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Community-led Plans in Oxfordshire: their potential contribution to strategic planning

Final report to the Oxfordshire Partnership

May 2007

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1: The purposes of the study

This project was initiated and funded by Oxfordshire County Council on behalf of the Oxfordshire Partnership. The Partnership commissioned the Countryside & Community Research Unit (CCRU) to produce an analysis of community-led plans across the county in recent years as a contribution to the development of the evidence base for the county's Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS)

The outline specification for the work, which formed the brief for the purposes of the project was to:

- assimilate information from recent parish plans and market town action plans in Oxfordshire;
- collate this information in a database/spreadsheet to ensure complementarity with other existing/future databases such as national Parish Plan database;
- identify key priorities and trends for actions for individual rural districts and for the county as a whole – under the 12 headings matching the 12 reports on themes for the SCS evidence base;
- consider the usefulness or otherwise of community-led planning in providing local evidence for higher level strategies such as the SCS and to make recommendations for future progress as one key element of the 'Community Life' report as part of making the case as to why community-led planning should be supported for the future.

The intention in fulfilling these purposes was to contribute to the development of a more coherent framework for community-led planning in Oxfordshire. This framework was being constructed in collaboration with the newly established Parish Plan Reference Group and a project, funded by the Carnegie Trust, that supported market towns in developing action plans and viable projects linked to Local Strategic Partnerships and Local Development Frameworks. We understand that Oxford City and Oxfordshire County Councils are engaging in parallel work designed to introduce a much stronger element of community leadership into the current area action planning process within the city. The present project is not directly concerned with that but may give useful pointers, nevertheless, to aid community-led planning in the county's urban areas.

In recent years the CCRU has undertaken a number of research projects of clear relevance to this work, notably:

- analysis and advice concerning the relationships between Parish Plans and the statutory planning system (CCRU, 2002);
- an evidence-based analysis of the issues and concerns raised in Parish Plans and Market Town Action Plans nationally (CCRU, 2004);
- an action research project examining the linkages between, on the one hand, Parish Plans and Market Town Plans and, on the other, Local Strategic Partnerships and Community Strategies (CCRU, 2005).

The experience gained by the research team from conducting these and related research projects was brought to bear in this work for Oxfordshire County Council. The first of these projects, the evaluation of community-based plans nationally, was particularly relevant in forming a context for the present study, and the Executive Summary of the final report is provided as Appendix 2 to this report.

The project also noted relevant work by:

- Jeff Bishop and colleagues undertaken for the Market and Coastal Towns Association and South West ACRE Network (SWAN) examining the future of community plans in relation to strategic planning initiatives (Bishop, Harris, Pearce and Sylvester, 2007) and
- James Derounian undertaken for Oxfordshire Rural Community Council examining the content of Parish Plans in Oxfordshire (Derounian, 2005).

Extracts from four of the above five projects are included as appendices to this report for reference as they provide a useful context for the Oxfordshire study and offer some relevant generic insights into the relationship between community-based plans and higher level strategic initiatives. But while references are made in the following text to each of those projects the present project differs from all of them in that it focuses mainly on the **actions** proposed in community-based plans.

2. Project Method

The project method adopted was very simple and comprised four main tasks:

- i. detailed scrutiny of 30 Parish Plans and Market Town Plans (these plans are listed in Appendix 1);
- ii. identification and analysis of trends for action and priorities in those plans (the analysis is set out in Section 3 below);
- iii. preparation of a database collating information from recent parish plans and market town action plans in Oxfordshire; (this database is submitted to Oxfordshire County Council as a separate item);
- iv. scrutiny of a wider range of publications and policies relating to community-based plans and preparation of commentary on the benefits of such plans in informing higher level strategies (this commentary is set out in Section 4 below).

The project was completed within just less than one month in May 2007.

3. Key trends for action in community-based plans in Oxfordshire

3.1 Introduction

Thirty community-based plans produced for Oxfordshire rural settlements¹ and market towns were considered in terms of eleven of the twelve themes listed below.² The first theme 'Community Life' is the subject of separate discussion in Section 4.

¹ The term 'rural settlements' is used throughout the following discussion to encompass individual villages and groups of villages for which community-based plans have been prepared.

² It is interesting to compare these 12 themes with the main concerns that characterise community-based plans nationally (see Appendix 2).

- Community Life
- Community Safety
- Economy
- Children and Young People
- Adult learning and workforce skills
- Environment
- Health, care and wellbeing
- Housing
- Population and migration
- Access to services and travel
- Recreation, leisure and culture
- Spatial Oxfordshire

In the case of each theme, attention is given to the type of action and, where specified in the plan, the individual or group responsible for the action. For ten of these themes at least one example of a proposed action is set out in a box at the end of each section, the exception being the population and migration theme, for which no examples of action were cited in any of the plans. Where responsibility for action was noted in the plan, this is recorded in the box.

Variations by district and by type of community are also considered. However, comparisons by district were made difficult by the imbalance of plans between the four districts, particularly in the case of market towns, as shown in Table 1 below:

District	Number of market towns	Number of rural settlements	Total number of plans
Cherwell	0	3	3
South Oxfordshire	7	8	15
Vale of White Horse	1	5	6
West Oxfordshire	2	4	6
Total	10	20	30

Table 1: plans considered by district and type of settlement

This analysis complements the work of Derounian (2005) who analysed twenty-one Oxfordshire community-generated plans completed between 2002 and 2005, looking in particular at issues of social inclusion and exclusion. Derounian also looked in detail at two of the plans included in the present research, those for Benson and Steventon.

In the following eleven sub-sections, it is emphasised that, quite apart from imbalances between the categories, the total number of plans is small and any comparisons can only be indicative of differences between districts or between types of settlement.

3.2 Community Safety

Twenty of the thirty plans (14 rural settlements and 6 market towns) raised community safety, excluding road traffic danger, which is dealt with under 'Access to Services and Travel' below, as an issue requiring action. The most common concerns were anti-social

behaviour and vandalism, although dangerous and untidy car parking was also mentioned.

Actions typically concerned lobbying for an increased police presence and improving or introducing neighbourhood watch schemes. Nine settlements wanted an increase in police presence and one was willing to consider offering a community contribution to fund a special constable. However, another pointed out that the main aim was to reassure residents of their safety. Nine settlements, mostly villages, wanted to introduce or improve neighbourhood watch but another preferred to use an informal approach. In addition, one market town was hoping to introduce a 'business watch'.

Other actions mentioned once each concerned:

- an improvement in school security,
- the introduction of CCTV,
- the need for policing of evening trains,
- the introduction community wardens,
- crime prevention advice and support,
- reintroducing the traffic warden service,
- discouraging door-to-door traders.

A number of plans explicitly or implicitly linked vandalism and antisocial behaviour with a lack of activities for young people. This issue will be dealt with below under 'Children and Young People'.

Most actions were assigned to a particular person or group but where this was done in the case of increased police presence, actions were usually assigned to the police - or to parish or town councils to lobby the police. However, one council pointed out that as they were unlikely to get an increased police presence, they would need to find an alternative solution for themselves. In the case of neighbourhood watch improvements or introductions, existing neighbourhood watches, parish councils and local people were mentioned as potential actors.

There were no marked differences of issues between the four districts, although plans in the Vale of White Horse area appeared less concerned with community safety issues than did those from the other three districts. It might be expected that there would be more crime and anti-social behaviour in market towns than in rural settlements, however, concern with crime did not seem to follow this pattern, with a slightly higher proportion of rural settlements raising the issue.

Raise the visibility of the [neighbourhood watch] scheme by issuing new window/door stickers and placing new signs on the highway.
(Fencott and Murcott Parish Plan, 2003)

Agreed Actions:

1. Hold an early meeting with a Senior Officer of Thames Valley Police, to raise village concerns and obtain an increased level and visibility of policing arrangements.
2. Make available additional crime prevention advice and support to village households.

(Sandford on Thames Parish Plan, 2005)

3.3 Economy

As might be expected, the economy was mostly an issue for market towns, being raised by eight out of ten market town plans and only seven out of twenty villages. A large number of actions were suggested, most of which concerned support for local businesses and local employment. Amongst these fifteen settlements, market towns tended to raise more economic issues than rural settlements, perhaps indicating that the economy is considered more central to market towns than it is to villages.

Four plans mentioned general support for local businesses, one of these specifically referring to the need for villagers to use their local shops. As regards specific types of business needing support, six plans referred to tourism and three to farming, indicating that these are seen as the industries most in need of support.

Specific actions to be taken in support of businesses were wide-ranging, with support for Broadband introduction and street markets and events being the most popular, mentioned in four settlements each. Three plans saw the need to promote the town to attract businesses and two to attract visitors. Two were intending to set up a business forum or partnership and two to produce a business directory. In addition, there were two references to the need to make banking easier and two to encouraging local businesses to employ local people. Other plans referred to the need to protect industrial land and office space and to supply start-up business units and workshops.

Other actions mentioned once each were:

- providing information to businesses about rate support;
- setting up a local employment trading scheme (LETS);
- setting up a credit union;
- becoming a Fairtrade town.

Although most of the plans that mentioned economic issues were in favour of business development, one village supported only light industry, considering other development to be inappropriate.

Specific actors were only mentioned in a minority of cases, but where they were mentioned, they tended to be local groups, such as the Chamber of Trade, who had the power to act directly in concert with others. This emphasis on direct action rather than lobbying others to act may have reflected the fact that a higher proportion of the settlements were market towns, which tend to have a wider range of more influential actors compared with smaller settlements.

Any differences between the four districts are masked by differences resulting from the number of market towns relative to other rural settlements completing plans in that district. However, six of the seven rural settlements mentioning the economy were in South Oxfordshire.

Seek to and establish small supported incubation units for start-up businesses - Chamber of Trade, TBAC, Business Link, WODC, OCC. (An Action Plan for Carterton, 2003)

Set up a Goring business forum. (Goring Village Plan)

3.4 Children and Young People

All but four of the plans were concerned about children and/or young people, with rather more emphasis on the older age group. We deal first with proposed actions to support young children and then discuss those affecting older children and young adults.

Eight plans proposed an action relating to improving children's playgrounds, some referring specifically to toddlers and one referring to 8 to 11 year-olds as a priority. These settlements were all rural. Four settlements wanted before and/or after school care and three settlements wanted to introduce or extend a holiday playscheme.

Five action points concerned supporting the local school and/or preschool, few of these being specific about the kind of support required. However, one referred to helping the school improve its facilities and curriculum and one to helping the pre-school find more suitable premises. With regard to school capacity, three settlements were concerned about making sure there were enough school places for local children and, conversely, one was concerned with arresting the decline in pupil numbers at the local school. Another action proposed was to monitor secondary school arrangements provided in the neighbouring town. In addition, there were two references to introducing safe and environmentally friendly 'travel to school' schemes and one to support for a school environmental prize.

