

Case study: Local influencing (pillar 1)

Shaping policy development

Context

Defra's funding of the Rural Communities Action Network (RCAN) has been used extensively to support the 38 local RCAN members to influence local policy making and implementation for the benefit of rural communities. By helping to 'rural proof' local policies they should become better suited to rural needs and circumstances. This assistance for local influencing forms pillar 1 of the Defra investment programme 2011-15 in RCAN.

The activity has supported a range of outcomes, which for pillar 1 are defined as something (e.g. policy, delivery plan, partnership working or funding) which changed in a way that should benefit rural communities as a result of an RCAN member's intervention. Examples of the outcomes that were achieved under pillar 1 include:

- Shaping policy documents, such as a Local Development Plan or transport strategy document so they took account of rural needs;
- Altering the policy stances of partner organisations, such as a local planning authority or a Local Enterprise Partnership so they recognise rural needs and opportunities;
- Playing a key part in winning funding for another organisation's rural initiative, such as a volunteer car scheme;
- Influencing the local allocation of resources, such as from the Local Sustainable Transport Fund to target rural needs.

This note explores outcomes delivered by Community Action Northumberland in respect of the county Local Development Plan and Shropshire RCC in shaping the County's asset transfer policy.

What happened

Northumberland

Northumberland became a unitary local authority in 2009 and so needed to produce a new countywide¹ Local Development Plan (LDP). When the Defra Agreement to invest in RCAN was signed in 2011, Community Action Northumberland (CAN) identified the LDP as something it should use that funding to seek to influence. There were many reasons for influencing the document, not least the long-standing need for more affordable housing in the smaller rural settlements.

In Summer 2012 Northumberland County Council issued an initial consultation document which it called 'Core Strategy Issues and Options'. CAN's response challenged the approach taken by this document to settlement planning. In particular, the way it proposed to use the settlement hierarchy, with house building virtually excluded from villages which did not contain certain local services e.g. a primary school. CAN sought an approach which emphasised improving sustainability of all settlements, including the smallest.

¹ Technically speaking, the Northumberland LDP is the main land use planning document for all of the county outside of the Northumberland National Park area.

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“In essence, our message to the County was that a broad brush policy was not going to deliver affordable housing in rural areas.” (Dave Francis, Director of CAN)

CAN argued the approach should recognise the interdependence of nearby settlements and that this might mean a primary school or shop in one village serving a cluster of villages, all of which might therefore be reasonable as locations for new housing.

CAN also gave strong support to an option for an exception sites policy, which would allow the building of affordable homes for local people on small greenfield sites around villages where development would not otherwise be permitted. However, CAN felt the policy as proposed did not go far enough and argued that, to be workable, settlement boundaries would need to be defined on maps, showing exactly which plots of land could be eligible.

In March 2013 the County Council issued a follow-up ‘Preferred Options’ consultation document containing more detailed policy proposals. CAN had good reason to be pleased with this document, which took account of the organisation’s arguments about affordable housing. Nevertheless, CAN took issue with a policy that would have required every housing development to include a mix of tenures and house sizes. CAN argued this policy was too prescriptive and would render many small rural developments undeliverable.

CAN further encouraged parish and town councils, community groups and voluntary organisations to respond to these consultations, recognising that the local authority planners had gone to considerable lengths to create opportunities for their engagement.

Impacts

Northumberland County Council agreed with CAN’s line of argument on the need to promote sustainability in all communities and their draft LDP subsequently adopted a revised hierarchy with three tiers – the main towns, key service centres and other settlements. In the other settlements development will now be permitted if it can be shown to be appropriate in scale, to meet needs, to protect the countryside from widespread development and, significantly, to help maintain or enhance local services.

Policy 9 in the draft LDP is the rural exception sites policy. As a result of CAN’s intervention the County has recently accepted that it will indeed need to map detailed settlement boundaries, and has said these will be included in a delivery document which will accompany the LDP.

Also as a result of CAN’s influence, the County has agreed to refine its policy which required a mix of housing tenures and sizes on all housing development sites. In the next draft of the LDP it intends to distinguish the smaller sites.

Northumberland County Council is expecting to publish a further draft of its LDP in Autumn 2013, after which it will be submitted for examination-in-public by a planning inspector (prior, if all goes well, to it being formally adopted).

CAN has been able to make a substantial contribution to the drafting of the new Local Development Plan. The result is that it contains policies which will support meeting local housing needs, and especially affordable housing needs, in the County’s smaller rural settlements.

