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Formative Evaluation of Community Strategies 2004–2007 Final Report

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Formative Evaluation of Community Strategies
2004–2007
Final Report

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Formative Evaluation of Community Strategies 2004–2007

Final Report

A paper prepared for:
Local and Regional Government Research Unit
Communities & Local Government

June 2008

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List of Acronyms

CPA – Comprehensive Performance Assessment
CSP – Community Safety Partnership
CYPP – Children and Young People’s Plan
CLG – Department for Communities and Local Government
KPI – Key Performance Indicator
LAA – Local Area Agreement
LEA – Local Education Authority
LNRS- Local Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy
LPSA – Local Public Service Agreement
LPT – Local Partnership Team
LSC – Learning and Skills Council
LSP – Local Strategic Partnership
MASP – Mansfield Area Strategic Partnership
NRF – Neighbourhood Renewal Fund
PCT – Primary Care Trust
PI – Performance Indicator
PM – Performance Management
RES – Regional Economic Strategy
RGO – Regional Government Office
RSS – Regional Spatial Strategy
SRB – Single Regeneration Budget

Summary of findings

About the evaluation

This is the final report from the national formative evaluation of community strategies. The evaluation has been undertaken by the Policy Research Institute at Leeds Metropolitan University and the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University.

This evaluation has been carried out in conjunction with the process evaluation of plan rationalisation, the final report of which is published separately.

The evaluation of community strategies commenced in 2004 and has included: scoping work, depth case studies, light touch case studies, two rounds of interviews with national and regional stakeholders, surveys of local government, reviews of community strategies, practitioner workshops and two regional action learning sets. The principal questions that the evaluation sought to address were as follows:

1. Have community strategies added value?
2. Are community strategies an effective mechanism to deliver central government objectives?
3. Are community strategies underpinned by robust systems of performance management?
4. What processes are being used to develop and implement community strategies and are these effective?
5. What systems of partnership, involvement and accountability have been developed for community strategies?
6. How do community strategies operate at different geographic levels?
7. How do community strategies mainstream other policies?

The evaluation has generated a series of publications throughout the course of the work. These are available on the CLG website at www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1136870.

This report synthesises the key findings from all of the previous reports.

The implications of the findings from the evaluation for both policy and practice are drawn out in section 9 of the report.

Community strategies in context

The development and implementation of community strategies by local authorities and their partners reflects important aspects of the wider local government modernisation agenda pursued by the government since 1997. The purpose of community strategies, their relationship to other local plans and strategies and their place within local institutional arrangements have been developed and refined through a series of policy developments and legislative changes. These have included:

- The development of LSPs as the ‘partnership of partnerships’ and, most recently, the introduction of the ‘duty to cooperate’ on the part of named partners.
- The transformation of community strategies into sustainable community strategies as proposed by the Egan Review and reflected in subsequent policy documents.
- The development of closer links between physical land use planning and community strategies.
- The piloting, and subsequent roll-out of Local Area Agreements (LAAs) as a means of pooling budgets to address agreed local priorities and the designation of LAAs as the delivery plans of community strategies.
- Increasing emphasis on the need to develop links between local, sub-regional, regional and supra-regional plans and strategies.
- The new emphasis on ‘place-shaping’.

Processes for developing and implementing community strategies

The use of evidence to understand local needs, develop priorities, and determine how resources should be targeted and to measure progress has been emphasised from the outset. During the course of the evaluation evidence use to inform community strategies has improved; most strategies now show signs that evidence has been used in some way. This evidence comes from a number of sources most commonly: community consultations, national datasets, local administrative data, neighbourhood statistics and local household surveys.

There are still some weaknesses in evidence use notably to inform the setting of baselines, for the purposes of geographical targeting and the use of ‘what works’ data to justify the use of particular interventions and actions.

The original government guidance suggested that community strategies should contain long term visions for localities together with shorter term goals and priorities that would be subject to periodic review.

The evaluation showed that by 2004 over 90% of local authorities had a formally adopted community strategy and around 40% had already completely or partly revised it. The most recent assessment of community strategies indicated that community strategies were beginning to develop a

longer 'shelf-life' as more strategic, higher level documents that are refreshed less frequently. This development has been accompanied by the development in some areas of shorter term delivery plans aligned with the community strategy.

Development of performance management systems has been generally slow but most recently the evaluation has produced evidence of progress with quite complex systems in place in some areas. However for many authorities this remains a challenging area. The recent development of a new outcomes framework for local authorities should be of help.

For those areas that are not in receipt of Neighbourhood Renewal Funding (NRF) lack of resources to support the development and implementation of the community strategies has represented a considerable challenge.

Content of community strategies

The original guidance on community strategies specified that they should contain three key elements: a long term vision; specific goals and priorities; and an agreed action plan. The most recent assessment of community strategies indicated that the majority of strategies now contain both a vision and a strategy. Fewer have action plans although in some cases a separate action plan has been prepared. There is some evidence to suggest that localities are moving towards greater differentiation between documents with the strategy document itself becoming a high level strategic document intended for wide circulation; this then is supported by other more technical documents intended principally for administrative use.

Most strategies are structured by policy area or cross cutting themes rather than by geographic area, population groups or LAA blocks. Although in some cases the community strategy and LAA have been at least partially aligned, this is by no means generally the case. However this is in part due to the different timescales associated with the introduction of LAAs and local review of community strategies.

By 2007 around a half of all strategies had a clearly identifiable action plan suggesting that there is still work to be done to move from aspiration to delivery.

Strategies typically cover a range of policy areas, notably those relating to local authorities' responsibilities. Areas that were generally less well covered include culture and leisure and transport. The treatment of cross-cutting themes such as social inclusion, equality and diversity, and sustainability varies considerably across strategies and is an area for development in the future.

Community strategies working at different levels

All local authorities, whether unitary or in a two tier area, are required to produce a community strategy. Guidance has emphasised the importance of authorities in two tier areas having regard to their respective plans and for all areas to develop linkages to sub-regional, regional and, where appropriate, supra-regional plans and strategies. In practice this has proved to be something of a challenge for many localities.

Although closer working between the two tiers of local government does seem to have been developed in some areas during the course of the evaluation, this has been hampered by continuing uncertainties and tensions in areas where there is the possibility of a local government reorganisation. Furthermore the introduction of different processes associated with LAAs has added a further layer of complexity.

Despite the increasing importance of sub-regional, regional and supra-regional strategies and institutions, the development of linkages between this level and local level community strategies remains an area of weakness. Towards the end of the evaluation there were signs of community strategies making reference to other plans, there was little indication of real engagement with sub-regional, regional or supra-regional issues.

