



PARISH AND COMMUNITY PLANNING TOOLKIT

for engaging
parishes, towns and
communities



ACRE - Action With Communities in Rural England, is the national umbrella organisation of the Rural Community Councils across England, promoting vibrant and sustainable rural communities. Rural Community Councils (RCCs) are charities, which have for many years, been delivering support and services to people in rural communities. They enable rural communities across the country to take action for themselves to improve their quality of life.

Local community planning was pioneered by RCCs, to help rural communities develop their own vision for the future, a process now formally recognized through parish planning. As part of their work, RCCs promote Parish Plans to communities and support them through the process, as well as brokering engagement between service providers and local communities at all stages.

This toolkit has been developed from a regional initiative of the RCCs in the South East of England (SERCC). As more and more Parish Plans were begun and completed across the region, the RCCs began to recognize that good quality Parish Plans, not only helped rural communities to develop their own solutions to local problems, but could also generate influence on the strategic policies of Local Authorities and other service providers to respond to local priority needs.

At the first National Parish Planning Conference in February 2006, delegates unanimously asked for a toolkit which could be used nationally, so that communities could undertake a Parish Plan with confidence and know that they were part of a robust national initiative. This Toolkit is a response to that request.



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Introduction

The Government wants local communities to have more control of their own lives, to say what they want doing in their own community or parish and to work with other organisations to get it done.

Community and Parish Plans give an opportunity for everyone in your community to make themselves heard. They provide a way for you to say if you want more open spaces, more effective public transport, affordable housing, better access to health care, a chance to buy local produce at local shops and to choose how your community helps everyone in it to relax and make the most of their social and leisure time.

This Toolkit is here to help you undertake your Community or Parish Plan and to ensure that it is robust and inclusive, so that it is effective in achieving your needs and acts as an influence on the strategic policies within your Local Authority and partner organisations.

It has been produced with the input of Community Development Workers from the Rural Community Councils (RCCs) across England and from some Local Authority District Councils. These RCC Community Development Workers have been helping rural people to produce Parish Plans since they were introduced in 2000 and have a wealth of experience about what works and is useful to know when developing a Parish Plan.

We wanted to be more pro-active, not wait to have things imposed upon us. Higher levels of government have their own strategic plans, we wanted to match them

Be warned - consulting the community is like opening up a Pandora's box. Once you've started you may not be able to stop. People are so delighted to be asked, to feel empowered

Perhaps the most positive outcome came from the supplementary sheet that went out with the questionnaire asking for volunteers. Lots of people offered to help with all sorts of activities - so that worked very well as a by product

This is your chance to have a say about the future of our village. We all want the best for the place we live in and we can really make change happen (or not if that is what we want). The only real problem is that there has never been any collective view of what people who live here desire. This is the purpose of the questionnaire...

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WHAT IS A PARISH / COMMUNITY PLAN?



Communities everywhere are constantly changing. The government wants local communities to take more control of their own lives, to say what they want doing in their own neighbourhoods and to engage with other organisations to get it done. You cannot prevent change, but what you can do is influence it. Parish or Community Plans help your community to make change happen. They mean an opportunity for everyone in your community to make themselves heard.

Parish Plans lay out a shared vision for the community over the next 10+ years and contain a detailed action plan for achieving this vision. It is up to the community to define the issues to be tackled by a Parish or Community Plan.



A Parish or Community Plan sets out how community action can meet local needs, can help to prioritise resources and can provide important information to help influence the policies, decisions and actions of others. Parish and Community Plans belong to the community, to be delivered by that community or in partnership with other agencies.

It is a process by which the whole community can voice their opinions on what actions they wish to see taken in their local area in the future. The plan when completed may highlight actions that can be taken by community members, be used to influence service providers such as your local authority, and act as evidence of need when applying for funding.

