

**Assessing the impact of the Parish Plans  
Grant Scheme: an in-depth look at the  
effectiveness of parish planning in six localities  
in the South East of England**

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Aims and objectives of this project<sup>1</sup>

This research contributes to the portfolio of lessons learnt from the Vital Villages programme by taking a distinct South East regional focus on parish plans and the planning system. It aims to achieve a more detailed perspective on the relationship between the parish and statutory development planning systems as played out in the south east region where development pressures in rural communities are particularly acute. It analyses the impact that the Parish Plan Grant programme in the South East region has had on building successful relationships between communities and the statutory agencies, particularly local authorities, through the experiences of six communities who have been involved in local community action planning. The communities were deliberately selected with a view to illuminate what might be good practice, and to ensure a good geographical spread. The communities are:

- **Brightwell - cum – Sotwell , Oxfordshire**
- **Hambledon , Surrey**
- **Harrietsham , Kent**
- **Pangbourne , Berkshire**
- **Sedlescombe , East Sussex**
- **Wickham , Hampshire**

Visits were made to each of these communities and interviews carried out with those who had been involved in the preparation of the parish plan as well as representatives from local planning authorities and other stakeholders. All those interviewed were happy to be included by name in this report and have had the opportunity to check through the relevant sections to ensure that their views have been reported accurately.

## 1.2 Background

Parish plans have their origins in the Rural White Paper 'Our countryside: the future' which was published in 2000. In this the government established its aim of supporting people living in rural areas to become fully involved in developing their communities and shaping the decisions that affect them. To achieve this, the government introduced the concept of Town and Village Plans, and funding was put in place to help 1,000 rural communities prepare their own Town or Village Plan, to be administered by the Countryside Agency.

*"We want to give rural communities the chance to set out what their town or village should look like and to guide its future development. The best decisions on these issues result from*

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<sup>1</sup> This research is a partnership project with the Kent Downs AONB Unit. Work is in progress on assessing the impact of all Village Design Statements completed and in operation in the Kent Downs AONB and is scheduled for completion in June. Together these projects will provide an in-depth assessment of the impact of community engagement techniques in the south east region on the statutory planning system.

*giving local people a share in those decisions. That means not only the opportunity to comment on individual proposals, but the ability to set out a vision of what is important, how new development can best be fitted in, the design and quality standards it should meet, how to preserve valued local features and to map out the facilities and services which the community needs to safeguard for the future.”<sup>2</sup>*

To help deliver the Rural White Paper proposal the Countryside Agency launched the Vital Villages programme in April 2001. The goal of this programme was to achieve socially and economically active rural communities that address their own priorities and are better equipped to shape their own futures. The Parish Plan Grant was one of four initiatives of the Vital Villages programme and between 2001 - 2004 provided a resource for communities across the country to set out their vision for the future of their parish and to put together an Action Plan. (Outstanding funding for offers made before the scheme closed will be honoured up until 2006). The parish planning process is now established in every English region and over 1,200 communities have completed, or are working to complete, a parish plan.

### **1.3 Parish plans and the statutory planning system**

From the outset it was envisaged that parish plans would play a role in the statutory planning system, enhancing the involvement of communities in the planning process.

*“local communities have a real opportunity to influence the nature and quality of future development ...and providing that their Plan is consistent with the local Development Plan, and the relevant national planning guidance, the design and land use aspects can be endorsed by the planning authority as Supplementary Planning Guidance. This approach has the potential to reduce the adversarial nature of new proposals and reduce costs for all, but this will only be achieved if everyone in the community has a real opportunity to contribute their views.”<sup>3</sup>*

This intention was reiterated in the guidance provided to parishes and community groups who expressed interest in producing a parish plan, emphasising the

*“opportunity for parish plans to form the bedrock of the new local development frameworks that will be prepared by every local planning authority to replace existing local plans... parish plans are already influential and will become increasingly important”<sup>4</sup>*

In this guidance parishes were advised that the most effective way for a parish plan to influence and guide development proposals is for its land use planning components to be adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance by the local planning authority and were assured that design and land use aspects of parish plans would have “a real role” in influencing and helping to guide planning decisions. In parallel guidance issued to local

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<sup>2</sup> Rural White Paper ‘Our Countryside : the future’ (2000) DETR paragraph 12.3.1

<sup>3</sup> Rural White Paper ‘Our Countryside : the future’ (2000), DETR, paragraph 12.3.2

<sup>4</sup> Parish Plans: Guidance for parish and town councils, Countryside Agency (2003), Foreword

planning authorities two potential ways in which parish plans could become integrated with or supplement Local Development Frameworks are identified – spatial planning components of a parish plan can be either adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance, or can be integrated into the relevant development plan document, typically an action area plan.

Furthermore, the government undertook in the Rural White Paper to set out in national planning guidance the role that town and village plans can play as Supplementary Planning Guidance and to examine whether, and how, the role of more locally based plans in the planning system might be further developed. Parish plans have however coincided with a period of major change in the planning system in England and Wales. A new statutory framework has been introduced and many new elements of national planning guidance have been produced since the parish plan scheme was introduced, as part of a general and extensive overhaul of the statutory planning process.

Most recently, Planning Policy Statement 1: ‘General Policy and Principles’ has been released and sets out the overarching planning policies on the delivery of sustainable development through the planning system. Community involvement in planning is at the heart of new guidance and the role of parish plans in encouraging town and parish councils to develop full and active community involvement in their areas is addressed<sup>5</sup>, though the integration of such community- initiated documents ‘upwards’ into formal Local Development Frameworks is no longer specifically promoted. Planning Policy Statement 12 : ‘Development Plans’ (2004) establishes government policy on the preparation of Local Development Documents, which were introduced in the Planning and Compulsory Order Act 2004 to replace the existing structure of local, structure and unitary plans. Parish plans are acknowledged in the companion guide to this Guidance which states

*“Authorities must involve local communities and stakeholders in the preparation of supplementary plan documents. Authorities will also need to consider how best to incorporate parish plans within supplementary plan documents, particularly their potential to provide further detail in respect of core strategies, area action plans and other development plan documents.”<sup>6</sup>*

By contrast however the key government guidance document on community involvement in the planning process, released in 2004, includes no recognition of a role for parish plans. Despite endorsing community engagement in the planning system

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<sup>5</sup> Planning Policy Statement 1 ‘General Policy and Principles’ (2005) ODP, paragraph 41

<sup>6</sup> Creating Local Development Frameworks, A companion guide to PPS12 (2004) paragraph 3.9

*“Planning shapes the places where people live and work. So it is right that people should be enabled and empowered to take an active part in the process. Community involvement is vitally important to planning...Active participation in the development of options and proposals should be at the heart of the process. The community must be able to put forward and debate options and help mould proposals before they are settled...”<sup>7</sup>*

this key document falls short of identifying parish plans as a tool for involving communities in the planning system; indeed it makes no reference to parish plans at all.

#### **1.4. Endorsement of parish plans by local planning authorities in the South East**

As part of this research every local planning authority and rural community council across the south east region was contacted in order to provide an up-to-date inventory of parish plan work in this region and to discover how many parish plans, or their land use and design components, have been adopted as supplementary planning guidance to local plans in the south east.

Encouragingly the majority of local planning authorities were aware of parish plans and many had recently taken the decision to appoint an officer as a contact point for parishes. A minority were unaware of completed parish plans in their area, despite, in some instances, such plans being used by the Countryside Agency as examples of best practice. Table One sets out, by county, the parish plans completed to date and reveals that of the 82 parish plans completed, and being used by parishes across the region, none have been adopted by local planning authorities as Supplementary Planning Guidance.

