

Rolling out rural experience of community empowerment

Input to the forthcoming Community Empowerment White paper

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

Executive Summary

The National Association of Local Councils (**NALC**), Action for Market Towns (**AMT**), Action with Communities in Rural England (**ACRE**) and the Carnegie Commission for Rural Community Development have come together to call for increased importance to be given to community-led planning as the most effective and efficient route to delivering community empowerment in all communities, whether rural or urban. This paper draws on their significant experience in building the capacity of communities to live up to the expectations expressed by Communities and Local Government in the above quote.

National networks supporting rural communities work within a context where local people have already taken responsibility for tackling the social, economic and environmental well-being of their communities. This is a natural result of their small dispersed populations, distance from centres of local government influence and the need for local community action to replace public services lost as a result of the higher cost of delivery in rural areas.

Empowering **rural** communities involves working with a structure of neighbourhood governance in parish and town councils, with some element of devolved budgets through the parish or town council precept and with communities that already own and manage their own community assets. Together, we represent the three major national networks whose local member organisations support community-led planning across the country and provide the bridge between rural communities and local government. One of the major success stories has been the delivery of genuine community-led planning, through parish plans and market town action plans¹. These underpin a powerful model of a community anchor organisation, based on a **Parish Partnership**, or **Market Town Partnership**.

However, experience and expertise honed in rural areas is equally relevant to empowering **urban** communities with neighbourhood management in the form of third sector anchor organisations. The approach used to building genuine involvement within communities and brokering formal relationships between communities and local government can easily transfer.

In conjunction with **Carnegie**^{UK}, who are sponsoring an action research programme on rural community-led planning, we ask that any emerging national proposals on community empowerment recognise the huge contribution that rural experience already makes in:

- providing a process, owned by the community, through which each and every citizen can participate in improving the quality of life within their locality
- instigating genuine engagement between communities and local government
- delivering effective support structures for community action.

¹ Parish plans and Market Town health-checks and action plans are a process through which local people debate and gradually develop a vision for their own future, identifying their priority needs and designing solutions in conjunction with local government and public service agencies

Community-led planning is not a pilot project being trialled in a small number of local authorities. It is a major movement across the country that has been well-researched and evaluated at local, regional and national level. Community-led planning is already embedded as part of the landscape of relationships between citizens, communities and local government.

What is community-led planning?

Many local authority approaches to community engagement involve a small number of individuals coming together across a wide geographic area and attempting to discuss local issues and services relating to a number of distinct and very different neighbourhoods. Holding a few meetings with local government and service providers generally results in a wish list where participants still expect the responsibility to be primarily on the state to solve problems.

Community-led planning adopts a different approach, where local people take ownership of the process and many of the solutions. It builds on the fact that people's interests lie very close to home where they can share common experience of their local area, the services and facilities that are available and how they would like their immediate neighbourhood to develop.

At least 4,000 communities have participated in community-led planning as a means of delivering a vision of their own future. Market town action plans and parish plans are essentially the same community-led planning model, whereby local people engage with their fellow residents, groups and representatives using a structured approach over a period of up to 18 months and where early links are made with external statutory bodies and service providers.

Very high rates of participation are achieved². 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.

Adoption by local and regional government

So effective is the process that many local authorities now rely on community-led plans to deliver both their community engagement strategies and consultation around Local Development Frameworks. Police and fire authorities are beginning to use them to develop their community involvement strategies. Regional Development Agencies sponsored the process within their Market Towns programmes. Several local authorities have gained Beacon status for community engagement as a result of building on parish planning, and many others are adopting community-led planning protocols for ensuring the relevant officers are available to the community during discussion of particular themes emerging during plan development.

A one stop shop for community empowerment

Many responses to individual government initiatives under the Local Government Act have pointed out there is a potential conflict created between **representative democracy** via elected members and **participative democracy** via linking citizens and the state. Community-led planning has the power to reconcile this at source, within the community, so that the resulting action plans reinvigorate both civil and civic society. In addition, community-led planning links perfectly with emerging initiatives such as participatory budgeting, neighbourhood charters, calls for action and the concept of community anchors. Thousands of residents in thousands of communities would not have volunteered their time and effort for no purpose. Why re-invent the wheel, when a powerful vehicle for effective community empowerment is already on the road?

