



West Midlands Rural Community Council Network

Parish Plans Community Empowerment & Engagement

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The West Midlands Rural Community Council Network draws together the four rural community councils (RCCs) which operate within the region. Each member RCC is an independent charitable organisation with a broad range of member organisations including parish councils, voluntary and community organisations and village halls, and has access through newsletters and mailings to over four thousand groups and individuals throughout the region.

The RCCs have the common aims of promoting voluntary action and improving rural life. Across the West Midlands the RCCS have a combined turnover of over £3.75 million and employ about one hundred full time equivalent staff providing technical and professional support on issues and projects to people in local communities.

West Midlands Rural Community Council Network

Parish Plans - Community Empowerment & Engagement

Introduction

This research has been commissioned by the West Midlands Rural Community Council Network in response to the governments drive to improve the quality, and levels, of community empowerment and engagement across the country. The Network aims to use this research to demonstrate 'empowerment in practice' and as evidence that the parish plan process is an effective and powerful mechanism through which genuine community empowerment and engagement can be achieved.

The research:

- a. Clarifies what empowerment means in the context of community led plans and shows how parish/community led planning helps to engage the community sector and develops empowerment;
- b. Identifies the key characteristics, skills and knowledge needed by individuals and community groups to maximise empowerment and engagement in the parish/community lead planning context;
- c. Identifies issues in the wider environment e.g. demography, geography, local governance arrangements, resources, technical support etc, that help, or act as barriers, to empowerment and engagement in the parish/community led planning context;

Context

Nationally community empowerment and engagement activity is coordinated by the National Empowerment Partnership (NEP) with delivery devolved at a regional level through Regional Community Empowerment Networks (RCEP). One of the key tasks of the RCEP is to establish and facilitate a regional network for Empowerment Champions. There is considerable scope within the parish planning process for Empowerment Champions to emerge in relation to both supporting the development of plans and ensuring the implementation of actions identified in parish plans.

Within the context of this report the definitions of community empowerment and community engagement are those used by the Department for Communities and

Local Government (DCLG) in the Action Plan for Community Empowerment: Building on Success:

‘Community empowerment’ is the giving of confidence, skills, and power to communities to shape and influence what public bodies do for or with them.

‘Community engagement’ is the process whereby public bodies reach out to communities to create empowerment opportunities.

Parish Planning

The Parish Plan initiative was launched by the Countryside Agency in 1999 and presented rural communities across the country with an opportunity to explore the issues facing their community and to identify which aspects they valued or felt needed to be changed. Through the process of community consultation issues are prioritised and an action plan is produced to support the implementation of the plan. The action plans contains three levels of action:

1. Actions the community can take forward by itself;
2. Actions that require some support or finance from outside the community;
3. Actions that require strategic support, through inclusion in statutory plans and/or investment from local authorities or service providers.

It is the engagement in this third level of action that offers the greatest potential for community empowerment, as defined by DCLG, through the opportunity to use the parish plan as a tool to directly influence decision making within local authorities and other public bodies.

National investment in the parish planning process has ended and where funding is available to support the process, both in terms of the costs associated with producing a parish plan and the facilitation and brokering support provided by RCC's, this is secured on an ad hoc county by county basis.

Research Methodology

As part of this research face-to-face and telephone interviews were carried out with the lead parish/community planning support staff in all four RCC's using an agreed topic guide (Appendix B). The purpose of these interviews was to:

- Explore the extent to which the existing structures and mechanisms which facilitate the parish planning process in each county are effective in enabling communities to influence local decision making;
- Identify what key factors support successful engagement;
- Identify the primary barriers to successful engagement;
- Identify what key characteristics, skills and knowledge are needed by parish planners and Local Authorities to maximise empowerment and engagement;
- Explore the extent to which parish planning contributes to community engagement and empowerment;
- Identify examples of plans which could contribute towards the evidence base.

In addition an on-line survey aimed at parish plan steering group members that had completed their plan was disseminated via the parish plan lead officers. In total 63 parishes completed the on-line survey.

Two face to face meetings were held with the parishes of Bayston Hill, Shropshire and Cradley, Herefordshire to explore some of the issues raised through the survey in more detail.

Research Findings

Extent of Parish Planning Activity

Nationally 4,000 parish plans are either completed or underway, representing participation by almost 40% of rural communities across England. A conservative estimate of the number of people benefiting in some way from the use of parish plans as a means of empowering communities is around 5 million.

