

COMMUNITY PLANNING, COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNITY PLANS, BUT WHERE ARE THE PLANNERS?

Tempting, isn't it, that word 'planning'? Maybe you have an inkling that 'community planning' is a bit beyond the world of town and country planning but 'community plans'? Surely anything with the word 'plan' in it should involve planners? After all, aren't Parish Plans a form of 'community plan', and many were formally adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance only a few years ago? And don't land use planners consider that they have long been leaders and innovators in terms of participation, or what is now called 'engagement'?

Largely as a result of two recent White Papers – “Strong and Prosperous Communities”¹ and “Planning for a Sustainable Future”² - this whole ill-defined, fluid territory, linking the idea of community involvement and possible decision-making, community-led planning and the idea of planning and plan-making (in their broadest senses) is changing rapidly and being fought over by many agencies and professionals. A current state-of-play judgement would have the balance swinging very much towards those other than (town and country) planners and in our view that would be a serious loss to all, including planners themselves.

Community Planning

Let's start by looking at 'Community Planning' because 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' studiously avoids using the term! This is in part (so we are told) to ensure no confusion in people's minds with what is happening in Scotland. In Scotland 'Community Planning' is the term used to describe the combination, in operation in England, of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) and Community Strategies; (not 'plans', you may notice). The two main aims of Community Planning in Scotland³ are:

- “Making sure people and communities are genuinely engaged in the decisions made on public services that affect them, allied to
- A commitment from organisations to work together, not apart, in providing better public services.”

But the same publication then includes a diagram with two-way links between the upper level of national frameworks and priorities and the local level of 'Community Planning Partnership Priorities' and also two-way links between the Partnerships and 'Localised/Neighbourhood Priorities' (ie. the local community level). The focus is therefore on improving public services (from the 'top') by improved 'consultation, cooperation and participation' (with the 'bottom'). So far so good, at least if experience in Scotland is better than that in England where the engagement practices of most LSPs that we have encountered hover somewhere between gratuitous and tokenistic. Interestingly, there is not a single word in this publication about links to land use planning.

Much of the above has now reappeared in sharper and tougher form for England in 'Strong and Prosperous Communities', even though the long-delayed guidance on next generation LSPs is still to be published. There is much to be applauded in the English White Paper. Reducing it to a speed-read checklist (but excluding those on engagement, to be picked up later) the aspirations or requirements include:

- Communities to have a say in setting local standards and priorities, and checking on their achievement
- Devolving service delivery and management
- Better integration of policies, strategies and plans
- Expanding neighbourhood management
- Local 'Charters' and 'Community Calls to Action'

- Power of well-being (and money) for Quality Parish Councils
- Systematic intelligence on people's needs
- Information to communities (but not 'from'!)
- Councillors to act as 'Democratic Champions'

There are even some explicit links to spatial planning in arguing for closer integration in terms of both content and involvement between the Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS) and Local Development Framework (LDF).

This latter point takes us on to the planning White Paper – 'Planning for a Sustainable Future' - which reciprocates the local government White Paper ambitions by (amongst many other things) repeating the need for 'closer integration of Sustainable Community Strategies and the Local Development Framework'. (This link is further reinforced by the recent publication from the "Effective Practice in Spatial Planning" report by Janice Morphet and others⁴.) But there, on this particular issue, it stops.

Community Engagement

Both English White Papers take a step further than happened in Scotland in terms of broad approaches to community engagement. The English White Papers, if in as yet varying language and using different terminology and details, both suggest a need for a more coherent approach to engagement at local level; in fact some aspect of engagement, consultation or involvement is mentioned on virtually every page. The other half of a speed-read summary of the aspirations in 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' therefore reads as follows:

- Consult communities on the Local Area Agreement (LAA), SCS, LDF etc.
- But link that consultation together
- Engage hard to reach groups better
- Increase community skills to engage
- Clear audit trails for consultation undertaken
- Each LSP to have some form of comprehensive engagement strategy

The (single) mention in "Strong and Prosperous Communities" of the need for each LSP area to have a 'comprehensive engagement strategy' is perhaps the most significant; (although the careful avoidance of capital letters maybe tells us something more worrying). At another point the suggestion (repeated from earlier papers) is that each LSP should have its own version of a Statement of Community Involvement (SCI). At yet another point all this is argued to be subsumed within the forthcoming Best Value 'Duty to Involve', though this would seem to serve rather different purposes. This is all rather inconsistent, certainly not clear and not reciprocated in the planning White Paper where one might expect it to be, notably on the potentially expanded role of SCIs.

