

INTRODUCTION TO PARISH PLANS

Introduction to Parish Plans

1. Introduction

Parish planning (also referred to as Community led planning) is a step-by-step process that can enable the community to take action and make the local area a better place to live. 4000 communities across the country have already produced similar plans since the late 1970s.

Parish Planning can help develop a shared understanding of the features of the community and ultimately agree on a range of actions that can be delivered for the benefit of everyone locally.

Parish planning is also an ideal way to prepare the community to take advantage of the community rights introduced in the 2011 Localism Act, including neighbourhood planning.

2. What is a parish plan?

A parish plan is an in depth survey of a community undertaken by that community itself for its own benefit, to find out how it wants to see itself develop over a five to ten year timescale. It includes an action plan to make sure that this actually happens.

It provides an opportunity for people to take stock of their community and to decide which aspects of their community they like and wish to preserve and perhaps enhance and which aspects they do not like and want to change.

There are three core principles that define parish planning and distinguish it from other methods of community engagement. These are:

- **Plans are owned, managed and led by the community.** This is different from other consultations where people in the community are asked for their views by local authorities and other service providers, largely on pre-determined projects or programmes. Parish planning provides the community with the opportunity to set its own agenda and bring about positive change without the need to wait for others to get things done.
- **Everyone in the community should have an opportunity to get involved and have their say.** This will enable you to produce a high quality and robust plan that has the support of everyone locally and

delivers actions that are based on a sound understanding of local needs and aspirations.

- **Actions are based on evidence and address a range of different issues important to the community.** Parish planning can cover social, economic, environmental and cultural issues. A plan can be produced to cover anything you want, within reason!

3. Why produce a parish plan? What are the benefits?

Parish plans have no statutory force and are not legally enforceable but despite this they can still be very influential both in the immediate locality and more widely within a local authority area.

In December 2004, the then Countryside Agency published a summary of findings on parish plans. Set out below are some of the **wider benefits** they found from producing a plan:

- builds community spirit;
- unleashes hidden talents;
- gives the parish council a fresh focus;
- produces a valuable source of information and an evidence base;
- encourages new councillors to come forward;
- forms new partnerships and links;
- discovers new funding streams;
- enhances public recognition of the value of parish councils; and
- can deliver tangible results, such as new play areas, footpaths, wildlife reserves, a tea shop, a recycling centre, youth clubs, youth councils, welcome packs, new events, home/farm watches, gardening clubs etc.

Local authorities should have regard to the content of parish plans within their areas to inform service delivery and funding distribution and spend. Plans can also be used for example, to influence spatial planning decisions, consultations relating to health care provision and the provision of bus services and telephone, broadband and utilities provision.

Communities that have identified particular land use planning issues in their plans can go on to produce a **neighbourhood plan**. This will require contacting the local authority at the very outset and seeking detailed guidance about this from the planners as there is a formal, statutory process that must be followed.

Parish Plans – Frequently Asked Questions

1. What exactly is a parish plan?

A parish plan is an in-depth survey of a community undertaken by that community itself for its own benefit, to find out how it wants to see itself develop over the next five to ten years and includes an action plan to make sure that this actually happens.

2. Does it have any statutory force?

No it has no statutory force whatsoever.

3. Is it a legally enforceable document?

No it is not a legally enforceable document.

4. How influential are parish plans?

Despite not having statutory force and not being legally enforceable they can still be very influential both in the immediate locality and more widely within a local authority area. Local authorities should have regard to the content of parish plans within their areas to inform service delivery and funding distribution and spend.

They have also been used to help to influence other areas such as land use planning decisions, consultations on health care provision and the provision of bus services and telephone, broadband and utilities provision.

5. Where does this influence stem from?

It stems from the fact that there has been a wide reaching community consultation and it is the community mandate which this provides that makes parish plans influential.

6. Who do they belong to?

They belong to the communities that produce them. Around 47% of the actions in them are in fact carried out by people from within the community without any input from outside.

7. Why produce one?

The best reason for producing one is that it will clearly articulate the needs of the community based on a widespread consultation.

8. What are the benefits of producing one?

There are many benefits including the following:

- identification of needs;
- increased community spirit/cohesion;
- improved communication;
- increased volunteering;
- improving individuals' skills and confidence;
- completed projects such as a new play area or community building;

- acquiring and sharing skills;
- improved relationships between the community and the parish council;
- improved relationships between the community and the local authority;
- encouraging intergenerational activities;
- using the plan to raise funds/grants;
- helping the parish council to plan its activities and spend;
- helping the local authority to plan its delivery and spend;
- providing a blueprint for change;
- providing a detailed evidence base about the community;
- informing local authority strategies;
- encouraging self help and self reliance;
- keeping communities resilient;
- opening up new funding streams; and
- forming new partnerships.

9. What are the downsides of producing one?

A parish plan is not a quick fix. Realistically it takes at least 12-18 months to produce and a large amount of very hard work and commitment by unelected volunteers. It can be hard to attract and keep enough volunteers and sometimes local apathy or cynicism can be hard to overcome. How difficult it is to produce a plan often depends on the mix of skills and experience you have in the parish, whether there are already active groups, good communications and somewhere for people to meet. It is not a panacea for all evils nor a magic wand or wish list.

10. What happens if we don't produce one?

If you don't produce one then it can be hard for the parish council and local authority to know what local residents want and need in order for them to be able to plan their service delivery and spend. There is no better way of identifying community needs than a well researched and widely consulted upon parish plan.

Having a plan can also help you to enter into and make the case at consultations on a range of issues including health, housing and transport provision. It can be useful in objecting to planning applications and at planning inquiries. If you don't have one it is harder to demonstrate what local people think about these issues.

