



Campaign to Protect
Rural England
Gloucestershire

COMMUNITIES, PLANNING AND LOCALISM

**A RESEARCH REPORT FOR
CPRE GLOUCESTERSHIRE**

BDOR LIMITED, JUNE 2011

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ES1. This report draws out key points from a study commissioned early in 2011 by CPRE Gloucestershire. In summary, the project brief was:

"... to contribute to the unfolding government policy on localism by reviewing the effectiveness of community involvement in neighbourhood planning in the area of Parish Plans and Village Design Statements."

Following early discussion with the clients it was agreed to widen the coverage to include several approaches other than just Parish Plans and Village Design Statements and to look, if briefly, at urban practice.

ES2 We summarise our techniques and findings in the paragraphs below and these are elaborated in the main body of the report, but our 'headline' conclusions are:

- We found widespread support for the principle of localism and neighbourhood planning.
- We were made aware of the many planning techniques that are already being used by communities, many of which have a proven track record.
- Only a few aspects of Neighbourhood Plans were seen to be adding useful additional 'tools' to the community planning 'toolkit'.
- Many of our respondents foresaw practical difficulties in preparing and implementing Neighbourhood Plans.
- Others concluded that a combination of community planning techniques might be the best approach for individual communities.
- Some respondents, from all sides, reflected that the time and cost involved in the Bill hardly justified what they saw to be the minor changes it would introduce.

ES3 The project was undertaken through desk study of published material, interviews with practitioners and professional bodies and a workshop that included a representative of DCLG. The findings therefore draw on the experience and views of a number of community activists, planning officers, elected members (District/Unitary and Parish/Town), Rural Community Council staff, private developers, staff from an AONB, planning/development consultants, staff from NGOs and others. This covered information from the highly pressured south east to some more disadvantaged areas, and from the urban fringe to remote rural areas. The focus was solely on those aspects of the Localism Bill that relate to neighbourhood planning and community involvement.

ES4. In terms of practice to date, we located an extremely wide range of approaches and methods that have been used over recent years (and heard of but did not pursue many variants of these), in some cases for over 20 years, to enable local people to have a voice in plan-making and project development. These vary from engagement in strategic plan-making to strongly community-led approaches. None was seen to be without flaws and weaknesses but enough examples were offered of good or best practice to suggest that all approaches have value in principle and could address a range of situations.

ES5. In terms of emerging approaches to localism there were varied levels of awareness, between those who were clearly well up to speed and others less so. In general there was uncertainty for a number of reasons, some to do with what were seen to be conflicts between what is in public statements and published material and some to do with the changes being made to the Localism Bill as it passes through Parliament. It was pointed out that what is in the Bill also needs to be seen in the context of other initiatives, for example the Local Growth White Paper and the New Homes Bonus incentive.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. This report draws out key findings from a study commissioned early in 2011 by CPRE Gloucestershire. In summary, the project brief was:

“... to contribute to the unfolding government policy on localism by reviewing the effectiveness of community involvement in neighbourhood planning in the area of Parish Plans and Village Design Statements.”

1.2. The focus was solely on those aspects of the Localism Bill that relate to neighbourhood planning and community involvement. Following early discussion with the client, it was agreed that the team should look beyond just Village Design Statements (VDSs) and Parish Plans (PPs) and also consider experience from a medley of other approaches from involvement in plan-making through to Community-based Landscape Character Assessment and Concept Statements. The team also looked in some detail at the developing proposals within the Localism Bill and some other related government documents (eg. the Local Growth White Paper), announcements linked to the Budget in May 2011 and ministerial announcements (eg. on making financial issues a material consideration in planning decisions).

1.3. Approaches to community involvement in plan-making have been most widely practiced in rural areas and this is reflected in the research. Urban examples are however important to this work, especially with regard to proposals in the Localism Bill, so are addressed briefly.

1.4. It was felt by the team and the client that a review of the wide range of approaches to community involvement in plan-making would add an important and overlooked dimension to the ongoing debate around the Localism Bill. This research was undertaken over a 5 month period from February 2011 and this paper was drafted in June 2011. At the time of writing the Localism Bill was maintaining its progress from the House of Commons into the House of Lords where amendments continued to be debated. Changes have occurred frequently since the Bill was first published so some points in this report may be out of date by the time it is published.

1.5. The project was led by Jeff Bishop (Director, BDOR Limited) with Prof. Steven Owen (University of Gloucestershire) and Katie Lea (Place Studio).

1.6. Following the short section on Methodology (below), this report is in two main sections, the first on practice to date, the second on statutory neighbourhood planning as proposed in the Localism Bill. The final section draws out overall conclusions.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. The approach to this research has been in two main parts:

- **taking stock of practice to date** with Parish Plans, Village Design Statements and other related approaches; their coverage, scope, use and value both generally and in relation to the planning system in particular, and
- **looking ahead to emerging principles and practice for localism in planning**; focusing on government material but also the commentary on it from many others (with the proviso that much of this was, and still is, in a state of flux).

2.2. The aim was to ‘fill gaps’ by focusing on issues either not addressed in previous work or that needed updating. The tasks were delivered through three main approaches:

- **Interviews, Questionnaires and Meetings:** The main aim of the interviews* was to explore the potential links between Parish Plan (PP) and Village Design Statement (VDS) experience and the aspirations and approaches around neighbourhood planning in the Localism Bill. Those contacted include planning officers, elected members (District/Unitary and Parish/Town), Rural Community Council (RCC) staff, community activists, private developers, staff from an AONB, planning/development consultants and others. Their experience ranged

from the highly pressured south east to some more disadvantaged areas (eg. south Cumbria), from urban fringe and remote rural areas as well as from Gloucestershire. (* Some people preferred to complete a questionnaire, others to arrange a face-to-face meeting.)

- **Desk Study:** This involved accessing and reading material available on work to date on PPs and VDSs, as well as on other approaches such as Community-based Landscape Character Assessment and Concept Statements and community involvement in plan-making and development control. This included books, formally published academic research, policy-related research (eg. for government), professional magazine and journal articles, training resources (eg. from the Planning Advisory Service) and guidance material/toolkits. There is of course far less material to date on localism but the team's work involved study of government publications, ministerial speeches and government press releases, commentary in newspapers and journals and commentaries by professional and other organisations.
- **Workshop:** This was held in April 2011 and brought together a group of experienced community planning practitioners to discuss emerging findings. The group included people from or representing DCLG, local authority planners, ACRE, an AONB, the Rural Coalition, Cheshire Landscape Trust, English Heritage, Natural England, Planning Advisory Service, CPRE branches and national office, as well as a planning consultant and an ex senior Planning Inspector. The event was run as a workshop, enabling all to participate fully and develop shared, agreed conclusions.

3. PRACTICE TO DATE

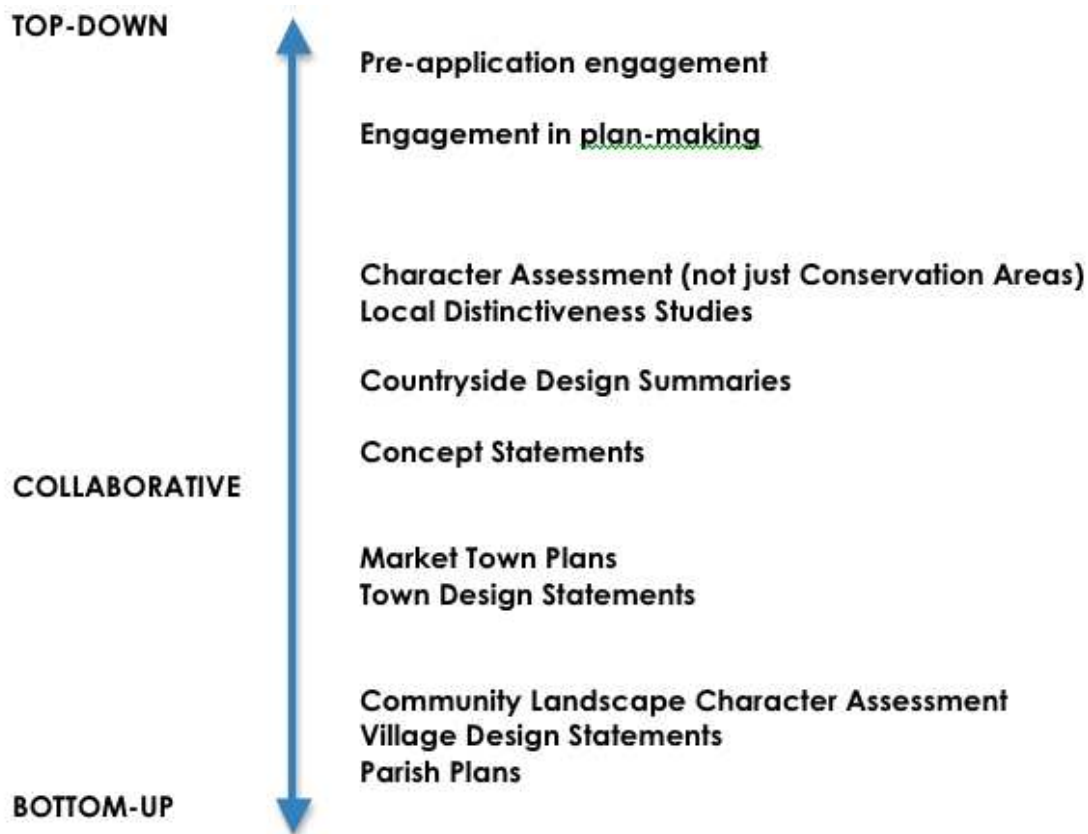
3.1. The Scope of Work

3.1.1. Although we focused our attention on PPs and VDSs, our brief was widened to include various other approaches. All of them warranted attention by being either mainly or totally community-led, or having some significant component of community involvement and all being, if to different degrees, relevant to the land use planning system.

3.1.2. There is in fact a spectrum of approaches that includes PPs and VDSs but also some others. Several have a long history, over 25 years. For example, Parish Plans developed from a combination of what were at the time two innovative and very different 'techniques'. One was Parish Maps, a highly graphic and creative way of summarising a community's view of local distinctiveness, the other was Parish Appraisals, a rigorous, generic (but adaptable) questionnaire format through which a community could assess its current circumstances and future needs.

3.1.3. This spectrum (overleaf) is based on the extent to which local authority planners, professionals/advisers or a local community are 'in the driving seat' (often termed 'top-down' and 'bottom-up'). This begins to sketch out some differences between parish/village level work and initiatives for larger market towns because the former are far more likely to have been led by, perhaps even completed totally by, a village community (though our work highlighted some done by consultants). The latter almost always involve, either as advisers or as leaders, external consultants as well as receiving often considerable amounts of input from a local authority (though again we located examples of market town groups 'going it alone'). By introducing the spectrum we are also able to introduce other approaches that are relevant to this study, so all have been looked at to some degree. Some of them will be shown to be particularly relevant when looking ahead to the changes likely through the Localism Bill

Fig 1. Spectrum of Approaches



3.1.4. Concept Statements are located at the middle of the spectrum because they are, in principle at least, a very collaborative approach that could be initiated by a local authority, a landowner or a community. Character Assessment is meant here to cover only the procedures used for Conservation Areas.