Across the West Midlands there are a total of 250 completed parish plans and a further 132 parishes are in the process of undertaking a plan. On completion this will bring the total number of plans in the region to 382 which constitutes 9.5% of the total number of parish plans nationally. 25 parishes have intimated that are proposing to undertake a parish plan in the near future. (N.B. this figure does not include data from all counties, partly due to the fact that funding to support parish plans is very uncertain and therefore parish plan officers are cautious about instigating new activity.)

County	No. of parish plans completed	No. of parish p's underway	No. of pp's proposed
Herefordshire	41	16	Not available
Shropshire	63	26	23
Staffordshire	55	10	Not available
Warwickshire	50	41	Not available
Worcestershire	41	39	Not available
Total	250	132	23

These figures illustrate the size of the evidence base upon which this research has been carried out and the potential collective power of communities to influence decision making not only at a local level but also regionally.

67% of parishes responding to the survey said that their parish plan was completed. Of these 76% reported that they have achieved some of the actions identified within the plan. 77% of these actions were those that the community had achieved on their own and 68% were actions that were achieved with the help of the local authority – this therefore also shows that some parishes had achieved actions on their own *and* with the help of the local authority.

County-based Structures Supporting Parish Planning

Shropshire has a county wide parish plan steering group (SNAPP¹) whose membership includes a representative of the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), the named single point of contact for parish plans within each Local Authority area, a representative from Shropshire Association of Parish Councils and the RCC Parish Plan Officer. Herefordshire and Worcestershire also have county wide parish plan steering groups with a similar membership based. The purpose of the steering groups is to try to ensure successful bridging of parish plan priorities with LSP and Local Area Agreement priorities, and to engage service providers with the parish plan process.

¹ Shropshire Neighbourhood and Parish Plan Group

Case Study

Worcestershire

The county wide parish plan steering group for Worcestershire was set up in 2003. The steering group comprises of representatives from: each district council, the county council, the county LSP and Community First. The aim of the steering group is to improve communication between district and county and to improve the links between parish plans and community strategies. The districts of Malvern Hills and Wychavon have developed clear links between parish plans and community strategies, and the steering group helps to disseminate this practice. One of the challenges that the steering group faces is reflecting the views of parish plans in a meaningful way with the county LSP.

The steering group has produced guidance on how to conduct a community led plan and recently held a county wide conference.

In Staffordshire and Warwickshire, there is no county wide parish plan steering group although a nominated member of the RCC staff takes on the role of strategic liaison between parishes undertaking a plan and local authorities.

Currently Shropshire is the only county that has a formal agreement outlining the process by which parish plans will be integrated into district/borough and county level decision making. This agreement is currently being re-written as part of a wider review of existing processes relating to the capture and use of community data in planning service delivery commissioned by Shropshire County Council. Neither the revised agreement nor the related research report were in the public domain during the period of this research and have therefore not informed this research. The existing agreement 'Putting the Community into Community Strategies' was adopted by the Shropshire LSP in 2003 and was borne out of Shropshire involvement in the 'Bridges Project'².

Currently the value of this formal agreement is weighted more towards its existence than its effectiveness. Whilst the agreement clearly sets out the routes through which parish plans will be cascaded to relevant local authority departments, and

² This action research project commissioned by the Countryside Agency examined the links between strategic decision making by Local Strategic Partnerships in Community Strategies and, on the other, planning by local communities in Parish Plans and Market Town Action Plans.

outlines the roles and responsibilities of all partners in terms of responding, implementing and evaluating the impact of parish plans these procedures and processes are frequently overlooked. This is the consequence of a number of factors:

- No-one is responsible for over seeing partners adherence to the processes outlined in the document;
- The lack of LA / service provider buy-in to parish plans in some authorities;
- The limited capacity of LA officers to actively engage in the process;
- A lack of accountability with LA's to engage with or respond to parish plans.

All of the counties report varying levels of engagement by LA's / LSP's. Survey respondents also reported that it was often difficult to engage with the Local Authority:

"It was difficult to find out who at the local authority was interested in Parish Plans. We have continuously asked the local authority to acknowledge that the parish council wish the parish plan to be the reference for development (of all types) within our community. This has still not been forthcoming."