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<sup>7</sup> Community Involvement in Planning: The Government’s Objectives (2004) ODPM Introduction and paragraph 2.5

**TABLE 1 : PARISH PLANS COMPLETION AND ADOPTION DATA  
SOUTH EAST REGION  
January 2005**

	<b>Parish Plans completed</b>	<b>Adopted</b>
<b>West Berkshire</b>	<b>9</b> (Brightwalton, Brimpton, Burghfield, East Illsley, Inkpen, Pangbourne, Peasmore, Purley, Stratfield Mortimer)	0
<b>Oxfordshire</b>	<b>12</b> (Benson, Blewbury, Brightwell-cum – Sotwell, Crowmarsh, Duns Tew, Fencott & Murcott, Harwell, Minster Lovell, Sandford of Thames, Steventon, Watlington, Wheatley)	0
<b>Surrey</b>	<b>10</b> (Buckland, Chobham, Tatsfield, Woldingham, Godstone, Crowhurst, Hambledon, Leigh, Churt, Ewhurst)	0
<b>East Sussex</b>	<b>15</b> (Chalvington with Ripe, Maresfield, Westham, Willington and Jevington, Hailsham, East Hoathly, Sedlescombe, Ticehurst, Brede and Broadoak, Ringmer, Hamsey, Newick, Ditchling, Hadlow Down, East Chiltington)	0
<b>West Sussex</b>	<b>16</b> (Fishbourne, Oving, Wisborough Green, Washington, Cookfield, Ardingly, Hurstpierpoint and Sayers Common, Hassocks, Aldwick, Middleton-on-Sea, Angmering, Pagham, Ferring, Amberley, Easebourne, Bosham)	0
<b>Kent</b>	<b>9</b> (Challock, Bethersden, Eastry, Harrietsham, Bredhurst, Hadlow, Leybourne, Herne and Broomfield, Graveney with Goodnestone)	0
<b>Buckinghamshire</b>	<b>6</b> (Cheddington, Wingrave with Rowsham, Maids Moreton, Hughenden, Chesham Bois, Stockenchurch and Radnage)	0
<b>Hampshire</b>	<b>4</b> (Langrish, Wickham, Lindford, Otterbourne)	0
<b>Isle of Wight</b>	<b>1</b> (Niton and Whitwell)	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>0</b>

## **2. The Case Studies**

### **2.1 Brightwell – cum – Sotwell, Oxfordshire**

#### **2.1.1 Introduction**

Brightwell-cum-Sotwell modestly describes itself as ‘simply rather an odd name on some signs between Didcot and Wallingford’. Such a description belies the reality of this picture postcard village complete with thatched cottages and the ‘seven Ps’ by which journalists tend to define a perfect village – pub, primary school, parson, public transport, phone box, petrol station and post office - and which planners more prosaically use as sustainability indicators.

Brightwell-cum-Sotwell had never undertaken a village appraisal or a community planning exercise of this nature before and embarked on their parish plan following a meeting held by Oxfordshire Rural Community Council which introduced the parish plan concept, and associated grant, to parishes and community groups in this area. The availability of the parish plan grant acted as a catalyst for the decision to produce a parish plan for this village – the community had no trouble getting resources in kind from local residents but without the grant to fund the process the parish council precept would have to have been raised. The parish plan group felt that at such an early stage it would not have been possible to justify the benefits to the community of this new venture.

At issue during the plan process was the closure of the only village shop and post office, a growing recognition of the need for affordable, local needs housing in the village and a widespread community belief that developers are increasingly imposing their own styles and agendas on local planning authorities and the planning system. This parish welcomed therefore the opportunity presented by the parish plan process for their community to strengthen its voice within the planning system and this provided the impetus to drive the process forward. Both the parish plan itself and the representatives of the parish plan group who we met in January 2005 are clear that they have been, and remain, driven by a desire not to prevent change but to influence it.

#### **2.1.2. Process**

In 2002 a local group of volunteers got together to get the parish plan underway. One of the first steps the group took was to undertake a ‘profile’ of the village, identifying all the different interest groups that they needed to involve in the process – particularly the harder-to-reach,

such as farmers, people living in mobile homes on the end of the parish, the housebound and young people. The group researched local views through a variety of means, launched with an exciting and interactive local event which attracted 200 participants. This event, which drew together for the first time all the clubs, societies and groups in the parish served to bring the community together around the parish plan process. Working parties on key themes, housing, amenities and the environment were established. Oxfordshire Rural Community Council's community development worker trained the group of volunteers in 'participant profiling' so that they could analyse the kind of people who did and did not participate and could then target future events to fill in gaps.

Consultation with the residents of the parish was done in a number of ways. A questionnaire was distributed to every household with a high 73% response rate. At the same time an Oxfordshire Rural Community Council Housing Needs Survey was distributed to assess the need for local affordable housing. A very successful Planning for Real™ exercise was undertaken by the primary school which set aside a week for the school children to produce a model of the village. This was a popular focus for discussions at the village fete. In these ways the group felt that the parish plan process *itself* had been successful in bringing the community together in a positive and forward looking way.

At the same time the parish plan group tried hard to engage with other agencies whose advice and expertise they needed and with whom they wanted to work on the implementation of the required action plan element of the process. Several meetings were held with the local authority to keep a process of dialogue active. At a workshop held by the rural community council in May 2004 Brightwell – cum – Sotwell, along with around ten other parishes then working on parish plans, expressed their concern that considerable work was being done by parishes, as encouraged by national agencies, with little or no reciprocal support evident from the local authority. Officers present assured parishes that their concerns would be relayed to planning officers. The group expected interest in the plan from other agencies, based on the Countryside Agency information on the purposes of the process, and, having complied with the community participation and consultation requirements, felt that the resource that the plan would represent for bodies such as their local authority would be recognised. A contact officer in the local authority's economic team was assigned to this project but she left the council and was only replaced after the plan was completed. The majority of outside help for the Brightwell – cum – Sotwell parish plan came instead from Oxfordshire Rural Community Council with support also from district councillors.

### **2.1.3. Issues**

One of the key issues to emerge from the parish plan was the value the community placed on their only village shop and post office. In 2002 the owners of the premises decided to close this facility and despite an offer to purchase it as a shop, post office and café proceeded to seek to gain planning permission for conversion to a residential use. (Planning permission has subsequently been refused for such a change on the grounds that it would lead to the loss of a community facility). The resultant removal of any opportunity for casual social interaction during the day, which the closure of the shop and post office has caused, has dealt a significant blow to community cohesiveness in the village. Alongside the retail and commercial service offered by the shop and post office were other community benefits, such as a prescriptions collections service, which have also suffered. Reinstating a village shop and post office emerged therefore as the prime objective of the Brightwell – cum – Sotwell parish plan.

Other issues which emerged as important to this community were the establishment of a parish website, which has now been completed, and a need to examine the feasibility of providing affordable housing in the parish.

The Brightwell – cum – Sotwell parish plan also includes a Parish Design Statement. The group had been inspired by the village of Wye in Kent, who in 2000 produced one of the earliest Village Design Statements. This document was adopted by the local planning authority and is used as Supplementary Planning Guidance. Again the Oxfordshire group were working to influencing change and saw getting the Parish Design Statement adopted as supplementary planning guidance, as is the norm for many such community-produced design statements across the country, a key aim making it one of their urgent actions in the parish plan action plan.

### **2.1.4. Impact**

On completion the plan was sent to every household in the parish, to planning officers, district and county councillors, neighbouring parishes, Local Strategic Partnership stakeholders and the Rural Community Council. The group reported that it had been well received but were disappointed with the response from the local planning authority who, due to what they were told were 'resources' issues, have not adopted the parish plan as was the group's aim in line with the benefits of the process listed by the Countryside Agency. Such problems with the implementation and influence of the plan as a working document within the planning system has allowed those in the minority in the village who had believed that there is no point in trying to influence change and those with low expectations that their voices will be listened to, to feel

vindicated and those who put considerable work into the production of the plan on a voluntary basis for three years to feel let down.

The local planning authority, South Oxfordshire District Council, explained that it was the view of the Council that parish plans don't fit into the statutory planning system and that procedural requirements make it difficult to adopt parish plans as Supplementary Planning Guidance, and that it was both disingenuous and inappropriate of the Countryside Agency to imply that such documents could be adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance given the nature of their content and scope. (Our research has revealed this view to be widespread across the local planning authorities of the south east region).

Oxfordshire Rural Community Council believes this gap between the expectations of communities who have undertaken the parish plan process in good faith believing such documents will strengthen their voices in the planning system, and the response of that statutory system, is problematic and stems in part from a lack of knowledge but that it is improving, though more slowly than is the case with other stakeholders. Their community development worker Anton Nath believes that parish plans represent the best catalyst for energising communities, acting as they do to engage communities on a proactive agenda but should be seen as the vehicles for community empowerment and combating social exclusion rather than an end in themselves. As such, in the case of Brightwell – cum – Sotwell and other parish plans completed in Oxfordshire they have enhanced the relationship between rural communities and the Rural Community Council to the extent that it continues to support and promote the production of parish plans and has put funding in place for such work to which parishes can apply.

The Brightwell – cum – Sotwell Parish Design Statement has not been adopted by the local planning authority as Supplementary Planning Guidance, the authority choosing instead to rely solely on its own District Design Guide when determining planning applications in the parish. Given that the Parish Design Statement has not achieved the status within the statutory planning system that the group had aimed for, this has again resulted in a feeling of being let down by the group with expectations not being matched with reality. The community is instead now working to produce a sheet which they wish to see sent out by the district council with every set of planning application forms for development in the parish, drawing attention to the parish design statement and the parish plan. They also wish to see any developer seeking permission to develop in the parish having to state in writing as part of their application how the scheme fits in with the local context. Negotiations on this are in progress with South Oxfordshire District Council.