3.1.5. At the top of the spectrum are the two main approaches used at the heart of the land use planning system – the engagement (or involvement) of communities in plan-making and the engagement of local communities by applicants/developers prior to submission of planning applications ('pre-application involvement'). These are clearly not community-led but, at best, use practices and procedures that are as thorough in terms of the role of local people as some practice on, for example, Parish Plans.

3.1.6. In order to fulfill the brief as comprehensively as possible, we also looked at practice in urban areas and sought out any interesting parallels in other countries. With the exception of a few insights from Village Design Statement work in Ireland, very little emerged from the international research. It is perhaps surprising that there are very few examples of urban communities developing their own 'neighbourhood plans' as an early, proactive way of helping to shape their own future. A few examples exist (eg. Lockleaze in Bristol) and many urban communities have produced things similar to plans in response to unwelcome projects by authorities or developers, occasionally (as with Coin Street Builders in London) to great and long term success. Though producing community plans in reaction to plans or projects by others (the feeling of being 'threatened') is a common reason for Parish Plans in rural areas, the rural examples are mainly proactive, holistic and wide-ranging whereas urban examples tend to be a community's specific project as a counter to an authority's specific project. Urban examples are also (especially at the start) mainly about land use and spatial issues rather than covering the range of issues common in PPs.

3.1.7. There is also an interesting urban model around community planning which, as far as we know, remains unique – the Bristol Neighbourhood Planning Network. It supports, coordinates and promotes the work of around 45 specific neighbourhood planning groups across the city. Although few groups have yet to develop completely community-led plans, there has been some genuinely collaborative work and several plans strongly supported by the City Council. This approach has also enhanced engagement in the Council's Core Strategy work and introduced a rigorous procedure (almost a formal requirement) for pre-application engagement on projects above a specified (and quite small) size.

3.1.8. The remainder of this retrospective section of the Stage 1 report deals with each of the spectrum initiatives in turn. Because they offer the fullest practice across the country, there is most to say about Parish Plans and Village Design Statements. Other initiatives are covered more briefly and commentary on these is based almost entirely on occasional examples and sometimes on pre-existing research that rarely covered issues about links to community-led planning. We proceed from the bottom of the spectrum and move up.

3.2. Parish Plans and Village Design Statements

3.2.1. This is the most substantial part of this section of the report and it draws on the findings of all of the work to date. The interviews with planning and RCC officers in particular covered both PPs and VDSs (whereas for most community representatives this was either a PP or VDS), so we have chosen to combine findings on both in the following paragraphs. Where necessary, however, findings on each approach are drawn apart. Each sub section highlights some key stages or aspects of PP/VDS preparation and use and includes the interview findings then the findings from the desk work. Please also note that planning officers often commented on Market Town Plans and Town Design Statements as well as PPs and VDSs, so some of that material is covered here. Key points about PPs and VDSs are then drawn out in a final summary.

3.3. Who prepared PPs and VDSs?

Interview Findings

3.3.1. All those to whom we spoke were initially keen to say that, overall, a variety of different communities have undertaken PPs or VDSs. However, almost all then went on to offer two main factors which influenced decisions to proceed and which, on reflection, rebalanced the original comments about a wide mixture. First, they mentioned that a decision to undertake a PP or VDS was a result of some local issue, not necessarily directly related to planning or design, or some 'threat', most commonly some potential development. Secondly, they also noted that action took place most regularly in more affluent, professional, active and already engaged communities. When asked about communities they would have wished to see undertaking a PP or VDS, the most common response was a combination of the comments just made, but reversed. They had hoped for responses from communities where development was planned, which – for revitalisation reasons – were also often those where there had been less general interest to date and where there were less (or no) professionals. One or two planners said that they had in fact tried to encourage certain less active communities to start a PP or VDS, especially where development was planned, but rarely with great success.

3.3.2. In terms of who then actually led the process for PPs, the most common comment was that this was by a small group, perhaps triggered by the Parish Council (PC) or by a community group but then being linked to, but at arms-length from, the PC. For VDSs it seemed that the process was more likely to be initiated and led by a group almost distinct from, sometimes completely distinct from, the PC. Most people mentioned the rare exceptions of a PP being produced by a very small group from the PC alone or the less rare examples of a few local people, typically architects (to which the word 'retired' was usually added!), preparing a VDS entirely on their own. We heard of occasional examples of VDSs being produced by or securing help from paid consultants.

3.3.3. In the early days of VDS work, several local authorities employed staff, or allocated parts of staff time, specifically to promoting and supporting VDSs, occasionally with grant aid from the

then Countryside Commission. Stratford-on-Avon District Council* is perhaps the best known example and that work generated at the time a relatively large number of VDSs with a high level of consistency while still celebrating local distinctiveness. To the best of our knowledge no authority currently has such a post. We also have some anecdotal evidence of developers funding VDSs; something of relevance to the later Localism section. (* The same district also undertook, at the same time, a Countryside Design Summary, see later.)

Desk Work Findings

3.3.4. "By the end of 2008, over 3,000 communities had produced a community-led plan covering an estimated population of 6.5 million people in 66 principal authority areas" (The Rural Challenge, 2010, p.42). Other related key points include:

- High participation rates (70% or more household involvement is often achieved), and development of social capital (The Rural Challenge 2010; ACRE 2009).
- Parish Plans can generate between 500 & 4,500 hours of volunteer time, worth around an equivalent of £30,000 - £50,000 per plan (Bishop, 2010 b).
- A separate but related group to the PC is important in encouraging wider participation and ownership.
- Key Individuals in the community with relevant expertise are crucial to success (CCRU, 2001; Derbyshire Rural Community Council, 2006).
- Research has indicated that communities with professionals associated with design or local government are more likely to undertake a VDS (Hughes 2006; CCRU 2001).
- Communities benefit from the input of a range of professionals to ensure the viability of their plans (Braithwaite, 2011).

3.3.5. PPs and VDSs make up the biggest proportion of community-led plans with the most recent estimate at around 4,000 PPs and 600 VDSs prepared in England to date (Owen 2011). More commonly taken up by rural communities, with their existing formal structures of self governance in the form of Town or Parish Councils, there has been a steady increase in the recognition of the importance and impact of community-led plans, including PPs and VDSs through both practice and policy.

3.3.6. They have been led by voluntary community groups in an overwhelming majority of cases (SQW 2007) many linked to parish councils as sub committees or working groups (Bishop 2010 a): the importance of maintaining wider community ownership is emphasised in both guidance and appraisal literature. However limitations in reaching out to the most disadvantaged are noted (Derbyshire Rural Community Council, 2006) along with concerns highlighted around the social equity involved with the initial uptake of PPs and the associated funding (Owen 2011).

3.3.7. Those undertaking a PP or VDS also have the wider support network available in rural areas, with RCCs cited as providing constructive, independent advice, though a skills gap in qualified planners is pointed to as a potential weakness (Bishop, 2010 a).

3.4. How were they prepared?

Interview Findings

3.4.1. In large part as a result of the proactive role of RCCs, it was usually the case that working groups would contact their local planning authority very early in the process. This was considered to have been enhanced when a local authority publicised its general support for PPs and VDSs, sometimes explicitly stating that they could be 'adopted' (in some form) into the formal planning system with the added clout that could bring. This did however then create some over-ambitious expectations of the status of a PP or VDS (see later).

3.4.2. Virtually everybody to whom we spoke nevertheless quoted examples of communities 'going it alone' not just at the start of the process but throughout; almost all planners offered a story of a completed VDS, and occasionally a PP, arriving out of the blue. To compound this issue, those communities least likely to consult with their RCC and local authority in the

preparation process also tended to be those with less understanding of how the plan would fit into the existing or emerging development plan.

3.4.3. The help provided by planners appeared to vary considerably and was often linked to whether or not an authority also had staff with some role such as community development. Planners themselves would most commonly do little more than visit to do a talk or a briefing and then see and comment on questionnaires, surveys, draft PPs or VDSs etc. Where community development staff were available the help was significantly greater, sometimes including the production of local guidance packs to complement the national ones. RCC support appeared to depend on the general stance of each RCC, some committing considerable resources, others rather less. In addition, and with a few exceptions, RCC staff generally supported PP work but not VDS work. That reflected funding constraints but also feelings of a lack of appropriate skills on design issues.

3.4.4. By and large, the preparation process for PPs reflected the general guidance. In other words it relied heavily on the work of a small steering group and some sub groups plus the use of a general community questionnaire. A few (older) planners commented on the way in which some communities produced their own questionnaires or chose to adapt standard models, comparing this to the rigour and consistency of the original 'Parish Appraisal' methodology that provided a more robust evidence base for plan-making work. Beyond this we heard mentions of occasional other more varied or innovative methods such as walkabouts, the use of arts activities, links with schools and so forth.

3.4.5. A similar pattern was quoted in relation to VDS preparation. In most cases people followed the original (now rather outdated) guidance and addressed the three key levels of Landscape, Settlement and Buildings, and again it was that consistency that was most valued by planners. Engagement methods were usually more varied but there was perhaps more of a contrast between those who may have seen design as something rather specialised, who therefore kept the work within a smallish group, and those who were keen to get the widest number involved, who ran workshops, undertook photography exercises, arranged walks etc.

3.4.6. Although we did not ask this directly, we gained a distinct impression that those PPs and VDSs that had had most impact were those that had built on early contact with the planners (and, for PPs, with an RCC) and which had been produced with a combination of basic and widely used methods alongside some interesting local variations.

3.4.7. Another question we did not ask directly—was about sources of funding. Almost all of the PP examples we heard about during the interview process, however, were produced during the period when grant aid was available, first through Rural Action and latterly via Defra. Funding to RCCs was also more certain and substantial during this period. A regular if not guaranteed source of funding for VDSs stopped when Rural Action ceased and more recently people have relied on small grants from a local authority or direct help, eg. for printing a final version.

Desk Work Findings

3.4.8. *"The steering group of the Easton in Gordano Community-led Plan in North Somerset used a variety of consultation methods including a questionnaire and several public meetings to successfully engage with 76% of households in a Parish of approximately 2,900 people."* (ACRE Policy Position Paper, 2009).

3.4.9. In rural areas support to communities undertaking a PP or VDS is available from external agencies such as the Rural Community Action Network (RCAN), Action for Market Towns (AMT) and County Associations of Local Councils (CALC). Published guidance produced by these bodies (and others) at a national and local level also provides an important point of reference for undertaking PPs and VDSs, with the ACRE Parish and Community Planning Toolkit widely used by RCCs. Again the support of RCC officers is noted as crucial in providing consistent advice (BDOR, 2006; Parker, 2008), though the need for further and continued funding is also highlighted. CPRE volunteers and branches, and members of Civic Societies, also have experience in participating in their preparation, and can perhaps add expertise in the workings of the planning system to the process.

3.4.10. Funding for community-led planning and professional support provided by some local authorities post 2004 is covered in the literature and this outlines approaches developed to help local communities to produce PPs in a way that can effectively contribute to informing policy development and service provision (Parker 2008; Bishop 2010 a). However, commentators also often note and occasionally criticise the ad hoc and short term nature of this funding and support.