Parish Plans - Community Empowerment & Community Development

Although the focus of this research is on how parish plans have the potential to empower local communities to gain influence with public bodies it is essential to acknowledge the extent to which parish planning supports community empowerment on a much wider level. Evaluation undertaken both nationally and locally has consistently reaffirmed the valuable role that parish plans make in terms of building thriving, more cohesive and sustainable communities. By applying this broader definition of community empowerment to the parish plans process it recognises the valuable role of community development within the process of empowerment.

Community Development Exchange defines Community Development as:

"The process of developing active and sustainable communities based on social justice and mutual respect. It is about influencing power structures to remove the barriers that prevent people from participating in the issues that affect their lives...educating, enabling and empowering are at the core of Community Development".

The RCC parish plan officers facilitate the participation of people within the parish plan process through, for example, the provision of information, resources and practical guidance. They also play a crucial role in enabling connections to be made between communities, local authorities and other service providers. This brokering role is identified by RCC's and parishes as a key factor in their ability to access local authority decision making structures that are otherwise perceived to be impenetrable.

Due to the inclusive nature of the consultation and engagement process of putting a parish plan together the parish planning has the potential to empower sections of the community that social discrimination processes have traditionally excluded, for example; older people, young people, people with disabilities.

"It has brought into the political process and public life people who would not otherwise be so engaged." Survey respondent.

Currently approaches are being developed in Herefordshire to increase engagement with socially excluded groups. The focus group which took place in Cradley also highlighted how parish planning can 'bring the community together' and engage a wide cross section of the community.

Herefordshire Case Study

Cradley

Cradley's involvement with community led planning started with a Village Design Statement (VDS), a process which pre dates parish planning. The VDS and eventually the parish plan were driven forward by a small group from within the parish council, although it was recognised from the beginning that there needed to be a high degree of community involvement if the process was to be successful. A public meeting was held at a very early stage and people were asked to join various working groups. The working groups were co-ordinated by a number of 'facilitators' who provided the groups with a clear brief. "Getting the right people with the right talents into the right groups worked for us."

Cradley also used 'Planning for Real' in three different locations of the village to ensure maximum engagement with the different parts of the parish. For example one 'Planning for Real' event was held in a certain location specifically to engage farmers, which worked very well.

As part of the consultation for the parish plan a survey was sent to every household in the parish. Responses were received from 259 households, representative of 59% of the parish. The extent of the community involvement in Cradley, and in particular the results from the survey, gave the parish plan group a clear idea of the needs of the community and these were reflected in the parish plan. The different methods of community engagement used also meant that a wide cross section of the community became involved and different sections of the village which have traditionally been seen as separate (for example the social housing estate) are now seen as part of the same community. There is a real sense that the parish plan, 'brought together the two parts of the village', and since its completion people living on the social housing estate are now members of the parish council and are also on the village hall management committee.

The completed Cradley Parish Plan has been adopted by the Parish Council and Herefordshire Council. Most importantly the community feel that their plan has had an impact on decisions affecting Cradley especially in relation to planning.

The parish plan has acted as a catalyst for a lot of other activity.

- People in the village are providing services which were previously unavailable but which the parish plan demonstrated a need for, for example a youth group;
- Funds have been raised, partly through the Football Association, for a new playing field, which will provide a much needed facility for young people;
- New road signs have been put up and members of the community have been trained in using speed cameras;
- A grade 2 listed building was refurbished into the village hall which now includes a Community Resource Centre;
- The development of a 'safe routes to school' project.

Parish Planning as a Mechanism for Community Empowerment

"Our Local Authority is more willing to listen regarding local Issues"

Parish planning helps to engage communities and through its ability to combine a number of key elements contributes to a sense of real empowerment for both individuals and communities. The research suggests that these key elements are:

- **Having decision-making power of their own** – because the parish plan process is community-owned and managed this instills a real sense of empowerment within communities and ensures that there is ownership of the actions within the final plan. On this basis actions, particularly those that can be self generated are more likely to be achieved, contributing to the cycle of empowerment.
- **Access to information and resources which enable informed decision making to take place** – the independent brokering role undertaken by the RCC parish plan support worker is essential in enabling access to information, resources and LA staff that may otherwise be perceived to be unobtainable.
- **The ability to exercise assertiveness in collective decision making** – where parish planning guidance is adhered to the parish plan process enables communities to enter into discussions with LA's with a 'shared community voice' which is underpinned by a robust evidence base.
- **Having positive thinking on the ability to make change** – this is best illustrated by the parishes that achieve 'quick win' actions during the course of putting the plan together. This is often cited as being the 'spur of motivation' at times when enthusiasm and momentum is waning.
- **A route to learning skills for improving individual or group power** – the parish plan process presents numerous learning opportunities both in terms of developing social and practical skills. Empowerment comes from harnessing those skills and applying them to achieve change both at a personal and community level.
- **Being part of an on-going process that is community-initiated** – the fact that the decision to undertake a parish plan is initiated from within the community ensures that the process is owned and driven by the community as opposed to being imposed from above. Where the Parish Council adopts the action plan as their 'business plan' this supports the implementation of the plan and provides a framework for its monitoring and review.
- **Increasing understanding of the potential of individuals with the community and the collective potential of the community** – many parishes refer to the ability of the parish planning process to uncover untapped skills within the community and how this enables people that have not traditionally engaged in community-based activity to take an active role. Frequently this engagement leads to their involvement in other community activities. Through bringing people together that have a shared interest the

parish plan also plays a valuable role in increasing levels of community cohesion and improving community spirit.

“We are doing it [a parish plan] because we want to create a community.” Parish Plan Steering Group member

Warwickshire Case Study

Henley in Arden

As a result of their Parish Plan, Henley in Arden realised they had a need for better communication and set up Henley News online (see www.henleynews.co.uk) As a result of this public opinion was more easily mobilised to oppose a high density redevelopment plan for their Cattle Market site. The local community are now working with Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation to run a Planning for Real exercise to ascertain just what local people need and want on the development site.

The parish plan has also enabled Henley in Arden to respond rapidly to the severe flooding there. They have set up a flood group and were able to offer their Heritage Centre as an alternative site for the town Library whilst flood damage is repaired.

Finally they have a Green group and there are weekly tips on sustainable living promoted within the e-newsletter.

Survey respondents were asked to what extent they felt empowered by parish planning. There seemed to be a common view that the parish plan had been a positive experience for the community and for individuals and that; “The parish plan has given the community an official voice”.

“We went into the project honestly believing we knew all the issues. Were we wrong! The Parish Plan process made us aware of what issues matter to residents, not what we thought mattered.” Survey respondent

There is also evidence that parish planning leads to people becoming more involved with civic life. For example there are a number of examples of community members who have joined the parish council as a direct result of their participation in the parish plan process; have started attending LA run open consultation meetings or who participate in local elections. One survey respondent also said; “The chairman of the

parish plan steering group became the local elected member of the borough council and champions the parish plan.”

There was a common view amongst both those interviewed and the survey respondents that parish plans facilitate empowerment and engagement in the following ways:

- By providing a useful insight into the structures and decision making processes of local authorities;
- By raising awareness about the roles and responsibilities of the different levels of local governance – which in turn enables people to identify where accountability lies;
- Through encouraging relationships between local communities and those who ‘represent’ them (i.e. councillors)
- By helping communities to identify the needs of those living within their community;
- By encouraging people to take action through their own initiative;
- By providing communities with a body of evidence to challenge proposals / actions that are not in line with the needs of the community as outlined in the parish plan.

Barriers to Engagement & Empowerment

“Parishes have become more confident and more vocal but there is still only a fragile mechanism to feed these plans into the overarching strategies and no way for them to get the attention of government who in reality hold the purse strings and are the puppeteers of the LAs.” Parish Plan Support Officer

Both the parish plan officers and the survey respondents identified local governance arrangements as the primary barrier to engagement & empowerment. Many respondents made specific reference to the difficulties presented by two-tier authorities and how having an additional layer of local government made the process of engagement more time consuming and complicated. In counties that operate a two-tier system there appears to be a more inconsistent approach to how local authorities engage with the parish plan process.

The size, structure and enigmatic nature of local authorities present challenges to engagement & empowerment on a number of levels. In many local authority areas the mechanisms for engagement between parishes and authorities are undefined and the RCC parish plan officer takes on this essential brokerage role.

Where formal procedures are in place, such as having named single points that act as the gateway to the local authority and provide a conduit through which parish plans are cascaded through authorities, the effectiveness of the system is largely reliant on the capacity, enthusiasm and commitment of the individual officer.

