

Integration of parish plans into the wider systems of local government

Executive Summary to the Department
for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This report looks at the development of parish plans, the extent to which they are integrated into the local government system, enabling factors that support integration and barriers to integration. The findings are based on case study work and consultations with stakeholders and form part of a wider programme of work to support local communities to shape their own lives. The report makes a series of recommendations for government, local authorities and local service providers and parishes to improve the integration of parish plans.

Development of parish plans

- In the overwhelming majority of cases, parish plan development is led by a dedicated voluntary community group. This self-driven approach helps to secure community ownership and is viewed positively by parish groups, local authorities and other strategic stakeholders. Parish councils tend to play a relatively minor role in the development of a plan (in line with national guidance); however, there are a few exceptions where the parish itself is comprised of a small number of residents.
- In most of the case studies, the development of parish plans was supported by the local authority, mainly in the form of guidance and advice. This support was provided, to varying degrees, by district, county and metropolitan councils. The ‘quality’ of a local authority’s involvement is dependent less on its structure, and more on whether members and officers have sufficient commitment to respond positively to parish plans.
- Most of the parishes in the case studies received advice or help with resources from their Rural Community Council (RCC)¹ and this was widely regarded as beneficial to the development of parish plans. However, the effectiveness of support in our case studies did vary.
- Well structured plans with maps highlighting how parish priorities fitted with mainstream priorities were more effective at engaging mainstream providers than those focused on a local audience.

¹ For a glossary of acronyms and terms refer to Annex H.

Extent of integration

Planning

- Some of the case studies were able to achieve modest degrees of success in integrating their plan within the wider planning system. However, many parish plans had difficulty in being prioritised in local planning documents and in some cases getting noticed by the local planning authority.
- Where planning decisions conformed to parish requirements this was viewed by local stakeholders as an ad hoc rather than systematic process; and, therefore, they did not think the decisions indicated a fundamental shift in planning authority priorities or ways of working.

Mainstream services

- In the case studies, modifications to mainstream service² agendas and budgets in response to parish plans were limited. Where they did occur, environmental services tended to be among the most responsive services, although some modest successes were identified with transport and highways departments and the police service.
- Strategic health and education services neither appeared to regard parish plans as a priority nor planned delivery at such a micro level. However, GPs and local schools did, in many cases, demonstrate their receptiveness to the parish planning process.
- Local Strategic Partnerships are seen by many as a potential route through which to influence mainstream providers, as they can provide a co-ordinating forum for the articulation of parish priorities. However, to date this possibility does not appear to have been demonstrated in practice.

Enablers

- The early involvement of service delivery bodies increases
 - the likelihood of their long-term buy-in to plans
 - their ability to respond to parish priorities, as they have prior notice of potential requirements.
- The early engagement of the local planning authority is essential if the parish plan's structure is to align with the requirements of the planning system, which will enable its subsequent integration in the planning system.

² Refer to the Glossary in Annex H for a definition.

- Effective guidance and support to parish groups in order to ensure parish plans are presented in the most digestible format and to minimise unrealistic objectives, increases the likelihood of mainstream providers identifying and responding to the practical implications of a plan
- A structured process for presenting parish plans to the local authority and Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) partners, for example, via a database and/or clusters of parish plans and issues enables systematic rather than ad hoc responses to parish plans.
- A single point of contact in the local authority (or LSP) is helpful to parishes and parish plan groups – it streamlines information flows, provides a trusted source of advice and can galvanise mainstream providers’ responses to parish priorities.
- Sufficient resources to fund local projects make a difference in building momentum behind a plan.
- The production of a holistic and quality plan, based on evidence and robust community consultation is essential if local authorities and other agencies are to use a plan in a consistent and meaningful way.
- The separation of planning priorities from other community oriented objectives (for example by drawing up a stand alone Village Design Statement (VDS)) can make it easier for planning departments to digest and integrate the parish view.
- Clusters of parishes to co-ordinate shared objectives of several parishes make it easier to engage with mainstream service providers.
- A pro-active and determined parish plan action group or a chair dedicated to implementation can be of significant benefit to the delivery of a plan, enabling the monitoring of mainstream providers’ responses and sustained follow up on the delivery of local priorities.
- Parish plans need to be endorsed and adopted by the parish council in order to be taken seriously by the higher tiers of government and other service providers.
- The commitment of senior politicians and officers in the local authority is essential for parish plans to have a systematic effect on mainstream services. Impact on policy agendas can also be aided by engaging with the LSP and using this as a channel by which to influence mainstream providers.