3.4.11. Other differences in approach to producing community-led plans have seen a move away from the production of a PP for a single community, to 'clustered' community plans. In North Dorset parishes are linked to their nearby market town (Bishop 2010), and the very well organised overall format sets out a clear structure for support and funding for PPs and Market Town Plans.

3.5. What did they cover?

Interview Findings

3.5.1. Reflecting the comments above, the variation in content – and to some extent its subsequent usefulness - also appeared to result from whether or not a group had followed the best guidance or had had contact with people such as the planners.

3.5.2. In general PPs still tend to cover exactly what earlier research (see later) showed – traffic, transport, housing (especially affordable), leisure and recreation facilities and so forth. In fact we noticed no real changes from the list produced by the earlier research (see later). In all cases this included some form of 'Action List' for either local projects or projects that they hoped the local authority (or other organisation) might undertake for or with them. We were however told of a few PPs that had also included, in their original form, direct statements or ambitions about land use and development. These were most commonly phrased in terms of a demand for no new development or for some that met affordable housing needs in particular. Some PPs suggested specific sites for development. This happened most commonly where links to the planners had been minimal and planners would then often ask (perhaps require) the community to remove those mentions or be aware that their PP could not then be used fully or at all. In a few cases more recently, communities have produced two documents; a PP that was careful not to cover land use and development proposals and another document that highlighted those other issues.

3.5.3. The pattern was very similar for VDSs. The majority of them covered the main issues of Landscape, Settlement and Buildings, though perhaps with less emphasis on Landscape and, in the view of some planners, perhaps too much on history and the clearly historic core rather than more recently developed parts of a village. There were also contrasts in the nature of the final guidelines, some being quite broad and open, some being highly specific. The latter often linked to an emphasis on history and guidelines that demanded traditional design only. Although the guidance is even more explicit than for PPs about not commenting on what development should go where, most respondents quoted examples of communities who had tried to do this. These were again the exception and usually proposed by those who had proceeded very much alone. Including ideas for what development might happen where (or, commonly, for no development anywhere) was resisted even more vigorously by planners because in most cases (see below) VDSs were formally adopted or endorsed in some way, so simply could not proceed if they made explicit land use mentions. Both for VDSs and PPs there was occasional annoyance, even anger, from communities when it was explained that they could not cover direct land use issues. There were some examples of a carefully considered VDS being produced in combination with, but separate from, a Community-led Landscape Character Assessment.

3.5.4. There were uncertain results when planners were asked (we did not ask RCC staff) about the requirement post-2004 and pre-2008 for Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs) to include a Sustainability Appraisal (SA). The results were uncertain for two main reasons: firstly because planners were uncertain about whether a PP could ever be adopted as SPD (see below); and secondly because they were uncertain (especially since a change to the law in 2008) whether SA was even required for an SPD. If they did judge that it was necessary then it was often applied to VDSs because they were regarded as genuine candidates for SPD status.

Those who did comment on this aspect noted that the possible requirement for SA had caused not only confusion amongst communities preparing both PPs and VDSs but also annoyance because of the additional amount of time and the highly specialised technical expertise required. (It is worth noting that there are still varied views amongst planners about whether or not SA is or is not required for SPDs or whether it is required for some but not others, notably Design Statements.)

3.5.5. The team also undertook a brief study of the actions contained in Parish Plans in Gloucestershire to establish how many of those actions could be judged to be directly land use related or have potential spatial implications (the latter being debatable, not least because what is actually proposed may turn out to be entirely non spatial in planning terms). Having looked at two plans from each district our findings suggest that there are 41 actions out of 173 with land use or potential spatial actions, ie, close to 25%. The whole database includes just over 2,500 actions so the county figure of land use or spatial actions could be in the order of 630.

Desk Work Findings

3.5.6. *“Actions resulting from a community-led plan can vary from small scale (provision of more dog litter bins) to those of more significance in creating sustainable facilities and services such as a community-owned shop, refurbishment or extensions to community halls, or new community-owned transport provision. Increasingly, plans have tackled the impact of climate change, producing community-based emergency plans, and energy saving and recycling initiatives.”* (The Rural Challenge 2010)

3.5.7. Community-led plans are considered to be the articulation of local aspirations (Gallent et al 2008), and PPs especially, holistic in nature.

3.5.8. Research undertaken for Derbyshire RCC outlines community plans as a ‘statement of how the local community sees itself developing in the coming years’ (Icarus 2006), and outlines two types of outcome:

- Action which the community itself proposes to take.
- Influencing the policies, decisions and actions of other bodies and service providers.

3.5.9. VDSs are also an articulation of community level aspirations, developed over 20 years ago as a response to a concern for design quality, and loss of distinctiveness in villages (Bishop 2010 a), providing a format for communities to establish the unique character of their setting, outlining design guidance for any future developments.

3.6. How were they used and to what effect?

Interview Findings

3.6.1. This divides into two elements. Firstly, how or whether a PP or a VDS was given any form of status within the planning system (or elsewhere). Secondly, how or whether completed PPs and VDSs have made a difference once produced.

3.6.2. Despite hearing, if only anecdotally, about PPs being formally adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG, pre-2004 system) we were surprised to find that none of those authorities where we spoke to planners actually did this. They may have done some years ago because national guidance at the time suggested that they could be adopted, despite the fact that they should not contain any clear land use policies/proposals. This shift to non adoption was reinforced after the 2004 Act when SPG became SPD, yet this was almost counter-intuitive because the 2004 Act argued heavily for addressing wider spatial rather than just explicitly land use issues. PPs often contain a number of spatial or potentially spatial issues and proposals so, although a whole PP might not be adoptable, any spatial issues should be considered fully by the planners. Taking this further, a PP might better be thought of as a very local Sustainable Community Strategy and they should therefore be steered towards, and perhaps in some way endorsed by, a Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). If that were done then the spatial issues could

be moved on to the planners, education issues to the relevant department and so forth. We did not pursue this on every occasion but found no example of it (though the idea was supported when mentioned). There is some evidence that LSPs in general have not succeeded in linking out to local communities and hence to community-led plans and there is of course no formal model, providing any sort of status, for adoption or endorsement of a PP or whatever by an LSP.

3.6.3. Although we found no examples of recent PPs being adopted as SPD, most authorities tried to find some way to credit the work done and offered some form of Planning Committee support or endorsement that was thought to give at least some status to a PP within the planning system. By contrast, many but not all authorities have always accepted, and still accept, well prepared VDSs as potential SPDs.

3.6.4. Adoption however is never the end of the story because PPs and VDSs exist to have an influence on the future of communities, villages, design and even development. This too divides into two aspects: firstly, how a PP or VDS is used in the preparation of Local Development Documents or in the preparation and delivery of other strategies (eg. transport); and secondly, how a PP or VDS is used as development proposals start to emerge and proceed, especially – for VDSs - to planning applications.

3.6.5. When asked about the use of PPs and VDSs in plan preparation, planners gave positive but not very specific answers. In relation to PPs this naturally reflected the view that they do not (and should not) contain explicit land use proposals so their direct use was limited by this. Most planners nevertheless suggested that good PPs added valuably to their evidence base for the Core Strategy in particular, and in one case for development of policies at that level. Responses in relation to VDSs were also limited by the current system in that most authorities to whom we spoke were still preparing their Core Strategies and these would not include anything about design. For the few authorities already involved with, or even having completed, 'Site and Allocations' or 'Placemaking' DPDs, further and fuller links were made with PPs but more so with VDSs.

3.6.6. There were however other routes whereby PPs have had an impact. Most authorities, often with help (and some pushing) from RCCs, have found ways to draw out relevant issues and proposed actions from PPs and circulate these to the relevant department for possible action – the approach usually described as 'bridging'. This has often been led by the planners, if solely because they are ones to whom PPs are usually sent. In other authorities, other officers (again perhaps community development) have taken on this role. With our emphasis on planning we did not pursue this in detail but we noticed occasional mentions of the difficulties faced by the more rural authorities which are still often in two tier structures. In such situations, issues and possible actions around traffic and transport, education, social services and so forth have to be sent to the County authority, and that appears to be a far less productive route in terms of subsequent action.

3.6.7. In terms of VDSs, the important use comes in development control (now usually termed development management). Because our interviews were all with policy planners (plan-makers) we did not raise this issue with them, though it arose occasionally. RCC officers also made occasional mention of this but, as above, they have usually had less to do with VDSs (Essex RCC being an exception). The experience is that any use of VDSs during the development control process is fragmentary and heavily dependent on motivated individuals, either planners or within local communities. The developer representatives to whom we have spoken have had only very limited encounters with VDSs and these have always been highlighted for them by the planners, but as part of the plan portfolio not as distinct items. By contrast a developer currently promoting a scheme in Olveston (South Gloucestershire) has clearly referred to that community's VDS (though to what end is as yet unclear). Despite the intentions behind VDSs when they were first developed, there appear to have been very few examples of the proactive use of VDSs by local communities themselves and developers do not appear to have experienced this. All of this experience is reflected, very dramatically, in the Irish experience where none of the 37 or so VDSs have ever been used!

Desk Work Findings

3.6.8. "A planning system which has been characterised by a top-down approach to policies and priorities, and the absence of any statutory responsibility to heed the demands of the Parish Plans means they are not seen as significant documents in the planning system and therefore wield little influence" (SQW 2007).

3.6.9. The use of PPs and VDSs has varied widely, and has been subject to the uncertainties produced by changing legislation and requirements for adoption (Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 & 2008 amendments).

3.6.10. In 2003 the Countryside Agency issued guidance on Parish Plans and the planning system. The guidance anticipated that (community-led) PPs could:

"... become integrated with or supplement Local Development Frameworks (by):

- adoption of the spatial planning features of a Parish Plan as SPG;
- Integration of the spatial planning aspects of a Parish Plan into the relevant development plan document".

3.6.11. In their report on Parish Plans and the Spatial Planning Approach in England (2008) Gallent et al discuss how and why these aims have, for the most part, not been realised. They highlight that this sort of integration would have been dependant on PPs having a "clearly identifiable spatial planning component", and be dependant on some expert input and support to the communities producing the technical information required for integration. Bishop also highlights the confusion caused by this guidance as it covered both old and new systems (Bishop, 2010 a).

3.6.12. Gallent et al suggested that VDSs were more "suited to integration into planning frameworks: they dealt with 'harder' design issues rather than 'softer' social aspirations" (Gallent & Robinson 2010). Also, under the pre-2004 planning system, they were commonly adopted as SPG. The literature also highlights the importance of professional input into preparation of VDSs/PPs, which often will result in a "clearer framing" and acceptance as material consideration, or for adoption (BDOR, 2010; Regional Empowerment Partnership, 2009; CRC45, 2007). VDSs have also been used at appeals, often successfully.

3.6.13. Issues and tensions:

- Difficulties in reconciling "the sporadic and focused outcomes of this form of very local participative democracy within strategic frameworks" (Gallent et al 2008).
- Disconnect between communities and local government structures, especially since 2000 (Gallent & Robinson 2010).
- Frustrations with local planning are focused on the interface between user-communities and policy-communities (TCPA, 2010).
- An 'output-orientated' system that can be difficult to 'input' into (Gallent & Robinson, 2010).

