

PARISH COUNCILS COMMUNITY ANCHORS

BACKGROUND

For some time I have been concerned at the reducing number of references to Parish Councils (Local Councils) in announcements about Localism. Some examples are the Government and particularly DCLG's reference to two tier local government - in three tier areas, the Quirk Review, the Community Kitty which seems to bypass local councils, Councillors Call for Action (not the anticipated opportunity for scrutiny from local councils), local councils not included in the main list of consultees for LAAs which are becoming a major plank of local finance replacing many grant streams, a Framework for effective Third Sector representation in Local Strategic Partnerships, which includes a clear definition of "Third Sector" by DCLG, but little or no mention of local councils, and so on. Additionally very recently the final report on the future role of the third sector in social and economic regeneration includes the need to build capacity in third sector organisations, and funding for this purpose. However a similar need urgently to build the capacity of the county associations to guide local councils has been highlighted a number of times by the Standards Board and the Rural Advocates office, but has been overlooked or ignored. Finally on December 12 the "Central – Local Concordat" which is all about central and local government working together for the benefit of the community seems to completely overlook local councils, the tier of government closest to the people.

ACTION PLAN FOR COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

This was launched by Hazel Blears on 19 October, with clear roles for Local authorities and the Third Sector, but with Parish councils mentioned only briefly in passing. It is as if the authors are unaware of or have no real understanding of the vital role that Local Councils play in thousands and thousands of rural communities. The recent Local Government Bill is now on the statute book, but the local council's vital role in real community empowerment is now virtually ignored.

A huge amount of impetus and support could be lost to rural communities in particular (but not exclusively) if the local council's role is overlooked. They are a vital Community Anchor which is not understood by most civil servants as well as the media. Vigorous lobbying by the sector is imperative and perhaps also some focussed PR to explain how local councils are so often the glue that holds together a community. Assets and cash could bypass local councils and the community in the end would be the loser. This is because Parish Councils are an ideal place to hold community Assets, whether as Custodian Trustees, or actively managing the asset. In the first case the council can act as the safety net if a local community group or a trust fails. In both cases, but particularly when involved in active management, any shortfall in cash flow of say a village hall can be made up from the precept. This is particularly important if disaster (e.g. such as dry rot, not necessarily covered by insurance) strikes. The same applies to many other assets, probably the other most common one being the play area, playing field and equipment. With town councils however, assets will often include important community buildings or open spaces vital for sports and leisure not just for the town but also for its hinterland.

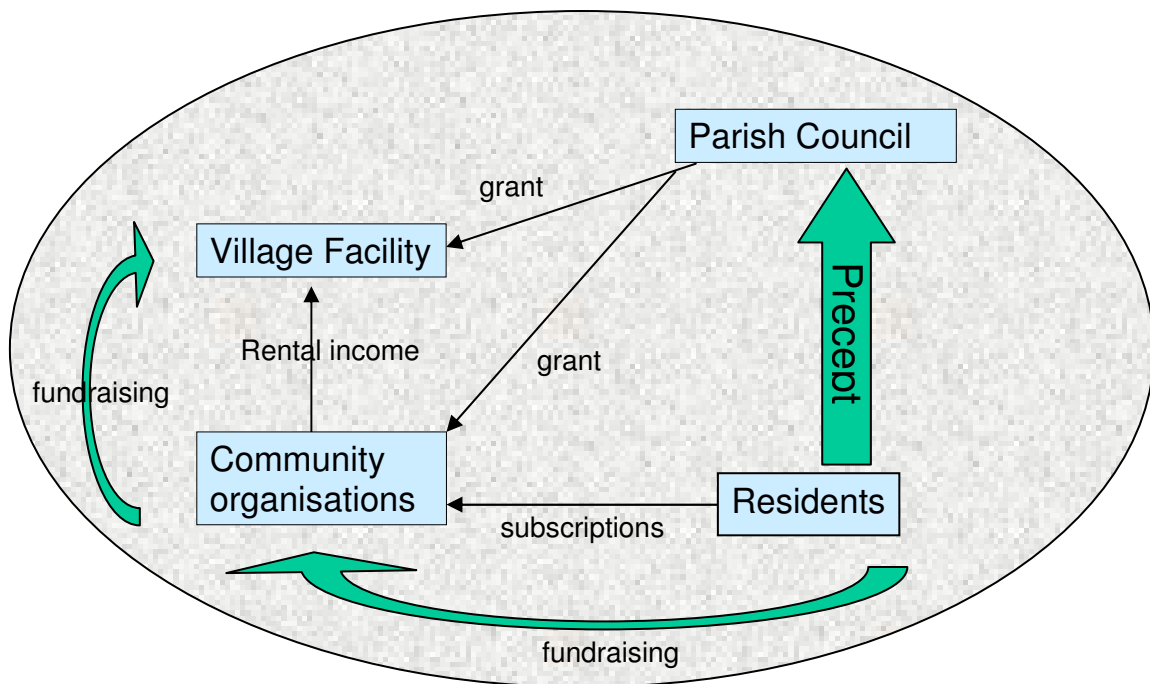
THE COMMUNITY PLAN & COMMUNITY ANCHOR

Some Parish Councils have been at fault in staying a little aloof from Community Groups, and the Community Planning process, they have been concerned as democratically elected bodies about some “local community groups where decisions are based on the loudest voice”. However, the importance of being involved and thus revitalising communities is I believe now accepted by a majority of Local Councils as the best model for community engagement.

