

## **Planning for better neighbourhoods together**

### **Department for Communities and Local Government**

The neighbourhood planning project is driven by the localism agenda. It puts communities in charge of neighbourhood planning: deciding where new developments should go, what they should look like and the infrastructure that they require.

DCLG needed to approach the project in a collaborative way. Success in implementing neighbourhood planning rests on thousands of parishes, groups or individuals choosing to take up the right and going through the often arduous process of consulting their community, gathering evidence and writing a plan. DCLG's team, on its own, can have limited impact on take-up or support: there are no regulatory levers or mandatory reporting and little funding to motivate local authorities and communities to take up the right.

#### **Working together for quicker and better results**

The main challenge for the team was to reach and engage a broad audience, many of which may not be proficient on a wide range of media tools. The team also had to recognise and utilise existing relationships, often encouraging a new approach to working and suggesting new tools to use. This was particularly prominent when establishing networks with local authorities and the public, where conventional online media tools are often under-utilised.

The neighbourhood planning team followed a 'mobilisation' approach to enable communities to take up the opportunity of neighbourhood planning. The approach empowers communities to lead the project by: enthusing and informing them about neighbourhood planning; helping them as they bring forward neighbourhood plans, through networking, funding and policies; and expanding the movement via volunteer Champions who engage locally and regionally.

The mobilisation approach is a Directorate wide approach based on more commonly cited principles, but with various iterations at team level to enable innovative practice. By April 2014, the first seven neighbourhood plans are now in place with over 1,000 communities following in their footsteps.

Listening to the communities has helped them solve neighbourhood issues as they emerge, jointly with the community. DCLG officials have provided direct support in conversation with communities and local authorities, for example considering the examination process in Thame where the first public hearing was used.

The team benefited from making themselves fully accessible to the public. They shared their contact details on LinkedIn and through the team's online bulletin. This did not lead to thousands of emails, as feared, but instead to early warnings of upcoming issues. The openness changed the dynamic of the relationship between government and communities without adding extra burdens. We did not know that it would work so well, however: offering support in this way was a gamble.

#### **Rolling the approach out**

The team was able to experiment with different mobilising techniques because the comprehensive evidence of community activity built credibility with Ministers. Staff

attended local meetings and ran networking events, they published a regular newsletter and utilised a variety of online tools to share progress.

- Twitter: particularly useful for firing out news items and maintaining direct contact with larger audiences.
- LinkedIn: a dedicated group was formed externally to which officials contribute. With a large, active audience there is now a broad crowd who can share issues and suggest solutions to particular and often complex questions.
- Pinterest: in a less conventional way, the team has been exploring how to signpost published plans, in this case posting links using the map function.
- Open data: published geographical data online and demonstrated its value on an interactive map.

We hope these initiatives will demonstrate the potential online environment available and have welcomed feedback and ideas across the board. The team is open to external ownership of these projects, including discussing how apps can be produced using Government data. The team avoid using tools that require too much management and focus on iterative approaches, trialling tools and managing external expectations to enable a space where the public can engage and often lead on collaborative platforms without too much initial buy-in.

Even though at first the team had to clear their tweets with Ministers, once they became more familiar with tools they were able to take forward projects more freely. The team's success has incentivised other teams to take up social media and map their impact.

### **Lessons learnt**

- The 'open' approach helped make the innovation a success by identifying emerging situations before they came to a head.
- Build the right team – professional expertise, flexibility, enthusiasm, readiness to go the extra mile, fresh thinking from interns, an impatience to improve and a willingness to accept risk and imperfection were key to the sustained good work and wellbeing of the team.
- Recognise early successes – combined with a passion for the work, direct association with areas and projects builds a strong identity between stakeholders and success embed a sense of positive competition to achieve ever better results.
- Persevere – doing new things in new ways will mean that people will be particularly risk averse at first, but if you persevere and demonstrate the benefits, it will become increasingly accepted.

### **Find out more**

The team have a page on Gov.uk to showcase some of the work they are doing: [www.gov.uk/government/policy-teams/neighbourhood-planning-team](http://www.gov.uk/government/policy-teams/neighbourhood-planning-team)  
To find the latest neighbourhood plans across England, you can search using Pinterest: [www.pinterest.com/nplanning/neighbourhood-plans/](http://www.pinterest.com/nplanning/neighbourhood-plans/)  
To find areas where neighbourhood plans are underway use this

map:[http://dclgexamples.mywebcommunity.org/npf/npanodes\\_osm.html](http://dclgexamples.mywebcommunity.org/npf/npanodes_osm.html)