Community-led planning

and its links to National Indicator 4
and other national indicators

Lorna Pearcey, Rob Hindle, Alison McLean
West Midlands Rural Community Action Network draws together the four rural community councils (RCCs) which operate within the region. Each member RCC is an independent charitable organisation with a broad range of member organisations including parish councils, voluntary and community organisations and village halls, and has access through newsletters and mailings to over four thousand groups and individuals throughout the region. The RCCs have the common aims of promoting voluntary action and improving rural life.

www.wmrcan.org.uk
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1. Executive summary

This paper was commissioned by the West Midlands Rural Community Action Network (WMRCAN) to understand the ways in which community led planning can be used to improve the percentage of people who feel able to influence decisions affecting their locality. It’s an issue of high importance by government who have listed it as national indicator 4 on the National Indicator Set.

It is clear that the community plan process has been a valuable catalyst for local initiative. The study reports on the power of community led planning to galvanise local action; quoting survey responses that show that 76% of those with completed plans had achieved some of the actions identified in the plan and that 77% of completed actions had been completed by the communities without third party help.

The outcomes from community led planning are apparent in social capital and cohesion, the acquisition of new skills and confidence amongst those involved with the process (often leading to people becoming parish councillors or starting volunteering within the community) and the legacy of local actions identified in the plan and subsequently implemented.

2. An introduction to community led planning

Community led planning is a process where all sections of a community work together to develop and then implement a set of actions designed to improve their shared space and the opportunities it provides.

The process must be led (but not necessarily initiated) by the community. The community must remain in control of the process and play a major part in achieving its objectives. Community led planning is therefore very different from a consultation or consultative plan-making process led by a third party. That process is wholly owned by the third party organisation, not the community.

The implication is that it is not possible to apply a standard approach or ‘scope’ to community led planning. For the process to be valid, each community must be able to focus on the issues that it defines to be important and to go about the planning process in the way that best suits the local context.
3. Scope of the study

The research and field work that supports this paper has been focused and delivered over a period of several weeks. It has included:

- A review of the Local Area Agreements covering the WMRCAN territory to identify relevant improvement targets;
- A workshop with community led planning professionals to review the history of community led planning in the rural West Midlands, to identify current activity and reflect on outcomes and its legacy;
- A seminar with officers from local government across the region to consider the relevance of community led planning to their work.

All four rural community councils have supported community led planning as part of their core business since 2000. Between 2000 and 2008 a total of 250 community led plans were completed in towns and villages across the region and a further 132 parishes had started the community planning process. On completion this will equate to around 37% of the parishes in the region.

4. Study findings

Current policy from the Department for Communities and Local Government is strong on empowering individual citizens, increasing their confidence and capacity to do things for themselves and to work together with their neighbours to improve their local environment. Policy is also keen to increase the involvement of local people in decision making, service delivery and governance.

Community led planning offers a good way of delivering against this agenda, but it has limitations. It is not straightforward for a local authority to roll out community led planning across its territory. Consistent take-up cannot be guaranteed; it is reliant on the willingness of individual communities to get involved and on their capacity to see it through. Where this will exists, community led planning offers real value to the statutory sector, especially if the ‘scope’ of the community fits the geography of interest for the service provider or policy maker.

There is therefore a strong argument to be made to the statutory sector that the use of community led planning can help it achieve some of its policy objectives around empowerment and active citizenship and that it will do so in a way that uses resources efficiently. It is not the only way to achieve these ends of course; but there is enough of a track record to show that community led planning will help statutory authorities improve the way that they deliver services, especially in dispersed communities. It will potentially save the cost of some service delivery as local people pick up the challenge for themselves.