² Target level of participation in parish planning is 90% of households in a community

Overview of community-led planning, its successes and benefits

Contents

1. The context of rural 'neighbourhood management'.....	4
2. Progress and reach of community-led planning.....	4
3. Challenges faced by rural communities.....	5
4. Delivering high quality engagement within communities.....	5
5. Outcomes of community-led planning.....	5
6. Giving communities a collective voice within local government.....	6
7. Local government and communities working together.....	7
8. Reconciling representative and participative democracy.....	8
9. Risks to be managed by those facilitating the process of community-led plans.....	9
10. Resources	10
11. Cost and efficiency benefits.....	10
12. Capitalising on the community empowerment process developed in rural areas.....	11
13. Response to the consultation questions in 'Unlocking the Talents'.....	13



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. The 38 Rural Community Councils at local level have a collective membership of over 12,000 organisations, providing advice, tools and resources to generate effective community action.

www.acre.org.uk



Action for Market Towns promotes the vitality and viability of small towns through an integrated approach. AMT has 400 Market Town Partnerships and town councils in members and provides services and self help support for market towns through regional networks

www.towns.org.uk



The National Association of Local Councils is the national body representing and serving England's 8,500 parish and town councils. In conjunction with County Associations, NALC provides advice and training and delivers initiatives such as the Quality Parish scheme to improve the effectiveness and accountability of local community governance.

www.nalc.gov.uk

1. The context of rural 'neighbourhood management'

There are approximately 11,000 rural communities across England, from small hamlets to large market towns. Rural communities have traditionally been divided between what are considered to be 'villages' and 'towns', reflected by the respective form of statutory community governance in 'parish' and 'town' councils. Parish and town councils are democratically elected bodies, with full accountability for the amount of money they choose to raise from the local precept. The precept forms part of the overall council tax, but is independent of that levied by principal local authorities. Parish councils have their own quality system and have a remit for representing their communities. For instance, they have status as a statutory consultee within various local government processes.

Rural communities have a long tradition of self-reliance, local management of facilities and provision of local services. 80,000 volunteers own and manage England's network of 8,900 rural community buildings which have a collective asset value of £2.1 billion. Very few, if any, are underwritten by any annual funding agreement with principal local authorities. Parish councils own local facilities such as playing fields, allotments, bus shelters, play areas, car parks and open space, and fund their maintenance through their own precept or other funding sources. Town councils in larger communities are likely to have a larger, more impressive property portfolio and may also have set up separate community organisations to manage these.

In short, rural communities already have experience of many of the aspirations sought by government for urban communities as a result of the initiatives under the Local Government Act and the Community Empowerment White Paper. So exploring what works and what doesn't work in terms of rural community empowerment will provide significant learning for government and the third sector alike.

2. Progress and reach of community-led planning

The lack of reliance on local government for provision of local community facilities and the dispersed ownership of property and buildings means local groups within rural communities have good reason to work together to maximise the sustainability of community infrastructure. A long history of community development vehicles used by rural communities has been matched by tried and tested approaches by third sector agencies delivering relevant support, advice and facilitation.

Rural Community Councils (RCCs) are members of ACRE's Rural Community Action Network (RCAN) which has been instrumental in developing this 'community sector infrastructure' over many decades. This work has been supported, in part, by ring-fenced rural investment through Defra and its predecessor agencies. Central to their work has been the development and promotion of community-led planning as a means of empowering communities. The latest vehicle for this is the parish plan programme. Approximately **4,000 communities** have embraced the opportunity to develop parish plans in the last six years.

In parallel, larger market towns have used the Healthcheck and Action Plan as a means of delivering community-led planning. Market Towns investment programmes, sponsored firstly by Defra's agencies and latterly by Regional Development Agencies, created town partnerships to oversee plans for their communities' development. **400 town partnerships** are now members of an England-wide network led by Action for Market Towns.

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. If the parallel process of market town action plans is included, this figure rises to 7.2 million.

