

EVALUATION OF COMMUNITY PLANNING IN NORTH DORSET

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**A Summary of a Report to Dorset Community Action
By Jeff Bishop, BDOR Limited: August 2007**

1

Community Planning in North Dorset

1.1. Over the last few years an approach has been developing across the North Dorset area to 'Community Planning'. This approach is based mainly on four independent and non-statutory 'Community Partnerships', each covering an area around the main towns in the district – Blandford, Gillingham, Shaftesbury and Sturminster Newton (although Stalbridge fits slightly outside the model). 'Partnerships' are exactly that – amalgamations of different area groups and organisations working together, including Town and Parish Councils.

1.2. Each Partnership is supported by a 'Community Development Worker' (CDW). The main roles of the Partnerships and CDWs include:

- community development and capacity building,
- establishing community needs and aspirations through community engagement,
- developing strategic action plans to determine priorities,
- identifying initiatives to deliver responses to the needs,
- bringing partners together where necessary to deliver against the needs,
- advocating on behalf of Partnerships and projects at District and County levels,
- securing access to funding, including some not available to statutory bodies and
- enabling and supporting projects to happen and be sustained.

2

This Evaluation

2.1. Having been underway for almost 5 years, and given likely changes in the context (eg. "Strong and Prosperous Communities", the Local Government White Paper), this was an appropriate time to review progress to date and draw ideas to inform the next stages of the approach. This was also the time when 'Local Delivery'* was being debated across the District and it was recognised that this too could lead to changes in the approach. Hence the current evaluation. (* *This is the title given to a programme of action by the District Council to address a significant budgetary shortfall, perhaps through delegation of functions to a more local level.*)

2.2. The work was commissioned by Dorset Community Action (DCA), also on behalf of North Dorset District Council (NDDC) and the Community Planning Steering Group. Jeff Bishop of BDOR Limited was appointed to undertake the evaluation. The task (in summary) was as follows:

"The proposed evaluation will look at the effectiveness and impact of the Community Partnerships, the Community Development Workers and the Administrative Assistants. It will also look at whether this is a good model for Community Planning, how to address weaknesses identified, and look at longer term development of the model."

2.3. This original brief was expanded slightly to consider the strategic and policy levels where structural and legislative change was anticipated.

2.4. The project was undertaken by a combination of desk work, visits, workshops and meetings and, most importantly, 'interviews', some of which were one-to-one, some were small group discussions. These were with local people, officers, members and others, chosen to include some involved in Partnerships, some not, and some known to be in support, others known to be critical. Jeff Bishop also drew on his general wide experience and on insights from other related work he had underway at the same time.

3

Why Invent Wheels?

3.1. Before commenting on how well Partnerships etc. were working, a more basic question was raised by some people: why invent structures when existing ones - notably Town and Parish Councils – could do the job?

3.2. This is a very long-standing debate and no simple answer can be given. Though there is a long history of Parish and Town Councils doing valuable small, and sometimes quite large projects, and some excellent Parish and Town Plans, the issue is whether they can or do take on the full variety of roles outlined in 1.2 above. Most people contacted during the study felt that Parish and Town Councils (generally) were not taking on all the roles and that the Community Partnerships were therefore filling a key gap. Several people felt that, if anything, Parish/Town Councils and Partnerships can, even should, be valuably complementary. This needs to be discussed more fully, not least because of changes in the policy context.

4

Practice Elsewhere

4.1. Based on general experience and on the specific work to look at practice across the South West, Jeff Bishop was unable to identify any examples of a more coherent overall approach to all aspects of community planning than the one currently operating in North Dorset. The full report highlights examples of what may be better practice on specific aspects but the North Dorset model as a whole is highly distinctive.

4.2. Too often, in other areas, good work happens at the community level but then has nowhere to go – it is 'bottom only' not even 'bottom up'! What makes the North Dorset approach so distinctive is how, in principle at least, the ideas and aspirations from community level are carried forward to meet the strategic level and how work at the strategic level is being adapted to respond to what comes up. Although, as becomes clear later, the mechanisms to go 'up' are not working as effectively as they might, at least they exist in North Dorset and that is a major factor in any success.

