

POWER TO THE PARISHES

DELIVERING REAL PARTNERSHIP AND COMMUNITY PLANNING

West Berkshire Council

Improving rural services - empowering communities

CASE STUDY 1.

April 2006

Summary

West Berkshire Council is a unitary authority. The Council has taken a lead in the development and implementation of Parish Plans. Fifty-three of our sixty-three towns and parishes are currently developing a plan of which sixteen have published and are implementing actions.

This case study is about the general issues facing a unitary authority in deciding to promote Parish, Town and Local Community Plans as a means of empowering communities to get involved in governance and to engage in identifying their priorities and aspirations.

It sets out the issues that emerged for the Council in supporting the development of Local Community Plans and delivering on the outcomes that arise from such plans.

Background

In terms of quality of life West Berkshire is a highly desirable place to live and work. West Berkshire is primarily rural and a comparatively prosperous area.

Overall, its population is relatively 'young' when compared across the UK - although this is made up of a significant proportion of people aged between 30 to 50 - rather than in their 20s. As a consequence, there are a high proportion of couples living in the district, both with and without children.

The district enjoys relatively low crime rates, although fear of crime is consistently high (mirroring national trends). Education in West Berkshire compares favourably with national trends and pupils make good progress, above national averages in achieving Key Stage 4 results.

Despite its overall affluence and prosperity, there are pockets of deprivation, notably in some of the urban areas and some of the more isolated rural communities. There are significant issues in the district in terms of access to housing and services due to the dispersed nature of the population and the cost of accommodation. Although historically accommodation costs were high in West Berkshire, the difference in property prices compared to the regional average has dropped noticeably in the last couple of years. The real cost and affordability of accommodation however, remains a key issue. The population of West Berkshire currently stands at just under 145,000 and is projected to grow by 7% by 2028. This will mean an additional 10,000 people living in the district within the next 20 years.

West Berkshire is a lead authority in the development and implementation of Parish Plans. Fifty-three of our sixty-three towns and parishes are currently developing a plan of which sixteen have published and are implementing actions.

The Authority, with strong support from the West Berkshire Partnership, promotes Parish, Town and other Local Community Action Plans as an effective means of building capacity in communities to identify and make progress on their local issues and aspirations.

This is key to West Berkshire Council's approach to promoting equality, diversity, engagement and in the development of better governance and active leadership.

Key issues / problems

The Council was always confident that it understood its more urban communities (about 66% of its population) but there was concern that much less was known about the issues and aspirations of its rural communities.

The Council began staging Area Forums four years ago and it quickly became apparent that the 63 Parish and Town Councils had an appetite for engaging with the unitary authority on a wide range of issues that affect them. They wanted more contact and to play a larger role in influencing the Council's policies and services.

The Council was concerned that there was, rightly or wrongly, a strong perception amongst its rural communities that they received less in terms of services, were not listened to and that they had some particular issues – for example, that they had less access to services, particularly because of poor public transport.

At the same time the Countryside Agency's Vital Villages initiative began to influence the Community Action for West Berkshire (CAWB) and some key decision makers in the Parishes who wanted to influence the Council at a more strategic level to address these issues.

Elected members did not recognise this as the opportunity that, with the benefit of hindsight, it was. Community governance models such as Local Strategic Partnerships and Parish Plan Teams can appear threatening to the long established structure of Parish and District Councils.

The Council's Policy and Performance service had set up the Partnerships Team in 2001 to develop external partnerships and relationships. Part of their responsibility was to develop relationships with the community sector and this led to a proposal to support the CAWB to undertake community development work through the Vital Villages initiative and encourage parishes and towns to develop Parish and Town Plans.

The West Berkshire Partnership (local strategic partnership) quickly saw Parish/Town/Local Community Planning as an excellent way of linking local aspirations to the Community Strategy and getting more people involved in sustainable communities.

There were no pressures in terms of timescales but there was an aspiration to pilot Parish Plans and pursue this agenda to increase engagement with rural communities and to see where that led.

Stages of Development

The key steps of the process were :

- A new Service Level Agreement with the CAWB was negotiated to include the development of Parish Plans.

- A new post within the CAWB of Parish Plan Development Officer was created.
- The Council promoted Parish Planning at Area Forums and the Annual Parish Plan Conference.
- Members of the Council's partnerships team visited parish meetings and promoted Parish Planning with the CAWB.
- People and organisations experienced in parish planning were brought in to talk to parish and community groups.
- The Council and CAWB developed a Toolkit and Parish Plan Surgeries to support parishes developing Plans.
- External funding advice was given to secure funding for Parish Plans.
- The Council developed a system for providing advice, adopting plans and acting on the actions which are the responsibility of the Council.
- The West Berkshire Partnership set up a Parish Plan grants scheme to give awards to Parishes publishing a plan to fund some "early wins".

Promoting Parish/Town/Local Community Plans had a number of, at the time, less foreseen outcomes including an increased interest in local governance and a more in-depth understanding of the diversity of rural communities.

Key outcomes

Parish Plan Development

It is an achievement in itself that so many, initially cynical, parishes developed such enthusiasm for the process

Over 84% of parishes and towns in West Berkshire are now engaged in developing a plan, 25% of whom have published and are at the implementation stage.

A key achievement was supporting parishes to help themselves and, in turn, one of their significant achievements was to encourage and support each other.