3. Challenges faced by rural communities

Rural communities are very mixed, with affluent living side by side with those on low incomes who are unable to exercise much choice in employment without their own transport and often priced out of local housing. The rural population is around 9 million, some 20% of which live below the official poverty line. Rural youth is disadvantaged through lack of transport to reach facilities their peers take for granted. Ageing in the countryside is more acute than in urban areas, compounded by the difficulty in accessing essential health and social care services. Increasing transport costs lead to a relentless withdrawal of public and commercial services from rural communities. Satisfaction with the rural way of life is rated highly in official statistics, but this masks the fact that this comes at a price that not all residents can afford.

Public service agencies often work in partnership with community organisations to provide outreach services or rely on community transport initiatives to ferry service users to main centres. Innovation is common in the work of local government and the third sector in rural areas where there are very low economies of scale. Finding ways of integrating services and harnessing formal and informal community action is the only way to maintain viable service delivery. Against this background, the ability of the community to come together to decide on their priorities is an important step to ensuring that those least able to enjoy high quality of life have the choices and support they require.

4. Delivering high quality engagement within communities

In 2006, RCAN members compiled a comprehensive national toolkit of guidance and resources for supporting community-led planning based on their collective experience and best practice. 800 communities across the country are currently benefiting from this more structured approach. The aim was to instil quality standards into community-led planning, by ensuring all sections of the population were engaging with the process, the appropriate evidence is collected and analysed and action plans are realistic and achievable. A self-evaluation exercise has been inserted as part of the process, which allows those 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 *Parish and Community Planning* toolkit³ is currently being revised to update the context set by the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, to incorporate new guidelines on quality plans and to strengthen areas of guidance and accompanying resources on generating approaches to sustainable living and supporting economic regeneration.

5. Outcomes of community-led planning

Both parish plans and Market Town action plans produce three types of outcomes that are fundamental to generating community empowerment:

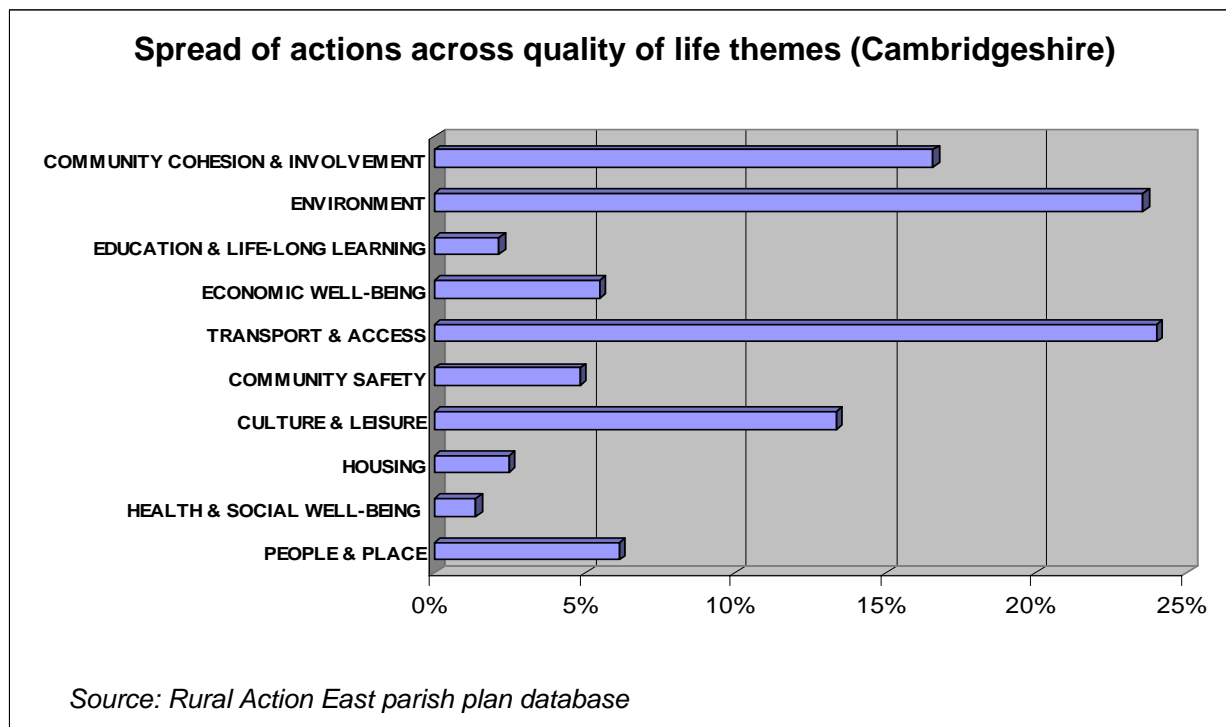
- Actions the community can take forward by itself
- Actions that require some support or finance from outside the community
- Actions that require strategic support, through inclusion in statutory plans, to bring to fruition.

