

Policy autumn 2009 Position Statement

Action for Market Towns Policy Position Statement on Community Led Planning

AMT's Position

AMT is committed to supporting and promoting effective Community Led Planning in market towns. Whilst devolution is high on the political agenda, budget cuts at the local level are increasingly commonplace. We want to support market town partnerships so that they have the funding and support necessary to deliver effective Community Led Planning. We want to work with local authorities and other public sector partners to ensure that local community plans are considered as core to their own strategic planning processes.



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What is Community Led Planning?

Community Led Planning (CLP) is about local communities being able to have a real involvement in the way their town is developed, and informing the statutory system. It is a structured process, involving local community groups, activists and volunteers creating a vision for the community and an action plan to achieve it.

The process involves using a mix of evidence collection, different types of consultation and debate at the very local community level. Every citizen should have the opportunity to participate and the resulting vision should focus on the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of the community and all those who live and work there.

The process ensures that links are made with external partners, such as local government, so that the action plans can be put into effect.

The Policy Context

National Policy

The Government is increasingly supportive of giving more power to the local level. The 2008 white paper, 'Communities in Control: real people, real power', highlights the need to enable local people to shape the places in which they live, and this has provided the catalyst for a range of policies that either require or encourage community involvement.

Regional Policy

Following the completion of the national Market Town Initiative, support and funding for CLP varies greatly among Regional Development Agencies. Some have been very proactive, such as in Yorkshire and the South East, while others have moved priorities elsewhere. RDAs are responsible for a range of key plans that any locally developed plans should both be aware of and be aligned to.

Local policy

There is more emphasis on local government working in partnership with the local community than ever before. The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 placed a new obligation on best value authorities to provide greater opportunities for people to get involved in local decision making and service provision. This 'duty to involve' came into force on 1st April 2009. In addition, Local Development Frameworks must contain a 'statement of community involvement', and CLP is a recognised element of devising local area agreements.

The importance of CLP in market towns

Market towns provide a key role as economic and social hubs for both their residents and for their wider rural hinterlands. Approximately 11 million people live in the 1600 market towns across England, which accounts for roughly 20% of the population.

In 2007 the Government announced a commitment to build three million new homes by 2020. The largest proportion of this new housing is planned for existing towns, and as a result many market towns across the country will be growing over the next decade or so by up to in excess of 25 per cent in terms of the current number of homes.

Balancing the need for growth - in terms of population, housing, services and facilities - against the social, cultural, economic and environmental needs of both existing communities living in/ serviced by market towns, and new communities arriving in market towns, is vital. A key way of achieving this is through effective and inclusive CLP.

10 key challenges for market towns

Some of the key challenges facing CLP in market towns, that AMT wishes to address, in partnership with others, include:

1. Overlapping CLP methodologies - We will work with other organisations to examine how the various CLP methodologies can be better streamlined and the data they use made compatible. We will also continue to advocate the importance of CLP as a way to empower communities.

2. Lack of capacity - We will ensure that market town partnerships have the skills, training, expertise and contacts necessary to undertake CLP.

3. Bridging the gap between community led plans and local authority plans - We will support and improve the way market town partnerships and local government and other partners communicate with one other on local planning issues. We believe that protocols and quality standards for CLP should be established to ensure that everyone involved in CLP has confidence in the process and knows what to expect from one other.

4. Cutbacks in local government spending - We will support communities who will need to compete to get their voices heard and their needs addressed as local government funding reduces, and services and policies are rationalised and directed towards those perceived to be most in need of support. We will lobby for additional funding to be directed to community led partnerships.

5. Complexity of local government structures and levels of representation - We will promote the need for local authorities to give greater autonomy to local people and to take their lead for planning and development from their communities. We need to ensure that CLP is undertaken in tune with often remote public structures and can link effectively into public sector timescales. This will require work with both local community partnerships but also local government officers and members. Issues we will consider include how representative council are of their local population given low levels of voter turnout, the often complex inter-relationships between the local town or parish council and the higher level District, Borough, County or unitary authorities, and the impact of local government restructuring on local governance.

6. Complexity of terminology and public sector plans - We want to keep things simple and promote plain English in the planning context. We need to ensure that market town partnerships understand the often complex terminology associated with developing strategies as well as the statutory environment in which planning takes place.

7. Need for sustainability - We will ensure that community led plans are sustainable - environmentally, economically and socially.

8. Focus on urban areas - We will explore how CLP manifests in urban areas. Many market towns are expected to grow substantially in the years ahead and some small towns already have a more urban setting. This might require more intensive support than is typical in rural areas whilst existing methods of consultation may need to be adapted.

9. Accessing and reporting up-to-date data - We will ensure that data at the town level, necessary for inputting into planning development, is up-to-date, complete and prepared in line with local authority data needs.

10. Shift in demographics - We will explore the drivers of change expected over the medium- to long-term and their impact on proposed market towns: in terms of population growth, ageing populations, mobility issues and services needs. These will introduce new challenges in terms of integration and developing community cohesion, which underpin CLP.

What is Action for Market Towns doing?

Action for Market Towns is already undertaking a range of initiatives to address the challenges identified and to support CLP in small towns. The Big Lottery funded Towns Alive programme specifically aims to provide support to market town partnerships, in terms of capacity building through training, enabling the sharing of best practice, and raising awareness of strategic policy issues. In addition, AMT has received funding from the Communities and Local Government Empowerment Fund and aims to use this funding to improve both capacity building as well as streamlining the way communities and statutory bodies work together. AMT, through its consultancy arm, amt-i, also offer a range of services designed to help market towns prepare their evidence base, such as town benchmarking and research services. More recently, an update to the market town Healthcheck is being prepared.

We are working with a range of stakeholders on CLP and have developed a detailed campaign programme stemming from this position statement which you can find on our website.

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