In the authorities that are perceived to have bought into parish planning and are deemed to be engaged with the process this is often based on the enthusiasm and commitment of the primary parish plan contact within the authority. Significantly this individual is often someone who comes from a community development background and recognises the inherent value of the process in terms of developing a sense of community spirit, giving communities a collective voice and building community capacity.

There was a strong consensus amongst survey respondents that the primary barriers that had prevented them from feeling as though they had more influence over decision making structures were a perceived lack of commitment from the local authority and their lack of understanding around the role of community action in influencing and shaping public service delivery.

“There is no formal process within principal authorities and no designated officers within the principal authorities. I do wonder whether they are even aware that parish plans exist.” Survey respondent

This research highlights that not all local authorities recognise the value of investing resources and officer time in parish planning activity or consider how parish plans can generate multiple outcomes that help, in many different ways, to deliver their own targets. RCC's have a key role to play in making these connections explicit, drawing on best practice from across the region, and nationally, to demonstrate how these outcomes can be achieved.

Staffordshire Case Study

Betley, Balterley and Wrinehill Parish Plan

Newcastle Under Lyme Local Strategic Partnership Community Engagement Task Group were keen to co-ordinate the different consultations within the Borough, and to ensure it was effective, relevant and beneficial to the communities involved. The task group felt the best way of doing this was to operate three area forum pilots to demonstrate and evaluate different methods of engagement. The PCT and Newcastle Under Lyme Borough Council funded this pilot initiative and selected Betley, Balterley and Wrinehill Parish as the rural pilot.

The four key roles of the forum were:

1. Information

Gathering and distributing information via meetings, notice boards, newsletters and websites;

2. Consultation

Enabling statutory bodies and other service providers to be better coordinated and inclusive when consulting local people;

3. Action

This included local people acting together on projects or addressing issues raised with other agencies;

4. Representation

Ensuring appropriate community representation on LSP boards and raising issues with agencies through appropriate bodies.

Betley has a population of 1500 and has a number of existing services, including a pub, primary school and village hall. The parish council and community are active and were involved in setting up the community forum made up of local people from across the community. The forum provided a clear and systematic way of raising and assessing local needs, issues and priorities, identifying gaps in service provision and coordinating an informed response to consultation.

A questionnaire was compiled and distributed to every household in Betley, Balterley and Wrinehill, so covering the whole spectrum of the community including socially excluded individuals and groups. A youth questionnaire was also used to gather information from people under the age of 20. As a result of the questionnaire responses, a youth council has been established called BBWYG (Newcastle Under Lyme Youth Group) that meets every 2 weeks and is supervised by youth workers,

members of the community and the parish plan facilitator. They work in the same way a parish council does with a set agenda and minutes of meetings are taken. Within the meeting the young people get to have their say and with the help of the adult supervisors, funding and project development advice is provided to help produce small wins for the group (e.g. youth shelter etc) as well as making longer term provision.

Throughout the whole process, which includes creating the questionnaire, the Borough Council have been engaged and the forum steering group feels that they have been very supportive. Prior to the distribution of the questionnaire the police, fire service and ambulance service visited the Public Services Committee and conducted presentations on their involvement in the community. This information was fed back to the steering group and helped to inform the subsequent consultations.

In addition Aspire Housing, the predominant social landlord in the borough, was engaged early in the parish plan process resulting in reference to the plan appearing in the Borough's Housing Strategy. The Youth Service has also played an active role in supporting the implementation of actions arising from the process.

There was also a feeling that empowerment was limited because ultimately the wishes of the community can be overruled or ignored at any point by statutory agencies. This was felt particularly strongly in parishes that had a small population, where they felt they did not have the weight of a critical mass behind them. Likewise in rural counties like Staffordshire that are dominated by large urban settlements where the needs of rural communities could be over shadowed by their urban counterparts. Both of these geographical examples contribute to parishes feeling dislocated from the centres of influence.

A number of practical issues relating to local authorities were also identified as being barriers to engagement and empowerment. These included:

- Use of jargon and acronyms by LA's / service providers contributes to communities feeling disempowered and reinforces a perception that language is used as a way of excluding them;
- Reluctance of LA officers to attend meetings outside normal office hours and to travel to more remote rural areas;
- A general lack of awareness and understanding about what parish plans were and what their relationship with statutory decision making is.