Barriers to integration

- Some local authority members and officers are reluctant to relinquish some of their influence and control to parishes. This limits the influence parish plans can have on the mainstream.
- There is often little recognition, by both local authorities and mainstream service providers, of the widespread benefits that parish plans can provide, not least the detailed levels of information on community desires and needs. The lack of appreciation of the ‘added value’ of parish/community plans means they are not used as effectively as they could be.
- The absence of synchronised timescales for the development of parish plans and Local Development Frameworks (LDFs), Local Area Agreements (LAAs) and community strategies makes integration difficult, as parish plans can miss the ‘windows of opportunity’ to influence decisions of mainstream providers and mainstream providers can find it difficult to respond to individual parish plans issued at different points throughout the year.
- A planning system which is characterised by a ‘top-down approach’ to policies and priorities, and the absence of any statutory responsibility to heed the demands of parish plans, means parish plans are not seen as significant documents in the planning system and therefore wield little influence.
- Changes to legislation – primarily the replacement of Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) by Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs) – have put more demands on parish plan groups, in terms of the complexity of the process and the resources required for sustainability appraisals of plans. This has made it more difficult for parish plans to be integrated into the planning system.
- Funding and capacity constraints act as a hindrance to parish groups and mainstream service providers, constraining their ability to develop, maintain and implement parish plans.
- Case study consultees highlighted that there has been a lack of ‘quality’ guidance and inadequate levels of support for parish groups.³ To date these issues have led to the production of plans that often do not conform to the standards required for formal adoption into local planning documents. It has also led to the production of ‘wish lists’ and ‘NIMBY statements’ that meant parish plans had (and have) a poor reputation among professional planners.

³ A Parish Planning Toolkit has now been published by ACRE. This will, in future, be able to address many of the problems encountered by parish groups due to lack of guidance. The Toolkit is featured and reviewed in Box 4-3 of the main report.

- Plans rely on volunteers, thus the process may suffer due to the inexperience of participants, apathy among potential volunteers and ‘burn out’ of those involved. It can be difficult to secure involvement from the development phase through to implementation, leaving some plans with little follow through, once they have been produced.
- The evidence also suggests there are particular problems of communication and co-ordination. Information comes from parishes in an ad hoc fashion, which makes it hard for mainstream providers to digest and respond. Parishes are also often unaware of the priorities, requirements and timetables of mainstream providers.

Recommendations

For government

Table 1 Recommendations for government

- DEFRA and DCLG should issue a joint statement outlining the utility of parish and community plans in tailoring services to local needs. This should encourage local authorities and other service providers to both engage with parish plan preparation and give plans more weight in their decision-making processes.
- Guidance should be provided by government for local authorities and mainstream services to stress the utility and importance of integrating parish plan objectives into their agendas. The guidance should provide advice to all relevant authorities on mechanisms of integration, such as a parish plan database, clustering of parishes, and parish representation in LSPs; it should set out expectations of how LSPs should work with parish and community plans. The refreshed guidance should also reflect changes in the planning system and the implications of the Local Government White Paper (LGWP) for parish plans.
- Government should work with national, regional and local stakeholders to identify the most appropriate way to ensure any new plans have the resources required for their development and that the support is available to ensure the plans are quality documents that are seen to be the product of a robust process.