Despite this niggle there is real potential here, in fact one might even say it is long overdue. The first central government mention of engagement strategies came over 10 years ago and then just disappeared without trace. Engagement (or consultation, or involvement) has almost fallen into disrepute in recent years as government report after government report has encouraged or even required it. This has led inexorably to the horrendous overload of randomly initiated, differently managed, overlapping and – in most ordinary people's minds - repetitive and ultimately diversionary 'consultations' on just about anything that moves! In one authority area we identified 128 consultations happening across a six month period, with inconsistent methods and nearly all of them targeting some of the same groups for every single process.

So bring on 'engagement strategies' and sooner rather than later please. But also, do that properly because there are some documents around which purport to be 'consultation strategies' but which patently are not. The few that we have seen include principles of engagement (or consultation) and lists of methods, and they outline some form of accessible programme to which anybody can log in and discover what consultations have recently finished, which are underway and what's coming soon. This is valuable, in fact programmes such as 'Consultation Finder' are excellent, but all this is not a strategy. At worst the finder simply tells you directs you to the endless, inconsistent and repetitive consultations going on!

But a strategy involves decision-making, priority-setting, coordination, combining consultations (as with SCS and LDF) and above all someone able to say "no" to the next bit of repetitive work. Not only are there very few genuine 'strategies' that tackle these challenges⁵ but It is our experience that most so-called strategies are managed on a day-to-day basis by relatively junior officers. Their lowly status means that they simply keep the 'finder' up to date and have absolutely no ability or authority to reject a proposed consultation even if it is about to ask virtually the same questions of virtually the same people just a week or two after the last one. Unless what emerges prove to be genuine strategies, not just lists, 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' will continue to be mired by ever-growing consultation fatigue and the inevitable backlash against engagement.

So what does "Planning for a Sustainable Future' have to tell us about engagement?

In terms of the profile for engagement issues, the major feature of this White Paper is the detail on the proposed 'Infrastructure Planning Commission'. This is extremely important but, in terms of this article's focus on more locally oriented community engagement, the key point is the removal of the requirement for independent inspection of Statements of Community Involvement. The bizarre idea of external inspection would never have been allowed through had it not been for strong (and late) ministerial insistence as the Bill moved to its final stages. It was doomed from the start and has done considerable damage to the advancement of good engagement.

It has however had two real merits – it has forced authorities to think about engagement on its own, not just an aside, and it has enabled us to have a look at all sorts of SCIs from all sorts of authorities. And most of it is a sad sight. Many SCIs that showed almost no response at all to the changed world of the recent reforms sailed through to adoption, while at least one other was held back because key local groups felt (quite rightly) that it was not good enough, even though it was far better than nearly all that had been adopted. This is not the fault of the Inspectors; one does not ask people with no real experience of involvement to inspect on that topic any more than you would ask a highly skilled computer engineer to look at your files and comment on your writing skills!

The problem now is that nothing is proposed in the White Paper to replace inspection and ensure appropriate and consistent standards. Without some sort of externally driven monitoring and standard-setting, things will almost certainly lapse back into random, ad hoc, minimalist practice. The alternative is not only obvious and has been proven on many occasions on specific projects but it is entirely consistent with the overall engagement agenda. The answer is local self-certification via some form of widely selected group of stakeholders who work with the planning authority to agree their own approach that meets the national standards. The end result – still an SCI – can then be sent to whoever (government offices preferably) with a clear statement on the process followed signed by those involved so that it can become formally adopted. The local group then of course becomes the core group for the annual monitoring.