It is not unusual to have 40 or more priority actions coming forward in a community's eventual action plan. Because the range of actions is so wide, every resident should directly benefit to some degree from any subsequent implementation of initiatives that result, for instance improved condition of public space or the setting up of local recycling facilities. But those that benefit most tend to be those with the most significant needs; for instance those that rely on

³ The toolkit is used by members of the Rural Community Action Network in facilitating parish plans within individual communities. The introductory section is available online at http://www.acre.org.uk/communityengagement_parityplans.html

transport to access services, those isolated in their own homes, those that cannot afford the price of local housing and those who have difficulty accessing training and employment.

To demonstrate this, the chart below summarises the 929 detailed actions resulting from 24 community plans in Cambridgeshire and categorises these against generic quality of life themes.



6. Giving communities a collective voice within local government

Representation of community interests is normally the remit of elected representatives or through 'representatives of local people' that might participate in the work of the Local Strategic Partnership. Communities and Local Government is supporting the development of guidance around the ***principles of representation of third sector interests***. The expectation is that the LSP would include selected organisations which would 'represent' by creating connections with the full range of third sector organisations operating in the authority area, mixing up small and large organisations, comprising communities of place and communities of interest, via various consultative mechanisms.

However, for geographical communities of place concerned with the 'place-shaping' agenda, there is a far more effective solution in building on the evidence of community-led plans and pass-portaling these through to the Sustainable Community Strategy. This is already in operation through direct representation of Market Town Partnerships or through the local RCAN member utilising the action plan priorities resulting from all parish plans in their area. Recent research amongst RCAN members showed that they were actively working with **58 higher tier local authorities** currently developing Local Area Agreements.

West Devon Local Strategic Partnership: *A new forum of town partnerships that has come together in West Devon is typical of the type of group that AMT's proposed Strategic Information Service is targeted at. Recognising that it is often difficult to make yourself heard when acting alone, four town partnerships have come together with the support of the Devon Heartlands Community Partnership with the purpose of creating improved strategic communications with local authorities and particularly to liaise with West Devon Local Strategic Partnership by means of a seat on its management board. Devon Heartlands is one of a number of examples of good practice in achieving strategic influence that is highlighted in the first of AMT's new Policy into Practice Papers.*

North Norfolk Community Partnership: As a 'Local Area Partnership' (LAP) in receipt of funding for a Market Town Healthcheck and coordinator in 2004, North Walsham Area Partnership (NWAP) could not understand how its Market Town Initiative work fitted into the existing structures around it. As such, the Partnership felt that it was unable to have an effective strategic voice despite it serving a quarter of the population of North Norfolk District. The Partnership therefore lobbied for its long-term representation on the North Norfolk Community Partnership (NNCP), the Local Strategic Partnership hosted by the District Council. By 2005 this resulted in the Partnership joining the LSP as a representative for both North Walsham and as a champion for the seven other market towns emerging as the hubs of thriving LAPs.

Advocacy and representation via the parish plan database

RCAN members provide both the facilitation for individual communities to develop plans, but also the 'bridging and brokering' role between communities and local government. Over the last three years, RCAN has generated a more strategic approach to tackling the bridging work with local authorities, through creating a database of individual community action plans. RCAN's database links individual action plans with strategic priorities in the relevant sustainable community strategies at district, county or unitary level, providing local government with better evidence of local communities' needs.

RCAN struggled to make sense of multiple, different local government priorities across a region, but developed a generic classification that helps categorise actions resulting from individual plans. This allows aggregation not just at local government level, but across regional and eventually national level. Four regions have already completed the database of community action plans from all communities with completed plans in their region. The database needs revision to better reflect how individual actions relate to the new local government indicators before a national version is available. The intention is that the final database is a web-based resource for communities, local government and policy-makers, providing a unique picture of communities' aspirations and priorities across the country.