On the issue of the village shop and post office the community has worked hard to resolve this problem and continues to do so. A post office has now, for example, been established in the village pub two mornings a week, with coffee and tea available, and a coffee morning has also been set up by the church as a direct result of the plan identifying the lack of meeting opportunities resulting from the closure of the shop and the need to work to resolve this community concern. The issue of affordable housing is also being actively addressed by the local community, in conjunction with the rural community council and the local authority. It is unclear whether such actions would have happened in any event without the parish plan but the important role played by the plan in providing evidence of the extent and nature of community priorities and concerns, and support for the resolution of these concerns, for outside agencies is clear and remains an important ongoing community resource and evidence base.

#### **2.1.5. Lessons Learnt**

This community has seen many benefits flowing from the process of producing a parish plan. There has been an increase in the involvement in village societies and an increased sense of community, enhancing social capital. The group remains committed to the process and maintains an extensive knowledge of the statutory planning system, even during the current confusing upheaval and the introduction of the Local Development Framework system. Meetings are held every six months to review progress on the action plan and to ensure the process maintains a forward-looking momentum. But there is an overall sense of being let down by, and being denied a genuine interface with, the planning system. Having worked to take advantage of the opportunity presented to communities to be pro-actively involved, there is a sense of disappointment that the admittedly good relationship with the local planning authority continues to take the form of a pre-set agenda to which communities can only react.

The local planning authority acknowledges the parish plan process is beneficial in giving an indication of community concerns but given the fact that the remit of a parish plan is more holistic in the issues it can raise and address than that of a development plan, sees no clear fit between the two processes. The new planning system in any event, in the view of South Oxfordshire District Council, makes any strong role for parish plans over and above being a material consideration in planning decisions, impossible.

The Rural Community Council believes the parish plan process to be very beneficial to rural communities and feels that it should continue – and is providing funding for communities to this end. In taking the scheme forward the Rural Community Council are encouraging

applicants to use a wide range of inclusive participatory techniques, something they felt was lacking before, and assisting them in addressing social exclusion issues.

## **2.2 Hambledon, Surrey**

### **2.2.1. Introduction**

Waverley District was formed in 1974 from three main communities and covers the largest geographical area of any Surrey District. It is totally parished, with 20 parishes. Ian Lynch, Corporate Services Manager at Waverley District Council, describes how from the outset the District Council recognised the independence of communities and the need to understand the relationship between villages and centres. Waverley commissioned Henley Forecasting Centre to report on planning for local change. This revealed that Waverley was facing decline unless they strengthened the economic focus and supported local communities. Their political commitment is reflected in them having an elected member who combines local economy with parishes.

The parish of Hambledon, with a mere 596 inhabitants is in many ways a bit of a surprise. Most residences lack mains drainage and mains gas and yet it is set within the heart of leafy Surrey. It does not classify as a settlement (the houses are dotted around) but it does support a village shop which is the hub of the local community. As in other cases, it was the money from the Countryside Agency that galvanised Hambledon into producing a parish plan. They didn't expect any formal adoption. Their intention was to assemble evidence that they could use in making cases to other agencies for the things they want.

### **2.2.2 Process**

The Hambledon parish appraisal and plan process took 18 months to complete, the average for the parish plan process across the country. They had a couple of public meetings at the beginning and conclusion of the appraisal process, one of which was facilitated by an external facilitator. They were delighted with their 84% response rate to the questionnaire, which elicited the information contained in the plan.

The parish has also been working to identify housing sites for affordable housing. Following a successful development in 1990, they asked the Rural Housing Trust to do another survey

which identified 15 potential owners/tenants. Unfortunately, to date a second site has not become available.

### **2.2.3. Issues**

One of the biggest issues was that of traffic speeding through the village. Jane Woolley, the Parish Clerk, says Highways Officer Mike Richardson, seconded from Surrey Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty to Surrey Highways, couldn't have been more helpful. He came along to a public meeting, helped work up ideas and came back for two more public meetings. Both the parish community and the Highways wanted a minimal approach.

At one meeting the District Officer present offered the community the opportunity to complete a questionnaire designed by Surrey County Council. While well intended, this had the effect of shifting the dynamics of the meeting, from one in which the professionals were there to support the local community in solving their own problems, to the professionals consulting the community in order to solve problems on the community's behalf. This is a subtle difference, but a crucial one, and in the view of Mike Richardson, set the process back. The community started to voice objections and the case to the District for inclusion in the County Transport Plan was weakened. Then the Parish called another meeting and made it clear that what was suggested was only a trial, and asked if the proposal could be included in the 2005/6 Highways programme.

### **2.2.4. Impact**

Initially, to their disappointment, progress on traffic calming has been limited. However, the proposals they have evolved now have their community's support and discussions are continuing. The parish plan was sent to local agencies, but there was no expectation from the community that it would be formally adopted. As far as they are concerned, it simply helps them make the case for things they want (fairly modest expectations therefore). Incorporation into the Waverley borough community plan was not a primary aim of their parish planning, since they recognised from the start that they would be one of 20 parishes and at this stage the parish clerk at least views the strategy as largely '*motherhood and apple pie*'.

### **2.2.5. Lessons Learnt**

Three lessons emerge from exploring the traffic calming issue in some depth. The first relates to the importance of keeping the community as the problem solvers, as described above. The second relates to the criteria for decisions on traffic calming matters. The Parish Clerk commented that it might have been useful to know what scoring system was used for

determining relative priorities. However, our inquiries suggest that unfortunately the method for determining priorities is very complex (technically) and professionals find it difficult to explain in layman's terms. This raises an important issue : which is more important, to have a system which is fair but opaque, or one which is less well balanced but transparent?

Following up the progress on the traffic calming issue led us to discover a third lesson that we think is worthy of mention. Peter Hitchens, from Surrey County Council Highways, mentioned that the authority had noticed over the years that they had often been very effective at traffic calming but that residents hated the look of the various bumps and signs. They also noticed that engineers with drawings and technical terms talked a different language than local residents. So they started something called the Jigsaw Exercise.

Phase one was to offer each parish two rolls of colour film in which they were invited to record images which denoted their sense of place, and where the issues lay (dangerous corners, congestion points etc). Then Jigsaw phase two invited parishes in the Surrey Hills district to go out and about photographing the sort of traffic calming measures they do and don't like, the good the bad and the ugly, as they called it, so that highways engineers have a better understanding of what matters to local residents. This struck us as an excellent example of a local authority taking the relationship with residents seriously. Rob Fairbanks, AONB officer employed by Surrey County Council but funded by the Countryside Agency, says the process has revealed a remarkable consensus on what constitutes a sensitive and fitting approach to highways matters.

## **2.3 Harrietsham, Kent**

### **2.3.1. Introduction**

A desire to understand the needs and wishes of the whole community inspired Harrietsham parish council to produce what became the Harrietsham Parish Plan. Harrietsham village lies to the east of Maidstone in the heart of the transport corridor to the Kent ports. The village has experienced considerable upheavals in recent years with the completion of the M20 motorway in the 1990s followed by the construction of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link, both of which run through the parish.

The parish plan process began here in 2000 with a number of new parish councillors joining the council and wanting to ensure that decisions taken by the council reflected the views of

the majority of the community they served. Following a meeting held by Kent Rural Community Council on community appraisals Harrietsham decided to embark on an exercise to gather as much evidence as possible about what their residents wanted from and for their community and to collect evidence that would help those who make decisions affecting the village.

Following the release of the Rural White Paper and the launch of the national parish plan initiative the goal of this community exercise moved from a community appraisal and became the production of a parish plan for Harrietsham. The parish council successfully applied for a grant from the Countryside Agency. As with other parishes we have studied, the availability of this grant was vital to ensuring the completion of the project in Harrietsham. Although the parish council in this instance raised £3,000 through the precept for the plan, as Julie Cook of the Harrietsham Parish Plan Steering Group explained, the process of producing the plan was in itself so demanding and time consuming that the group could not have found the time or the energy to fund-raise as well.

Harrietsham had been active in community consultation in the past, having completed a Housing Needs Survey in the past and the adjacent parish of Lenham had carried out a village appraisal in 1996 (the two villages are in the same electoral ward and thus have been able to share their knowledge and experiences of community engagement processes). The parish never saw a role for their parish plan in the statutory planning system and thus have not sought to have the Harrietsham parish plan adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance, using it instead successfully as an evidence base to draw in funding and support for a range of community projects. The local planning authority sees a similar evidence or local information role for the document but as it is not adopted emphasise that it doesn't carry any weight in planning decisions.

### **2.3.2. Process**

The first step in the preparation of the Harrietsham Parish Plan was the holding of a public meeting to allow a wide range of views to be taken on board. This meeting, jointly chaired by the parish council and Kent Rural Community Council, was attended by 120 people and led to the formation of a steering group to take the project forward and oversee the process.