Less relevant, but worth mentioning, is the suggestion in the planning White Paper of removing the stage of formal consultation on options. When genuinely 'front-loaded' involvement takes place, options emerge from that 'continuous' process and to then step back and consult on them (even inventing some just for the sake of consulting!) is banal. This alone is a source of frustration for many.

However, the key proviso to this is that the early stages must be done and done properly. We still hear regularly of planning authorities where there has been no front-loaded and continuous engagement on evidence collection, issue identification and option development (as Regulation 25 requires) and where an outdated 'Issues and Options' paper is the first that people hear. If, as appears to be happening, they can get away with this omission then removal of consultation on the options stage will mean that no serious, early engagement would happen at all in these authorities. This would be disastrous and would create a situation worse than that in place before the pro-engagement reforms.

What appears to have happened is that people have assumed that 'informal' means 'discretionary' and they have therefore missed out the really important early stages. Regulation 25 may offer scope for discretion on how to do early engagement but it offers no discretion on whether to do it. If the options consultation stage is removed, it must be balanced with a restatement of the requirement to fulfill Regulation 25.

By the way, we also know of many authorities where those planners preparing the SCI did not even talk to their own authority's consultation officers. So much for joined-up engagement!

Community Plans

And finally, what of 'Community Plans'? This is where the real disappointment comes in both White Papers. For almost 20 years now there has developed a pattern in which the planning system has given some sort of formal credence to 'plans' produced at community level, be that a Parish Plan or a Village Design Statement; indeed there has often been money around to help communities prepare such documents. Sadly, there is not a single direct mention of this level of operation in the planning White Paper, despite important changes to the context for such plans in recent years. The only almost direct mention comes in relation to the proposed relaxation of the need for full and formal Sustainability Appraisal for Supplementary Planning Documents. Highly welcome and long overdue this may be but it is no excuse for saying nothing more about the all-important bottom level of community-led plan-making.

But should we expect any better? There is currently a 'pass the parcel' exercise going on at central government level with DCLG being pressed to take on the role of managing various forms of community-led plans or statements (but resisting that). To which some may say: "but don't they do this already"? Sadly, the answer is a blunt "no". Village Design Statements are now the concern of Natural England, Parish Plans still operate via Defra, Market Town Strategic Plans end up (via RDAs) with DTI and anything on conservation passes through DCMS! The fact that none are managed through DCLG always was totally unforgivable, and is so even more now, given the two White Papers. Even if the direct link of community-led plans to planning and to formal adoption gets more tenuous day by day, the link to the remit of 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' is – or should be – getting stronger.

At which point we look again at "Strong and Prosperous Communities", hoping that the heavily increased emphasis on reaching out to and engaging communities is something more than a way to get people to endorse top-down strategies and plans. Here too we are disappointed because, although there is a mention of local level planning, it is very minimal and one is left with the conclusion that people at community level simply should not even try

to develop their own plans or strategies. This is however firmly against the broader aspirations of the White Paper. It shows remarkable short-sightedness by those in DCLG for whom revivifying Community Plans would almost certainly be the quickest, cheapest and most effective way of engaging people around the country in the White Paper's agenda – certainly far more effective than waiting (probably for a long time) for 'Community Calls to Action'! More generally, it does not take much of a look at local involvement in community-led plans to realise that this is a key way to revitalise citizen interest in the democratic process.

Yes, we all know that some Community Plans are little more than wish lists, are short-term and (almost by definition) parochial, but many are not. The good examples that we found in recent research⁶ were genuinely and appropriately challenging, wide-ranging and widely supported 'Local Sustainable Community Strategies'. Some would put Community Strategies produced by some LSPs to shame! The problem is that, as this shift has happened, so the scope, coverage, and very nature of good Community Plans has moved them well beyond the point at which they could even be considered for formal adoption within a Local Development Framework. And yet, to close the circle back again, the two most commonly covered issues in Community Plans (other than Design Statements) are traffic/transport and housing, both topics on which good a Community Plan has much to contribute to an LDF – even to a Core Strategy.

