Advice Sheet

5	Prioritising and planning action

Resource Sheet

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STEP 5 — PRIORITISING AND PLANNING ACTION

Purpose

This step shows you how to prioritise and plan actions that will improve your local area.

What's involved

Making sense of the information you have already gathered, discussing this with members of your community and agreeing on some priority actions that will need to be carefully planned.

Useful resources

Resource Sheet 4/1 – Community wellbeing and sustainability
Resource Sheet 5/1 – Analysing quantitative and qualitative data
Resource Sheet 5/2 – Prioritisation techniques
Local resources – contact your Rural Community Action Network (RCAN) member for details

Introduction

By now you will have gathered a lot of information about your community's wellbeing and sustainability, having taken into consideration existing facts and information along with the views and expectations of everyone locally.

This step is about how you can use this information to prioritise and plan actions that will improve your area. It shows you how to make sense of the data you have collected, discuss the findings with the rest of your community, and make some informed decisions about what actions to take forward and how these will progress.

Making sense of the information you've already gathered

Groups that have spent time considering existing facts and information about their area and made efforts to consult everyone locally will almost certainly end up will a mountain of data that has been captured in different ways. Some data might be numerical, some might be notes or quotations taken during interviews or meetings, and some might even be pictures, drawings or models! Making sense of this can be a tricky business and will take time. However there are a number of things that you can do to make your data more coherent and easier to understand.

A good starting point is to categorise your data according to the elements set out in Resource Sheet 4/1 which together comprise community wellbeing and sustainability. For instance, you could gather all your data that refers to the local environment into a discrete folder or code it by a certain colour. How you do this is entirely up to you and depends on the way you prefer to organise things. However, the goal should be to break the data down into more manageable chunks.

See also: **Resource Sheet 4/1 – Community wellbeing and sustainability**

Once you have categorised your data, you will need to look for common themes or issues that are referred to. In doing this, you may find there is general agreement or even contradictions. It's important that you tease out the detail of this in your analysis. For instance, local census statistics may have alerted you to high levels of unemployment locally. This might marry up with survey feedback that identifies people's concerns about finding work locally, or pictures taken during a photo survey that shows empty commercial properties as a part of town that could be improved. Conversely, you might have taken notes during a focus group with school leavers that

suggested many of them want to look for work or go to university elsewhere. Essentially, good analysis should result in a story about the themes or issues that you have identified, demonstrating different perspectives or opinions where they exist.

To save time, you may wish to task volunteers with analysing different parts of the data and get them to report back to you.

Resource Sheet 5/1 provides more detailed information about the different types of data you could come across, and how you can analyse and interpret this to best effect.

See also: **Resource Sheet 5/1 – Analysing quantitative and qualitative data**

Testing your findings and prioritising actions

Once you have undertaken some basic analysis of the data collected, you should look to test your findings with the rest of your community and begin to prioritise some actions.

The best way to approach this is to summarise the data you have collected into a short report. This should briefly explain the information that was gathered and flag up particularly interesting themes or issues that were identified. Again, you can structure this using the elements set out in Resource Sheet 4/1. As a rule of thumb, aim for no more than one page per element – anything more and people are likely to be put off reading the report!
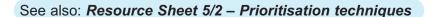
When the report is finished, it needs to be drawn to the attention of everyone locally. This is an opportunity for you to test the results, discussing these with other people to develop a clearer idea of what actions need to be in your final plan. Ideally this can be done at a public meeting or event where people have an opportunity to share their views and ideas. However, you may wish to do this via an online forum or survey if you think this is likely to engage a larger proportion of your community.

Regardless of the method you use to discuss the findings with your community, you should broadly seek to answer the following questions:

• Are people in general agreement with the evidence presented?
• Is there anything missing?
• Are there any themes or issues that should be adddressed as a matter of priority in the plan?

Resource Sheet 5/2 suggests some techniques that you can use to facilitate answers to the last question, particularly if you are using a public meeting or event.