Community, governance and representation

Statutory guidance for the preparation of community strategies emphasises the importance of community engagement in the process of developing community strategies. The evaluation has shown that methods for engaging communities have become more developed and embedded so that community engagement is now widely regarded as an essential part of the community strategy process especially during the development phase. Engagement typically takes the form of consultation about the strategy itself and/or community involvement in LSP structures and decision-making processes.

Some barriers to effective community engagement were highlighted in both the case studies and the light touch studies: these include:

- Differing interpretations of what is meant by the term 'community'
- Lack of capacity within communities to participate effectively
- Lack of resources, including staff time, to promote and facilitate community engagement
- Consultation 'overload' for some communities
- Perceptions that community strategies have little direct impact on neighbourhoods.

A number of local areas have developed innovative and enterprising approaches to try to overcome these barriers.

Partnership working is key to the community strategy process. The evaluation indicates that, overall, the community strategy process has been useful in strengthening partnerships. There is evidence that partners in all case study areas continue to be involved in their LSPs and in overseeing work on the community strategy, attending and contributing to business at meetings. However, there is also recognition that each agency is driven by their own agendas and the priorities set them by their sponsoring government department, which has the potential to undermine their commitment to partnership working at a local level.

The evaluation has shown that elected members have an important role to play in the development and implementation of community strategies although, in practice, their contribution varies considerably between areas. The implications of elected member involvement in LSPs raises important issues relating to local democratic processes which need to be addressed. These include clarity regarding roles, accountability and decision making.

Community strategies as a strategic driver

Increasingly community strategies are being assigned the role of the key strategic document in localities. As such they are intended to provide the vision and strategic framework for other local plans and strategies and, more recently, they have also been given a key role in relation to 'place shaping'.

During the course of the evaluation there is evidence to show that community strategies are, increasingly, taking on the role of strategic driver in many areas providing a framework for integrating the plans of key local agencies. Furthermore, if they have not yet developed a clear role in relation to place shaping they do, in most cases, at least convey a sense of place.

LAAs offer a further challenge. The intention is that they should be informed by the vision and strategic priorities as set out in the community strategy. In reality this is not yet happening in many areas. The timescales for the introduction of LAAs have, in many cases, meant that they have to some extent been developed separately from the community strategy. There is also evidence, however, that this is changing.

Progress and added value

The evaluation has provided evidence of considerable progress towards the achievement of important *process* outcomes as a result of the community strategy process. These include: enhanced partnership working; budget pooling; integration of strategies; and joint target setting. The areas where there has been least progress are budget pooling and mapping spend and activities by area. The community strategy process has also contributed to better understanding of local needs and the determination of local priorities.

Identifying areas where community strategies have resulted in added value in terms of achieving positive outcomes is more difficult. However, in general it was felt that most progress had been made in relation to crime and community safety, and least progress in relation to jobs and worklessness.

The following barriers to progress were identified:

Governance issues

- The challenges of partnership working
- The lack of 'teeth' of the community strategy and the LSP
- Uncertainty around local government reorganisation
- Challenges of two-tier working
- Ownership and accountability issues relating to the community strategy
- The need to develop skills in partnership working
- Balancing the priorities of different interest groups and wider strategic needs.

Central-local government issues

- The proliferation of central government policies and initiatives with implications for localities
- Confusion about the purpose of community strategies – top-down or bottom-up?
- Tension between central government policy priorities and locally identified needs
- Lack of joined up working across central government departments.

Resources

- Lack of resources to support development and delivery of the community strategy
- Short term nature of many funding regimes
- Difficulties associated with budget-pooling.

Sustainable community strategies remain central to government plans for local governance and expectations of what they can and should deliver are high. The evaluation has highlighted some important issues that will need to be addressed if they are to meet the expectations of them.

1. Introduction

1.1 Community strategies

Community strategies have emerged as one of the central elements of the wider Local Government Modernisation Agenda (LGMA). The 2000 Local Government Act introduced the requirement for all local authorities in England to prepare a community strategy. Since then considerable efforts have been focused at the local level on preparing, developing and implementing community strategies that reflect the needs of local areas and highlight local priorities, with the ultimate aim of improving economic, social and environmental well-being.

Formal guidance on preparing community strategies was issued by the then Department for Environment, Transport and Regions (DETR) in 2000¹. This set out the underlying principles for community strategies as well as the process for their preparation and implementation.

The formal requirement to prepare a community strategy lies with the local authority, however the intention has always been that Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) should play a significant role and work with local authorities to develop and implement strategies. The community strategy has therefore developed in a complex institutional context.

Since the introduction of the formal requirement in 2000 the policy context within which community strategies are being developed has changed considerably. Key amongst these changes has been the shift to *sustainable* community strategies – in line with the recommendations of the Egan Review² – and the introduction of Local Area Agreements (LAAs).

More recent policy shifts with implications for community strategies include the proposals set out in the 2006 Local Government White Paper, for instance streamlining the performance management requirements of local government, an emphasis on the place shaping role of local government and an increased focus on promoting more responsive services and empowered communities. The recent Sub National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration³ sets out an enhanced role for local government in relation to economic development.

The changing context within which community strategies are being developed and implemented is considered in more detail in Section 2.

1 DETR (2000) *Preparing Community Strategies: Government Guidance to Local Authorities* London: Department of the Environment, Transport & the Regions. www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/156672

2 ODPM (2004) *The Egan Review: Skills for Sustainable Communities* London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/152086

3 HM Treasury (2007) *Review of sub national economic development and regeneration* London: HM Treasury. www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/9/5/subnational_econ_review170707.pdf

1.2 The formative evaluation of community strategies

This is the final report from the national formative evaluation of community strategies. The evaluation has been undertaken by the Policy Research Institute at Leeds Metropolitan University and the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University.

The evaluation has been undertaken jointly with the process evaluation of plan rationalisation. The rationale for this is that plan rationalisation and community strategies are in practice closely intertwined. As two of the key elements of the modernisation process within local government they have closely related objectives including:

- giving high performing local authorities new freedoms and flexibilities
- recognising the role of the local authority as community leader
- identifying new ways to deliver services through partnership
- changing the relationship between central and local government, for example by allowing central government to develop a more differentiated and two-way relationship with local government, based on local needs and local differences.

In addition, the process of plan rationalisation itself entails subsuming some plans – for example local agenda 21 strategies, local cultural strategies and local library plans – within community strategies.

Undertaking the two evaluations together has brought a number of benefits in particular joint use of research tools and case studies, and has also allowed the evaluation to identify synergies and relationships across the two policy areas.

