The Audit Commission will introduce Comprehensive Area Assessment in 2009. This seeks to assess the overall impact of all public policy and service delivery at a local authority level (i.e. county or unitary). It will be focused on the quality of the *outcome* delivered by public service activity. It is significant to note that the views and actual experience of local communities will be influential in the assessment process as will evidence of their involvement in policy development and service planning.

## 2.7   There is concern that this new framework will not improve conditions for rural communities

"A 'standardised' approach to Place Shaping using the new 'locality framework' will be unlikely to secure proportionate impact for all communities across an Local Strategic Partnership's territory – rather it will inherently prejudice those whom it is hardest, and most expensive to reach."[26]

If *proportionate impact* is to be achieved in rural communities it will be important that the LSP, those

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[24] Rural Challenges, Local Solutions Building on Rural Delivery Pathfinders in England,  Defra, December 2007
[25] Local Government & Public Involvement in Health Act, 2007
[26] Rural Services Network Response to Department for Communities and Local Government on Creating Safe, Strong and Prosperous Communities Consultation Paper, February 2008

involved in negotiating with it within Government and its *Duty to Cooperate* partners robustly and positively address how this will be achieved as part of the process of setting outcomes and targeting activity. A superficial rural proofing enquiry after the event will not be sufficient.

The ability for those involved in *Place Shaping* to engage effectively with local communities is therefore very important. Research which prefaced this study[27] demonstrated how, despite national policy makers' best intentions, there appeared to be very limited evidence of any real link between the outcomes of local community planning activity and strategic decision-making or service planning. This gap must be addressed if the intent of Government policy is to be realised.

## 2.8   The need for policy makers and service deliverers to engage communities

If, for example, Local Area Agreements are to effectively improve social, environmental and economic conditions those administering them will have to understand and accommodate the widely varying needs of their different communities and neighbourhoods.

> **"Engaging communities directly in defining what they want and how to deliver it provides valuable bottom-up input to plans.** Top-down pressures, often target-driven, and a lack of joined-up working across and within public bodies can lead to sub-optimal solutions being put into practice. Local communities hold much relevant information not available at local authority level. Accessing it – whether through parish and town councils, community associations or other interest-based or neighbourhood-based groups – means decisions are more likely to meet community needs and aspirations"[28]

## 2.9   Local councils

The size, performance and effectiveness of groups which represent rural communities varies significantly. The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and the Local Government White Paper 2006 identify local town and parish councils as the leading democratically accountable local organisations. It sets out proposals to improve the community empowerment role of local councils.

The Act requires regular reviews of parish and town councils to ensure that they meet the needs of the local electorate by being effective and reflecting the community's identity and interests. The Act allows for *grouping orders* to brigade smaller councils into larger groups which may increase effectiveness by allowing

local devolution of services and increased influence on service providers. In addition, the Act grants parish and town councils the right to rename themselves village, community or neighbourhood councils. This may build more community involvement and sense of place.

The Act also introduces the opportunity, the *power of well-being*, for local councils which meet the eligibility conditions, which are to be prescribed later by the Secretary of State, to use locally raised precepts to improve local conditions.

## 2.10   Conclusion on the value of community planning

It is clear that new legislation and strategic policy provide a framework for greater involvement of communities in service planning and policy development. It leaves statutory agencies in no doubt as to their responsibilities to engage with service users and residents.

Given this context, the community engagement and empowerment, consultation and local evidence gathering offered by community planning suggests that this methodology has the potential to be a key tool, both for better understanding needs at locality level and for evidencing progress in meeting that need over time.

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[27] Local Context Testing the Regions Rural Priorities, Rural Innovation for Government Office of the North West, 2006
[28] Rural Challenges, Local Solutions Building on Rural Delivery Pathfinders in England, Defra, December 2007

# 3. Evidence

## 3.1 The Action Learning Sets

This section of the report reviews the operation of the action learning sets, summarising the themes that emerged during their individual discussions.

The work of the action learning sets comprised two key components which were taken forward once a common context had been set for their work through briefings by Rob Hindle and other members of the project team.

During the first stage of their activity, each action learning set focussed upon different issues as identified by their participants. This was viewed as a strength rather than a weakness since it enabled discussions to focus on issues of interest to the specific group of participants and also provided the project with a breadth of focus that was greater than would otherwise have been possible.

Latterly, all three groups were asked to formulate observations on a series of key issues that had been identified by the research team as areas that warranted specific exploration.

The following summary of the action learning set activity is therefore set out in two sections. In the first of these we capture the common threads of discussion that emerged within the action learning sets, together with their responses to the key issues that they were asked to address by the research team.

Later in this report we separately summarise the proceedings of each action learning set. We have reported in detail in order to properly record the contribution that each action learning set has made to this project and also because it is in these discussions that you will find the evidence for many of the conclusions that we have drawn.

### 3.1.1 Common Themes

The three action learning sets explored a diverse range of topics that reflected their respective contexts and the interests of individual participants. However, there were consistent threads that appeared in the discussions of all three groups. These common threads were:-

### Theme 1 - Managing expectations

Local authorities have concerns that community planning may raise unrealistic expectations. They therefore wish to work with communities to ensure that the realities that will impact on action plan implementation are understood. These may relate to limitations on the resources available locally, regionally or nationally for implementation or to the focus of strategic activity on a limited number of previously agreed priorities.

### Theme 2 - Guidance and facilitation

Access to toolkits, case studies, training sessions and face to face advice and support is essential to the delivery of a quality process and in enabling communities with limited capacity to undertake community planning exercises. The neutrality or independence of those providing facilitation and expert advice was also viewed as an important contributor to the completion of an effective and high quality plan.

### Theme 3 – Protocols

Formal agreements such as community planning protocols already play an important part in managing the complementary roles of community planning groups and local authorities. However, discussions identified a number of ways in which they may be improved and also suggested that they should be used to engage a wider range of partners including LSPs and service providers such as Primary Care Trusts and the Police.

### Theme 4 - Strategic briefing

A significant pathway to greater strategic influence was identified in highlighting the importance of briefing community groups about the strategic priorities of their public sector partners. Improved protocols represent a tool for setting out joint arrangements whereby groups can be briefed about strategic priorities early in their work and for addressing the need for the early exchange of information.

### Theme 5 – Member engagement

The elected members of parish, district and county councils and unitary authorities play a critical part in enabling communities to influence at a strategic level. The better briefing of these members about community planning, and their closer engagement in planning activity in their locality would help to strengthen dialogue between local authorities and planning groups and lead to both greater strategic influence and the closer involvement of local authorities in action plan implementation.

### Theme 6 - Sharing information

Planning groups need simple routes to accessing background data and information held by public sector partners. Equally, the fine grain of evidence collected by planning groups can be of great value in informing public sector processes including the development of community strategies, local area agreements and local development frameworks.

### Theme 7 – Better understanding

Information on the quality of the community planning process in general, easier access to the plans completed in their locality and also access to the background data collected at community level would all encourage the officers of local authorities and local strategic partnerships to value the process and its outcomes more seriously. These steps would also improve understanding of its value in informing policy development and in harnessing local action to deliver community strategy and LAA outcomes.

### Theme 8 - Shared understanding

The use of accessible language is important in establishing a common understanding of strategic issues, local challenges and shared goals.

## 3.1.2 Key Issues

In addition to their individual exploration of a range of local and more strategic issues, the action learning sets were invited to respond to a group of key issues. These were posed by the research team in order to focus discussion on points of known agreement and disagreement and also to generate discussion of issues raised by external partners.

### Issue 1 - The use of toolkits, standard formats and questions in the development of community plans

**Cheshire** – The Cheshire Action Learning Set takes the view that complete standardisation of formats and questions would stifle creativity and innovation (see Good Practice Guide, section 6.3). Cheshire Action Learning Set is in favour of toolkit help and consistent guidance provided through the Parish Plan development Officer[29] to ensure quality of process. Cheshire has a detailed Guide to Parish Plans which includes advice on key topics (e.g. good community engagement).

Structured help and advice provided through the Parish Plan development Officer (e.g. critiquing documents, workshops, help with funding applications, supporting toolkits, precedent documents, etc.) ensures a quality process while leaving the content for communities to decide for themselves. Funding Criteria and the Terms and Conditions of Funding are also used to ensure quality of process. Groups have to demonstrate proper planning, financial budgeting and wide community engagement, minutes of meetings have to be supplied to Parish Plan Development Officer, groups have to be properly constituted with elected officers, draft documents have to be submitted for comment etc.

Cheshire Action Learning Set is mindful that Parish Plans are created by unpaid, unelected volunteers working for the good of their community, therefore the burden of regulation needs to kept to a reasonable level. Cheshire Action Learning Set does not therefore favour telling Parish Plan Groups to ask set questions or to insist on a specified format for the Plan.

**Cumbria** - The quality of community led plans varies enormously. This is to some extent a reflection of when they were undertaken, older plans tend to be of lesser quality, but also reflects the way in which they have been facilitated. A number were undertaken using Countryside Agency funded consultants. These tend to be rather formulaic in their approach and have not stood the test of time well. Those that have been facilitated by the rural community council show progression in their quality as learning has informed the developing process. That learning is now captured in a national toolkit, published by ACRE, and a Cumbria toolkit, published by Voluntary Action Cumbria. Both take a modular format, to allow for change and development.

While community planning is an elective process, using these tools underpins the quality of the action plans that are produced. Toolkits are also an essential means of ensuring that community groups progress their work in an inclusive way, using a variety of means of engagement to reach a broad cross-section of the community.

A degree of consistency between the questionnaires used in different communities is an important tool for establishing a qualitative base-line. Since the data collected through the community planning process is of interest not only to the community itself but also to public sector partners, a degree of consistency that will allow data to be compared and aggregated is essential in maximising wider benefit from the process.

**Lancashire** - delivered the community capacity building element of the Rural Social and Community Programme which was routed through the LAA as a part of the Safer and Stronger Communities building block.

The Parish Planning aspect of the work was integral to rural development in the sub region. All communities who undertook a Parish Plan within this programme had to include ten compulsory questions (see section 6.2). In addition a range of suggested questions were also developed to aid the steering group all of which linked directly to the themes of the LAA. The key outcomes for the programme were;

1. To enhance the community capacity building and entrepreneurial capability of rural communities so that those communities can work together to shape their own future

2. To develop the capacity of the voluntary and community sector, and of the town and parish council sector, in order to reinforce the entrepreneurial capability of rural communities

3. To develop the capacity of the voluntary and community sector and of the town and parish council sector, to reinforce the delivery of the first two aims

The need to include compulsory questions was identified following work with Local Strategic Partnership officers and County Council District Partnership Officers who, following research with other relevant officers/statutory bodies were of the opinion that a standard format would enable them to better integrate the plans into district and county priorities and enable rural evidence to be gathered which may help to deliver outcomes for the LAA and Lancashire's Community Strategy, Ambition Lancashire.

The Parish Plan process was not designed as a strategic

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[29] In Cheshire the Development Officer is employed by Cheshire Community Council but funded by the County Council as one way in which it supports community planning.

tool and it has proved difficult for statutory authorities to be able to use them to inform community planning. If they are to be accepted as a credible evidence base for informing community plans, they need to be standardised to a greater degree and statutory bodies should have a greater input to their production than they have had previously.

### Issue 2 - The need to establish protocols with local authorities, local strategic partnerships and service delivery organisations to secure effective connections

**Cheshire** - Cheshire has a number of Parish Plan Protocols in place (e.g. Cheshire County Council, Chester City Council, Macclesfield Borough Council, Vale Royal Borough Council). Protocols and practice vary from District to District, with varying degrees of support and funding available. It would help if protocols were common across the County and notes that current protocols fail to deal in detail with the implementation phase of community planning. Cheshire County Council is currently rewriting its protocol to include further detail on the implementation phase and process.

There are no protocols for Local Strategic Partnerships, nor for other external agencies. Macclesfield Local Strategic Partnership already has a representative from Rainow Parish Plan Group with a community plan focus at Local Strategic Partnership meetings. This is the only District where there is direct community plan influence within an Local Strategic Partnership.

Community plans should go to Executive Board level and then be referred to Heads of Service for a response, supported by an inter-disciplinary group within each local authority to monitor progress and implementation. Currently Macclesfield BC receives completed community plans at Cabinet level. It also has an inter-disciplinary team, the Parish Plan Development Group, which meets about every 6 weeks and includes the Parish Plan development Officer.

