

Cumbria Rural Forum – Community Briefing



*In March 2009, Cumbria Rural Forum, in collaboration with **ACT** - Action with Communities in Cumbria, North West Together We Can and the Cumbria Improvement and Efficiency Partnership, hosted a conference on **Community Empowerment** and especially the role of **Community Led Planning** in helping to achieve empowered communities. The event included presentations and workshops covering a range of both urban and rural experience of working with communities.*

Much of the discussion concerned the Community Led Planning process that has been widely used in Cumbria. This is a voluntary process in which local people, usually a mix of parish councillors and interested individuals, collate evidence, consult with residents and produce an action plan for the future. These usually include a mix of actions that local people can do for themselves and those which will require the involvement and support of public partners. The Conference reflected this, bringing together a mix of community and public sector participants.

Empowerment in Action

Community empowerment is a key Government priority and something that local authorities and a wide range of public and third sector agencies are keen to achieve. However, this is unfamiliar territory for at least some of those involved and consequently there is a real need to share good practice.

This conference therefore sought to share experience from Cumbria and the region and create opportunities in workshops to discuss challenges such as quality assurance and information sharing.

The National Context

Gillian Bishop of the North West Improvement and Efficiency Partnership and Rob Hindle of Rural Innovation provided delegates with a picture of how Government policy is impacting upon the work of local authorities and communities. Not only does this require that local residents are given greater opportunity to influence the decisions that affect them. It also demands continuous improvement by local authorities in the techniques that they use and the outcomes that they achieve.

Sylvia Brown of Action with Communities in Rural England then reflected upon best practice among communities responding to the opportunity that empowerment creates for them. She highlighted, in particular, just how widespread the use of Community Led Planning is as a methodology. She also demonstrated that this particular approach is effective at generating voluntary action to deliver outcomes that are of both local and strategic benefit.

Top-Down v Bottom-Up

Barbara Cannon, Cumbria County Council's acting portfolio holder for Acting with Communities provided a very engaging and in some respects challenging perspective to the audience.

Focusing on the role of elected members, Barbara talked about the tensions that exist between the structures of representative democracy and the empowerment of local people to act on their own account. Importantly she underlined the key role of elected representatives as advocates for the communities that they serve and reminded delegates of the need to work with Councillors when engaging at community level.

Good Practice

Formal presentations at the conference concluded with two that highlighted good practice in the region.

Mark Fryer, Neighbourhood Manager for South Workington described his approach to working in a part of Cumbria that is regularly identified in Government statistics as one of its more disadvantaged localities but where it can be difficult to instil in people the belief that they really can make a difference to their area.

This experience was contrasted with that from Cheshire, described by Alison Roylance-White of Cheshire Community Action. Here, in communities with very mixed populations, there is a high level of interest in taking control and working collaboratively to develop local action plans.

Working with the people and communities of Cumbria to realise their potential

The Workshops

A programme of seven workshops followed the formal representations. These gave delegates an opportunity to hear more about the urban experience from Billy Maxwell of Liverpool City Council and contrast this with rural practice from Cumbria and Cheshire.

Workshops created the opportunity to consider some common issues such as how to ensure that a community-driven process delivers quality outcomes and better understanding. Also discussed was the sharing of evidence being produced by local people and the relevance of Community Led Planning to the network of locality partnerships that are emerging in parts of Cumbria.

Current Cumbrian Practice

In Cumbria over 130 communities have now either completed a Community Led Plan or are in the process to developing one. Almost all of these communities have been assisted in their work by the staff of **ACT**, working in close collaboration with the officers of local authorities and agencies.

Communities are encouraged to undertake a structured process, using toolkits and other guidance, to ensure that the investigations undertaken locally, the evidence gathered and the community engagement that takes place are all thorough and comprehensive. These are key routes to the production of an action plan that is soundly based and locally relevant.

Also critical is the development of effective partnership working between the local Community Led Planning group and the authorities and agencies that are responsible for local services, planning decisions, etc.

Increasing emphasis is being placed on early discussions with key partners to improve engagement and understanding.

With so many plans being completed, now covering about half of Cumbria's parishes, these offer an important source of information and commentary upon key issues that local people consider require action, whether through community initiatives or the public sector.

To help make this information more easily accessible and usable by partners, **ACT** has

worked with Cumbria County Council to create a database of information from Community Led Plans that can be used to inform strategy development and service planning.

The Cluster Approach

An increasingly common feature of Community Led Planning in Cumbria is the willingness or desire of communities to work with their neighbours when developing their plans. This cluster approach offers several benefits; enabling some of the smaller communities in the county to participate and helping to share the workload that is involved. Clustering also enables communities to more effectively consider and influence issues of strategic as well as local importance.

Encouragingly, communities that are choosing to work together are finding public sector partners increasingly willing to engage in and inform their work. This results in plans that are more effective from the community's point of view and more relevant to, and therefore influential on, their public sector colleagues.

If you would like to know more about Community Led Planning in Cumbria, to see what other communities have been doing or find out more about the Community Led Plans database please contact **ACT**.

The Conference Speakers were:

- Gillian Bishop, North West Improvement and Efficiency Partnership
- Sylvia Brown, Action with Communities in Rural England
- Cllr Barbara Cannon, Cumbria County Council
- Rob Hindle, Rural Innovation
- Mark Fryer, Cumbria County Council
- Alison Roylance-White, Cheshire Community Action

You can contact the speakers through **ACT** and their presentations are available on our website www.cumbriaaction.org.uk

**For further details about the Cumbria Rural Forum, contact Dani Hudson at ACT
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