Parish and Community Plans should:-

- be comprehensive, considering all aspects of local life including social, economic and environmental issues of concern to the community.
- involve the whole community; everyone should have a chance to have their say and get involved in producing a Parish Plan.
- be based upon information provided by community participation, surveys and research.
- involve Local Authorities with the process
- be focused on creating an action plan with a clear statement of Who? What? Why? and How?

Parish & Community Plans can be produced by any size of community and neighbourhood including those in urban areas. They all can use the process described in this toolkit to create their own Parish or Community Plans. A plan can take you on average between 12 and 18 months to complete.



WHY PRODUCE A PARISH OR COMMUNITY PLAN?

'If you do not know where you are going, how will you know when you have got there'

As part of its policy of 'active citizenship' the Government wants to give more power to local people to decide what's best for their own communities. If you as a community can show that you are taking your future seriously, a Parish or Community Plan might increase your chances of getting local authority support to enhance your community's economic, social and environmental well-being. It will give you the evidence to help inform policy-making by a range of organisations, from the local planning authority to police and health services. It will also help you to develop and maintain effective working relationships with all those outside bodies that provide services to your community, now or in the future.

Parish and Community Plans, with your enthusiasm and determination, can make things happen in your community. The benefits of producing an Action Plan within the Parish or Community Plans are many. They:-

- Give all local people, not just the confident, the chance to develop a vision for their community, identifying positive and negative issues
- Influence and inform others including Community Strategies and Local Development Frameworks
- Provide clear evidence of community needs and priorities for Town and Parish Councils to plan their resources and effort
- Strengthen the Town or Parish Councils relationship with all sections of the community
- Help the community enhance its status
- Develop increased local voluntary action
- Create a real sense of community spirit, getting people involved and talking to each other
- Reinvigorate local democracy by stimulating interest in community affairs
- Gain funding for local initiatives by demonstrating you have been through a needs assessment with full community participation
- Highlight projects which need involvement from other agencies
- Encourage partnership working



WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED?

Everyone should be involved, led by a steering committee made up from a wide cross section of the community, with the task of carrying out the detailed planning and coordination of the project. The Parish and Town Council's role is to support them in that work, with a small representative presence on the committee and to have ultimate responsibility for endorsing and adopting the final Parish or Community Plan.



WE HAVE HEARD OTHER COUNCILS TALK ABOUT A 'VDS'. WHAT IS THAT?

Some Parish or Town Councils may be considering a Village Design Statement (VDS). A VDS is different from a Parish Plan, in that it only focuses on the spatial aspects of the community eg housing, hedges, lighting, and signage. Similarly, through consultation, it aims to identify the qualities and characteristics that local people value in their village and surroundings. A VDS cannot be used to stop new development, but it can be used to influence developers and local planning authorities, and to ensure that new buildings respect and reflect local character. A VDS can be produced on its own. However, many communities either produce one at the same time as a community plan or as one of the actions identified through the process.

WHAT SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE?

Carrying out a Parish or Community Plan is fun and rewarding for a community. It can also be hard work.....but help is at hand!

Your Rural Community Council or sometimes, if they have one, a Local Authority Parish Plan Officer, will provide support throughout the process of producing a Parish Plan.

This includes:

- Support in planning the process.
- Advice on the project
- Support to establish a steering group - advising on inclusiveness and representation on the steering group or town partnership
- Advice on funding sources, including budget and timetable preparation for production and implementation of the action plan within the Parish Plan
- Provision of sample documents such as constitutions, draft questionnaires, action plans etc
- Attendance at some steering group meetings to pass on information and advice from other communities
- Providing direct contact with other Parish Plan groups
- Guidance on community involvement and consultation - making the process fully inclusive
- Linking into other relevant County, District / Local Authority initiatives, and support services where appropriate
- Advice on which statutory agencies, service providers and other bodies should be approached to achieve maximum results from the Parish Plan
- Advice on linking the action plan to other local strategies such as the County or District / Local Authority Sustainable Community Strategy
- Practical help in implementing the action plan
- A library of community development tools.



