

“Pathways of Influence”

Community Led Planning - Why It Matters

Summary, Findings and Calls to Action

March 2008

Report of a project undertaken by
North West Rural Community Councils and



GOVERNMENT OFFICE
FOR THE NORTH WEST

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CHANGING MINDS • CHANGING LIVES

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i) Community Led Planning - Definition and Introduction

Community led planning¹ 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 which, 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?

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.

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. The Local Government White Paper 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 West⁶ 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 Defra⁷ 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 tiers⁸ of local government, and from regional organisations. 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
- requirements that statutory agencies have of community planning

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

- 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 progress⁹ 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.¹⁰ Representatives from community planning groups¹⁰ 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.

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 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 4¹² and NI 6¹³ 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.

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 ACRE¹⁴ 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 carry¹⁵. 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.

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.

¹⁴ Action with Communities in Rural England

¹⁵ Evidence from the West Berkshire case study and elsewhere proves this to be the case.

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 shows¹⁶ 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 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

¹⁶ West Berkshire Case Study

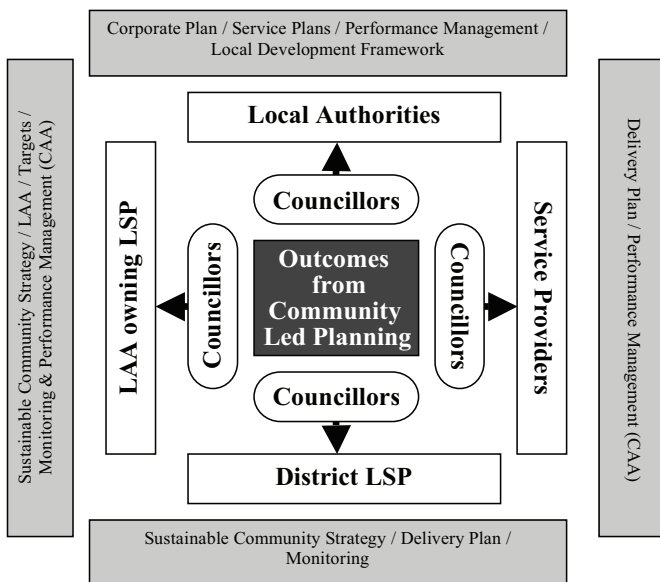
9. Engagement of Leaders within Local Authorities and Service delivery Organisations is crucial.

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 account of the day's proceedings appears in the full project 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 Programme¹⁷. 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