How does this model work in practise?

Here I am indebted to Sylvia Brown of Acre for her clear diagrams, which are worth many words:

Supporting rural communities: integrating finance

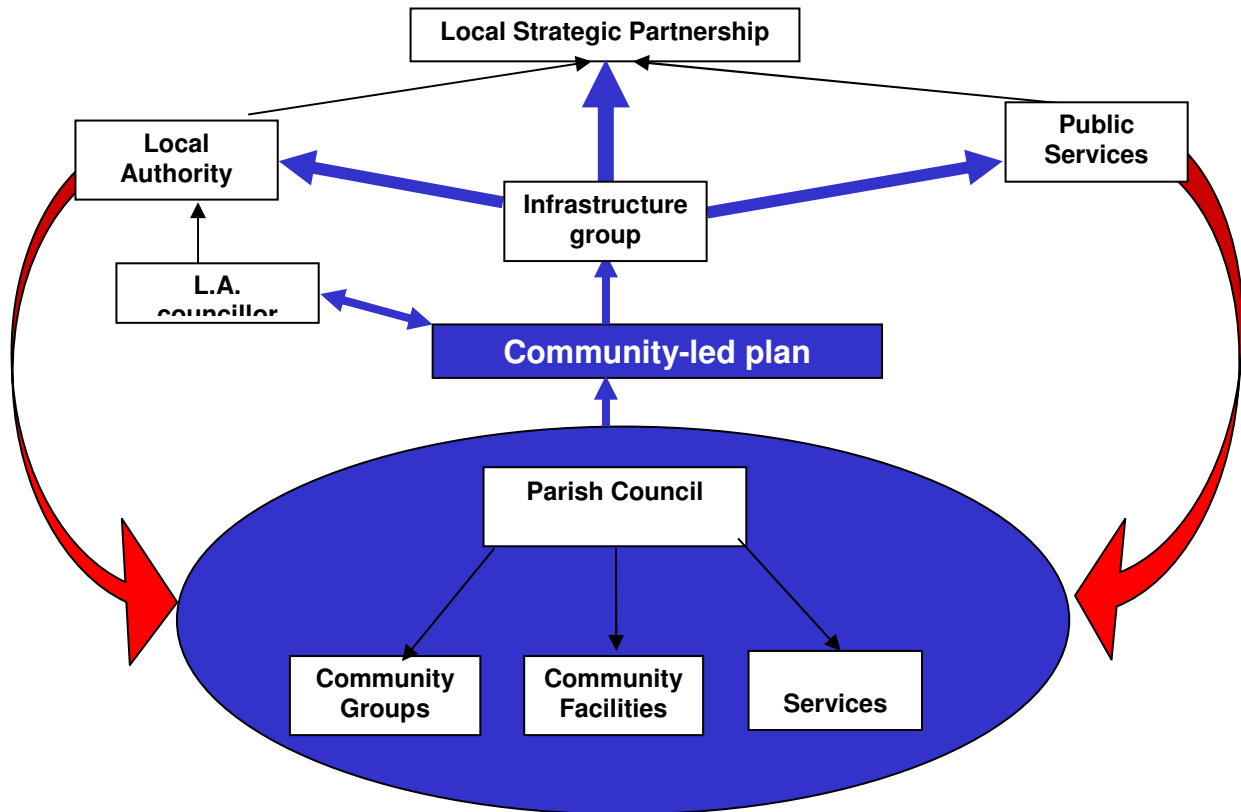


The Parish Planning, MCTI and other initiatives, when working well convert the community’s ideas into action very effectively. These plans should not be a snapshot of what the community wants at one moment in time, but a continually evolving process, delivering a steady improvement in the quality of life for the community on a sustainable basis. They are in effect a community development process, which is a major raison d’etre for Parish Councils.

But there are wider implications for these plans. Whilst many actions are local, when similar needs are repeated again and again in many separate local plans, it is, hopefully, identified that these issues are strategic. They need to be noted by the LSP as part of the wider County/Unitary Sustainable Plan and/or action taken by local authorities. There is much discussion, certainly in the South West but also elsewhere in the country about a Database to identify common issues, and also help communities to learn from one another. But how does the whole community planning process ideally work in practice....

The following diagram demonstrates this eloquently, and shows how Parishes and the Third Sector working together with the Local authorities can deliver most effectively for the community:

A rural community anchor in action



If this successful, sustainable and often vibrant model is to continue to operate, local councils must be properly recognised at all levels of government. It is from this model that the needs are identified that will drive the Local Area Agreement (LAA). This should be a dynamic process that flows from the heart of the community and generates funding via the LAA to produce a virtuous circle of improvement.

The local council sector at national, regional and county level must lobby vigorously to avoid the breakdown of this model and thus vast amounts of funding bypassing an established successful structure, with potential non sustainable consequences for the future.

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Footnote

Although the Local Councils are sustained via the Precept, the County Associations rely on voluntary membership of the councils to provide their income and thus sustainability. Apart from a very small number who are generously funded by Local Authorities, most County Associations; which provide all the legal and administrative guidance, the drive for continually improving local councils, the Quality scheme, most training, and representation of local councils within counties and beyond; are woefully under-resourced and lack capacity for their vital role.