3.6.14. Parker (2008) highlighted the need for rigorous empirical work on parish planning, and other forms of community-led planning in order to facilitate improvements and adaptations that could lead to further integration (as opposed to incorporation) into the wider planning system.

3.6.15. Some of the successes of community-led planning covered in the literature include:

- Benefits to local government and service providers by linking community aspirations to formal policy, planning and service delivery systems (National Empowerment Partnership 2009).
- Rigorously prepared community-led plans based on detailed local knowledge, providing insight and priorities not available to professionals.
- The product of the community-land planning process forms a potentially important input into the evidence-gathering exercise (Gallent et al 2008).
- Improved relationship between communities and service providers (Braithwaite 2011).
- Integration of VDSs into planning frameworks pre 2004 (and encouragement of production in

- national guidance - PPG7 - in 1997).
- Longevity - PPs, VDS and other forms of community-led plans have become established over a period spanning almost 20 years (Bishop 2010 a).
- A wide range of approaches that can be modified to suit places, people and projects.
- Social capital: recognition as a tool for community empowerment, with many communities developing enhanced capacities and skills (Braithwaite 2011).

3.6.16. Some of the problems of community-led planning covered in the literature include:

- A gap between the 'rhetoric' of policy and the realities of a centrally controlled planning system - "the focus on community empowerment potentially at odds with the government's 'steering centrism" (Gallent and Robinson 2010).
- Adoption in the post-2004 planning system is difficult, as the requirement for a Sustainability Appraisal has resulted in a more complex and resource-hungry process.
- Lack of joined-up delivery - conceived and promoted by the Countryside Agency, under the aegis of Defra, PPs failed to link into the statutory planning system which, at the time, was the responsibility of the ODPM (Owen 2011).
- Perceived to be reactive rather than forward-thinking.
- Disconnect between communities and local decision-makers (Gallent & Robinson 2010).
- Questions over the usefulness of parish plans as a potential source of spatial evidence.
- Lack of clarity on how local level planning policy responds to or works with community-led plans.
- Limitations on community capacity, 'consultation fatigue' and burn-out.
- Timetable of production not aligned to LDF production schedules.

3.7. Key Points on Parish Plans and Village Design Statements

3.7.1. As this is the most fully researched section we have chosen to provide a fuller summary of key points at this stage, leaving overall points to the final conclusions.

Parish Plans

3.7.2. These provide by far the greatest volume of what may be termed community-led plans. In general it appears that they have more often been produced by more affluent and already active communities, motivated by several factors, one of which is a perceived 'threat'. The most successful (in terms of all forms of subsequent action) appear to be those led by a group linked to but at arms-length from the Parish Council. Those led by a small group made up solely of Parish Councillors appear to have been less successful. There is also evidence that those supported by either a RCC officer or a planning officer, sometimes both and sometimes a community development officer, were more likely to trigger actions, especially if those actions involved the local authority. By contrast, those who chose to 'go it alone' often seem to have been less successful.

3.7.3. Once again, greater success in delivering actions and change appears to connect with the stage at which external support was sought; the earlier the better. Success also appears to link to whether or not the group used some of the available published guidance on plan preparation. However, the critical factor appears to be the extent and form of community engagement undertaken during plan preparation. Once again, those plans produced almost entirely by a small cabal were least effective, while those developed through extensive and more innovative engagement were more effective. Compared to participation rates on larger scale projects (strategic planning), on traditional questionnaires or urban plan-making work, participation in PP preparation was often very high, sometimes remarkably high. It was also clear that the general activity of plan preparation matched closely the availability, or not, of forms of grant aid. PP activity appears, for example, to have fallen away since the removal of grant aid from Defra.

3.7.4. The original aim of PPs was to enable a community to cover all and every issue considered important locally. Despite the word 'plan', and despite some confusing guidance about the inclusion of land use issues, PPs were never intended to include clearly land use issues

and only peripherally to include spatially related issues. This clearly raised concerns and continues to bubble as an issue (see next paragraph). However, the majority of plans have always tended to focus more on social and economic issues, if touching regularly into mainstream planning by including issues and actions about transport and housing. There were, however, some examples quoted of plans that included patently land use or spatial proposals, which planners usually either pressed to have removed or made clear they could not handle them. Not surprisingly, this was more often the case with plans produced by 'go it alone' groups.

3.7.5. It is unclear why, given the above, anybody ever thought that a PP could be adopted into the statutory planning system. The most commonly given explanation for why this became a standard expectation or hope is that communities believed (and continue to believe) that the only way to give any sort of weight or clout to the product of their local work is to get it into the planning system; linking to, for example, a Sustainable Community Strategy was simply seen as a waste of time. Given this, it is to the credit of very many planning officers that they sought other ways to value PPs submitted to them and also that they often (not always) tried hard to pass on to relevant other departments (occasionally other authorities in two tier areas) the action lists that passed across their desks, even though they themselves could do little with them. In general, the number of positive actions delivered as a result of PPs, be that by the community itself, by them with an authority or by an authority alone, is very impressive.

Village Design Statements

3.7.6. In terms of who prepared VDSs, in general this reflects the conclusion for PPs above (3.7.2.) in that most VDSs have been produced by wealthier communities (very often with someone like an architect living locally) and very often as a result of dissatisfaction with recent designs and concern about those schemes to follow. Groups leading VDSs seemed to often be slightly more detached from their Parish Council, occasionally even assertively independent of it. External help and support was, however, more difficult to locate. Some planning officers felt unable to help much on design issues and most RCCs avoided helping with VDSs for the same reason. Finally, just as with PPs, those 'going it alone' seemed least successful.

3.7.7. In terms of how they were prepared the results are again similar to those for PPs. 'Go it alone' groups (in one case a 'group' comprising a retired architect and his two friends) seemed to be most likely not to use published guidance or to engage others, and suffered for that later. By contrast, the more successful groups in terms of getting their VDS adopted (in some way, see 3.7.9. below) and then used, were those who undertook wide and often very creative community engagement. Grant aid has been far less available for VDSs than for PPs and this appears to have slowed action in recent years in particular.

3.7.8. All VDS guidance made it clear that a VDS should only comment on how development might best happen in design terms and should not cover what development and where. Most groups kept to this guidance although some still tried to use their VDS as, in effect, a land use plan for their village. Planners made clear that this was not appropriate.

3.7.9. In terms of how they were then adopted and used, there is a real contrast with PPs. VDSs were developed very carefully to be documents that could and should be formally adopted as (at the time) Supplementary Planning Guidance. It was therefore something of a surprise to find how many local planning authorities did not adopt them, some giving them little status at all, others giving them enough for them to be used, if with less clout, as material considerations. Things changed from 2004, however, with the introduction of Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs) and the requirement for SPDs to go through a process of Sustainability Appraisal (SA). This in effect stopped VDS activity (and some PP activity) almost stone dead and generated some real annoyance, because of the time and skill requirements involved with SA work. Despite subsequent amendments to Regulations it remains uncertain whether SA is required for a SPD. More significantly, for those VDSs adopted or given some other formal status, the key point about their use – in fact their non-use – relates to the long-standing gulf between policy planners (who would have been the people supporting VDS development) and development management planners. The latter appear to have only rarely valued and used VDSs in the development management process.

3.8. Community Landscape Character Assessment

3.8.1. This approach emerged out of VDSs and can be regarded as a very close parallel, with the key difference being that it applies to larger areas of landscape, not just that which provides the context for a (built) village. In part the approach was also a response to very professionally-led formats for Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) which, perhaps surprisingly, rarely included any significant community involvement, often none at all.

3.8.2. The idea was first piloted and then developed by the Cheshire Landscape Trust with support from the Countryside Agency. The Trust has since helped around 15 communities to produce their own community LCAs. All communities were concerned at the outset about whether an LCA could be formally adopted as SPG/SPD and hoped that could be the case. However, advice from an otherwise very helpful Government Office North West was uncertain, so most communities chose to produce two documents as a 'suite' – a VDS that could be adopted and a closely linked LCA. This at least gave the LCA some clout and, pre the local government changes in Cheshire, most authorities made very positive use of the community LCAs in their plan-making and there have been similarly positive examples of their use in development management.

3.8.3. The idea was picked up a few years ago by CPRE nationally. They secured some funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund to test the approach further and produced some national guidance – 'Unlocking the Landscape' (CPRE 2005). (A similar format has been developed and used by a number of communities in Ireland.) As far as we understand it, there has been limited take-up of the CPRE approach, although CPRE Hampshire and some others have promoted it enthusiastically. (As this report was being finalised the Natural Environment White Paper was published. This emphasises the importance and value of local level work on landscape issues.)

3.9. Town Design Statements

3.9.1. Although the precise chronology is unclear, Village Design Statements led, as above, into Parish Plans and Town Design Statements followed soon after. They were, in principle at least, a natural follow-up to VDSs because there seemed no reason why the approach used in a large village should not also apply to a small town. Once again the Countryside Agency took the lead and promoted some pilot work and then produced guidance.

3.9.2. Although the basic approach to TDSs is similar to that for VDSs, two important differences started to emerge and these then flowed through into different approaches to TDS production.

3.9.3. Firstly, the larger scale of towns and the larger numbers involved necessitated more complex process management that included an additional stage to that used in most VDS work. This involved studies to determine various character areas within a town after which often quite different conclusions could emerge, and different people get involved, for each area. Secondly, the scale of the task and the need for greater rigour (TDSs were assumed to be more significant in planning policy terms) created a major challenge to the resources and skills available in many communities. All this resulted in processes that were less community-led than for VDSs and more likely to be led, occasionally undertaken completely by, external consultants. In addition there was more involvement from the planning authority teams, often as a result of early contacts by the appointed consultants. This is why TDSs are placed higher up the spectrum introduced earlier.

3.9.4. Almost all planners to whom we have spoken mentioned TDSs as well as VDSs and in some cases these have been able to be formally adopted as SPG then SPD. At the same time (and noting that there are of course fewer towns than villages!) there have been far fewer TDSs than VDSs produced. Apart from the early evaluation from the pilot programme (which was prior to the guidance) we were unable to locate any studies specifically on TDSs and our interviews so far have provided little evidence of the regular and effective use of TDSs in development management. (It is, however, worth noting the final section in this part of the report that mentions 'Local Distinctiveness' studies because these would appear to be a close parallel to TDSs but are done very much by the local authority or consultants.)

3.9.5. The developer representatives to whom we have spoken to date have not had any experience of using TDSs.

3.10. Market Town Plans

3.10.1. In historical terms these flowed from Parish Plans and Town Design Statements but, in the process, also met up with the aspirations of the (then) Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) to revitalise market towns. The result was a national programme, prompted by the Countryside Agency, of Market Town Plans (MTPs) around England managed and mainly funded by the RDAs. (This contrasts with the routing of Parish Plans via Defra.) Regional support groups were put in place with full time support officers and then (and now) a national association – The Association of Market Towns.

