

How to create a parish plan?

By Dr Wendy Le-las

The Countryside Agency sees Parish Plans as revolution in the making. Dr Wendy Le Las, independent planning consultant, explains how you can set one up for your parish.

Parish Plans were announced in the 2000 Rural White Paper, and are an integral part of the Countryside Agency's Vital Villages Initiative. They should express a vision of how the community wants to develop, and identify the actions needed to achieve it. Parish Plans are still at the pilot project stage and all concerned are on a steep learning curve.

The countryside Agency (CA) hopes there will be a 1,000 parish plans by March 2005: currently there are 70 completed plans, and another 441 for which they have allocated grants.

Clearly the program would have to be expanded tenfold for coverage to be complete, let alone be a statutory requirement.

Why should any given local council get involved? By leading their communities through the Parish Plan process, local councils may not only preside over a livelier, more prosperous community but also be more effective in their dealings with other strands of government. The countryside agency is particularly interested in helping councils with few resources and little experience.

In some instances as many as five local councils have banded together to produce a parish plan.

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Starting the process

To get started you need to register with the relevant Countryside Agency Regional Office. The Countryside Agency's excellent “Parish Plans: Guidance for Parish and Town Councils” (available free from 08701206466) will nurse you through the process. You need to contact your elected members, the Local Planning Authority (LPA), RCC and CALC. The whole idea is that local people are best placed to celebrate

what is important about their community, identify their own needs and tackle their own problems. However the RCC or CALC should be able to find someone to help you ask the right questions, plan your work programme and point to sources of information and funding. Next, you will need to set up a steering committee that represents a cross-section of your community including the less visible members and the young. It is important at this stage to estimate, in broad terms, the person power needed to produce the plan, the probable cost and potential financial sources: the latter are many and various, but the Countryside Agency grants up to £5,000 are of cardinal importance for most parish plans.

Many readers will have undertaken village appraisals, design statements, or traffic surveys. Your LPA will have various development plans and may have commissioned relevant research. Government web sites – such as www.odpm.gov.uk, www.defra.gov.uk, and www.countryside.gov.uk – could be full of pertinent information.



Justification for funding application for large-scale projects, like this heritage centre, can come from the results of Parish Plans

Provisional soundings of the community may identify key issues and recruit useful volunteers. Draw up a plan brief that sets out the scope of the plan, indicates how the necessary information is to be collected, its cost, possible financial sources, and the plan's format. Then you submit a formal application to the Countryside Agency; funding us on the basis that it should take no more than a year to get to this stage, otherwise you could lose momentum.

Having got the Countryside Agency's blessing, get cracking! What really matters is that all sections of your community are able to make their specific input into the plan. Eliciting information and processing it when you get it back is both an art and a science: it is cost effective to consult the experts beforehand. Most local councils set up working parties to investigate different topics: here again use 'blue chip' sources and methods. But do not forget to have fun en route. In years to come all this information will be put to diverse uses, including backing up funding applications, negotiating with the powers that be and opposing undesirable development, so bear this in mind when collecting it.



A Parish Plan might identify a need for specific services – as well as innovative solutions, like this portable Post Office

Write up your draft findings, maybe launching it with a special event to thank all those who have contributed, but also to gather their comments. It will also be necessary to discuss the draft report with your LPA and other partners. Feedback may mean that the plan should be modified. Of vital importance for the ongoing support of your community, is the need to decide what action needs to be taken, when, how and by whom: check with them and all your partners before you produce the final version. Copies of the plan should be sent to all who have helped in its making, especially the CA. To carry the action plan forward, it is politic to send copies to all whose help will be required if your community's ambitions are to be realised.

Wider Picture

In due course completed plans should be feed into the LPA's community strategy: both cover all aspects of life , the land-use aspects of which will appear in the new Local Development Frameworks, as described in LCR January 2002. Work closely with your LPA if you wish your plan to influence Core Policies, Action Plans and Supplementary Planning Guidance (see Parish Plans and the Planning System: Guidance for Local Planning Authorities, Countryside Agency, March 2003, For a free copy, tel. 0870 120 6466).

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