The Planning sections of a number of community plans have been adopted as Supplementary Planning Documents in Cheshire, particularly Macclesfield. A significant number of community plans have the production of a village design statement as an action with the intention that this be adopted as a Supplementary Planning Document. We also have evidence that community plans are being considered by local authority planners when development proposals are under consideration.

**Cumbria** - Protocols are a valuable tool in establishing and clarifying relationships and responsibilities. However, they depend upon a good prior level of understanding between the parties concerned about community led planning, its purpose, process and value. For example protocols have particular importance in allowing the various partners to agree a basis for engagement that suits their individual needs and enabling them to manage the resulting workload in a way that suits their specific needs.

Protocols are also a means for ensuring that certain key points in the planning process are properly supported. It has been recognised that a key means for improving strategic relevance is to ensure that communities are fully briefed on public sector priorities at an early stage in their planning programme, not to force them to consider strategic issues but to give them the opportunity of shaping their work in a appropriate way. Similarly, protocols enable all parties to share understanding about the value of engaging with elected members.

**Lancashire** - Discussion in the action learning sets identified the key role of Community Champions (e.g. non-elected members) as distinct from the Parish Council/Parish Plan Committees themselves. Community Champions need to understand how protocols affect them and the value of Parish Plans as the tool to provide evidence about local priorities and needs.

In June 2007 Lancashire County Council ran a series of road shows with Parish and Town Councils across Lancashire to consult on the development of a Parish Charter and agree a framework for working together to develop the fundamental themes of the charter over the following 12 months. Community Futures took part in the road shows and from discussions identified a number of issues.

For example the Parish Council Road Shows in Ribble Valley demonstrated that knowledge, training and support for community engagement and the devolution of services varied across Parish Councils. But Parish Council needs across the districts vary significantly; some have linked to strategic service providers while others have worked in isolation.

It was also felt that the Community Champion role should be broader than that of Parish Councils, and community planning needs to be wider than Parish Plans. Community Champions need to be empowered to influence the Local Strategic Partnership and the Local Area Agreement. Protocols need to encompass these roles in addition to just Parish and Town Councils.

### Issue 3 - The value of 'clustering' or collating and summarising the views and issues raised by a number of parishes

**Cheshire** - Clustering can be useful and it is encouraged, e.g. clusters of parishes score more highly on the scoring for funding if they produce joint plans. They are also actively encouraged by the PPDO and in the Guide to collaborate on common issues that cross Parish Boundaries.

Collaboration also occurs in training e.g. the Crewe and Nantwich Parish Plan Network which has covered writing funding applications and community engagement methods. *Buddying up* is used to link up Chairmen, Treasurers, Secretaries from one group with their equivalent officers in another group that is further on in the process to help in the sharing of expertise. Using guest speakers from other parishes is very common and encouraged as a way of sharing expertise.

Generally however, there is a reluctance to produce *joint* or *cluster plans* as most Parishes believe that their concerns are particular to them and very different from other Parishes. They also often fear that their voice/needs will be overlooked or subsumed into the needs of larger, neighbouring Parishes.

**Cumbria** - In Cumbria, clustering has been embraced primarily for the opportunities that it creates for smaller communities to become involved in the community led planning process. This is a reflection of the fact that some areas of the County have numerous very small civil parishes and/or are very sparsely populated. Many communities therefore have limited capacity, resources and skills to apply to the community planning process.

A clear emerging benefit of clustering is that it provides a better platform for the exploration of strategic issues, as demonstrated by the Upper Eden contribution to housing policy debate (see page 22).

There are eight active clusters of communities in various stages of the community planning process. These range in size from three to seventeen parishes. Each cluster has usually emerged organically through local engagement and discussion stimulated by the rural community council.

**Lancashire** – Clustering has not been actively undertaken between parishes within Lancashire and only recently has one cluster been generated. Parishes have indicated that they thought their own areas to be large or diverse enough to attempt to collate views and have suggested that taking into account additional communities would lead to a non-representative view of the communities within their parish.

In Lancashire the use of compulsory questions has made it possible to gather information from each of the parishes undertaking a plan and to then use this to collate the views of all the parishes across the sub-region. This information is being collated by Community Futures and linked to Local Area Agreement targets.

**Issue 4 - The optimum approach towards raising funds for the four phases of parish planning:** *development; delivery & influencing; monitoring; and refreshing*

**Cheshire** – Cheshire Action Learning Set is pleased with the 3 funding streams that have been operating in Cheshire since April 2006, funded by Cheshire County Council. These are the Parish Plan Starter Grant, the Parish Plan Development Grant and the Parish Plan Implementation Grant. However, this funding is in jeopardy because of the Local Government Review and we have yet to ensure that there is ongoing funding for community plans when the new arrangements are in place. We are conscious that action is needed now to ensure that community plans feature within budget bids and proposals that are being prepared.

Some districts (e.g. Macklesfield, Vale Royal) and parish councils also provide funding and/or in kind help. The county-wide Rural Community and Parish Planning Group oversees the funding streams which are administered by the Parish Plan development Officer. Using the funding criteria and terms and conditions of funding to ensure quality control of process has been very effective.

However, we are missing out on sponsorship opportunities from local businesses and companies. We need to explore this opportunity further and develop appropriate protocols. The Parish Plan development Officer and Macclesfield are starting to explore this in relation to one large local employer.

Action plan projects in Cheshire have received or are exploring a range of funding from the Implementation Grant, Rural Social and Community Programme, WREN[30], Manchester Airport and Big Lottery. *Grantfinder* is also available to Groups via Cheshire Community Council and both the County and Districts have funding units that advise.

**Cumbria** - We have identified that there has been a failure to effectively market the community planning process to the public sector on the basis of its potential to deliver to corporate strategic priorities such as delivering their duty to consult and involve local people in decision-making.

**Lancashire** – All parish plans have been funded directly through the Vital Villages and Rural Social and Community programmes; lack of additional funding means that many parishes wishing to engage in the process have not been able to. Within the most recent tranche of the Defra Rural Social and Community Programme, grants were awarded to enable eight new plans to be developed and three plans to be refreshed. There was also an allocated fund that was available for parishes to deliver identified activities highlighted in their community plans.

The role a parish plan can play in enabling a local authority to develop its strategic direction has still to be recognised. Community plans are a mechanism for collecting information but communities need to be realistic about the strategic impact they will have. Community plans need to be used across the county as the tool for gathering standard information linked to strategic priorities. The work undertaken with Local Strategic Partnership officers and County Council District Partnership officers and the use of standard questions may contribute to raising the profile of parish planning as a valuable strategic tool and lead to further investment for more parishes.

**Issue 5 - The role of elected members in the four phases of community planning**

**Cheshire** - The current involvement of elected members is limited and varies across the County depending on how much awareness there is of

community planning.   In Macclesfield there is greater awareness and understanding and greater participation - with Borough Councillors attending public, open meetings, writing letters of support and helping with the implementation of projects.

Training about community planning for members at all levels would ensure better understanding and correspondingly greater ability to be involved in the process and to support parishes effectively. Parish council conferences and Parish Plan Network events are being used to do some of this awareness and training (e.g. action learning sets for Parish Planners, Cheshire Training Partnership courses that include community engagement and community planning).

Occasional tensions between unelected volunteers in a planning group and elected representatives at parish, district or county level need to be addressed and managed as part of the process, although much of the problem can be dealt with through effective communication and teamwork.

**Cumbria** – Cumbria's discussion has focussed upon the issue of strategic influence with the conclusion that community planning has in some cases been progressed almost deliberately outside formal public sector structures. This is one important, but not the only, reason why little strategic influence has been achieved. Therefore, both local toolkits and protocols need to strengthen guidance about working with elected members.

There is also a need to promote community planning among elected members as a process that can achieve priority outcomes for the public sector. This will relate to:

- Capturing detailed local level information
- Strengthening public engagement and participation
- Validating public sector priorities
- Harnessing community activity and local actions to deliver strategic priority outcomes
- Leverage of non-public sector resources to deliver public priorities

**Lancashire** – Parish Councils have to underwrite any community plan that is developed.  The formation of a steering group on which both parish councillors and community champions would sit encourages engagement between the elected and non-elected members to ensure effective delivery of the programme. It has been recognised that Community Champions may not be elected members, so in order to gain an equal quality of information from all participants; the balance of power needs to be addressed. This interaction within the steering group enables Community Champions to be empowered and to gain the skills and knowledge needed to effectively influence the local and sub regional policies and services. It is important that the skills and structure

needed for all Community Champions to influence the LAA are identified.

The role of elected member is often seen as 'gate-keeping' knowledge and assistance.  There must be transparency and ownership across the whole process along with the recognition of the roles that can be played by both elected members at parish level and community champions. This involvement of elected members and representatives from county and district level at an early stage addresses the requirement for information to be in a format which would be robust enough to enable it to be incorporated into strategic policies.

### Issue 6 - Effective engagement of local authority officers

**Cheshire** - Training and awareness for all levels of local government officer is important.  Planning groups are encouraged to make contact with officers during the consultation phase of a community plan to gather information, advice and active support and then to form partnerships with parish, district and county officers to implement projects.

Generally engagement of officers in parish planning is good in Cheshire where officers from each of the Districts and the County serve on the Rural Community and Parish Plan Group and act as unofficial *champions* for community planning within their authorities. Officers regularly share a platform with the Parish Plan development Officer at meetings, training events and community plan launches to support relevant initiatives.  The Parish Plan development Officer and council officers have close and effective working relations which include sharing intelligence, working together, training and information events, funding decisions etc.

There are district community plan networks in Crewe and Nantwich and Macclesfield, the county-wide Rural Community and Parish Plan Group and district council website information on community planning with links to the Parish Plan development Officer.

**Cumbria** - Effective two-way communication between public sector officers and community planning groups is essential if the process is to deliver maximum mutual benefit. Good communication is especially important:

- To ensure communities are fully briefed about local authority and strategic objectives
- To enable effective dialogue at draft action plan stage as a means of engaging local authority support and moderating community expectations
- During action plan implementation, as a route to ensuring local authority support, where relevant, for the delivery of key actions.

**Lancashire** - An understanding of the strategic context needs to be the basis from which community consultations, Community Champions and the public sector begin the process. An understanding of rurality

across the sub region is crucial. The lessons learnt from the Lancashire Rural Delivery Pathfinder, Longridge neighbourhood pilot and this action learning set will assist in providing the information needed to empower Community Champions to use the information they gather in community planning to influence service providers and policy makers.

To assist effective engagement an application form for funding has been devised in which communities must show that they are prepared to work with officers from the local authority at pre-application stage through to the completion of the plan. The submission of community plans to the appropriate district and county authorities and the inclusion of the compulsory questions which are linked to the LAA should ensure that the aspirations of a parish can be included into community strategies being developed by the local authority.

### Issue 7 - Any lessons or effective good practice applicable to each of these four phases

**Cheshire** – Annual monitoring and review is undertaken and linked in to annual parish meetings, other aspects of good practice are described in the Good Practice Guide (see section 6.3).

Cheshire has a *Renewal* process in place that two parishes (Bollington in Macclesfield and Helsby in Vale Royal) are currently undergoing. The RCPPG has agreed that funding should be available for Renewal. Cheshire is also trying to encourage an element of external audit through *Critical Friend Circles* and CALS is trying to get a pilot underway.

**Cumbria** – The following development needs or opportunities have been identified:

- The need to translate community plan actions into strategic priorities through, for example, the implementation of a community plans database (see 3.2.4)
- Identifying resources to better support:
  - ◆ The costs that communities incur during their planning activity
  - ◆ Maintaining a network of independent facilitators to advise and support community activity
  - ◆ Funding to enable the implementation of actions identified by communities

**Lancashire** –

- Parish Plans are a key mechanism for the standardised collection of information.
- Communication between Community Champions and the public sector is needed at an early stage.
- More liaison between officers and service providers will lead to a better understanding of community needs at district and sub regional level.

- More liaison with service providers through a coordinated forum at which community champions are able to represent local needs would reduce the need for individual services to have community engagement meetings that do not link to strategies or other services.
- Community Champions need be have the capacity and understanding to be able to lobby all service providers.
- Public sector and Community Champions need to be able to recognise both their value and limits.
- In Lancashire, *Rural* has been mainstreamed, therefore community planning as a research mechanism needs to be rolled out across both urban and rural areas.
- Community forums need to be district based.
- Community Champions from rural areas need to be present and lobby for their needs alongside urban counterparts.

