

Cirencester has received insufficient investment to meet its infrastructure and service needs for many years. In a large rural district with many small market towns and other settlements, the town was perceived to be “too wealthy”, “too rural”, “too small” or “too large” to tick any of the targets set by the Local Strategic Partnership or the councils. It simply fell between all the stools, and local people were becoming increasingly frustrated that the town was “going to pot”.

Many smaller towns face similar problems. In addition, the economic downturn is putting new pressures on already stretched local authorities who are often facing reduced income and staffing levels. At the same time, public expectations for service delivery continue to rise and statutory targets remain in force. Strategic funding and resources tend to be deployed in major growth areas or urban conurbations leaving gaps for smaller towns.

This workshop seeks to use an example drawn from community planning in Cirencester to show how communities can rise to meet these challenges.

Community planning seeks to ensure that local authority and other policy and economic development services better reflect the needs and aspirations of the grass roots community level. It is a very cost effective means for understanding what the community wants, identifying service delivery objectives and is a way to join up budgets to deliver projects that are more meaningful and provide better value for money than had the budgets been spent in isolation. Grant funding and other resources that wouldn't otherwise be available can be tapped into. It can be done by a lower tier of government (Parish or Town Council) level, or in partnership with District, County or Unitary authorities and so can take advantage of manpower resources wherever they are available, or it can be done entirely within the voluntary or non-profit sector. Finally, it can kick-start regeneration or revitalisation of a historic town in a way that doesn't rely upon large public sector budget allocations.

Cirencester as an example of how to effectively engage with a community to create a sustainable market town...

The Town Council began the process of developing a community plan entitled “Our Future Cirencester” in January 2008. In the project's first 15 months, 16 projects have been developed to promote the town's economic development, enhance its cultural and heritage offer, make it a better place for young people to grow up in, and sustain its role as a market town that provides a hub of activity within a wide rural hinterland. The community plan uses local volunteers to identify needs and solutions from the grass roots level to encourage local government service delivery to be relevant and delivered where and how it is required. This handout outlines the key lessons we have learned so far. More information is available on Cirencester Town Council's website: <http://www.cirencester.gov.uk/ofc.php>

Lessons learned from the Cirencester experience...

Recognise the potential to act and get your story straight. It is more than likely that there are pressures and opportunities that are not currently being addressed in your town. These should be recognised as valid and important so that they can become a catalyst for action. There may be popular initiatives that have failed in the past, the offer of potential funding, community discord, dissatisfaction with service delivery or significant growth pressures. Whatever they are, they offer the opportunity to refocus. Once you have recognised the problem, prepare your "story" of why you need to take action and why the community should support you.

We had had a number of failed initiatives over the years. Many hours of volunteer time had been spent on these and there was a real feeling in the community that it was pointless to start again. However, we received a £20,000 start-up grant from the Market and Coastal Towns Initiative and the Town Council had appointed a new Chief Executive who wanted to make a difference. We launched the community strategy in the face of consistent and resigned public opinion that expected us to fail. This view has changed after our first full year of sustained success and we now have a dedicated group of participants.

Make their objectives your objectives. Early in your project, learn about what your partners are trying to achieve and seek to mould your own objectives to meet theirs and not the other way around. Potential partners have no incentive to join forces with you unless you help them achieve

We started working with the local education authority and found that we could bid for money to progress our projects. We had to first develop activities that reflected their agenda.

what they want. If you do this, you may be able to tap into their resources and increase your project's potential for success.

Create a formal management structure to oversee the project.

Create a formal steering group with adopted terms of reference. This group should represent main community groups and local government to provide links between service providers of all sorts. The group should provide the overall policy direction, oversee budgetary expenditure and fundraising, management of consultants, communications and strategic planning. Individual projects should be run by sub-groups or working groups. Excellent project management skills are required to keep a community plan on track.

Our Steering Group is chaired by a Town Councillor since this is the main financial contributor to the community plan project, and is composed of a number of representatives from local organisations and charities. Working groups are chaired by members of the steering group and manned by volunteers. All meetings are attended by the project manager who facilitates discussion during the meetings, writes papers and progresses work and projects.

Get a project manager. It is very important that community projects achieve credibility so that they can attract partners and resources. Community planning is a complex process that requires excellent project management skills, sensitive negotiation, budget management, fundraising and an awareness of how local government and other services are provided. A successful project must have proper project control systems in place. The management group or the volunteers will need support and somebody else to do the actual work for them. A good project manager will be required who can provide organisational skills,

In Cirencester project we employed a professional project manager with relevant local government experience. The project manager reported to the Steering Group, prepared reports, ran engagement exercises, and liaised with all levels of local government on behalf of the community.

progress initiatives and do all the preparatory work so that the management team and participants provide guidance and direction but are not required to devote significant time to making progress. This is in contrast to the way in which many community based initiatives operate.

Document all contributions. Keep track of all volunteer hours by using sign-in sheets for all meetings and keep minutes of meetings including phone calls and interviews. This will provide data about the amount of 'in-kind' contribution you have received. If possible, estimate the 'value' of each person's time. It is very important to grant providers and other partners that they can be certain that there is genuine community support. This helps convince them that their resources will be effectively deployed and will achieve real benefits.

In six months, we logged 880 hours of volunteer time, which was almost 24 weeks of full-time work, at an estimated value of £34,000. Because we were able to demonstrate genuine community involvement, we were able to attract significant grant funding without needing to provide cash match funding.

Use the skills in your local community in a focussed, meaningful and time-limited way.

We had a number of working groups that met monthly for six months. We noticed that volunteers began to lose interest after around 4-5 months and in future will not design volunteer projects that last longer than 6 months.

