

Lanchester ... a great place to live!

Villages throughout County Durham with a population of 5,000 and under were called to action in the County Durham Village of the Year competition 2009. The competition was organised by Durham Rural Community Council (DRCC) with sponsorship provided by Calor.

The villages that entered were judged across four areas of rural village life including community, business, sustainability and communications. The competition was about recognising, rewarding and encouraging vibrant and sustainable village communities which pull together to make the best of local opportunities.

In previous years, all the villages that entered found the experience of working together as a community, identifying the many positive aspects of village life and recording them on the entry form, extremely valuable. This process is so fulfilling that every village felt the competition made them a winner' from the start.

County Durham has many exemplary communities, all of which are involved in some excellent projects and are really working hard to improve life for villagers of all ages. DRCC wanted to give villages the opportunity to showcase what they do well while recognising what they can do to improve or where best practice can be incorporated. The aim of the competition was to get villages to help themselves and as many villages as possible were encouraged to get involved.

The Village of the Year competition is of benefit to all communities that enter and residents routinely comment on just how much they have got out of entering it, irrespective of who wins the cash prizes. It's a village health check - a `community MOT` - and volunteers and residents repeatedly say that they didn't know how much their community did until they entered the competition and took stock of all the activities taking place.

The judges sought out well-balanced, pro-active and caring communities that have made the best of local opportunities to enhance the quality of life for all inhabitants. Lanchester village was a worthy county winner of the competition in 2009 when judges found that fantastic work was taking place achieving excellent results for the community as a whole. Clerk to the Parish Council Sally Laverick, commented that the key to their success lay in the close working relationship between the Parish Council, Lanchester Partnership and village organisations.

Lanchester Parish Council and Lanchester Partnership took the lead in the competition entry and working with village organisations, they found it relatively easy to build on the good work which was already going on. Motivating residents to get involved was not difficult as many groups were already co-operating together. The free, monthly newspaper, 'The Village Voice' was also instrumental in disseminating information and drumming up support via promotional articles.

Completing the application made everyone realise just how much was going on in the village and that community cohesion was the magic ingredient that made Lanchester a good place to live, like head teachers from the local schools meeting with local councillors to develop projects in which they were able to work together. Lanchester boasts around 70 to 80 community groups all of which thrive because of the staunch public support they receive. Before they even started to compile the winning entry for the competition the Parish Council made sure they had as many of the organised groups as possible involved in the application. Children and staff from local schools, people from church groups, parish councillors, the partnership, community centre, music organisations and those involved in charitable work all worked together to outline their involvement within the community.



When they lifted the trophy, the working group decided to split the £800 prize, presented at Durham RCC's Annual General Meeting, between the Community Centre, the Community Partnership and two local primary schools to benefit as broad a range of people as possible. The residents of Lanchester impressed the judges with the standard of their entry and the village demonstrated outstanding community values. DRCC was delighted to be able to recognise these qualities in 2009.

Lanchester community as a whole works together to improve the environment and raise funds for good causes. The annual Lanchester Carnival provides family fun and raises funds for good causes. The Christmas lights are a local attraction and the November bonfire and fireworks display is one of the best locally, attracting thousands of visitors each year. The brass band and the male voice choir are award winning organisations whilst the community centre web-site has been judged to be excellent, winning the Communigate Web-Site of the Year in 2006. The Village Design Statement, produced by volunteers won a Royal Town Planning Institute Award and residents themselves produce the Village Voice, a monthly community newsletter that is delivered free to every household.

Lanchester is a caring community that continually raises funds to improve the local environment and to support others less fortunate, for example, Willowburn Hospice, Mercy Ships, Lanchester House Orphanage, and All Saints School, Liberia.

The Lanchester Parish Plan, adopted in 2006, identified the current needs and aspirations of the community and also attempted to anticipate how those needs and aspirations might change over the next decade and beyond. Aiming to "research and identify the needs of the different groups within the community", the Parish Plan involved a 4 stage consultative process including a public launch meeting, an open community workshop, a questionnaire survey distributed to over 1800 households and a series of meetings with local community interest groups. The questionnaire was distributed to every household and yielded an unusually high response of 42%.