So where are planners? Where should they be?

As of now, the Sustainable Community Strategy is to be the over-arching policy document in any area and the Local Development Framework needs to manage the spatial expression of the SCS. Ignoring the timetabling complexities (some SCSs are being reviewed after Core Strategies, some before) this might be taken to mean that the LDF is supplementary. However, the LDF, with its roots in long term, robust and legally framed procedures can still carry more weight and will have far less discretion than an SCS. The need for very close integration is unarguable.

The shift towards spatial planning has potentially strengthened not just the need for closer integration but also the methodological base for it, yet all still depends on two aspects. First, on the willingness and ability of all involved to work closely together (from our experience that is still unclear) and, secondly, on the ability of a widely spatially determined LDF policy to stand up successfully at Inquiry and then at Appeal (also as yet unproven). Although the forthcoming guidance on LSPs (and presumably SCSs) will sharpen the requirements and processes, there is still a considerable amount that skilled planners can and should offer to the SCS process to stop a repeat of the rather vacuous, could-be-anywhere Community Strategies produced last time round.

In terms of planners linking to and improving practice in community engagement, Comprehensive Engagement Strategies (properly done) are the key. Whether or not that follows the suggestion of an SCI for the LSP is almost irrelevant. Good planners again bring enormous experience and skill in terms of delivering engagement that flows seamlessly into policy (and is not just 'fun', as too much Community Strategy work was in the past). To turn the tables on the comment about those drafting SCIs not talking to their consultation officers, we already know of one so-called 'Engagement Strategy' that has been produced without any contact with that authority's planning team!

At the same time, many planners need to wake up quickly to the world around them because it is changing fast in terms of engagement and they are likely to be left behind. This would be a pity for all involved because collaborative work on engagement is probably the only way that truly effective processes can be delivered in a resource-effective manner. It's all a bit like learning to swim. When you first start, it seems to take all the body's resources just to

get across one width, so the prospect of doing length after length seems daunting. Once you've learned, however, far less effort is needed for far more effect – and especially if you work with others and make it a relay!

In terms of planner involvement with community-led plans, this one might seem to be slipping away, but it shouldn't. Though the notion of adoption of a whole Parish or Market Town Plan into an LDF as a Supplementary Planning Document as the mechanism for integrating spatial and community plans is probably now dead, strong links still need to be made. Good community level work can enhance and focus your evidence base, it can generate issues and even options – and perhaps more deliverable options as well. Looked at crudely, supporting local level work is incredibly resource-efficient. Recent evidence suggests that the average Parish Plan generates around £72,000 of voluntary effort. If an authority promoted and supported 10 plans in its area, ensuring that the work was robust and consistent enough to inform the LDF, that would be staggering value for money.

In summary then, the two recent White Papers offer good news and bad news for planners. But that is only potential. Nothing is yet set in stone and there are genuine opportunities at all levels for planners to pick up the baton and run with the community planning, community engagement and community-led plans agendas. If they do not, then community planning, engagement and plans will be less effective. It may be challenging to move outside the box but the only choice at the moment for planners is marginalisation and reduction to low level enforcement. Over to you – your choice!

References

¹ Strong and Prosperous Communities; Department for Communities and Local Government. Cm 6939-1, February 2007.

² Planning for a Sustainable Future; Department for Communities and Local Government. Cm 7120, May 2007.

³ Community Planning: Statutory Guidance; Scottish Executive, April 2004.

⁴ Shaping and Delivering Tomorrow's Places: Effective Practice in Spatial Planning; UCI and Deloitte, April 2007.

⁵ For a good example see Consultation Framework – 2006-2009, Nottingham City Council; download from www.nottinghamcity.gov.uk

⁶ An Exciting Future for Community Plans; by Jeff Bishop and others; download from www.swan-network.org.uk