Your community will be full of people with special skills to take your projects forward, whether these be knowledge of local history, website development skills or links to schools. Find out who these people are and ask them to help in very

focussed ways. Only ask for as much help as you need to achieve a specific objective. If you use working groups to progress a project, for instance preparing a plan or set of objectives, prepare a time-limited programme beforehand and only invite volunteers to join when you can be certain that they will only be required to give a specified input. In this way, people will feel that they understand

the obligation they have to you and the project and they will be able to leave at the end with the feeling that they have made a real contribution. If you do not provide volunteers with a project end, they will be less likely to join you because they will perceive the project as a huge commitment. At the end of the specific project, they can be invited to join a new project if they wish. This will keep their commitment fresh.

Keep the process transparent. Ensure that information about the project and how it is run is readily available. Don't spend a lot of money on publications – it is usually sufficient to post documents on the internet. However, it is good practice to use a range of communication methods, for instance, make the most of existing publications wherever you can. The important thing is that if people, including the press, want to find out what's going on, they can do so simply and readily. It is also helpful to make information available about project costs and income from sources such as voluntary in-kind contributions and grants received. Regular feedback to the press is also a good idea and can stop bad press stories from taking hold. Ignorance often leads to suspicion so don't be shy!

We had the press asking questions about the cost of the community plan so we prepared a statement that set out the Town Council's costs offset by grants and in-kind contributions. A story was run that told of how we had brought in more resources than we spent – a 160% return on investment.

Consult often using a variety of techniques. It is better to prepare simple engagement exercises using existing opportunities than to invest significant effort in preparing detailed consultation documents and events that are costly and have 'one hit'. The objective of consultation should be to learn what the community wants, and not to validate what you think they want. You will find that after you have run a number of events, you will have captured most of the community's views. However, regular consultation ensures that your projects and policy objectives remain on track and also ensures that the community is kept aware of the project's progress.

We employed a number of inexpensive techniques such as doing a survey of 'three favourite projects in the plan' during a family festival event held by a local charitable organisation, we ran a series of articles in the local paper seeking views, we held two planning for real events using post-it notes and flip charts for people to write their ideas upon, and the town council holds regular 'Community Lunches' where people with specific interests such as tourism or young people are invited to meet and chat.

Use the local press as an engagement tool. Work with the editor to create a series of articles

We received around 30 letters from members of the public on various issues. Though not many in number, they raised detailed matters that would not have otherwise have come forth.

that encourage feedback either through the paper's website or in the letters pages to generate local debate about key issues. Give a website address for responses.

Plan and run a full media campaign. Find a designated reporter from the local newspaper and give them regular updates. Impress upon them the importance of keeping community development stories current and frequent to improve local people's views of their town and also of the

We regularly have articles in our local paper highlighting our achievements and now people in our own town are becoming involved in our projects.

community plan. Write press releases that give a positive spin to what you are trying to achieve and seek to emulate the editorial style of the local paper so that the editor will be more likely to use your text.

Make the most of the economic down-turn. Many planning departments are currently facing a reduction in applications which means that some officers may not be fully utilised. Take this opportunity to renew policies and to engage with the public on emerging issues so that your authority or firm is ready for a resurgence in the building and regeneration process. Times of hardship reveal where weaknesses lie.

Consultation at times like this will help identify strengths and weaknesses in time to prepare robust policy responses when things get moving and funds start flowing again. Likewise, there may be able and skilled people in the community who are not fully occupied who would be willing to donate their time.

We are preparing a number of economic development projects that require a long lead-time. We are now working with in partnership with the Chamber of Commerce to put together a number of 'shop local' activities that we hope will eventually build up to a full proposal for a Business Improvement District once the process has gained momentum, credibility and a large following.

Be flexible and opportunistic about which projects you take forward. Prepare a wide range of possible projects in the early stages and take those forward only for which funding becomes available. It is better to be too ambitious and have a range of possible projects, expecting to

We started with 16 outline projects in our community plan and then spent the first six months after adoption to work out which to take forward. Opportunities presented themselves where we were not expecting at the outset but fell within our overall objectives. By doing this, we have made

progress only few, than to put a lot of work into the preparation of projects for which funding is not forthcoming. At the early stages, it is not a matter of 'less is more' but 'the more the merrier!'

Find the right vehicle to take your project forward. It is likely that once the process has taken hold, a new organisation will need to be established. Once the programme has been established and embedded, it will involve bidding for future funding and project delivery. A range of organisational structures exist and the format you choose will depend upon the unique needs of your project. Also, bear in mind that once the process has taken root, local groups and individuals may well take over. Let them.

Getting Started

Develop your strategic objectives and desired outcomes.

- Why do you want to engage with the public?
- What do you want to achieve from the exercise?
- How do you know when you are finished?
- How would you measure success when you are finished?
- What happens after you are finished?

Prepare your organisational structure.

- Who has overall accountability and how are decisions made?
- Who are the key stakeholders and how will they be involved?
- How will the project be managed?
- What is the role of everyone involved in the project?
- Where do you get basic administrative and operational support?
- What happens at meetings?
- How are you going to cover your initial project running costs?

Identify the basis upon which to build the project.

- Who is already in the community delivering projects and programmes aligned to your strategic objectives?
- Who will work with you?
- What work has already been done that you can use, for instance plans, policy documents, studies, etc?

Prepare an outline work programme.

- What is your initial engagement strategy where you begin your relationship with your community?
- How do you maintain the relationship with the community throughout the life of the project?
- What do you want to achieve in the first three years of your project?

Develop an outline communication strategy.

- How will you advertise the start of the project?
- How will you get people involved?
- How do you build interest and report success?