



## Briefing:

# Community involvement at the heart of a sustainable partnership and strategy

This briefing covers the links between community involvement and sustainable development, and looks at how these links can help strengthen the community strategy process and the LSP. Community involvement is integral to the ideas behind community strategies. This briefing demonstrates why strong community involvement throughout the process is also crucial for the move towards sustainable development.

The briefing does *not* attempt to look at the “how” of community involvement within community strategies and LSPs. There are many more detailed briefings and resource sources that do this. For a list of some of these, see the end of the briefing paper.

Links between community involvement and sustainable development. Many of the benefits of strong community involvement in a community strategy process have direct links to sustainable development:

- **Local knowledge:** Workable local solutions depend on local knowledge. Local knowledge is vital part of the jigsaw of information which will inform sustainable and integrated solutions.
- **Interconnectedness and perception:** Integrated solutions often develop most naturally at a local level, where people can relate problems and solutions directly to their own lives – rather than siloing issues according to local authority departments or services. At a neighbourhood level, links between issues are made more easily, and the impact of one solution upon another, more easily understood.

The integration approach to decision making, outlined in the briefing “Joined-up Working and Policy Integration”, explicitly recognises differing and sometimes conflicting objectives, dependant on the perceptions of different stakeholders. This means that stakeholder – and especially community – involvement in debate and decision making is vital if we are to move towards more sustainable, integrated solutions.

- **Strong communities are part of a sustainable society:** Healthy communities are places where people have the power to work together, to take action to improve their circumstances, and where they can influence decision making. Healthy communities are a central objective of sustainable development. Yet they only develop with thought, support, resources and some devolution of power to a local level.
- **Education and awareness, individual action and changes of behaviour:** Strong community involvement in sustainable development decision making leads to increased knowledge, awareness and understanding at a local level. Whilst behaviour is affected by many factors, such as poverty and power relationships, knowledge, awareness and understanding are all building blocks for changes in individual behaviour which play a central role in sustainable development.
- **Community action, local ownership and lasting change:** Local community action can increase local ownership of solutions. There is strong evidence of more dynamic links between people and their local environment and a growth of social capital, both generated through community-level action.
- **Challenge:** Local community views and action tends to challenge formalised and institutional approaches to decision making, and to question assumptions underpinning these structures. This can be used as a dynamic and useful part of the community strategy debate and a valuable input to integrated and sustainable solutions.

Local Agenda 21, which, in many cases has now been incorporated into the community strategy agenda, has long recognised the dual objectives of sustainable development and community involvement. The movement has included:

- cross-stakeholder debate – often via LA21 fora
- action at a local level through community organisations
- influence of the corporate agenda of local authorities and the adoption of corporate sustainable development objectives.

**Example from practice:** [East Hampshire District Council](#) East Hampshire District Council has developed a method of involving local people through Area Committees which has been very useful in the community strategy process.

Community priorities = sustainable development priorities?

Local strategic partnerships are tasked with coordinating action to meet local priorities, whilst also working within strategic regional and national agendas. This tension between high level priorities and local priorities is often thought to be especially apparent when addressing sustainable development, where many of the issues are national and/or global, and often long-term in nature.

There is growing evidence that this tension can be eased if:

- multiple viewpoints are included, to bring together the range of perspectives and concerns at a local level.
- people participating within the debate have access to information which will help inform their deliberations (the process for integrated decision making, outlined in the briefing “Joined-up Working and Policy Integration” stresses the importance of having access to relevant information to make informed choices)
- the process of involvement is facilitated to ensure that people’s view points are able to be articulated and listened to, that the discussion is deliberative and that relevant information is used to challenge view-points and facilitate difficult decisions. This is, of course, a process which requires adequate funding.

The Greengage report *Leadership for Sustainable Development* (see resources section below) found several examples of local authorities where this form of community involvement has allowed community aspirations to be seen as a ‘proxy for sustainable development’.

Moving beyond consultation towards action for sustainable development

The familiar rally cry of *Think Globally: Act Locally*, which grew from Agenda 21 is underpinned by the principle of local action by communities. There is a strong movement of community projects acting on environmental, health, youth, support and many more issues, which has grown from the Local Agenda 21, as well as through many other routes.

Whilst the language of community strategies stresses the importance of community involvement throughout the process, in practice this often means little more than consulting with communities about specific parts of the process. Typically consultation can be as little as identification of issues at the start of the process and commenting on actions plans. Community involvement and participation, on the other hand, implies a longer-term relationship, based on dialogue rather than two-dimensional consultation.

