



Parish Planning

- it's a community thing!

This interview with Cliff Smith was conducted for Village Green, it provides a good insight into what prompts a parish to start the process of producing a Parish Plan and provides some innovative suggestions on how to engage the community.

Tell us about the parish of Bridgerule

Bridgerule is a village of about 600 people situated on the river Tamar 6 miles from Holsworthy in West Devon. Most of the village, is on the western side of the Tamar and used to be in Cornwall until 1844 when the county border was adjusted. Bridgerule has everything a village needs! The Bridge Inn, which is the only pub in Devon west of the Tamar, the Post Office, the Church, the Chapel and the Parish Hall. Various clubs and sports are based in the hall and the pub and the big event and get together of the year is a fantastic revel week and carnival.

What made your Parish Council decide to produce a parish plan?

Bridgerule has everything a village needs – we want to keep it that way! We also want to improve the things we have! We realise the importance of setting out a clear plan for the future and a parish plan seemed the ideal vehicle to use to pass on our aspirations to the district council and other service providers. We wanted to get a clear view of the things Bridgerule residents really do want. We saw the parish plan as a means of helping them to get it, and if the majority view is that change isn't wanted we can use it to this end!

The important element in developing a Plan is to consult with a comprehensive cross-section of residents. How have you gone about involving your community?

We knew that to gain any credibility a questionnaire was essential and we tried to make sure everyone knew it was on the way. After 5 meetings, a good proportion of the village knew about the plan. Bridgerule has an annual revel week and this was the obvious time to publicise the plan. We sent a card to everyone in the village with the revel newsletter explaining what we were doing and that the questionnaire was on the way. We also started a village website www.bridgerule.co.uk to keep everyone informed. We will then publish the results to everyone in the village and all the service providers we rely on. A couple of ladies on the steering group produced an excellent newsletter and the first issue was delivered to every home in the village with the questionnaire. This was extremely popular and I'm sure it has helped with the response. We are only just collecting the completed questionnaires but the majority of the village has responded and there now seems to be a lot of interest in what is going on. We are taking the anonymous questionnaires, sealed in envelopes to be opened and independently analysed by CCS (part of Devon County Council) to counter any accusations that the published results were inaccurate.

Bridgerule Tomorrow – our vision for the future

Pto>

What support have you had from people in the parish?

As with all these things there is a small nucleus of people that are plain helpful! It falls on their shoulders to do anything community spirited. The steering group has been marvellous and there has been a steady attendance at the steering group meetings. We spent hours going through a huge list of questions to select the ones we wanted to ask and I think we got it right. The answers will tell! The pub allowed us to hold the meetings and the shop allowed us to advertise and place a "ballot box" for questionnaire responses. One of the steering group kindly volunteered to let us sticker up his van and he drove it in the annual carnival procession and parked it at strategic points throughout the village during revel week and CCD kindly made us up some exhibition boards which we displayed in the hall throughout the week. Two members of the steering group arranged a successful litterpick and another one is coming soon. Another member lives in a very prominent position in the village and she put a home made ostriche outside her house in the carnival scarecrow competition with the caption "Don't bury your head in the sand – support the parish plan!". This and the parish plan van were hard to miss and must have been seen by almost everyone in the village, which was very helpful.

What local issues is your plan going to cover? What do you hope to achieve?

We gave the parish plan the name "Bridgerule Tomorrow as this seemed to describe what it was about. We hope to help shape the future of Bridgerule to fit in with the requirements of the questionnaire. Like any community we have "burning issues" that can divide people and we want to use these to bring everyone together. We are looking forward to getting the questionnaire results. It is easy to think we know what everyone wants but until the questionnaire results are in we can't be sure. We have a steering group of 12 people and for all we know we could be in a minority of 12. We think the main priorities will be improvements to the parish hall and properties in bad repair but whatever comes to light we will form action groups to see what we can do once we have the backing of the majority. I think this will be the interesting part.

If you knew then, what you know now, would you have embarked on a Parish Plan?

Yes. It was hard work at first and we made a very slow start. We held a very well attended initial meeting but the next 3 meetings just covered the same ground and numbers were dwindling. To try to revive interest a few of us drew up a very basic draft plan and took it to the 5th meeting for approval. This seemed to do the trick and we finally elected a chairman and a dozen or so people volunteered to form a steering group. Their enthusiasm started things moving and it is now a very interesting project. It now seems to be gaining momentum all the time.

What would your advice be to parishes that have not yet prepared a Parish Plan?

Persistence, and take all the help and advice that is available! There will always be people that think a parish plan is a complete waste of time and their comments can easily put you off but the enthusiasm of a few can be catching! There is a lot information available from CCD and this gives you a good start and saves you from reinventing the wheel, although I think the completed plan should as unique as the village it relates to - or they would all look the same!

