

So what's the point?

In the middle of any project, it's always worth standing back for a moment to take stock – where are we now, what have we achieved, and where are we going; that sort of thing. So I did a bit of counting this week. Just over a year on and the Parish Plan has clocked up its 400th customer. That's to say that about 25% of people in the Parish have attended one or more of our consultation meetings starting with our adventure in school in September when all the children and many of the teachers were involved in a study of 'Our Village'; they conducted interviews, took photographs, prepared statistics and walked round the village, in and out of a number of significant buildings, and prepared an extensive and attractive exhibition full of models and articles which has been enjoyed more than once on different occasions in both Cradley and Storridge. Since then, regular research groups have met to explore a number of hot topics and their work formed the basis of the 'Planning for Real' exercises which proved so successful last month. 160 came to those four meetings; they discussed, sometimes argued, pored over maps and stuck flags in locations where they hoped to see improvements or change – excellent sessions. Beyond that, we've had meetings with the representatives of over 40 voluntary organisations in the Parish, enjoyed the opportunity to meet and hear the views of a large number of elderly, and other, members of the community at the Evergreens' coffee morning on 11th August and have plans, in the immediate future, to consult more closely with the young people of the Parish and to visit all those who live in Buryfields and the Leys.

The major stage of the consultation is yet to come. Advertised elsewhere in this edition is the Questionnaire which goes out to every household in September. If such exercises produce a return of 50% it is usually thought to be an exceptional result. On the evidence of the quality and the amount of interest already shown in what we've been doing, we have every reason to expect a much higher return than that. Please complete it; please return it; please let us know if you haven't received it or would like further copies. It's quite a long document and we hope you'll find it worth doing. As a gentle inducement, and we don't think you'll really need one, all completed forms (numbers only, no names) will go into a draw to be made on Wednesday 16th September; the prize, a Singapore supper for two at 'blue-inger' on 27th September generously donated and, no doubt delightfully hosted, as ever, by Sue Lim.

So, beyond that what's the point? We quite frequently hear thoughtful and not unreasonable responses arguing that this exercise, and the one before it, are wasted effort because they ask members of the community to address issues that they can do nothing about. Planning is a matter for County approval, the state of the roads is in the gift of the Highways Agency and speed limits are controlled not so much by local wish as by the Police

who act only when the number of recorded fatalities in accidents prompts them to do so. To some extent that is true; these are complex matters involving many different interests and obligations and, anyway, it's obvious that, in a pluralist society, we can't all have what we all want all the time.

That apart, I would argue that already we can see the benefit of a process which invites people from all sections of the Parish to meet and talk together about what involves them as those who live and work in the community. Already we have seen developments directly resulting from the good work of the previous Plan – the introduction of the 30mph limit and the establishment of a Youth Group, for example. Already the Parish Council, together with the Parish Plan recommendations, is initiating significant conversations with the County about flooding and road safety. The consensus view of the Parish as a whole which the Plan aims to gather provides a significant tool in our supporting or, indeed, questioning proposals which come from outside without the same stamp of lived experience. The reverse must be unacceptable - especially in a Parish as lively and concerned as this one is – that developments will otherwise happen here, to us, without our indicating any kind of interest. The Parish Plan will express your view, loud and clear; the Parish Council will work energetically to make it heard and effective in the corridors of power.

One other thing something we have learned in putting this programme together and in the processes of consultation that we are now undertaking, is that much of what we identify for scrutiny or change is not so much a matter for 'them', that is the local or even national government or an equally remote body, but for 'us'. If we feel that there are things to be put right, then many of the solutions are to hand. It is, after all, our newsletter, our Parish Council, our youth club, our village hall. And, I'd say, without wanting to get too preachy about it, our community responsibility – if you believe that such a concept is important. If we want a flourishing scout group or a 'drop-in' centre, are we willing to help to fund and to run them? The questionnaire tries to drop in a nudge or two in that direction, as well.

The debate's open and running. The questionnaire invites your views of whatever sort. Please join in; the more, the better. It's becoming a bit of a mantra now ...

Our Say ... Our Future ... Our Plan And it's a good one.

Peter Diamond