7. Local government and communities working together

Across the country, local authorities have begun to use community-led planning as the building block for their community engagement strategies. As examples, **West Berkshire Council**⁴ gained beacon status for embracing parish plans for all their communities. **Dorset County Council**⁵ has produced guidelines on how parish plans can engage and influence key service providers and how the county council will respond. **Shropshire County Council**⁶ strongly promotes the use of parish planning and has contributed to production of a DVD extolling its benefits.

Evidence coming through the Carnegie Rural Action Research Programme on community-led plans identifies the key need for local government to create protocols which allow community plans to link into statutory planning. This has potential relevance for the government's emerging concept of neighbourhood charters. The case study below illustrates the processes involved in one District Council.

Facilitating the bridging process

The Wealden Links Project⁷ is led by the local RCAN member, Action in rural Sussex, in conjunction with Wealden District Council, the LSP and local communities. It aims to broker appropriate linkages between community-led and strategic statutory plans so that action plans can be pursued.

⁴ <http://www.westberks.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=4143>

⁵ <http://www.dorsetforyou.com/index.jsp?articleid=340084>

⁶ <http://www.shropshire.gov.uk/ruralservices.nsf/open/E79CF524C188A314802571CD0053656A>

⁷ One of the projects being researched under Carnegie UK's Rural Action Research Programme

The particular strengths of this project are:

- *A formal 'bridge' is created between communities and local government*
- *It is 'owned' jointly by local government and third sector partners*
- *It recognises that, for communities to proceed with some of their action plans, they need to discuss issues with the relevant officers in different departments within local government and public service partners*
- *It seeks to involve elected members (both local government and parish and town councillors) where it matters i.e. in discussions within the community itself.*

Four communities have engaged with the project, selected on the basis of their size, location, proximity to each other and the progress of their community-led action plan. The statutory partners have arranged for the local communities to have access to an appropriate 'resource team' from relevant local government and public service agency officers, to explore taking forward the actions resulting from a community-led plan.

Those communities affected by proposed new housing development have focused on the planning process, developing projects that relate to the use of Section 106 money and addressing pressure on infrastructure and traffic volumes. Other issues identified have been activities for young and older people and a need for community transport. Two participant communities want to develop new capital build projects such as a community and health centre. One parish is opting to form a local action team to oversee issues relating to a housing development and associated infrastructure, drawn together by their District Councillor. Another has decided to focus on one issue at a time and have chosen to develop project plans for a new recreation facility for young people.

8. Reconciling democratic and participative democracy

The Local Government Act promotes a variety of means of ensuring local citizens feel they have more influence over decision-making in their area. Sometimes these initiatives hinge on supporting the work of democratically elected leaders (the Councillor's Commission, skills and leadership development, power of well-being for parish and town councils, councillor's call for action). Others are more about local government and service providers inviting individual citizens and service users to participate in designing strategic plans, priorities and public services (citizens juries, participative budgeting). Yet another raft of initiatives rely on community organisations developing a credible 'voice' for their community in relating to local government and service providers, as well as developing their own services to benefit their residents (community anchors, transfer of assets to communities).

A very mixed picture is emerging on the ground but many locally elected members are already voicing fears that their remit for representing their communities could be undermined by other ways of accessing the views of their community. The advent of 'locality managers' within local authorities engaging directly with local citizens has left elected members on the sidelines.

Similarly, local community organisations are looking at the community anchor concept as a way of directly relating to local government, service providers and others around the needs of their community. There is often direct competition on the ground between elected members and third sector organisations to act as the credible 'voice' of the community, which does little to generate community cohesion.

Community-led planning can resolve any such conflict at source – within the community - provided both arms of the democratic spectrum work together in partnership, maximising their collective strengths. To generate this partnership working, RCAN's parish and community planning toolkit specifically identifies how parish councils, for instance, should relate to the plan

process. Since the community owns the plan, parish councils should facilitate the setting up of a steering group, maintain their involvement with the group's work, step in when necessary, but not 'lead' the process themselves. Finally, when the plan is complete, the parish council should adopt the action plan as its own business plan for the development of local facilities and services, resourcing it where possible from its own precepting powers.