### Issue 8 – What added value does community planning offer - in particular its place alongside other neighbourhood engagement activity undertaken by local authorities, police forces, fire & rescue services, primary care trusts etc

**Cheshire** - In addition to actual projects being delivered on the ground, there are a number of important and very significant social benefits derived from community plans that relate to social cohesion, the volunteering ethos, improving relations within communities, improved communication, a more flexible, innovative and holistic approach to problem solving, self help, confidence and capacity-building, up-skilling and sharing of untapped and latent expertise.

Community plans are:

- non-political and don't change with administrations
- bottom-up initiatives centred within communities
- important for informing service delivery and priority setting at parish, district and county level
- resulting in renewed interest in parish councils and in new parish councillors coming forward
- actively enabling communities to *place shape*
- through local volunteers, able to examine communities at a level of detail that other bodies cannot hope to achieve
- identifying much more effectively what local people want and need
- identifying local solutions to issues that are more likely to work because the community has a very real stake in them
- able to think more laterally, creatively and tangentially about possible solutions

- able to make unusual connections because of the holistic approach of the parish plan process.
- not constrained in terms of regulation, time, departmental boundaries, etc as local authority officers and members.

Some community plans have been especially important, identifying issues that were wholly unexpected, for example, debt problems amongst young married couples in private housing, drug problems and parenting issues. A consequence has been the harnessing of local initiative to tackle major social challenges. For example, one parish plan group is now running parenting classes, has set up debt counselling and drug awareness classes and is looking to appoint a Youth Co-ordinator to oversee the very varied range of youth initiatives they have identified as necessary to tackle some of their youth problems.

**Cumbria -** There is good evidence of the theoretical value of the community planning process as a tool for community engagement and consultation. The comprehensive nature of the community planning process means that it allows engagement on a diversity of issues through a single process, minimising duplication and community consultation fatigue.

Its strengths relate to its

- ability to engage the energy, enthusiasm and imagination of a cross-section of the local community
- potential to engage effectively in consultation and data collection because it is seen by local residents as something over which they have a degree of ownership
- independence from the public sector as a consequence of which it is perceived to be unconstrained by public sector involvement.

A result of these strengths is a rising interest, at least in Cumbria, among local authorities and other bodies (e.g. Cumbria Primary Care Trust) to engage in the process.

**Lancashire** – Community plans are a mechanism for the structured collection of information needed by Parish Councils and Community Champions to lobby service providers and funders.

Their ability to:

- Investigate all aspects of community life including social, environmental and economic issues
- Be inclusive, giving the entire community the opportunity to have an impact on the production and contents of the plan
- Provide information for local community groups alongside service providers
- Provide a clear plan of action with lead partners for each action
- To bridge the communication gap between local authorities and parish communities

means that they can be used alongside other neighbourhood engagement activity. A parish plan can be used in numerous ways to benefit a community or a parish. Ultimately it is a community document that individuals, businesses and groups can use to pursue their own projects and ideas. The plan also provides information to local authorities and service providers which in turn can help them improve their services by ensuring that other partners seeking similar information can avoid duplication of consultations.

Using an urban model, neighbourhood engagement has taken place within a rural area of Lancashire. Mapping and consultation was undertaken in Longridge and the findings used to provide information which could be compared with the urban communities. An officer provided through Lancashire County Council undertook a linking role in order to ensure that information on ongoing activity and the findings from the community consultation was shared.

The added value of parish planning can be shown through the Preston Pilot which was set up to look at how the Council engaged with its communities. Consultation was undertaken within one urban area in order to establish priorities. Two rural areas that have undertaken a parish plan are also involved. They have been able to provide evidence collated through the production of the plan of the communities needs and priorities. This work is ongoing with Officers from the Council holding open events in order to look at the priorities and how they can be addressed.

# 3.2 Examples of Current Practice

## 3.2.1 West Berkshire – A Beacon Council for Community Engagement

West Berkshire Council is a unitary authority serving a population of some 150,000 people who live in and around its main centres of Hungerford, Lambourn, Newbury and Pangbourne.

West Berks has been recognised under the Government's 'Beacon Council' programme as having a special expertise in community engagement, a recognition founded upon the way in which the Council has supported community planning.

In practical terms, the Council's support includes the following elements:

- facilitation in the form of a community planning support officer employed by the rural community council but funded by the Council;

- a grant fund to which communities can apply for the resources that they need to implement community plan actions;

- the brokering of third party sponsorship to offset some of the costs that communities incur while developing their plans e.g. printing, etc.

- quarterly surgeries at which planning groups can meet a range of Council officers to review progress and discuss emerging issues e.g. highways, housing, planning, etc.

- careful consideration of draft action plans followed by a positive commitment on the part of the Authority to support those actions that it is able to support

- a monitoring and reporting process, shared with Local Strategic Partnership that reports to senior officers on progress made with action plan implantation and especially the delivery of those actions to which the Council has committed support

- allocation to each planning group of a specific senior officer to manage liaison, ensure enquiries are dealt with and lead on monitoring, etc.

- similarly, an officer with a specific community transport brief

- arrangements that link community planning with the process of developing the local development framework.

Strong leadership has been central to developing the Council's obvious enthusiasm for community planning as an effective engagement tool. The Chief Executive has championed this approach, taking a direct personal interest that has included participating in community meetings and progress-chasing on the delivery of Council-supported actions. This takes place within a structure where all departments are asked to report on delivery of relevant actions. This leadership role has been critical in changing perceptions within the Council about the importance of community plans as a statement of local needs and priorities and has transformed its practical support.

As elsewhere, the Council is concerned to manage the expectations of its community planning groups. It achieves this by taking an active part in dialogue with planning groups right through process. This allows for open debate about the feasibility or otherwise of ideas coming from communities and enables the Council to positively commit to delivery of those actions that it agrees to support. The Council views as key its engagement immediately once surveys and data collection are complete. This early engagement also enables Council to build emerging ideas or requests into its own planning and budgeting processes. It specifically does not discourage communities from including aspirational actions, instead it tries to be very clear about what it, as the local authority, will or will not be able to do.

It is clear that West Berkshire Council has made a significant investment in time and resources in supporting community planning. It has not done so through altruism. Instead the Council has very clear views about the benefits that it gains from the process. These include:

- The demonstration of practical and effective community leadership

- The implementation of action plans helps to draw down funding from non-public sources for strategy delivery, including volunteer time and private and third sector resources

- Community planning offers the Council better engagement with its communities, helping to offset perceptions about the distance between the Council and the communities on the periphery of its area

- The community planning process captures new sources of evidence that are relevant to the Council's own policy and strategy needs

- Stronger engagement with its communities will strengthen the Council's performance in Comprehensive Area Assessment

- Community planning has been seen to promote higher levels of democratic participation

- Community level surveys are valuable for the identification of trends and emerging issues

- Direct involvement in the community planning process helps the Council to actively manage community expectations.

While clearly at the forefront among local authorities engaging with community planning, West Berkshire's process still offers some scope for improvement. For example:

- There is no defined route through which elected members can engage with the process although the community planning officer within the rural community council does ensure that members are contacted at start of process to ensure awareness and invite participation.

- Some Council officers do not see community planning as a part of the day job.
- The Council would like to strengthen quality control of community plans, it already encourages the use of smart objectives and consistent survey processes.
- Integration of community plans into the full range of local authority strategy development, rather than just community strategy development, could be strengthened.
- There is scope to engage a wider range of partners e.g. Primary Care Trust, Police, etc

The West Berks experience illustrates a number of important points that are of wider relevance. These include: the critical importance of leadership within local authorities; the range of practical support that local authorities can provide; the mutual benefits that accrue to both communities and the local authority from high levels of local participation in capturing data and debating local priorities. In addition, West Berks demonstrates that it is entirely possible to embed community planning within corporate strategy, performance management and service delivery without raising unrealistic expectations among communities.

### 3.2.2 Upper Eden Community Plan – The effective use of clustering, pathways and language in exercising influence

The Upper Eden area of Cumbria is one of England's most sparsely populated localities, reflected in a network of parishes many of which have very small populations, some with less than 100 residents. The Upper Eden Community Plan process has brought 17 of these parishes together to work jointly to address the needs of the town of Kirkby Stephen and the small communities that look to it as a service centre.

The planning process has been supported by Voluntary Action Cumbria while a grant from Defra's Rural Social and Community Programme enabled the communities to employ a project coordinator to help them with what was inevitably quite a complex process.

Voluntary Action Cumbria has adopted a policy of encouraging communities to take a cluster approach to community planning, having found it effective in enabling a diverse range of communities to participate. The approach is especially effective among smaller communities with some shared challenges, and is an efficient way to enable a larger number of communities to engage in community planning than the limited resources available for support would normally permit.

Work on the community plan started in the autumn of 2005 and a draft is to be published in April 2008. During the development of the Plan, a critical issue was identified that affects most if not all of the communities in the locality, the provision of affordable housing. Upper Eden is an area where house price to income ratios are amongst the highest in the Country.

This problem had already prompted some discussion between the community plan coordinator and officers of the local authority, Eden District Council, as the Upper Eden Community Plan group sought to set out its preferred policy for the provision of affordable housing. Then, in August 2007, the Council put its Housing Development Plan Document (DPD) out to consultation. This set out proposals concerning future housing development and targeting, and how it was proposed that affordable housing needs in the District would be met.

The Local Strategic Partnership and local Parish and Town Councils were among the consultees for the Housing Development Plan Document and their established relationship with the Upper Eden Community Planning Group created opportunities for the cluster of participating communities to respond promptly and effectively to the consultation. The following timeline records the process that developed over the following weeks:

- 4th Sept:  The Eden Local Strategic Partnership Steering Group meet to discuss a response to the Housing Development Plan Document.  The Upper Eden Community Plan Co-ordinator (a member of the Local Strategic Partnership Steering Group) presented his preferred responses to the Document, informed by the community plan's Affordable Housing Policy. The Local Strategic Partnership debated and approved, on a majority vote the *controlled mechanism* for affordable housing provision suggested by the community plan draft policy.

- 5th Sept:  The Chair of the community plan group, and of Kirkby Stephen Town Council, contacted the Voluntary Action Cumbria Rural Community Officer supporting the group.  He requested that the next planning group meeting become a joint discussion of the housing consultation with Kirkby Stephen Town Councillors, providing a positive opportunity to work beyond the normal scope of community plan development.

- 13th Sept:  The community plan group met with members of Kirkby Stephen Town Council.  Their debate was informed by the community plan's Affordable Housing Policy and Local Strategic Partnership discussions.

- 14th Sept:  The responses to the consultation questions agreed by the Upper Eden Community Plan group and members of Kirkby Stephen Town Council were circulated to Parish representatives who wished to use it as a basis for individual Parish consultation responses.

- 17th Sept:  The Local Strategic Partnership Officer met with the community plan Coordinator to finalise the Local Strategic Partnership response to the consultation.  Their work was informed by the community plan policy, Local Strategic Partnership Steering Group discussions and the community planning group and Kirkby Stephen Town Council joint response.

The Local Authority's planning policy staff have since met with representatives of the Upper Eden Community Plan to discuss its policy proposals. The publication of a revised draft Housing Development Plan Document will show the extent to which the Council's thinking has been influenced by the community plan and Local Strategic Partnership joint intervention.

This case study embodies a number of useful learning points:

- The clustering of communities enables those whose resources are limited by, for example, population size to take part in community planning processes.

- Clustering enables the effective application of the limited resources available to facilitate and finance community planning.

- Such clusters are an ideal vehicle for the shared exploration of common problems and needs.

- Community plans prepared by clusters of communities gain credibility from the number and scale of communities that they represent because they are seen to have clear strategic relevance.

- The emerging Upper Eden Community Plan consciously sought active engagement with the Local Strategic Partnership and in consequence is able to influence and be influenced by the Local Strategic Partnership.  This relationship is regarded as central to its future success in achieving strategic influence.

- A strong functional relationship was established between key officers early in the community planning process – Voluntary Action Cumbria's Rural Community Officer, the community planning group, the group's Coordinator, the Local Strategic Partnership Officer, etc.

- The community planning group was able to develop an Affordable Housing Policy, and work so closely with Local Authority officers, at least in part because their coordinator is a Planner with experience of local authority working who is able to use appropriate terminology when taking the Group's concerns and ideas to the local authority.

- The Local Strategic Partnership's practice of including community representatives, such as the community plan Coordinator, has been instrumental in increasing the influence of Community Plans over its community strategy development.