See also: **Resource Sheet 5/2 – Prioritisation techniques**

STEP 5 — PRIORITISING AND PLANNING ACTION

Planning actions

Once your community has agreed to the findings of the summary report and identified some priority issues, you will then need to work out how these can be translated into some practical actions. These should be 'SMART' and demonstrate the following characteristics:

Specific — The action is well defined and clear to everyone involved

Meaningful — The action is valued and supported by members of your community

Appropriate — The action is based on an understanding of the evidence you have already collected and the difference it will make to everyone locally

Realistic — The action has considered the skills, knowledge, resources and support available

Timed — The action is envisaged to be completed within a clear time frame

To begin planning your SMART actions, it's recommended that you undertake some further investigative work. For each action consider the following questions:

- Looking at the evidence collected so far, what do we want to achieve?
- What steps do we need to take to get there?
- Who will be responsible for getting things done?
- Who else needs to be involved?
- What resources are needed and how will these be obtained?
- How long is it likely to take?

For all actions, think carefully about whether you need to involve officers from you local authority or other service providers. They can provide technical advice, explain existing strategies for your area and might even be able to offer some kind of support for the work you want to pursue.

See also: **Resource Sheet 3/2 – Creating a simple project plan**

If you're able to answer the above, you're ready to move onto Step 6 which shows you how to draft your final plan document which will detail the various actions you propose.

> **By the end of this stage, it is recommended that you have:**
>
> - **Made sense of the information you have collected about your community**
>
> - **Tested your findings with members of your community and prioritised some key issues that your plan will address**
>
> - **Begun to scope out various actions that will feature in your final plan.**

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ANALYSING QUALITATATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE DATA

Use this for…

Making sense of the data you have collected about your community.

See also…

Resource Sheet 4/1 – Community wellbeing and sustainability

Step 4 recommends you spend time gathering existing facts and information and consult as many people as possible to develop a better understanding of your community. Having done this, you've probably ended up with a large amount of data that's presented in different ways.

This Resource Sheet outlines the two main categories of data that you're likely to capture as part of your plan and explains how it can be put to good use.

Different types of data

There are two types of data that you will have gathered about your community; quantitative and qualitative. They are both equally important and can be used in different ways.

Quantitative data (numbers)

Much of the information you have collected about your community is likely to be numerical. This might be drawn from census data or consultation activities (such as questionnaires) where responses can be easily counted. Essentially, quantitative data can provide you with some seemingly hard evidence that might be representative of the broader needs and expectations of your community.

Quantitative data can be useful for:

* Identifying changes that have happened in your community over time (e.g. census statistics between the years of 1991 and 2011 might show that the number of people living in your community has changed significantly and there are now more residents aged 65 and over)

* Comparing the characteristics of your community with other places (e.g. in your community profile report[1], you might find that your parish or ward ranks higher in terms of deprivation than other areas in your county, perhaps due to levels of unemployment

* Showing the number of people that are in agreement or disagreement about characteristics or features of your community

* Example: 30% of respondents to a questionnaire felt that public transport provision was inadequate. Of these respondents, 80% currently had no access to a car.

Be careful when looking for patterns in quantitative data. It's easy to make the mistake of taking statistics out of context or believing that that they speak the absolute truth without critically reflecting on how they were generated. For example, if you used a questionnaire, think carefully about how many people responded, whether they represent a good cross section of your community. If it's the case that the majority of respondents were white, middle class and over the age of 50, you might want to consider whether their behaviours, views and opinions can be generalised to represent the wider community!

[1] Available from Rural Community Action Network (RCAN) members, see **www.rural-evidence.org.uk**

Qualitative data (text, audio, visual)

You're also likely to gather a large amount of qualitative data as part of your consultation.   If you've undertaken interviews, focus groups, encouraged people to express their opinions using video diaries or undertaken neighbourhood walks you will have recorded things that are written, said or presented but can't necessarily be counted. This data is just as important as the information that can be counted!

