

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT BILL – CONSULTATIVE DRAFT GUIDANCE ON COMMUNITY PLANNING

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report brings to Members' attention the draft guidance which has recently been published by Central Government. The Local Government Bill will require local authorities to prepare community strategies and, in doing so, to have regard to guidance issued by the Secretary of State. Members are now asked for their comments on the draft guidance which is outlined below.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 In anticipation that the Local Government Bill will shortly become law, the Government have now issued draft guidance in respect of community planning and are seeking any comments by 31 August 2000. It is anticipated that the formal guidance will be issued in October. The duty to prepare community strategies forms an integral part of the wider modernising agenda and is inextricably linked to the other key elements of the modernising programme – in particular best value and the new political management structures.

3 DETAILED CONSIDERATIONS

What is a Community Strategy?

- 3.1 The Local Government Bill will place local authorities, including District Councils, under a duty to prepare community strategies. Such strategies should aim to enhance the quality of life of local communities through action to improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of an area and its inhabitants.
- 3.2 A community strategy will have to meet three objectives. It must:
- allow local communities to articulate their aspirations, needs and priorities;
 - co-ordinate the actions of the Council, and of the public, voluntary and community, and private sector organisations that operate locally;
 - focus and shape existing and future activity of those organisations so that they effectively meet community needs and aspirations.
- 3.3 A community strategy must have 4 key components:

- a long-term vision for the area focusing on the outcomes that are to be achieved;
- an action plan identifying shorter term priorities and activities that will contribute to the achievement of long-term outcomes;
- a shared commitment to implement the action plan and proposals for doing so;
- arrangements for monitoring the implementation of the action plan, and for periodically reviewing the community strategy.

3.4 It is recognised that the precise way in which these components are constructed will vary from one area to another, depending on local circumstances. However, the following guiding principles should underpin all community strategies. They should:

- be prepared in partnership with other bodies;
- engage and involve local communities;
- be based on a proper assessment of needs and the availability of resources;
- include systems for monitoring and review and for reporting progress to local communities.

3.5 The draft guidance outlines that the process by which community strategies are produced is as important as the final strategy itself. The key to an effective community strategy will be successful partnership working and community involvement throughout the process.

3.6 Many local partnerships have already been set up to fulfil specific objectives such as crime and disorder partnerships and Health Improvement Programmes. In particular, Councils through their Local Agenda 21 strategies should have gone a long way towards developing effective partnership working, a long-term vision for the area and the necessary implementation mechanisms.

3.7 In recognition of the different stages that Councils have reached, and the challenging goal that fully-developed community strategies represent, the Government does not intend to use the guidance to prescribe a date for their completion. The Government does, however, expect councils and their partners to assess their progress against the requirements set out in the guidance, and to set realistic and publicly-agreed targets for putting in place their first community strategies.

Key Elements

3.8 The draft guidance states that an effective community strategy should:

- be developed and implemented by a broad 'community planning partnership';

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- develop a long-term vision for the area, focussing on the outcomes that are to be achieved;
 - identify what the different public, private and voluntary bodies are doing in the area, the gaps in provision that exist and the opportunities to realign activity to better achieve the strategy's goals;
 - chart what needs to be done to realise the long-term vision;
 - establish the shorter term goals and priorities that will contribute to long-term outcomes;
 - develop an agreed action plan for meeting those shorter-term priorities;
 - set-up systems for assessing and monitoring progress, for reassessing goals and priorities and for reporting back to the community.

3.9 Every stage of the process will require:

- strong involvement of Councillors;
- the involvement and commitment of other organisations;
- community engagement.

Councillors' Involvement

3.10 The draft guidance envisages that local authorities will have adopted a new political structure and that the responsibility to initiate and facilitate the community strategy will rest with the executive, although its final adoption will rest with Full Council.

3.11 Councillors will be involved:

- as representatives of their wards, leading and listening to formal and informal discussions and consultations, and representing these community views to the executive;
- as members of overview and scrutiny committees;
- as members of area and neighbourhood forums and committees where appropriate;
- as Council representatives on outside bodies, ensuring that their views receive full expression in drawing up the community strategy.

A Community Planning Partnership

3.12 The Government believes that the most effective way of ensuring the commitment of other organisations will be for the local authority to establish a community planning partnership. This should comprise the key partners operating in the area that the strategy is to cover.

3.13 The partnership should provide a voluntary framework for local co-operation. While the onus will be on local authorities, in the first

instance, to initiate the process and involve other appropriate bodies, they should recognise the operational autonomy of their partners.

- 3.14 The draft guidance envisages that the establishment of a community planning partnership should provide an opportunity to rationalise existing strategic planning processes.