### 3.2.3 Cheshire Rural Community and Parish Planning Group – Cross-sectoral working to support community planning

The Rural Community and Parish Planning Group which operates in Cheshire and Warrington, facilitated by

Cheshire Community Council, represents an exemplary approach to the involvement and active participation of public and third sector partners in developing a shared of understanding of community planning and support for the process.

The following is a brief description of its structure and working methods.

**Representation -** This is a Cheshire County-wide Group that also includes near neighbours Warrington and Halton.  Some of the members are planners by specialism and others are community development specialists.  It comprises the following representatives:

- Cheshire County Council with a rural and a grants focus (2)
- Macclesfield Borough Council
- Vale Royal Borough Council
- Chester City Council
- Crewe and Nantwich Borough Council
- Congleton Borough Council
- Warrington Borough Council (separate unitary authority)
- Halton Borough Council (separate unitary authority)
- Cheshire Association of Local Councils
- GONW
- Parish Plans Development Officer for Cheshire
- Parish Plans Development Officer for Warrington
- RSCP Officer
- CEO Cheshire Community Council

**Terms of Reference -** The group initially operated as the Parish Plans Development Group. When the Rural Social and Community Programme came on stream it was decided to expand the remit of the group to include the Programme. One meeting takes place but it is split into two sections, dealing with Rural Social and Community Programme and then community plan issues.

**Frequency of Meetings -** The group meets about every 6 weeks except over the summer holiday with a total of about 9 meetings a year at the offices of Cheshire Community Council which hosts the group. Chairman ship began with the chief executive of Cheshire Community Council but is now rotated amongst members.

**Content of Meetings -** The group discusses issues that are relevant to the Rural Social and Community Programme and to community planning. It discusses and seeks agreement on protocols, policies, processes, documentation and funding. The group also develops joint responses to consultation documents and exchanges information on a range of subjects including grant availability, Post Office Closures and Local Government Re-organisation.  It has proved to be an excellent way to air common issues and problems and develop and share potential solutions.

Invited speakers occasionally attend. These have included:

- Cheshire Landscape Trust giving a presentation on Village Design Statements
- North West Planning Aid explaining their work and how they could help Parish Planners
- Rural Housing Enablers for East and West Cheshire describing their Rural Social and Community Programme funded work; and
- North West Regional Assembly attended describing their Integrated Appraisal Toolkit.

The work of the Rural Community and Parish Planning Group demonstrates the mutual benefits that can arise from regular networking using community planning as a theme. In Cheshire this approach has built support for the process and contributed to strengthening engagement between community planning groups and local authorities. Having observed these benefits a similar group is now being developed in Cumbria.

### 3.2.4 Community Plans Database – Translating community findings and actions to a strategic level

Discussion with public sector partners has identified as a particular challenge the complexity, and simple workload implications, for each authority in obtaining copies of all the community plans in their locality, scrutinising these for relevant information and then disseminating this among elected members and officers.

In response, the Rural Community Action Network (ACRE and the regional and sub-regional rural community councils) has developed and is beginning to implement a community plans database as a nationally consistent tool.

The purpose of the database, and its value to partners, lies in its ability to establish relationships between the needs and actions that communities identify and those strategic priorities to which they relate. The database is able to achieve this, for example, in relation to sustainable community strategies at a range of spatial levels. Individual community plans are analysed, each action entered into a database and relationships between that action established with relevant regional, sub-regional and local strategic priorities. Following this process of data capture the totality of community evidence can be reported to local authorities and service planners in the context of their own strategic frameworks and priorities.

In the North West work is ongoing in Cheshire, Cumbria and Lancashire to implement the database in this way and is expected to become operational later in 2008 (it is already fully operational in some other counties and regions). As work progresses it becomes much easier to:

- produce grass roots evidence that supports strategic activity and decisions.

- capture information concerning activity taking place at a local level that contributes to the realisation of strategic priorities.
- identify significant concerns that are being expressed at local level but that are not being addressed by more strategic activity.

Making the information from community plans available in this accessible and readily digested way is viewed as an invaluable pathway by which those involved in local activity may influence their strategic partners. The process also offers direct benefit to the officers and members of strategic bodies by giving them access to a wealth of local evidence and information.

### 3.2.5 Investing in Communities – Strategic collaboration to strengthen community influence

Developed by the Lake District National Park Authority, the Investing in Communities project recognises that the National Park's residents and communities are central to achieving the Authority's vision of the Park as a place with a prosperous economy, world class visitor experiences and vibrant communities as well as a spectacular landscape.

The project's community focus is reflected in the partnership that has come together for its delivery. To date, each has been separately engaging with local communities for a particular purpose:

- The Lake District National Park Authority as Local Planning Authority
- Voluntary Action Cumbria, Cumbria's rural community council
- Cumbria Rural Housing Trust, a charity working with communities to address their particular housing needs

The project aims to create more effective ways of working that will benefit the communities of the Park by:

- Creating opportunities for working collaboratively both within and between communities;
- Gathering evidence about and improving understanding of local needs and priorities;
- Effectively communicating these local needs and priorities to the National Park Authority and the other organisations that provide services
- Providing access grants that can help with implementing some of the actions or projects that participating communities may identify.

Investing in Communities is intended to help communities to achieve some or all of these outcomes by providing access to a distinctive package of support and advice that includes:

- A higher level of support from the staff than can usually be provided.

- Access to an integrated approach in which the project partners work together to ensure that participating communities gain maximum benefit from their activity.
- Opportunities to access a wide range of staff and sources of advice.
- Participation in a programme of workshops that will offer the opportunity to acquire and hone skills.
- Participation in a mentoring programme through which communities will share and learn from one another's experience.
- Access to sources of grant funding that will assist in community planning activity and the implementation of community plan actions.

For their part the project partners hope to learn how they can make most effective use of the resources that they have for supporting community initiatives.

Funding for the project comes from a successful bid to the HM Treasury "Invest To Save" fund and runs until 2010.

For more information contact:
rogerroberts@ruralcumbria.org.uk

### 3.2.6 Community Planning Toolkits – A resource for practical support and quality control

One outcome of the Pathways of Influence project has been the development of a Best Practice Guide by the project's partners in Cheshire. This is appended in full as a part of this report (section 6.3).

All of the action learning set discussions showed clearly that access to guides and toolkits is an essential means of supporting groups undertaking a community plan. There is also agreement that these resources help to ensure the quality of process that the community undertakes and the plan that it produces.

Action with Communities in Rural England published a national "Parish and Community Planning" toolkit in early 2007. Based upon initial development as a part of the Defra Rural Pathfinder programme this is now being utilised throughout the Rural Community Action Network (of 38 rural community councils) to deliver consistent and informed support to numerous rural communities.

Taking a loose leaf format to facilitate easy updating and addition of extra information, the toolkit comprises:

- Overview – a definition of community and parish planning, advice on links and bridging to strategic level and a summary of the "9 steps" of community planning
- Core Advice and Resource Sheets – information and advice relating to the 9 steps which are:
  - ◆ Getting Started

- ◆ Establishing the Steering Group
- ◆ Developing a project plan
- ◆ Community consultation
- ◆ Prioritising and planning action/sustainability
- ◆ Drafting the plan
- ◆ Finalising the Plan
- ◆ Implementing the action plan
- ◆ Monitor and review
- Local Information – local support, advice, contact, grants, etc.

At the same time, many rural community councils have produced support materials that reflect local experience and needs. For example Cheshire Community Council has produced a Guide to Parish Plans, County Funding System and Toolkit while Voluntary Action Cumbria has published "Community and Parish Plan Guidance Sheets". Based upon its experience of facilitating the development of over 80 community plans by Cumbrian communities this currently comprises a set of 12 guidance sheets covering both the planning process and some of the issues that communities regularly encounter:

- A Timetable for the process
- Consulting your community
- Joint working (i.e. clustering with other communities)
- Writing the plan
- Action planning
- A model action plan
- Implementing the action plan
- The Bigger Picture (i.e. the strategic context and routes to influence)
- Rural Housing (i.e. housing affordability and provision, a key issue in much of Cumbria)
- Funding for plans and actions
- A better local environment (i.e. environmental actions, carbon reduction, etc.)

More information about these resources can be obtained from:

www.acre.org.uk
www.ruralcumbria.org.uk/

# 4.    Challenge!

The emerging findings of the Pathways of Influence project have been subject to two primary sources of challenge prior to the publication of the definitive Findings and Calls to Action.

The first of these has been through reference back, on a number of occasions, to the wider project team including officers of Government Office for the North West and the three sub-regional rural community councils.

More formally, the work has been scrutinised by the North West Rural Affairs Forum. A large part of the NWRAF event 'Strengthening Community Action Planning' of 7th March 2008 was devoted to presenting and challenging the key findings of the Pathways of Influence project.

During the programme approximately 60 delegates received presentations from Rob Hindle (Rural Innovation) and Roger Roberts (North West Rural Community Councils). Together these summarised the strategic context within which community-led planning is now taking place, viz

- A strengthening role for Local Strategic Partnerships
- The government's focus on 'place shaping' and community empowerment
- The national revisions to the Local Area Agreement process
- Recent publication of the National Indicator set
- The clear potential for community planning to deliver place shaping, empowerment and progress towards key National Indicators (e.g. National Indicator 4)

This introduction also outlined the Pathways of Influence project, the methodology used and the way in which layers of evidence and conclusions have framed the project's draft findings and their related 'Calls to Action'.

The views expressed in these introductory presentations were reinforced through a presentation by Mark Harris (West Berkshire Council) who described the Councils 'Beacon' activity to support community planning and embed the process in the Council's work. Mark's presentation touched upon a number of exemplary points, viz:

- Enthusiastic support for the community planning process among the Council's senior staff, notably the Chief Executive
- Financial support in the form of funding for an independent facilitator employed by a third sector partner and a grant programme to support action plan implementation
- Other forms of support including facilitating in-kind third-party support to cover printing, etc.
- Structured access to council staff for technical advice

- Commitment by the Council to delivery of agreed Action Plan actions through negotiation at a draft plan stage
- Embedding of Action Plan delivery in the Council's performance management framework
- Nomination of senior officers as lead contacts for groups of community plans.

Following these presentations, delegates took part in workshops at which they were invited to consider and report back against the following questions

- Identify one Call to Action that you can improve (and how)
- make a case for any that you feel should be removed
- Make a case for any you would add

In overall terms, delegates were very supportive of both the findings of the research programme and the way in which these have been translated into calls to action.

Key conclusions from the event were:

- With some refinement the findings and Calls to Action are useful and comprehensive (there was no consistent proposal from delegates that any should be removed)
- There is a need to shorten statements and simplify the language used
- Additional reference to the key role of leadership is required
- Other suggested additions related to: training; routes to funding; signposts to relevant NIs; a broadening of focus to include the police, Primary Care Trusts, Health Trusts and other key public service providers.
- Local Strategic Partnership engagement represents a particular challenge because of their relative lack of resources.
- Need to revisit comments about clustering in order to emphasise the need to maintain local community ownership of process and action plan

These conclusions have been taken into consideration in editing this final report, resulting in the amendment of eleven of the calls to action and the addition of a further finding which reflects the emphasis that delegates placed upon the key role of those in a leadership position.

The Challenge process has significantly contributed to the value of the research programme, its findings and the calls to action that are based upon these.

# 5.   Action Learning Set Proceedings

## 5.1   Cheshire Action Learning Set

Cheshire Community Council facilitated the work of the action learning set in the County. This brought together ten participants representing a cross section of local authorities and community representatives with experience of the community planning process. At its first meeting the group discussed the strengths and weaknesses of community planning, and the constraints that affect the process. This approach established that experiences varied widely for both public sector and community participants because of the different systems in place for supporting, funding and responding to the planning process.

Over subsequent meetings, the group developed discussion, focusing their time in particular upon the weaknesses and threats that they had identified. Building on their discussions, the group then presented their key conclusions in the form of a Good Practice Guide. This is appended in full to our report (see section 6.3) and represents a valuable outcome from the work of the Cheshire group which has much wider relevance and application.

### Reaching achievable and realistic projects and not raising unrealistic expectations

While recognising the importance of communities considering all contributions and perspectives the importance of being able to distinguish between needs, wants and wishes as a part of the process of prioritising actions was accepted. It was considered important not to constrain the ambition of communities but, equally, necessary to offer a sense of reality about what could and could not be implemented. Effective communication would be key to ensuring that this happened in an appropriate way.