11. What if the parish council is keen but the community isn't?

If the parish council is keen to produce a plan but the community is not, then the plan should not be progressed. It is a fundamental part of any parish plan that the community actively wants to produce one. They should be prepared to be part of the process and get engaged in it, through volunteering, attending meetings, identifying the issues, completing questionnaires and then helping

to implement the action plan.

12. What if the community is keen but the parish council isn't?

If the community is keen to produce a plan but the parish council is not, then the community can still proceed without the parish council but see the question below. It is not easy to do this nor is it recommended.

13. Can the community produce a parish plan without the parish council?

The simple answer is 'yes'. A community can set up a properly constituted parish plan steering group and produce a plan without the parish council. However, we would not recommend that the community proceed without support from and involvement by the parish council. The most successful parish plans are those where the parish council and the volunteers from the community have a constituted steering group and work collaboratively and cooperatively together to produce a plan.

14. What is the relationship between the parish council and the parish plan volunteers?

The parish plan volunteers (who normally include between 1 and 3 parish councillors) are constituted as a community group known as a parish plan steering group. They work separately from the parish council, having their own non-parish council chair. They also have their own treasurer and secretary (not the parish clerk), their own constitution and they minute their meetings. The parish council and the parish plan steering group communicate with each other regularly and usually agree a method of communication that suits them both. The parish council may hold any funds that have been secured for the plan and this is usually administered by the parish clerk via the steering group treasurer.

The final plan is endorsed by the parish council on completion as follows "*We endorse the parish plan as an expression of the community's aspirations and acknowledge it as a framework for community action within the parish.*"

The parish council and the parish plan steering group are therefore separate entities but working alongside each other collaboratively and co-operatively.

15. Isn't it the parish council's job to plan for the parish?

The parish council is a corporate body and a legal entity. It is a statutory body which has various responsibilities in relation to the parish and this ongoing work obviously has to continue. Some of the types of work that parish councils cover include planning, highways, traffic, community safety, housing, street lighting, allotments, cemeteries, playing fields, community centres, litter, war memorials, seats and shelters and rights of way. Many parish councils find that their time is already well taken care of dealing with these issues. The parish plan enables the community to tackle a new and wider range of issues and also to inform the parish council on the work that is within the realm of the council.

16. How long does it all take?

Realistically, it takes at least 12-18 months to produce a parish plan although sometimes it takes longer. This depends on a wide range of factors, including

the number of volunteers, their range of skills and expertise, the population size, the complexity of the local issues.

17. Who does all the work?

The work is done by unelected volunteers, working within a structure that is headed up by a constituted steering group. There are also between one and three parish councillors within the steering group.

18. How much does it cost and where does the money come from?

It varies depending on the size and population of the parish and complexity of the issues but an average plan tends to cost around £3,000. The availability of funding varies depending on where the parish is situated administratively. Any grants can also be supplemented by donations, fundraising, sponsorship and parish council contributions. In addition 'in kind' donations are often made to the plan such as free or discounted rate room hire, raffle prizes, discounted printing or photocopying and volunteer time.

19. Why constitute the steering group as a community group?

There are a number of reasons why it makes sense to constitute the steering group as a community group separately from the parish council, including the fact that there are some grant funds that community groups can apply to that a statutory body (like a parish council) cannot. This means that additional sources of funding may become available for projects.

In addition, the parish plan is a community initiative that should not be dominated by the parish council and hence the setting up of a separate grouping. It also needs to be remembered that all the normal ongoing work and responsibilities of the parish council continue and a separate grouping provides an additional but complementary 'tool in the box' for achieving change locally.

20. Do we have to call it a parish plan?

No, you can call it what you like but it needs to have a name that is relevant to the process of parish planning and meaningful to local residents and that is inclusive of everyone in the community.

21. Is it just about land use planning and development?

No absolutely not. Most plans contain a range of issues including:

- social;
- economic;
- environmental;
- cultural; and
- spatial planning and development.

Some plans do not contain any spatial planning issues at all. A parish plan takes a much wider and more holistic overview of the community.

22. What other type of things can it include?

As stated above it can include social, economic, environmental, cultural and planning and development issues. Examples might be setting up a youth club, getting a speed limit reduced, improving communication through newsletters

and websites, getting new village activities started, building a new village hall, setting up Home or Farm Watch, opening up a village green, debt counselling, parenting classes, appointing a tree warden and undertaking a tree survey. There are many, many more examples.

23. Who decides what goes into the plan?

The community decides what the issues are that will go into the plan through a series of consultation activities and events that take place within the community organised by the steering group. The agenda is set by the community itself. The steering group may seek guidance and advice from a range of experts including elected members, local authority officers, utility companies, transport bodies and many others.

24. What happens to the plan once completed?

Once completed the action plan within the parish plan is implemented and the projects and actions identified are carried to fruition by an implementation group. The progress of the actions is monitored and reviewed each year and this is then reported back to the community.

25. Who implements the actions in the plan?

The actions are normally overseen by a constituted community group called the implementation group, made up of unelected volunteers and parish councillors. Some of the actions will be delivered by the parish council using precept monies, others by the implementation group, through community based working groups, doing fundraising and applying for funding. Invariably, some of the larger projects will require input, help and funding from the local authority, funding bodies like the Big Lottery and external agencies, organisations and bodies.

26. What is the difference between a parish plan and a neighbourhood plan?

Neighbourhood plans and parish plans are both types of **community led plan** i.e. plans initiated and led by local volunteers involving extensive consultation with the local community. A parish or town plan sets out a vision and action plan for the community, in which many of the actions will be a range of projects that can be carried out by members of the community e.g. establishing new social events, creating a community website, setting up a litter picking group, organising improvements to a play area.

A neighbourhood plan, however, is focused on land use and development issues and alongside the Local Plan is used by the local planning authority to determine planning applications.