

PLANNERS SAY FAREWELL TO PARISH PLANS?

Well, yes and no; more a case of farewell Parish Plans version 1 and welcome version 2. So, what has changed and why, and where do planners stand in relation to Parish Plans in the future?

Almost a year ago, some colleagues and I set off to look into how to integrate Parish Plans and Market Town Strategic Plans into the new planning system. In true consultant style we ended up telling our clients - the South West ACRE (RCC) Network and the Market and Coastal Towns Association - that this was not the best question and that 'if we were you, we wouldn't have started from here'. In fact we went almost full circle, ending up with a view of Community Plans* that requires a different, more mutually valuable and probably almost indispensable contribution from planners. (* This is our preferred term for all such animals, including urban neighbourhood 'plans'.)

We were commissioned mainly by the two organisations named above, topped up by support from Government Office South West the RDA and others, to look at recent and likely future practice across the South West in terms of links between the planning system and those producing various forms of Community Plan. Inevitably, that also involved looking at the role of organisations such as Rural Community Councils (RCCs). The study was mainly desk-based but with a large number of telephone interviews. Once we started, however, Defra topped up the work by funding three detailed case studies and the Commission for Rural Communities then stepped in and paid for a further two. That enabled us to visit more places and people across the region than we had anticipated. (See the end of this article for references to all the results.)

If we could stereotype what used to be the link between Parish Plans and statutory planning in the old system, and capture it in a series of bullet points, it might look like this:

- Communities developed their plans without contacting planners and were then surprised that they could not be adopted.
- Communities prepared their plans then sent them to the local authority saying, 'over to you, now deliver it'.
- Planners only agreed to meet and help communities when the work was mainly done and it was too late.
- Efforts were made to get a plan adopted only to find that planning could not deliver on most of the actions – the plan was just a whimsical 'wish list'.
- Communities were confused when a plan was adopted but that made no difference to development control practice.

We need to be careful, however, because that stereotyped view does a serious injustice to many Community Plan groups, individual planners, planning teams, and staff in the RCCs. Over quite a few years they have invested enormous amounts of time, effort and skill both alone and together to shape some superb Community Plans that have had a genuinely positive influence at community level and at the planning policy level, even through to development control.

Shifting tack now, towards the new planning system, isn't it right that this new system offers more, better, stronger opportunities for initiatives such as Community Plans? Aren't 'spatial' approaches closer to the cohesiveness of community ways of thinking about their places and people? Doesn't the increased emphasis on community involvement lead inevitably to local people producing their own aspirations, visions, plans? And won't all the changes in planning obligations make it easier for pooled contributions to be used more effectively at a local level in more rural areas?

All that is almost undeniable yet it all comes along with additional demands in terms of achieving what is now Supplementary Planning Document (not Guidance) status, most notably for the great panoply of Sustainability Appraisal procedures. Despite all the potential benefits from the new system, the SPD procedures alone have stopped many community groups dead in their tracks; a situation worsened when a Government Regional Office (not South West) puts out a note saying they do not expect any community-generated initiatives to ever secure SPD status!

If that all seems to lead into a major cul-de-sac, remember my point about 'not starting from here'. While all the changes were happening in planning, other key changes were happening in other parts of the governmental system. Here are some of the most important ones:

- The shift from Community Strategies to Sustainable Community Strategies.
- The implications of this in terms of more comprehensive and consistent topic coverage, taking a longer term view and avoiding narrow parochialism in strategy development.
- Forthcoming changes to the system of Local Strategic Partnerships.
- Next stages for Local Area Agreements.
- The hints in the Local Government White Paper about 'neighbourhoods' and devolution.

That led us to start to see Community Plans in a new context. We believe they are better thought of as (very) local Sustainable Community Strategies, covering everything a community wishes to address (and its LSP might want them to address) about its aspirations and the plans and tactics for realising them. There would be encouragement, and incentives through LAAs, for communities to be more outward-looking and work together, and to work within an overall framework of agreed issues, criteria and information – yet adapted to celebrate local distinctiveness. There would be a greater emphasis on genuinely implementable action plans and the whole process would be supported by some form (varying from area to area) of 'local enabler'.

And now we come full circle back to planning. In our future model, it seems unlikely that the right approach for any Community Plan as a whole would be to aim for it to be adopted as SPD. There may be elements within some plans which (probably not alone) might be appropriate for SPD – notably if some form of Village Design Statement is included. However, let's put that aside for a moment. The more important features for us are that properly developed Community Plans, if using the right basic framework and common procedures, would provide you as planners with an enormously valuable grounding of evidence for LDF documents (as some authorities are doing at present). Parts of a series of Community Plans might lodge in parts of the Core Strategy or an Area Action Plan or other SPDs. For smaller communities in particular, by coming together in a coherent and managed way there would be the potential to 'pool' planning obligations funds to better meet the size and timescales of smaller scale rural development. And, of course, any good Community Plan will be produced using principles and methods that you have already written into your Statement of Community Involvement.

Well what a relief; instead of having to spend ridiculous amounts of time squeezing wide-ranging plans into the straitjacket of SPD, or rejecting plans that are patently inadequate because you weren't able to spend that time with people, you can start to be positive planners again! You can (ideally from 'day one') be tactical and careful with your time and help communities to target to you and your territory only the things that genuinely belong there and which you can then support, with adoption backing if necessary.

So, it is not a case of 'Farewell Parish Plans'. It is a case of farewell to wasted time, conflict and distrust and welcome to approaches to Community Plans that we hope you will find personally stimulating and liberating and which enhance the new LDF system. Oh yes – an aside for any urban people who have read this far. Watch this space for the Community Plan approach to start to get kick-started in towns and cities!

Jeff Bishop
BDOR Limited

References

To download the summary or full report (An Exciting Future for Community Plans) go to:

www.swan-network.org.uk

Any day now (maybe already) the full case studies will be available on the Defra website. Go to:

www.defra.gov.uk and search for 'parish plans'.