5

Community Partnerships - effectiveness and impact?

5.1. Most people felt that the existing and emerging Partnerships are, in principle, important additions to their local areas as agencies for engaging people, assessing needs, generating ideas for action, setting priorities against overall plans and then supporting, either directly or indirectly, projects and initiatives. By and large, with inevitable (and often appropriate) local variations, this therefore meets the list in 2.1 above. Overall, the North Dorset model is working well, is tuned to its local context, is varied appropriately for local settings and is delivering a growing sense of community confidence and capacity and many practical projects.

5.2. The 'in principle' point above relates to the fact that, for DT11 (the Blandford area), those involved were mostly optimistic but it was seen as too soon to be certain, while some (not all) in Shaftesbury believed that how things are actually now operating in their town is failing against the principles.

5.3. The original survey, Strategic (or Parish) Plan and Action Plan stages have managed, through different approaches, to draw out community needs and aspirations. However, it may now be time for a review for some Plans. There is still some tension between the role and status of Parish Plans and overall Partnership (whole area) Plans.

5.4. This tension is part of a broader picture of varying levels of engagement (or non-engagement) by Parish Councils in particular; some of them feeling (as in 3 above) that Partnerships are unnecessary and undemocratic and some feeling that the Partnerships are really just for the towns. This too needs some form of review to ensure full engagement in the Partnerships not just of Town and Parish Councils but also town and parish communities as a whole and the many voluntary and community group 'partners'.

5.5. In terms of actions, from high profile projects such as The Exchange to smaller ones such as replacing a stile, from big events such as festivals to regular activities such as websites and newsletters, the practical outcomes now form a remarkably long and diverse list. This needs an important proviso, however. The Partnerships as such do not actually do and deliver all the projects. Projects might be delivered through a Working or Theme Group of a Partnership, but many are delivered by single community/voluntary groups, groups working together, Parish and Town Councils, even by statutory bodies. The Partnership and the CDW may provide anything from significant help to just a tiny amount; projects are "delivered in partnership". This is a perennial challenge for community development activity but it probably needs action to clarify roles and relationships to the wider public.

5.6. The picture in terms of representation and local democracy is less clear but not negative. There are some small signs that the approach is beginning to revive interest and confidence in local democracy but that is limited by the fact that few people made any link between the Partnerships and their various local councils. The Local Delivery debate is currently muddying all of this.

6

CDWs and Assistants - effectiveness and impact?

6.1. The Community Development Workers are employed and managed by Dorset Community Action DCA) to work across all 4/5 areas, with funding provided by, amongst others, North Dorset District Council. This is mainly to ensure a degree of independence, something considered to be important at local level. (This is also why DCA were the commissioners of this evaluation.)

6.2. In general the results here could hardly have been clearer: the CDWs and their Administrative Assistants are highly valued both in principle and practice and are seen as absolutely crucial to any success. All are, however, overloaded and success is heavily dependent on them doing work 'beyond the call of duty' (and the related salary!). The only varied result on this issue came from some in Shaftesbury who were critical of their CDW. This appears, however to link more to the general situation there because such concerns were not raised as a result of that CDW's work for DT11.

6.3. There is real concern that the CDWs and/or their Assistants might be lost as a result of general cutbacks and specifically as a result of Local Delivery changes. This needs to be addressed explicitly and the (crystal clear) view from local level given real value.

7

The Strategic Level - effectiveness and impact?

7.1. Though not in the original brief, we added this section because of the importance of the way in which community ideas, aspirations, projects etc. are (potentially) supported at strategic levels and the consequent delivery of, for example, funding. The work by CDWs and others at local level is the foundation of any success but what enables so much to be built on this is also the support at strategic levels.