For local authorities and mainstream service providers

Table 2 Recommendations for local authorities and mainstream service providers

- For parish plans to be effective in bringing change at the local level, local authorities and other service providers should work with the process, rather than seeing it as a challenge to their own authority.
- To ease access to information for mainstream providers and to enable parishes and mainstream providers to identify common concerns – local authorities should maintain a database of all parish plans and their priorities.
- Local authorities and LSPs should establish a single point of contact to liaise with parish groups and to advise mainstream providers how to work with parish and community plans. They need also to identify the role (or potential roles depending on local circumstances) of the ward councillor in assisting the development and/or implementation of community and parish plans. This will be particularly important as the role of ward councillors develops in line with the Local Government White Paper 2006.
- Local authorities and LSPs should consider making resources available to support the development and integration of parish plans as a cost effective way of consulting and engaging the public and gathering information on local concerns. Possible ways in which to do this include:
 - the establishment of a community development team to provide support to those working on parish and community plans – this may be within the council or as part of an LSP secretariat
 - the maintenance of a database of all parish plans and their priorities – to ease access to information for mainstream providers and to enable parishes and mainstream providers to identify common concerns
 - the allocation of some money to locally elected members to fund local priorities.
- Local authorities and LSPs should consider the merits of ‘clusters’ of parishes and/or joint meetings of parishes and service providers to drive the integration of parish plans in the ways that mainstream providers operate.
- Local authorities should identify how parishes can be engaged in both setting LAAs and in delivering on the priorities set out in them.

For parishes

Table 3 Recommendations for parishes

- Parish groups must ensure that contact is made with local authorities, LSPs and mainstream providers requesting their engagement from the outset.
- Should parishes want to include a planning dimension in their plans, they should seek involvement from planning officers at the outset. The final output on planning should form an identifiably separate section in the plan, in order to ease its absorption by the relevant planning authority.
- Refreshed guidance on parish and community planning has been produced by ACRE.⁴ Parish groups considering the development of a plan should consult this guidance, which will improve the likelihood of a plan's objectives getting integrated into mainstream delivery.
- In order to show their own commitment to developing and/or refreshing parish plans and to demonstrate the community's belief in the added value of a plan, parish councils may need to use their precepting powers or revenue raised from charges for services to help develop plans.
- In order to ensure the parish plan is given due consideration by local authorities and other agencies, parish plan groups should ensure the process for producing the plan is robust and engages all parts of the community. The final document needs to be clear about what it wants from whom and why. This may best be done via a quality assurance process that enables parish plan groups to document what they did and how it affected the final plan or it may be done via an external judgement, for example, from the RCC or its designated agent.
- While parish plans should not be seen primarily as planning documents, where planning issues are addressed they should be based on guidance from planners and be treated separately, for example, in design statements that respond to the requirements of the planning process.
- Parish plans should be aspirational, but they also require 'actionable first steps'. In order to build momentum and confidence at local level and in mainstream agencies, parish groups should focus on achieving 'quick wins', which require minimal resources.
- In order to generate sufficient lobbying capacity, parishes should consider the option of forming a cluster, or working in partnership with neighbouring parishes, to pursue their aims, particularly where there are common priorities. This may also make it easier to deal with mainstream providers, who will gain economies of scale from acting with larger groupings.
- In order to ensure there is 'follow through' on a plan, parish groups and/or parish councils should establish a dedicated action/implementation group to take forward the objectives of the plan. This may, or may not, comprise the same people as those involved in the plan's development. This

⁴ See Glossary – Annex H

dedicated group should identify the actions which the local community can respond to and those where others are required to act and work with partners. It should also ensure there are regular progress reports for the community.

- Once a plan is completed, parish plan groups should seek its formal adoption by the parish council. This is the first step to its integration with the wider system of local governance. In order to enhance the likelihood of adoption by the parish council, the parish plan group should demonstrate how it successfully expresses community views
- When developing parish plans, groups should consider the requirements of the implementation process and identify people to lead on taking the plan forward. This may involve different people, as those interested in delivery of the actions in the plan may not be interested in getting involved in drawing up the plan.

For multiple partners

Table 4 Recommendations for multiple partners

- In order to minimise the disruption associated with local political rivalry, partners should seek to build a local consensus on the issues to be addressed and the ways to address them, thereby bringing an element of stability to the plan.