What is a Parish Plan?

Parish Plans were introduced in the **Rural White Paper 2000**, which set out the government's plans for the countryside. Parish Plans are a development of Village Appraisals and Village Design Statements. The intention of Parish Plans is to provide a means for local communities to take more control of their lives by saying what they want doing and engaging with the organisations that have the power to get these things done. In this, Parish Plans are part of the broader government policy of "active citizenship", which aims to "increase individual participation in public life and for public bodies to consult communities about the delivery of services."

A Parish Plan sets out a **vision** of how the community wants to develop over the next few years (usually interpreted to mean 5-10 years) and identify the **actions** needed to achieve the vision, both actions which the community proposes to undertake itself and actions that will need to be implemented by other organisations and will therefore need to be influenced by the Plan. It is not an appraisal, but looks forward.

Although there is no standard format for Parish Plans, it is generally accepted that the end product will be an **Action Plan**. This needs to be succinct and to set out clearly what needs doing, when, why, by whom and at what cost.

In order that the Action Plan can be succinct, it should be supported by a detailed report explaining how the community was consulted and what conclusions were drawn. To be effective in influencing others, this report should also provide facts about the community to inform decision-makers in a wide range of organisations on issues from local planning to policing. In other words, Parish Plans need to be **information-based**.

Given that some problems are more urgent than others and that the resources to tackle problems are always limited, **priorities** need to be attached to the actions.

As Parish Plans are a means for communities to take more control of their lives by saying what they want doing, they can include any social, economic and environmental issues that the people who live or work in a community think are relevant to them. There is no prescriptive list of issues to be addressed. In other words, Parish Plans should be **comprehensive** in scope.

To be efficient and effective, Parish Plans need to consider local issues 'as a whole' and make links between issues. In other words, Parish Plans should be **holistic**. By taking an integrated view of a community and its environment, Parish Plans are supposed to identify opportunities to find local solutions to local problems. Many of the problems identified in a Parish Plan could be tackled by local people given the right support and funding.

Given that Parish Plans are a means for communities to take more control of their lives by saying what they want doing, Parish Plans must be based on **consultation**. Among other things, the consultation should identify key facilities and services in the community, its valued characteristics and features, and problems that need to be tackled. Parish Plans must reflect the views of all sections of the community, not just those traditionally involved in local affairs, and must make special efforts to include those who do not usually involve themselves in local affairs (young people, senior citizens, less able-bodied people, people living in outlying areas and people who work out of the community or unsocial hours). It also means including people with a common interest but who are not members of a formal club or society, eg dog walkers, young parents and visitors.

Consultation has made Parish Plans a great way of bringing people together, tapping local talent and enthusiasm, fostering a sense of community and reviving local democracy. The interaction of people, the recruiting of new talents and the analysis of local issues can catalyse new community activities, even new clubs and societies. In other words, Parish Plans promote **community and inclusion**.

As Parish Plans reveal more effectively than any other exercise what local communities want, they have the potential to **influence** a wide range of external organisations which affect the

lives of rural communities, particularly in respect of how services are managed and delivered locally.

The influence exerted by Parish Plans will be enhanced if they are prepared with the co-operation and advice of everyone outside the community who has an impact on what goes on in the community and needs to be influenced. Consultation during the preparation of the Parish Plan is an opportunity to build effective **working relationships** with these outside bodies that will result in a better Plan, help in its implementation and open up channels of information, advice and influence that will yield lasting benefits for the community.

The most important external decision-makers for most communities are the **local authorities**. District and County Councils are continuously involved in drawing up and reviewing their policies. More specifically, Parish Plans feed into the Community Strategies that local authorities are now required to draw up at regional, county and district levels. These are intended to improve the social, economic and environmental well-being of areas by identifying what sort of services, activities and support are needed, to make links between services and organise them better so as to avoid overlaps, and to promote local people's involvement in planning and improving services in the area where they live. In addition, most county and unitary authorities have committed to negotiate Local Public Service Agreements with central government, comprising a dozen or so specific targets to improve local services. They are encouraged to involve partners, particularly at Parish level and through Community Strategies in drawing up and delivering these targets. Parish Plans can influence Agreements --- and therefore the delivery of social and community services at ground level --- through Community Strategies.

Local communities are often most concerned with **planning** decisions of local authorities, both general land use plans and their approach to individual planning applications. Parish Plans can influence the planning process, for example, by identifying the local need for affordable housing or community facilities, producing a Visual Design Statement for new development, identifying which open spaces are needed and valued, and, in the long term, feeding into the new Local Development Frameworks (which are due to replace Local Development Plans). Visual Design Statements are the only non-statutory documents that have to be taken into account in planning decisions and can therefore weigh against undesirable developments.

One major **constraint** on Parish Plans is that they must complement and help to deliver the strategies of central, regional, county and district authorities. In particular, they must respect local planning policies and frameworks. However, they have the scope to influence local housing and land management strategies when they are being reviewed.

Parish Plans also need to be prepared with the co-operation and advice of everyone outside the community who might be affected by the Plan, eg **neighbouring communities**.

Parish Plans can help the local community secure **funding** for local projects. By showing that the community is taking its future seriously, Parish Plans can increase the chance of external funding or local authority support for efforts to improve the social, economic and environmental well-being of the community. Organisations offering grants to rural communities may want to see written evidence of need, community consultation and plans for implementing the project. Parish Plans can be used to provide this information and to accompany the funding bid. They can also be a useful tool in negotiating with external organisations for action against problems or improvements to services.

In order to ensure that Parish Plans are truly consultative, they are not managed by **Parish Councils**. Instead, it is recommended that a **Steering Committee** is elected by the local community. However, the Steering Committee should include Parish Councillors (but no more than 2-3) and will keep the Parish Council informed of the progress of the Parish Plan, not least, because the Parish Council is the elected local authority and will be asked to implement some of the actions identified by the Parish Plan. The Parish Council is also expected to endorse the Parish Plan when it is completed.

Further information about Parish Plans can be found on the following websites:

www.odpm.gov.uk
www.dft.gov.uk
www.defra.gov.uk
www.countryside.gov.uk