

# Community Led Planning: Turning Engagement into Empowerment



*Community Empowerment is about people and government, working together to make life better. It involves more people being able to influence decisions about their communities, and more people taking responsibility for tackling local problems, rather than expecting others to.*

***Communities and Local Government website***

Engaging local people in making decisions about their own locality is now central to local government policy and practice. People of all ages engage better when they take ownership of the process, working together to discuss and debate the local environment, local services and the health and vibrancy of their local neighbourhood to arrive at their own vision for its future. However, genuine empowerment comes from local people taking responsibility for making things happen to deliver the vision, rather than waiting for others to do it for them. Empowering communities becomes a process, not just a consultation exercise.

## **What is Community Led Planning?**

Community led planning is a long established practice in rural communities through, for instance, market town action plans and parish plans. Many local authorities have recognised its potential and achievements and designed their community engagement strategies on the process. As a result of this interest, its use is being extended into more urban neighbourhoods.

With the advice and support of an external facilitator, local people within a very local neighbourhood take the lead in organising dialogues with residents, community groups, local institutions and businesses to learn how their community works and then explore solutions to issues that arise. The structured approach can take up to 18 months to complete, making links along the way with relevant statutory bodies and service providers. Working with the involvement of relevant partners and elected members, they then decide on priorities for their area and how they can contribute to making their vision a reality.

Very high rates of participation are achieved. The hard-to-engage and the hard-to-reach are enlisted via many different and often creative approaches or through involvement of the local groups to which they already belong. The extended dialogue increases local people's understanding of the needs of all residents, particularly those disadvantaged by lack of mobility, lack of employment, or marginalised for other reasons. The result is an evidence-based action plan for the local neighbourhood which sets out priority issues and potential solutions, and which the community can formally adopt in its relationships with local government and service providers.

The results are impressive, whether it's the volunteering effort generated, the credibility given to democratic representation or the strengthening of relationships both within and outside the community. Many of the strongest outcomes are the very practical achievements that have resulted from community's own commitment to delivering many of the activities within their action plan from their own resources or by leveraging in finance from a range of appropriate funders.

## **A structured process, not just a single consultation or a document**



*To date, over 4,000 communities have participated in a community led planning process. A conservative estimate of the number of people already benefiting in some way from its use 7.2 million and the skills and expertise gained are now increasingly being harnessed to deliver similar benefits in urban neighbourhoods.*

<sup>1</sup>Target level of participation in parish planning is 90% of households in a community

# Community led planning stimulates community action,

Good quality community led plans are holistic, covering social, environmental and economic issues affecting their communities and will have explored how the community may change in the future as a result of either internal or external and global impacts. Plans are based on evidence collected within the community and a structured process of debate and consultation which can take up to 18 months to complete. In a rural community, experience shows that it is generally possible to reach around 90% of households and ensure that the hard to reach, the elderly and the young have all had a chance to contribute.



## The plan leads to actions for the community and for others

The output of the process is a comprehensive action plan, containing three types of priorities:

- Actions the community can take forward itself
- Actions that need external support to achieve
- Actions that require external influence over longer term statutory plans.

Where the community has taken responsibility for pursuing an action, the nominated community group or the new volunteers generated during the plan's development start making it happen. Where there is a form of independent neighbourhood governance, for instance in parish or town councils, the action plan can become the 'business plan' through which they organise their own priorities for investment from their council tax precept or neighbourhood funding.



## Community led plans are the basis for community engagement by local government

The action plan is a comprehensive list of activities needed to deliver the long term blueprint for the community. Local authorities use such plans to form the building blocks of Sustainable Community Strategies, whilst the delivery plans of service providers can use the evidence they provide to respond to the priorities identified. As examples, West Berkshire Council gained Beacon Status for embracing parish plans for all their communities. Dorset County Council has produced guidelines on how parish plans can engage and influence key service providers and how the county council will respond.



## Supporting effective local government

Local people prefer being consulted in a way that is meaningful to them. Community led planning can replace separate consultations or surveys from various areas of local government and service providers and generate a more coordinated approach to handling resulting data. This improves the evidence gained, avoids consultation fatigue and generates higher levels of participation than would otherwise be achieved.