**The Ladder of Participation was originally developed by Arnstein in the 1960s, and has been adapted by many people since. It describes a spectrum of power relationships between communities and organisations. The assumption which underpins the ladder is that there should be a movement from tokenistic and more superficial relationships which**

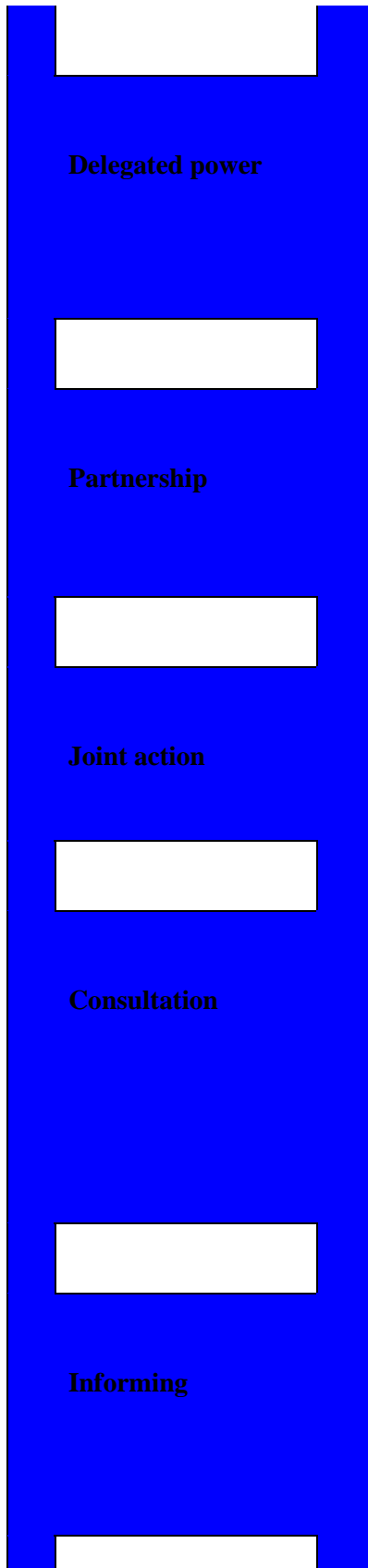
reinforce existing power relationships, towards greater community power and control over decision making.

The adaptation of Arnsteins ladder which follows describes its various levels in relationships to the community strategies and LSPs.

- In practice, each of the levels on the ladder will be appropriate for different parts of the community, at different times, addressing different aspects of sustainable development. However, realism and honesty are real objectives of community involvement.
- There is a body of practical knowledge and skill which has been built up about achieving good community participation, and processes for strong community development. Information about community development and developing strong communities can be found from the Community Development Foundation (see resources section below).
- There is no need to reinvent the wheel. Most areas have a range of community groups focusing on a range of different issues. Environmental action in particular is often carried out locally by groups of local people. There are also likely to be voluntary sector forums, community group networks and Local Agenda 21 fora, which are already linking into various groups. Existing action often goes unrecognised or supported, whilst new schemes are constantly being set up!
- There will also be stacks of knowledge and experience both within the Local authority itself, and through its partner organisations – work with community development workers, Local Agenda 21 officers, youth workers, health workers, voluntary sector works, etc.

**Example from practice:** [Durham Biodiversity Partnership](#) [Durham Biodiversity Partnership](#) involves a wide range of organisations in promoting local biodiversity and has now launched a pilot project aimed at integrating biodiversity concerns into the community strategy.

Levels of involvement and community strategies



**Objectives for the CS / LSP process**

**Sustainable development examples**

- Local people taking control of local decisions.
- Local people taking responsibility for some aspects of the community strategy / theme groups.

- Budgeting, strategy setting and action at LA21 forum/ neighbourhood forum.
- Full representation from these groups on broader partnerships.
- Strategy of broader Partners are informed by community.

- Local people working with other agencies to decide on priorities, identify actions, take action.

- LA21 forum membership on the partnership.
- Links between the LSP and LA21 Forum
- Emphasis on representation and links to community organisations

- Local people involved in delivering change on the ground.

- Existing local action recognised and legitimised.
- Involvement of local organisations and groups in action planning and delivery.

- Local people asked what they think about priorities, vision and action.
- Local knowledge and local experience recognised and built upon.

- Local people having an opportunity to influence the stated vision.
- Local people having an influence over the priorities.
- Local people having an opportunity to influence the action plan.

- People are informed about the process and about how they can get involved.
- People are informed about the implications of decisions and options.

- Local people are informed about how, when and why the community strategy process is taken place.
- Local people have access to information about the implications of decisions.

Links to sustainable development fora, voluntary and community sectors.

The white paper recommends nesting partnerships within the umbrella of the LSP. Many LSPs are now operating as umbrella strategy bodies, and Government policy calls for dovetailing between existing partnerships. LSPs are increasingly linking to action partnerships, through which policy is carried out, strong links with the community are developed, and which in turn then feed into strategy development.

This provides opportunities for strong relationships to be developed between the LSP and sustainable development fora, such as LA21 partnerships, air quality partnerships etc, to act as Action Groups with direct relationships to the LSP. Sustainability Fora often act as networks for a wide range of voluntary and community organisations taking action on a range of issues.