## Can the process divide the community?

All agreed that the ideal approach to community planning was based upon close links between the community plan group and the parish council, a model which was known to deliver most effectively. It was also accepted that, in some instances this was not possible and that it continued to be important that the group working on community planning be supported. It was suggested that a close relationship might be fostered if more information on community planning were to be embedded in the training of parish clerks and chairs.

### Is the process representative of the wider community?

### Is the plan a true reflection of community views if the percentage of returns is low?

The need to engage widely with all sections of the community was highlighted in discussions. While there should not be any lower limit on questionnaire/survey responses, it was agreed that the quality of the process and methodologies used should be scrutinised, including any actions taken to encourage the participation of harder to reach groups.

### No formal place for community plans – and not influencing 'planning' to the extent envisaged.

### Difficulty with fitting into the Local Development process

It was felt that communities with a community plan should be treated differently from those without because of the robust consultation process that provides a basis of community plans.

Protocols are recognised as having great value. However there is scope to develop these to involve a wider range of participants such as Local Strategic Partnerships, Primary Care Trusts, the Police and utility companies. Examples of issues involving utilities would include electricity substations and water pumping stations.

There are already four Parish Plan protocols in place in Cheshire, one for the County and three within the six Boroughs. The Boroughs each provide something slightly different in the way of support and help for community plans and therefore each protocol reflects the nature of the support and help offered and the resources available. They also reflect the differing significance that each Borough gives to community plans within its own area.  It was acknowledged that the protocols largely omit the implementation end of the process and the Cheshire and Warrington Parish Plan Group urged that we needed to look more closely at this, as does the Good Practice Guide.

In this context it was suggested that more consistent protocol content would help in managing the relationship between local authorities and community planning groups. This should include arrangements for:

- Pre application engagement
- Developers having regard to community plans
- Use of community plans as evidence in developing a new Local Development Framework/development plan
- Provision of planning extracts to community planning groups starting out on the process
- Working with community planning groups
- Implementation – what happens to completed plans etc
- Signing off by service heads
- Receiving plans at Cabinet level
- Internal, mixed disciplinary groups to monitor and work with community planning groups on implementation
- Allocating officers to each completed community plan as a Champion.

A Local Strategic Partnership Implementation Protocol was also suggested.

### Reluctance of some officers to get involved and/or respond to local issues raised

Several community representatives felt that there had been little or no feedback from district or county councils on community plans submitted after completion or on updates concerning the implementation of action plans provided subsequently. Both plans and updates appeared to disappear into a *black hole*. The group identified an important role for protocols in setting a framework for community plan implementation, as well as preparation. Protocols might also provide guidance to community representatives by setting out suggestions on how plans may be implemented with sample letters and ideas for funding etc. A Guide to Implementation of Parish Plans similar to the existing Guide to Parish Plans produced by the Parish Plan Development Officer would be very useful.

### Clustering

There was some discussion of the idea of Parishes being clustered and working together to produce a plan. Fears were expressed particularly by community planners about larger, more prosperous or more skilled parishes coming to dominate the process and others fading away and losing interest as a result. There is already some experience of this with some smaller parishes close to larger parishes with much larger populations and precepts where the smaller parish felt that its interests would be different and would possibly be overlooked or overtaken by the views of their larger neighbour. However, joint working might be appropriate in order to address common issues although the result might be an issue specific plan rather than a holistic one.

Clustering parishes for training purposes and to provide information is a good and economic way of using time and resources and getting people to share ideas and expertise with others. The Guide to Parish Plans makes reference to sharing of information and to inviting neighbouring parishes to launches and sending them copies of plans and *buddying up* of parishes to help one another and share skills and expertise. Things like the Parish Plan Network in Crewe and Nantwich is a good way of helping groups to share and do some simple training and providing of information. Inviting speakers from completed parishes to speak at open meetings in parishes just getting started, is also useful and highly effective.

### Engaging a wider spectrum of public service providers

The issue of involving the utility companies was re-iterated. It is important to draw in all potential partners who might be affected and who can contribute to the community planning process. Agencies or organisations specifically mentioned in discussion included registered social landlords, BT (plus other telephone, television and cable providers), transport companies, British Waterways Board, Cheshire Wildlife Trust, local large landowners (National Trust, estate owners including the Crown Estates) and big employers such as Astra Zenecca and Barclays and local Golf Clubs

### Good Practice in relation to the involvement of elected members

The group considered the role of local authority members in the process. Although elected members had been involved by some groups, and proved very supportive, engagement was not consistent, depending upon the needs or initiative of individual community plan groups. Where they had been included councillors had been able to open doors and to put planning groups in touch with the right people. Guidance to community planning groups concerning councillor engagement would help to raise awareness of the value of doing so. It was noted that inviting councillors to the open meeting and keeping them involved/informed is good practice and especially beneficial as outcomes start to emerge.

Discussion also explored the role of parish councillors within community planning. They were potentially key members of the planning steering group and also implementation group, although the parish council should not be expected to implement all the community plan actions. It was suggested that the Guide to Parish Plans should be revisited to highlight the benefits that result if the Parish Council and community plan group work collaboratively.

### Existing community action planning toolkits

Local material includes The Guide To Parish Plans, the Funding Pack, Steering Group materials etc. These are frequently updated and amplified in order to address new issues and needs. The group considered these resources to be invaluable and to make a particular contribution in ensuring quality of process.

### Good practice on effective community engagement

There have been interactive workshops on effective community engagement run by Chester City Council, Vale Royal and Crewe and Nantwich, in which the Parish Plan Development Officer has been involved and devised case study materials. There are toolkit guidelines on community engagement and the Cheshire Training Partnership has run Community Engagement workshops for Parish Councillors and Parish Clerks in which the Parish Plan Development Officer was involved. There is also plenty of email and telephone guidance on effective community engagement available from the Parish Plan Development Officer and other staff of the Rural Community Council. The parishes also share their skills and experiences and host speakers.

## 5.2   Cumbria Action Learning Set

Covering an area of 800 square miles, half within the Lake District National Park, and a population of 166,000 people, West Cumbria comprises the districts of Allerdale and Copeland.

Within these two districts are a total of 89 parishes of which about one third have completed community plans. A further 5 are actively involved in the planning process and others are about to start.

Community planning in Cumbria is supported through facilitation by Voluntary Action Cumbria (the rural community council) and modest grant assistance (until 31st March 2008) from the Defra Rural Social and Community Programme. Informal liaison takes place between community planning groups, VAC and the local authorities/agencies. Draft protocols exist to help the various parties manage this liaison but at the time the action learning set was meeting these had not been formally adopted.

The action learning set was intended to use discussion of the influence of community plans on the West Cumbria Community Strategy as a basis for exploring the key issues arising from their shared practical experience.

It comprised up to ten participants who included officers from the county and district councils and local strategic partnership alongside people with experience of community planning at local level.

The action learning set met on three occasions and members undertook supplementary discussion and research between meetings to inform their contributions.

At its first meeting the participants engaged in some shared discussion and also explored the strengths and weaknesses of the community planning process, from their perspective, in sectoral groups. This session helped to identify four main areas for detailed exploration by volunteers from the group prior to subsequent discussion. The themes identified were:

- Understanding the community perspective
- Collaboration with elected members
- Supporting disadvantaged communities
- Effectively engaging local authorities
- Understandably, there was considerable interweaving of the threads of discussion that took place.

### Understanding the community perspective

The emerging, overarching principle that underpinned discussion concerning this aspect of the process was the need for more open dialogue between communities and local authorities, agencies and strategic partnerships. Key points concerned the need for:

- Effective two-way communication between all the parties involved
- The open exchange of information and data
- Engagement with communities of interest as well as communities of place
- Early dialogue between communities and local authorities/LSPs about possible questionnaire content.

There was broad agreement about the need for an improved community planning protocol to help manage these processes and especially to ensure that communities embarking on a community plan understand and are able to reflect upon the strategic priorities for their locality.

Discussion also highlighted the failure of those involved in community planning to effectively explain to local authority officers and members, and other partners, how community planning might be of relevance and use in public sector activities.

### Collaboration with elected members

All participants agreed that effective engagement with elected members is a key route to increasing strategic influence and in maximising the benefit of the community planning process for both communities and local authorities/LSPs. Key actions identified included:

- Information for councillors concerning the community planning process and current activity in their ward/locality.
- Better explanation of the contribution that community planning can make to strategic priorities, place shaping, local area agreement outcomes and the Government's community empowerment agenda.
- Provision of best practice examples of engagement between local authorities and community planning that highlight the benefits to local authority participants.

### Supporting disadvantaged communities

The action learning set had concerns that community planning was generally undertaken by communities with greater local capacity and resources, and therefore arguably with less 'need'. In practice this was difficult to evidence, because community planning in Cumbria has spanned a wide diversity of communities from the least to the most affluent. However, it was suggested that the participation of some more disadvantaged communities had resulted from external influences, for example direct approaches from the Countryside Agency and/or Voluntary Action Cumbria. The group concluded that:

- Local authorities, Local Strategic Partnerships and third sector partners such as Voluntary Action Cumbria must continue to identify and support communities in need of external support with community planning
- There is an ongoing need for resources to support expert and independent facilitation, the costs incurred by communities in completing a plan and projects contributing to action plan implementation. These are especially important for those communities that have more limited skills and/or resources.

### Effectively engaging local authorities

The group agreed that community plans were little used by local authorities and explored the reasons why this is currently the case. A number of issues were identified:

- A low level of awareness of community planning as a process and its relevance to local authority interests
- Limited understanding about the quality of the process – the data and evidence collected, level of community participation, engagement with hard to reach groups
- Lack of easy access to completed community plans
- Concern that action plans represent little more than a 'wish list'
- Failure of community plans to address key strategic concerns alongside matters of more immediate and local interest.

### Use of community planning protocols and toolkits

In the context of the challenges, needs and opportunities that their discussions highlighted, the action learning set's discussions turned often to possible solutions. Much of this discussion focussed on the use of protocols and toolkits to help structure the community planning process in a way that would best meet the needs of both the community and their public sector partners. This discussion included the scrutiny of existing documents and suggestions about ways in which these might be improved.

These discussions concluded that, to be effective, protocols must explain and/or make appropriate provision for:

- The value of community planning to both communities and public sector partners
- The roles of the various participants (community representatives, elected members, officers, service providers)
- Communication arrangements that will enable an effective exchange of information/data while allowing public sector partners to manage the resultant workload
- Involvement of a wider range of partners to the protocol e.g. Primary Care Trust, Police, service providers
- Clear opportunities for elected members to be involved in or informed about the process and local activity
- Effective strategic briefing of community planning groups at an early stage in their work
- Early opportunities for public sector partners to comment on emerging action plans, recognising that responses may range from the management of expectations to clear commitments to certain elements of action plan delivery

## 5.3    Lancashire Action Learning Set

Community Futures, the County's rural community council, facilitated the action learning set in Lancashire. The county is primarily rural but has densely populated urban conurbations, a total population of 1.41 million includes approximately 267,000 people who live in rural areas.

Community planning in Lancashire is facilitated by Community Futures as a component of its activity to support the community capacity building element of the Lancashire Local Area Agreement. To ensure appropriate relevance to the LAA, community planning groups are asked to include ten core questions within their survey work that link directly to the main themes of the LAA.

The work of the action learning focused upon the way in which Community Champions could influence a local area agreement, working in the context of Ribble Valley, one of the County's more rural districts.

The action learning set also took place in the broader context of a number of projects over the last 2 years that have explored similar issues. These included Community Futures' own work to deliver the Rural Social and Community Programme and the Longridge Pilot scheme which explored the effective use of parish and town councils as a route to greater community influence on decision-making.

Largest of the projects was the Lancashire Rural Delivery Pathfinder, part of the national Defra Pathfinder programme. That work had enabled partners to collaborate in the exploration of rural delivery issues and to identify a number of recommendations:

- The development of a sophisticated public service tasking framework is essential to achieve an equitable level of public service provision in rural areas where the added cost of delivering services (the rural premium) is a barrier to social inclusion and equity.
- An improved understanding of the evolution and change resulting from the interaction of market forces and policy within rural communities, and the role and responsibilities of the public sector and agencies, is fundamental to achieving strong, prosperous and balanced rural communities.
- Embedding rural service delivery within mainstream public service delivery, and not rely upon grant intervention, will require the development of practical rural proofing tools that are usable by and attractive to service delivery managers.
- The development of a usable dataset and impact assessment tool will help to inform service delivery decision-making by enabling targeting and performance monitoring.
- Decision-making affecting rural communities must be improved by balancing the identified needs and aspirations of a community with relevant strategic priorities and social interests. This means effectively linking local community planning to community strategies and therefore sub-regional and regional strategy and policy development.