The next step - a Planning for Real™ day, facilitated by the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, proved to be a significant element of the parish planning experience in Harrietsham. This event was one of the first times the Planning for Real™ process had been used by a rural community in producing a parish plan and is widely used as a good example

of community engagement techniques. Children of Harrietsham primary school built a giant 7 x 2 metre model of the village which was then used as the focus of a drop-in day attended by more than 300 people. Every organisation in the village was invited to come along and local medical and policing services were also involved. Borough councillors and officers were present to answer questions and take part in the discussions which the model generated. At this event residents were encouraged to point out problems, opportunities and things they would like to change about the village. More than 4,000 issues were raised. In this way the Planning for Real™ day allowed the steering group to ensure that the questionnaire that followed focused on the major issues raised by the community.

The launch of the parish plan project in Harrietsham was complicated by an ongoing issue at the time involving the future of the Harrietsham primary school. The Steering Group worked hard to keep the issue separate from the parish plan project and to prevent it from dominating consultation exercises. That this was ultimately successful was due in part to the use of the Planning for Real™ process which served to unite the school, which built the model, with the wider community.

### **2.3.3. Issues**

Perhaps the most significant issue to emerge from the parish plan process in Harrietsham and the one on which most progress has been made was the recognition of the need to involve the youth of the parish and to address the issues that they face. The parish plan process revealed a lot more young people living in the parish than many had realised. This led Harrietsham, in 2002, to become the first parish in Kent to establish a Youth Parish Council, with its own budget. This body has now been in existence for three years and was the first direct practical success of the parish plan. The Youth Parish Council in turn contributed to the parish plan process, carrying out its own questionnaire survey, and has been instrumental in a glass recycling programme in the village with its members distributing leaflets and collection buckets.

### **2.3.4. Impact**

Much of the direct impact of the Harrietsham parish plan process has been felt in the field of youth facilities. The data and evidence provided in the parish plan was used to attract European Leader Plus funding for two years for the Beat Project – a company which visits the village once a fortnight to develop music, film and drama skills with local young people. This project has gathered its own momentum with those children who had been involved at the outset now involved in the management of the project and being given the skills themselves to train and work with those younger members who have joined more recently. The borough

councillor for Harrietsham, Janetta Sams, is clear that this funding would not have been received without the parish plan and the evidence base that it provided. Harrietsham's Youth Parish Council has also inspired the provision of parish-based Youth Forums, which are currently being established across Maidstone borough.

The plan has become a working document for the parish council which has adopted it as a form of business plan with a consequent commitment to meet the actions set out in its action plan. The Steering Group believes that by demonstrating their desire to be pro-active and take responsibility for issues within their control the relationship with the local authority and other stakeholders has improved.

There have been indirect benefits too – the plan is talked about and has, the Steering Group feel, put the village on the map. Any cynicism of the process ceased when the plan was published. Given the number of traffic issues raised through the plan the community now regularly invites the Highways Agency to the parish and works with them on highway concerns.

### **2.3.5. Lessons Learnt**

The Harrietsham Parish Plan has successfully demonstrated how the parish planning process can act as an evidence and data gathering vehicle to draw in funding for community projects. As we have found with other parish plans we have studied, the benefits of producing a parish plan for this community are derived as much from the process as from the final document. Although it is in the field of youth facilities where the benefits of the parish plan in this village have been most clearly felt, Harrietsham's parish plan has also served to enhance the social capital of the parish with many instances of help in-kind emerging during the process. Throughout the process Harrietsham has remained realistic about the role their parish plan can play in the planning system.

## **2.4 Pangbourne, Berkshire**

### **2.4.1. Introduction**

Pangbourne lies on the south bank of the river Thames, seven miles from Reading in Berkshire and is justifiably proud of its Village Plan – one of the earliest and the first produced in Berkshire, which is used as an example of good practice both locally and across the south

east region. A large village of approximately 3,000 people, Pangbourne had not undertaken a community engagement exercise of this kind before beyond a short four page village appraisal many years ago.

In November 2001 West Berkshire Council, the Countryside Agency and the Community Council for Berkshire invited parish councils to a meeting to explain the concept of parish or village plans and the funding available and to encourage parish councils to start work. Pangbourne Parish Council, which had been giving serious consideration to producing a village design statement at this time, welcomed the opportunity that a village plan presented for three reasons. Firstly, that it would provide input from their community into the emerging West Berkshire Community Plan, secondly the parish council wanted to gather the views of their community on what was important to them and what they wanted to change or improve, and thirdly saw the usefulness of a process which would assemble evidence required for future funding applications for such issues as an extension to their village hall. Interestingly, in relation to this research, Pangbourne did not expect or aim for their village plan to be adopted as supplementary planning guidance by the local planning authority. In their view such an outcome was more applicable to village design statements and that parish plans fed into the community planning and not the statutory development planning system. This was the position of the local authority from the start of the process and the parish council was happy with this.

#### **2.4.2 Process**

A working party was set up and led by the parish council with members drawn from across the community. Grants were received from both the Countryside Agency and West Berkshire Council who offered funding to the first parishes to decide to embark on the process of producing a parish plan. Considerable in-kind resources were received throughout the project. The availability of the grants was crucial to ensuring the Pangbourne village plan got off the ground. As we have found with other parishes, the option to fund such a venture through raising the parish precept was not considered feasible given both the scale of funding required and the fact that the process was a new one with no proven benefits.

The process got underway with a drop-in event held in the village, attended by more than 200 visitors, to get an idea of the key issues of concern to the community. Working Groups were then established to address these issues – village services and facilities, environment and development, people and community and traffic, transport and pedestrians. Subsequently a questionnaire based on these issues was distributed to every household in the village with a high 62% response level. A 'Health Check' was conducted to establish the current status of the identified issues, a local computer company analysed the results of the questionnaire and

a second drop-in event was held to present the results of the questionnaire process. This information was then used to draw up the action plan together with results of a survey of river and hotel visitors undertaken over a bank holiday weekend and meetings which were held with local organisations and businesses and with officers of West Berkshire Council. The village plan working party welcomed the support received from the local district councillor from the start, who they feel promoted the cause of the village plan to great effect.

### **2.4.3. Issues**

The issues that arose from the Pangbourne Village Plan are not markedly different from those that currently concern many rural communities. The appearance of the village is considered important, as well as safety of pavements and street lighting, to the majority of local residents. Traffic issues figure highly and care for the elderly has been shown to be very important to this community due to the high percentage of retired people living in the village. The village plan and its action plan also demonstrates the desire to retain the character of the village through the priority given in the plan to the production of a village design statement (now underway), and to preserve the areas of open countryside that separate Pangbourne from neighbouring settlements and that residents enjoy. The benefits of having countryside within walking distance is keenly felt and reflected in the village plan's support for bodies such as the Pang Valley Countryside Project.

Although these are issues that may be prevalent in many villages, in Pangbourne's case the community has now got a strong evidence base for taking these issues forward in a pro-active way and to engage with local authorities and stakeholders on a clearly established positive agenda drawn up by the community themselves.

### **2.4.4. Impact**

The acceptance of the Pangbourne Village Plan as a working document provides many lessons in how the parish planning process can be of mutual benefit to both communities and local authorities and to the relationship between communities and the many stakeholders involved in the provision of services and functions on their behalf.

West Berkshire has proved to be one of the leading authorities in the South East in promoting, supporting and funding the parish planning process. Currently there are 38 parish plans being developed or completed in the district, with parishes in West Berkshire securing 12% of the Countryside Agency's entire South East region parish plan budget. Practical support and advice is given to parishes by Community Action West Berkshire (CAWB) and West Berkshire Council. A full time parish planning development worker post at CAWB has been established

and a Parish Plans Toolkit has been produced to provide West Berkshire communities with locally relevant information and support to guide the production of their parish plans.

None of this was however in place when Pangbourne completed their plan in 2003, and being the first to be completed meant that for both the local authority and the local community there was a period of uncertainty as to how make best use of the document. A six month lull followed the presentation of the plan to the local council at the local area forum and the delivery of a A5 summary plan to every household before an open review meeting was set up by the parish. This was chaired by the local MP and attended by councillors, chief officers and the chief executive of West Berkshire Council and other stakeholders including the primary care trust. This commitment at the highest level from the council has been a distinctive feature of West Berkshire's approach to the parish planning initiative and is also a tribute to the form and content of Pangbourne's plan which set a benchmark to enable a non-confrontational and mutually beneficial relationship to develop.

At this first meeting the local authority committed to meet as many of the actions in the village plan as possible in 12-18 months and two months after the initial meeting a council chief officer and his team met with the parish council to agree the details of the action proposals and timescales for action. (The local MP also picked up the issue of home care for the elderly which he is working on). Ongoing follow up meetings have been held with council officers and a formal review meeting has taken place with West Berkshire's Chief Executive.