The Council developed a Toolkit with CAWB and stages quarterly Parish Plan surgeries for members of parish teams to meet with officers who assist them with information, advice and guidance.

The Council has also developed and adopted internal procedures for ensuring that expectations are met when a Plan is published in terms of delivering on commitments to improve services.

Community engagement

With the advice and support of the CAWB and the Council, the parishes have staged some highly effective consultation exercises. Parishes have achieved a response rate on community questionnaires of between 63% and 96%. This goes far beyond what the Council can hope to achieve on its own. In addition there have been many innovative engagement projects – consultations with traveller communities, a film made by a group of young people, and a young people's consultation award funded by Vodafone.

Improved services , new community projects.

Some examples of outcomes achieved by parishes as a result of developing a Parish Plan :

Pangbourne

- Started a local branch of the Citizen's Advice Bureau.
- Improved the Dolphin Adventure Centre.
- Local businesses promoted Pangbourne to increase the number of visitors.
- New re-cycling facilities introduced from 2006.
- Improved pavements in Whitchurch Road.
- Planning Applications made available in Pangbourne library
- Public toilets now opened year round.

Burghfield

- Improved access and signage to village footpath routes
- Worked with Council to reduce fly-tipping.
- Started a Parish magazine and website.
- Improved crime reporting to Police.

East Ilsley

- Started new village magazine and website.
- Restored the village pond.
- Lobbied Highways Agency for quieter road surface on A34.
- Improved access and signage to village footpath routes.
- Lobbied British Gas for gas supply to village.

Peasemore

- Newbury College started Adult Learning courses in Village Hall.
- New seating/benches in village.
- New sports equipment for Village hall.
- Discussions with Council on highways and road safety improvements.
- Developing a Village Design Statement.

Stratfield Mortimer

- Volunteer environmental group cleared litter and tidied up village.
- Developing a community composting scheme.
- Developing a Village Design Statement.

Inkpen

- Replacing footpath stiles with disabled accessible gates.
- Clearing village drainage ditches.
- Working to improve broadband coverage / quality.
- Developing a Village Design Statement.

Brightwalton

- Fundraising for new village sports facilities.
- Developing use of school facilities for community.
- Developing a Village Design Statement.

Evaluation

Reading University is undertaking a major evaluation of the effectiveness of Parish Plans in West Berkshire. The results will be available in December 2006

Resources

Council investment

Partnerships Team - Officer time	£20,000 pa
Parish Plan Surgeries - Officer time	£3,000 pa
Parish Planning Toolkit	£5000
Events	£1500 pa
Funding of CCB Parish Planning Development Officer	£15,000 pa

West Berkshire partnership	
Parish Plan grants	£50,000 pa
Vodafone match funding of CCB for Parish Planning Development Officer	£25,000
Other assistance in kind.	£5,000 pa

It is too early in the process to quantify savings. Savings expected are in the following areas;

- The Council is already expending thousands of hours of officer time annually in ad hoc responses to the needs of Parishes. Parish Planning has led to the Council adopting a more efficient corporate approach to dealing with the needs of parishes and local communities.
- Increased data and information coming from communities to inform services and planning.
- Communities taking direct responsibility for a range of projects and issues that they previously expected to be at the Council's expense.

Who was involved?

West Berkshire Council

Who was involved	Role
Elected members	Policy and Leadership Resources
Corporate Management Team	Corporate Policy
Policy & Performance / Partnerships Team	Community development, information, advice and guidance. Policy development. Procedure and strategy development.
Officers from across all services	Supporting Parish Plan Surgeries with information, advice and guidance

West Berkshire Partnership

Who was involved	role
Management Board	Policy and leadership

	Resources
Vodafone	Funding for Parish Planning Development Officer and Youth consultation.
Greenham Common Trust	Support for consultation analysis Parish Plan design and print.
Community Council for Berkshire / Community Action West Berkshire	Parish Planning Development Officer. Community development, information, advice and guidance.

Barriers and how they were overcome

Cynicism from communities about local authorities

Communities have been disengaged from governance and direct involvement. In most cases the parish councils have embraced the Parish Plan process and led it. The parishes themselves have overcome this by demonstrating that they have delivered outcomes based on their community consultation exercises. The Council helped them to do this by providing the impetus, support and guidance to develop plans and parish plan grants to fund “early win” projects identified in the Parish Plan process.

Tensions between elected members and communities

In most cases the parish councils have embraced the Parish Plan process and led it. Some, however, were developed in spite rather than because of their parish council. Some elected members feel this is a threat to a long-established structure. As parish plans have been published they have been harder to ignore. The majority of elected members recognise them for what they are – a clearly defined set of local priorities which form a clear agenda for them to support in order to increase/improve services for their community.

Council officers perceptions of Parish Plans as “extra work”

In a small unitary authority that has undergone significant restructuring to ensure that it is lean and mean, officers can feel hard pressed and the actions emerging from Parish Plans can look like extra work. However, they are already spending thousands of hours each year in ad hoc responses to the needs of parishes. There is, therefore, a realisation that, by streamlining the Council's response through a corporate approach to Parish/Town/Community Plans, they can actually save time and money.

Critical success factors

The main reason for supporting Parish/Town/Community Plans is that they produce what the Council cannot – a clear set of local priorities based upon high levels of consultation response and community engagement.

Key contact

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