CONNECTIONS / LINKS / BRIDGING



MAKING CONNECTIONS AND LINKS: A BRIDGING GUIDE

Bridging is the term used for linking your Plan to those of Local Authorities other Statutory Partners and Voluntary Organisations.

Making an Impact with Service Providers

Some issues in your Parish and Neighbourhood Plans will be able to be addressed through direct action by your community with little outside help. Other actions especially those linked to local services, cannot be addressed by the community alone. The majority of your community's services are provided by Local Authorities. These pages are dedicated to helping you work in partnership with these Local Authorities and other service providers to both influence and improve those services.

Getting what you want from these service providers may not be as simple and easy as just making a good case. It is important to recognise that Local Authority budgets are not unlimited. It may involve changing or influencing the policies and strategies which guide spending decisions on, for instance, planning, highways, education, healthcare, housing, and so on. Creating the links between Parish and Neighbourhood Plans takes time and effort, and those links need to be in place as early as possible in your plan timescale.

Details of the key departments that may be useful to you when carrying out and implementing your Parish Plan are provided on the 'Local Contacts' page in Section Three of the Toolkit

If you do not have a Parish or Town Council please go to the "Local Authority" section.

Parish and Town Councils

These are statutory bodies - an elected tier of Local Government, with a democratic mandate to represent and act on behalf of their residents. They also have the power to raise money through a dedicated part of the Council Tax (the Parish Precept), which is independent from that levied by the principal local authority, although it is all accumulated in one Council Tax bill sent out to residents. Parish and Town Councils deliver a form of neighbourhood governance now encouraged by government as both an urban and rural solution to giving greater power to neighbourhoods to run their own affairs.¹

The monies raised through the Precept can be used to finance the business of the Parish and Town council, to spend on improvements and facilities to the local area and to support local organisations. As a result, Parish and Town Councils often devote funds towards the maintenance of community halls, recreation grounds, allotments, play areas and bus shelters. Sometimes they fund local services via grants to community organisations, for instance community transport or good neighbour schemes.

Make sure you know what the powers of your Parish and Town Councils are and how they use them. This is a fast changing environment and government policy on the role of

¹ Local Government White Paper Nov 2006



local communities is extending the influence they have in shaping public services, taking ownership of community buildings and facilities and calling public service providers to account.²

Why are Parish and Town Councils important for your Plan



Parish and Town Councils may be able to respond immediately to some of the actions coming out of your plan. However, it is likely that many other actions will require more finance than could be generated by a small Parish Council Precept, or are concerned with services which it would be difficult or impossible for a Parish or Town council to provide. In developing your plan, make sure you identify what your community is already contributing from its own resources towards the provision of services and facilities in your community - it is important for the outside world to recognise this.

Recent legislation and directives from Government ensure Parish and Town Councils are consulted by Local Authorities and other agencies to represent their communities' views within their own service delivery plans. Parish or Town Councils can be instrumental in getting recognition and support for your validated action plans in such matters as affordable housing, leisure facilities, traffic and transport issues. It is worth noting that a Parish Council benefits from the existence of a credible Parish Plan. Influence with outside bodies is much stronger if the views expressed are drawn from high levels of community involvement as can be achieved within a Parish Plan. Undertaking a Parish Plan is also one of the elements linked to a Parish Council achieving Quality Status.



² Local Government White Paper Nov 2006

What should the relationship be between the Parish Council and the Parish Plan steering group

Ideally, the Parish Council's role is to support the Parish Plan steering committee in their work, possibly having a representative presence on the committee. They have ultimate responsibility for endorsing and adopting the Parish Plan as the community's vision, so they need to make sure the plan succeeds, but not necessary lead its development. As far as you can, involve your Town or Parish Council right from the start of your Plan so that they are fully engaged with your issues and ideas. The Council may hold the funds being used to develop and produce the plan and may also be of help in developing a 'cluster' approach to grouping a number of neighbouring parishes together to solve certain problems, for instance on transport provision.