There was more emphasis on the recreational needs of older children, with twelve plans referring to this as an issue, three of them specifically mentioning the need for a skate park. Additionally, six plans (all in South Oxfordshire) proposed providing a meeting place for young people, whether it be a café or a simple shelter. Five proposed a youth worker or volunteer(s) and four wanted to introduce or revitalize a youth club.

Ten settlements planned to improve communication with young people and/or involve them in decision making, two suggestions being a 'youth issues group' and a 'youth parish council'. A young person's section on the village website was also suggested. Other proposed actions, mentioned once each, were:

- provide free or concessionary sessions for young people at the leisure centre;
- provide a foyer (housing and support for vulnerable young people);
- find ways in which young people can benefit the village;
- provide activities for younger children;
- provide a natural play area;
- increase interaction between young and old;
- encourage the school board of governors to charge a governor with responsibility for 'community liaison'.

The concern for children and young people extended to all four districts and both types of community. Where the actions were assigned to particular individuals or organisations, parish and town councils were most commonly mentioned, particularly in providing play facilities for younger children. However, where schools were the focus of

proposals for action they, or sometimes more specifically school governors, tended to be assigned the responsibility. District and county councils were also mentioned in association with youth clubs and youth workers. We understand that three parishes have successfully combined to apply for and obtain funding for an additional youth worker serving all three parishes, although we found no specific reference to that in the plans we examined.

Establish sections on the website and in the Upton News for younger residents.
Parish Council;
(Upton Parish Plan, 2005)

Form a working group of interested individuals so as to address the points raised by the young people and to set up an event in which the young people can participate and feedback their specific ideas.
(A LaserQuest activity – funded by Oxfordshire Rural Community Council – was held at the Sports and Social Club in January 2005 and attended by about 50 young people).
(Dorn Valley Parishes Plan Report, 2005)

3.5 Adult Learning and Workforce Skills

Adult education did not seem to be a major concern in most places covered by community-based plans. There were only nine mentions of adult education or workforce skills. Six of them concerned the introduction or improvement of evening or day-time classes for adults. They extended over all four districts and both towns and villages.

Of the above, one village intends that its parish council should increase publicity for existing classes, another intends to assess the demand for evening classes, and a market town hopes to set up purpose-built premises for adult education.

There are two references to increasing workforce skills. One concerns the skills of hotel and restaurant staff and the other closing the 'skills gap' between local people and the requirements of local businesses. Also, one village has succeeded in its plan to provide training in information technology. It has been accomplished by a group consisting of the Parish Plan IT working group, volunteer trainers and the district and county councils.

In addition, there were several references to the need to improve library services, but as these do not necessarily involve adult education, they will be dealt with under the theme, 'Access to Services and Travel'.

"Whilst educational achievement at Faringdon Community College is good and improving it was flagged up by local business that the skilled people they require are not available in Faringdon. This project aims to [set up] a partnership that brings together education and private business to look at skills/education gaps."
Key organisations: Local businesses, Community College, Cranfield College, Business Link
(Faringdon Action Plan, 2002)

Encourage development of a purpose-built adult learning centre.
LWS, OCC, ACL
(Thame in Trust, 2004)

3.6 Environment

All but one of the thirty plans made reference to an issue concerning the environment. A large number of issues were raised and they will be considered in five sections:

- the appearance of the settlement and conservation of the built environment,
- wildlife and environmental conservation,
- environmental sustainability (including resource use),
- pollution (including noise and light pollution) ,
- other environmental issues.

Issues concerning building development (unless they specifically mention the 'natural' environment) are dealt with under the Spatial Oxfordshire theme.

Appearance

Thirteen settlements had problems with litter and flyposting and/or aimed to promote general cleanliness and tidiness, and four specifically brought up the problem of dog mess. Seven mentioned the need to preserve or enhance the general appearance of the settlement or protect historic buildings and another eight pinpointed particular areas or buildings that need to be protected. Four actions concerned entering or continuing to enter a competition such as 'Britain in Bloom' or 'Best Kept Village', two involved producing a village or parish design statement and one a building design guide. Three mentioned a conservation area or conservation plan. In addition, three plans were concerned with the possible environmental impact of development and another with maintaining the 'rural character'. Another plan pointed out the detrimental appearance of overhead telephone and electricity wires.

Wildlife

Five plans aimed to involve local people in nature conservation and environmental issues, one of these aiming to set up an environment group. Four plans proposed to protect a particular area such as a local nature reserve and one to maintain a 'rich natural environment'. More specifically, five plans specified actions to plant trees or look after existing trees, two to look after wildlife and biodiversity and one to protect water courses. One settlement aimed to produce a conservation strategy and another to produce an environmental action plan.

Sustainability

The actions proposed under this heading mostly showed concern with the long-term sustainability of the environment. Twelve plans are concerned with waste and recycling. Although a few points related to the convenience of the council's waste collection, there were many actions aimed at encouraging recycling and reducing waste, additionally two settlements aimed to introduce community composting schemes, and another wanted a separate collection for compostables.

One plan proposed action concerning reducing energy use and two aimed to produce energy sustainably. Additional actions, mentioned once each, were:

- producing a sustainability strategy,
- using environmentally friendly products on parks and gardens,
- buying local to reduce transport,
- water saving.

Pollution

Air pollution and noise pollution were quite frequent concerns, although often specifically associated with traffic. Consequently, these issues will be dealt with below under the 'Access to Services and Travel' theme. Four plans proposed actions concerning the reduction of light pollution; three of these also involved resisting the introduction of street lighting. However, two rural settlements wanted improved street lighting, although one of these also wanted to reduce light pollution. Additionally, there was one complaint about smells.

Other environmental issues

The need to reduce incidences of flooding was mentioned three times. In one case the drains had been unblocked as a result of the plan and this appeared to have helped the flooding problem. Allotments were mentioned twice two plans proposed actions where it was unclear whether they were referring to the built or natural environment, one of these being to establish an environment trust.

Concern for the environment occurred in both market towns and rural settlements, and there were no obvious differences in the issues raised. With regard to the four districts, there appeared to be rather more environmental concerns in South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse, but the numbers are not large enough to make this significant.

Where actions were assigned to a particular actor, this was usually the parish or town council or, less frequently, the district council. The county council and others were mentioned in association with particular issues.

Make sure that all villagers are aware of the recycling possibilities in the village.
Launton Lines Committee
(The Launton Village Plan, 2005)

The parish will set up a scheme in which people are asked to look after the tidiness of specific areas of the village.
Blewbury Village Society
(Blewbury Parish Plan, 2004)

3.7 Health, Care and Wellbeing

Just under half (13) of the plans were concerned with health, care and wellbeing. A wide variety of actions was suggested, some concerning general health services and facilities and some being specifically concerned with the elderly and infirm.

Regarding health facilities for the general population, three plans raised the need for NHS dental provision. A number of points were raised concerning the need to keep or (in one case) introduce facilities such as a surgery (2 plans), the local hospital and a

pharmacy. In addition, one plan suggested a healthy living centre and another suggested a monthly clinic providing a range of health-related services. One plan requested more preventive medicine and another more information about drug abuse services. More generally, there were calls for more investment in health and social care and more information about a health service consultation.

With regard to the elderly and infirm, the emphasis was on enabling physical access to services. Four plans proposed actions concerned with providing or publicising transport schemes to enable people to reach medical appointments and three with providing a prescription collection service or a local place where prescriptions could be collected from. There was also concern to provide:

- improvements in daycare and recreational activities for the elderly,
- a visiting scheme for the sick and elderly (2 plans),
- home delivery of groceries by the local shop,
- provision of seats for the elderly at a local beauty spot,
- respite for carers.

Concern for health issues was apparent in both market towns and rural settlements and in all four districts, although only one of the three Cherwell parishes raised health-related issues.

Again, where responsibility was allocated to a particular organisation to carry out the action, it was most commonly the parish or town council. The NHS, the primary care trust, church leaders and a parish plan working group were also mentioned.

Provide seats for the elderly to be sited on the Hurst Water Meadow - Parish Plan Facilities for the Elderly Working Group.
Two seats hewn from oak butts have been installed.
(Dorchester Parish Plan, 2005)

Expand the existing good neighbour car scheme and examine the possibility to arrange a local prescription collection service.
(Enstone Parish Plan, 2004)

3.8 Housing

Nineteen out of the thirty plans mentioned housing as an issue, all but one of these making some reference to affordable housing. The vast majority of these actions involved increasing the supply of affordable housing, although two intended to keep the situation under review and one hoped 'to find ways other than affordable housing of facilitating young and old locals living in the village'. Two plans mentioned the need for housing for key workers and one pointed out that high housing costs were hindering business. Four plans suggested methods other than new build for providing affordable housing. One advocated abandoning the right to buy social housing, one wanted to find a way of bringing empty homes back into use, another advocated using the planning system to retain small homes by opposing extensions and knocking houses together and one market town plan proposed to promote 'living over the shop'. Two plans for rural

settlements also identified a need for sheltered housing and care homes for older residents.

Some plans wanted new housing to meet the needs of local people or to contribute to the growth of the settlement and make it more viable, others were opposed to any development, and at least one rural settlement was split between those residents who did not want any development and those who saw a need for affordable housing. There was a general concern that any new housing should meet the needs of local people, in one case this involved proposals for a mix of housing types including large ones. Four plans proposed actions to carry out or update housing needs assessments or similar investigations.

As regards the location of new housing development, four plans wanted any development to stay within the village/town footprint and two were actively looking for suitable sites for housing. There were also a number of site-specific actions concerned with a particular development and a request for developers to consult with the parish council early on in the process. One settlement also wanted developers to contribute to local infrastructure and the local environment. In addition, there was one reference to parking standards, regarding the Government's advice on 1.5 places per dwelling as too low for a rural area.

Concern with housing, especially affordable housing, was prevalent in both market towns and rural settlements. Suggestions of ways other than new build to meet housing need tended to come from market towns, probably because they have more scope for other solutions such as flats over shops. There was some evidence that the larger settlements were more willing to accept new development but this was not conclusive. There were no obvious differences between districts on this issue.

Where a lead actor was mentioned, this was usually the parish or town council or less frequently, a parish plan steering group. District councils, housing associations and the Rural Community Council were also mentioned as potential partners.

Examine opportunities for encouraging the development of houses suitable for first-time buyers and the retired.
(Fencott and Murcott Parish Plan, 2003)

Work with WODC and a housing association to see whether affordable housing can be built in the village.
(Minster Lovell Village Action Plan, 2003)

3.9 Population and Migration

In general, populations of the settlements covered by the plans have been increasing over the years – in some cases quite quickly. However, some settlements still felt that they need a larger population in order to sustain village services, although this had to be balanced against a reluctance to allow housing development outside village boundaries.