- All stakeholders should work to build a positive local attitude towards change in rural particularly where development will maintain balanced rural communities.

The action learning set comprised up to 10 Community Champions including councillors at borough and county level, chairs of rural community groups and parish councils. It took a very open view of its brief, recognising that issues of community involvement, engagement and empowerment are broader than the community planning process. At its first meeting, the group identified five key topics for discussion:

- How can the Local Area Agreement *listen*, use a common language and common targets?
- Community Champions should influence the Ribble Valley Community Strategy which should in turn influence Ambition Lancashire (the county community strategy).
- How do we feed the community's issues and needs into the Ribble Valley Community Strategy and Ambition Lancashire and what happens to non-priority issues?
- Councillors to feedback information to communities and to be reflective of the community i.e. meaningful representation by councillors and officers.
- Clarity of the three tiers of government and how these can work together and communicate, to deliver partnership across all three levels.

At subsequent meetings the action learning set members explored four areas: barriers, pathways, changes in planning methodologies and changes in attitude to input into the Local Area Agreement; in relation to these five topics.

Their discussions led to the conclusion that, in order to develop transparent solutions for the Community Champions to influence the Local Area Agreement the following would be needed:

### Governance structures for engagement and delivery

- A clear and jointly agreed purpose – Community Champions and the public sector must understand and value each others role
- Communication through a common language
- A resourced and coordinated network
- Transparency about how the information will be dealt with at each tier of government and by each service provider

### Accountability of representation

- All partners (especially Community Champions) must have a mandate and mechanism for feedback
- Community Champions have a role in ensuring that information is incorporated in policy or passed to service providers

- Community Champions must have a knowledge of important dates for the Local Strategic Partnership and Local Area Agreement in order to be able to feed back information
- Community Champions and elected members must work in partnership in order to have a collective voice

### Capacity building for Community Champions and the public sector

- An understanding of the roles, responsibilities and influences
- Information available in 'plain English'
- Longer consultation periods
- Signposting into the community and public sector
- Community Champions must be able to provide a strategic context for community consultations; this will also strengthen the links between the action planning process and the Champions
- A formalised training programme to ensure that Community Champions understand the commitment and responsibility that is involved

### Strong leadership

- Community Champions must be empowered to be able to challenge at all levels when asking for feedback
- Accountability of roles (Community Champions/Ribble Valley Community Strategy and partners/Ambition Lancashire and its partners)
- An acknowledgement of the Community Voice as a collective
- An understanding of the wider issues affecting the voluntary, community and faith sector in Lancashire
- A drive by the leaders of the Local Strategic Partnership to ensure the district's information is included in the Local Area Agreement
- Representation on the Local Strategic Partnership / Local Area Agreement must be reflective of and feed back to its constituents
- Recognition that all services have Community Champions and how these can input from their areas
- Recognise what is aspirational and what is deliverable

### Research-based evidence and views

- Community planning/community consultation toolkits must have a recognised format
- Community planning/community consultation information must link directly back to local policies and partnerships

- Community planning/community consultation must be representative of all the community including all age groups
- There needs to be a central site for accessing community planning/community consultations across Lancashire
- There should be agreed timescales for public consultation to ensure good community response and to allow public organisations to coordinate responses (perhaps using Local Compact guidelines)

### Recognition of the value of community activity and its impact on strategic outcomes

- Community planning/community consultation information and the impact of neighbourhood activity on local and sub-regional policies
- Ownership of local policies

The action learning set agreed their key messages to be:

- Communication is crucial across all the tiers of government
- Partnership working must be effective and all partners must be equal
- There must be transparency and ownership across the whole process
- A recognised and coordinated governance structure must be in place to allow district-based Community Champions to influence the Local Strategic Partnership and Local Area Agreement
- All partners must be knowledgeable of the following issues:
  - ◆ Rurality
  - ◆ The strategic context
  - ◆ Community engagement and empowerment
  - ◆ The impact of neighbourhood activity on strategic outcomes
  - ◆ The impact of non activity in rural areas
- There must be feedback from all partners at all stages to development
- Community Champions must use community planning information to feed into consultations
- Community planning formats must be recognised across the sub-region

# 6.    Example Materials

## 6.1  Cumbria Community Planning Protocol

### 1.    Purpose

The purpose of this protocol is to promote good working practices, and especially effective communication, between parties involved in Community Action Planning i.e. community groups, local authorities, other partners and the infrastructure organisations that provide independent support to the process.

This protocol is intended to establish an easily understood framework to manage the flow of ideas and information between communities, local authorities and other partners with two objectives in mind, to:

- provide the community groups with confidence about their key points of contact

- enable other partners to manage requests for information and for comments upon proposed actions in a way that best suits their operational needs

### 2.    Definition

Community Action Planning is:

- An **elective, grass roots process** of survey and planning led by the Parish/Town Council and/or community volunteers and which produces a plan in which the community has been involved and over which they have ownership.

- **Facilitated** using a tool kit based upon **national and local best practice** to ensure -

  ◆ **Wide engagement** with the community using a variety of different methods of consultation and engagement

  ◆ **Consideration of the needs of all sectors** of the community including young people, BME and other hard to reach groups

  ◆ **Use of a sound evidence** base to define problems and needs

- Leads to an **action plan** that includes:

  ◆ actions within local community control

  ◆ issues to be taken forward by working with authorities and agencies

  ◆ longer-term aspirations

- **Balances aspiration and realism** about what may be possible.

The value of Community Action Planning is that it provides a process through which local people may think about their needs for the future. The collaborative work that is involved brings local people together and contributes to building social capital. Their research and conclusions then provide a readily accessible source of evidence and community views that local authorities find valuable in informing the development of strategies such as Local Development

Frameworks, Sustainable Community Strategies and Accessibility Plans. A Community Action Plan also provides the community with the evidence that it will need in order to access funding opportunities and stimulate projects.

The Community Action Planning process can be greatly strengthened if the relevant elected members of both district and county council are engaged from the outset. This may be by informing them about the community's ideas, inviting their active participation on a steering or working group, providing regular updates about progress or asking for help in overcoming specific problems or barriers.

There are 4 sections to the Protocol:

- Commencement

- Practical support

- Information sharing

- Progressing outcomes

### 3.    Commencement

Groups interested in community action planning should be supported from the earliest possible stage. VAC is resourced to act as a first point of contact with communities and is skilled in facilitating the process. It may also be able to access grant aid to support the community concerned. Partners will therefore refer initial enquires to VAC.

VAC believes that promoting a 'cluster' approach through which several communities collaborate in action planning is beneficial in the use of resources, enables smaller communities to participate and limits the demands for communication and information that are experienced by other partners. It will therefore promote such an approach with new groups seeking to begin work on a community action plan. In practice, the number of such clusters likely to be active in any one local authority area at any one time will be limited.

Once a community or group of communities are ready to start work, VAC will facilitate an introductory meeting at which the relevant local authorities and other partners will be represented. This meeting will be informal in its structure but its purpose is to enable all of the partners to share information about:

- Respective roles and responsibilities

- Advice on engaging with elected representatives

- Strategic priorities that the community group should consider

- Appropriate sources of information

- Relevant strategic plans

The outcome of the meeting is expected to be that the community group will clearly understand who in each partner organisation is their single point of contact and the strategic context in which they are working. This should help to manage information flows and also ensure that the group's work is of strategic relevance and therefore benefit to the local authority.

## 4.    Practical Support

As a general principle communities will contact local authorities only through their nominated point of contact (which may be a specific officer or team). This contact will use their best endeavours to circulate incoming requests and information to all appropriate colleagues and to collate any response that may be needed. Local authorities will undertake to respond wherever possible with 15 working days, either with the input or information requested or an indication of the timescale within which this can be provided.

In response to requests, and within the practical limits imposed by resources, the partners will provide a range of support and guidance to groups including:

- Provision of information on areas of responsibility and current plans in these areas
- Signposting of groups to relevant officers for specialist information
- Assistance in engaging with elected representatives
- Commenting on a draft community questionnaire
- Inputting/commenting on a draft community action plan and where possible
- provide access to base maps and plans

The last of these points, commenting upon a draft plan, is the single most useful contribution that local authorities can offer to the process. There should be a clear commitment on the part of both the community concerned and the local authority, enabled through this protocol, to sharing and commenting upon a community action plan in draft form.

The partners will indicate, during the introductory meeting, how they wish to be contacted as an additional means of managing the workload involved. This might, for example, include a preference for receiving correspondence through email, especially for comments on draft questionnaires and draft action plans because this allows documents to be shared throughout the relevant departments.

## 5.    Information Sharing

Communication between authorities regarding plans will be through the key contacts.

VAC will develop and maintain a Community Action Plan Issues document for each locality. This will incorporate information from all of the current plans in a locality in order to provide strategic partners with a convenient and accessible source of information. This will help in the identification of recurring and emerging issues across each district.

## 6.    Progressing Outcomes

Completed Community Action Plans will be sent by the community group concerned to the key contact at each authority. They will provide the following number of copies; District Council – 3; CALC - 1; County Council - 2; Lake District National Park Authority (where appropriate)

- 2; VAC - 2. Wherever practicable each organisation should be provided with a digital copy for ease of circulation.

On receipt of a newly published plan each partner will acknowledge receipt and circulate the document to relevant departments/teams.

If requested, each partner also agrees to attend a community action planning group meeting to advise on effective action plan implementation.

Each partner also agrees to put local groups in touch with each other to share experience and good practice
In addition:-

*The District Council will:*
- Circulate the plan to the relevant ward councillor(s) and the Local Strategic Partnership and ensure the existence of the plan and relevant issues are communicated to key officers.
- Respond with a list of areas where the Council has a role to play in the development and delivery of projects e.g. helping to make links with funding programmes.
- Help to make linkages between the Community Action Plan and other key local initiatives
- Provide a link to Community Action Plans on the Council website
- Follow up and feed back progression of actions through the key contact

*The County Council will:*
- Raise issues on Neighbourhood Forum agendas where appropriate either as points of information or as discussion items
- Help to facilitate a local public meeting/launch event to raise awareness and initiate work on the action plan
- Provide a copy of the plan to the elected member in that area

*The LDNPA will:*
- Identify issues and actions where it can assist with sign-posting; that are of information and/or assistance to the Authority or that can be directly assisted by the Authority
- Work with steering groups to assist in achieving actions
- Keep a watching brief over any actions and ensure the steering group are given updates on progress

*The Local Strategic Partnership will:*
- Include actions from Community Action Plans into a district wide issues table.
- Work with VAC to draw issues together and disseminate information to partners.
- Identify actions for LSP Task Groups to address.
- Put plans on, or develop links to the LSP website.

## 7.    Key Contacts

The key contacts are:

### District Council:

Name:_____

Tel No:_____    Email:_____

### Cumbria County Council:

Name:_____

Tel No:_____    Email:_____

### Lake District National Park Authority:

Name:_____

Tel No:_____    Email:_____

### CALC (Cumbria Association of Local Councils)

CALC Office:_____

Tel No:_____    Email:_____

### VAC

Name:_____

Tel No:_____    Email:_____

## 8.    Protocol Review

Once agreed by the partners, the satisfactory operation of the review will be monitored annually through a liaison meeting organised by Voluntary Action Cumbria that will bring together representatives of the lead partners.

This protocol has been agreed to by:

Name:_____

Authority:_____

Date:_____

## 6.2 Lancashire - Incorporating LAA related questions in Community Plan Questionnaires

Community Futures facilitates community planning in Lancashire as a key part of its activity to support the delivery of Local Area Agreement outcomes. In order to ensure a clear and consistent relationship between community plans and the Local Area Agreement, the organisation requires that participating communities include a set of standard questions within the questionnaires that they use. Communities then add questions relating to local issues and priorities to these standard questions.

