

Who is involved in bridging the gap?

A range of organisations have key parts to play in bridging the gap between individual communities and improved service delivery. These organisations include:

Action with Communities in Rural Kent: Provides advice, training, guidance and grants to support communities in preparation of parish plans and other community planning exercises. This organisation is also part of a national network which offers a standard parish planning toolkit and database of evidence arising from parish plans.

District / Borough Councils: Can utilise locally identified need in their own policy formulation and management of public services. Can also provide professional expertise to help communities understand particular statutory & discretionary functions of local government during parish & community plan preparation.

Kent Association of Parish Councils: Provides legal, procedural, financial and general advice to member parish & town councils – the organisations that usually act as 'accountable bodies' for parish & community planning exercises.

Kent Downs AONB unit: Provides advice and guidance to communities in preparation of village design statements within the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Kent Rural Towns Group: A partnership providing grants, training and guidance to small towns undertaking health-checks

Kent Partnership: Gives a strategic steer to service delivery across Kent – particularly through the Kent Agreement (and its successors) – and requires a robust evidence base to help ensure relevant services and initiatives are developed to meet local need.

Kent County Council: Can utilise locally identified need in its own policy formulation and management of public services.

The most important partners, of course, are **local communities** themselves. Parish and community planning has significantly brought wins through

- involving a substantial number of people in any community
- leveraging, in recent years, discrete grant funding from central government to support it: more than 3,000 plans have been completed in England but only 45 of these in Kent
- bringing resources to communities – one village in Kent has brought over £1 million in investment on the back of its parish plan
- being validated by central government, assorted policy 'think tanks' and academic studies as an effective means of **engaging communities** (1 parish plan in Kent had a 100% consultation input)

The future: Can the gap be bridged?

There are currently no assurances of public-sector finance to help parish & community planning exercises happen from April 2008. Those organisations involved in the preparation of this prospectus are working together to try and ensure that delivery of plans from across Kent occur beyond that date.



Action *with* Communities *in* Rural Kent

Action with Communities in Rural Kent
15 Manor Road
Folkestone
Kent
CT20 2AH

Tel: +44 (0)1303 850816
Fax: +44 (0)1303 850244
Web: www.ruralkent.org.uk

Charity No: 212796

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Bridging the Gap Engaging Communities

A Prospectus for Parish & Community Planning in Kent



This prospectus has been prepared in partnership with:



Bridging the Gap: Engaging Communities

One of the seven “Future Challenges” set out in the Vision for Kent (the countywide Sustainable Community Strategy signed up to by public, private and voluntary / community sector partners) is “Engaging Communities.”

The engagement of communities in helping improve the effectiveness and efficiency of public service delivery is at the core of a range of government initiatives. We are about to see a strengthening of this as legislation and new partnerships emerge to help deliver on policies set out in the Local Government White paper published during late 2006.

Perhaps the most all-embracing methods of engaging communities are those led by communities themselves. This prospectus sets out how such methods – **parish & community planning** exercises – can be used to help shape future service delivery across Kent.

What gap is there to bridge?

This prospectus is one outcome from the Bridging the Gap conference co-organised by Action with Communities in Rural Kent, the Kent Partnership and Kent Rural Towns Group in Canterbury during the autumn of 2006.

The Bridging the Gap conference sought to begin to look at how actions identified as needed by communities in parish plans, village design statements and town health-checks could be incorporated better into local service delivery. Key barriers to progress included

- **Low uptake of parish plans in Kent. 45 completed against a national average of 78 per county (and Kent has an above average population level)**
- **Existing resources to support parish plan preparation being too low; on 2006/07 resources all parishes would not have a plan until 2041**
- **Requirement to prepare a Sustainability Appraisal for any document seeing adoption as a Supplementary Planning Document (e.g. village design statement)**
- **Communities not feeling 'listened to' once their needs have been identified.**

In other parts of England strides have been made to bridge gaps – e.g. West Berkshire Council has received 'Beacon Council Status' for its work in engaging communities through parish & community planning exercises, while in Cornwall work has commenced with local planning authorities to negate some of the perceived issues arising from the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004. Similar, possibly greater, achievements are possible in Kent.



What can be achieved locally: Case studies from Kent

- Bredhurst Parish Plan:** Frequency of street cleaning increased and extended to the whole village, need for affordable housing for local people accepted in principle
- Detling Parish Plan:** Establishment of Detling Community Interest Company to operate local services
- Harrietsham Parish Plan:** £150,000 investment in new services and projects
- Lynsted Parish Design Statement:** Guidance to developers on acceptable development
- Sandwich Town Health-check:** Development of facilities for young people
- Shoreham Parish Plan:** Creation of new tennis courts
- Staplehurst Parish Plan:** Play area and play equipment refurbished

What benefits are there from bridging the gap?

We would like to highlight four benefits. The four are:

- **Place shaping**
- **Strengthened local democracy**
- **Greater opportunities to attract additional resources to Kent**
- **Prioritising existing resources**

Place shaping: The Local Government White Paper places an emphasis on people-centred services, and empowering local people to gain influence in local decision-making. Parish & community planning exercises have already taken the first step towards this goal and other service providers, such as local authorities, police and primary care trusts can draw upon community-identified need to inform their own operations.

Strengthened local democracy: Elected members perform an essential role in local democracy – as 'frontline councillors' they have an enhanced role as advocates for communities they represent. Parish & community planning exercises provide evidence (often from upwards of 70% of the population) to support better decision-making and intelligent use of public resources.