More specifically, some plans mentioned the loss of young people from the settlement as a result of increasing house prices and the lack of affordable housing, and others mentioned lack of housing for key workers.

While there were no action points directly relating to population and migration, the concern with providing affordable housing could be seen as a response to out-migration of young people and, in some cases, a need for in-migration of skilled workers, causing an imbalance in the population. This concern extended over all the districts and was apparent in both market towns and villages.

3. 10 Access to Services and Travel

All but one of the settlements had an issue relating to access to services and travel. As this theme covered a wide range of types of issue, it has been subdivided into seven categories, each of which will be discussed separately below. The number of settlements documenting an issue or an action in each category is shown in Table 2:

Category	Number of settlements
Service availability	12
Roads and traffic	23
Public transport	17
Cycling and/or walking	22
Parking	14
Disabled access	5
Integrated transport	3

Table 2: number of settlements raising issues in each category

Again, the parish council was most commonly named as a lead actor but with the support of other bodies. In particular, the support of the county council was needed over matters of roads, traffic and public transport.

Service Availability

Seven plans were concerned with setting up a shop or supporting an existing one, and one market town intended to start a street market. Five action points, mostly from South Oxfordshire, concerned improvements to the local library. Four settlements in West Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse would like mains gas where it is at present unavailable, and there are two worries about emergency service provision. Other services mentioned once each were:

- cash machines,
- post boxes,
- reliable electricity supply,
- delivery service.

There were also proposals to identify gaps in services, produce a directory of services and to encourage the use of local services. Concerns about service availability were present in plans for both market towns and rural settlements, although the base level of services was higher in the larger settlements.

Roads and Traffic

Roads and traffic generated a large number of issues.³ Eighteen settlements were concerned with traffic speeds or wanted to introduce traffic calming, although one market town wanted to remove some traffic calming to improve access to the shops. There were eight additional points about traffic danger more generally and six actions proposed to control traffic levels, two of these specifically mentioning a problem with heavy lorries. In addition, three plans contained complaints about traffic noise and one about traffic-induced air pollution. Ten settlements wished to improve road maintenance and eight wanted improvements to the road network. One plan specifically proposed to improve goods access to a market town. Four plans proposed actions concerning directions and signage and three concerning street lighting. One settlement intended to increase car sharing and another to set up a group to look at traffic issues. Other settlements had problems with wider transport infrastructure, such as busy trunk roads.

There were no obvious differences between the districts or between rural settlements and market towns on road traffic issues, apart from a cluster of villages in the Vale of White Horse concerned with road maintenance.

Public Transport

The availability of information about public transport was an important issue, with ten plans aiming to introduce improvements. Nine plans contained actions to improve bus services and three to improve rail services. This reflected the reliance on buses for public transport in rural areas. Six plans mentioned other public transport schemes, such as dial-a-ride and community minibuses, which are mostly run on a voluntary basis. This is in addition to the hospital car schemes discussed above under 'Health, Social Care and Wellbeing'. Two plans raised the matter of improvements to bus shelters and one a complaint about rail noise. More generally, four settlements had a general commitment to improve public transport, three aimed to identify gaps in provision and two proposed action to encourage use of public transport. Public transport concerns covered all four districts, although there was no mention of rail in the three Cherwell plans. In general, rural settlements appeared more concerned with bus services than did market towns.

Cycling and Walking

Twenty settlements proposed action points concerned with maintenance and improvements to footpaths and pavements and there were a further eight points concerning pedestrian road safety. One plan proposed to develop long-distance footpaths and another to produce a footpath map. Fourteen settlements were concerned with cycle provision, mostly concerning cycle paths, although the provision of cycle racks was also mentioned. Additionally, one plan proposed to provide more information about walking and cycle routes. Plans for all four districts and both types of settlement contained proposals for walking or cycling.

Parking

Eight plans were concerned with providing additional car parking and two with ensuring that new development provided for enough parking. Three plans wanted more parking controls, another three to encourage responsible parking - and two wanted to guide parking to a particular place. Four plans also made general comments about parking

³ In the analysis of the concerns of Parish Plans and Market Town Plans *nationally*, this was consistently the most important issue to local communities (CCRU, 2005).

problems. Parking was seen as a problem in rural settlements as well as towns and in all four districts.

Disabled Access

Concerns with disabled access were raised in South and West Oxfordshire. Four of the five settlements raising them were market towns. Specifically, one town was considering introducing a 'shopmobility' scheme, another wanted to increase disabled parking, and a third to improve disabled access to buses. The other two raised more general concerns.

Integrated Transport

Points concerning integrated transport were all raised in plans for market towns in South Oxfordshire. One proposed action to co-ordinate bus and rail services, another intended to carry out a transport needs survey and the third was considering projects emerging from an existing Integrated Transport Study.

The Parish Council to persuade the bus company to publish regular and simple timetables in the Parish News Letter.
(Duns Tew Village Plan, 2005)

Research the demand for and possibility of getting mains gas.
The village
(The Launton Village Plan, 2005)

3. 11 Recreation, Leisure and Culture

Twenty-five of the thirty plans included action points or issues relating to recreation, leisure and culture. Fifteen settlements wanted to improve or build meeting facilities such as village and town halls, one of these hoping to take-over a disused scout hut. Two market towns were intending to investigate opening a cinema/arts venue and another wanted to improve a sports pavilion. Eight settlements wanted to develop sports provision and one of them was aiming to introduce a local sports council. Additionally, recreation ground improvement was the subject of four proposed actions and public open space was mentioned in three. Another settlement – a market town - was considering a multi-use recreational area. One plan also proposed to attract a family restaurant and another hoped to introduce a snacks/lunch venue. In one plan, an investigation into the viability of a swimming pool had found it to be too expensive.

Four plans proposed to increase the number of clubs and societies, four intended to encourage or support arts events and four supported or introducing carnivals, festivals and fetes. Also, five plans proposed to increase awareness of existing activities and two proposed to provide events information to visitors.

Four plans referred to local history and museums, two (both on the Thames) wanted to develop water-based activity and one hoped to persuade nearby RAF Brize Norton to introduce a viewing area. There were also two commitments to furthering community recreation in general and one to investigating the use of facilities in neighbouring villages.

There was no noticeable difference between the districts in this respect, although, as might be expected, market towns tended to be more ambitious than rural settlements in the provision of recreational and cultural opportunities. As on other issues, proposed lead actors tended to be parish or town councils.

Provide new indoor sports facility.
Parish Council, District Council, Linden Hones, Clubs and Societies
(The Cholsey Plan, 2007)

Establish a biennial Benson Festival.
(Benson Parish Plan, 2004)

3. 12 Spatial Oxfordshire

This section covers concerns and proposed actions connected with land-use planning and development, other than development specifically concerning housing provision (which is dealt under the housing theme above) and issues explicitly concerning the appearance of development (which are considered under the environment theme, also above). It also covers relations (other than transport links) of the settlement with other places, both within and without Oxfordshire.

Fifteen of the plans contained issues or actions under this theme. Five rural settlements were concerned with protecting Green Belt and their own identity by opposing development that would link them to a neighbouring town. Another two plans wanted to protect green spaces within the settlement and another referred to keeping certain areas free from development. Three plans proposed actions to monitor development on particular sites, and the plan for one village wanted to make sure development conformed with the statutory local plan and 'vigorously oppose' proposals that were not acceptable.

However, not all development was opposed. One of the villages opposed Green Belt development in general but added the rider:

'without seeing them as an impediment to meeting the needs of the parish community and farm diversification'.

Five communities, mostly market towns, wanted to redevelop particular sites or relocate particular facilities; one market town plan was keen to identify land for commercial development and also to influence the statutory local plan. Other actions relating to land use planning, mentioned in just one plan each, were:

- strengthen planning controls,
- review past planning applications,
- provide better publicity for planning applications,
- consider forming a planning committee,
- form a working group with surrounding villages to monitor planning,
- educate councillors about the planning functions of the district council,
- educate councillors about the statutory local plan and the structure plan.

Three market town plans wanted to improve links with surrounding villages and one wanted to increase links with its twin town.

There were no obvious differences between districts on spatial planning issues, but there were differences between market towns and rural settlements. Market towns seemed to be more likely to be in favour of development or redevelopment, although there were some rural settlements that wanted limited development. Market towns also appeared to be more concerned with external links, particularly to their surrounding villages. Where actors were specified, they were generally parish, town or district councils.

Establish a small group to work with a community architect/planner in consultation with local businesses, councils, land agents etc. to draw up design options for redeveloping the town centre –
CTC, WODC, C of T, Market Traders, landowners.
(An Action Plan for Carterton, 2003)

Work with ORCC to establish better links with the surrounding villages.
(Thame in Trust, 2004)

Specific connections between community-led plans and the statutory planning system

Because of its authority as a statutory activity, the planning system has an important relationship with community-led plans; it can be the means to implement some of the actions proposed in those plans. In an earlier research project for the Countryside Agency, the CCRU examined the relationship between Parish Plans and the statutory planning system and provided advice on how that relationship could be made more mutually beneficial (CCRU, 2002). This was later published as guidance to local planning authorities (Countryside Agency, 2003). The 12-point good practice advice note contained in that guidance is reproduced as Appendix 5 to this report as the advice offered provides generic value by setting out the practical benefits that can be secured by creating systematic linkages between community-based plans and strategic planning initiatives.

However, recent work by Jeff Bishop and colleagues undertaken for the Market and Coastal Towns Association and South West ACRE (SWAN) examining the future of community-led plans in relation to the spatial planning process (Bishop, Harris, Pearce and Sylvester, 2007) has moved the discussion further on in the context of the 2004 reform of the planning system. The detailed ways that community-led plans can interact with elements of the spatial planning process are too numerous to include in the present report. Readers are recommended first to consult the summary of the Bishop report in Appendix 4 and then to read it in full at the SWAN website www.swan-network.org.uk

It is sufficient to record here that there are clear opportunities for planning proposals emanating at the very local level to be incorporated into the statutory planning process, not least through their adoption as supplementary planning documents. Much depends on the demonstrable rigour and inclusiveness of the community-led plan making process and upon the capacity for any proposals to add to, or give local interpretation to, the planning policy at the strategic level. Very local proposals must go with the 'grain' of the

development plan documents and must fulfil stringent tests of accountability. This demands early and ongoing liaison and negotiation between the very local community and the local planning authority.