Current outcomes that have been shown to result from establishing such a partnership approach are:

- Parish & town council advocacy is supported by credible evidence
- Local interest is raised and volunteers come forward to deliver actions that can be accomplished by the community
- Civic participation is re-invigorated through new interest in the democratic process – there are numerous examples of new parish councillors coming forward as a result of participation in community-led plans
- Local authority members can draw on plan outcomes to support their own representative activity for their communities.

Reinvigorating local democracy and civic participation in Headley, Surrey

In 2004, representatives from the parish council and members of the community attended a presentation by the local RCAN member, Surrey Community Action, on the benefits of community-led plans.

At the annual Headley Village Meeting in May 2004, with the support of the parish council, the village decided to engage in the process of producing such a plan and volunteers were recruited. Members of the community came forward, including children and young people, to offer their skills in design, IT, analysis, and communication, as well project management and a Steering Group for the project was formed.

Following completion of the plan, results are already being achieved in terms of improving the area and access to services. However, the social outcomes are impressive:

- *For the first time in 30 years, seats on the parish council were contested and several new parish councillors have been elected*
- *Engagement with the community-led plan process has galvanised community cohesion*
- *Residents are interested in what is going on*
- *Existing organisations have been revitalised, new clubs have been set up and a nucleus of new volunteers has emerged.*

9. Risks to be managed by those facilitating the process of community-led plans

However good the initiative, there can be pitfalls to avoid. Three of the main risks with community-led planning are:

- **Over-expectation** – planned initiatives can fail through lack of buy-in from local authorities, relevant service providers or parish councils and lack of access to external funding to implement the actions. Expectations need to be managed using the self-evaluation process which includes the input of appropriate external facilitation and requires engagement with relevant local government officers during the plan development
- **Lack of inclusivity and rushed local consultation** – the length of time taken for debate allows attitudes in the community to change; for instance to accepting the need for affordable housing, for youth to be seen as an asset rather than a problem, for awareness of climate change to develop and for potential solutions for delivering better services to arise from the community itself. Use of the RCAN toolkit and external facilitation delivers higher quality plans that have improved the community's credibility with local government

- **Local government wanting ‘quick wins’** and expecting communities to be able to adhere to timescales set by statutory processes. In particular, the spatial planning process can deliver economic and housing regeneration in an area but requires multiple inputs at set times and this does not always fit well with the community-led planning process. Brokerage by external, independent facilitators is often a crucial element in reconciling such issues between local government officers and communities. This should eventually be managed by community-led planning cycles establishing a better fit with statutory planning timescales.

10. Resources

The parish plan programme was initially generated through ring-fenced rural funding programmes through Defra and its predecessor agencies. The Countryside Agency’s Vital Villages programme invested in the community development workers network (CDWs) across England to provide local support and facilitation for communities. £5 million per annum funded the CDW network and the grants to communities to cover local costs of production of their plan (up to £5,000 per community). The average cost of producing a parish plan within a community is around £3,000, but many have been done for less. The major cost to delivering a parish plan programme in an area is the investment needed in the independent facilitation and support for the community and the cost to local government of officer input during development of the plan.

Vital Villages was superseded by Defra’s Rural Social and Community Programme, a two year programme of central investment which was invested through local partnerships who defined local priorities for spending. This programme ended in March 2008, but in its last year, it provided approximately £1.8 million to support parish plan development, match-funded with significant local investment from local government.

Defra has now mainstreamed rural funding, expecting local government to respond to continued support for this work. Unfortunately, local government finances have not fully replaced the previous central investment and the loss of £1.8 million investment across the country has meant significant loss of capacity to continue the development of community-led planning.

The Market Towns Healthcheck and Action Plan was also originally funded by the Countryside Agency, but responsibility and investment transferred to Regional Development Agencies several years ago. Action Plans are still being actively used in many regions to determine funding priorities but most are in need of review and updating. AMT is in discussion with SEEDA and the South East Towns Rural Partnership about how the Action Planning process might be revised and more closely aligned with the needs of Local Strategic Partnerships and other public bodies.