Establishing a Vision

- 3.15 Having set-up a broad community planning partnership, the first stage in developing a community strategy will be to establish a long-term vision for the area, which will sit within the context of wider regional and national visions for better quality of life. If this is to command support, it is important that the widest possible number of local people and organisations are involved. The aim should be to arrive at a broad consensus about what the area should look like in 10 to 15 years time, and the sorts of communities in which people want to live.
- 3.16 A community strategy should not realistically attempt to cover every issue that may be relevant to a local community. Rather, authorities and their partners should seek to draw together the views of their communities to identify a number of broad priorities or themes. In doing so, they will also need to take account of what their community strategy might contribute to regional and national priorities.

The Implementation of Community Strategies

- 3.17 The preparation of a community strategy should result in:
- a long-term vision for the area, focussing on achievable outcomes;
 - specific goals and priorities that will contribute to those outcomes;
 - an agreed action plan for meeting those goals and priorities.
- 3.18 The strategy should identify the key priorities for action in a Council's area. It follows that it should act as an overarching framework for other service or theme specific plans and together with other key strategic plans, such as Health Improvement Programmes, strategies should influence a wide range of activities. A community strategy will not specifically cover every local issue, but it should affect the delivery of a wide range of services, including housing, education, transport, crime-prevention, economic development, environmental health, culture and leisure, etc. A community strategy should provide a practical context for information and linking other service-specific or theme-specific plans including those already prepared with local partners. In reviewing or drawing up such plans, authorities should consider with their partners the extent to which the plans can and do contribute to the priorities in the community strategy. However, it is acknowledged that work on other plans should not be delayed until after a community

strategy has been finalised. Instead, other plans should be revised later.

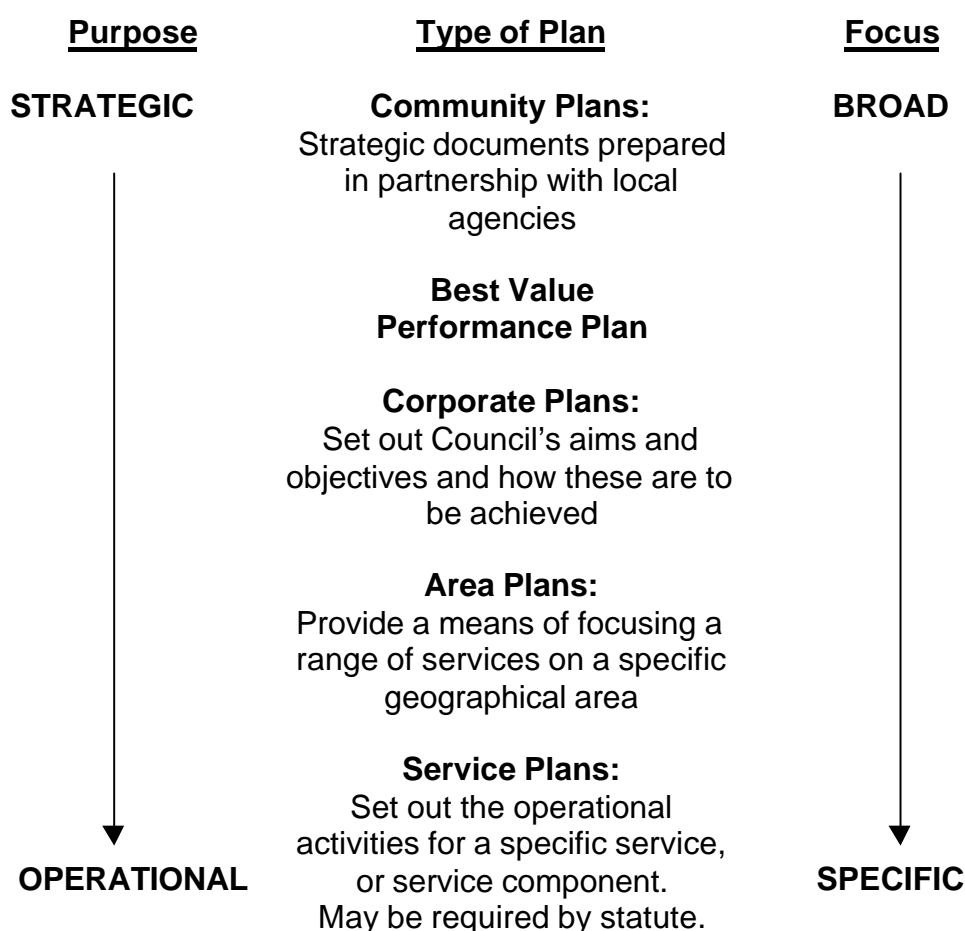
- 3.19 The development of a comprehensive community strategy is seen as inextricably linked to the delivery of a local authority's duty of best value. The key local priorities identified through the community strategy should be reflected in the setting of the authority's corporate objectives, and in the establishment of authority-wide objectives and performance measures. These objectives should then help to provide the overall context and framework for an authority's approach to best value, and enable Best Value Performance Plans to give practical expression to them.
- 3.20 It is recognised that District Local Plans and community strategies need to be complementary. In preparing community strategies, local authorities will need to take into account the policies and proposals in any existing adopted local plan. Once a community strategy has been established, the local plan should provide the means of taking forward those elements of its vision and priorities that concern the physical development and use of land in the authority's area. Where local plans are themselves in need of updating, there may be scope for taking forward, in an integrated way, the alteration or replacement of the local plan alongside work on the community strategy. The consultation process and involvement of the local community required by the local plan preparation procedures can, for example, form part of the wider process of participation involved in developing a community strategy.
- 3.21 Community planning partnerships will need to establish systems for monitoring progress, ensuring that the activities identified in the action plan are carried out and assessing their success in addressing the priorities identified in the community strategy.
- 3.22 It will be important to establish key indicators of progress at an early stage and identify the most appropriate body to collect the data on each one. In this way, it will be possible to avoid duplication and minimise the data collection burden within the community planning partnership.