The parish planning process has also been enthusiastically supported and encouraged by both the Community Council for Berkshire and Community Action West Berkshire. A parish planning development worker post has been established, funded by the West Berkshire Partnership, to work with both local communities and the council on meeting the West Berkshire Partnership's aim of making sure that all parishes have the opportunity to establish robust parish plans with deliverable action plans. Quarterly research events are staged by the council which have proved to be beneficial at the consultation and action planning stages of parish plan preparation. Wide-ranging support is available to parishes from CAWB including assistance with obtaining Ordnance Survey maps, and contact names and numbers of council officers who want to talk to parish planning groups at the early stages in their plan process (on issues such as rights of way, archaeology, planning and recreation) through a quarterly parish plans newsletter. The commitment from the council to the parish plan process is also a financial one. West Berkshire Council has set up a fund of £150,000 to assist in the implementation of parish plans over the next three years. Any parish planning group that has

presented their completed plan to their local area forum and has an agreed action plan in place can apply for individual grants of up to £5,000 at a time.

#### **2.4.5. Lessons Learnt**

Pamela Bale of Pangbourne Parish Council who chaired the Pangbourne Village Plan Working Party believes that the village plan process has caused a sea change in the relationship between the district council and the village. The council realised that they weren't being confronted on perceived failings and the community itself has a clearer understanding of what are their own responsibilities. Sarah Ward, Parish Planning Development Worker for CAWB believes that West Berkshire is very tuned into the potential of parish plans and that parishes including Pangbourne have benefited from the commitment to community engagement at a high and decision making level of the council.

The achievements of Pangbourne Village Plan have included the establishment of a Business Forum, a successful Christmas event which is now an annual village event, the provision of new litter bins and hanging baskets and the placing of copies of planning applications in the village library. Work is ongoing on larger issues including the preparation of a village design statement and transport problems such as improving access to the railway station for the less able.

One of the few issues that Pangbourne would do differently next time would be in the area of involving the youth. This area of parish planning has seen many innovative and successful approaches in recent years. Purley for example, also in West Berkshire, went beyond the traditional questionnaire and consulted with over 400 young people aged 3 – 18 years as part of their parish plan project through the creation of a Planning for Real™ model of the parish by the local Beaver Scouts group, a drop-in event for older children including a video diary area, a series of photographs to promote discussion and a series of controversial statements for people to respond to on a 'graffiti table', a short questionnaire distributed through the local secondary school and a photographic project where young people were given disposable cameras and asked to take photographs of the area, their favourite and worst places and examples of facilities and amenities that they would like to see locally. All this information has been included in their parish plan. A 'Big Buzz Challenge' has also recently been launched by CAWB to fund innovative methods of youth consultation through art, drama, music and other mediums.

The future therefore looks good for parish planning in West Berkshire, building on the successful start given to the process by the Pangbourne Village Plan. Parish plans that have

been completed are being given support in achieving their action plans and those that are now getting underway are being put in contact with those such as Pangbourne who have already completed theirs. A realistic role for such plans within the community and development planning systems has been clearly defined by the council and is supported and acknowledged by both communities and stakeholders. Increasingly innovative ways of involving hard to reach groups such as the youth are being undertaken – providing a useful source of consultation technique options for local authorities, increasingly charged with ensuring effective community consultation is built into statutory processes, to draw on.

With so much support for the parish planning process now in place, and working successfully for all sides in West Berkshire, the cessation of the parish plan grant available from the Countryside Agency has been keenly felt. It is hoped by those involved in parish planning here at community, local authority, community council and local stakeholder levels that a new funding stream can be swiftly established at a national level in order to support the national community engagement agenda and to build on the successes already in place in West Berkshire.

## **2.5 Sedlescombe, East Sussex**

### **2.5.1. Introduction**

Sedlescombe is a village of between 1300 and 1400 people, about 7 miles north of Hastings. It has had the same Parish Clerk for 30 years, Pauline Raymond, and there is a long history of survey work. They did a Village Appraisal in 1989, a Market Towns health check in 2002 and a Safer Villages scheme questionnaire in 2002 before embarking on the parish plan survey in 2002. The District Council did a Housing Needs Survey in 2001, the results of which were incorporated in the Parish Plan. The parish council decided to prepare a new parish plan when the Countryside Agency grants became available.

### **2.5.2 Process**

The Parish Council took the decision to go ahead with a parish plan in October 2001. The whole thing was completed by December the following year, the fastest time scale we came across. Their experience in doing plans of various types was immediately brought to bear

when they identified the questions they wanted to ask, making sure they didn't duplicate what had already been asked in other surveys. They took into account that local residents had received four questionnaires in a couple of months from various local government departments. As well as sending out questionnaires to every household, they also sent another one to every local business and another for completion by visitors to the area. Every village organization was also asked to comment and many of them did. The school was involved, as was the Pestalozzi International Village. Consultation was, therefore, carried out across all the areas of village life.

Statistical analysis was contracted out to a professional, funded out of the Countryside Agency grant.

The whole process was driven by the Parish Council. They seemed to enjoy enough confidence from the community to be trusted to do a good enough job. Staff from Action in Rural Sussex, formerly Sussex Rural Community Council, facilitated a workshop on tourism but were otherwise in the background. There was little contact with the District Council staff in the production of the plan, although copies were sent to the council and other agencies after it was produced.

When the appraisal was complete, they grouped the results loosely on the District Council's Annual Performance Plan key aims. The result is an extremely comprehensive and professional looking plan (which runs to 75 pages).

### **2.5.3. Issues**

A big issue for the village was crime and the fear of crime. Close working with the local police eventually resulted in the appointment of a Community Safety Warden (now 'Police Community Support Officer'), an appointment that, in common with many other places, has been regarded by the community as a significant success. Relationships with police have improved, and they now have a signed agreement.

### **2.5.4. Impact**

The parish council uses the plan all the time, reviewing progress regularly every year, and updating it. In effect it is a rolling business plan, a management document for the council, and is used directly to inform the annual report.

Apart from the success on community safety, there was a significant achievement in the establishment of a walking bus. There were serious concerns about congestion outside the

school gates. When discussions with the school were first opened they were asked if they had a transport plan. The head teacher said she had never heard of a transport plan. But through working together they helped to produce a plan which included the walking bus.

### **2.5.5. Lessons Learnt**

Due no doubt in part to their long experience in locality based planning, the expectations they had were very realistic, and most importantly, were broadly matched by the community they served. The parish council were confident in their own ability to deliver a quality plan, and from the start saw the process more in terms of business planning, which any public organisation needs to stay focused and accountable. They did consult the community, albeit in a fairly modest way, and the parish council held a firm grip on the process throughout.

Given this particular match in expectations between the community and the parish council, the end result was a success and stimulated some notable achievements. It's not possible to say, though, that these wouldn't have happened without the parish plan.

The interesting feature of the Sedlescombe approach is that it was so tightly managed and yet is one of the most professional plans we came across, with extensive action points under each heading. For us the case highlights the variety of purposes that can be sought through the parish planning process, and how important it is to ensure that the purposes chosen in a particular locality need to be matched not only with the agencies but within the community itself.

## **2.6 Wickham, Hampshire**

### **2.6.1. Introduction**

Wickham lies within the Winchester District in Hampshire, and has a resident population of about 2,600 people. The area includes Knowle, a new estate about a mile away, which has its own residents' association.

In 2000/01 Wickham drew up a Village Design Statement, led by James Crick, Chairman of the Wickham Society. They also did a separate housing needs survey, which amongst other things was successful in identifying an Exception Site for 12 houses for local people. This example of community participation in the development planning process has worked well,

with both parish and district council staff saying how valuable it was to have the planning flexibility which applies to Exception Sites. The houses are now being built, and will be available for rent only for local people.

Visitors to Wickham cannot fail to be impressed with the generous size of Wickham Community Centre, which was established about 20 years ago, after a community led planning appraisal. These two projects have resulted in a community that knows that local action can make a difference. In deciding to produce a parish plan the parish council wanted a document that would shape the next 20 years, and could be updated roughly every five years.

And so in the summer of 2002, Wickham Parish Council, supported by local organisations, decided to undertake a new parish appraisal. The aim was to identify local problems and issues of concern to residents and to build an action plan to address the findings.

### **2.6.2 Process**

The beginnings of the appraisal and parish planning process were all a bit painful. Winchester Area Community Action (WACA) appointed a co-ordinator to mobilise the community to produce a parish plan. The post was funded by Hampshire County Council, Winchester City Council and Mid Hants Primary Care Trust. While the intentions were good, the experience of the parish was that this attempt to orchestrate planning at the community level failed to engage the community, and the whole process felt very complicated. The Co-ordinator convened focus groups but these did not, in the view of the Parish Clerk, add much of value. The partners took what seemed like an age to decide which questions should be included in the questionnaire. The group found the number of questions overwhelming, and in the end doubted that issues such as what sector people worked in actually mattered that much.