Support for empowerment & engagement

The role of the RCC parish plan officer as the 'honest broker' between local communities and local government is consistently cited as a major factor in successfully engaging with local authority decision making structures. Survey respondents identified support received from the RCC and a named officer within the local authority as being equally important in terms of helping the parish to engage with the local authority.

Resourcing the following roles is critical:

- independent parish plan facilitators to act as a conduit between local communities and local authorities / service providers, providing practical advice and support on effective community consultation and supporting the analysis of data and action planning process;
- local government officer time to actively engage in the process through the provision of information, input into the consultation process;
- community development support to assist the implementation of the actions contained within the plan.

The engagement of key local authority departments has emerged as a critical factor in the successful implementation of parish plans, particularly in relation to achieving level 3³ actions. The timing of this engagement is aligned to 3 key stages in the parish planning process;

Firstly, prior to the first open public consultation meeting – engagement at this early stage in the process enables LA's to inform parishes about resource availability and budgetary constraints, strategic plans and decision making structures and

³ Actions that require strategic support, through inclusion in statutory plans, in order to be brought to fruition.

cycles. If made accessible to parishes this information should help to ensure that the actions which emerge from parish plans are realistic and achievable.

Secondly, during the questionnaire development stage – a few parishes identified that where a LA department eg. planning had helped to shape the questions that were asked in relevant sections of the plan they felt this had helped to increase the buy-in from those departments. This was affirmed in some cases in terms of on-going support to implement related actions in the parish plan. Engagement at this stage in the process also enables LA's to discuss any development plans that may be in the pipe line that may impact on the parish and the possibility of including questions about these plans within the questionnaire. In addition engagement at this stage may present LA's with an opportunity to collect data specifically linked to their LAA targets.

Thirdly, during the action planning stage – engagement at this point in the process enables LA's to update parishes on any changes that have occurred during the period of the plan development in relation to resources and budgetary constraints, strategic plans, decision making structures and cycles. This ensures that actions emerging from the plan avoid being little more than wish lists which are largely unachievable.

Ownership of the plan process is in the hands of the community, but experience shows that higher quality plans are produced when there is facilitation through external agencies to provide the community development support as well as an understanding of local authority processes and thus guidance on how to present the plan. Higher quality plans, which are likely to lead to the most change, are considered to be those that are informed by the relevant Local Authority and/or service provider's policies and where appropriate reflect the structure and format of local authority strategies. A note of caution should be raised here however because ownership and control of the plan and the processes for developing it should not be compromised by optimising the opportunities to increase the perceived value of the parish plan through helping to influence local government decision making and contribute to LSP targets.

On completion of the plan communities require on-going support to help with the implementation of the parish action plan, specifically in areas where the plan is not adopted by the Parish Council. Where capacity allows support to facilitate collaborative working between parishes to achieve collective actions (e.g. the

development of a community transport scheme spanning a number of neighbouring villages) this has proved extremely beneficial. The facilitation of parish networks and the 'clustering' of parishes is a particularly effective means of engaging local authorities and service providers who are more likely to respond to a call for action from a group of parishes. Although the experience of some RCC staff suggests that 'clustering' is most successful in sparse rural areas.

Comment [k1]: Linda Ridgeley commented that clustering is only really successful in **sparse** rural areas

Shropshire Case Study Parish Plan Clustering

The "Parish Cluster" event was developed in response to the need to address the issues raised within parish plans that required input from the local authority or other service providers in an efficient and effective way. Neighbouring parishes that had completed a parish plan were invited to join relevant services providers at a two hour event to discuss the key concerns identified in their plans.

The event was organised by Shropshire County Councils Rural Pathfinder team, working closely with the Community Council of Shropshire. Three parishes that completed a parish plan were involved in the event and 5 parishes that had not completed a parish plan were also invited. The purpose of inviting along parishes yet to complete a plan was to enable them to learn more about the benefits of parish planning.

The main aims of these events were to:

- enable local people to talk directly with service providers to voice their concerns regarding current service provision;
- give service providers an opportunity to listen to the issues of the community and to enable them to inform local people of the constraints within their service;
- provide an opportunity for both service providers and local people to try and address some of the issues raised in the Parish Plans by agreeing joint actions;
- offer a chance for neighbouring parishes to network and identify joint activities to address similar concerns.

The community themselves decided which topics they wanted to talk about at the event according to the priorities contained within their parish plans. This was identified as an important success criterion for these events and demonstrated that the LA and service providers were there to listen to priority issues identified by the communities involved.

