

Involving People in Planning:
Rural Experience Shows How to Deliver Coalition's Ambitions.
Findings from Northumberland Research



New research conducted by Action for Market Towns in Northumberland¹, re-enforces the view that new Coalition policies for involving local people in planning, have much to learn from the rural experience. From the findings of the research, it would seem that Community Led Planning processes -widely used in rural areas for years- can play a pivotal role in delivering the new Coalition Government's aspirations to help people shape the places where they live¹.

Community Led Planning (CLP) is defined in Action for Market Towns' (AMT) recently published *Policy in to Practice Paper*² on the subject as, "a *step-by-step structured process, used by local community groups, activists and volunteers to work with local residents and businesses to create both a vision for the community and an action plan to achieve it.*"

Importantly, CLP should ensure that the links are made with local government officers and members that may be needed to bring parts of the action plan to fruition.

Such an approach is consistent with the Coalition Government's policies expressed previously in the Conservative Party's 'Open Source Planning Green Paper'³. This emphasised that the evolution of the plans should start at 'ground level' and be backed by the provision of good data by the local planning authority.

Although evidence suggests that the use of CLP is widespread, especially in rural areas, local authority support for the process is at best, patchy. Surveys undertaken by ACRE indicate that whilst many local authorities are perceived to be supportive of CLP, many lack processes or procedures for responding to and dealing with community groups that are already producing plans⁴.

¹ Our Programme for Government
http://www.direct.gov.uk/prod_consum_dg/groups/dg_digitalassets/@dg/@en/documents/digitalasset/dg_187876.pdf

² AMT 2009. Policy in to Practice Paper. *Making the Connections. Community Led Planning – An Introduction*. Available at: <http://towns.org.uk/files/100317-DR5258-AFMT-POLICY.pdf>

³ The Conservative Party's 'Open Source Planning Green Paper
<http://www.conservatives.com/~media/Files/Green%20Papers/planning-green-paper.ashx>

⁴ ACRE (2008) ACRE Report of Community Led Planning in England, 2008; ACRE (forthcoming) ACRE Report of Community Led Planning in England, 2009

The research led by AMT was undertaken in close cooperation with Northumberland County Council and was important because it was one of the first attempts to assess the opportunities and challenges that CLP presents to local authorities.

A key focus of the research findings was on the way plans prepared by community partnerships, could be used as the basis for an ongoing dialogue with councils at the local level. In the case of Northumberland County Council, this seems best brokered through the new Local Area Forums and their scale of operation seems well-suited to brokering the CLP process. The suggestion is that these Forums can serve as a key 'pinch point' in bringing together the strategic and service delivery interests of the Council and the evidence and resourcefulness of communities that can be marshaled through CLP.

Rather than just focusing on the creation and 'signing-off' of an agreed plan, the Northumberland research concluded that the CLP process is better able to provide longer-term benefits for local authorities and the communities they serve if it forms the basis for ongoing relationship between them. Similarly, whilst the future development of CLP should focus partly on the improvement of technical processes to gather and use evidence; this should be seen as part of a wider framework that shows awareness of the relationships that need to be brokered between communities and local authorities. Writing dry documents from either side, is not a suitably dynamic process.

The research also highlighted the need to involve democratically elected local councilors in the process and suggested that they might have a pivotal advocacy role in using the evidence gleaned from CLP to strengthen the links between representative and participatory democracy. This too is consistent with the Coalition's emphasis on fully involving democratic representatives at all levels as expressed previously in the Conservative Party's 'Open Source Planning Green Paper'⁵.

AMT intends to use the findings of this and other research to inform its discussions with the new Government and provide a framework to help with improve community involvement in planning in both rural and urban areas.

ⁱ This research has been undertaken by Action for Market Towns (AMT) to contribute to two pieces of work on the links between Community Led Planning (CLP) and strategic planning processes.

The first of these is a long-term, national project seeking to increase the ability of CLP to achieve strategic influence with local authorities and other agencies that is funded under the Department of Community and Local Government's (CLG) Empowerment Fund Programme.

⁵ The Conservative Party's 'Open Source Planning Green Paper
<http://www.conservatives.com/~media/Files/Green%20Papers/planning-green-paper.ashx>

The second piece of work is the development of a CLP framework for Northumberland as part of a short-term contract that AMT, with consultant Sue Bevan, has been commissioned to undertake by Northumberland County Council and that is funded from the North East Regional Efficiency and Improvement Partnership.

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