3.10.2. Market Town Plans are placed further up our hierarchy because, as with Town Design Statements, the nature and scale of the task was far more challenging for totally community-led approaches, especially as the aim was always and explicitly to influence not just planning but all local government spending priorities and programmes. As a result most MTPs were produced more by professional officers and/or consultants than by communities themselves, although the level and quality of community engagement often exceeded that of PPs and VDSs. MTPs were never intended to be formally adopted into the planning system for the same sort of reasons as applied to PPs – they included all aspects, not just land use and spatial issues. Some plans have, however, secured some sort of formal or semi-formal status and one or two have been taken forward as formal Area Action Plans (if with much of the non-spatial material removed). Guidance on MTP preparation was usually produced separately within each RDA area.

3.10.3. We have already commented on the surprising lack of coverage of MTPs in the literature, be that articles or more substantial research; in fact we are not aware of any research to match that done on several occasions for PPs. In our interviews with planners, and less so with RCC officers, MTPs were often mentioned but again did not feature strongly (which may reflect our emphasis as much as their interest or knowledge).

3.11. Concept Statements

3.11.1. Concept Statements started life as a result of a project led by BDOR for the Housing Research Foundation entitled 'Development Briefing'. The model that emerged was taken up by several authorities and then by the Countryside Agency through work led by The Planning Cooperative, a practice linked to BDOR. The model that came from this second wave of work was entitled Concept Statements.

3.11.2. These statements bring together several aspects of the planning, design and development process. One of these, central to the current project, is the introduction of planned community engagement at the intermediate stage as a bridge between authority plan-making and developer project design. There are, however, other aims that will be relevant for later in this project. Concept Statements require the introduction of basic viability appraisal into the statement preparation process, something which is rarely done by planners (not least because they are not trained to do it). This is critically important at a very early stage because so much of the failure to achieve appropriate development is linked to over-ambitious valuations of land by owners and hence over-priced options and sales to developers, after which any recovery back to a more locally appropriate value involves a loss to the developer and is inevitably resisted. If a reasonable value can be set early enough, this creates 'space' during which planning ideas and community input can generate a more appropriate project, yet still offer a good return to the developer. This also has the benefit for the planners of making a bridge between plan-making principles and detailed development control practice. Most importantly, Concept Statements can be 'endorsed' if not formally adopted by the planning authority and hence gain status from there on as proposals for sites are produced.

3.11.3. The original Development Briefing model was included, very innovatively at the time, by Wycombe District Council in its Local Plan. That was supported very robustly by the Inspector of

the plan against objections by major housebuilders and it was subsequently supported at Appeal when one of those developers had an application refused because no statement had been produced.

3.11.4. Guidance on the use of Concept Statements was produced by the Countryside Agency, although the approach is not restricted to rural settings, as shown by uses of the Development Briefing model. We are not aware of any study being done to check the use or eventual value of Concept Statements so our evidence here is entirely anecdotal.

3.11.5. South Hams District Council used the approach to develop statements for all its village and small town sites in its previous Local Plan. We have interviewed the lead officer, who was very supportive of the approach. In particular he commented that:

- The first round of statements was produced in haste as part of the Local Plan Review and, as a result (a) they lacked adequate community engagement and (b) the basic viability work could have been more robust.
- This initial use of Concept Statements had a 'cathartic effect' on elected members who finally realised the link between strategy/policy and development management.
- Many smaller developments have now emerged successfully, with noticeably less negative community reaction or last minute changes pushed by members.
- In preparing the Sites and Allocations DPD they used a similar approach (a version developed by the Prince's Foundation) focused more on site selection and less on site statements.
- This was equally successful, the DPD had very few objections and the process used was supported by the Inspector at the examination.

3.11.6. This needs to be balanced with the experience of a national developer. That interviewee supported the idea of Concept Statements but found that their existence and relevance was almost denied by local people when trying to move forward on a specific site in South Hams for which a statement had been prepared. This does not devalue the idea but is important in the light of point (a) in the first bullet point above.

3.11.7. South Gloucestershire Council had a policy in their (previous) Local Plan requiring the production of Concept Statements by applicants/developers as a precursor to the development of any design. This proved to be particularly effective on many projects, for example for the new neighbourhood on the northern part of the Filton Aerodrome site.

3.11.8. St. Edmondsbury District Council has prepared what they term Concept Statements for some large sites as a first stage in masterplanning, although they appear to be very planner-led with no significant community engagement.

3.12. Countryside Design Summaries

(Countryside Design Summaries, and the approach that follows – Local Distinctiveness Studies – were added to the spectrum only recently and we therefore do not have as much information on them. They are, however, clearly relevant.)

3.12.1. In parallel with the original research on 'Design in the Countryside' (Countryside Commission, 1994) for the (then) Countryside Commission that led to VDSs, BDOR also developed a second methodology. Just as it was felt that the system as a whole lacked methods to get down to the more specific level of village or parish (and later town) – hence the development of VDSs and TDSs – so it was felt that district-wide assessments of character had become too heavily focused on landscape and 'natural' features rather than the built environment of settlements. In fact one major publication at the time about landscape character (the Cambridgeshire Landscape Guidelines) treated towns and even villages and hamlets rather like holes in gruyere cheese, by not commenting on them at all!

3.12.2. Countryside Design Summaries (CDSs) were therefore intended to cover, in a fairly 'broad brush' fashion, the character of both landscape and settlements across a whole district. They were to be produced mainly by professionals but with a good degree of community involvement

and were to include some guidelines based on the analysis. A CDS could then become Supplementary Planning Guidance.

3.12.3. CDSs were less well used than VDSs, probably because they demanded a set of varied skills not available to most authorities or to most consultants (who tended to either address built or natural aspects of character, rarely both). For some authorities it was also uncertain what they would add to their policy portfolio. Nevertheless, though we have not yet had time to pursue coverage in any detail, we have discovered CDSs produced for at least 15 authorities (inevitably most being rural) and also found that they have been promoted in Northern Ireland and through Scottish Natural Heritage. However, much of this is pre-LDF material.

3.13. Local Distinctiveness Studies

3.13.1. The term 'local distinctiveness' was developed by Common Ground in the early 1980s and has caught on in many ways. It can for example be seen in use in arguments about loss of identity in urban high streets, or linked to events such as 'Apple Days' to celebrate and rediscover lost varieties of apple specific to particular areas. It has also been used in relation to traditional music and songs!

3.13.2. Local distinctiveness was always a key principle behind VDSs and TDSs and is something that many planning authorities (not just rural ones) have now openly taken on board, if as yet not very robustly through LDF policies because the idea is rather elusive and difficult to justify, for example at Inquiries and Appeals.

3.13.3. Brighton and Hove City Council have produced an Urban Characterisation Study (Brighton and Hove 2009). The document forms a part of the evidence base for the LDF with analysis of the urban structure and neighbourhoods of the city serving to "guide decisions about the location, form and type of future development". New Forest District Council is now underway with producing Local Distinctiveness studies which are "*aimed at ensuring new development is well designed and respects local character and distinctiveness*". The New Milton study was "*the first of a series of guidance documents which the council will be preparing for the towns and villages across the district. Protecting and enhancing local character and distinctiveness, in the face of pressures for change, has become an increasingly important issue to both New Forest District Council and local communities*". The draft study for Lymington is out for consultation and that for Ringwood has just started.

3.13.4. These studies might best be thought of as an almost entirely professionally-led version of Town Design Statements because the analysis is very similar, as are the type of guidelines finally produced. The key difference is that the studies are initiated and led by the authority with a small amount of community involvement; they are not community-led or subject to thorough engagement.

3.14. Character Assessment

3.14.1. This section is specifically about Character Assessment that is required to be done for all Conservation Areas which, of course, cover parts of many villages and market towns. Conservation Areas are initially declared on the basis of a fairly minimal report. Local authorities are then supposed to undertake a far more thorough Character Assessment which can provide the baseline of information to be used by development control officers in evaluating the impacts of any proposed development on the Conservation Area. The aspects that can be controlled, ie. on which a refusal can be based, are more extensive, particularly in terms of design details such as front garden walls, than is the case outside such areas.

3.14.2. Undertaking a full Character Assessment is a demanding and expensive task that, for many smaller authorities, requires the involvement of outside expert consultants and the use of rigorous guidelines laid down by English Heritage. For these reasons it is rare to find an authority where assessment has been completed for all Conservation Areas. In Bristol, for example, only around 7 of their 31 Conservation Areas are currently backed with a full Assessment.

3.14.3. Character Assessments are required to include not just a description and assessment of value but also some design guidelines. To that extent they are not dissimilar to Village Design Statements, if – quite appropriately - with a greater emphasis and more detail on heritage. The overlap is clearer when one sees some Village Design Statements that cover a whole village of very mixed developments yet with a section on the Conservation Area at the heart of the village. Indeed some Village Design Statements focus solely on the historic parts of their village, leaving out anything on (for example) the 1930s, 1960s or 1980s development.

3.14.4. Although English Heritage began to take interest in community involvement some years ago, recently this effort has been significantly increased. This increased attention to community involvement has arguably resulted from a combination of factors – partly the generally growing interest in community involvement, partly because Design Statements have shown that local people can do high standard work, and partly because of the recession and reducing local authority resources. Once again our direct experience of practice is as yet anecdotal but there have already been examples of community-led approaches in, for example, Bristol and Oxford.

3.14.5. Discussions with English Heritage have clarified (a) that they have and are developing far more than just the one tool covered in this section and (b) that they are moving well beyond their traditional focus on high intensity conservation and heritage issues and addressing issues more firmly in the territory of local distinctiveness (eg. through the growing use of 'local listing') and into heritage landscape issues. Community involvement within these sorts of activities is also being accorded greater significance.

3.15. Involvement in Plan-making

3.15.1. Along with the introduction of Local Development Frameworks (inter alia), the 2004 Planning Act made it a mandatory requirement for every planning authority to draft, then have examined and adopted, a Statement of Community Involvement (SCI). The main role of an SCI is to lay down some principles for effective involvement in plan-making, the general pattern of those to be involved and some methods or processes to do so for the different stages of different 'plans'. Once an SCI is in place the planning authority has to follow its principles and procedures and prepare a report, to accompany any plan, to show how they undertook the work and what notice they took of respondents' comments. The Inspector is required to examine this report when examining any plan and can, if appropriate, declare the plan 'unsound' if the SCI has not been followed or if relevant responses have been ignored.

3.15.2. Aspects of SCIs have had a chequered history, mostly on issues that are not relevant here. However, two core principles behind the 2004 Act need to be mentioned. The whole commitment to community involvement should include consensus building and, in particular, the involvement of local people from the very outset – what is termed 'front-loading'. More specifically (and crucial to consensus building), planning teams are required to involve local people in developing the evidence base, the key issues and the main plan 'options'. As part of one of the government's own research programmes, set up shortly after the 2004 Act ('Spatial Plans in Practice'), the study team looked at the effectiveness of involvement practice across the country. In simple terms they found that the previous way of managing the process had continued in that most teams developed evidence, issues and options themselves then presented those in a full report to the public – the now discredited 'decide-announce-defend' model. It was rare to find examples of involvement from 'day one' in any development of evidence, issues or options. Practice was also shown to have varied considerably both between authorities in terms of methods used and resources committed, and within authorities on different aspects of the LDF. Our own experience matches this precisely.