To compound matters the local parish team steering the appraisal fell apart because one died, one moved away, one fell ill. The questionnaire was eventually undertaken in April 2003. They did not find the software advocated by Countryside Agency helpful, and ended up employing someone to number crunch the results.

Some people in Wickham responded to a public meeting to discuss findings, but they didn't find a way to engage with the community in the other parts of the parish. One of the local District councillors was the portfolio holder for community services, but they didn't engage with her particularly. The community feels that the best part of the process was the Youth Survey done through Hampshire Youth Service. Teams spoke with youngsters, and got them really involved.

The results of the appraisal were written up and plan was finally published in November 2004, with the Countryside Agency funding the printing. The whole process had taken two and a half years and the group had found it hard to sustain the momentum and enthusiasm over such an extended period.

In this case study we found that, in the main, contact with developers was adversarial and unsatisfying. As Steve Tilbury, Director of Community Services for Winchester City Council, commented:

*'Communities assume developers are evil, and the council should protect them from them. Those writing Parish Plans won't even talk to developers...there's just too much antipathy. For example, the prevailing view is that Developers should not be involved in funding the Village Design Statements....communities just feel they cannot be trusted'*

The exception was the consultation over the Exception Site, where the planning context was much more relaxed and the community felt able to influence what is currently being built.

### **2.6.3. Issues**

The common issues such as traffic, litter, public transport, community safety and health feature in this plan as expected. While the parish can mobilise its own resources to make a difference in some of these areas, the impression we gained from enquiries was that the opportunities to grapple with the more systemic problems in the locality have been elusive. Despite the relative affluence of an area like Wickham, there are pockets of deprivation, and problems of isolation can affect any social group. The estate at Knowle was cited as a particular example. There is inadequate public transport from Knowle, the service is not viable, but there is a real need amongst those that need it. The density of housing is determined largely by government policy and local communities cannot solve the problems they identify.

### **2.6.4. Impact**

Winchester City Council has adopted the village design statement but not the parish plan. The community didn't really expect the Council to adopt it, they see it as focused more on social than land use issues. Steve Tilbury, Director of Community Services Winchester City Council comments:

*'Village Design Statements are easier to get your teeth into, more tangible. Parish Plans less tangible, involve more agencies. We can't endorse them as supplementary planning guidance as they stand....there isn't an obvious place for parish plans to fit. For this*

*round of community strategy things have evolved in parallel rather than as a nested hierarchy...it's more of a notion than a reality.'*

On the positive side, the parish council are pleased to have assembled the evidence they need to fight their corner on the issues that matter to them. The appraisal helped them to make the case for an IT drop in centre within the Community Centre. They got money from the Children's Fund and the BIG Lottery Fund to convert the old shower room, and it's now an IT suite, used by approximately 34 children after school.

On a more negative note, relationships between agencies and the community haven't improved during the course of the project. Volunteer groups didn't get over the co-ordinator issue, and on their part agencies feel frustrated in trying to work with the community.

### **2.6.5 Lessons Learnt**

Although the Wickham case may not be a best practise example, there are a number of useful lessons to be learned.

At the beginning the Parish Clerk felt a major drawback of the co-ordinator appointment was that the person appointed didn't live in the community (although others argued this could have been helpful) and, for her, didn't meet the requirements of the job description; more support from the agencies for a capable local person would have been better.

*'The co-ordinator could not also be the facilitator, there was a conflict of interest. I wish we had been more confident about our own ability and told the agencies to back off...they offered help but didn't deliver, so high expectations were not met.'*

The community also felt that the number of questions suggested in the questionnaire was excessive and the emphasis on statistical accuracy and software to process it was a distraction. Guidance on just choosing questions that were important *to them* might have helped. The feedback from this community points to the importance of the process being conceived as primarily a *social* process, informed by evidence, rather than a quasi scientific process which obscures the woods for the trees. A summary of other people's experiences would, in the opinion of the Parish Clerk, also have been helpful.

Steve Tilbury at Winchester City Council, feels that to be more effective the planning process needs to be more challenging. He recognises that too many parish plans and community strategies read like anytown's aspirational wish list, and could be written in advance following a one day visit.

*'A lot of people are against the idea of a parish plan anticipating change and want things to stay as they are. How much forward looking is there really in parish or community planning?'*

It seems to us that paradoxically this arises partly from an obsession of seeing citizens as customers drawing up a shopping list. But citizens are also electors; sometimes they are co-producers of services; and often problem solvers. A big step towards a more challenging parish planning system might be accomplished if local agencies (led in particular by local councils) were pro-active in feeding in planning and market thresholds at the outset of the appraisal process e.g. how many houses justify a shop, bus route etc. Such information could be injected into the community's deliberations early on so that creative solutions could be sought through the planning process, including looking for collaborative trade offs with neighbouring parishes.

### **3. Conclusions, Recommendations and Questions**

#### **3.1 Matched expectations**

The case studies explored revealed very different expectations about what parishes wanted to achieve from their parish plans and specifically in the importance they attach to influencing the planning system. We found parish plans can be approached as *a tool*

- for seeking project funding (Harrietsham)
- for managing the parish council's business (Sedlescombe, Pangbourne)
- for influencing changes to the built and social environment (Brightwell-cum-Sotwell)
- for strengthening the democratic mandate of the parish council (Pangbourne, Harrietsham)
- for providing the impetus for local community action and community spirit (Brightwell-cum-Sotwell, Pangbourne)
- for setting out the parish's case for influencing other agencies (Hambledon, Wickham)

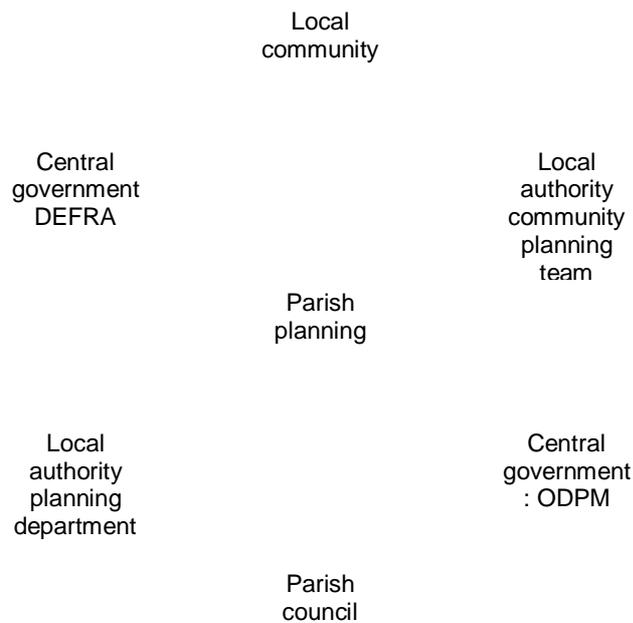
and in one case (Pangbourne) we found that it was also used as *a process* for *mutual* influence in the strategies, plans and policies of all the main actors in the locality.

We think this variety is healthy, and indicates that purposes are being differentiated locally. However, it also became clear to us that what matters most is whether the purposes a parish establishes are **matched** elsewhere in the planning system. Where they were (at Pangbourne and Sedlescombe particularly) the outcomes for all parties were rewarding. Where they were

not (Brightwell-cum-Sotwell) the outcomes are frustrating and social capital is diminished rather than reinforced.

We detected six (at least) main protagonists who make up the parish planning context:

- central government...ODPM;
- central government...DEFRA
- the local authority planning function;
- the local community strategy making machinery (local strategic partnerships, community planning teams etc);
- parish councils,
- communities themselves.



There are several relationships in this web (which is admittedly simplistic) where we discovered aims can be non-aligned. Outside this particular study, we have come across examples of where alignment was lacking between the parish council and the community, and the community's efforts to exercise real change were frustrated by a parish council whose interests were elsewhere. At Brightwell-cum-Sotwell, the aims of the parish and the local authority planners were clearly not aligned. As explained in our introduction, the planning

policy framework laid down by central government is not currently aligned with the advice given to parishes by either local authorities or the Countryside Agency and, as significantly, is not consistent across government planning guidance issued to local planning authorities.

**Recommendation:** *It would be a great step forward if the relevant national bodies could agree the advice they give to parishes so that there was a greater chance of discovering a shared purpose.*

**Recommendation:** *At a local level, before parish planning begins, there could be an encouragement for all the parties to have a pre planning dialogue so that expectations of each other are matched.*

### 3.2 Moving upstream

Each of the parish plans we studied was an attempt by the community to get involved as early as possible in what is seen by most as a linear planning process. None of the plans were triggered by an immediate threat or by a sense of trying to prevent change or development, rather as Brightwell–cum-Sotwell explained, to *influence* change. We noticed a variety of approaches being taken to influence local agencies. Most conceive of the process as a one way street (parishes attempting to influence local councils). For them, the focus was on exercising *influence at the point of decision*. Only one (Pangbourne) conceived of it as a two (or more) way process, in which there was *joint* influence over the framing of the decisions themselves.