On the evening of the event the room was split into four workshops and local people and service providers were invited to join the workshop that they felt was the most relevant to them. Each table was facilitated and tasked with agreeing at least one action, the facilitator's then fed back to the room. The second part of the evening provided an opportunity for local people to network with other parishes over tea and cake. This was included in response to the parish plans identifying a desire by the local community to work more closely with neighbouring parishes. The parishes that had not completed a Parish Plan were also given the opportunity to discuss the benefits of parish planning with The Community Council of Shropshire.

The Rural Pathfinder team took responsibility for following up the actions and communicating progress back to everyone involved.

Other support issues

- The production of an unrealistic action plan that doesn't achieve the results because of over-optimism on access to external funding or responses from local government and service providers can be a disempowering experience and can undermine much of what has been achieved during the process. It can be cured at source if external facilitation is used and cooperation and advice obtained from local government and public service providers as an integral part of plan development;
- At all stages of the parish plan process it is crucial that there is engagement of an appropriate staff member within the local authority. For example communities ideally need a named point of contact within a local authority who can signpost them onto relevant officers but who also can provide information on how the parish plan can be used to inform the priorities of local

authorities and local strategic partnerships. Similarly in the case of the county wide steering groups it is important that the officers with enough influence over all departments within the local authority are engaged;

- The role of the parish or town council is also crucial in taking on the action plan, using it in its own advocacy with higher local authority tiers and supporting some of the initiatives directly with the council's own financial resources.

“We have asked the village to comment on important issues that have been raised in the process; this informs what the Parish Council does and has given some shape to our planning. We are also now going for Quality Status.” Survey respondent

Future WMRCCN support mechanisms

The research also suggests that there is a need to review the service delivered by the RCCs and explore potential areas of collaboration. There is currently some variation in the way that support is delivered by the RCCs, mainly due to local circumstances and reflecting resources available. However resources for parish plans work in the future is likely to be reduced, which will mean a reduction in capacity across the region and less support to communities. There may be scope in considering how a regional approach could be adopted to ensure that some support is still available in each county and, importantly, strategic links are not lost.

Key characteristics, skills and knowledge needed for parish planning

“As Chairman of the Steering Group I learned a lot about community engagement, leading disparate groups, enabling people to feel valued and to take part in activities whatever their level of knowledge and understanding.” Survey respondent

79% of survey respondents felt that participating in the parish plan process had enabled them to develop their skills and knowledge. Survey respondents identified that they had developed skills and knowledge in the following areas as a result of the parish plan process:

Knowledge

Of the workings of local government

Issues for local residents

Of how to conduct a community survey

Understanding of how to engage other agencies for community benefit

Skills

Chairing a meeting

Leading a team

Interpersonal skills

Management skills

Public speaking

Planning

Negotiation

Community engagement

Making people feel valued

One respondent said; "I was central to developing our parish plan and now chair our implementation group. Interpersonal skills, management skills, public speaking skills, all have been improved as a result."

There was also a feeling that the characteristics needed by an individual for the parish plan process included patience and perseverance. Most parish plans happen over a period of one to two years, but are the catalyst for much longer term engagement with community activity.

Although the above list focuses on communities, skills, knowledge and other characteristics are also needed by other partners, for example local authorities. Further research would need to be undertaken to identify these skills but they are as important as the skills needed by communities if the parish plan process is to reach its full potential.

Conclusion

Parish planning clearly contributes significantly to the government's empowerment and engagement agenda. There are many examples from across the region of communities feeling more empowered as a result of parish planning either through increasing their influence on local authority led processes or through achieving outcomes generated as a result of collective community action.

The current support offered by RCCs already fails to meet the demand from communities. The reduction in resources available in the future is likely to mean that

this gap will widen, possibly compromising the outcomes achieved by parish plans at parish, local and regional levels. Support is needed at the regional level and from within every local authority to prevent this from happening. The crucial elements of support needed to ensure effective parish planning, mentioned above, should be considered as a minimum level of support.

The WMRCN also have a role in terms of ensuring that the service is delivered as efficiently as possible across the region and where possible collaboration between RCCs leads to a more standardised service whilst still reflecting local circumstances.