Greater opportunities to attract additional resources to Kent: According to research available through the Commission for Rural Communities “the most visible and concrete response to the parish plan process can be seen in the burgeoning of new projects, often accompanied by successful funding applications.” This research, drawing on examples of parish & community planning exercises from across England demonstrated that new money and services can be attracted to an area on the back of a well-executed parish plan.

Prioritising existing resources: There are a range of existing resources at the disposal of the public sector, businesses and voluntary / community groups which can be allocated effectively when evidence shows there is need to do so. For example allocation of local authority member grants, the tasking of neighbourhood policing teams, corporate social responsibility actions and setting up of new services by local communities themselves can all draw upon evidence-backed expressions of local need.



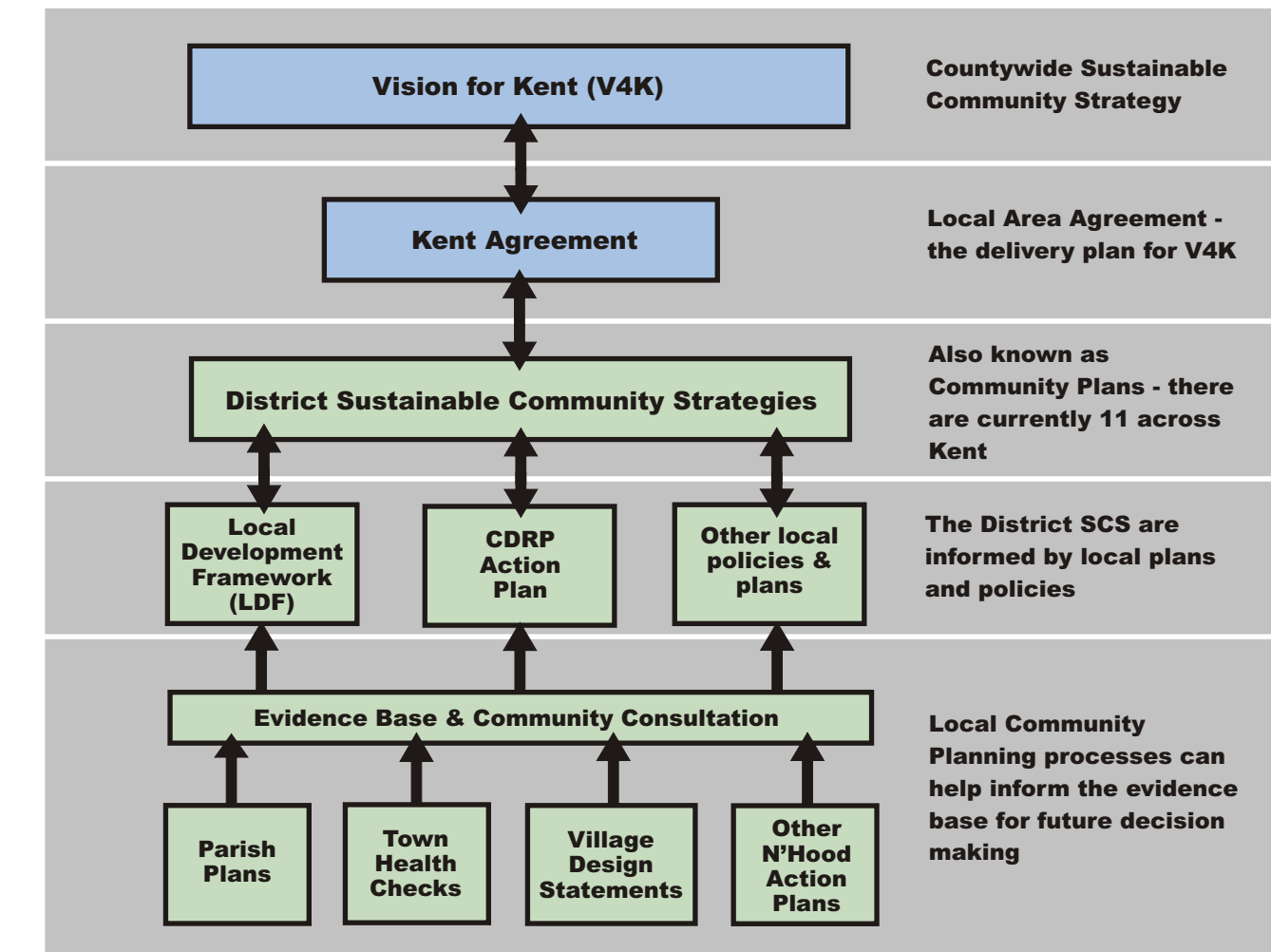
Image courtesy of Oxfordshire Rural Community Council

How can we bridge the gap?

The simplest way to bridge the gap is to integrate data generated through parish & community planning exercises into an evidence base that informs delivery of the countywide Sustainable Community Strategy. This requires:

- identification of a place within the sustainable community strategy mechanism
- resource allocation to/by key partners in order to 'bridge the gap'

The diagram below shows how parish & community planning exercises can be incorporated into a mechanism that informs delivery of the countywide Sustainable Community Strategy Vision for Kent.



In terms of resource allocation, key organisations have a responsibility to:

- help parish & community planning exercises take place
- advocate, at a strategic level, on behalf of communities that have prepared their plans
- use data gathered from plans as part of their own decision-making processes