From recent research for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in relation to housing allocations<sup>8</sup> it is evident that the system as a whole benefits from engagement and dialogue as early as possible in the planning process. This was borne out by West Berkshire where we had the impression the parish council and the local council had both seen their working together as a *joint opportunity* to influence, *and be influenced*, by each other. There was a sense in Pangbourne of the two being in partnership from the outset, including authority-wide commitment and support from Chief Officers. Encounters between parishes and the council in West Berkshire are carefully stage managed so that the diversity of voices can be heard. The intention here seems to be to make sure that there is plenty of opportunity *upstream* to shape the nature of discussions, surface options and plan decision frameworks. This has the direct benefit of ensuring that discussions are rooted in realistic issue assessment by all sides, which in turn can offer an increased chance of local acceptance, or even ownership, of planning decisions further downstream in the process.

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<sup>8</sup> Cambridge Architectural Research (2004) Housing Futures : Informed Public Opinion

**Question:** *How can Local Authorities be rewarded and encouraged to enter into meaningful dialogue as early as possible in the planning process at the parish level?*

### **3.3 Parish planning ... or parish dreaming?**

One of the strong messages we had from the agencies concerned with parish planning was that at its least effective, parish planning can become an irrelevant and ill informed fantasy, where people invest a lot of time and energy in things, or 'wish lists', which have no realistic prospect of coming to pass. This can happen because there is insufficient stakeholder engagement, and the parish sets about the process in isolation. (We found that while most communities had engaged with their local councils, at neither Wickham nor Hambledon had they found it easy to engage with the Primary Care Trust for example and no one had engaged with local developers as part of the process. Local politicians only featured significantly at Harrietsham, Pangbourne and in the Wonersh story about saving the village shop).

But the process cannot be effective if carried out in isolation for parish plans are never starting with a blank sheet. Given that communities can be out of touch with political and economic realities, and planners and other agencies can be out of touch with the priorities and local knowledge of communities, for community engagement in the planning system to work for all involved the parameters in which the parish plan process will be working must be honestly addressed and agreed at the outset, as was the case in Harrietsham and Pangbourne.

Engaging with agencies takes time, something that is not in inexhaustible supply and not always easy given that parish planning is undertaken voluntarily in spare time predominantly, we found, by those in employment, and for it to work there has to be reciprocal effort and benefits on, and to, both sides. The more ambitious the plan, the more stakeholder engagement is required and while communities see potential benefits in engaging with other stakeholders, the benefits to agencies such as local planning authorities have yet to be clearly spelt out or encouraged. Inducements currently offered by government to local planning authorities are predominantly based on quantitative criteria, such as timescales for the determination of planning applications, and authorities, often understaffed and resourced, have yet to grasp the resource that parish plans can offer in terms of detailed local information and an increased acceptance, or even ownership of planning decisions.

**Question:** *How can some of the other voices in the system (developers, planners) be encouraged to enter into the dialogue at an earlier stage?*

### 3.4 Parish prompting

Issues we have found where the parish plan process feeds well into areas of planning concern include identification of sites for affordable housing (Brightwell-cum-Sotwell, Wickham) (although this is more often in conjunction with specific housing surveys); creating new footpaths/cycleways; walking buses; neighbourhood wardens (although again these results might have been achieved through vehicles other than parish plans); supporting rural economies and businesses (Pangbourne). There are some areas where it seems to take longer to translate aspiration into action such as traffic calming, and some, like public transport can seem intractable.

Even where agencies and parishes are engaged together, it is still possible for the process to default to a fantasy if the parties involved are not sufficiently challenging with one another, and either avoid difficult issues out of politeness or, the opposite, avoid moving forward because they are wedded to an adversarial approach.

Common concerns in all the parishes we visited included the speed of traffic, or congestion black spots, and the case for better public transport. For officers planning in any of these areas, a number of tests must be met before a locality can have any chance of a solution. In the case of traffic calming, not only must there be demonstrable community support but the data on traffic volumes and speeds has to meet certain thresholds before they have any chance of getting on the priority lists. In public transport, there has to be evidence that a new bus route will be viable. It is commonplace for viability to be assessed by reference to the number of households and other measurable factors. That means a certain number of residences are needed before a route can be established. This is as it should be. However, these thresholds are hard for the average citizen to discover. In the case of traffic, we were told by Surrey County Council that the thresholds are simply too complex to explain clearly to anyone who is not a professional highways engineer.

**Recommendation:** *When we discussed this issue, there was enthusiasm for something we have called parish prompting. This would involve each parish being given data on the thresholds relevant to its issues of concern, so that the parish can look creatively for ways to meet them. For example, it might prompt collaboration with a neighbouring parish, or even lead to a relaxing of development restrictions in order to achieve the optimum size for services to be available.*

### **3.5 Parish brokerage**

Combined with parish prompting, we saw a need for what we would call parish brokerage. The need for brokerage in partnership working contexts has been explored before, including for example by Jupp (in 'Working together' Demos, 2000), by Cherrett (for the Housing Corporation Rural Advisory Group 2002) and by the University of Gloucestershire (for the Countryside Agency 2004). We saw that need again here, where the potential for inter parish collaboration over common interests was flagged up (within the Winchester City district and by Oxfordshire Rural Community Council) and between agencies and parish councils. We came across a few cases where the brokerage role was performed, at least at District level, by the County Council's Community Planning team (e.g. West Sussex) and by the Rural Community Council in the case of West Berkshire and Oxfordshire, but at parish level such brokerage resources are harder to locate.

Where they were active, local elected members in general took an *advocacy* role on behalf of the community (in Harrietsham local councillors continue to act effectively in this way with agencies including the Highways Agency) rather than an *enabling* one, (where they would bridge to different organisations and across different interest groups). The one exception was again Pangbourne, where the local MP chaired the meeting called to take the parish plan and its action plan forward to the implementation stage.

**Question:** *How can parish brokerage be best promoted , perhaps using the services of the Rural Community Councils?*

### **3.6 Community participation**

Funding for parish plans through Rural Community Councils is increasingly only released when communities demonstrate that they intend to carry out innovative and wide-ranging community consultation techniques. We found particularly striking examples initiated by both parishes (Harrietsham, Brightwell-cum-Sotwell), and agencies (Surrey Highways, Community Action West Berkshire, Oxfordshire Rural Community Council). These should be a good source for local planning authorities now charged with consulting and involving the community in many different ways. Furthermore, all the communities we studied got a high response to their questionnaires. Parish Plans therefore have a strong democratic basis and such community action planning can often reach further than local authorities can.

However the whole business of community engagement is one which demands a high level of sophistication and awareness if it is to stand any chance of success. Mike Richardson, consultant deployed by Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty on traffic

management issues, who worked closely with Hambledon, talks of the subtlety involved in working closely with community interests. In his view, the professional is not there to consult them but to facilitate the community coming to its own solutions in conversation with the professionals. Our research case studies at Wickham and at Hambledon reveal where well intentioned but naïve attempts at community consultation can backfire. Such efforts can shift the onus of problem-solving from the community to the professionals, or worse, de-motivate the community from taking responsibility for their own futures.

The danger of ritualistic and ill-prepared (although well intentioned) engagement looks as if it may well grow. The government's enthusiasm for community participation has led to a new requirement for local authorities to account to Government Offices on how they are consulting communities. These requirements include complying with the methodology for consultation set out in a Council's Statement of Community Involvement as part of its Local Development Scheme.

We can understand the logic, and certainly the good intention here. But the effect of such *upward* accountability is to *displace* community accountability, and the process of community engagement becomes a hollow process, formulaic and top down. The irony is that Government Offices have a lot less experience than local authorities do of what constitutes effective local participation. Says Mike Richardson, who has experience both as a professional and an elected member for Epsom and Ewell, '*top down consultative processes just don't work.....I just cannot see the new arrangements working*'.

It also ignores the resource that parish planning represents in this area. To comply with funding requirements, parishes are having to look beyond the questionnaire/ public meeting approach and undertake innovative and wide-ranging community consultation techniques, aimed in part at tackling social exclusion issues (the approaches taken by Purley in West Berkshire to engaging with the youth of the parish, detailed earlier, is one such example). Such experiences can provide useful test- beds for local authorities who are themselves now obliged to consult and involve communities in ever more inventive ways.

**Question:** *How can expertise in productive forms of community engagement be made more widely available?*

**Question:** *Is the goal of increasing community participation best served by requirements on local authorities to account to Government Offices on the methodologies they use?*

### 3.7 The fit with Local Development Frameworks

The majority of planning departments consulted as part of the data gathering element of this research believed that it was unrealistic to expect parish plans to fit into the development planning system. Parish plans are more holistic in nature than development plans, frequently covering issues that are beyond the scope of the planning system. Furthermore, to be effective, parish planning need to stimulate a process of collaborative participation (as we found in West Berkshire) which can sit awkwardly within a development planning system which by seeing public participation as involving communities on the one hand and government on the other, encourages a more adversarial approach to participation.