Recommendations

Learning from other areas

- Approach the Parish Plans contact in West Berkshire to gain insight into how they use parish plans to increase community engagement (they gained beacon status for community engagement through use of parish plans);
- Review the West Dorset Partnership guidelines on how parish plans can engage and influence key service providers – identify and share best practice amongst Parish Plan officers;
- Contact ACRE to find out more about the action research that is currently being undertaken in 3 districts in East Sussex to provide appropriate local government officer time and resources for use in community-led plans with a view to pass-porting action plans into relevant strategies.

Engaging with the region

- To approach RAWM to request that a member of the WMRCN attends a forthcoming Regional Empowerment Network meeting to deliver a presentation on 'how parish planning contributes to the engagement and empowerment agenda'.

Future Delivery of RCC Parish Planning Support

- To explore options for collaborative working across the region which may include:
Holding a region wide seminar aimed at Local Authorities and hosted by WMRCN to explore how parish plans can be effectively fed into community strategies;

Consideration of a regional approach to strategic liaison with Local Authorities. Much work has been done in Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Shropshire to ensure effective links with local authorities. A consistent approach across the region may prove beneficial to the other counties;

Continuation of the regional meeting of parish plan officers but with individuals leading on different aspects of work across the region, for example database development resources should be secured to ensure that at least one person in each RCC has responsibility for supporting communities with their parish plan. The research shows that this is crucial to strategic engagement and is highly valued by communities;

- There appears to be variation of how the parish plan service is delivered across the region, whilst this may be because of local circumstances, there may be scope to explore a common approach to support;
- To keep up-to-date with the development of the national parish plan database
- To continue to explore ways to ensure that marginalised and traditionally excluded groups are engaged with the parish plan process
- To develop an action research project targeted at areas of the region that are not currently engaged with the parish plan process to find out why they have not done a plan and to develop solutions to overcome these obstacles.

Appendix A

WMRCCN Background Information

West Midlands Rural Community Council Network is made up of the four RCCs in the West Midlands; Community Council of Shropshire, Warwickshire Rural Community Council, Staffordshire Rural Community Council and Community First in Herefordshire and Worcestershire. WMRCCN aims to ensure that rural needs and issues are represented to regional bodies/agencies in an informed and co-ordinated way.

The development of WMRCCN is an on going process, but the overall purpose is to:-

- Assist RCC's in combating disadvantage and enhancing service delivery to local communities
- Reflect the interests of rural communities to regional partners
- Facilitate the engagement of local communities in the regional strategic agenda
- Share expertise and good practice amongst the four RCC's
- Build capacity of the four RCC's to deliver services with equity across the region

Appendix B

Parish Plan Topic guide

The West Midlands Rural Community Council Network is doing some research to try to find out some of the benefits of the parish plan process. In particular we are interested to know whether undertaking a parish plan (i) makes a difference to rural communities and (ii) increases their understanding of how decisions which affect their community are made (iii) enables their community to become more involved with Local Authority structures, for example the Local Strategic Partnership.

As part of this research we will be:

- Conducting interviews with all of the RCC Parish Planning Officers
- Producing a survey to send out to parish plan activists
- Holding focus groups sessions with identified parish plan groups

If you have any questions regarding the research then please contact either Sarah Fishbourne 01432 860323, sfishbourne@tiscali.co.uk, or Claire Carter 01694 731 759 jigsawconsultancy@btintrenet.com

County:

No. of pp's completed	No. of pp's underway	No. of pp's proposed

1. Please describe how parish planners in your county currently engage with the local authority during the PP process. Is this consistent across the county?

If not why not?
2. Does your county have a formal PP agreement with the LA or LSP? Can we have a copy of it?
3. How effective is this in helping parish planners to engage with decision making structures?
4. In your view how does the pp process help to empower local communities?

5. To what extent do you think PP in your county has managed to successfully engage communities in LA decision making structures? Can you give examples to illustrate this?
6. What has enabled this?
7. What has prevented this? (e.g. demography, geography, local governance arrangements, resources, technical support)
8. What needs to change to increase engagement?
9. What is the RCC's role within the PP process in terms of engagement with LA / LSP's
10. What do you perceive the LA's role to be in parish planning?
11. To what extent do PP action Plans influence the priorities of LAA's. Give examples where possible.
12. What are the key characteristics, skills and knowledge needed by parish planners to maximise empowerment and engagement?
13. What are the key characteristics, skills and knowledge needed by LA's to maximise empowerment and engagement?