To this extent, community led planning provides an excellent route to the development of working partnerships between communities and service providers. Research has shown that communities who work closely with their local authorities during the process (either via officers or elected members) develop a much stronger relationship and understanding with the council and its service units.
What makes community led planning distinctive is that, done well, it involves building the relationship between service providers and local communities as part of the plan development itself. Because it is made up of actions to be taken on by local volunteers, community groups, local government and other service providers, it produces more impressive results than can be achieved through a top-down approach to consultation by local government to feed their own strategic plans. A community led plan challenges local people to say what part they can play in improving their own local neighbourhood and builds the capacity of local community groups to respond.”

ACRE (www.communityledplanning.com)

This should make it of value to public service providers, as it meets many of the central objectives2 (now being translated into local government policies) around the empowerment of communities and the ability of service deliverers to work with local people to improve the responsiveness of local services.

In a sense, however, there is a fundamental mismatch around aspirations of ‘place shaping’ between the interests of individual communities – which think that their ‘places’ are the ones that should be ‘shaped’, and the interests of a local authority or partner service provider, which are focused on their ‘territory’ as the place that should be shaped.

Despite this, a well-managed and inclusive community planning process will generate tremendous well being within a community and can lead to change (through local action) which adds real value to people’s lives. It will generate robust local intelligence for a local authority or service provider, but that intelligence will be place specific. This is because community led planning as practiced in rural areas is ‘place focused’.

People involved in community led planning are thinking about their needs and how the place in which they live can be improved or adapted to address them. They are interested in how services might be delivered or retained within their community (e.g. the post office, shop or youth club), or how issues may be addressed (e.g. speeding and traffic problems) rather than the needs of a particular group of people, which local providers need to consider across a wider territory.

It is not surprising therefore that the services that have expressed most interest in community led planning as a source of evidence of local needs and/or aspirations are those that are focused on spatial issues (planning and environment) rather than client based services (health, education, social care).

This points towards the need and opportunity for a more local dialogue between community and service providers. The strong place focus of community led planning could be a virtue if the scope of the community (place or interest) mirrored the area of interest of the service provider.

1. www.communityledplanning.com
2. Communities in Control, Real People, Real Power, CLG July 2008
5. Ways forward

Community led planning is an excellent means of building a relationship between service units and the communities they serve. It’s seen as increasingly important by local government officers and something that they are keen to see developed as part of their drive to empower communities and devolve more services locally.

Within the region a number of local councils have provided money, officer and member support, set up protocols and made resources available such as premises and access to committees and governance structures as a means of supporting the rural community councils and their work supporting rural communities with community led planning.

There is no consistency, however; support where available is predicated upon the views and attitudes of a few important decision makers. Where support is available, it tends to be because those decision makers recognise that they need to do something different to engage with dispersed communities in their rural areas, or that they are keen to make delivery of appropriate services as locally focused as possible.

Whilst community led planning offers local empowerment, capacity building and improved dialogue between community and state (about operational and service issues specific to each community), in its current form (as practised in small rural communities) it is not well suited to the task of gathering consistent and timely local intelligence capable of informing service delivery across an entire local authority or local partnership territory.

None of these ‘enlightened’ local authorities have adopted the community led planning model as their only way to engage with communities. The reality is that there appears to be no evidence to show that the need to fund RCCs to promote and facilitate community led planning is accepted as ‘core business’ by local authorities and public service providers, in this or any region.

It is important to consider that whilst statutory organisations need to engage with communities (the duty to involve makes this a legal obligation) they do not need this engagement to be community led. Community led planning has complications for statutory organisations that other forms of engagement do not; it is more expensive to support and takes longer. We therefore need to think of community led planning as a value-adding process. As such the ‘sell’ needs to be focused on improved outcomes for people and communities rather on process ‘wins’ for statutory organisations. The focus therefore should be on those things that community led planning has been proven to deliver and which are important to the statutory sector.

To this end, it would be valuable to ensure that local intelligence generated by community led planning is retained and shared with the statutory sector and to achieve a common position from local authorities and statutory agencies around the manner that they receive, consider and respond to community led plans. This system would also help the community led planning process to encourage communities to articulate their priorities and offer an improved understanding of their quality of life in ways that fit better with public sector working.