This report focuses on the evaluation of community strategies. The final evaluation report for plan rationalisation is published as a separate document. Both reports however draw out linkages between the two initiatives.

The evaluation of community strategies has been running since 2004 and has included: scoping work, depth case studies, light touch case studies, two rounds of interviews with national and regional stakeholders, surveys of local government, reviews of community strategies, practitioner workshops and a series of action learning sets. The details of the research methods can be found in Annex 1.

The original specification for the formative evaluation of community strategies set out 18 questions or areas for the evaluation to focus on. During the scoping phase of the project these were rationalised to a set of seven core questions. These are:

1. Have community strategies added value?
2. Are community strategies an effective mechanism to deliver central government objectives?

3. Are community strategies underpinned by robust systems of performance management?
4. What processes are being used to develop and implement community strategies and are these effective?
5. What systems of partnership, involvement and accountability have been developed for community strategies?
6. How do community strategies operate at different geographic levels?
7. How do community strategies mainstream other policies?

These core questions have provided the basis for the evaluation. It should be noted that the nature of formative evaluation and the changing policy environment has meant that the evaluation has evolved in order to address these broader changes and the needs of policy makers.

The evaluation has been informed by a 'theory of change' approach which seeks to uncover and assess the validity of key causal assumptions which underpin policy initiatives. The scoping phase of the evaluation identified four broad theories that might be of relevance to community strategies and plan rationalisation. These were:

- Changing centre-local government relations to better deliver central and local objectives.
- A shift from central-local relationships characterised by planning to relationships characterised by audit and inspection, guidance and differentiated approaches.
- Development of new sets of local relations based on community leadership and stronger community involvement.
- Increased local flexibility to allow stakeholders to more effectively address the (identified) needs and opportunities of current (and future) local residents.

1.3 Outputs and dissemination

The evaluation has produced a number of outputs at regular intervals. A full list can be found at Annex 2, but key amongst these have included:

- A scoping report setting out the findings from the scoping phase of the research and the detailed evaluation framework.
- Annual Reports in 2004 and 2006 summarising key findings and reporting progress on the evaluation.
- Reports on individual elements of the research including a report of the survey of local government in 2005, reports of review of community strategies in 2005 and 2007 and reports synthesising the findings from the main case studies in 2005 and 2006.
- A series of 'issues papers' drawing together findings from across the evaluation on particular issues of interest to Communities and Local Government (CLG) for instance two tier working, community engagement, and the role of councillors.

All published outputs from the evaluation are available on the CLG website: www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1136870.

The emphasis of the evaluation has been on producing regular, timely outputs to inform emerging policy in this area. For instance findings from the evaluations have been fed into consultation papers, government white papers as well as forthcoming guidance.

The evaluation has also included mechanisms to actively disseminate the findings. These have included a series of practitioner workshops (March-May 2007) which were designed to provide a forum for local practitioners to discuss some of the findings from the evaluation, and two regionally based action learning sets. Emerging findings from the evaluation have also been presented at academic and practitioner conferences.

1.4 Content and structure of the report

This report draws together findings from all the key elements of the evaluation. The aim is to summarise evidence already published and draw out lessons for policy and practice. Where appropriate, the report refers to other published outputs from the evaluation. The structure of the report is as follows:

Section 2 sets out the policy **context for community strategies**, focusing on the changing policy environment within which community strategies operate.

Section 3 analyses the **process of developing community strategies** including the way in which evidence has been used to inform priorities, the thematic coverage of community strategies and timescales for their production and review. It also considers issues such as performance management, the use of resources and the extent to which equality and diversity have been considered in the development of community strategies.

Section 4 reviews the **content of community strategies** including format and structure, coverage of themes and cross cutting issues as well as the inclusion of targets and indicators.

The issue of how community strategies work at **different geographical levels** is examined in Section 5. The ways in which strategies are being developed in two-tier areas is firstly addressed, focusing on the different approaches and models in use. The issue of upwards linkages to the regional level is also addressed, in particular the extent to which community strategies reflect regional priorities.

Governance arrangements and community engagement are addressed in Section 6, which also considers the role of elected members and how partners have been engaged in community strategies.

A key issue that the evaluation has considered is the extent to which community strategies are becoming the **key strategic driver in their local area**. This issue is considered in detail in Section 7 focusing on the emerging relationship between LAAs and community strategies, how the community strategy relates to other local strategies, their place shaping role and their contribution to the rationalisation of planning processes in local government.

Section 8 presents the emerging evidence of the **impact and added value of community strategies**.

Finally, Section 9 draws **conclusions** from the evaluation and summarises the key issues for policy makers and practitioners.

2. Policy Context

2.1 Introduction

This section briefly reviews the policy context for the development of community strategies. In particular, it summarises the main developments in policy between 2000 and 2007.

2.2 Local government modernisation

Since coming to power in 1997, Labour has developed a thoroughgoing and transformational agenda for the modernisation of local government and its relationship with central government. The main legislation taking forward this agenda includes the Local Government Acts of 1999 and 2000 and the consultation documents that preceded the legislation.

The modernising government agenda has five underpinning principles. These are:

- ensure that public services are responsive to citizens' needs rather than being for the convenience of service providers;
- ensure that public services are efficient and of high quality;
- ensure that policy making is joined up, strategic and forward looking (not reactive to short-term pressures);
- use information technology to tailor services to users' needs;
- value public service and tackle the under-representation of minority groups.

These principles were revisited in 2004 in *The future of local government* which aimed to establish a relationship between central and local government that was more strategic. It also identified a need for a '*more coherent approach across central Government towards local government*'. The document stated that this vision is rooted in the four principles of public service reform set out by the Prime Minister in March 2002:

- national standards for the things that matter most to people, to ensure that citizens have the right to high quality services wherever they live;
- devolution and delegation to the front line, giving local leaders responsibility and accountability and the opportunity to design services around the needs of local people;
- flexibility for public organisations and staff to meet the aspirations of users;
- more choice for service users.

The objectives of ensuring enhanced coordination of local service delivery local joining up, improved service quality and democratic renewal were reflective of 'new localism' a term used originally in the United States which

has been defined by Stoker as: *'a strategy aimed at devolving power and resources away from central control and towards front-line managers, local democratic structures and local consumers and communities, within an agreed framework of national minimum standards and policy priorities'*.⁴

2.3 Local Strategic Partnerships

An important principle informing New Labour's approach to modernising local government has been a commitment to working in partnership. In this context Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) are an important element in the new institutional framework of local governance.

