

Developing a Parish Plan - Experiences from Tiverton & Tilstone Fearnall Parish

What is a Parish Plan?

Parish Plans are part of the "Vital Villages" scheme being run by the Countryside Agency to help rural communities take action on the many issues affecting their lives. A Parish Plan is a document outlining how the community sees itself developing over the next few years.

The production of a Parish Plan gives everyone a chance to say what they think about the social, economic, and environmental issues affecting life in their community. But more importantly, lets them see what they can achieve as a community, what elements they need help with, and what elements they have little control over.

Parish Plans are important because they offer communities the chance to reflect on their needs for the future. They offer the opportunity to consult with all residents in the parish, particularly concentrating on finding out the opinions of those that do not normally make their views known.

The above dry stuff is the official line on parish plans, quoted from various promoters of parish plans, but what is the reality? The recent experiences of Tiverton and Tilstone Fearnall in pulling together their Parish Plan may be helpful to those other parishes in our area thinking about undertaking the production of a Parish Plan. Even if your Parish Council is reluctant to take the lead, local groups are encouraged to move ahead without them. Experience shows that Parish Councils do come on board as the plan process gathers momentum.

Agencies are keen to emphasise the benefits but let's put it in perspective by considering what is really involved. As with most things in our communities it's down to a small number of people putting in a lot of hours to produce a mound of paperwork that may or may not stimulate the rest of the community into action. Once produced, the same committed group of people then seem to have their hands full in driving the actions forward. Maybe that sounds negative but there is quite definitely an upside to the process around generating some very good feelings of community involvement and

getting to know people that you may only have seen 'across the road' before. There's a great range of talent in our communities and this provides a superb opportunity to knock on a few doors and ask for help and opinions which, in the main, people seem to be very willing to volunteer when asked.

How do I get started?

Cheshire Community Council has been very helpful to Tiverton and Tilstone Fearnall Parish in the preparation of its plan, holding many meetings with us including the opportunity to network with other parishes in Cheshire who were further along the road to completing their own Parish Plans. These networking meetings were particularly helpful in demonstrating that the problems faced by the parishes are broadly similar: coping

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with housing development, access to services for the elderly, road safety issues particularly from speeding vehicles, community facilities for young people and a whole range of environmental protection issues.

The Community Council provided us with a template process from which we were able to pick and choose with the underlying message that a Parish Plan only has any real value if the whole community is involved in its production. This doesn't mean an army of people doing, but it does mean that everyone within the community should have an opportunity to voice their opinions on issues that might be included in the Parish Plan.

One of the key events to get Tiverton started was a history day, the sort of event that most people readily buy into, and are prepared to help. We were able to assemble a wide range of articles and photographs and even artefacts found in and around the village. Whilst putting on a history day was a lot of work, it helped us establish good relations with our neighbouring parish experts at Peckforton who had a lot of experience in displays and exhibitions. The history day provided

an opportunity to talk to a wide range of people from the community and pull together the basis for a household survey, a questionnaire that would go out the entire community. This questionnaire addressed the major areas that we felt would be of concern to the community with plenty of room for opinion. One decision that was helpful with this questionnaire was to arrange for a stamped addressed envelope to ensure a good response (in the event we got a 55% return from our community) From this overview, we were able to identify broad groupings which then formed the basis for three discussion groups to flesh out the issues within each of the identified areas: housing and development, transport and road safety, community and environment.

Each discussion group had a chairman appointed from the Parish Plan steering committee, together with members of the

community who had offered to become involved through the History Day and Household Survey. In a short series of meetings, each discussion group put together the content of the final Parish plan, using the template provided by the Community Council. As ideas consolidated, the steering group found it very helpful to involve local authority groups particularly the planning department who are very supportive of the parish plan concept. There is valuable guidance as to the sort of issues that might be actionable as opposed to those issues which were would be destined to stay on a wish list forever. Whilst the Parish Plan must reflect the community views to be of value, the aspirations of the community need to be realistic if any long-term action is to be achieved. Input from outside agencies is really necessary to separate the achievable from the blue sky. On planning issues, we were strongly advised that any proposed actions contradictory to higher level planning guidance and strategy were liable to remain as just that: paper actions that would go no further. Alignment of proposals was clearly the way to an actionable plan, but if this wasn't

representative of what the community wanted, then what? And to be of value, the Plan must be representative of local opinion, a real Catch22 for the Steering Committee?