Bishop makes the point – and it is emphasised here – that despite the importance of the connection between Parish Plans and the statutory planning system, community-led plans are not intended to focus exclusively or even substantially on the land use / development dimension, albeit perhaps encouraged by the word ‘plan’, many communities attempt to do so. Rather, the concept is to link holistic planning at the very local level with holistic planning higher up, so that the scope for community-led plans to influence, for example, Local Transport Plans or the various housing or health-care plans is just as relevant as their influence on spatial planning.

3. 13 Conclusion

This research has analysed the action points arising from thirty community plans produced by market towns and rural settlements in Oxfordshire. Where plans did not specify actions, their expressed concerns were included instead. The plans analysed overlapped with the group of twenty-one Oxfordshire community plans analysed by Derounian (2005). It is therefore interesting to make some comparisons regarding the issues highlighted.

The present research found all but one of the plans to be concerned with the ‘environment’ and with ‘access to services and travel’ and more than half to be concerned with ‘children and young people’ (especially activities for young people and children’s playgrounds), ‘recreation, leisure and culture’, ‘community safety’ and ‘housing’ (especially affordable housing), whilst exactly half raised points under ‘economy’ and ‘spatial Oxfordshire’. This can be compared with Derounian’s priorities (see Derounian, 2005, p.11) of ‘affordable housing’, ‘facilities for young adults’, ‘improved public transport’ and ‘police presence/crime related’, the most notable difference being the lack of environmental issues from Derounian’s list.

In spite of differences between the two pieces of research, both show that there is a wide range of issues raised by parish and town plans and, perhaps more significantly, for which actions at a local level are proposed. While many issues are raised in a large number of plans, each community has a different range of priorities and proposed actions. Thus, plans can be used both to raise general issues such as affordable housing, and to gauge the views and priorities of a particular community, for example as to the relative importance of affordable housing and protecting greenfield sites.

While the main focus of the present research is on the actions proposed in parish and town plans it is also interesting to compare the main concerns of such plans with those identified in the national analysis conducted by the CCRU in 2005. Unsurprisingly, the range of concerns in community-based plans prepared in Oxfordshire mirrors the national sample, but the order of importance of those concerns at nationally emphasises the priority attached to road traffic issues. Nationally, the main concerns in Parish Plans were, in rank order:

- road traffic
- housing (in various guises)
- inadequacy of facilities for young people

- law and order / policing
- inadequacy of public transport
- minor environmental concerns
- inadequacy of specific village services
- car parking issues
- environmental protection
- village hall matters.

The concerns expressed nationally through Market Town Plans were very similar, with road traffic issues again heading the list of concerns:

- road traffic
- deficiencies of the town environment
- inadequacies of public transport
- inadequacies of facilities for young people
- inadequacies of leisure and recreation facilities
- poor range and quality of local shops
- neglect of the towns' tourism potential
- insufficient facilities and support for local business
- poor quality of employment
- affordable housing
- health and health-care issues

The number of plans examined in the present research is too small to make many meaningful comparisons and the issues raised in the four districts were very similar. However, differences between market towns and rural settlements were apparent on some issues, indicating, not surprisingly, that the size and facilities of a settlement will have an effect on the priorities of its inhabitants.

Many plans did not assign actions to particular actors or groups of actors. However, where this was done there was usually a lead actor, which was either the parish or town council or a parish or town plan working group. However, this body often did not have the power actually to make the desired change, in which case the action usually involved putting pressure on another body such as the district or county council.

It appears from the research, though, that parish and town plans have a valuable role to play in pinpointing local priorities and either stimulating local action or informing other bodies such as principal authorities of local priorities and needs. They certainly appear to offer a great opportunity to start a real dialogue between the community and service providers to build a better mutual understanding of what is needed and what the possibilities are for finding solutions. In more complex cases, new solutions may be found through partnerships between local actors and those working on a larger scale.

4. The Usefulness of Community-led Planning in the Development of Higher Level Strategies

Our analysis of recent Oxfordshire parish plans reported above, coupled with other work we have undertaken in recent years regarding both the 'bridging' of such plans with higher-level Community Strategies⁴ and the messages that might be distilled from an analysis of 80 Parish Plans spread across rural England⁵, together offer useful pointers in relation to the key question of how best to make use strategically of such plans. In that regard it should be stressed of course that 'parish plans' are just one kind of 'community-led holistic plan' drawn up at the very local level. Market town action plans, and indeed other bottom-up plans for neighbourhoods within larger towns are generically similar and much of what follows is likely to apply equally in those contexts.

That said, two key points regarding parish plans - the most widespread type of 'community-led plans' in Oxfordshire - are that they generally involve a clear call for action on matters of local concern (i.e. they are 'plans' and not just 'appraisals') and that they distil and express concerns and aspirations with an attention to local evidence and debate that it would be beyond the resources of county - or even district-wide agencies to replicate. If such plans are genuinely the product of people with their 'finger on the local pulse' and if they express a measure of local consensus on priorities for action, then their value as a resource for strategic agencies becomes apparent. Reinforcing that, of course, is the fact that so many of the issues covered in parish plans resonate with the local authorities' statutory responsibilities – for example in relation to transport, young people and housing

It should be noted however, that the 2000 Rural White Paper which first broached the idea of parish plans, and subsequent Countryside Agency documentation which sought to make them a reality, made clear that parish plans were not intended to be primarily a resource for strategic planners. Rather they were intended to help build local capacity (especially the competence of parish councils) and to give local communities their own locally derived and convincing charters for action. With that in mind, we may cite four specific ways in which parish planning / plans are far from ideal in a strategic – e.g. county-wide – sense:

- (i) they are geographically sporadic – i.e. total county-wide coverage may never be achieved. And does that involve bias in some way?
- (ii) they are temporally sporadic – i.e. they are apt to emerge at times dictated by local, not strategic, considerations;
- (iii) they are uneven in their definition and coverage of issues; for example the need for affordable housing or for improved community safety may get very different treatment, or even be ignored, from place to place;
- (iv) they are variable in quality, legitimacy and inclusivity.

In short, in a strategic sense they are 'messy' and strategic planners have to decide how best to work with that 'messiness' and how far trying to reduce it would offend a key precept of community development that allows for, and indeed promotes, local variability and a bottom-up definition of priorities. Thus, would it be right or wrong (or just

⁴ CCRU (2004) and Appendix 3

⁵ CCRU (2005) and Appendix 2

impossible) for 'county hall' to try to get local communities to work to a blueprint that prescribes a common timetable, agenda of issues and manner of working?

The answer to that question, we suggest, is that some careful and modest steps towards uniformity would be sensible – and indeed might be heeded if local communities were to feel that sacrificing some autonomy was likely to prove worthwhile. In this regard the current Oxfordshire initiative, embodied in draft papers on 'Community Life' and 'Developing the Infrastructure around Community-led Planning in Oxfordshire,' clearly champions that approach of fostering 'careful and modest steps towards uniformity'.

What can Parish (and similar) Plans provide for Strategic Planners?

Despite the above potential shortcomings, parish plans – and similar community-led plans - offer two particular benefits to strategic planners.

- (i) If enough have recently been produced, they can collectively provide a community-based snapshot of issues and perceived priorities across the county as a whole, or at least across its rural component. (This point is likely to be equally valid regarding the small town or intra-city context.) Those working at a strategic, e.g. LSP, level may get a better perspective on the relative weight of concerns to which they should direct their attention. For example, in a certain county what is the relative perceived importance of traffic-related problems, affordable housing, local service delivery, employment shortages, landscape degradation etc? And under each of those headings how common are particular concerns (e.g. is it bus frequency, or reliability, or cost that people are most concerned about)? Moreover is there similarly an emerging county-wide perspective on useful ways forward e.g. 'more scheduled buses' or 'more community transport schemes'? If the sample size permits, these snapshots might also be attempted for subsets of parishes such as those in particular districts or in specific size categories.
- (ii) They will certainly identify particular concerns and priorities at the individual parish level which require specific, bespoke, reactions. (Specific examples in the Oxfordshire context include: Launton wishing to remain separate from Bicester; Brightwell-cum-Sotwell's concern for its closed village shop, and Chinnor wanting improved sports facilities to be included in the redevelopment of a former cement works). The task of strategic planners in this respect is to consider whether and how far existing and future programmes and delivery mechanisms might be modified in order to respond adequately to such concerns.

A third and very significant way in which community-led planning may benefit strategic planning must also be cited (and this is rightly stressed in Oxfordshire's draft 'Community Life' paper) –

- (iii) It relates to developing human and social capital (taking 'human capital' to indicate individual people viewed as a resource, and 'social capital' to mean structures, groups, shared values etc, again viewed as a resource). If, increasingly, it is to be local communities that are to deliver more of what they

need⁶, then such capacity building is important – and it appears that human and social capital are often best generated as a by-product of people doing things together rather than as the product of specific initiatives such as training.

Going on from that, our earlier work on parish plans, which again can be applied to other types of community-led planning, suggests that the action points that such plans commonly set out are of three types, each type requiring a different strategic response:

- (i) projects that local communities can very largely undertake themselves, even if they require a measure of fundraising. Examples in the Oxfordshire case include: Dorchester establishing its own community web-site; Henley on Thames town council providing more public waste bins, and the Dorn valley parishes recruiting a group of people to walk local footpaths and monitor their condition. Here the ‘strategic need’ is likely to be modest and not go beyond ensuring that some facilitation assistance and possibly pump-priming money, is available. And here, of course, the local voluntary and community sector, and those who support it, is vital.
- (ii) projects that require one or more external agencies or service providers to undertake them, possibly in partnership with the local community. Thus, it is clear that Goring needs Highway Agency support to achieve enhanced traffic calming in the village High Street; Farringdon seeks town and district collaboration in increasing its stock of affordable housing, and Carterton wants town and district councils, as well as the Tourist Board and local Chamber of Commerce, to collectively market the town’s business opportunities. Other examples emerging in our parish-by-parish research include action to support young people, or public transport or community centres. In such cases a key need is for strategic planners to consider how far the proposed project accords with existing priorities and, in consequence, to consider any allocation of resources;
- (iii) issues that do not require explicit resource allocation by strategic planners, but a possible variation in general policy. For example a widely expressed general fear of crime, or concern for climate change might each suggest a need to look across the range of potentially relevant strategic policies with a view to strengthening, or revising, them in certain respects.

Recommendations and Concluding Remarks

In this final sub-section we first present some recommendations which flow directly from the evidence presented above (i.e. from both our analysis of Oxfordshire parish and market town plans and the subsequent brief review of good practice nationally.) Then

⁶ See the forthcoming report by the Carnegie Commission for Rural Community Development (of which Moseley has been a member). The report, due to be launched in late June of this year (but in mid-May without as yet an agreed title!), will very strongly support ‘community-led planning’ at the very local level, and its stronger integration with strategic planning at a higher level. It will also call for stronger elected governance at the very local level and an approach to development that adds value to what is already there and locally championed rather than seeks to respond to local deficiencies.

we go on to make a few concluding remarks relating to the current work of the Oxfordshire Partnership with regard to fostering community-led planning in the county.