LSPs bring together local partners from the public sector together with representatives from the business, community, voluntary and faith sectors with the intention of enhancing joint working and collaboration at the strategic level. They are intended to *'include representatives from each of these sectors, and an appropriate balance between public service and community, voluntary and private sectors. It is crucial that the partnership is one of equal players'*⁵. They are, therefore, non-statutory, and largely non-executive organisations.

LSPs are expected to operate at a level which enables strategic decisions to be taken as well as having links to the neighbourhood level in order to facilitate direct community engagement. Improving inclusion of all sectors in the development of priorities for service provision and developing a strategic vision and plan are therefore central to LSPs. In 2002 the Local Government Association said: *'LSPs have been established to support localities in their attempts to work together more coherently in the pursuit of community wellbeing and good governance by providing a single strategic focus within a locality'*⁶.

The Government's Local Government White Paper, *Strong Local Leadership – Quality Public Services* (December 2001) confirmed that LSPs should be a key player in developing an integrated approach to service delivery at the local level and tackling priorities in a joined up way. However, LSPs are not themselves delivery bodies; their principal role is one of strategic co-ordination.

LSPs were established more rapidly in the 88 localities containing the most deprived neighbourhoods in England that are eligible for government funding from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF), which is conditional on the existence of an LSP. Subsequently, LSPs have been developed in most other areas providing a vehicle for partnership working, taking a community leadership role, providing opportunities for better quality local engagement,

4 Stoker G (2005) *New Localism, Participation and Networked Community Governance*, University of Manchester, UK.

5 *A New Commitment to Neighbourhood Renewal National Strategy Action Plan*, Report by the Social Exclusion Unit, Cabinet Office, January 2001

6 Local Government Association (LGA) (2002) *We Can Work it Out*. London: LGA

and playing an important part in delivering local and central government objectives⁷. Most LSPs have been developed under the leadership of local authorities although around 40 public bodies have been identified as having an interest and potentially important role within them.

The formative evaluation of LSPs⁸ concluded that LSPs have – in a relatively short time – ‘established themselves as a vital part of the institutional arrangements of modernised local governance’. However, the findings from the evaluation highlight considerable differences between localities in the extent to which they have established robust and sustainable governance arrangements, especially significant differences between NRF and non-NRF authorities and between different types of local authority areas. In summary, many LSP structures can not yet be considered to be ‘fit for purpose’.

2.4 Community strategies

The development of LSPs was accompanied by the Local Government Act 2000 which introduced a new duty on all principal local authorities to prepare community strategies. Statutory guidance⁹ to support this duty was published in December 2000. Box 1 below provides a summary of what the guidance expected strategies to contain. Whilst the duty to prepare a community strategy lies with the local authority, the fundamental rationale for them is that they are based firmly on a partnership approach. Although LSPs were expected to take a leading role in developing the strategy, local authorities are ultimately responsible for producing the strategy in consultation with local residents and partners (usually partners of the LSP).

LSPs in receipt of NRF also have to produce a Local Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy (LNRS), which sets out how the LSP will narrow the gap between the most deprived neighbourhoods and the rest of the district. In practice, LNRSs are often incorporated into the community strategy.

Community strategies are intended to be the overarching plan for the local area drawing on and influencing plans from other local organisations. They should make use of available data and evidence of community aspirations to identify priority issues for sustainable communities.

7 ODPM (2005) *Local Strategic Partnerships: Shaping their Future*. London: ODPM.

8 ODPM/DoT (2006) *National Evaluation of Local Strategic Partnerships: Formative Evaluation and Action Research Programme*. London: ODPM www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/143384, 115.

9 DETR (2000) *Preparing Community Strategies: Government Guidance to Local Authorities* London: Department of the Environment, Transport & the Regions. www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/156672

Box 1: Key attributes of community strategies (DETR Guidance 2000)

The community strategy should aim to enhance the quality of life of local communities and contribute to the achievement of sustainable development in the UK through action to improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of the area and its inhabitants.

If this aim is to be realised, a community strategy will have to meet four objectives. It must:

- Allow local communities (based upon geographic and/or identity to articulate their aspirations, needs and priorities).
- Co-ordinate the actions of the Council, and of the public, private, voluntary and community organisations that operate locally.
- Focus and shape existing and future activity of those organisations so that they effectively meet community needs and aspirations.
- Contribute to the achievement of sustainable development both locally and more widely, with local goals and priorities relating, where appropriate, to regional, national and even global aims.

A community strategy must have four key components:

- A long-term vision for the area focusing on the outcomes that are to be achieved.
- An action plan identifying shorter-term priorities and activities that will contribute to the achievement of long-term outcomes.
- A shared commitment to implement the action plan and proposals for doing so.
- Arrangements for monitoring the implementation of the action plan, for periodically reviewing the community strategy and for reporting progress to local communities.

The following guiding principles should underpin all community strategies:

- Engage and actively involve communities.
- Involve active participation of councillors within and outside the executive.
- Be prepared and implemented by a broad 'Local Strategic Partnership' through which the local authority can work with other local bodies.
- Be based on a proper assessment of needs and the availability of resources.

2.5 Recent developments

Since 2000 there have been a number of important policy developments which have considerably changed the landscape within which community strategies operate.

The first area of development relates to the emergent role of the community strategy in **promoting sustainable communities**. The Egan Review, published in 2004, focused on the need to create *sustainable* communities

and the skills that are required to do this. The review recommended that community strategies should become *sustainable community strategies*, setting out *'not only the vision for the community, based on our common goal...but also how sustainable development can be used to promote economic prosperity in the area, to promote and benefit social cohesion and enhance environmental quality'* (p. 36).

To achieve this goal the strategy and related documents, including the Local Development Framework (LDF), should set out in detail the steps required to deliver across the sustainable community components. These are detailed in Box 2 below and include:

- the economic performance of the area and the opportunities for future economic competitiveness;
- major development opportunities that are available to help shape the community, to create neighbourhoods where people choose to live, and when these opportunities will be brought forward;
- the infrastructure necessary to support planned development, the long-term costs, location and timing of capital investment in public services, and the community benefits associated with this;
- specific action needed to help local people access the opportunities and wealth created; and
- people and skills needed to effect delivery, and learning and skill strategies to help local people fill some of the gaps.