3.15.3. The net result was that Inspectors found it extremely difficult to declare plans unsound because although so few plans had followed the good practice principles, declaring plans unsound for this reason alone would have been professionally challenging.

3.15.4. Once again there have been valuable exceptions to the generally poor practice but it is important to note that it is this general 'democratic deficit' that underpins many of the arguments that have shaped the Localism Bill in terms of giving local communities more of a role in plan-making.

3.16. Pre-application engagement

3.16.1. As with good plan-making, for many years some applicants for planning permission, notably government agencies and some larger developers (hence more urban or urban fringe than rural), have deemed it essential to undertake some form of consultation in advance of their planning application with communities likely to be impacted by their projects. Statements of Community Involvement were required to mention authority aspirations for pre-application involvement – to encourage it - but could not actually require it to be done, ie. authorities could not refuse to register an application if involvement had not been done or attribute any weight to it (or the lack of it) in their reports.

3.16.2. For parish and town councils there is at least an opportunity to see and comment on applications in their area but only after submission; something on which people have often expressed annoyance at local level, especially if they feel that their comments are then not taken into account. Yet, at the same time, many individuals and even many parish and town councillors remain unaware of the formal encouragement in SCIs to applicants to undertake pre-application involvement, so they never reinforce this by their own encouragement at local level. In those places where groups or individuals do their own encouragement there is anecdotal evidence that it does indeed persuade some applicants to carry out pre-application involvement.

3.16.3. However, two key problems of practice to date have been that (a) pre-application engagement has been very heavily public relations-led or trapped in trade-marked single methods rather than being genuine consultation, and (b) it has taken place just before an application, with proposals only being exhibited at a point where changes are difficult if not impossible to make (certainly not 'front-loaded'). The result of this is a prevailing perception, within the public as well as the private sector, that pre-application involvement is all costs and no benefits. Examples do exist, however, of properly managed involvement processes making significant contributions to finally submitted schemes, generating applications to which there were few if any major community objections and proving the cost-effectiveness of the process to developers (public and private).

3.17. Consultee Summary

3.17.1. We are not aware of any other commentary, review or research that has covered the range of issues addressed in this section of the report. However, at the April 2011 workshop, attended by an extremely wide mix of relevant and experienced people, the whole spectrum was introduced and, with this in mind, participants summarised their overall conclusions on practice to date as follows (in their own words):

3.17.2. Strengths

- Community driven/led
- Ability to energise the community
- Enhanced social capital
- Engagement at the appropriate time
- Rich description and analysis from the community
- Non-bureaucratic and flexible (at best)
- Mix of various sorts of plans and processes
- Prompted local authorities (LA) etc to think local
- Practical outcomes not necessarily spatially related
- Enjoyable (should be)
- Very powerful if supported by the LA
- Adoptable
- Holistic (PPs/TPs)

3.17.3. Weaknesses

- Status?
- Lack of consistency
- Difficult to translate local distinctiveness into policy and guidance
- Ineffective at catching all voices. Remains so for hard-to-reach groups
- Good at raising expectations, however delivery can be patchy
- Unrealistically anti-development – NIMBYISM can be the main driving force
- Regularly updated?
- Amount of resources needed – money and hours
- Commitment and continuity from community and local authority
- Plan and process inward looking. Lacking context
- Accountability?
- The need to conform with the local plan
- Aspirations included in the plan but sometimes unrealistic and undeliverable
- Poor promotion and lack of joined up delivery from the Government (P/TPs with Defra, V/TDSs with DCLG)
- Urban areas with Parish Councils less likely to produce community-led plans
- Sustainability (could be a strength or a weakness!)
- Poor connectivity between P/TP process and plan-making process

4. LOOKING AHEAD TO THE NEW LOCALISM

4.1. Interview Findings

Once again we have grouped answers to a number of questions into a small set of themes. We also focus on the interview findings because, by definition, there is little other than speculative published material, and no other real research¹ yet available on Localism in its current context. Two examples of recent commentary (all of which are critical) include the following:

“Much depends on who is actually involved in neighbourhood planning. Neighbourhood communities are not yet functioning entities. There are a plethora of community-based organisations, usually focused on specific functions or activities. These will need to be brought together - alongside all those people who have chosen not to join those organisations. Neighbourhood planning will have to build community organisations and ensure that they are not enclaves of specific interest, but rather genuinely represent the locality. Currently local government derives its legitimacy from its democratic mandate, low as the turnout often is. How can neighbourhood planning be legitimate if even fewer people are involved?” (Rydin, 2011)

“While we should be supportive of the attempts to allow communities to help shape decisions that may affect them, the mechanics of the system need to be spelled out more clearly. There are many questions unanswered, including the definition of 'neighbourhood', agreeing who would draw up the plans, and what status they would have.” (Cariaga, 2011)

4.2. Localism and the Core Strategy

4.2.1. Across the various authorities and areas from where we drew our interviewees we came across very varied levels of progress with the Local Development Framework. Two authorities where we spoke to planners had been very quick off the mark after the 2004 Act and already had a full suite of DPDs in place; not just the Core Strategy but also Sites and Allocations, Infrastructure and others. Both of these authorities are now beginning to look ahead to formal

¹ The only 'semi-research' work we know of was undertaken briefly through the RTPI. They asked members in the south west to comment on available existing approaches in the light of the Localism Bill. However, this was not research as such. It was used to shape an 'Information Note' entitled 'Existing Tools for Neighbourhood Planning', available from the RTPI.

reviews. By contrast, we spoke to planners in authorities where, after the May 2010 elections, their members had required them to almost restart the whole LDF process. Others sat in-between, being at an Issues and Options or Preferred Options stage for their Core Strategies.

4.2.2. This proved very relevant because of the growing community awareness that any Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) must be 'in general conformity' with the overall authority plan(s). Housing figures in very early DPDs were of course based to a large extent on Regional Spatial Strategy figures and communities in those areas apparently now feel concerned that there is no scope for any NDP they might do to change numbers and locations. The same is probably true for those Core Strategies that have reached the Preferred Options stage but they will soon be looking ahead to Sites and Allocations work at which point input from communities through any NDPs could be influential, although timescales would seem to work against this. While it might seem that the greatest opportunity to influence Core Strategies would be in places where strategy work is least advanced, those authorities are now being pressed by central government to get up to date plans in place. In fact some respondents regarded this pressure as a threat, given that it has been linked to some form of strong presumption in favour of approval being given on appeal to schemes that advance to application stage in the absence of an adopted plan. (And see later comments on the Vanguard/Front-runner projects.)

4.2.3. The pattern of progress described above also had a direct effect on any mentions by interviewees of Localism in Core Strategies or other DPDs. For the most advanced authorities, that is now impossible, except when plans come up for review. For those at a mid stage there was still seen to be scope to at least mention things such as NDPs or make changes to how they were proceeding, but no authority seemed to be actually considering this. That also applied even to those least well advanced with DPD work. This seems surprising given that the Localism Bill is proposing a whole new, formal, sub Local Plan level of plan – the NDP.

4.3. Awareness and Action on Localism to Date

4.3.1. When asked whether communities, PCs etc. had already been in touch to ask about or even offer to do NDPs etc., or to ask about Localism more generally, the response from authorities varied considerably. Adding in the occasional comments from RCC staff, this all seems to relate to a high level of uncertainty amongst those communities who are even aware of it – and it is clear that many are not even basically aware. Though we did not ask this directly, reflecting on the type of areas/communities about which we have been asking, it again seems to be that the more vocal and professional communities are those already aware and asking questions. (At the time of writing, it is becoming clearer how the government might support, with grant aid, communities wishing to do NDPs. Subject to this being confirmed, and also subject to the guidelines about selecting communities to support, there is scope for ensuring that resources in the future do not always go to those most aware or most vocal and professionalised.)

4.3.2. The questions that have been raised by the public with planners vary greatly. Some local people think it is all over to the local authority to do NDPs. Some still think that their NDP really can dictate development levels and so forth and that it can therefore dictate to the Core Strategy (ie. showing no awareness of or acceptance of the 'conformity' issue). If there is any common pattern at all it is of communities (a) saying, 'but we wanted no development at all' and/or (b) expressing disappointment and occasionally apparently real anger that they felt they had been promised local community control by the Government and were now not being given it as they envisaged.

4.3.3. The pattern of proactive work by planners with communities or their own members reflects what has just been covered. They too feel uncertain and worryingly exposed. Some have already done some training/briefings for members and PCs/TCs while others are waiting until the detail and implications become clearer. There is, for all parties, a feeling of being 'in limbo' at present, not just because things have not yet been settled but because the Bill is still progressing through Parliament, and therefore there is awareness that the framework for neighbourhood planning could yet still change.

4.3.4. When asked whether, or in what ways, they were preparing to handle possible requests to support NDPs, or work with communities on Neighbourhood Development Orders (NDOs) or Right to Build (RTB) projects, planners commented that this too was still rather premature. Some RCCs are considering running briefings etc. but probably with their local planners rather than alone (see next section).

4.4. Resources and Skills

4.4.1. All the planners we interviewed were aware of the mentions in the Bill and other information about local authorities providing resources but felt unclear as to what this might mean and, in particular, whether they would receive extra funds to do this. Most suggested that they might be able to cope with one or two NDPs, NDOs or RTB projects per year but that would still be a considerable challenge for them. A few commented that people in communities had said to them that the time and resource demands would make it impossible for any community to do something like an NDP.

4.4.2. Planners were concerned that the apparent requirement for them to give time to support a community undertaking a NDP might lead to a distortion of their own priorities (or, more properly, their elected members' priorities). In particular some commented that they might have to support wealthy communities, who might not be in any great need and who have professional skills, at the expense of disadvantaged communities.

4.4.3. RCC staff were supportive in principle but also cautious because a shift to an emphasis on land use/spatial plans rather than the broader community plan format of PPs would make it difficult for them to give support unless they had access to, or themselves could fund, a planning professional.

4.4.4. This exposed a generic weakness in what is currently available to support communities. While RCCs offer considerable community development expertise they do not generally feel able to cope with the more detailed and statutory process demands of NDPs etc (as illustrated by the caution about RCCs supporting VDSs). Planning officers, by contrast, feel strong on detailed planning issues (or they would do once the detailed guidance is available) but are concerned about the greater demands on community development that work on NDPs etc. would require. Planning forums and 'groups' (with RCC officers and Planning Officers meeting on an annual basis) were mentioned as ways to start thinking about how to address the skill and resource gap.

4.4.5. In this context there was considerable concern expressed at the demise (now partly rescinded) of Planning Aid, an organisation with, at its best, skill and experience in both community development and planning issues.

4.5. Other Key Findings and Comments

4.5.1. As stated earlier, there is as yet no research evidence about Localism practice in the current context and only a limited amount of commentary in the journals. Apart from regular comments on the removal of any level of plan-making or related activity between national and local levels (not just the RSS), the majority of comments appear to be about detailed practical aspects. Particular concerns are raised frequently about practical issues for NDPs etc. in urban areas, notably the absence (with a few exceptions) of any equivalent of recognised bodies such as PCs/TCs, and the challenge of defining 'neighbourhoods' in large towns and cities with highly inter-connected activities and functions across a wide area.