These standard questions are:

**What are your views about the standard of services in . . . ?**

|  | Very Poor | Poor | Average | Good | Very Good |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Broadband |  |  |  |  |  |
| Dental |  |  |  |  |  |
| Dog Bins |  |  |  |  |  |
| Litter Bins |  |  |  |  |  |
| Mains electricity supply |  |  |  |  |  |
| Mains Gas supply |  |  |  |  |  |
| Mains water supply |  |  |  |  |  |
| Medica |  |  |  |  |  |
| Mobile Phone Reception |  |  |  |  |  |
| Pharmacy |  |  |  |  |  |
| Post boxes |  |  |  |  |  |
| Refuse collection |  |  |  |  |  |
| Roadside care/cleaning |  |  |  |  |  |
| Street Lighting |  |  |  |  |  |
| Winter weather service |  |  |  |  |  |

**From your house, how easy is it to reach the following with your usual means of transport?**

|  | Very Easy | Easy | Fairly Difficult | Very Difficult | Not Available |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Public Transport |  |  |  |  |  |
| Petrol Station |  |  |  |  |  |
| Nursery/Childcare |  |  |  |  |  |
| Primary School |  |  |  |  |  |
| Secondary School |  |  |  |  |  |
| Further Education (college) |  |  |  |  |  |
| Training |  |  |  |  |  |
| Hospital |  |  |  |  |  |
| GP |  |  |  |  |  |
| Dentist |  |  |  |  |  |
| Pharmacy |  |  |  |  |  |
| District Nurse/Ante Natal |  |  |  |  |  |
| Specialist Health (physio, counselling, chiropody) |  |  |  |  |  |
| Post Office |  |  |  |  |  |
| Bank |  |  |  |  |  |
| Cash Point |  |  |  |  |  |
| Food shop |  |  |  |  |  |
| Community Hall |  |  |  |  |  |
| Library |  |  |  |  |  |
| Advice Services |  |  |  |  |  |
| Sports/Leisure Facilities |  |  |  |  |  |

**Are you aware of the following Forums, Surgeries & Meetings which take place in the village where you can speak?**

|  | Yes | No |
|---|---|---|
| Parish Council |  |  |
| Area Meeting |  |  |
| Police & Communities together (PACT) |  |  |
| Community Safety Partnership |  |  |
| MP Surgery |  |  |
| County Councillor Surgery |  |  |
| Borough Council Surgery |  |  |
| Parish Council Surgery |  |  |
| Police Surgery |  |  |

**Do you feel your elected representatives take account of your local views and concerns in respect of decision making?**

|  | Yes | No |
|---|---|---|
| Parish Council |  |  |
| Borough Council |  |  |
| County Council |  |  |
| Member of Parliament |  |  |

**Do you know who represents you and how to contact them?**

|  | Yes | No |
|---|---|---|
| Parish Council |  |  |
| Borough Council |  |  |
| County Council |  |  |
| Member of Parliament |  |  |

**What type of future housing developments would you support in . . . ?**
*(Tick more than one box if appropriate)*

| | |
|---|---|
| Housing for Young People |  |
| Affordable Housing for Local People |  |
| Housing for the Elderly |  |
| Large Family Houses |  |
| Housing Estates |  |
| Small groups of houses |  |
| None |  |

**Could you envisage starting your own business at any point in the foreseeable future?**
*(Tick appropriate box)*

| | |
|---|---|
| Yes |  |
| No |  |
| I am already self employed |  |
| I already run a business |  |

**Would you be more likely to start your own business if support & advice was available?**
*(Tick appropriate box)*

| | |
|---|---|
| Yes – Much more likely |  |
| No – Wouldn't make any difference |  |
| Yes – A little more likely |  |
| Don't know |  |

**What is the main means of transport to and from work/school/college for each working/student member of your household?**

*(Please write the number of people in the appropriate box)*

|  | Number |
|---|---|
| Bicycle | |
| Bus and Train | |
| Car/Van | |
| Getting a lift | |
| Motor bike/scooter/moped | |
| Private Bus | |
| Public Bus | |
| Taxi | |
| Walking | |
| Other | |

**How often do you use the following services?**

|  | Daily | Weekly | Monthly | Occasionally | Never |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Community Transport | | | | | |
| Private Bus | | | | | |
| Public Bus | | | | | |
| Taxi | | | | | |
| Train | | | | | |

**How would public transport need to improve for you to use it more than currently?**

*(Tick which are appropriate)*

|  |  |
|---|---|
| Increase the frequency of provision. | |
| Community Transport available *(service comes when you phone)* | |
| Better information on times of service. | |
| No matter how it improved I would not use it. | |
| I think public transport is adequate as it is. | |
| Easier access for people with mobility difficulties. | |
| Run at more appropriate times. | |
| Assistance with baggage/young children. | |
| Current provision being more reliable. | |
| Better value for money. | |
| Increase safety on current provision. | |

## 6.3 Community Planning Good Practice Guide developed by the Cheshire Action Learning Set

In Cheshire, during the course of its work the Action Learning Set established as a part of the Pathways of Influence project captured its learning and local good practice in the following guide . . .

### General Comments

There is no single approach to the production and implementation of a Parish Plan. Parishes come in different sizes and geographical arrangements and with different types of community – they may have widely different needs and priorities. Methods that are suitable for larger but compact communities may not be appropriate for smaller dispersed rural communities. Some parishes may be more keen to take on more responsibility for running their own affairs than other parishes that may not have resources to do so. The beauty of the Parish Plan is that it allows the local community the freedom to express its views on priorities for future development on a whole range of different issues. This document sets out guidance on issues that may have arisen in the production and subsequent implementation of a Parish Plan, drawn up on the basis of discussions between representatives of a number of community groups that have produced Parish Plans in Cheshire, Cheshire Community Council and Officers of local authorities at District/Borough and County levels, that have supported, guided and in some cases funded the preparation and subsequent implementation of Parish Plans.

Examples of the pathways for a number of Parish Plans produced within Cheshire are attached.

| Potential Queries | Responses | Commentary and examples |
|---|---|---|
| What are the strengths of the Parish Plan Process? | 1. It can provide an opportunity for the local community to express its views on local matters including all issues.<br><br>2. It can lead to an improved two-way dialogue with District/Borough and County Councils.<br><br>3. It can lead to improved recognition and understanding of the wishes of the local community by the Local Authorities and can start to inform decisions on priorities for service delivery/spending.<br><br>4. A Parish Plan provides a formal reference document and body of information that can be used by officers and communities as a lobbying tool and to support funding applications.<br><br>5. It can help community cohesion and help to develop a volunteer base committed to improvements.<br><br>6. It can help to re-energise local democracy and improve relationships within the Community.<br><br>7. The wider consultation can raise awareness of issues not recognised previously by the Communities themselves and Councils.<br><br>8. It is a flexible and creative process that is holistic and all inclusive, requiring communication at and between all levels.<br><br>9. It can provide an opportunity to ensure that provision is made for young people, the disabled, elderly and infirm and other socially excluded groups to be part of the process.<br><br>10. It can provide an opportunity for place shaping. | In Bollington, the Parish Plan brought in a number of able people keen to see improvements in the community but not wishing to be involved in local politics/Town Council. In Helsby there were various events to get local people involved ranging from questionnaires and formal consultation sessions to setting up a stall at a fun day with flip charts and post it notes. In Odd Rode active inclusion of the PC throughout from inception to implementation has been very useful. In AEH an initial "Big Issues Flyer" was sent out first before the questionnaire and this flyer helped drive what went into the questionnaire. Tiverton Parish Council initiated the Parish Plan process and reached out to the community to involve new people. In Moulton it has enabled volunteers to develop their involvement in community activity. In Poynton and Rainow the Parish Plan has strengthened the Parish Council. In Poynton a range of 'social' issues were identified for action including the need for debt counselling and parenting classes which are now both being provided. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| What opportunities can be provided by producing a Parish Plan? | 1. It can lead to real improvements in local communities<br>2. It can provide an opportunity to lever in grant funds.<br>3. It can lead to devolved responsibility and funding for local schemes.<br>4. It can lead to the involvement of volunteers and expertise not previously available.<br>5. It can support and invigorate the local democracy.<br>6. Training needs can be identified and thereby met to provide additional competencies for volunteers in Parish Plan Groups and Parish Councils.<br>7. It can allow local and unrestrained thinking, although this must be tempered by realism, resources and prioritisation. The influence of environmental issues such as climate change can be considered.<br>8. It can influence strategic planning issues by informing the Local Strategic Partnership.<br>9. It can also influence local planning issues through Supplementary Planning Documents | Bollington and Rainow found this is an opportunity to identify a reservoir of retired professional and other people willing to provide their expertise provided they see it having positive effects. For Odd Rode, encouragement for the Parish Council to use this has been constant but is much resisted. AEH had concerns about reliance on a small group or individuals, who eventually become dispirited if things don't happen or exhausted at the amount of work involved and/or stressed at the amount of responsibility. Tiverton found that it requires quite a lot of effort on the part of the leadership group continually to persuade people to participate; we achieved several new faces who seem to have stayed around the centre of influence. Absolutely the best outcome from the completed Plan for Moulton and emerging from the Parish Plan process in Rushton is tapping into expertise not otherwise known about. |
| How can the Plan produce achievable and realistic projects and not raise expectations that cannot be delivered? | The process should not be constrained initially – all ideas should be recorded for potential future review. Priorities should then be established taking account of funding and practicality.<br><br>Contacts need to be developed from an early stage with a range of other bodies, including Parish/District/County Councils where appropriate. The Community Council now provides continuing assistance throughout the process including open meetings, steering group meetings and help with draft questionnaires, plans and action plans and funding. There needs to be wide consultation with other groups as the Plan emerges (e.g. police, transport). | Not an issue for most Plans in Cheshire, but AEH dispirited by illogical rules e.g. no tree planting because of underground services but no gas and electricity overhead cables. Moulton found that the community needs to be told that the Plan records needs and wants - not all achievable - important to show how priorities have been identified. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| How can it be ensured that the process does not 'divide' the community, particularly between elected and non elected people? | The Parish/Town Council should ideally be at the heart of the process but not controlling it.  The recommended procedure for both development and implementation of the Plan is for there to be close collaboration between the Parish Plan Group and the Parish/Town Council.  The Parish Plan Group should be chaired independently but have between 1 and 3 Parish/Town Council representatives on it.  The completed Parish Plan should be submitted in the first instance to the Parish/Town Council for endorsement by them. Any community has the right to produce a Parish Plan, but failure to collaborate with Parish, District or County Councils and other relevant agencies is likely to make implementation where their funding is required, more difficult. There should be regular updates of progress to both the Parish/Town Council and the community at large throughout the process of development and implementation of the Plan. Annual progress reporting through the annual Parish meeting is recommended to Implementation Groups as also is updating of communities on periodic review. | Not a problem in Bollington, Helsby Tiverton and Rainow. Odd Rode consider that division is inevitable, but is less damaging if people know and understand others perspectives. AEH view - Try and focus on issues and some actions where agreement can be reached, or find a compromise or agree to put off the difficult matters? Rainow found that initial general apathy changed and became a genuine feeling of goodwill. |
| How can it be ensured that the Plan represents the views of the wider community? | The process should give everyone and all groups in a community the opportunity to engage in and be involved and if they choose not to be involved/engaged, then that is their choice.  However, the methodologies and processes used in order to engage widely, should be clearly spelt out in the documentation and any actions taken to get round the problems of the harder to reach groups and community apathy should be documented.  Care must be taken that the process is not taken over by personal agendas. It is important to obtain the right balance between urban and rural issues appropriate for the particular community.  Quality control of the process needs to be built into the Parish Plan system to ensure wide community engagement, consultation and communication. This can be done by appropriate funding criteria and Terms and Conditions of funding (as in Cheshire)linked to reporting requirements. | All Parish Plan Groups delivered questionnaires to every house – smaller communities carried out house collections, larger ones had multiple collection points.  Responses varied from 10% to over 50%.  Absolute number and consistency important. |

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| How can Parish Plans influence the formal Local Planning Process? | Parish Plans will seek to influence both Planning Policies in the Local Development Framework and the more wide-ranging Sustainable Community Strategy produced by the Local Strategic Partnership. Local Planning Authorities could make a clear commitment to take Parish Plans into account in Local Development Framework preparation through a specific Council resolution or through their Statement of Community Involvement (although further anticipated planning reforms may bring an end to Statements of Community Involvement).