Box 2: Components and sub-components of sustainable communities

A COMMON SUB-COMPONENT across all components is:

- All provision and/or activity to be high quality, well-designed and maintained, safe, accessible, adaptable, environmentally and cost-effectively provided

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL – Vibrant, harmonious and inclusive communities

- A sense of community identity and belonging
- Tolerance, respect and engagement with people from different cultures, background and beliefs
- Friendly, co-operative and helpful behaviour in neighbourhoods
- Opportunities for cultural, leisure, community, sport and other activities
- Low levels of crime and anti-social behaviour with visible, effective and community-friendly policing
- All people are socially included and have similar life opportunities

GOVERNANCE – Effective and inclusive participation, representation and leadership

- Strategic, visionary, representative, accountable governance systems that enable inclusive, active and effective participation by individuals and organisations
- Strong, informed and effective leadership and partnerships that lead by example (e.g. government, business, community)
- Strong, inclusive, community and voluntary sector (e.g. resident's associations, neighbourhood watch)
- A sense of civic values, responsibility and pride
- Continuous improvement through effective delivery, monitoring and feedback at all levels

ENVIRONMENTAL – Providing places for people to live in an environmentally friendly way

- Efficient use of resources now and in the future in the built environment and service provision (e.g. energy efficiency, land, water resources, flood defence, waste minimisation etc)
- Living in a way that minimises the negative environmental impact and enhances the positive impact (e.g. recycling, walking, cycling)
- Protecting and improving natural resources and biodiversity (e.g. air quality, noise, water quality)
- Having due regard for the needs of future generations in current decisions and actions

HOUSING AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT – A quality built and natural environment

- Creating a sense of place (e.g. a place with a positive ‘feeling’ for people, and local distinctiveness)
- Well-maintained, local, user-friendly public and green spaces with facilities for everyone including children and older people
- Sufficient range, diversity and affordability of housing within a balanced housing market
- A high quality, well-designed built environment of appropriate size, scale, density, design and layout that complements the distinctive local character of the community
- High quality, mixed-use, durable, flexible and adaptable buildings

TRANSPORT AND CONNECTIVITY – Good transport services and communication linking people to jobs, schools, health and other services

- Transport facilities, including public transport, that help people travel within and between communities
- Facilities to encourage safe local walking and cycling
- Accessible and appropriate local parking facilities
- Widely available and effective telecommunications and internet access

ECONOMY – A flourishing and diverse local economy

- A wide range of jobs and training opportunities
- Sufficient land and buildings to support economic prosperity and change
- Dynamic job and business creation
- A strong business community with links into the wider economy

SERVICES – A full range of appropriate, accessible public, private, community and voluntary services

- Well-educated people from well-performing local schools, further and higher education and training for lifelong learning
- High quality, local health care and social services
- Provision of range of accessible, affordable public, community, voluntary and private services (e.g. retail, food, commercial, utilities)
- Service providers who think and act long term and beyond their own immediate geographical and interest boundaries

The publication in 2005 of the *UK Sustainable Development Strategy: Securing the Future*¹⁰ gave further impetus to the move towards sustainable community strategies, by stating that they ‘*will evolve from community strategies to give a greater emphasis to sustainable development objectives which are necessary for creating an area where people genuinely want to live long-term*’ (p. 127).

As a consequence of this process there have been moves to more **closely integrate land use planning and community strategies**. The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 introduced the requirement for all planning authorities to have an LDF in place by September 2007. Planning

¹⁰ ODPM (2005) *Securing the Future: Delivering the UK Sustainable Development Strategy*. London: ODPM. www.sustainable-development.gov.uk/publications/pdf/strategy/SecFut_complete.pdf

Policy Statement (PPS) 12 published in 2004 further elaborated on the nature of LDFs, in particular the intended relationship between LDFs and community strategies. The emerging relationship between community strategies and LDFs is examined in detail in a recent issues paper¹¹ and key points are summarised in Section 7 in relation to the place-shaping role of community strategies.

A further set of developments relate to the redefinition of central-local relations through the **introduction of systems of negotiated targets and associated additional flexibilities and incentives**.

Local Public Service Agreements (LPSAs) were designed as voluntary agreements between upper-tier local authorities and government and were piloted with 20 authorities starting in late 2000. The 2001 White Paper¹² further developed this approach by giving greater freedoms to higher performing councils and incentives to support the achievement of stretching targets. The second generation of LPSAs had a more explicit emphasis on the engagement of partners and a renewed emphasis on local targets and priorities

Local Area Agreements (LAAs) constitute an important policy development that has had significant implications for community strategies. An LAA is a three year agreement between central government and a local area (including the local authority and partners) based on agreed targets and pooled budgets and intended to promote flexibility to improve outcomes in relation to local priorities. In March 2005 LAAs were signed with 21 pilot areas and an announcement was made that the Government 'would roll LAAs out across England' over the next two years. Guidance was issued in June 2005 for a second phase of pilots, involving 66 additional areas¹³.

Local authorities are required to show that their proposals are supported by local people, and need to work with a range of partners to deliver LPSA and LAA targets, through the agency of the LSP. Indeed, the LAA process is intended to '*provide a focus around which the work between local authorities and their partners through the community strategy, the LSP and other partnerships is strengthened*', involving '*an enhanced community leadership role for local authorities and better joining-up locally*'.

The relationship between community strategies and LAAs is still being worked out in many areas with a variety of different approaches being adopted. LAAs were introduced during the fieldwork for this evaluation and issues relating to the emerging relation between LAAs and community strategies have been considered and are discussed in more detail in Section 7. The ongoing impact evaluation of LAAs and LSPs will explore these issues further.

11 Dowson, Lynne. (2007) *Local development frameworks and community strategies*. London: CLG.

12 Department of Transport, Local Government, Transport and the Regions, December 2001 *Strong Local Leadership: Quality Public Services*,

13 *Local Area Agreements Guidance*, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, June 2005

A final policy development relates to the shifting **regional and sub-regional policy framework**. The Treasury-sponsored *Sub-national Review of Economic Development and Regeneration*¹⁴ refers to a strengthened role for regions, emphasising partnership working between local authorities and regional development agencies and regional ministers in setting the strategic policy direction at a regional level, including looking at the role of Multi Area Agreements (MAAs) and a strengthened role in relation to economic development. The Review recommends greater local authority involvement at the regional level. How this will work in practice remains to be seen as it implies coordination not only at the regional level, but between the strategies produced at different geographic levels. The different ways in which community strategies operate within complex regional and sub-regional governance structures is explored in Section 5.

2.6 Sustainable community strategies – the new policy context

In 2006 a Local Government White Paper¹⁵ was published which set out a series of further reforms to local government, many of which have implications for community strategies. The White Paper was informed by a consultation paper published in December 2005 by ODPM, *Local Strategic Partnerships: Shaping their future*, which addressed a range of issues facing LSPs including the introduction of LAAs and the reshaping of community strategies as sustainable community strategies in line with the recommendations of the Egan review¹⁶.