For our purposes here, the key comments made during interviews were as follows.

4.6. Neighbourhood Development Plans

4.6.1. PCs and TCs are taken as automatically qualifying as appropriate organisations to produce NDPs. Given the number of empty PC seats, the number of uncontested seats and the poor public perception of some PCs (less so with TCs) this automatic pre-qualification has been

queried by a number of respondents. At the same time, they are, however, a clear and formally mandated level of local democracy and there is evidence from previous exercises that adding to the challenge and role for PCs/TCs can in fact help to revitalise them.

4.6.2. Even in rural areas, defining 'neighbourhoods' in a manner relevant to planning issues and policies is sometimes far from easy. It was suggested that there are few issues which relate to a single parish/town, that some key issues cover large areas and therefore that an appropriate geographic scale for a NDP might be two or more parishes together.

4.6.3. The traditional Parish/Town Plan evidence base is poor by planning system standards where the key question is always 'will it stand up to legal challenge?' The type, amount and rigour of evidence required for something that would become a statutory plan is seen to be far more than that supplied through a questionnaire and the results of discussion groups. Several people have suggested that, due to the evidence requirement, the time required from a community to undertake a NDP may be up to 5 times what had been given in the past to a PP.

4.6.4. The point about evidence picks up an issue raised in the previous sub-section about the availability of both technical skills in planning (and other aspects such as report preparation) and community development skills (well beyond the usual practice in 'consultation'). The general feeling is that any successful NDP can only be produced through a genuinely collaborative process between a community and planning professionals, which in turn raises an issue about resources.

4.6.5. NDPs will be formal, statutory documents and therefore can only cover those issues that are clearly about land use or which have obvious spatial implications. This probably bodes well for some form of incorporation of VDSs and TDSs into NDPs but several people have raised questions about the future status of many traditional PP/MTP issues that are more about social or economic aspects and which are therefore not clearly (or perhaps very minimally) spatial. This is an issue for any group starting an NDP – where if at all can they cover those varied issues so important to local life? It is also an issue for those who have completed their PP or MTP who may now have concerns about the future of those documents if NDPs, as statutory plans, start to be in the spotlight.

4.6.6. The point was also made that, if a NDP must be in conformity with the upper level plans, and if a NDP cannot address strategic issues (which an authority could define very broadly), what could a NDP address and to what level, ie. could it include 'policy'. This will hopefully become clearer as the neighbourhood planning agenda develops.

4.6.7. It is currently the case that the standards set in Statements of Community Involvement do not apply to the preparation of NDPs. There is, as of now, no formal requirement to consult or engage on a NDP. Everybody who raised this, or who we asked about it, considered this to be an extremely worrying omission.

4.6.8. Until very recently, people were confused about the statement in the Localism Bill that whoever leads the examination of a NDP cannot be a Planning Inspector. This has now been amended so that 'employees of the Crown' can play the role. Although the suggestion that the examination of a NDP would be 'light touch' is part of a general intention to reduce the burden, time and costs of all examination procedures, some people in communities expressed concern that this may seem to imply that their NDP is a less important document.

4.6.9. The proposal that any NDP, once it has cleared examination, must go to a referendum raised the most strongly expressed concerns. The Bill proposes that a NDP can only be adopted if more than 50% of those voting support it via a local referendum. People commented that referenda are not a usual part of our democratic system (being reserved for very occasional and special national issues such as AV), that experience at local level is that referenda can be extremely socially divisive, that they enable people to avoid any serious engagement during plan preparation stages because they can simply vote 'no' later and that people who have not considered or discussed proposals before a referendum will always vote 'no'. Some suggested that if an alternative approach required high standards of community engagement, and that

was then delivered, a referendum would not be needed and the examiner could declare a plan sound on that aspect.

4.6.10. Furthermore, the Bill suggests that the local planning authority or the examiner can require the referendum to cover a broader area than that on which the NDP is based. Presumably for example, this would mean reaching out to a school catchment (ie. beyond a parish boundary) if a NDP makes a case for school retention or enlargement linked to housing provision. This was generally seen as impractical.

4.6.11. Given the still uncertain status of NDPs, and especially the issues of examination and referenda, it remains unclear how or whether any NDP can be formally challenged.

4.6.12. Finally, a concern from the development industry is that the emphasis on local determination on many aspects, ie. not just at authority level but at the level of potentially many different villages/towns, will mean such different approaches, policies and procedures that understanding the policy context in each separate place could become ever more complex.

4.7. Neighbourhood Development Orders

4.7.1. There has been far less commentary on this topic (and on the others that follow). Concerns have been raised that a NDO can be secured without any need to prepare a NDP, that a NDO is likely to cover only very minor issues (eg. none that might have highways implications) and also that, if a community is in effect giving itself permission, what scope or process is there for anybody to challenge this decision?

4.7.2. Since the Bill was published we are aware of just one equivalent of a NDO proceeding and being adopted, and that used the 2004 Local Development Order (LDO) legislation. This LDO was developed by Cornwall Council with the Parish of Feock and it is valuable to note two factors about this example. First, that Cornwall Council only agreed it on the basis that Feock already had in place a good quality Parish Plan and good quality Village Design Statement. Secondly, that the issues delegated are very minor: extensions at the front of properties, additions to the roof at the front, and porches (up to 5 square metres).

4.7.3. Several people commented that, accompanied by adequate information, LDOs might already fulfill the role envisaged for NDOs.

4.8. Right to Build

4.8.1. This offers communities an opportunity to proceed with small local building projects – a village hall extension, a few affordable homes etc. – without seeking planning permission from the planning authority. This is therefore a dramatically increased level of delegation as compared to the example above for a LDO/NDO. Once again questions arose about the likely scale of such projects, their by-passing of plans or procedures at higher levels, the potential for others to advance projects outside the scope of even a NDP, the fact that many will have implications (highways, environmental impact, transport etc.) that require quite high levels of technical skill in developing and appraising projects, the uncertain control over design and other standards and the lack of any opportunity for local or wider challenge.

4.9. Incentives

4.9.1. An argument made less through the Localism Bill material but more in the Local Growth White Paper and in ministerial speeches, concerns incentives that might encourage communities to accept, perhaps even to promote, development in their neighbourhoods. The two main incentives are argued to be the New Homes Bonus and the Community Infrastructure Levy. The early rhetoric suggested that the money from these would go to local communities, ie. those impacted by development, but recent statements now suggest that the money from both will go to the 'strategic authority' (hence including counties and especially highways departments) but that a proportion should then be passed on to the community of impact. The figures could be

substantial – for example a New Homes Bonus figure of £120,000 for a village ‘accepting’ 20 new houses (if all was passed on to them).

4.9.2. Almost all commentators appear to agree that, even if all the money went to communities of impact, this would (a) not change views in many wealthier communities who are already anti any development and (b) offer little real benefit to poorer communities. The approach is also seen as a rather blunt instrument that appears to take no account of the quality or need for development. There is also increasing concern at what is seen as backtracking on the promise that money would go to local communities, given recent statements that only a proportion of it would be for local people. (See also later comments on making financial aspects a material consideration.)

4.10. Pre-application engagement

4.10.1. Although ‘Open Source Planning’ made bold statements about ensuring in-depth ‘collaboration on design’ on all planning applications, the latest suggestion from government is that pre-application engagement should only be formally required on schemes of over 200 houses or 10,000 square metres.

4.10.2. This is therefore seen to rule out the vast majority of schemes in rural areas. Consultation is underway and we know that many have suggested that this limit is far too high and that it should be reduced to 10/12 houses and 1,000 square metres, commonly used current thresholds for other aspects of applications. Those few who commented on this aspect were keen that a far lower threshold should be set.

4.11. Neighbourhood Planning in Urban Areas

4.11.1. Much of the concern that we have outlined about the application of the principles and procedures of Localism to rural areas also applies in urban settings. In fact the debate about various aspects of the term ‘neighbourhood’ in urban areas has been, and remains, especially contentious and even raises questions back to the rural context. Several commentators have raised two key issues.

4.11.2. Firstly, defining urban neighbourhoods is notoriously difficult and some have suggested it is impossible, inappropriate or wrong. This is because of the geography of urban areas where some centres of possible neighbourhoods might perhaps be defined and agreed, but not their boundaries. Furthermore, the pattern of social habits, use of facilities and services (access to shops, school, leisure and health for example) are complex and overlapping. Given the ability of local authorities or inspectors to suggest, perhaps require (though this is unclear) wider than neighbourhood referendum areas if they believe that a NDP covers issues beyond its boundary, this could create a complex and difficult to manage process; for some this was seen as completely unmanageable. Any NDP mentioning transport in a major city would presumably have to be tested by a referendum across the whole that city, if not the county. This strengthens the point made above about sticking solely to parish/town boundaries on many NDP issues and the referenda implications of this.

4.11.3. Secondly, in non-parished urban areas (all but one we understand), the latest proposals (early May) now suggest that any group wishing to be supported in producing a NDP or taking on a NDO must have a membership of at least 21 individuals, each of whom must live in the neighbourhood area concerned, work there or be an elected council member for that area. This is a step up from 3 people who need not even live there but it still raised questions for interviewees about legitimacy, not least if several groups in one area meet these criteria and wish to proceed with a plan. Most importantly for this study, however, the questions now being asked of urban groups only serve to reinforce the point earlier about the validity of some Parish and Town Councils and the need to not just assume a PC automatically qualifies but to set reasonable standards for qualification.

4.12. Recent Announcements, Changes and Initiatives

(Care is needed with what now follows because it is based on announcements made very late during our study period.)

The May 2011 Budget

4.12.1. There was a clearly different character to interviews conducted before and after the Budget, and not just with planners. Before the Budget statement, most people were positive about Localism in its aspirations but cautious about it in detail. After the budget there have been some serious concerns expressed about the Government's ambitions for localism. Though we cannot comment in any detail because of the timing of these announcements late in the study programme, it appears that several items in the budget, as well as disturbing comments from senior ministers about planning as a barrier to economic development led to this change in attitude. Some negative comments about planning described it as "enemy of enterprise" (David Cameron), a "drag anchor to growth" (Eric Pickles) and a "barrier to social mobility" (Vince Cable). The suggestions at this time included the following:

- The suggestion that those authorities without Core Strategies in place must now hasten to complete them or any planning applications in the interim would be given an amber if not green light. It is unclear what this means for standards of community involvement.
- Councils will be enabled and encouraged to auction off public sector land pre-approved with planning permission to encourage more areas to be developed.
- The creation of a new presumption in favour of sustainable development.
- Allowing developers to obtain permission to convert empty office blocks, warehouses and business parks into housing without change of use permission currently subject to consultation.
- Allowing businesses to establish neighbourhood planning forums solely for the promotion of economic activity, as introduced by a Government amendment to the Localism Bill at Commons Report Stage.

Financial Considerations in Determining Applications

4.12.2. A further major concern is that, ostensibly to clarify the legitimacy of incentives such as the New Homes Bonus, a Government amendment has been introduced to the Localism Bill that would make it lawful for financial considerations unrelated to the development in question to be material considerations in planning decisions. CPRE, TCPA and RTPI have all raised serious concerns about the impact this change could have on the integrity of the planning system, and its ability to pursue the public interest in land use decisions.