What follows is a description of those external bodies that you will need to make contact with to support delivery of your plan's aspirations

Local Authorities

The majority of your community's services are provided by principal local authorities (which may be classed as a District, Borough, Unitary, County or Metropolitan authority). In most urban areas and some rural areas, there are just Unitary Authorities - one tier of local government providing the full range of local authority services for an area. In many rural areas, however, there are still two different tiers of principal local authority, where several District Councils work within a larger area run by a County Council. Councils may be known by other names, for instance, Boroughs or Metropolitan authorities, but the structure is either unitary or two tier, as described above. Make sure you know the local government structure in your area and the contact details of the elected Councillors who serve your area on each relevant authority. The services provided by each type of authority are outlined below.

District Council

District Councils have many departments that offer services that could be useful for the implementation of your Action Plan. These services include building control, business rates, bus permits/shelters, car parks, community safety, council tax & housing benefit, flooding, housing, leisure, planning, parks & recreation grounds, recycling and street cleaning.

County Council

County Councils also have many departments that offer services that could be useful for the implementation of your Action Plan. Services include education, fire, police, highways, public footpaths, children's trusts/boards, social services, street lighting, trading standards, transport and waste disposal. Your local RCC will help you with contact details of the appropriate people in the Council who have responsibility for different areas of work.

Unitary Authorities

Where there is a unitary authority, all of the services will be provided by the one local authority.



A local authority, of whatever type, will have some overarching strategic plan and a range of service delivery plans that govern its actions and spending in your area. There are a number of important 'pillars' to this work which are outlined below, together with their relevance to your Parish Plan work.

What is the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP)?

Every principal local authority is required to have an overarching Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), to devise and develop the strategy for the area they serve. The LSP is a single body that brings together different parts of the public sector as well as the business, community and voluntary sectors so that different initiatives and services support each other and work together. Public, private, community and voluntary sector organisations all have a part to play in improving the quality of life for local people and work together to influence strategic decision-making at a local level.

As well as the Local Authority a typical LSP might have representatives on it from Primary Care Trusts, the police, the Chamber of Commerce, and local Voluntary Sector Organisations such as Age Concern, RCCs, CVSs and Race Equality Networks

What can the LSP do for Parish and Neighbourhood Plan groups?

The LSP has a duty to ensure that local people are consulted on their overarching plan for the whole geographical area they serve. There are many ways in which this might be achieved, but Parish Plans, because of the high degree of community involvement, are often recognised as giving a strong steer on what local people expect from public services in their local neighbourhood. Parish Councillors can use the results of their Parish Plan to bolster their influence in arguing for actions to take place. Proposals can then be looked at by the LSP who will make recommendations as to the level of support that can be provided through the process of building their overall strategy for the area.

The LSP may have a representative who monitors and reports on the progress of Parish and Neighbourhood Plan groups and highlights the support that may be available from the Local Strategic Partnership.



What is a Sustainable Community Strategy?

The strategic plan that is governed and monitored by the Local Strategic Partnership is called the Sustainable Community Strategy. It is designed to promote and improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of all people in an area and contribute to the achievement of sustainable development. The strategy will identify priority aims on which the relevant public service delivery agencies or departments of the local authorities will concentrate their efforts.

There is strong guidance from government on how Sustainable Community Strategies should be developed, especially the ability to demonstrate partnership working, and effective communication with the public through consultation and engagement programmes. Some Beacon Councils have used Parish Plans as the basis for making these consultative links with local neighbourhoods and parishes, so steering groups should try and ensure the links are in place at the start of the process. Typical priorities which a Sustainable Community Strategy could contain reference to are:

- Traffic congestion & road maintenance
- Affordable housing
- Access to services in rural areas and public transport
- Young people
- Local economy and town centres
- Neighbourhoods with social and economic problems

District and County Councils should already be working together to develop compatible Sustainable Community Strategies at each level and coordinate delivery of services. This is especially important when local issues are not the sole preserve of one tier. One example would be in supporting community-led transport initiatives, which may be relevant to the work of both District and County Councils, because it underpins access to services. The requirement for coordinating the work of two tier authorities is set to increase,³ and this will simplify the task of making the connections between your Plan's priorities and the strategies of both tiers.