Commissioned by the Parish Council and prepared by a mixed group of local residents, the Parish Plan built upon the 1998 parish appraisal, which led amongst other things to the reconstitution of the working group as the Lanchester Partnership. The partnership went on in turn to produce the Village Design Statement in 2004, designed to ensure that building development would reflect the general character of the village. The Village Design Statement itself was adopted by the District Council as Supplementary Planning Guidance.



The Parish Plan demonstrated that Lanchester is an active, self-supporting, caring community with over 90% of those who responded to the Parish Plan questionnaire reporting that they felt part of the community and more than 70% shopping in the village once a week or more. There is good and active community leadership and governance in place, vigorous and energetic local partnerships and numerous examples of community engagement.

With the confidence to formulate a series of recommendations in an `action plan` for the Parish Council and its partners to implement, the Parish Plan steering group sought to pose and answer the question: "What kind of a place do we want to live in now and in ten years' time?"

The response to the consultative process embodied in the Parish Plan demonstrated a high level of interest in the local environment and as a result, the Parish Council in association with the Lanchester Partnership subsequently commissioned a 'Locality Map'. The Lanchester Parish Group worked together to prepare the map, which was published at the end of 2009.

The Locality Map sets out a concise approach to the wider countryside and rural communities of the parish, drawing together a number of themes:

- Encouraging and increasing sustainability
- Appreciating that landscapes are dynamic
- Recognising that farmland appearance changes in response to government policy, schemes and farming practices
- Providing a resource for tourism and leisure
- Encouraging planning policies to match with a vision for the future of the Parish
- Seeking a fit for all stakeholders, including farmers, landowners, residents, commuting workers, tourists and visitors, local businesses, local authorities, local organisations and partnerships and those managing wildlife habitats
- Delivering on Local Development Plans

In producing the locality Map, the people of Lanchester sought to demonstrate their support for the land-based economy as custodian, managing the countryside of their Parish to conserve and enhance the area's rich landscape, diversity and character. The Locality Map was printed in 2009 and has subsequently secured over £70,000 of external funding to employ a Development Officer to take forward and act on the action plan.

Similarly in response to recommendations contained in the Lanchester Parish Plan, in 2007 the Lanchester partnership produced the "Working with Lanchester's Young People" report. The report concluded in general the community's young people "seem to be happy, socially well-adjusted and doing well academically...it is a safe, strong and supportive community (and) provides an environment in which they can grow up well". However for those not willing or able to access the range of semi-formal facilities on offer, "we provide nothing - not even a decent shelter from the winter weather".

In its recommendations the report stated: "In the opinion of the working group there is a moral obligation on us, the residents of Lanchester, to do more for the teenagers who are losing their way". The report's recommendations were approved by the Lanchester Partnership and - subject to the availability of resources implement them - by the Parish Council in November 2007.

In order to enhance its influence in all matters affecting the Parish, the Parish Council strove to attain Quality Status and demonstrate to the community that they are representative, in touch with the community, competent and capable. In 2009 the Parish Clerk achieved the Certificate in Local Council Administration and the Council achieved Quality Status.

This pro-active community doesn't confine its caring to home. Since 2003 the village has also found the time and commitment to support work in West Africa. There have been numerous fund raising events and massive support for an orphanage in post civil war Liberia. In 2005 the fundraising stepped up when a dormitory roof was urgently needed at the orphanage and within 3 weeks over £3000 was sent from the people of Lanchester to complete the building, which the Africans named 'Lanchester House' in honour of their benefactors. Thanks to further generous donations from the Lanchester community most of the damaged buildings at the Orphanage have now been replaced, including the building of a new school, 'All Saints School, Liberia', funded almost entirely by All Saints School, Lanchester.

What Lanchester does, it does together. Active local partnerships work with the Parish Council for the benefit the whole area. The community takes a pride in the village and there are joint church services held on the village green for all residents.

And what benefits everyone, benefits Lanchester. It's an attractive village, set in equally attractive countryside. Its residents are its greatest asset and work together to invest in the health and well-being of the community for benefit of everyone. There are 3 good schools that engage actively in and enrich village life, strong local businesses that provide employment and facilities and healthy and active community organisations that meet the needs of all sections of the community, including the hard-to-reach, the housebound and the young. Lanchester is an active, self-supporting, caring community...it really is a great place to live!