Front-runner Projects

4.12.3. At the time of writing several 'waves' of government 'Front-runner' projects (originally termed 'Vanguards') have been selected and those involved are gearing up to get started properly. There were 17 in the 'First Wave' (receiving help from DCLG as well as £20,000 to the supporting local authority) and 33 in the 'Second Wave' (receiving just the £20,000). We have been in contact with 28 of the local authorities involved in the first two waves with front-runner projects and sought a brief overview of their projects (though many stressed that it was 'early days' and that the detail was still being shaped). The majority of projects were described as NDPs with just three outlining plans to prepare a NDO (using existing Local Development Order legislation). Many of the projects are building on existing community-led, or collaborative planning work, with strong community groups, including one Community Interest Company.

4.12.4. Some of those we have interviewed have commented on the front-runners, and there have been various mentions in articles etc. Two key points are being made. Firstly that none of these, by definition, can be a full NDP project. Some appear to be mainly specific, community-led practical projects, for example reuse of an old building. It also seems that most of those now described as NDPs are in fact being advanced under existing procedures such as Area Action Plans. Secondly, there are serious doubts from all those familiar with pilot projects at community

level as to whether any useful conclusions will emerge from the front-runners in time to inform the final stages of the Bill.

Support Agencies

4.12.5. Four organisations or consortia are now being funded by DCLG to provide 'Free advice to support neighbourhood planning'. They are:

- NALC with CPRE
- The Prince's Foundation
- The RTPI (In fact for Planning Aid)
- Locality, with the Glass House, Eden Project and Community Planning

4.12.6. NALC/CPRE will be providing what might be called 'gearing up' advice to communities, Parish and Town Councils, CPRE branches and others. The Prince's Foundation will be offering 'three planning tools', and we can probably guess that the RTPI/Planning Aid will be offering a service similar to that provided through their 'Community Planning' work in the last few years. Locality etc. will be setting up an advice website and offering resources and guidance to communities.

Localism and Recent Elections

4.12.7. Ever since the Localism concept has emerged, there has been a general feeling amongst planners, those in the development industry and to some extent even within RCCs and amongst elected members, that it could amount to a 'nimbies charter'. There has been a concern that it could simply enable some communities to frustrate all development. The findings in section 3 already show some of this but it raised its head even further in the recent district and even parish elections. Planning magazine of 6th May included a story in which they commented on 'a raft of areas where the elections have prompted would-be councillors to come out against development'. Areas listed included East Devon, West Somerset, Wycombe, to which we can add Thornbury and the fringe of Swindon.

4.12.8. We have also now heard of a Parish Council election in which 11 new candidates were elected on an anti-development ticket and now control that council (in a front-runner area).

4.13. Summary

4.13.1. The comments above are almost all negative. That certainly reflects what commentators from all sides are saying at present and what respondents said to us in our interviews, but it misses a very important point. There is nevertheless also, from almost all sides, a high level of support for the ambition or principles behind the Localism agenda. This can be reinforced by referring again to the key points made at the project workshop held in April. In summary, those present suggested that the potential benefits of Localism could be (again in their own words):

- Addition to the toolbox of options
- Formal status in the planning system
- Potential to bring in urban community-led planning in a serious way
- Could bring the development industry and communities together
- Ward councillors will also have a different role to play
- Could lead to 'richer' local plans
- Would raise awareness of planning and planners
- Developers may fund the plans (also a threat)
- Should strengthen portfolios of Parish and Town Councils
- Prompt plan-making
- Motivation through Community Infrastructure Levy etc - potential value

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1. In terms of practice to date, we located an extremely wide range of approaches and methods that have been used over recent years, in some cases for over 20 years, to enable local people to have a voice in plan-making and project development. We also heard about but have not pursued a number of informal variants to these (for example, Area Action Plans) and some informal ones (for example area plans developed on the fringes of formal planning policy by planning authorities or other authority departments). We also chose to look at, and found interesting examples from, a broad spectrum of approaches. These varied from engagement in strategic plan-making through some that could be described as genuinely collaborative to strongly community-led approaches. Within this we did, however, hear of examples in which one party or another – local authority or community – had ‘gone it alone’ without working collaboratively.

5.2. None of the existing approaches we asked about was seen to be without flaws and weaknesses and some were almost structural weaknesses or uncertainties, for example the limited use of pre-application engagement or the still continuing question about whether or not community-led ‘plans’ could or should be formally adopted.

5.3. However, to balance this, we heard about enough examples of good and even best practice to suggest that all approaches have value in principle and could address a wide range of situations.

5.4. In terms of emerging approaches to localism there were varied levels of awareness from those (from all sides) who were clearly well up to speed and others who knew little. In general there was uncertainty (occasionally frustration, even anger) for a number of reasons. Some of this was to do with what were seen to be conflicts between what is in public statements and published material. The most significant of these, one that has clearly reduced community confidence in the Bill, is the apparent shift from what was taken as a pre-election ‘promise’ (in Open Source Planning) that local people would be able to prepare their own plans to a requirement that community-led plans must be ‘in general conformity’ with plans at higher levels.

5.5. For all involved, there are also mixed feelings about the seemingly regular changes and amendments that are being made to the draft Bill. There is an understanding that it is good that the government is apparently listening to feedback alongside a concern that it is difficult to start preparing for the new regime if one does not know exactly what it is from week to week. This feeling of being ‘in limbo’ appeared to be shared by all, including those most fully involved with the Bill’s development.

5.6. Some people were also concerned that the focus on Localism as outlined in the draft Bill would miss out on the implications of other closely related initiatives, for example the Local Growth White Paper where incentives such as the New Homes Bonus are described.

5.7. The findings highlight two important issues, one of practice and one of principle. The issue about practice in fact covers several aspects about the practical delivery of what is in the Bill and about how valuable the new proposals will prove to be. This set of issues is also predominantly negative.

5.8. There were some aspects of what is proposed that most people regarded as unworkable and/or inappropriate. These included the definition of neighbourhoods in urban areas, the development of appropriate ‘Forums’ in urban areas (allied to cautions about the ability of PCs/TCs to manage processes properly), the likelihood of liberating enough resources (community or professional) to advance NDPs in particular and the proposed use of referenda (especially if areas of coverage are expanded beyond the community or neighbourhood preparing a plan). No solutions were offered for these and it was felt by many that their imposition could damage existing relationships and structures.

5.9. There were also several areas of uncertainty, for example about what actual policies could be included in a NDP, how to deal with non spatial issues that have for so long been the core of community-led planning, the procedures for and value given to thorough community engagement at a local level and controls over manipulation of procedures funded by a business or developer. Solutions ought to be available for these but are not yet known. Once again, if not addressed properly, it was felt that these too could damage existing practice.

5.10. This all led some to query whether the proposed approaches outlined in the Localism Bill would add anything significant to what is available already, suggesting instead that better use of the many approaches or methods available now could deliver aspects of the Bill's ambition better than the new repertoire of Neighbourhood Development Plans and so forth. Finally, these concerns raised questions for some about whether all the time and resources being invested in the Localism Bill were proportionate to what many consider to be the minor benefits that might emerge.

5.11. The list was not, however, totally negative. Many people valued the fact that, if the Bill proceeds, local communities would – for the first time – have a full legal right to have their voice heard in the shaping of policy for their areas. Some considered that this extra right could help to revitalise moribund Parish or Town Councils and trigger more structured community organisation in urban areas. There was a hope (we can say it no more strongly) that the general shifts would lead to more genuine forms of community involvement in plan-making and pre-application engagement. There was also cautious support for the idea of a Community Right to Build.

5.12. In terms of principle, it was remarkable to note the extent to which everybody, from all sides, shared a high level of support for the core ambitions and aims that they took to be behind the government's localism agenda. We noted very little disagreement about the intent and the rationale for improvement, if with small provisos. There was some scepticism from those such as planners and developers about giving too much power and control to local communities on the basis of bad experience to date – the well-known 'nimby factor'. However, assuming that any future processes could be stronger, more coherent, more democratised and, in particular, more collaborative, the principle of giving greater status to community evidence, aspirations and ideas was well supported.

6. REFERENCES

- ACRE (2009) Community-led Planning - Policy Position Paper, ACRE, available at <http://www.acre.org.uk/our-work/policy-position-papers> (accessed June 2011)
- BDOR (2006) *An exciting Future for Community Plans*, report to South West ACRE network (SWAN) and Market and Coastal Towns Association, BDOR Ltd
- Bishop, J (2010 a) From Parish Plans to Localism in England: Straight Track or Long and Winding Road? *Planning Practice and Research* 25 (5), 611-624
- Bishop, J (2010 b) Localism, Collaborative Planning and Open Source. *Town and Country Planning* 79 (11) 376-381
- Braithwaite, K (2011) *The Power of the Plan* Carnegie UK Trust
- Brighton and Hove City Council (2009) Urban Characterisation Study, available at <http://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/index.cfm?request=c1162887> (accessed June 2011)
- CCRU (2001) *Village Design Statements: Monitoring and Evaluation*, Countryside and Community Research Unit for the Countryside Agency
- CPRE (2005) *Unlocking the Landscape Action Pack: Preparing a Community Landscape Character Statement*, CPRE
- Gallent, N., Morphet, j. & Tewdwr-Jones, M (2009) Parish Plans and the Spatial Planning Approach in England, *Town Planning Review*, 79 (1), pp1-29
- Gallent, N & Robinson, S (2010) Some notes on desirable localism: a summary of recent research into connectivity between community planning groups and policy makers. *Town and Country Planning*, 79 (11) 472-480
- Hughes, C & Danny Chesterman (2005) *Village Design Statements: Do They Make a Difference? An Analysis of the Effectiveness of Village Design Statements in the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty 1998-2005*, Kent Downs AONB & the Environment Agency
- Icarus (2006) *Planning Together? The Impact of Parish Plans and Village Appraisals in Derbyshire*. Derbyshire RCC
- Owen, S (2011) From Orthodoxy to Anarchy: The Continuing failure of Rural Settlement Planning in England,
- Parker, G (2008) *Parish and community-led planning, local empowerment and local evidence bases: An examination of 'good practice' in West Berkshire*, *Town Planning Review*, 79 (1), 61-84
- RTPI (2011) *Existing Tools for Neighbourhood planning*, available at http://www.rtpi.org.uk/item/4591/pg_dtl_art_news/pg_hdr_art/pg_ftr_art (accessed June 2011)
- SQW Consulting (2007) *Integration of Parish Plans into the wider systems of Local Government*, July 2007, DEFRA London

TCPA (2010) Communities and Local Government Committee Inquiry on Localism - TCPA Submission Dec 2010, available at [www.tcpa.org.uk/.../20100929 TCPA FINAL CLG Committee Localism.pdf](http://www.tcpa.org.uk/.../20100929_TCPA_FINAL_CLG_Committee_Localism.pdf) (accessed March 2011)

The Rural Coalition (2010) *The Rural Challenge. Achieving Sustainable Rural Communities for the 21st Century*, The Rural Coalition, available at <http://www.acre.org.uk/our-work/the-rural-coalition/Rural+Coalition+Publications> (accessed April 2011)