There is good evidence that protocols agreed between a local authority and communities (covering issues such as the form of action planning, and the submission / review / respond process) significantly increase the likelihood of public sector partners’ involvement in supporting and delivering local actions. The four RCCs should work together to develop a regional model protocol to form the core of a document; however, it will need to be varied to fit the processes and culture of individual statutory bodies.

By using a managed framework it is quite possible to include issues of interest to local government and their partners within a community planning process, but not to design its shape or timeframe to meet the procedural requirements of the statutory sector. This does not mean that the statutory sector should be excluded from the process, quite the contrary. The community led plans which deliver the best outcomes tend to be those where the local authority and service providers have had every opportunity to take part in the process and provide input into an action plan as it develops.
6. Conclusion

Whilst a community led plan is an excellent means of identifying actions and investment needed within a specific geographic community, and (subject to the attitude of the relevant service provider) of securing appropriate third party help to achieve it, it is not a particularly effective route for a community to achieve increased influence through shaping the development of wider public sector policy.

Community led planning can and will empower people, communities and service deliverers by:

- Offering people the chance to build their skills and confidence;
- Giving people a chance to work together to improve their local environment;
- Helping all sections of a community understand each other better;
- Generating collaborative activity and volunteering;
- Attracting investment of time and money as a result of collective effort;
- Bringing together communities and the individuals that represent them;
- Bringing together service user and the people responsible for delivering services;
- Generating high quality evidence of local (community level) conditions and experiences of real value to service providers;
- Creating the basis for an ongoing dialogue and relationship between individual communities and the public sector.

In these areas it has much to offer all parties and provides some valuable learning which could be applied in any type of community, regardless of its characteristics, culture or geography.

However, community led planning will probably not:

- Guarantee that issues raised in individual plans and local attitudes or proposals are included in statutory plans or strategies;
- Give any individual community a ‘fast track’ or unencumbered access to a local authority’s decision making fora;
- Provide a territory wide, comprehensive and consistent local evidence base for policy makers and service planners;
- Meet all the community engagement needs of a statutory organisation.

Furthermore, the evidence to date suggests that efforts to shift the community planning process to ‘fit’ more closely with statutory sector requirements for a territory wide local evidence base (on the assumption that this will gain more influence on local policy making) run the risk of damaging the value of community empowerment that lies at the heart of the community led planning process.

Community led planning is clearly a valuable initiative. There are many examples of a community led plan being used as a “business plan” for a town or parish council. It has been shown that a community led planning process is an excellent way to develop a vision and action plan for the community.

The process itself has proved to be a catalyst for strengthening relationships within the community, leading to an increase in local action and collective effort. Research has shown that, in general, approximately 50% of the actions identified in a community led plan can be undertaken by the community itself with minimal support from external bodies.

To this extent, it has an excellent track record in engaging the majority of residents. Questionnaire return rates of over 80% are not unusual. So community led planning provides valuable information about the needs and aspirations of particular places, leading to more appropriately designed and targeted service delivery and encouraging a more ‘joined up’ approach from local providers.

This is largely due to the unique opportunities for close dialogue between the community members leading the process and local service providers. Where there are robust mechanisms for feeding the results of community led planning into the statutory processes, appropriate and timely action can be taken to address issues raised and help the community find solutions. It also encourages a greater understanding among community
members of the context (and constraints) within which statutory providers operate.

Furthermore, community led planning provides excellent place specific information and has a clear and direct relevance to spatial planning processes (the Local Development Framework) and other services that are focused on places rather than people (for example, highways, footpaths, transport).

Community led planning builds local capacity to undertake innovative approaches to involving the community in local decision making, including participatory budgeting, devolution of service delivery and transfer of assets.

Ultimately community led planning helps build strong, resilient and self-sufficient communities. Over time it will lead to a sustainable community model whereby community members take on increasing responsibility around managing their own facilities and looking after their own spaces.