All planning authorities spoken to were of the view that the adoption of parish plans as Supplementary Planning Documents under the new planning system was impossible (one authority going so far as to say it would be illegal), given the requirements and processes for such documents under the new system. Problems are also becoming evident as Councils must front-load both their Local Development Schemes, which will include any programme for Supplementary Planning Documents to be adopted, and their consultation processes, both of which will be subject to public inquiry. There seems little scope for community driven and initiated documents such as parish plans and village design statements, or indeed little evidence in the new system that Supplementary Planning Documents are produced by bodies other than local planning authorities.

For these reasons the ability of parish planning to add value to Local Development Frameworks<sup>9</sup> may be missed. Parish plans offer the means to enrich district level planning policies with village-specific proposals that respond to the particular characteristics of individual localities and communities. They can provide a level of detail that the local planning authority might be unable or unwilling to attempt, including locally specific criteria against which to judge planning applications. They might well also offer an increased chance of local acceptance, or even ownership of planning decisions. All in all parish planning can help to foster communities that are better informed about, and less antagonistic towards, the statutory development planning system, and at a time when there is a decline in trust in that system and a rise in interest in environmental issues this is quite a prize.

***Recommendation:*** *If Parish Plans are to play a role in this new planning system the nature and extent of this role needs urgent clarification.*

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<sup>9</sup> Stephen Owen and Malcolm Moseley, University of Gloucestershire (2003), 'Putting Parish Plans in their place'

### 3.8 The fit with Community Strategies

Given the poor prospects for parish plans influencing Local Development Frameworks, it is unsurprising that the helping agencies (like Countryside Agency, and the Improvement and Development Agency) have emphasised the role of parish plans in informing and influencing wider Community Strategies. In fact, of our six case studies, influencing Community Strategies was only an explicit aim in one of the parishes. In most cases, Community plans had been drawn up *in parallel* rather than informed by parish plans. In Sedlescombe it was suggested that the low number of parishes in East Sussex that had produced plans made it unrepresentative for District Councils to take into account the few that had. Harrietsham's parish plan was completed after the first Community Strategy for the Borough was produced though its key issues are now influencing the current review of this Strategy.

Even where there was an expectation of influence in Community Plans, this was described both by Community Planners and Parish Clerks more in terms of a paper exercise whereby an officer sits down and somehow extracts the main themes from all the parish plans to incorporate within the wider community strategy. We saw no evidence that, framed in this way, this was, or was likely to be, a productive process. It has little to do with participative dialogue, and reveals that plans are regarded more as inert 'things' than dynamic human processes, or conversations for action. There is all the difference in the world between 'having a strategy' and working together *with strategic intent*. Community Strategies themselves are most often defined as "*statements of the overall objectives*" (our italics), They are conceived as 'instruments', which, in the government's words, are somehow able to :

- *Improve the co-ordination of services delivered by many different bodies*
- *Respond to the concerns of local communities*
- *Deliver services in ways which suit the people who depend on them ('customer-focussed')*
- *Take account of the needs of future generations*<sup>10</sup>

Leaving the fit with Community Strategies until after the plan is cooked misses the point; it's already too late by that stage.

**Question:** *How can we best encourage a shift of focus where what is valued is not the paper product but the process of mutual challenge, learning and problem solving?*

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<sup>10</sup> DETR (2000) Preparing Community Strategies: government advice to local authorities

### **3.9 Have parish plans a future?**

Although this question was outside our brief, we found that this was not a question we could take for granted. All those who we spoke to who have been involved in producing a parish plan were glad they had done so and would recommend the process to other rural communities. We discovered that parish plans can add value to the planning process by capacity building, by developing people's skills and awareness as far as planning matters are concerned. In this way they can ensure a better informed and perhaps less antagonistic debate on planning issues in the future. Where there was a pro-active council willing to engage in real dialogue (as in West Berkshire/Pangbourne), and mutual risk taking (as in Waverley/Wonersh) there was potential for real change. The parish planning process sometimes produced unintended benefits and the appraisals on which they were based produced the evidence that parish councils need to advance issues for themselves (as with the youth facilities and Beat Project at Harrietsham).

On the other hand we noticed that in all cases the parishes said they were triggered by the Countryside Agency grant. In the absence of that grant, it is a moot point as to how many will muster the necessary resources. Furthermore at the very moment when many more parish plans are being developed than have yet been completed and recognition of their potential is emerging amongst local planning authorities we spoke to in the south east, the prospects of influence through the development planning system are seemingly extinguished.

At the workshop we held midway through our study it was tentatively suggested that one way forward might be to separate two purposes. One purpose was mobilising self help within the community, for which various forms of public engagement (Planning for Real™, appreciative inquiry, Enquiry by Design etc) might be the appropriate vehicle. The other purpose, of engaging local voices in the district planning process might be better accomplished not through parish level or initiated planning at all but through a more creative approach to community engagement from the planning authority.

**Recommendation :** *We believe there is a case for a fundamental re-appraisal not of parish plans per se but of the links between all the various planning processes, both social and land use. Such an appraisal would benefit from exploring how the divergent but legitimate purposes can best be served at the local level.*

## **Appendix 1: An excursion into Wonersh, Surrey**

*We have included this brief account of a Parish near to Hambledon because although the parish are only now embarking on a parish plan they undertook a village appraisal which resulted in some remarkable outcomes*

### **1. Introduction**

A village appraisal was conducted in Wonersh in 1998. Waverley District Council were very supportive throughout. The parish also had early involvement and active support for the village appraisal from the local County Councillor, Dr Povey. The process was led by Christine Howard, who initially started as a community activist, became a parish councillor then a District Councillor, now works for Waverley District Council. She has been a key mover throughout that time. The parish has benefited enormously from particularly well informed and well connected people within their community.

The Rural Development Commission was important in the early stages and helped with consultation techniques and brokerage. As often is the case, issues of traffic management were high on people's list of concerns. But just to show that some things do change, albeit after a long time, the village did get a 30 mile per hour speed limit after campaigning for nearly thirty years! It was this history of community action and planning that was to be crucial in what happened when the local shop came under threat.

### **2. The story**

Owners of the local village shop wanted to sell up in order to convert to housing. A public meeting was called and over 200 people attended. A shop committee was formed to look at the possibility of the village purchasing the shop as a Co-operative or similar. It was actually put up for sale, but didn't raise the price the owners wanted.

Then a series of remarkable things happened. Christine took a risk in actively supporting the council intervening. The Council got an independent valuation which confirmed that the market value was quite a bit lower. The District Council's Corporate Services Manager Ian Lynch 'stuck his neck out' to apply a Compulsory Purchase Order, in what may be the first example of a council doing this to save a village shop. The community took on the challenge of raising £150,000 to buy the shop. The Post Office took a risk and agreed to suspend their normal policy not to reopen Post Offices that had closed. Local entrepreneurs, who now run

the shop, took a risk in putting far more of their own money into the shop when the Countryside Agency were unable to provide funding.

### **3. The impact**

The history of co-operation around mutual interests in Waverley has produced all sorts of benefits. Waverley District Council has the second best record in the South East for identifying housing sites - 54 units of housing. This record could not have been achieved without the parish councils being behind it. At the local elections in May 1999 the parish had a 44% turnout (very high for a local election), helped in part from the interest generated by the village appraisal.

Apart from saving the village shop all sorts of other unintended beneficial results occurred. A by product of the parish appraisal was the Millennium party organised for New Year's eve. The committee hit on the brilliant idea of having supper parties all over the village. Everyone in the village was invited and you could register for a party pack. On Millennium night there was a party and line dancing, singing, fireworks and a Millennium service - all in all a great success. Another unintended outcome of a village appraisal in a neighbouring village, Shamley Green, was something called Village Schools 2000. For two years Shamley decided it would link with a school in a developing country. Funds raised during those two years would be divided to the benefit of Wonersh and Shamley Green First School, and a school in a similar village thousands of miles away. Through Committee contacts a school near the Kenya coast was selected as the overseas beneficiary. Ngongzini Primary School near Mombassa had eight classrooms, three of them derelict. Nearly 300 pupils shared a dozen desks and one toilet. Funds raised through fairs, a Valentine's Ball, sponsored bike ride, Christmas Fair - in excess of £10,000 - permitted valuable improvements: four new class rooms, a new toilet block, desks and teaching aids.

### **4. Lessons Learnt**

For communities to mobilise the resources both within their midst and in adjacent agencies several conditions appear to make a difference:

- A history of successful cooperation between communities and agencies, the longer the better
- A well connected community, both professionally and politically
- Individuals willing to take a risk and invest their own time and money

## Appendix 2: Acknowledgements

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