First some recommendations. Given the various benefits that can and do commonly spin off from community-led, very local, planning we recommend that at the strategic level:

- (i) Unequivocal encouragement and support is given to the launch and undertaking of such planning, focussing specifically on parish and town councils (primarily to give the exercises the legitimacy that would be lacking if just *ad hoc* groups of residents were responsible, as was often the case with 'village appraisals') and on any disadvantaged parishes where 'little or nothing seems to happen'.
- (ii) Such support may have several aspects e.g.
 - ensuring the provision of sufficient professional advice and guidance at the individual parish (or other locality) level,
 - making available small sums of money to help defray the expenses of preparing and publishing a Parish (or similar) Plan (while not forgetting that the parish precept can and perhaps should cover some or all of this and thereby help to ensure parish council 'buy-in'),
 - facilitating networking and mutual support and learning between parishes undertaking parish planning and those contemplating such ventures,
 - demonstrating in various ways that it is 'worth the effort'. This should involve producing clear evidence that strategic bodies take these plans seriously, and that real benefits accrue to local communities,
 - instigating a 'conditional promise of funding' process whereby the top priorities expressed in Parish Plans of appropriate rigour and quality have a reasonable chance of getting at least partial funding.
- (iii) Putting in place clear procedures and machinery so that community-led plans can be properly received and acted upon. Chapter 4 of the authors' 'Bridges report (CCRU, 2004 and Appendix 3) suggested a number of 'components of effective bridging' including; providing clarity about bridging; identifying the roles and responsibilities of participants; creating effective structures linked to the LSP / Community Strategy machinery; improving bridging processes; identifying appropriate resources and support for bridging; and monitoring its effectiveness. One key issue concerns the pros and cons of also having machinery at an intermediate geographical area (i.e. between parish and county) designed to receive and respond to parish plans emanating from local parishes (as with the 'community areas' used in the cases of Wiltshire and Dorset).
- (iv) One specific suggestion in that report, which we repeat in the present context, is that once all of the above is undertaken, a 'Guide to Bridging' is produced and widely circulated (see Appendix 3). In the context of Oxfordshire this might include:

Oxfordshire – the Bridging Context This section should include a clear user-friendly explanation of how the LSP / Community Strategy process works and how effective bridging to/from the very local level is envisaged. Reference will be needed to the variety of strategic planning and resource-allocation exercises that might be relevant to parish planners;

A Bridging Protocol for Oxfordshire This section should specify what is expected of all partners in the exercise. Also a note should be included on the support that parish planners might expect in both the preparation and implementation of their plans;

A Bridging Template for Oxfordshire This section would comprise a tool to identify the 'fit' between the relevant proposals of a completed community-led plan and the objectives and proposals of the LSP; it would then serve as a basis for the strategic response to those proposals.

- (v) Addressing a number of 'human resources' issues, in particular:
- ensuring adequate staffing at the strategic level – 'adequate' to ensure that the above proposals are undertaken in a timely and efficient way;
 - capacity building at the local level, especially in those places poorly endowed with community leaders;
 - clarifying the role of elected (district and county) councillors in this process who, at worst, may feel bypassed, or more positively, may become better placed to champion the needs and priorities of their constituents. The current enquiry into strengthening the role of rural councillors by the Commission of Rural Communities⁷ is relevant here.
- (vi) On the assumption that at least a dozen or so community-led plans are produced in the county each year, produce an annual 'State of the County's Communities' report, distilling the main substantive messages of the latest crop of plans (and perhaps also reporting on the tangible results flowing for the previous crop of such plans).

Finally some concluding remarks.

Happily it seems that the Oxfordshire Partnership has already, independently, taken on board much of what we recommend above. A brief perusal of two draft internal (i.e. internal to the Partnership) documents makes that clear, though it was not part of our brief to critique those documents explicitly or to appraise the various proposed action points within them.

The draft documents are;

- *Developing the Infrastructure around Community-led Planning in Oxfordshire... (a paper narrowly focused on the strategic / community planning processes – the subject of this report)*
- *Briefing paper 1; Community Life ... (a paper more broadly addressing the components and significance of communities in Oxfordshire)*

Successive sections of the former document deal in turn with

- Funding for (a) the process and (b) project delivery
- Professional advice

⁷ The Commission for Rural Communities 'Inquiry into Strengthening the role of Rural Councillors' – interpreting that term to include parish and town councillors, and 'rural' councillors at the district and county levels - is due to report in the autumn.

- Mutual learning and support
- Understanding local community satisfaction or otherwise
- Developing 'Protocols' regarding support and delivery
- Monitoring the support given
- Extending coverage across the county
- Securing complementary funding streams
- Securing SCS and LAA recognition of community-led planning
- Enabling community-led planning to influence Strategic plans

On the basis of the research reported in earlier sections of the present report, we endorse the need for all eleven of those 'areas of work', though without looking at the individual action points broached. Only one of them is clearly additional to what we propose – namely 'understanding local community satisfaction or otherwise', and this seems eminently sensible. In particular it would be good to know more of individual and community motivation in getting involved in what is inevitably a time-consuming and taxing exercise. Given a sound understanding of that motivation and satisfaction, the strategic authorities will be better able to sustain interest – and that brings us back to capacity building and the key need to be able to demonstrate that positive benefits generally flow from parish planning and the like. In short, success with regard to the other 10 bullet points set out above is the best way to reinforce local motivation.

All of that said, it would be valuable for the Oxfordshire Partnership to be acquainted with Appendices 3 and 4 of the present report which each set out concise advice on just how to 'bridge' community-led plans with the planning and resource allocation undertaken at a strategic level. These 'statements of concise advice' were written largely independently of one another and thereby provide a sort of checklist or yardstick against which to consider the evolving Oxfordshire plan of action.

Some piloting in Oxfordshire of the various measures would of course be valuable – so long as it is not delayed too long. In that regard the county's Carnegie-funded action-research project related to the very topic of this paper, could prove an invaluable testing ground.

References

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Appendix 1: Parish Plans and Market Town Plans

The following 30 Parish and Market Town Plans in Oxfordshire were examined.

Benson Parish Plan
Blewbury Parish Plan
Brightwell-cum-Sotwell Parish Plan
An Action Plan for Carterton
Chinnor Parish Plan
Chipping Norton Town Appraisal
The Cholsey Plan
Crowmarsh Parish Appraisal
Dorchester Parish Plan
Dorn Valley Parishes Plan
Duns Tew Village Plan
Enstone Action Plan
Faringdon Action Plan
Fencott and Murcott Parish Plan Vision
Filkins and Broughton Poggs Parish Plan
Goring Village Plan
An Action Plan for Harwell
Henley on Thames Action Plan for Year Three
The Launton Village Plan
Minster Lovell Village Action Plan
Sandford on Thames Parish Plan
South Hinksey Parish Plan
Steventon Parish Plan
Tetsworth Village Plan
Thame in Trust: a vision and action plan
Upton Parish Plan
A Town Plan for Wallingford
Suggestions for a Better Watlington
West Hagbourne Parish Plan
Wheatley Parish Plan

Appendix 2: Executive Summary of the 'Patplans Report' to the Countryside Agency (CCRU, 2005)

England's several hundred Parish Plans and almost 200 Market Town Health-checks, all undertaken by local people following the 2000 Rural White Paper, were intended, and have been, a basis for concerted local action and are as a result somewhat individualistic in style and in coverage. Notwithstanding that, however, they also collectively comprise a rich resource for producing a 'snapshot' of the issues considered to be most important by the residents of our rural communities.

To that end the research reported here distils, categorises and reflects upon the key issues contained in nationwide samples of 80 parish plans and 40 market town health-checks – numbers that rise to 101 and 64 respectively when evidence assembled in similar earlier studies is added to the picture. All of that documentation was read and key issues identified using an essentially pragmatic form of content analysis.

In the case of the **Parish Plans**, and acknowledging that categorisation is more of an art than a science, the top issues emerging nationally were, in descending order:

- road traffic
- housing (in various guises)
- inadequacy of facilities for young people
- law and order / policing
- inadequacy of public transport
- minor environmental concerns
- inadequacy of specific village services
- car parking issues
- environmental protection
- village hall matters

The prevalence of these and other issues is considered regionally (ten sampled parishes per region) and also by broad location of the parish (remote or accessible) and population size. In each case the problems of small sample size preclude over ambitious generalisation but it certainly seems that affordable housing is the key concern in the remoter parishes and road traffic in those that are more accessible. Whether there are distinctive regional profiles of parish-level concerns is more debatable – with England's eight regions being large and heterogeneous – but some tentative hypotheses based on the limited evidence are put forward.

In the case of the **Market Town Health-checks**, the top eleven concerns (this time placed in no particular order) emerged as:

- road traffic
- deficiencies of the town environment
- inadequacies of public transport
- inadequacies of facilities for young people
- inadequacies of leisure and recreation facilities
- poor range and quality of local shops
- neglect of the towns' tourism potential
- insufficient facilities and support for local business
- poor quality of employment

- affordable housing
- health and health-care issues

In the case of the towns, it seemed that in the larger small towns it was road traffic that was the principal concern, while in the smaller small towns deficiencies of local services were more to the fore. Again inter-regional differences were less apparent due, it seems, both to problems of small sample size but also to the likelihood that true 'regional profiles' distinct from one another, do not exist.

The main conclusions reached are as follows.

- 1 Every parish and small town has its own distinctive profile of concerns and the case for place-specific, locally generated programmes of action remains a sound one.
- 2 That said, for all their uniqueness (and deficiencies) these locally generated audits of local issues can be used as a crude barometer of concerns felt across rural England; indeed further 'culls' of their messages should be periodically undertaken.
- 3 Overall, excessive road traffic (meaning road congestion, excessive speed, road safety, environmental nuisance etc) emerges as residents' key concern in the parishes and small towns combined. Otherwise, deficiencies in the local environment and in service provision, concerns for certain social issues (especially perhaps the needs of younger people to include affordable housing) and for the local economy (articulated especially in the market towns) stand out.
- 4 With responsibility for parish and small town regeneration initiatives passing significantly to the regions and to sub regional bodies such as the local authorities, Rural Community Councils and Local Strategic Partnerships there is much here to help them refine the focus of their work.

Appendix 3: Section 4 of the 'Bridges Report' to the Countryside Agency (CCRU, 2004)

Components of Effective Bridging

This section identifies components of bridging that, from the experience of the case studies, are likely to make the process more effective and to be worthy of application wider afield. It builds on the foregoing evaluation by offering ways to overcome barriers, maximise opportunities, and take advantage of good practice.