How can you link into a Sustainable Community Strategy?

Some LSPs will have a protocol for linking Neighbourhood and Parish Plans into their Sustainable Community Strategy. Towns and Parishes should keep in regular contact with their Local Authority, right from the start of their Plan. On completion Parish and Neighbourhood Plans should be presented to the relevant council contact. Council / LSP member assistance should be discussed and feasible actions fed into the relevant Sustainable Community Strategy action plan. Seek advice from your local Rural Community Council or Local Authority about relevant time frames.

The more comprehensive the range of issues covered in your Plan, the greater the influence it may have within the development of the Sustainable Community Strategy.



³ Local Government White Paper Nov 2006



What is the Local Development Framework (LDF)?

The LDF is a portfolio of documents which sets out the local planning authority's policies and proposals for the development and use of land in their area over a period of up to 10 years.

The LDF will comprise the following documents:

Local Development Scheme (LDS) - this sets out the overall timetable for the production of the LDF;

Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) - this will say how the Local Authority will engage and involve the community when it is preparing planning policy and guidance;

Local Development Documents (LDDs) - these will comprise a Core Strategy, specific allocations of land, Area Action Plans, Proposal Maps, General Development Control Policies and Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs).

Why is the Local Development Framework important to your plan



Parish and Neighbourhood groups should keep in regular contact with the Local Planning Authority, to enable a good understanding of the implications of any planning issues that may arise and how they may be addressed in your Plan. Local Development Frameworks are statutory documents. Parish Plans may influence what goes into a LDF and if the Plan is robust may be used as 'material evidence' in Planning decisions. Completed Parish Plans should be presented to the relevant Council contact. It may ultimately be possible for appropriate issues identified in Parish Plans to be addressed in the policies and guidance that form part of the Local Development Framework. This will need to be timetabled in to its preparation

There is no guarantee that the aspirations of a community as expressed in a Parish Plan will be adopted within the LDF. However if spatial planning is important to your community it is vital that you contact and discuss issues with a Local Planning Officer right from the start.

The work programme for the preparation of the LDF is under constant review and is alive to issues and proposed actions emerging from the Community Strategy and other community - led initiatives, although it must focus on priorities.

What are Local Area Agreements (LAAs)

An LAA is a three year spending plan for service delivery, focused on a number of priorities identified within the Sustainable Community Strategies. It sets out local priorities agreed between Central Government and the Local Authority and other key partners through the Local Strategic Partnerships. They simplify some central government funding, help join up public services more effectively and allow greater flexibility for finding local solutions to local circumstances. LAAs are structured around key blocks (or policy fields) Children and Young People, Safer and Stronger Communities, Healthier Communities and Older People, and Economic Development and the Environment.⁴

Why is the LAA important to your plan?



LAAs are spending plans and therefore could help resource some of the actions in your Plan. The key blocks have strong relevance to community initiatives and needs in terms of service delivery.



⁴ Local Gov White paper proposes to change the Economic Development block to include the environment and also encompass transport, culture and sport. pp105

Who else can help you with your Plan?

Rural Community Councils

Rural Community Councils (RCCs) are not a council in Local Authority terms, but is the collective name for a group of local independent charities with specialist skills in community development and local community planning. There is an RCC in every English county and they go by a variety of names. To find your local RCC go to www.acre.org.uk

Parish Plans were pioneered by RCCs to help rural communities develop their own vision for the future. In 2005 RCCs were given the lead by Defra in supporting communities across England to undertake Parish Plans. They will help rural communities, to both develop Parish Plans which consult and include the views of the whole community and to broker engagement between service providers and local communities at all stages. RCCs have skills in helping communities identify their own needs and in developing a community's ability to take action for themselves across social, economic and environmental issues. Their ethos is to help rural people to help themselves, by providing support and advice and by making them aware of the help that is available from other bodies - both statutory and voluntary.