In general, the proposals in the document were welcomed not least because they provided clarification of certain issues that had arisen since the first community strategies had been prepared.

The Local Government White Paper published in October 2006 includes proposals designed to strengthen local communities and devolve more responsibility to local authorities, whilst at the same time placing a statutory duty on named partners to work together. The specific changes of significance to community strategies can be summarised as follows:

- Giving local communities more influence, and rebalancing the relationship between central and local government.
- Putting greater emphasis on service user consultation and participation, which will be underpinned by statute.
- A new framework for strategic leadership focusing on delivery plans for the sustainable community strategy being framed via Local Area Agreements (LAAs) – there will be a duty on local authorities and their partners to agree priorities for their LAA and to have regard to these.

14 HM Treasury (2007) *Review of sub national economic development and regeneration* London: HM Treasury. www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/9/5/subnational_econ_review170707.pdf

15 CLG (2006) *Strong and prosperous communities: The Local Government White Paper* London: HMSO.

16 ODPM (2004) *Skills for Sustainable Communities: The Egan Review* London: ODPM.

- A new assessment regime to replace Comprehensive Performance Assessment with around 35 LAA priorities for each locality, drawn from 198 outcome-based indicators.

The White Paper reiterates the importance of partnership working and localisation. It proposes the strengthening of the role of Councils both in terms of their ability to draw in public sector bodies in the preparation of community strategies, and also holding them to account through the overview and scrutiny functions. The White Paper proposes that public sector bodies (including health, police, probation, skills and employment but not including public utilities) that operate at a local level, will be required to cooperate, and provide appropriate information.

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill, which is currently before the House of Lords, is expected to receive royal assent in Autumn 2007. This will enact many of the proposals in the White Paper, including:

- establishing a statutory basis for LAAs;
- empowering councillors by strengthening powers of overview and scrutiny, including new powers to scrutinise partnerships;
- improvements to community governance arrangements (to be implemented by April 2008);
- presentation of two-tier local authorities with options to seek unitary status or to become pathfinders pioneering new two-tier models;
- creation of a duty on named partners to cooperate with one another;
- devolve power to local authorities to create parishes and parish councils;
- introduction of a streamlined performance management framework; and
- creation of Local Involvement Networks (LINKs), involving local people in commissioning, provision and scrutiny of health and social services.

These and other changes will provide the basis for new guidance on LAAs and community strategies and how they should work together¹⁷¹⁸. It is hoped that this will address some of the challenges faced by local areas in developing and implementing LAAs and community strategies that have been highlighted in this and other evaluations.

2.7 Summary

The development and implementation of community strategies by local authorities and their partners reflects important aspects of the wider local government modernisation agenda pursued by the government since 1997. The purpose of community strategies, their location *vis-à-vis* other local planning documents, and in relation to local institutional arrangements, have been developed and refined over the last ten years through a series of

17 CLG (2007) *Negotiating New Local Area Agreements*. London: CLG www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/476151

18 CLG (2007) *LAA dry run negotiations: Final Report Headline Messages*. London: CLG www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/475662

further, related policy developments and legislative changes. These have included:

- The development of LSPs as the 'partnership of partnerships' and, most recently, the introduction of the 'duty to cooperate' on the part of named partners.
- The transformation of community strategies into sustainable community strategies as proposed by the Egan Review and reflected in subsequent government policy documents.
- The development of closer links between physical land use planning and community strategies.
- The piloting and subsequent roll-out of LAAs that are intended to focus pooled budgets on agreed local priorities. LAAs are now emerging as the *de facto* delivery plans of sustainable community strategies.
- Greater emphasis on developing links between localities and regional and sub-regional plans and strategies.
- The new emphasis on 'place-shaping'.

Community strategies have increased in importance and significance since their rather tentative introduction. The extent to which their development and implementation reflects this increased significance is examined in the subsequent sections of this report.

3. Community strategies processes

3.1 Introduction

Evidence from the evaluation indicates that localities have developed a range of different processes in relation to the development of community strategies. Furthermore, over the period of the evaluation, practices have changed both in response to the changing policy context and also as localities have gained greater confidence and experience in community planning.

This section examines some of the process issues relating to the development of community strategies. The role of evidence in informing priorities is considered as are the timescales for producing and revising community strategies and how these are changing in relation to other planning processes notably the introduction of LAAs and LDFs. Issues of performance management and resources are also addressed.

3.2 The use of evidence

The use of evidence to inform the development of community strategies is increasingly important given the broader policy environment which emphasises evidence-informed policy and practice. The evaluation has focused specifically on the extent to which evidence is used to inform the priorities and actions in community strategies.

Evidence is used as part of the community strategy process in a number of ways including: understanding local needs and issues, providing a rationale for priorities or actions, to measure or track performance and to benchmark performance.

The 2004 survey of local authorities showed that local data has been used 'to a significant extent' by 58% of authorities. It also found variation in the use of evidence by authority type, with district authorities less likely to make extensive use of local data than counties and unitaries. It also found that the community strategy process had stimulated the sharing of data, with 63% of respondents agreeing that data sharing had been stimulated to a significant or moderate extent.

The 2005 review of strategies highlighted a number of weaknesses in the use of evidence by community strategies, notably:

- Actions defined without targets or evidence.
- Little or no benchmark data.

- An absence of baselines and their variability in terms of quality.
- Strategies making assertions and setting priorities with no evidence that these were genuine issues facing the area.

The 2007 review of strategies indicates that there has been some improvement in the way in which evidence is used to support community strategy development. Specifically there are now relatively few strategies that do not make use of evidence in some way. Nevertheless there is little consistency in the use of evidence; typically it takes the form of a 'where are we now' picture of the locality.

The latest review also indicates that a range of sources of evidence is used to inform priorities. The most common are findings from community consultations, national data (for example Census data, Labour Force Survey), locally collected 'administrative' data (for example housing benefit, school achievement), neighbourhood statistics and local household surveys.

This finding is supported by evidence from the main case studies, through which we were able to explore the changing use of evidence to inform the priorities within community strategies. This highlighted that as partnership working has improved there has been a greater emphasis on sharing information and data between partner organisations, with positive implications for the quality of the data used.

Despite these improvements, the way in which evidence is used in community strategies varies considerably. To some extent this is a result of the wide variation in the nature of community strategy documents themselves (see Section 4 on the content of community strategies). For example, the most recent review of strategies found that some community strategies were essentially high level strategic documents in which evidence is not cited within the body of the strategy itself, but is included instead in supporting, 'technical' documents.