These 'components of effective bridging' are set out under six headings, though some overlap is inevitable:

- i) providing clarity about bridging,
- ii) identifying the roles and responsibilities of participants,
- iii) creating effective structures,
- iv) improving bridging processes,
- v) identifying appropriate resources and support for bridging,
- vi) monitoring the effectiveness of bridging.

Specifically, a key bridging resource - a locally focused **Guide to Bridging** - is identified for taking forward these components. The Guide would be in three parts.

- The first part of the Guide, the **Bridging Context** (see Box 1), would provide all participants in bridging within an LSP area with a clear, 'user-friendly' explanation of how the LSP/Community Strategy process works, how the local community-based planning process works and how effective bridging between these two processes might be achieved. Additionally, the Guide would contain two specific bridging tools, which would assist in making the process more effective. Thus;
- The second part would be a **Bridging Protocol** (see Box 2), which would set down (i) the arrangements for linking local community-based plans⁸ with LSPs/Community Strategies within an LSP area and (ii) the support that the local community-based planning teams might expect in preparing and implementing those plans.
- The third part would be a **Bridging Template** (see Box 3), which would identify the 'fit' between the relevant proposals in a completed community-based plan and the objectives and priorities of the LSP, and would then become the basis for the LSP response to those proposals.

4.1 Providing clarity about bridging

A prerequisite of good bridging is that all potential participants should understand how the various elements of bridging fit together structurally and in operation. The principal responsibility for providing such clarity lies with the LSP.

Clear information should be available to *all* potential participants about the basic elements of bridging, for example:

⁸ The term 'local community-based plans' is used here to encompass any holistic plan that is produced by, and for, the local community at parish, neighbourhood or small town level, although of course the research project has focused on Parish Plans and Market Town Action Plans.

- the remit and composition of LSPs, including, where relevant, the two-tier county/district arrangement;
- the relationship between the LSP and the local authority/ies (and other represented organisations);
- what a Community Strategy is – and is not - including what it can deliver; and the way in which it forms a policy context for local community-based plans;
- the process of preparing and reviewing a Community Strategy, including the points at which local community-based plans can best influence its development;
- the scope and remit of local community-based plans such as Parish Plans and Market Town Action Plans.

In addition to this generic information about bridging, each LSP should provide information specific to bridging in its own area including, for example, the names of key personnel, the timing of key decisions relevant to bridging and, possibly, the long-term objectives of its Community Strategy. All these elements could be included in the first part of a Guide to Bridging, written in plain English and targeted mainly at local community groups, but also usable by LSPs and other organisations (see Box 1). The Guide would need to be reviewed every two or three years.

<p>Guide to Bridging in ...shire/district</p> <p>PART 1: THE BRIDGING CONTEXT</p> <p>The purpose is to provide all the participants in this county/district with a clear explanation of the local context for bridging. It should be prepared by the LSP and targeted mainly at PP/MTAP teams, but should also be capable of being used readily by all stakeholders in the process. It should be user-friendly, relatively concise and written in plain English.</p> <p>The main elements might be:</p> <p>a) an explanation of the remit and membership of the LSP</p> <p>b) an explanation of the purpose, format and content of the Community Strategy along with the method and timetable for its preparation / revision and opportunities for community involvement</p> <p>c) an explanation of how PPs / MTAPs can ‘bridge the gap’ with the LSP and Community Strategy</p> <p>d) sources of useful information, advice and support and contacts</p> <p>(The Bridges ‘Good Practice Guide’ prepared in parallel with this Report will provide a simple model to guide this)</p>

Box 1: Guide to Bridging - Part 1: The Bridging Context

4.2 Identifying the roles and responsibilities of participants

The roles and responsibilities of the following participants in the bridging process should be defined in the Guide to Bridging and made clear to all participants:

- LSP officers and LSP Board members,
- Parish Plan teams,
- Market Town Partnership members and officers,
- Any other producers of local community-based plans,
- Local authority members and officers,
- Rural Community Councils (RCCs) and County Associations of Local Councils (CALCs),
- Intermediate level organisations such as Area Forums etc.

This might be reinforced by the LSP constitution specifying the roles and responsibilities of the LSP Executive Board members with regard to bridging. Consideration should be given to whether there should be PP/MTAP team representation on relevant LSP Boards or sub-groups; where many Parish Plans are being prepared in a county or district, such representation might be organised on a rotational basis, or by an agreed representative (e.g. from the CALC).

Each PP/MTAP Team should identify one named person as a main point of contact for the LSP and, in turn, the LSP should identify one named person as a main point of contact for all of the PP/MTAP teams. This **LSP contact could act as a one-stop shop**, a single point of entry into the bridging process for PP/MTAP teams. In this role s/he would work with teams from the outset, pointing them towards the different agencies, or sources of expertise, that could best assist with the preparation of their plan and giving extra information on the LSP/Community Strategy on a 'need to know' basis. Later in the process s/he would receive the Bridging Template relating to the completed action plan (see section 4 below) and broker a response to the plan proposals from the appropriate service provider(s).

Local elected members have a role to play in helping to develop the bridge and, where appropriate, in encouraging communities in their constituencies to prepare Parish Plans.

4.3 Creating effective structures

Clear structures relating local community-based plans with LSPs/Community Strategies are essential for effective bridging.

One useful element of a bridging structure would be a countywide or district-wide body that played a co-ordinating role between the different levels of the bridging process as well as encouraging horizontal linkages between local community-based plans, whether clustered on a geographical or an issues basis. This role might well be undertaken most effectively by a Community Support Network such as that adopted in West Berkshire (see below) or, if such a body is not created, by a Local Community-based Plans Steering Committee such as that operating in Shropshire.

Where issues have implications for adjacent communities, PP/MTAP teams should consult with surrounding parishes or towns. Likewise, LSPs should work together with neighbouring LSPs/local authorities where there are issues of common concern. Where

Area Forums or other intermediary bodies (such as the area-based groups of the CALC) already exist between parish and LSP levels, there would be some advantage in gathering together and distilling issues coming forward from Parish Plans as a means to inform and/or influence the LSP and the Community Strategy. Where these intermediate bodies do not already exist, though, there might be resistance to setting up another layer of organisation specifically to deal with bridging matters.

The bridging process should be structured clearly to allow local community-based planning to be dovetailed with the preparation and review of the Community Strategy. While this sequence should be embedded in the cycle of relevant meetings of the LSP/local authority, it should be sufficiently flexible to allow local community-based plans to feed in on a number of occasions in any one year. Nevertheless, the preparation of a Community Strategy and the relevant meetings of the LSP Board should follow a carefully planned and publicised timetable in which it is clear what decisions will be taken at what points. This would enable PP/MTAP teams to present their action plan proposals to the Board at appropriate times in relation to, say, its resource allocation decisions. Further, bridging might be a standing item on the agenda of the Board of the LSP and the annual meeting of the full LSP. Where several local community-based plans were being considered at the same time the need for such clear and robust process would be essential to prevent confusion at both strategic and local community levels.

For each local community-based plan an *ad hoc* **Bridging Group** (referred to in the Good Practice Guide as a 'Making it Happen Group') could be formed to oversee bridging; this should include at least: the relevant LSP (and local authority where appropriate) officer, one or more PP/MTAP representatives and a Rural Community Council officer. This group should not need to stay in existence for more than approximately 12 months and should not need to meet on more than three or four occasions. It would be advantageous if all members were connected as a 'personal email group'.

We propose that the best way of encapsulating and breathing life into these structures would be in the form of a **protocol**, or agreement, produced by the LSP in consultation with other participants (see Box 2). The protocol, which would form a discrete part of the Guide to Bridging, would be used consistently as a framework for all local community-based plans in a district/county and, as such, be a single county/district-wide document drawn up with the help of the RCC (and perhaps the CALC) in their representational guises. That said, there could be a limited scope for fine-tuning to reflect special local circumstances. The purpose of having the protocol ratified separately for each local community-based plan would be to engender a sense of ownership of the bridging process at the local community level and to emphasise the creation of a bridging partnership between the LSP and the PP/MTAP team.

Amongst other things the protocol should specify the nature and amount of support that the LSP would give to PP/MTAP teams. It should make clear how the LSP would receive, consider and react to local community-based plan proposals for action, making reference perhaps to the Bridging Template set out in Box 3. It might advise on the most appropriate structure and format for action plans to achieve compatibility with relevant parts of the Community Strategy; and it might specify minimum quality standards to be attained for local community-based plans to be considered for inclusion in the Community Strategy. These standards might relate, for example, to the use of evidence-

based information and the adoption of rigorous consultation processes, although LSP officers should be aware of the potentially 'messy' nature of these plans in that they will tend to be variable in quality and inconsistent in topic coverage.

Guide to Bridging in ...shire/district

PART 2: BRIDGING PROTOCOL

The purpose of the Protocol is to set down procedures, entitlements and expectations in linking local community-based plans with LSPs/Community Strategies in an LSP area. The protocol would be prepared by the LSP consulting its own membership and particularly the RCC and CALC as effectively representing the parish and town communities.

The Protocol might cover:

- a) the practical support that local communities producing local community-based plans might expect from the LSP or local authority,
- b) linking local community-based planning to district and county activity, referring *inter alia* to the identity and role of the link persons, any area groups, the logistics of two-way communication etc.,
- c) quality standards for local community-based plans – what really has to be respected if the LSP is to give due attention to them,
- d) the focusing of activity into localities with areas of identified need – any preferential attention that will be paid to more needy localities,
- e) connecting local community-based plans into statutory land use planning – the particular challenge of linking such plans to the land use planning process (referring explicitly to the Countryside Agency guidance on this),
- f) monitoring activity and evaluating outcomes – how the operation of the above process will be monitored; more substantively how the substance of the local community-based plans will be reviewed, say annually (see section 6 of this chapter).

Box 2: Guide to Bridging – Part 2: Bridging Protocol

One crucial element of a bridging structure should be the arrangements made for continuing the process into the medium term and beyond. The example of a **Community Support Network** introduced in West Berkshire seems to offer an excellent model here. The objectives of such an arrangement, sponsored by the LSP, might be:

- helping local community-based plans feed into the Community Strategy;
- monitoring the delivery of action plans;
- supporting parishes in taking forward actions;
- providing a point of contact on particular issues;

- suggesting issues/questions for service providers;
- looking at draft local community-based plans;
- committing officer time to responding to consultation.

4.4 Improving processes of bridging

Structures and process overlap, circumstances differ around the country, and there is no single bridging process. The evaluation of the case studies has shown that different elements can fit together effectively in different ways. The following, therefore, are some generally applicable precepts of how the processes of bridging might be taken forward.