Apart from Parish Planning they have specialist skills and can offer advice about community development and empowerment, rural transport, rural housing, rural social enterprise, village and community buildings and environmental issues. Your local Rural Community Council will help you contact the appropriate person in each District, County or Unitary Authority who has responsibility for different areas of work covered by a Parish Plan.

Councils for Voluntary Service (CVS)

Again, these are not councils but is the generic name for a network of charitable organisations which offer generic support and advice to local organisations in your community that could help deliver your action plan. They may be able to help with funding advice, organisational issues and training for staff and volunteers. In many counties your local CVS and RCC will be the same organisation. To find your local CVS go to www.navca.org.uk

Other Organisations that may help with specific issues

Age Concern, Mind, Race Equality Networks, Youth Action. There are variety of others. The 'Local Contacts' page in section three will list details of these.

THE 9 STEP PROCESS



To produce your Parish or Community Plans

Each of the steps is fully explained in the follow up sheets in Section 2 of the Toolkit but below is a mini-guide to the main steps for the community and how you bridge and connect with your Local Authority

STEP 1 GETTING STARTED

Community Steps

To start the process you need to get people interested with publicity and hold an open event to gather support to undertake the process

Bridging with Local Authority

Make contact with your Rural Community Council and Local Authority to inform them of your intention to produce a Parish or Community Plan and ask for their support.

Invite your Councillors to early meetings and events to engage with the community

STEP 2 ESTABLISHING THE STEERING GROUP

Community Steps

Set up a steering group with wide representation from the community

Bridging with Local Authority

Nominate a steering group member to act as the main point of contact with the Local Authority officers

STEP 3 DEVELOPING A PROJECT PLAN

Community Steps

Over a series of meetings put together a strategy, budget and programme on how you are going to undertake the plan, ensuring you consult with everyone in the community.

Bridging with Local Authority

Include in your programme the moments at which you wish to involve local authorities, although it is best to engage with them, right from the beginning of your plan.

STEP 4 COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

Community Steps

This is a time to undertake a variety of interesting and fun consultation exercises involving as many people as possible both in taking part and in expressing their views.

Bridging with Local Authority

Consult with the LSP and LDF officers about the linkages between the Sustainable Community Strategy and Local Development Framework, how they are relevant to your community and what questions can usefully be asked.

STEP 5 PRIORITISING AND PLANNING ACTION

Community Steps

Sort and prioritise the issues and begin to form focus groups to take forward actions.

Bridging with Local Authority

Liaise with the LSP and LDF coordinators and any other agencies that have been identified in an action, to agree that what is being proposed is feasible and can be delivered. This does not mean you cannot have aspirations for future actions which are not possible at present.

STEP 6 DRAFTING THE PLAN

Community Steps

Put together the first draft to share with the community and partner organisations.

Bridging with Local Authority

Make your plan more accessible to outside agencies by using the Model Action Plan as a template. Show a draft plan to all relevant stakeholders.

STEP 7 FINALISING THE PLAN

Community Steps

Consult with the community and partner organisations and produce the final document.

Bridging with Local Authority

Categorise your actions under community, service providers and strategic.

At this point celebrate with your community but keep the momentum going to implement what you have decided

STEP 8 IMPLEMENTING THE PLAN

Community Steps

Consolidate any actions started and begin to implement others.

Bridging with Local Authority

Feed into the Sustainable Community Strategy or the Local Development Framework, for longer term implementation.

STEP 9 MONITOR AND REVIEW

Community Steps

Once you have completed a plan a regular review and update will ensure continuous progress on the needs and requirements of your community.

Bridging with Local Authority

Keep your service providers and local authorities (such as your Local Strategic Partnership, Local Area Committee and Planning Department) informed of your progress. Successes and challenges should be fed back.