

For the 'Reporter' February 2010

A Living Plan

The meeting on 18th January was a significant moment in the Parish Plan process; after over twelve months of activity culminating in the questionnaire in September we reviewed our progress so far and defined how much has been achieved and what still remains to be done. It wasn't quite a case of 'first the talking, now the action' but since we have given 31st July as the date for completion of the Plan, it was a public moment when the emphasis of our effort shifted from preparation to completion.

Talk of end points and products, rather than research and consultation, prompts me to try to examine, on the one hand, the notion of the 'living plan', a concept we've spoken of from the beginning, in the context of a finished plan, on the other, the published statement to be adopted by Cradley Parish Council and Herefordshire Council as our recommendations for the development of the villages in, say, the next five years. We are aware there is a paradox here. Socially, economically and politically, circumstances change rapidly and all the time. What we might have identified as a blueprint for action in 2008, or even 2009, may well have become redundant at the start of 2010. Equally, critical issues which were defined in the questionnaire or, independently, by committed residents as matters of immediate community concern, cannot wait until the official approval of public bodies before clearly defined actions are taken. This is a plan which moves, which grows and changes. Nevertheless, the parish needs a publicly recognised framework within which decisions can be made; that is the expression of the community will which should guide the deliberations of those who, ultimately, have the responsibility for shaping the development of our community and, thus, significantly affecting the quality of our lives.

So we have two objectives. The first, to produce a document which sets out the aspirations and ideas of those who live in these villages; they have been, and still are being, carefully and objectively researched in widespread discussions and consultations of all kinds. And throughout, those have been conducted in close collaboration with our partners, both local and more widespread, to help in identifying those ways in which we can work together to manage change in our communities. It is to be a framework document, an updated version of the 2004 Plan, which will be referred to and used as a clear expression of the parish's long-term expectations and desires. What it is not to be- and this is why it needs to be considered within the context of a living approach – is a publication, pretty and complacent, which gathers dust on the shelves of council officials; it's done, we sigh with considerable relief and leave the project to a disinterested and cynical public.

The second of our aims, more difficult to define but surely quite as significant, is to move towards what we are calling a living process which is a matter both of attitude and action. I'm a man with two hats. As Chairman of the Parish Plan group I speak on their behalf; as a Parish Councillor I have a single voice. When I became involved in both bodies, one of my colleagues, very experienced and very wise, used to say, repeatedly, that the Parish Plan group had no 'authority'

to do more than research and recommend. And, in a sense, he was right. The Parish Council, as the sole statutory representative body of the Parish, speaks and legislates on its behalf. Certainly this principle would apply to the published Plan, officially approved and adopted. Equally, though, this is a counsel for inaction, for a 'frozen' plan. There are many examples which I might choose to illustrate the point that, in keeping with the notion of the 'living' plan, to 'wait and see' is no option. Take the instance of the latest plan to develop the St Katherine's site. It is obligatory that before any planning application is submitted for such a scheme, there should be wide public consultation and, indeed, any application unaccompanied by a certificate of community involvement is considered invalid. A small, well informed, band of residents with an immediate interest in the project is working to ensure that this proposal, and any other later versions, take account of local concerns. But this is, and must be a matter for whole community involvement, too, and the Parish Council is the agency which must initiate and lead that. Or consider the 95.13% of those who completed the 'Traffic' section of the questionnaire agreeing that they would 'support the Parish Council in employing someone to maintain ditches, drains and repair potholes with a grant from Herefordshire Council.' 95%! That's some 'authority'. My voice in the Parish Council – one hat to another - is that we don't wait for ratification in this, and other such 'living' instances – the live response is to act now. Let's do it.

It follows that the plan goes on living. By definition, it gains further recommendations as it grows and some drop away as they are fulfilled. The published framework adapts and augments. It doesn't gather dust because it isn't a museum piece; it's an invitation to continuing action and continuing review. July 31st 2010 is the next significant stage in the process but it is not an end in itself. And at every stage, before and after any 'due date', Cradley Parish Council must lead.

One last thought. If this exercise is to be the expression of the whole community then the whole community must take the opportunity to express itself. Nearly 59% of the parish completed a questionnaire. Good. But 41% did not. There's an invitation here to come forward and to have your say. Try, first, the website at cradleyandstorrridgepp.org.uk ; get involved!

Peter Diamond