Apart from the three areas discussed above the Parish plan also contains a section which puts the parish into context, this is where we condensed a lot of the material from history day into just a few pages.

... without ownership, nothing much happens.

Inevitably, production of the final document will fall on just one or two people to pull it all together but it is of great help to have the process well budgeted for (publishing the document is probably the one activity that will need real money) and a good treasurer certainly earns their keep.

It goes without saying that it will take longer than you think. Looking back on our initial project plan, we thought it would all be done in 15 months at the outside. Reality was different: it took almost a year to get funding approved and from that launch in November 2003 it took a further 21 months to publication of the final document. And we're still working at the action plan!

One tip for those of embarking on this exercise: try to ensure there are some ICT skills within the steering committee so that best use can be made of e-mails, spreadsheets and other electronic documents.

For those who want to see the full document, it is available as a PDF file on our parish website at www.tiverton-cheshire.org.uk Incidentally, this website was one of the by-products of the Parish plan process and has provided a valuable repository for a lot of parish documentation that might be of interest to the community. We have had enquiries for more detail from as far afield as New Zealand

But what were the key issues that emerged from these months of meetings and deliberations? All the detail is obviously in the Parish plan but the issues can be summarised as follows:

- planning/preserving the character of the village, looking at affordable housing;
- addressing traffic speed, and improving road signage;
- reopening of Beeston Station;
- extending home watch and arranging for better police visibility;
- a village society to oversee social and other events;
- a better understanding of our natural environment and community

action;

- improved community information.

With a document running to some 55 pages, what do we do to ensure that it doesn't just sit on shelves gathering dust? After all it is a plan for future development and for the aspirations of the community.

Who is going to drive it forward?

In Tiverton, we have been fortunate enough to have the full support of the Parish Council in the preparation of the plan (our networking experiences showed that in some parishes, a small band of

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committed people not only had to take on the full burden of preparation of the plan but also needed to convince their Parish Council of its value). Now that it is complete, our Parish Council have wholeheartedly adopted the plan and see it as their responsibility to drive through the action plan. This is being done through Parish Council 'action groups' who will review and advise on priorities with the bulk of the 'doing' work being carried out by interested members of the community. There is good liaison with other groups within the Parish, eg the village hall, churches, home watch and the parish website coordinator which gives confidence that things will happen.

Initial action has been to arrange meetings through County Officers for transport and highways, and planning; to arrange a meeting to try and to launch a Village Society. With public money at stake this latter does involve the usual committee type structures, almost calculated to turn volunteers away?

To maintain momentum, we like to arrange for public events to publicise our

intentions, such as a stall at our Village Day when we presented a copy to our MP, Stephen O'Brien, and in November a celebration event at which we expanded on some of the environmental issues raised in the plan with help from EConet. Ad hoc events such as these are valuable in keeping the Parish Plan action process on track and in keeping it in the collective consciousness.

Are we going to achieve the objectives we set out in our plan?

We believe they are well considered and representative of community views but we do need to get the decision-makers to listen and the Parish Council is using every opportunity to push the Parish Plan before the various council functionary groups. It was very gratifying at a recent Chester City planning board meeting to hear the Tiverton & Tilstone Fearnall Parish plan referred to by several council members during the debate on a controversial planning issue in Tiverton village. It also helps in funding applications to be able to quote the data from the Parish Plan; there is no better way of convincing potential funders of a real need than a respected survey.

We also need to get a broader spread of the community involved; youngsters have been hard to engage given their heavy school and sporting commitments. This is a slow process but we believe the momentum is gathering through regular publicity and events. Above all, there needs to be a high-profile group driving the action plan and in this we are fortunate in having an energetic parish council firmly committed to getting all it can out of our Parish Plan; without ownership, nothing much happens.

If any of the communities that enjoy the circulation of the Sandstone News would like to talk about the issues around generating a Parish Plan in more depth, we would be only too happy to share our experiences. Please get in touch with us through our website, by e-mail to info@tiverton-cheshire.org.uk or by contacting the Parish Council Chair, Liz Scott on 01829-73 3907.

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