In return, Parish Plans should recognise national planning policy and existing formal regional and local planning authority strategy documents such as the Local Plan and core strategy. An officer from the Planning Authority should be invited to take part in discussions during formulation of the Parish Plan to comment on proposals put forward affecting the Planning Authority. The response may include whether elements of the Parish Plan are appropriate for a Supplementary Planning Document. The attention of developers should be drawn to Parish Plan recommendations and these should be taken into account in determination of Planning Applications. It should be noted however that they will not carry the same weight as formal planning guidance prepared by local Planning Authorities. In terms of the Sustainable Community Strategy it will be important for the Parish Plan to identify issues and actions requiring changes in policy and practice of public agencies so that the need for change can be considered in preparing and implementing the Community Strategy.

It is recommended that issues relating to planning matters within a Parish Plan are always placed together in a separate section/chapter of the Parish Plan. | |
| | Recommendations in the Bollington Plan were used as a basis for a Supplementary Planning Guidance Document.

None of the completed Cheshire Plans have yet influenced the Local Strategic Partnership, but cross representation is now being implemented to allow this to happen. | |

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| Working arrangements with District/Borough/ County Councils and officers, including at local level and support for Parish Plan activities. | It is important to keep elected Borough/District and County Councillors informed of progress with Parish Plans and to invite them to attend some meetings. It is also important to keep key stakeholders and public organisations fully informed – good communications are vital. It is recommended that each of the higher level Councils should appoint a liaison officer to provide a link with each Parish Plan in the later stages of production and again during implementation (different persons and levels of support may be appropriate at different stages). Inevitably, a number of recommendations from Parish Plans come into the area of jurisdiction of officers of the District/ Borough/ County Council at a local level. It will sometimes be the case that these officers do not have the resources or sub-budgets to assist and the recommendations may conflict with established Council wide policy. Any such problems should be resolved by the Heads of Service. Where possible, the liaison officer should involve local officers from specific departments to advise on matters under discussion affecting that department during preparation of the Plan. When the Parish Plan has been endorsed by the Parish Council it should be submitted to the Chief Officers of the District/Borough/County Councils. It is recommended that these Councils have a protocol that the Parish Plan should be received at Cabinet or Executive Board Level and subsequently referred to Heads of Service for response. There should then be a formal response by each of the Heads of Service to the Council stating what action is proposed to implement the recommendations affecting that section. It is further recommended that Parish Plans be included as a Cabinet Member portfolio. There should then be an annual update from the Council to the Parish Planning Group on progress made and proposals for the forthcoming year.<br><br>It is important for each Local Authority to have a protocol for assistance with implementation of Parish Plans as well as for assistance with the development of the Plans. It would be helpful for each Local Authority to have a Parish Plans Development Group with an interdisciplinary team monitoring progress on Implementation of Parish Plans. | There can be inconsistencies in terms of funding and in kind support available and degree and nature of support offered. The Guides to Parish Plans, County funding system and Toolkit and the level and nature of support offered by Parish Plan Development Officer apply equally across the County and this does now provide a large degree of consistency. However the localised support may vary. Bringing the Parish Plan protocols closer in line might improve consistency in terms of development and implementation.<br><br>Different models of arrangements for implementation have been used for different plans in Cheshire. |
| What training is available for Councillors, Council Clerks and Officers about Parish Plans? | There is a definite need for training to be available for Parish, Borough/District and County Councillors, Parish Clerks and Borough/District and County Council Officers. The responsibility for training of Borough/District and County Council Councillors and Officers rests with those Councils. It may be appropriate to provide such training through conferences and seminars or in-house training courses. For Parish Councillors and Clerks this could be included in requirements for Quality Parish Council schemes. It is also important that Cheshire Community Council and Cheshire Association of Local Councils should be involved in providing appropriate guidance. | Parish Council conferences are already being used to inform Councillors and Clerks as also are Cheshire Association of Local Councils courses, Parish Plan Network events, action learning sets run by Cheshire Community Council and presentations to Parish, Town and Borough Councils. |

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| How can funding be obtained for implementation of Parish Plan recommendations. | Different Parish Plan Groups will have different needs for funding because of the wide variety of sizes and types of community and complexity of issues. It should not be assumed that funding for implementation of recommendations will be available automatically. Some proposals will not require funding. It is important to consider the potential cost of proposals and sources of funds as part of the Parish Plan process and feasibility studies should be considered as a potential first stage. It is desirable that there should be some low level of pump priming funds from the Parish/District/County Councils or through the Community Council. Where possible, potential funders should be contacted during formulation of the Plan. The possibility of seeking sponsorship from local firms should be considered. The Higher Level Councils should be encouraged to respond as to whether proposals can be put into their budgets for future years. The Cheshire Community Council and Councils can advise on other potential sources of funding for specific projects. Training on the preparation of grant applications is available from the Community Council and the County Council for example and a funding guide is provided by the County Council. Exchange of information through Parish Plan Networks can also be helpful. | Several of the Cheshire Parish Plan Groups have been able to obtain funding from Borough/District and County Councils, Defra through the Rural Social and Community Programme, WREN and from North West Development Agency. This has required positive action by the groups in applying for such funding. There is now a County-wide Parish Plan Implementation Grant in Cheshire for small Parish Plan projects, administered by Cheshire Community Council and funded by the County.<br><br>C&N has a Parish Plan Network for Parishes within the Borough that meets twice per year. |
| What other outside bodies should be involved in Parish Plans? | It is important to seek to involve other public organisations directly and through the Local Strategic Partnership. These should include the Police, Fire and Rescue, Utilities companies, Schools/Education, Transport, Housing Associations and Health Services. It may be appropriate to involve other public sector and voluntary organisations such as British Waterways, the Cheshire Wildlife Trust and service providers such as Transport companies, in specific cases. It may also be appropriate to involve major local employers and landowners in relevant aspects of the Plan. It is advised to consult with/ inform/involve these organisations during formulation of the Plan as they may be able to offer practical help and assistance and will feel engaged with the process rather than present them with a fait accompli once the Plan is published.<br><br>It would be useful for Local Strategic Partnerships to have their own Parish Plan Protocols in terms of their development and implementation and have a named individual within the Local Strategic Partnership with a Parish Plan focus and remit. Regular slots on Local Strategic Partnership agenda to 'receive' Parish Plans would be good practice. Contact details and information about the work of Local Strategic Partnership s should also be available for community groups.<br><br>Contact and involvement with outside bodies should be at both local level (e.g. the PCSO) and at County/sub-regional level (e.g. the Chief Constable). | Several of the Cheshire Parish Plan Groups feel that there is a definite need for co -ordination of public organisations through the Local Strategic Partnership.<br><br>The Macclesfield Local Strategic Partnership currently has a member (Ken Butler) who has a Parish Plan focus within the Local Strategic Partnership. |

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| **How can Parish Plan Groups ensure that they have enough volunteers with the right expertise, available time and commitment? How can the volunteer base be maintained?** | This is likely to vary between different communities. Specific training may be possible as part of Parish Plan Network meetings and mentoring schemes. The Parish Plan Group is likely to evolve both with respect to membership and expertise. It is important to be on a constant look out for more contributors and give open praise for those who are participating. It is a good strategy to consider a dedicated volunteer organiser as a key team member within a PP Group. It is also important to carry out a skills audit of available volunteers and to get them to be honest about the commitment they will be able to provide in terms of time and skills. It is also important to utilise volunteers at as early a stage as possible and for them to see that their efforts are appreciated and having a positive effect. It is important to 'sell' the potential benefits of having a Plan. There should be expertise within the officers of the Local Authorities that can provide basic advice as to the best way to proceed. It may be possible to bring in expertise from outside the specific area. Advice and support on questionnaires and draft plans can be obtained through constructive comment from the Community Council Parish Plan Development Officer. Consultants may be necessary if there is a genuine lack of skill identified in a Parish. | Support can be provided by the Community Council through Cluster Parish Network meetings and helping groups to manage and support their volunteers. 'Buddying Schemes' where a Parish Plan Group Chairman/Secretary/Treasurer is 'buddied' with a Parish Plan Group Chairman/Secretary/Treasurer from another PP Group further along in the process can provide useful support. |
| **What should be done with the completed Parish Plan?** | A copy of the plan should be sent formally to the Chief Executives of all authorities mentioned in recommendations (Parish/Town, Borough, County Councils, Cheshire Community Council, Police, Fire and Rescue, Health, Waterways etc.) MP/MEP. Copies should be available to all members of the community, for example deposited in libraries, information centres, medical centres, leisure centres and other places where locals visit and an electronic version made available on the parish/district/county website. The action plan should be sent to all residents. There should be pressure for the Town/Parish Council to endorse the Plan and for the Borough and County Councils and the Local Strategic Partnership to receive the Plan actively under new PP Implementation Protocols that need to be created and put in place. There needs to be a focus on implementation, through a subcommittee of the Town/Parish Council and/or dedicated implementation groups. It should be recognised that there may be a need to produce a large print or audio version of the Plan. | In smaller communities it should be possible to distribute the completed Plan to all residents but the costs of doing this for larger communities may make this less appropriate. What should be ensured is that anyone who wishes to have a copy of the completed Plan should have one and at the very least every resident should have easy access to one locally. |
| **How can cynicism and disillusionment by the Community be best avoided?** | It is essential for the Plan to include some items that can be delivered quickly. The Action Plan should include some quick wins within 6 to 12 months and demonstrable benefits within a time scale of two to three years. It is also essential to get responses from Borough/County Council Heads of Service to recommendations so that the Community can see that they have been considered. It is important to retain an ongoing dialogue with the community so that they know what is going on. The style and type of communication is important to retain Community support - reasons for non implementation of recommendations should be explained. | |

| Question | | |
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| What can be done if there is no funding available to implement the Plan? | Not all projects require external funds but there are grant funds available for suitable projects. It should be possible to get Local Authorities to include some aspects of plans for the future. Examples of projects that can be implemented without funding are group litter picks and tree wardens to coordinate planting trees. Local events can be organised to raise some funds. It may be possible to develop elements of the Plan as a social enterprise. It may be possible to obtain sponsorship for specific items. Serious consideration needs to be given to continuation funding for Parish Plans. | There are concerns in Cheshire about the impact of Local Government Reform and the need to ensure that adequate funding to support the Parish Planning Process. |
| What can be done if there is no political will for a Parish Plan in the Town / Parish Council? | If the Parish/Town Council is opposed to the preparation of a Parish Plan but a significant part of the Community wishes to proceed, there should be an ongoing dialogue involving local Borough and County Councillors to get things moving. The system should however remain sufficiently flexible to allow a community to produce a Parish Plan without the support of the Parish Council, if their there is community support but no political will. It is useful to demonstrate the success of others Plans and the potential benefits that other Parishes have derived. Encouragement and incentives such as funding to develop plans and implement them are also useful. It would be helpful for Cheshire Association of Local Councils to be more pro-active in promoting Parish Plans to Parish Councils. | There is one example in Cheshire where a Parish Plan has been produced without the support of the Parish Council, with help from the Community Council. |
| What should be done about updating and refreshing the Plan? | There should be a review of progress on an annual basis by the Implementation Group, reported to the Community via the annual Parish meeting and other local communication methods such as newsletters, village websites etc. There also needs to be communication and reporting to other relevant stakeholders.<br><br>The Plan should also be periodically renewed at an appropriate time e.g. once a large percentage of the actions in the action plan have been completed, this could be at 2 to 5 years with a report of achievements, successes and items no longer appropriate, followed by an updated version for the next period. | A renewal procedure is in place for Cheshire with guidance from the Comm. Council. Bollington and Helsby started an update three years after completion of the original plan.<br><br>In Cheshire there is also a Critical Friend Circle process for introducing external audit into review, which can be built into the Renewal Process. |
| Should we work on a Parish Plan or a Village Design Statement? | Village Design Statements are separate documents and cover a limited range of planning issues reflecting the character of the Town / Village. Parish Plans cover a much wider range of issues - there is a role for both documents. Cheshire Community Council and Local Authority officers explain the difference between Village Design Statements, Parish Plans and Parish Landscape Statements at a very early stage in the process and the decision on which is the more appropriate route then evolves from those initial discussions. Contact details for Cheshire Landscape Trust are provided to enable groups to obtain further advice and information. Some Parish Plans will inevitably include planning matters which aren't suitable for a Village Design Statement and then they should be kept in a separate Planning section of the Plan. | It is not recommended that Communities undertake Village Design Statements and Parish Plans at the same time, although this has been done occasionally. There is one Cheshire parish that chose to produce a Village Design Statement, Parish Plan and Parish Landscape Statement all at the same time – it hasn't been done since. |

## 7.   Thanks

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