

What is a Parish Plan?

Parish Plans are “holistic” or comprehensive in scope. They should set out a vision for how the community wants to develop, and identify the action needed to achieve it. They can include everything that is relevant to the people who live and work in the community, from employment and playgrounds to the design of new buildings and protection of hedges and ponds. They can include any social, environmental or economic issues. **It is up to the community to decide, what is important to them.**

Parish Plans have the potential to influence a wide range of organisations and processes which affect the lives of rural communities. They should complement and help deliver local planning policies and frameworks but they cannot override adopted planning policy. They should influence local housing and land management strategies. They should also contribute to the way local services are managed and delivered.

A Parish Plan is a statement of how the community sees itself developing over the next few years. It:

- reflects the views of all sections of the community;
- identifies which features and local characteristics people value;
- identifies local problems and opportunities;
- spells out how residents want the community to develop in the future;
- prepares a plan of action to achieve this vision.

Who decides?

The Parish Plan gives everyone a chance to say what they think about the social, economic and environmental issues affecting their community, and how they'd like to see it improved in the future. It is important that the whole community is involved in producing the plan, not just those people who usually come along to parish council meetings.

What's it leading to?

The Parish Plan needs to consider local problems and opportunities as a whole. It makes the links between these issues and sets out a broad vision for the future – where the parish wants to be in 5 or 10 years time. But achieving this vision will require action. This includes both:

- action which the parish itself proposes to undertake;
- policies, decisions and action carried out by other bodies which the plan might influence.

What does the plan look like?

There is no standard format for a Parish Plan and no prescriptive list of the subjects it should address. It is up to the community to set out its vision, decide which issues it would like to tackle, agree priorities for action and present the information in a way that is interesting and attractive to everyone.

A practical way to present the plan could be in two parts:

1. A detailed report explaining how the consultation has been carried out and conclusions drawn. It could take various forms, including photographs, documents, sketches or even a video.
2. A succinct action plan clearly setting out what needs doing, when, why, by whom and at what cost.

Summary

- Parish Plans are local, action-based plans which address a range of problems and opportunities affecting rural communities.
- They can include social, economic and environmental issues.
- The **whole community** should be involved in producing the Parish Plan, with the parish council taking lead responsibility.
- The Parish Plan must be **consistent** with related policies set out in the local authority's planning documents and local strategic partnerships.
- The plan should be based on information provided through **survey, research, consultation and community participation**.
- A **grant** to assist with the production of Parish Plans is available from the Countryside Agency. **Advice and help** with producing the plan and involving the community **are available** from the rural community council.
- **Parish Plans should identify actions** which can be taken forward by the parish council, by other individuals and groups within the community or by other service providers and statutory bodies. These should have a clear focus on Who? What? Why? How? When?

Why produce a Parish Plan?

It is Government policy to increase individual participation in public life and for public bodies to consult communities about the delivery of services. As part of this policy of "active citizenship" the Government wants to give more power to parish councils to decide what's best for their own communities.

If you as a parish council can show you are taking your future seriously, a Parish Plan might increase your chances of getting local authority support to enhance your parish's economic, social and environmental well-being.

It will give you the evidence to help inform policy-making by a range of organisations, from the local planning authority to police and health services. It will also help you to develop and maintain effective working relationships with all those outside bodies who provide services to your community, now or in the future.

Influencing local authorities & other service providers

Local authorities are continuously involved in drawing up and reviewing land use plans as well as deciding individual planning applications. A Parish Plan can potentially influence both these processes. It might do this by:

- identifying local needs for affordable housing or community facilities;
- producing a design statement for new development;

- identifying which open spaces are needed and valued for community use;
- in the longer term, in line with government proposals for a reformed planning system, there could be an opportunity to feed into the new Local Development Frameworks (LDFs) which are due to replace Development Plans.

Local authorities are also required to draw up ‘community strategies’, to promote or improve the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of their area. This is usually achieved through parish councils, involving representatives from public, private, voluntary and community bodies. The main aims of a community strategy are:

- to identify what sort of services, activities and support are needed;
- to make links between services and organise them better to avoid overlaps;
- to promote local people’s involvement in planning and improving services in the areas where they live.

In addition, most county and unitary authorities have signed up to negotiate a Local Public Service Agreement (LPSA) with central government, comprising a dozen or so specific targets to improve local services such as health and police. LPSA authorities are encouraged to involve local partners, particularly through the parish councils and the community strategy, in drawing up and delivering these targets. A Parish Plan has the potential to influence LPSAs through such community strategies.

There are structures which exist to help deliver social and community services at ground level. A Parish Plan can help feed into these processes and give your village a real voice and influence in the wider community.

Integrating the local economy

The economic life of rural communities is undergoing a period of change. Declining rural services, increasing traffic, a shortage of affordable housing, and a crisis in farming culminating in the Foot and Mouth epidemic require urgent attention.

Finding solutions to these problems is often difficult as one size rarely fits all. But a Parish Plan can help. By taking a holistic view of a community and its surrounding environment it provides an opportunity to find local solutions to local problems. For example, it could:

- identify a redundant farm building that might be developed into workshops for a new local business;
- encourage a local farmer or producer to sell their produce in the local shop or to local pubs, hotels and restaurants;
- persuade a local landowner to donate a parcel of land for a children’s playing field or local nature reserve;
- develop and market an area for tourism;
- provide support for the increasing numbers of people working from home, eg. by building telecottages;
- support environmental conservation measures, such as protection of wildflower meadows.

The character of the countryside around a village is an integral part of its identity. It should be managed in a way that takes into account its aesthetic and economic importance to the village.

Planning action that the local community can undertake itself

Many of the issues and opportunities identified by rural communities are things that local people could tackle themselves, given the right support and funding. Such actions will help foster a sense of ownership of the plan, too, for example:

- encouraging the setting up of a parent and baby group;
- creating a new play area and place for young people to meet;
- improving liaison with the police and establishing a neighbourhood watch scheme;
- reopening a closed village shop;
- providing community transport;
- calling for the establishment of quiet lanes where traffic and speed is restricted;
- protecting locally distinctive hedgerow or landscape feature;
- establishing a local food network;
- creating a local nature reserve.

Bidding for funding

Organisations offering grants to rural communities may want to see written evidence of need, community consultation and plans for implementing the project before they will consider offering funding. The Parish Plan could be used to provide this information and to accompany the funding bid.

Community spirit

People who have taken part in similar projects, like village appraisals and parish maps, say it's a great way of bringing people together. It taps local talents and enthusiasms and helps foster a real sense of community. It can revive interest in local democracy and demonstrate the importance of the parish council in the democratic process. These benefits can often lead to fresh initiatives which otherwise would not have happened. They can also be hugely enjoyable as social and creative projects in themselves.

It's worth the effort!

Drawing up a Parish Plan offers a great opportunity to bring together everyone in the community to work together and decide where the parish is going in future. It will take time, energy and commitment. But it will be time – probably about 12 months – well spent.

Summary

Parish Plans provide:

- a way to influence decisions by other authorities;
- a basis for action by people in the parish;
- a route to winning funds for local initiatives;
- a boost to parish councils' standing.