Qualitative data can be useful for illustrating particular phenomena or characteristics of your community, for instance:

- Telling a story about how certain people in your community might experience something differently (e.g. how people without access to cars might find it more difficult to secure employment)

- Telling a story about how people view things in different ways and how this might be addressed as part of the plan (e.g. where some people have expressed concerns about the availability and affordability of homes locally, in contrast to others who are opposed to any new development)

- Illustrating or explaining quantitative findings (e.g. responses in a questionnaire suggested that there were not enough buses serving the community. A focus group with people interested in the bus service revealed that the problem was not the number of buses serving the community, but the times at which they called were not compatible with peoples travel requirements)

Be careful not to think of qualitative data as representative of your community. It will say a great deal about how particular people or groups of people might experience something, but their views might not be the same as other people in your community!

STEP 5   PRIORITISATION TECHNIQUES

Use this for…

Identifying some simple techniques for gauging which issues or themes people in your community want to address as a matter of priority.

See also…

Resource Sheet 4/1 – Community wellbeing and sustainability
Resource Sheet 4/4 – Example consultation methods
Resource Sheet 5/1 – Analysing quantitative and qualitative data
Resource Sheet 6/1 – Action plan template

Having taken time to analyse information you have gathered about your community, you will need to discuss your findings with other people and reach agreement what should be done next. You should aim to establish if the key issues and themes have been identified, to prioritise these and ensure that they are fed into the action plan and ultimately the final version of the Community Led Plan.

There are a number of tried and tested techniques for identifying and prioritising actions for your plan from the information you have already gathered. These are similar but subtly different from the information gathering consultation methods featured in Resource Sheet 4/4 – Example consultation methods.

See also: ***Resource Sheet 4/4 – Example consultation methods***

The most important thing to remember, as with all other stages of your Community Led Plan, is to include everyone. If people have taken time to respond to the initial surveys and consultation they will be keen to ensure that their concerns are taken forward.

Deciding on an appropriate technique

You can use one of the consultation techniques suggested, a combination, or you may have ideas of your own but you should take into account:

- Which members of the community you are addressing and whether the technique will suit them. You will be familiar at this stage with the best ways to attract the attention of your community by considering what worked well at other stages of the consultation
- Whether the venue is appropriate for the activity
- That minority interests are important and the majority doesn't always rule
- That the community might have reached saturation point with questions, surveys and consultations, especially if the Community Led Planning process has taken longer and been more involved than expected. Try a different activity and make it fun.

Some suggested techniques

Agreement Continuums
You will need to set out the findings from your analysis as individual statements and discuss whether the community agree or disagree. Each statement can then be placed on a continuum line. This could also be done physically by asking individuals to move along an imaginary line one end being agree and the other disagree. Younger people would probably appreciate expressing their view in this way. An advantage of using this method is that results are immediately visible and can be discussed.

Dot Tally
A number of the flagged items are put on a flip chart/board and each individual puts dots next to the ones they for example, want to keep, like, want to discuss or explore further, want to prioritise. This technique can highlight quite quickly where the priorities might lay.

Pros/Cons
Ask the community to list the pros and cons of each of the flagged items and also to score each pro or con based on some weighting. This ensures that it is not just the greater number of either pros or cons that makes the decision but the weight of each is also taken into account.

Focus Groups
This technique can be used with small groups so, for instance, you could run a focus group for older residents at one of their meetings or attend the youth club to speak to a group of young people about the analysis and findings and whether they agree with the priorities identified.

Voting
Some RCAN members have electronic handset systems for voting which they can lend to communities. This can add a fun element to identifying the priorities and appeals to all ages. If the technology works correctly then immediate results are possible. However, there are other methods of voting i.e. using a ballot box, hustings and using voting tubes.

To conclude

At the end of the session(s) it will be necessary to have reached an agreement, or at least understood what your community considers the priorities to be. Remember you will have to work out how to turn them into practical actions. Return to Advice Sheet 5 – Prioritising and Planning Action for some advice on how to do this.

For further advice about prioritisation techniques contact your Rural Community Action Network (RCAN) member.