Key issues to consider in this relationship would be:

- demonstrating the links between the agendas of existing partnership/fora and the objectives of the LSP.
- identifying potential conflicts between the objectives and activities of partnerships and searching for ways to overcome these.
- the development of a consultation and involvement strategy (which addresses, amongst other issues, representation on the LSP and working groups)
- processes for influencing the LSP Board (there are many examples of LA21 Fora making strategic links with key Partners.)
- representation on the LSP Board from voluntary and community sectors. This can be a route for ensuring that there is sustainable development knowledge within the core LSP group. Representation is a complex issue which should be given detailed consideration with the LSP
- reconciling the different cultures of the LSP (generally fairly formal and strategy orientated) and LA21 Fora (generally more informal, community focused and sometimes more action orientated)
- ensuring that LA21 Fora are not simply a way of ghettoising environmental and sustainable development issues
- the links between LA21 Officers and Community Strategy / LSP Officers.
- equality of voice on the LSP board

Communities influencing the CP and LSP process.

The Community Development Foundation has recently published a resource publication for community and voluntary sector organisations, to help them influence LSP agendas (see resource section below).

The Venn-diagram at the end of this briefing shows the stages of the community strategy cycle, through which community organisations can be involved and influence the sustainable development agenda. There are many ways that community groups working on sustainable development objectives can build formal links with the LSP and influence the community strategy process:

- the Local Agenda 21 forum could link formally to the LSP, as a ‘nested’ action group.
- the voluntary sector forum is likely to have a place on the LSP – is the representative fully briefed about sustainable development and about the local action already taking place? Update your representative regularly and develop strong links with them
- via training and capacity building for community groups – there is money available for this via the Community Empowerment Fund in the 88 Neighbourhood Renewal Authorities.

However, many Local Agenda 21 fora are finding that these formal links are difficult to develop because of the different cultures of community organisations/fora and LSPs. Community organisations are often more unstructured than formalised, strategic partnerships, and this often means that the work of the former goes unrecognised and undervalued. Yet community organisations are crucial actors within any strategy to promote sustainable development. They provide links into the many section of the community, which would otherwise not get involved in the process, forming a conduit for ideas, influence and action for sustainable development.

**Example from practice:** [Welcome to our Future \(Local Agenda 21\)](#). WTOF is a community owned charity and company limited by guarantee. It was set up in 1998 as a result of the Local Agenda 21 Forum in Herefordshire and Worcestershire after calls for an independent organisation to take forward LA21 in the counties. Its board is made up of representatives from the environmental and community/ voluntary sectors, local authorities, and from business. Due to the eclectic make-up of the membership and the board, WTOF is in a position to bridge the gap between the different sectors. It has one foot in the ‘top-down local authority camp’ and one foot in the ‘more lateral grass-roots camp’. This provides WTOF with an opportunity to play a linking role in local strategic partnerships.

**Example from practice:** [Sunderland City Council](#) Sunderland’s emphasis on a participatory approach to community involvement began on sustainability issues but has spread into other areas covered by the strategic partnership.

**Example from practice:** [Warrington Borough Council](#) Warrington Borough Council is drawing on its pre-existing community forum to assist integrating sustainable development objectives in the local strategic partnership, and is planning a broader community network to be an ‘external arm’ of the LSP.

**Example from practice:** [Firthmoor Community Partnership Board](#) Firthmoor, an area of Darlington in receipt of SRB funds, has developed a genuine community partnership, where local people have the final say in all major decisions. The potential for the community to take over the running of the estate, as a cooperative, is now being investigated.

**The benefits of community involvement**

- *Health in England 1998: Investigating the links between social inequalities and health* The Stationary Office, London
- InterAct: a network of UK process practitioners working on sustainability issues.
- *Leadership for sustainable development: actions that local authorities are taking to mainstream sustainable development*, Greengage Consulting Ltd for DEFRA, November 2001 [dave@greengageconsulting.ltd.uk](mailto:dave@greengageconsulting.ltd.uk)
- *Thinking locally, acting nationally: lessons for national policy work on local sustainability*, Chris Church and Jake Elster, Joseph Rowntree Foundation in association with CDF available from CDF (see below)

**Community involvement in LSPs**

The following are all available from the Community Development Foundation at [www.cdf.org.uk](http://www.cdf.org.uk)

- See *At the Starting Blocks: community involvement in local strategic partnerships*, Peter Dale, Community Development Foundation December 2001
- *The LSP guide: a handy guide to getting involved for voluntary and community groups*, Alison West, Community Development Foundation, September 2001
- *The new community Strategies: how to involve local people*, Gabriel Chanan, Charlie Garrett and Alison West, Community Development Foundation, 2000
- See also: [\*Effective Local Strategic Partnerships: LGA advice note for working with the community and voluntary sector\*](#)

## Community involvement in the community strategy process

Community involvement is not confined to specific parts of the community strategy process, but should be an integral part of the whole process. Community-level *action*, for so long part of the environmental movement, can play a direct part of the process – both acting on community strategy objectives, and informing strategy development.

This model of the stages of community strategies shows in green the key stages through which communities can be involved.

