

Parish Planning Training

Report to N&RN APB

2nd March 2011

There is an increasing emphasis on Local Authorities to engage more with the local community and there are many reasons why the Area Partnership Board (APB) and its partners should, and need to, engage with residents especially to resolve local issues, improve reputation and build trust. This is highlighted in the recent Decentralisation and Localism Bill which is expected to devolve greater powers to councils and neighbourhoods and give local communities greater control over decisions such as planning.

In keeping with this ethos it was agreed by the APB to produce an annual community engagement plan to map and promote engagement activity across all partners in order to avoid duplication, reduce the number of meetings, rationalise structures but allow for joint consultation and communication whereby all partners will;

- Identify why and what they want to inform, consult and engage on
- Identify where and when they want to engage
- Identify how they want to engage which will be a more flexible approach (see below)
- Show how engagement activity links to the APB plan and work activity
- Include an assessment of what activity is already taking place
- Include Town and Parish Councils in the engagement activity as they are already close to the heart of communities
- Create engagement activity to allow balancing between local priorities and strategic or national statistical priorities.

The APB is currently putting together an area action plan based on the priorities being identified by the four sub-groups. These priorities will be higher level statistically based priorities but do not reflect the lower level resident led priorities. Fortunately the Northwich and Rural North area is fully Parished with 25 Parish Councils within the area and they are ideally placed to understand the needs of their communities.

In relation to Parish Councils there are a number of initiatives available;

- Parish planning which involves an independent community group co-ordinating community consultation and putting together the local priorities which are presented to and adopted by the Parish Council. Only seven out of the current 25 Parish Councils in the N&RN area have a plan and most are due for refreshing.
- Quality Parish Status whereby Parish Councils have to meet set criteria such as having a trained Clerk, election of 33% of Parish Councillors etc. Only four of the 25 Parish Councils have been approved for Quality status.
- Central Government have announced their Neighbourhood Planning initiative which is mainly linked to communities having decision making on planning issues in their area. This initiative is still being developed.
- Village Design Statement which is a document produced by the Parish Council and its community stating how the current and future housing should be of a particular design to blend in and keep an overall 'feel' to the village.

There is a common denominator amongst all these initiatives, the community!

There are also very close inter-links with all the initiatives; in order for the Governments Neighbourhood Planning to be successful the community and Parish Council need to be consulted and will make decisions on planning issues in their village/town. If the community and Parish Council are deciding on planning issues then it would make sense to firstly have a Village Design Statement (VDS) so village maintains its identity. If both documents are produced the Parish is virtually ready to achieve Quality Parish Status (QPS) and would only need the community to be voting in 1/3 of the Parish Councillors.

In order to undertake the Governments Neighbourhood Planning, the VDS and QPS then the Parish Council needs to understand the village/town overall priorities and this will lead to the development of a Parish Plan. In Cheshire West and Chester the approach used is to have an independent community group with Parish representation driving forward the priorities. (See appendix 1.) In turn the Parish Plan would feed in to the APB Area Action Plan.

However in order for the independent group to undertake Parish Planning they will require core skills and support such as;

- Setting up a meeting
- Chairing
- Presentations
- Preparing questionnaires
- Consultation techniques
- Analysing data
- Evaluation

Ideally if all 25 Parish Councils had a Parish Plan in place not only would they be better placed to undertake the Governments Neighbourhood Planning but the APB would have comprehensive information about community priorities that it could balance between its higher level priorities.

The APB is asked to support and fund the development of a programme of training for all Parish Councils to place them in a position whereby they can undertake Parish Planning.

Appendix 1