7.2. For those involved more fully, the work at NDDC level is well known and the work and commitment of directly linked officers and members is greatly appreciated. There is still, however, concern from community level that neither the officers as a whole nor all members either fully understand or are 'on board' with the model. This point applies to how officers and members value, promote and support community level initiatives. In particular there does not yet appear to be a coherent link between the format for responding to 'bottom-up' initiatives and the procedures used at NDDC level to develop its own strategies, policies and procedures ('top-down'). This needs to be addressed if the next level of progress is to be achieved.

7.3. The uncertainties about strategic support also apply to the mechanisms to enable a coherent and strategic way of handling community initiatives at District and County levels. The key mechanisms are the 'Steering Group', the 'Negotiation Round Table' and the 'Bridging Group'. We have commented that it is good that they exist, but nobody felt that they were working as well as they ought to, or that these were the best mechanisms: "we have the tools but we don't use them". There is a need, especially in a changing context, for a rigorous review of all these practices and a need to be sure that, once any new system is in place, it is genuinely understood and valued by all NDDC officers and members.

7.4. Not surprisingly, for the majority of those minimally involved, all this level of work was almost completely unknown and traditional 'council-knocking' was still common! As with community development, this is a perennial challenge but it should still be addressed.

8

Is This a Good Model for Community Planning?

8.1. It should be obvious from the above that we believe it to be a good model, certainly in principle, and effectively delivered through much of its practice. The improvements listed in the next section are important but they are about evolving, even expanding the model, not changing it in any major way. Though not able to pursue this in detail it also seems clear that the community planning approach is remarkably resource-efficient.

8.2. This all depends, however, on large amounts of voluntary time. At the moment this is freely given in a way that would not be the same if Partnerships were pressed to pick up the tab on any formal service delivery. So although the Partnerships should not be seen as a 'way out' of the funding challenge, they can be important agents in helping all parties to come together to find mutually agreed solutions.

9

Where Next? Recommendations

9.1. The text above hints at a number of suggestions for next stage actions. These are summarised here and, if appropriate, elaborated a little. We are also aware that some are already underway.

- Awareness needs to be raised and debates and discussions held about what Partnerships can and should do as compared to what Town and Parish Councils can and should do. Though the current position may be clear, ideas in the Local Government White Paper, and perhaps Local Delivery, may change the picture.
- Current 'Plans' of all sorts need to be looked at together and some may need to be reviewed, minimally or more significantly.
- Ways need to be developed to engage (some) Parish Councils more in the overall community planning process, ideally directly into the Partnerships.
- Something needs to be done to communicate better to the general public about the Partnerships and their roles, and the roles of NDDC and Dorset Community Action. This is always very difficult but having a number of proven projects 'under the belt' helps!
- Every effort needs to be made to ensure continuity for the CDWs and their Assistants.

- Although the emphasis in this report has been on the model as a whole, there is probably a need to look around for ways to sharpen practice on specific elements (eg. community engagement) to meet best practice.
- There is an acknowledged need to look again at all aspects of the mechanisms (Steering Group etc.) that help to take community level ideas up into strategic levels.
- There is also a need to 'close the circle' by building in procedures to make a coherent link between top-down work (NDDC policies, procedures etc.) and the bottom-up work of community planning.
- Though the Partnerships should not be used to actually take on responsibilities via the Local Delivery approach, they can play a significant role as intermediaries between Parish and Town Councils and NDDC.

9.2. The full brief also asked for suggestions for a possible framework to enable positive progress to be made. The tactical emphasis in the main report is on the recent Local Government White Paper because this lays out a good and relevant set of aims and ideas that will become a template for some aspects of community planning when the Act is passed (early 2008 is anticipated).

9.3. As of now, community planning in North Dorset 'scores' extremely well against many of the aims in the White Paper. In fact what happens in North Dorset is, on some other aspects of community planning, actually ahead of government thinking. Adopting the White Paper aims as part of a core framework could give North Dorset's approach greater credence elsewhere (including with Government Office South West) and help to ensure continuity for the model in the face of any attempts to standardise and lose its absolutely critical local relevance and distinctiveness.

***In summary: North Dorset is already ahead,
and has a significant chance to pull further ahead!***

This report is the Executive Summary. The full report has also been completed and is available from (DCA? NDDC?)