Community Planning in Non-Unitary Areas

- 3.23 The draft guidance recognises the development of a community strategy will present particular challenges in areas with both county and district councils. It is considered that it is especially important for these different tiers of authority to work together to establish a joint approach to the preparation of community strategies. Unless county and districts work together, the process of preparing community strategies is likely to lead to considerable duplication and conflicting priorities. That might mean, for example, 'nesting' district level strategies within a broader vision and framework established at county level.

4 OFFICER COMMENT

- 4.1 There is no doubt that if it can be effectively delivered, community planning can provide a framework and direction for integrating the work of local partner organisations. It can also provide the potential to secure greater efficiency and effectiveness in the use of public sector resources, and should help to provide a robust mechanism for engaging local communities in debate about their aspirations for their areas. It offers the opportunity too, to provide a mechanism for 'joined up thinking and action' at the local level. However, the development of a community strategy is likely to be a complex and demanding task and certainly a challenge in shire areas, such as Rochford, where there are effectively three tiers of public authority – the County Council the District, and the town and parish councils – plus numerous other partner agencies.
- 4.2 The draft guidance is silent on the level of resources likely to be required. Certainly, for a relatively small shire district such as Rochford, resource capacity will be key as to how quickly and effectively the authority can engage in this process. The Authority by statute already has to produce a number of other strategies and plans, and whilst the draft guidance makes some reference to the relationship of the community strategy to other plans; in particular the Best Value Performance Plan and the Local Plan, there is no indication as to whether the community strategy will eventually supersede any of the other documents that authorities have to produce. There is thus a very serious issue in relation to resources.
- 4.3 The Local Government Association has produced a diagram which attempts to explain how the community strategy fits in with other strategies and plans. This is shown in the diagram below.



- 4.4 The guidance could certainly benefit from further expansion on the relationship between the community strategy and the numerous other plans and strategies which authorities have to produce and in particular on such aspects as conflict resolution and precedence in terms of both content and timescales between documents, particularly where those plans and strategies have a statutory basis.
- 4.5 The draft guidance also assumes a degree of involvement and inclusiveness by both partners and the community which decades of consultation with both partner organisations and the community on the local development plan process has yet to achieve. It will be interesting to see how issues such as housing provision – a top down process from Central Government – are reconciled between the community strategy, where public aspirations are likely to be for fewer houses, and the Local Plan, which has the responsibility for allocating the District's housing provision in line with statutory guidance. Similarly a number of the performance measures and indicators being produced are top down – from Central Government and the Audit Commission – and it will be interesting to see how these are reconciled at the local level with community preferences and priorities.

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- 4.6 Again, with this draft guidance, there is an emphasis on engagement and consultation with the local community as part of the development of the community strategy. This continues the theme of engagement and consultation on a variety of strategies and plans, which local authorities and their partner agencies have to produce. If the number of plans and strategies to be prepared remains the same or continues to increase, it is felt that there is a real need for Government to consider how all this consultation can best be delivered by all the public agencies to maximise resource inputs, to avoid duplication, and to minimise public confusion. Whilst there are things that can be done at the local level to help resolve this, it is clear that the exercise would also benefit from more 'joined up' thinking across the various Government departments as to how this should be achieved.

5 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The production of the Community Strategy will involve consideration of environmental issues.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The production of the Community Strategy will have resource implications, in terms of member involvement, staffing and funding for such issues as consultation, preparation and publication, monitoring and review.

7 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 The production of a Community Strategy will become a duty on the Authority once the Local Government Bill becomes an Act.

8 PARISH IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The production of a Community Strategy will involve the Parishes and the Town Council.

9 RECOMMENDATION

It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES**

To note the contents of the draft guidance on Community Planning and subject to Members' comments, endorse the Officers' comments outlined above as this Authority's response to the consultation draft.(CE)

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Background Papers:

For further information please contact Paul Warren on (01702) 546366