

AN EXCITING FUTURE FOR COMMUNITY PLANS

SUMMARY ISSUES AND IDEAS FROM
A REPORT COMMISSIONED BY MCTA AND SWAN

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South West ACRE
Network of Rural
Community Councils

WITH FUNDING AND ASSISTANCE FROM



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

LOOK AHEAD A FEW YEARS AND JUST IMAGINE

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

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

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

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

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

THE SOURCE OF THIS FUTURE VISION

The Research Project

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

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

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

The Changing Context

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

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

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

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

COMMUNITY PLANS AND THE PLANNING SYSTEM

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

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

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

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

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

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

COMMUNITY PLANS AND THE WIDER SYSTEM

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

The future model, lodged in a wider system than just planning, is as illustrated in the ‘Vision’ on the opening page. It is optimistic and challenging and draws on a number of changes (eg. to LSPs) mooted but as yet not fully delivered. At the same time the approach is certainly not dependent on all of these system changes and it could even be taken forward productively in the current context. That is however challenging for central government (where Community Plan support is currently fragmented) and for local government. It is also challenging for local communities because it requires them to take a more open, less parochial approach than many appear to take at present.

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

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

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

MAKING THE FUTURE VISION HAPPEN

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

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

In relation to Community Plans and the new planning system:

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

In relation to the wider future vision:

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

PROJECT CLIENTS AND TEAM

The Project Clients were:

- SWAN - South West ACRE Network of Rural Community Councils
- MCTA - Market and Coastal Towns Association

With financial support received from:

- South West of England Regional Development Agency
- Government Office for the South West

In association with:

- South West Regional Assembly

With further funding for case studies received from:

- Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
- Commission for Rural Communities

The above organisations have commissioned and funded this study, but the views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect their policy.

The Project Team included:

- Jeff Bishop (BDOR Limited)
- Rowena Harris (Independent Facilitator and Associate to BDOR)
- Barry Pearce (South West Planning Aid)
- Felicity Sylvester was involved on some of the separately funded case studies

FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information and to download the full report please visit:

www.swan-network.org.uk

or contact:

Stephen W Wright MBE DMS
Regional Director
SWAN
C/o Community Council of Devon
The School Huts
County Hall
Topsham Road
Exeter
EX2 4QB
Tel: 01392 383342
E-Mail: stephen.swan@devonrcc.org.uk

SWAN

SERVING RURAL COMMUNITY COUNCILS IN THE SOUTH WEST

OUR VISION

Is a vibrant, inclusive, diverse region, and our **mission is** to be an effective focus for knowledge and expertise on rural issues.

OUR AIMS

Are appropriate policy development, effective representation and advocacy, a vibrant voluntary and community sector, thriving rural community councils, and high quality services.

OUR JOB

Is to support rural community councils in their important work.

For further information please contact:

SWAN Regional Director and Administrator
c/o Community Council of Devon
County Hall, Topsham Road
Exeter, EX2 4QB
Tel: 01392 383342
E-Mail: swan@devonrcc.org.uk, www.swan-network.org.uk

MCTA

OUR VISION

To create vibrant, healthy and sustainable market and coastal towns in the south west by helping local communities and their partners.

Established in October 2004 and supported by a range of regional organisations including the South West of England Regional Development Agency and English Heritage, the Association is charged with delivering the Market and Coastal Towns Initiative throughout the region. The Association currently provides:

- Professional information, advice and guidance
- Bespoke training and mentoring
- Access to best practice, expertise and learning resources
- Partnerships and networking support
- A research and analysis function
- Website
- Newsletter

For further information please contact:

James Hassett
Chief Executive
Market and Coastal Towns Association
East Reach House, East Reach
Taunton, TA1 3EN
Tel: 01823 250815
E-Mail: info@mcti.org.uk, www.mcti.org.uk