## Community led plans can be a one stop shop for:

- Compiling the place survey
- Registering priorities within the Sustainable Community Strategy and LAA spending plans
- Spatial planning and use of developer's infrastructure contributions
- Neighbourhood spending and investment plans
- Community-based evidence for Comprehensive Area Assessments.



# community cohesion and increases resources to communities



Multiple evaluations and research exercises can't be wrong. Community led planning:

- Dramatically increases participation and involvement
- Harnesses local community action to support service delivery
- Levers in additional resources and build confidence, skills and inclusion
- Reinvigorates interest in local democracy and active citizenship.

Community led plans provide a strong basis for democratic representation because Councillors have both the evidence and the detailed plans on which to base their advocacy within local government. Where there is devolved local funding for the area, a list of ready-made priorities exist that the community has identified for itself and contributed to any resources required.

A range of case studies and research which demonstrate these outcomes is available on [www.communityledplanning.com](http://www.communityledplanning.com) which also contains guidance as to best practice and relevant contacts.

## Rural experience of community led planning

Market Town Action Plans and Parish Plans were key to government's rural investment over many years, facilitated locally by community development practitioners in the 38 local member organisations within ACRE's Rural Community Action Network (RCAN). Since 1999, the network worked to improve the quality and rigour of community led plans and use them as the basis for advocacy on behalf of rural communities with statutory bodies at local, regional and national levels.

In 2006, RCAN members compiled a comprehensive national **Parish and Community Planning Toolkit** of guidance and resources for supporting community led planning, based on their collective experience and best practice. The aim was to instill quality standards into community-led planning to increase their lasting value to both the community and to avoid production of what were little more than unachievable 'wish lists'. Thousands of communities across the country are currently benefiting from this improved approach.

The toolkit is based around a 9 Step structured process which can ensure that community led plans are comprehensive in the topics they address, engage with all sections of the local population and that the actions are realistic and achievable. However, successful community led planning needs more than a toolkit which communities take on in isolation. The use of external facilitation avoids the risks of communities missing key stages or challenges, brokers relationships with external partners such as local authorities, elected members and service providers and provides the advice and support which community groups may need to explore and take on the challenges they have set for themselves. This is a key principle underlying the success of the process.

A self-evaluation exercise has been inserted as part of the process, which allows the local steering group leading on the plan development to check progress, demonstrate inclusivity and realism and ensure they have had advice and input from relevant service providers and local government officers.

The Community Led Planning toolkit is currently being revised to update the context set by the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and be made available to RCAN practitioners. The revised version will also incorporate new guidelines on producing quality plans, strengthen areas of guidance and accompanying resources on generating approaches to sustainable living and supporting the continued economic health of the community.



For more information about the 9 Step structured process involved in developing a community led plan, see the ACRE community led planning website at <http://www.communityledplanning.com>

# National coverage: Local reach



**Action with Communities in Rural England** is the national umbrella of the Rural Community Action Network (RCAN), which operates at national, regional and local level in support of rural communities across the country.

## National coverage: Local reach

The Rural Community Action Network is the collective name for the 38 Rural Community Councils (RCCs) throughout England, their eight regional bodies and their national umbrella, ACRE. RCCs are charitable local development agencies, generally based at county level, which support and enable initiatives in rural communities.

### RCAN collectively:

- employs approximately 1,000 staff with a variety of specialist skills
- engages in 1,300 different partnerships, including working with 58 different higher tier local authorities
- has over 12,000 fee-paying members and
- reaches 40,000 grass roots contacts and organisations in the 11,000 rural communities across England.

Members of the Rural Community Action Network have a strong ethos of working with each other to provide comprehensive links across geographical areas and between grass roots activity and national advocacy.

### The aims of the Rural Community Action Network are to:

- Support community-led action and strong local governance
- Increase the long-term sustainability of local community life
- Influence policies and services, particularly to achieve equity for rural communities.



**We do this with a passion for social inclusion and high standards throughout the network.**

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