

Council focus

Andrea Pellegram, a consultant specialising in community planning, is working with Cirencester Town Council on its community plan. Here, she outlines the lessons learned from actioning a strategic plan for change

Cirencester is a beautiful market town in the centre of the Cotswolds but for many years it had a reputation as a charming, if old-fashioned place. When the recession hit in 2008, many were worried that the town would run down. But Cirencester has come out of the recession better than it went in. The recession saw the closure of most of the few high street chains there. However, significant inward investment was achieved through private development from Wildmoor properties and grants from Heritage Lottery for a New Brewery Arts centre and the parish church. As a result, parts of the town centre have been upgraded.

But the town is facing new challenges. It has recently had two new major urban extensions with around 1,000 houses. The new draft local plan proposal for 2,350 new homes will add further pressure. Many people are concerned that the new development will change the town forever, ruining its unique character and causing overheating and congestion with a squeeze on services.

How can a town council bring positive change in the face of local government cuts and also protect itself in the face of largescale major development?

When Andrew Tubb took on the role of town clerk in 2007, later to become chief executive, he came to a council where not much was happening. He soon put into action a strategic plan for change.

Working with local communities, project managed by myself, a former director at Cotswold District Council, a wide-ranging consultation exercise was launched called Our Future Cirencester.

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The town council took the plan and ran with it. The plan was used as the basis for an organisational re-structure, a change in culture, developing a forward work programme and having in place a clear budgetary framework. The community plan has recently been reviewed and most of the planned work has been completed, is well underway or has made significant progress.

Which plan?

The community plan has delivered projects through partnership and development initiated by the town council. Funding and impetus has therefore come from the first tier of local government alone.

originated through the council rather than the planning authority. The town council considered starting a neighbourhood plan but decided that the process was so onerous, and so expensive, that it needed a better way to deliver change. It decided to use the informal community planning process instead and seek to engage with the development process on an ad hoc basis, using the community plan as its starting point and developed a planning concept statement.

This strategy has proven effective and looks likely to yield above satisfactory results. The local planning authority should take account of 'material considerations' such as a community plan if it was based on public consultation and was ratified by the local council of elected representatives. A community plan can provide sufficient certainty about public aspirations for open space, urban design, movement and community infrastructure, to feed into the creation of effective and sensitive planning policies and development management decisions.

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The Localism Act enabled local (parish and town) councils to prepare neighbourhood plans which could yield similar, but distinctly different, results. A community plan is more a validation of local aspirations and a way to join local stakeholders together to deliver projects. This might result in development, for instance with the market place improvement scheme, but these projects are more about capital delivery and good management than they are about land use planning.

Neighbourhood planning delivers local planning documents that were

The benefit of using a community plan is that it is a process based on co-operation and joint delivery and results in strong partnership working and consensus. This is quite different from the formal planning process, of which neighbourhood planning is part.

The Cirencester example clearly shows that more value can be delivered with a community plan. It has encouraged all stakeholders to see Cirencester in the same way – generally, everyone is seeking to achieve the same objectives.

Many voices speaking the same message can be very powerful. ■