1. The contact LSP officer should be involved from the outset: to help ensure understanding between the main participants in preparing a local community-based plan; to increase the chance of developing useful action plans and to reduce the chance of later conflict – but officers should resist the urge to take over the process from local people.⁹ This relationship between the LSP and PP/MTAP teams might take the form of a partnership explicitly marked by agreement of the protocol. To facilitate this, clear lines (and means) of communications should be established between the participants from the outset and adhered to throughout.

2. The distinction between the following three types of action proposals in local community-based plans is crucial to the operation of the bridging process:

- i. specific actions that PP/MTAP teams can undertake for themselves;
- ii. specific actions that require practical help from specific service providers which are members of the LSP;
- iii. strategic challenges or issues that have policy implications for service providers and are best dealt with in a review of the Community Strategy.

Because the first of these types of action can be implemented at the local community level, it can be discounted from the bridging process.

3. With reference to the second and third types of action the LSP contact would, respectively, (a) broker responses to specific action proposals directly from specific service providers, or via the LSP Board where an integrated approach was considered appropriate, and (b) place the identified issues before the LSP Board so that it could consider whether the Community Strategy should be reviewed and amended accordingly. These arrangements are represented in Figure 1 below.

4. To avoid tension between bottom-up local community-based plans and top-down Community Strategies concerning the legitimacy of local community-based plans, such plans must pass through a rigorous consultation process and, ideally, should be formally adopted by the parish council. The principal local authority councillors (typically at

⁹ As far as statutory planning is concerned, there are already examples in practice where early involvement by local planning authority officers in the preparation of Parish Plans has led to the development of an effective working relationship with the parish over town and country planning matters. Some authorities are taking individual planning decisions in line with Parish Plan proposals and, in turn, reviewing their local plans in the light of their involvement in parish planning.

county and district levels), again ideally, should also support both local community-based plans and higher level Community Strategies.

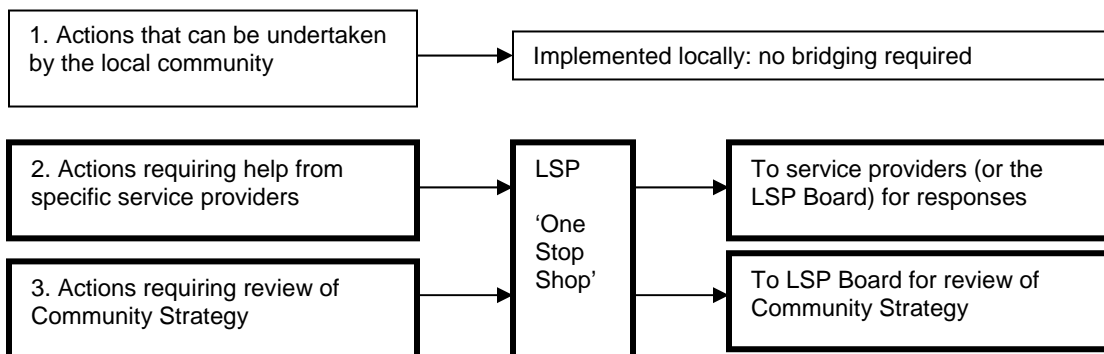


Figure 1: Responding to action proposals in local community-based plans

5. Where possible PP/MTAP teams should aim for compatibility between their plans and the LSP/Community Strategy, but without stifling innovative thinking. Where PP/MTAP teams wish the LSP to help implement their proposals they should produce information in such a way that the LSP, or other appropriate authorities, can process it alongside information from other such teams in the area. The LSP should provide guidance on such data presentation, but should be careful not to inhibit the individual responses of different local communities. One specific mechanism for use in this regard would be a **template** by which the local community planners sought to match their plan's proposals to the priorities of the LSP and the objectives of the Community Strategy, with the LSP then considering how to respond to those action points that matched their priorities (see Box 3). Like the protocol, this template could be a discrete part of the 'Guide to Bridging'.

6. An example of the sequence of stages that could be followed in using the template might be:¹⁰

- i. the PP/MTAP team sends its completed plan to the LSP;
- ii. the LSP officer sends the PP/MTAP team the template setting out the priorities of the LSP and the objectives of the Community Strategy;
- iii. the PP/MTAP team maps its action plan proposals against the template and, in a brief analysis, suggests which proposals the LSP could help to implement, and then sends this analysis to the LSP officer;
- iv. discussion takes place between the LSP officer and the local community-based plan representative about whether there is indeed a fit between the action plan and the strategic priorities of the LSP and what sort of help the LSP could offer;
- v. the LSP officer brokers responses directly from service providers where matters do not need to go to the Board;
- vi. the LSP officer presents the agreed analysis relating to each local community-based plan to the Board meeting;
- vii. the Board decides on appropriate action with regard to the relevant proposals in the local community-based plan, notably whether to respond to the proposals in an integrated manner, to remit individual proposals to

¹⁰ This is based on the application of such a template in the Carlisle & Eden case study between April and November 2003.

- appropriate Board representatives, or to incorporate into the next edition of the Community Strategy;
- viii. to 'close the loop' the LSP officer discusses with the PP/MTAP team the outcome of the Board decisions.

7. As part of the bridging process the LSP should publish its Community Strategy through a range of readily accessible media, including a website, ensuring that the information is up to date. In turn, PP/MTAP teams should publicise their proposed actions widely, using local media and, where available, a web site. The LSP should also publicise tangible achievements that have resulted from the bridging process in order to provide encouragement to other PP/MTAP teams, and should disseminate examples of good bridging practice.

Guide to Bridging in ...shire/district

PART 3: BRIDGING TEMPLATE

The purpose of the Template is to identify the fit between the relevant proposals in a completed local community-based plan and the priorities of the LSP/ objectives of the Community Strategy, and thereby to provide a better basis for the LSP to respond to those proposals, whether collectively or as individual service providers. The template would be prepared by the LSP in consultation with the RCC and/or CALC for subsequent use with individual PP/MTAP teams throughout the LSP area. The Template might include the following.

A brief statement of the priorities of the LSP and the key objectives of the Community Strategy, covering, for example:

Health and Well-being
Economy
Young people
Housing
Environment
Transport

Questions relating to each of these priorities and objectives to be answered by each PP/MTAP team in relation to its own action plan proposals, e.g.:

1. Is this LSP priority/Community Strategy objective identified in the local community-based plan?
2. Is there a link between the action plan proposals and the priorities of the LSP/objectives of the Community Strategy? If so, please elaborate.
3. What, if any, might be the role of the LSP in responding to, or helping to implement, the action plan proposals, e.g. (a) individual service providers responding to the proposals directly, (b) the Board responding to related proposals in an integrated manner, or (c) the Board reviewing the Community Strategy?

Box 3: Guide to Bridging – Part 3: The Bridging Template

4.5 Identifying appropriate resources and support for bridging

Shortage of staff at the LSP and local authority level is a major barrier to effective bridging and there is over-reliance on a small number of volunteers at the local community level. As proposed in 4.2 above, to ensure effective bridging the LSP – or local authority – should appoint a **one-stop-shop contact** and make arrangements to cover for this person in case of absence to counteract the problem of staff being one-deep. Throughout the present study the action researchers have played a valuable role in stimulating bridging initiatives and lending momentum to the process. In future a local community-based plans co-ordinator might undertake this role or, again, the Rural Community Council might do this.

A large LSP might consider establishing a broader rural community support services network (similar to the Community Support Network cited above) to co-ordinate advice, funding and community development support for communities as they prepare their plans. Such a network would be made up of key LSP partners, supported by a dedicated officer, with the role of supporting communities from an early stage in preparing and implementing realistic local community-based plans. The network would analyse completed individual plans and, with the parish, draw up a timetabled programme for addressing actions that fall within the remit of the LSP. Even with these arrangements, however, the LSP should indicate the number of local community-based plans that it could support effectively in any one year.

At the local community level there is great variability in terms of the skills and experience of local volunteers; in many instances **capacity building** will be needed to bring some communities up to a common baseline of competence. Examples of specific capacity building arrangements at both levels that have been used in the case studies and that might be adopted to make bridging more effective include:

- training in bridging for PP/MTAP teams, local authority officers and LSP Executive members;
- the preparation of induction packs for LSP members;
- briefing on bridging matters for local authority officers and members.

The Learning & Skills Council might fund such arrangements and the Rural Community Council might assist in providing training and briefing as part of a Service Agreement.

4.6 Monitoring the effectiveness of bridging

The LSP should promote a monitoring process for assessing progress in implementing the action points arising from local community-based plans. This might include a formal annual review at the LSP Board meeting of issues arising from local community-based plans. As part of this monitoring the LSP should inform individual PP/MTAP teams of subsequent developments in the Community Strategy relevant to their submitted action plans and should identify where it has taken on board action points from their plans. In turn, local community planning groups should monitor the implementation of their plans and review and update them regularly.

The following might be amongst the items included in the formal annual review of the bridging process across the LSP:

- the number of local-community based plans in place and the number underway;

- the range of issues that emerged in the local community-based plans completed during the preceding year and how, if at all, they were dealt with in the Community Strategy process;
- feedback from local communities that have undertaken a local community-based plan about the degree to which the process of producing the plan has been successful and how individual action points contained in those plans have been implemented with or without the support of the LSP and its member organisations;
- the adequacy of the support given to PP/MTAP teams during the year, and the resource issues implied.

4.7 Conclusion

The above consideration of the components of effective bridging forms the basis of a Good Practice Guide to be issued by the Countryside to all potential stakeholders in the bridging process. The Good Practice Guide, which has been submitted separately to the Agency in draft form, could provide material for the Guide to Bridging that should be prepared by each LSP.

Appendix 4: Extract from ‘An Exciting Future for Community Plans’, a report to the Market and Coastal Towns Association and South West ACRE (Bishop, Harris, Pearce and Sylvester, 2007)

SUMMARY ISSUES AND IDEAS

This ‘research’ project ended up somewhere different to where all involved had expected at the outset. For that reason this summary starts with a description of how Community Plans could be handled in the (hopefully not too distant) future.

LOOK AHEAD A FEW YEARS AND JUST IMAGINE

Parish Plans and Market Town Plans (as back in 2006) still continue and more hybrids and variations have begun to appear, such as where a group of communities collaborate to create what is almost a ‘Rural Area Action Plan’. More variation also now occurs in the relationship with statutory processes. Instead of the all-or-nothing of either opting in (going for formal adoption within the Local Plan) or opting out (having a plan with no external validation), it is now possible to place many different elements of a plan, as appropriate, into many different contexts – the Sustainable Community Strategy the Local Development Framework Core Strategy, planning obligations ‘pooling’ arrangements, housing plans, the Local Transport Plan etc.

