

Some communities are choosing to work in groups to produce a joint **Community Led Plan**. Natural clusters develop around a market town, industry, historical affinity or experience of working together. In Cumbria, cluster **Community Led Plans** have varied in size between two and seventeen parishes.

Where to start

Clustering, in the context of Community Led Planning, has no precise definition but can be used to describe partnership or joint working, co-operation and local group development

The term used here is taken to mean the many ways in which community groups can increase their effectiveness and meet their objectives through collaborative or joint working, and through partnership arrangements.

The most significant relevance is its potential for enhancing the capacity of community groups, this could be achieved by:

- Collaboration in service delivery and resource sharing.
- Lobbying a principal authority or other agency together.
- Networking and sharing good practice.

Engaging with Local Authorities

Often more strategic in approach, clustering is a relatively easy way for local authorities to engage with Community Led Plans. They can also fit strategically with 'locality working' in many parts of Cumbria.

Advantages

- **Capacity** - economies of scale can be derived from sharing key functions.
- **A louder voice on common issues** - clusters can lobby for change or influence service delivery.
- **Addressing area wide issues** - clustering can provide a means of tackling those issues which impact on more than one parish in a more co-ordinated way.
- **Better representation and influence** - easier to get a seat at the partnership table in particular the Local Strategic Partnerships.
- **Funding leverage** – clustering enables more effective engagement with funded initiatives and projects.
- **Networking and exchanging ideas** – can lead to mutual learning and support through exchange of information and understanding that the solution rests in working together.
- **Training** – clustering can be a vehicle for communities to identify and arrange their own training requirements.

Individual plans contributing to one area plan

- Local issues not lost.
- Area plans can be more strategic.

Single plan for an area

- Draws in smaller communities who may not have produced a plan alone.
- Still able to produce own local plans.

Advantages and Disadvantages to 'clustering'

- Stronger voice to influence local authorities and funders, and to find collective solutions.
- Varying levels of commitment from different local areas – be prepared to agree to differ!

Challenges

- Competition and clashing priorities.
- Varying levels of commitment to the process.
- Different meeting schedules and parish powers.
- Managing the process; some groups employ a co-ordinator to do this.

Different approaches

Groups have chosen different approaches to 'clustering' - a) One single plan carried out jointly by all parishes within the cluster; or b) Existing individual plans contributing to one strategic plan.

One single plan to cover whole area

- Works well where a number of parishes want to work together and none of them have a plan already.
- Draws in small communities that may not do a plan otherwise.
- Some of the smaller, more local issues can be lost. However, individual communities can produce their own action plans within the cluster plan, if they want to.
- Can be difficult to engage the wider community because only a small number of representatives from each community will be involved on the cluster steering group.

Individual plans contributing to an area plan

- Local issues are not lost; they are picked up by the individual Community Led Plans.
- Area-wide plan can be more strategic if needed.
- Each community does its own local consultation and engages local people and ensures that the wider community has ownership of the process.
- Works well in areas where some parishes have plans already and some don't.

- One or two communities may not want, or feel able, to produce their own plan and miss out feeding into area-wide plan.

The secrets of success

As with all joint working, communication is key. A co-ordinator, if you have one, can help with this, but make sure all decisions are recorded and shared. It is important that local representatives report back to their communities and involve other local organisations.

Time taken getting to know each other and planning how you are going to work together is time well spent. Don't rush through these early stages and make sure you recap what you have achieved.

Look for the positive benefits of joint working - a shared support officer could support several parishes with different projects. Allow the cluster to evolve – sometimes it can make sense to bring in new communities to tackle larger problems and learn from each other's experience.

Manage people's expectations by agreeing in advance how stages like consulting, action planning and writing the plan will be delivered. Are the questions you're asking relevant to everyone? What actions will have priority? How many pages will each community have in the Plan? It's important to resolve questions like these early.

Finally, actions beneficial to some communities may not be important to others. It's okay to agree to differ!

Contacts & Additional Resources

ACT has experience of working with cluster Community Led Planning groups and provide advice and support.

A range of additional Community Led Planning guidance sheets are also available on our website. www.cumbriaaction.org.uk

**For more information please contact ACTion with Communities in Cumbria on
Tel: 01768 425 666 or visit our website: www.cumbriaaction.org.uk**

ACT champions community and rural issues

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