Shropshire

Shropshire RCC (SRCC) played a key role in local policy influencing when the county’s Voluntary and Community Sector Assembly began looking at the four new Community Rights brought about by the Localism Act 2011. The Rights devolve aspects of power from

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government to communities, local authorities and individuals. One of the Rights is the Community Right to Bid which provides communities with more time and opportunity to bid to buy and run valued local amenities if they come onto the open market.

SRCC already had significant experience of the issues involved with community bids through its support of community facilities such as village halls. Some staff had also undertaken training with Locality's Asset Transfer Unit. Via the Voluntary and Community Sector Assembly, SRCC was invited to join a Shropshire Council task-and-finish group to develop a new policy for asset transfer.

Community Rights were still untested initiatives at the time and SRCC was able to play an important role in ensuring that the Council's policy enabled local community groups to access a clear process, understand what was required of their initial expressions of interest and how to access support. The Council was already receiving queries about asset transfer but did not yet have a co-ordinated response.

Impacts

Through testing ideas, commenting on drafts and consulting with partners, SRCC was able to use its understanding of community groups to influence the Council's new asset transfer policy. For example, SRCC's intervention shaped the policy to be more realistic and accessible for rural voluntary and community groups, particularly in respect of their finance, staffing, governance and capacity issues. Specific examples of SRCC's influence include:

- Ensuring that the decision making panel included either staff or officers who had knowledge of the voluntary and community sector and who could view applications with the benefit of that experience.
- Ensuring that technical requirements around capitalisation of land or assets did not exclude community groups. For instance, insisting on realising full market value would have worked against many in the sector. The policy now includes flexibility around this.
- Making the first stage application form as clear as possible and not seeking to duplicate information at various stages of the process. The form also enabled applicants to set out a business case in a way that made sense to community groups.

Now that the policy has been adopted, SRCC is working with community groups across the county to develop and bring forward their asset transfer ideas. SRCC is in a unique position to help test the policy in practical situations. Through this approach the RCAN member has been able to feed back further advice to the Council.

Opportunities, challenges and lessons

These examples highlight how influencing opportunities can come through differing routes:

- For CAN, influencing the LDP was always likely to be its main opportunity to impact on the supply of affordable rural housing. Hence, its Action Plan, written in 2011, clearly identified the LDP process as a target for its Defra-funded influencing activities.
- Similarly, SRCC's long-standing work with the Shropshire Voluntary and Community Sector Assembly, as well as with other infrastructure organisations, proved to be the way in to this issue. Interestingly, it was the sector-specific links rather than rural-specific networks that proved important, but the end result has bought benefits for rural community groups.

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The value of long term engagement with the subject material can also be valuable:

- It helped that CAN had over many years engaged with the local planning agenda. However, its working relationship with the County planning team was strengthened by the LDP production process. After submitting a written response to the issues and options document, CAN sought and gained a meeting with the head of the planning team. That initial meeting was very positive and has resulted in a regular dialogue since.

Expertise and credibility are clearly crucial:

- CAN thinks its track record on planning was enhanced around 2012/13 due to its involvement with neighbourhood planning. CAN helped get things off the ground locally by supporting individual communities and working with the central Government-sponsored support programme. Its Director worked in town planning many years previously and the organisation could claim a degree of expertise of the planning system.
- SRCC's background in supporting community's to develop their own facilities, such as village halls, and its specific training around asset transfer proved to be an important source of expertise on a relatively new and emerging policy area.
- CAN notes that individual communities (for understandable reasons) rarely engage early enough with things like the LDP process. The County was attracted to CAN as an organisation which understood rural community issues well and which was willing to be involved from the off.

In both these cases Defra funding has made a material difference to the work of an RCAN member and to the rural communities who will ultimately benefit from the outcomes achieved. It is the Defra funding that paid for both organisations to invest time and effort undertaking this policy influencing work, since all their other income streams are tied to particular areas of service delivery or community support.

These examples also illustrate the close links between local influencing (pillar 1) and community support (pillar 2) work. Efforts to influence at a strategic level, in due course, provide direct benefits and opportunities for communities. And it is RCAN members who are helping communities to take advantage of them. Indeed, SRCC's work with community groups on asset transfer continues to feed its policy influencing work.

This is one of a series of learning notes and case studies which has been produced from the mid-term evaluation of Defra's 2011-15 investment in the RCAN/ACRE network.

The learning notes and case studies were commissioned by Defra

They were written by David Atkinson, Brian Wilson and Rob Hindle

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