Community Plans are now seen as Local Sustainable Community Strategies. Community Plan groups are encouraged to be more outward-looking and collaborative; to work and share with other communities and build the added value that can come from consistent approaches and common evidence.

The new breed of LSPs have, as suggested in 2005, become the champions of Community Plans and the main format through which they are developed and secure their own appropriate ratification and then funding support. In exchange for this external support, funding for Community Plans is dependent on the local groups following an agreed procedure, negotiated with the help of an independent enabler and with input from local voluntary sector groups (notably the Rural Community Councils, who still administrate grants). The local enablers also play more roles across the life of Community Plan projects, proactively helping and pressing to ensure good links between communities and public agencies. In order to do this, they also work closely with the new generation of more senior and influential LSP Coordinators.

In general, the evidence collected in Community Plans is now far more robust and used directly by local planners and other officers: the old and narrow route of formal adoption is no longer the prime way forward. Community Plans have also developed a far sharper approach to their Action Plan stage such that they are more firmly linked into public sector funding decisions, especially through the Local Area Agreement. Action Plans also define far more carefully how the local community expects to be involved in developments of any sort in its area, especially by the private sector. As a result of all this, it is now rare to find a Community Plan as a whole becoming formally adopted into the planning system.

NB. The term ‘Community Plan’ refers to both Parish Plans and Market (and Coastal) Town Plans.

THE SOURCE OF THIS FUTURE VISION

The Research Project

This exciting approach developed from a study initially intended “To analyse the regional position with regards to the current relationships between the statutory planning services and initiatives such as parish planning and MCTA planning, and explore where authorities have adopted these initiatives into the new planning system, focusing where possible on the new Local Development Frameworks.”

The ‘region’ is the South West. The clients and project team are listed at the end of this summary. From the very start (in January 2006) the team, with client support, widened out beyond the planning context to include, for example, evolving policy and practice around Sustainable Community Strategies. As is obvious from our opening section, the study also moved beyond analysis and description into prescriptions for better future processes. The core project work involved desk study, telephone contact with key actors at national, regional, local and community level and a number of short case studies.

This core work was supplemented by 3 more in-depth case studies funded by Defra and 2 funded by the Commission for Rural Communities. (The case studies will shortly be on, or available via, the Defra and CRC websites.)

The Changing Context

The project brief rightly highlighted important changes in the planning system that could affect Community Plans. Key changes included:

- The introduction of Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS);
- The introduction of Local Development Frameworks (LDFs);
- The shift from a land use focus to a spatial planning focus;
- The far greater importance attached to community involvement;
- In particular the use of Statements of Community Involvement (SCIs);
- The shift from Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) to Supplementary Planning Documents (SPD);
- The generally greater rigour involved in the SPD process and especially the requirement to introduce Sustainability Appraisal (SA); and
- Forthcoming changes to the system of planning obligations (S106).

In the wider context the team also drew attention to the potential and implications of:

- The shift from Community Strategies to Sustainable Community Strategies;
- The implications of this in terms of more comprehensive and consistent topic coverage, taking a longer term view and avoiding narrow parochialism in strategy development;
- Planned changes to the system of Local Strategic Partnerships;
- Piloting of Local Area Agreements; and
- The emerging government approach to neighbourhood devolution.

COMMUNITY PLANS AND THE PLANNING SYSTEM

In terms of the initial focus of the study, the team looked at how Parish Plans and Market and Coastal Town project groups addressed the issue of linking in to the statutory planning system. The team also looked at the other side of the equation – how community groups are dealt with, supported and linked in to formal systems by the planners (in particular, but also other local government professionals).

There were significant differences between Parish Plan approaches and those of Market and Coastal Town projects. Parish Plan groups were left mostly alone to do their work with variable support from RCC fieldworkers; some were encouraged to seek adoption as Supplementary Planning Guidance under the old planning system. Market Town groups were driven far more by the grant aid procedure, informal guidance and fairly specific procedures – for example the rigorous ‘Healthcheck’. As a result, links between Parish Plan groups and local authorities varied considerably while Market Town groups, who often used outside professional consultants, established good links early in the process with relevant agencies, although not always with planners.

If Parish Plan groups did contact their local authority the link was usually to the planning department. This appeared to be based on assumptions about the scope and status of Plans, especially that they have greatest influence if they are formally adopted within the planning system as (in the old system) Supplementary Planning Guidance. Without much external guidance or understanding of planning, even those plans where the group was seeking adoption were too often seen by planners as little more than ‘wish lists’.

Formal planning authority responses to Community Plan work varied enormously from patent resistance to strong support. In general there was little of the latter. Individual planners, especially the more junior ones, were often more positive and supportive. Other authority officers often gave support and various forms of advice and support were available from Rural Community Councils (if less strong on specific planning issues).

In relation to the new planning system, many in communities believe that the greater status of community involvement, the more holistic approach of ‘spatial planning’ and the need for a careful approach to sustainability issues all suggest that Community Plans will be even more important and stronger. Unfortunately, that belief is now seriously shaken by the often tokenistic support for community involvement, planner confusion over the meaning of ‘spatial’ and the complexity and uncertainty of Sustainability Appraisal and SPD adoption.

Market Town groups often stood outside this complexity because they relied so much less on links with planning and were more professionally organised with other links such as to LSPs. They were also (probably again as a result of their professional help) more focused on the practicalities of implementing any Action Plan.

COMMUNITY PLANS AND THE WIDER SYSTEM

The team examined many examples and a possible future model began to emerge. Several authorities were clearly working on similar ideas (e.g. linking more to the LSP) and many community groups were clearly supportive of a broader, more holistic approach not so tied in to the planning system. In one case (North Dorset District) the team located an example – their ‘Community Planning Model’ – which, to be honest, they drew on heavily in developing the Vision at the start of this Summary.

The future model, lodged in a wider system than just planning, is as illustrated in the ‘Vision’ on the opening page. It is optimistic and challenging and draws on a number of changes (e.g. to LSPs) mooted but as yet not fully delivered. At the same time the approach is certainly not dependent on all of these system changes and it could even be taken forward productively in the current context. That is however challenging for central

government (where Community Plan support is currently fragmented) and for local government. It is also challenging for local communities because it requires them to take a more open, less parochial approach than many appear to take at present.

The new approach is also not totally distinct from planning. Appropriate links into the planning system will still be important for almost all future Community Plans and for some it will be crucial. Taking the pressure off the all-or-nothing notion of 'adoption' means that communities and planners can now work far more creatively together to find the relevant way of working for each specific set of local circumstances. That may mean using the Community Plan to provide evidence for main policies and LDF documents, engaging directly with the development of Core Strategies, linking in to Area Action Plans, leading on to Village Design Statements or ensuring locally sensitive approaches to the pooling and distribution of Section 106 monies. There may even still be situations in which adoption as a Supplementary Planning Document is exactly right for that place at that time. And finally, all of this will be of enormous help to planners in addressing the challenge of truly holistic 'spatial planning'.

The clients and team are excited by this approach and believe that it has the potential to:

- Tackle head-on the old conflict between top-down and bottom-up by showing that this need not be an either/or choice;
- Engage communities with others like them at a local level;
- Pick up on the type of holistic approach that community groups have always argued that they operate (and the public sector does not); and
- Integrate this through the practical delivery of targeted support and funding to coherent programmes of community level action.

MAKING THE FUTURE VISION HAPPEN

It is almost certain that others are thinking along the same lines, if only on certain aspects. There are also a number of other initiatives currently underway to advance aspects of Community Plans activity. The first stage of moving forward must therefore involve 'mapping' all this activity.

More importantly, all of this can be achieved with no changes to policy, general procedures or funding regimes. It requires a range of practical measures as below.

In relation to Community Plans and the new planning system:

- Clarification of planning procedures and requirements to explore all possible links, not just adoption as SPD.
- Developing a 'community-friendly' approach to Sustainability Appraisal that can be done collaboratively with local planners.
- Highlighting, or developing afresh, creative approaches to community involvement generally (for projects as well as plans).
- Promotion of and support for some form of reasonably independent local 'enabler' to act as intermediary between community groups and all in the public sector.
- Production of guidance materials – varied for different groups.
- Awareness raising with a medley of different groups and organisations.
- Ensuring that planning schools teach about Community Plans and community involvement – something few do despite the importance of such issues in the system.

In relation to the wider future vision:

- Establishing some form of 'Concordat' and 'Protocols' signed by the local authority, local association of town and parish councils and voluntary sector agencies to promote commitment and common approaches.
- Wider and proactive promotion and more detailed development of the basic idea.
- The Community Plans approach needs to be seen to be valued by central government, which many currently feel is not the case.
- Even more so than with planning integration, local enablers are critical.
- Enablers need senior LSP Coordinators to work with.
- As with planning integration, guidance materials, awareness raising and changes within initial and continuing education and training are needed – for all.
- A single funding model, probably linked to LSPs and even LAAs, will be needed.

Appendix 5: Good practice advice for local planning authorities: extract from Countryside Agency guidance Parish Plans and the planning system (Countryside Agency, 2003)

1. Parish Plans offer parish councils and communities a means to make detailed planning proposals and tailored guidance for individual parishes, based on full community involvement, that otherwise might well be beyond the resources of the local planning authority.
2. Parish Plans should be a means to engage communities in the constructive planning of their parishes to help shape and manage change.
3. Recognize that Parish Plans are 'holistic' in scope and that although planning matters are likely to be a significant component, they are only one – and for some communities not the most important – component.
4. Work in partnership and become involved early in the preparation of a Parish Plan. This increases the chance of developing useful planning proposals and reducing the chance of conflict between the local planning authority and the parish council later in the process.
5. Explain clearly to parish councils at the outset the importance and scope of supplementary planning (guidance) and the need for the planning components of Parish Plans to be prepared rigorously.
6. Consider holding quarterly forums with groups of parishes, ensuring that Parish Plans are a standing item on the agenda of such meetings.
7. Resist the urge to take over the process from parish councils
8. Prepare local guidance for the parishes in your district on how to prepare the planning components of a Parish Plan. This can be used by all the parishes in the district and will reduce the amount of time spent explaining procedures to individual parish councils. The guidance could usefully accompany or include a protocol explaining what continuing assistance might reasonably be expected from you and other partners.
9. Prioritize assistance to those parishes in most need or with local development issues rather than adopting a laissez-faire approach that might benefit those parishes where problems are less substantial.
10. Where appropriate, take the initiative and go to parish councils to tell them about the benefits of Parish Plans.
11. Include supporting policies and scope for Parish Plans and other similar community-based documents in your Development Plan / Local Development Framework.
12. Get local authority commitment at the highest level and keep channels open internally with other officers, departments and members / committees.