The extent to which strategies are based on robust and reliable information is difficult to assess. The latest review showed that evidence is often presented but with little indication of how it has been used to develop priorities and actions. The review and main case studies indicated that there continues to be a less than transparent process for the development of priorities.

The 2007 assessment also highlighted a number of continuing weaknesses notably the absence of evidence to generate baselines, limited use of data to inform spatial targeting and limited use of 'what works' evidence to justify particular actions.

3.3 Timescales for producing and revising community strategies

The original 2000 DETR guidance stated that community strategies should contain a long term vision for the area with the aim being 'to arrive at a broad consensus about what the area should look like in 10 or 15 years time' (para 70). The guidance emphasised the need for the timeframes for community strategies to be 'decided in the context of local circumstances and following the articulation of the communities' aspirations'. In order to deliver the long term vision for an area – the guidance states – there is a need to establish short term goals and priorities. In addition there is a need to establish a timetable for periodic reviews of community strategies, both interim and full-scale – again dependent on local circumstances.

The 2004 survey of local authorities indicated that 94% of authorities had a formally adopted community strategy and 4% were still in draft form. Over half of all strategies had been adopted prior to 2003, and a high proportion of these early adopters were NRF funded authorities.

In 2004 13% of authorities had revised their strategy completely and 30% partly. The majority of authorities were revising their strategies on an annual basis (52%) with 21% reviewing them every two to three years.

The most recent review of community strategies provides some evidence of community strategies developing a 'longer shelf life' as more strategic high-level documents that are refreshed less frequently. An increasingly common format is to have a core community strategy that is revised relatively infrequently with a separate action plan which is revised on a more frequent basis.

It is clear that the development of LAAs has impacted on the timescales for the process of revising community strategies. Our work on the emerging relationship between community strategies and LAAs¹⁹ highlighted that officers within local government were increasingly aware that planning processes – including timescales – for LAAs and community strategies needed to be more closely aligned. The increased alignment was not universal however; some authorities found this to be an area of significant challenge.

The emergence of LAAs as a relatively new policy area that has been superimposed upon the existing community strategy framework does mean that it will take time for the two processes to dovetail. It is also clear that LAAs have been seen in some areas to have superseded community strategies and LAAs have been the primary focus of activity. The forthcoming guidance needs to further clarify the relationship between the two processes and re-emphasise the role, purpose and rationale of community strategies.

¹⁹ Monro, S, Jassi, S, Darlow, A (2007) *The relationship between community strategies and LAAs*. London: CLG.

3.4 Performance management

The evaluation has highlighted the variety of approaches to performance management of community strategies that have been adopted. By performance management we are referring to the processes and systems put in place by local authorities and LSPs to assess progress towards meeting targets set out in community strategies.

The 2004 survey of local authorities revealed significant variation in the extent to which authorities had established performance management systems. Perhaps unsurprisingly – given NRF authorities were required by the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit to instigate a performance framework – authorities in receipt of NRF were much more likely to have established performance management systems (87% for NRF compared to 64% for non-NRF authorities). Unitary authorities were also further advanced than authorities in two tier areas, perhaps reflecting the difficulties that have been evident in the development of community strategies in two tier areas.

Since 2004 it is clear that there has been progress in the development of performance management frameworks, and many authorities have invested considerable resources in sometimes quite complex systems (see Box 3 for an example).

Box 3: Performance management

Barnsley has produced a three year action plan that sits alongside its integrated community plan and neighbourhood renewal strategy. As part of this action plan details of the performance management process are provided including lines of accountability and responsibilities. A four stage performance management process is outlined as follows:

Delivery Leads: to manage and monitor performance at service delivery level and to ensure that performance management information is collated against outcomes, indicators and targets in their area of responsibility.

Relevant Delivery Partnerships: to champion performance management and ensure links are made across the service blocks in managing and reporting performance.

Performance Management Group: to monitor performance across the whole of the Local Strategic Partnership and ensure that appropriate linkages are made with existing performance management arrangements.

One Barnsley Board [LSP]: to have overall responsibility for the strategic steer of the performance on the Community Plan across all partner organisations.

Performance is monitored using a suite of indicators to track actual performance against agreed targets and outcomes.

In line with the findings from the LSP Formative Evaluation, our work with the case study authorities highlights the difficulties of instituting

performance management frameworks and suggests that authorities continue to find this a complex and challenging area. Key issues emerge around the sharing of data across partners, ensuring that partners keep data up to date, the lack of data available to monitor progress and the lack of powers to hold partners to account. In practice performance management of community strategies is closely linked to performance management of the wider LSP.

The roll out and process of refreshing LAAs will, of course, have implications for the performance management of community strategies. The agreement of 35 core outcomes and relevant indicators as part of the new LAA framework is likely to considerably simplify performance management processes at the local level. How this will develop in practice is not yet clear although it is important that whatever indicators are eventually selected that there is accurate, timely and reliable data available to populate the indicators and to track progress.

3.5 Resources

The issue of the resourcing of community strategies needs to be considered on two levels: firstly the resources made available to support the community strategy process and secondly the way in which mainstream resources are used to support the implementation of the priorities and targets within the community strategy.

The 2004 survey of local authorities highlighted the differential level of resourcing of community strategies. Overall, 69% of authorities had either one or two members of staff with community strategy development as a major part of their job; 5% of authorities had no dedicated member of staff. Levels of staffing were higher amongst unitary and county authorities as well as NRF funded authorities. The survey also showed that only 57% of authorities had a dedicated budget for the development and implementation of their strategies.

A lack of staffing and financial budgets emerged as the second and third most significant barriers (after gaining the commitment of stakeholder organisations) to the development of community strategies (mentioned by 20% and 18% of the 233 local authorities that responded to the survey respectively).

More recent evidence, in particular from the main case studies, indicates that the level of resources allocated to support the community strategy has decreased in recent years. This might be expected as authorities move away from the major consultation exercises and process of drafting of strategies that took place in the early stages towards a less resource intensive mode whereby the focus is on lighter touch revisions to community strategies. It also reflects that, at the local level, there is a strong feeling that the community strategy 'has been done' and newer policy initiatives – for example, and in particular, LAAs – are absorbing the energies and budgets of

authorities. If community strategies are to play an important role at the local level the issue of resourcing and prioritising of community strategies may need to be considered in revised guidance and in inspection regimes especially the Comprehensive Area Assessment.

The use of mainstream funds to implement community strategies is more problematic and is clearly an area that is under rapid development as a result of the roll out of LAAs to all upper tier authorities. Prior to the introduction of LAAs the evaluation showed that resourcing community strategies through mainstream funds had been problematic. This reflects the varying approaches of local areas to community strategies and differing interpretations of the guidance.