In the light of central government’s decision to end ring-fenced rural funding programmes, there is a clear need for further investment if existing activity in communities is to be supported, quality of plans and their outcomes is to increase and the reach of the community-led planning movement is to be promoted and extended to other contexts. The cost and efficiency benefits of funding this at local level are covered in the next section, but there is also a need for a parallel investment at national level to deliver development, promotion, evidence collection and sharing of good practice.

11. Cost and efficiency benefits

Communities devote huge amounts of **volunteering effort** to producing plans over a period of up to 18 months. Parish councils often provide support through funding venues for events and get involved in promoting and supporting local initiatives that result from the action plans. Communities prefer to be consulted ‘in the round’ on local issues, rather than respond to multiple consultations on individual issues by different service providers. Response rates are

therefore far more impressive and inclusive, compared with traditional consultation approaches.

Cost savings and efficiencies for local government are delivered by using the parish and town plan vehicle as the basis for their engagement with communities. No additional consultation initiatives are needed by either those compiling local community strategies or public service providers requiring local input to meet their involvement strategies. Taking a strategic approach to delivering the aspirations within a community plan maximises efficiency because all partners are working to a common goal and are engaged right from the start.

Behavioural change: the development process in community-led planning allows individuals to come together to explore experience of others and understand their needs. The link between parish plans and acceptance of the need for more affordable housing in rural communities has long been recognised and it is no surprise that action plans frequently identify a priority for a housing needs survey, whereas beforehand, the same community would object to any development. Other aspects of behavioural change are becoming equally important with the need to address **sustainable living and climate change**. The range of environmental projects now resulting from community-led plans is a clear demonstration that awareness within communities can be raised and local action generated without separate, expensive local campaigns.

Better value service delivery: local communities are more aware of their issues, contribute more to developing and supporting community-led services and find innovative approaches to benefiting local residents by working in partnership with local government. Investment by the state in such co-production goes further, satisfies more people and contributes to the efficiency of public service delivery.

We believe there will be a positive response by local government to investing time and effort in community-led planning as a part of their new **duty to involve**. The approach provides added value in the delivery of multiple outcomes and impact against a wide range of different indicators within the **new local government performance framework** and can contribute a firm basis for the **Audit Commission's comprehensive area assessment** process. However, this assumes that national policies and programmes on community empowerment provide a supportive context for the community-led planning approach and give due recognition to the multiple benefits that can be achieved.

12. Capitalising on the community empowerment process developed in rural areas

The forthcoming Community Empowerment White Paper will establish government's view of how local initiatives should work to promote connections and joint working between local government and communities.

We ask that the following factors are taken into account:

The adoption by local government and other service providers of community-led planning has now reached the point where its relevance to urban as well as rural communities has been recognised by local government and rural third sector bodies at local level. At national level, even though parish plans have been rightly applauded in documentation produced by Communities and Local Government, it is still generally regarded as of marginal interest – something that is Defra's responsibility, and which a few rural communities take on but of dubious relevance to mainstream initiatives. Meanwhile, public money is invested in testing out 'innovative pilots' on community engagement and empowerment without reference to rural experience.

We ask that the Community Empowerment White Paper adequately acknowledges the achievements in delivering community empowerment in rural areas and the potential for mainstreaming these within urban areas. A process that delivers beneficial outcomes for 7 million people should rate highly against the more limited reach of other CLG-led initiatives.

The current delivery of rural community empowerment needs a supportive context of government policy. There are a number of new initiatives proposed by Communities and Local Government and it is essential that these work with the structures and processes that are already established, rather than ride roughshod over them:

- The development of **neighbourhood charters** can build on the experience of existing parish charters which govern the relationship between parishes and many local authorities. It should also build on the new local government protocols on bridging community-led plans into sustainable community strategies
- Initiatives on **participatory budgeting, community kitties** and **devolution of budgets** should work with and through local partnerships created as a result of community-led planning, who already have spending plans and budgets to improve their own neighbourhoods
- Any definition of **community anchors** should embrace the concept of Parish Partnerships⁸ and Market Town Partnerships which create joint working arrangements between parish and town councils and community organisations such as development trusts, community building managers and community-service providers
- Arrangements for **engaging with local residents** should respect the existence of parish councils and Market Town Partnerships, and ensure local government and public service providers relate directly to the community's elected representatives, especially where their advocacy is supported by community-led plans
- Evidence of priorities identified within community-led plans should add significant weight in progressing any **councillor call for action**
- **Skills and training** for elected members needs to take account their different relationships with their community when there is an extra tier of neighbourhood management, statutory or otherwise, in place within the community
- The new **power of well-being for parish and town councils** should reflect the wider role they should now play in working with community-led plans
- Revisions of the **quality parish scheme** should place more emphasis on a parish council's ability to develop its community business plan in the future, rather than simply reporting to residents about its past activity
- The Audit Commission should recognise the power of community-collected evidence within community plans in implementing **comprehensive area assessments**
- Good practice guidance via **IDeA** should learn lessons from achievements made by rural community empowerment programmes and explore their relevance to both rural and urban communities
- Links should be recognised between the power of community-led planning processes and local initiatives on delivering **behavioural change** to contribute to building sustainable communities, and reducing CO2
- Consideration should be given to **investing in further development and delivery of the community-led planning system** to secure enhancements and support progress with delivery, best practice sharing, evidence collection and promotion in urban as well as rural areas.

⁸ Parish Partnerships are a joint ACRE/NALC initiative on developing rural community anchors based on the representative and well-being role of parish councils and community organisations owning local facilities. Separate proposals around this have already been discussed with Defra, CLG and Office of the Third Sector

13. Response to questions within Unlocking the Talents

How can government at all levels work together to tackle worklessness and promote enterprise in the most deprived areas? What are the best means of coordinating social, economic and physical regeneration?

Worklessness and deprivation affect individuals across the country in both rural and urban communities. Different priorities and solutions need to be worked through to tackle major concentrations of deprivation in urban areas compared with the dispersed nature of worklessness, low incomes and disadvantage more prevalent in rural areas. Key rural issues such as affordable housing and the fragility of local economies have both started to be addressed within community-led planning. The same process can generate local initiatives in urban areas, though the priorities and solutions that result may be very different.

Community-led planning in rural areas requires and encourages an integrated approach to securing social, economic and environmental objectives. This is appropriate both for communities with geographical concentrations and communities with more mixed demographic characteristics.

What is the role of government in encouraging and supporting citizens to be active? What steps need to be taken to revive involvement in local civic and democratic roles?

Community-led planning delivers again as demonstrated in preceding sections of this paper. Government must first acknowledge and learn from what already happens at local level in delivering these objectives. Decisions then need to be made about the balance between encouraging local investment through local government and the need for investment at regional and national level in structures which provide support, improve the reach and drive up quality in initiatives taken at local level.

How can the power of consumers be better used to improve local services? How can social housing tenants be given more choice and voice?

Local services are best improved through allowing local residents and users to create a dialogue between themselves and with service providers. This should identify priority needs but then encourage local contribution not just to design, but also delivery of public services. The reliance on commissioning and procurement of public services misses the very areas of local involvement being encouraged. Local community groups or neighbourhood management organisations may already deliver 'public' services, but through their own efforts and enterprise unfunded by the state. Public service providers need to recognise the contribution made by community-led service delivery and acknowledge and support it appropriately.

The strong focus within community-led plans on provision of affordable housing often leads to sites being identified and local schemes being taken forward. The process has already involved and identified local residents who seek to stay in their own locality but cannot afford market housing, thereby giving them a voice. The use of 'exception' sites and the advent of Community Land Trusts has opened up new potential for communities to have a hand in design and delivery of affordable housing provision.

As identified throughout this paper, community-led planning has been shown to be the spur to regenerating or creating local services through local action.

What more is needed to encourage consistently strong local leadership? How best can we increase opportunities for communities to hold local public officials and representatives to account?

Both of these can be developed once appropriate building blocks of civic and civil involvement are in place. As this paper explains, community-led planning has the power to re-invigorate representative democracy and improve the credibility of elected members. It also delivers a significant impetus to participative democracy, improving local people's understanding of public services in their locality and giving them opportunities to create an effective dialogue with the public officials and representatives. If this proves unsatisfactory, a community-led plan then provides the appropriate evidence of local support to bring forward a 'call for action'.