The 2000 DETR guidance emphasised the need to map and analyse the expenditure of partners in relation to the priorities and themes within the strategy. However, the evaluation has found limited evidence of comprehensive mapping of public expenditure in the way that the guidance envisaged. The 2004 survey of local authorities indicated that only 3% of authorities had mapped spend to a 'significant extent'. Instead, there has been an emphasis on the community strategy as a strategic document with high level objectives and priorities, and there is very little evidence of the extent to which resources have been mapped or aligned against the targets within the strategy.

Whilst there is limited evidence of mainstream funds being specifically allocated to or aligned with community strategy targets, in some strategies additional money has been identified and set against specific actions. This has happened particularly in NRF funded areas and also through, for example, allocating funds from council tax levied on second homes.

3.6 Summary

Localities' approaches to developing, implementing, monitoring and reviewing their community strategies show significant variations.

- Evidence use in understanding local needs, providing a rationale for priorities and actions, measuring, tracking and benchmarking performance has evolved and shows signs of improvement. In 2007 there were relatively few strategies that did not make use of evidence in some way.
- As partnership working has improved so too has data sharing with benefits for the quality of evidence to support community planning.
- There are still significant weaknesses in evidence use, notably in relation to the setting of baselines, geographical targeting and 'what works' evidence to justify particular actions and interventions.
- Many community strategies are now being revised and there is a tendency for them to establish a longer 'shelf-life' as they become more strategic, high-level documents with separate, shorter-term action plans.

- While some areas have established quite sophisticated systems and processes for managing and monitoring performance, in other areas systems are still rudimentary.
- The lack of resources to support community strategy development and implementation has been and continues to be a problem that negatively impacts on outcomes.

The implications for **policy** are as follows:

- Guidance should be produced that sets our expectations in relation to evidence use and provides good practice examples.
- The need to align LAAs with community strategies should continue to be emphasised.
- Government expectations in relation to performance management need to be clearly stated as should their views on resources.

The implications for **practice** are as follows:

- Localities need to adopt a much more robust approach to evidence use to inform the development, implementation, monitoring and review of their community strategies.
- Evidence should be used to provide a more transparent rationale for priorities and actions.
- A more coherent and logical approach in the use of evidence and the findings of community consultations would provide a better balance of information to inform priorities.
- Timescales for reviewing community strategies need to be brought into line with LAA processes so that the two are fully aligned.
- LSPs need to consider the resource implications of sustainable community strategies both in terms of secretariat functions and also resources available to support the delivery of initiatives.
- Localities need to consider developing more efficient performance management systems that use a smaller set of key indicators to measure progress. The new outcomes framework should be of help here.

4. Content of community strategies

4.1 Introduction

This section focuses upon the content of community strategies, in particular their coverage of key themes including cross cutting issues and specific priorities and targets. It draws substantially upon the 2007 review of community strategies as the most up to date evidence we have of the content of community strategies; the emphasis is, however, on how the content of strategies has developed over the lifetime of the evaluation.

4.2 Structure and format of community strategies

The original policy intention was that community strategies should contain three key elements: a long term vision; specific goals and priorities; and an agreed action plan for achieving those goals and priorities. The 2007 review indicated that the majority of strategies now contain both a vision and a strategy. Fewer have action plans as part of the main strategy document although in some cases this exists as a separate document. This suggests that LSPs are moving towards greater differentiation between documents with community strategies becoming a higher level more strategic document which is intended for wider circulation with other more technical documents produced principally for administrative use. Figure 1 provides a summary of progress of strategies in relation to the four principal elements identified in the original guidance.

The majority of strategies are structured by policy area or by cross cutting themes, rather than by geographic area or by LAA blocks. However there is some evidence to suggest that as strategies are revised they are likely to be more closely aligned with LAA priorities.

The 2007 review suggested that many strategy vision statements say broadly similar things and use similar language. There is some evidence that the place shaping agenda is, however, starting to be reflected in some vision statements. Examples of different types of vision statements are set out in Box 4 below.

Box 4: Examples of vision statements

Hampshire County Council

Hampshire will be a prosperous and attractive county for all, where economic, social and environmental needs are met in the most sustainable way and the quality of life and sense of community of present and future generations are improved.

Boston Borough Council

Our vision for improving quality of life is: 'To make Boston a great place in which people want to live, work, invest and visit'.

Colchester Borough Council

Our vision is for Colchester to develop as a prestigious regional centre. Colchester will be a place where people, families, their communities and businesses thrive; where everyone has the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

Craven District Council

To enhance the quality of life for Craven residents through the coordinated activity of the Craven LSP to improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of the District, and contribute to sustainable development.

Wear Valley District Council

A confident community motivated by self-worth, in which each individual is able to achieve a collective improvement in Wear Valley.

Wigan MBC

A place where people matter and you can afford to live the life you want.

City of York

We will take pride in our city and our local neighbourhoods and will work together to plan our own communities and support networks. Key organisations across the city will support neighbourhoods by working in partnership to ensure provision of accessible and flexible services, meeting the needs of local people. York will be a great place to learn and do business; we will have a prosperous and flourishing economy, a highly skilled and motivated workforce and quality employment for all. We will all be able to move around the city with ease, using effective and accessible integrated transport networks. York will be one of Europe's premier visitor destinations with a diverse and vibrant culture, set amidst clean, safe and welcoming streets.

We will all, businesses and residents, take responsibility for the effect our actions have on the environment and we will work together to reduce York's ecological impact to a more sustainable level.

York will be a place where people experience good health and enjoy good housing provision. The potential and creativity of our children and young people will be encouraged and a culture of healthy living and learning for life will be promoted. The quality of life will continue to improve for everyone in the city.

Our heritage will be conserved and enhanced to safeguard the special character of York for the generations to come.

London Borough of Wandsworth

A place which is safer, healthier, more prosperous and sustainable – a good place to live and work now and a better place in the future.

If we interpret the term 'strategy' to mean a set of priorities or themes which could form the basis for an action or delivery plan then the review showed that a majority (40 strategies out of 50 assessed) included an explicit strategy. However in many circumstances it was difficult to clearly differentiate the strategy from the vision or action plan.

Overall, around a half of the strategies assessed in 2007 had a clearly identifiable action plan. In seven cases out of the 50 assessed the action plan had been explicitly integrated with the LAA so that the LAA has effectively become the action or delivery plan for the community strategy. In other cases it was less clear what the relationship between the two was and if and how they had been integrated or aligned although most contained some reference to the LAA. What is clear is that community strategies are, to an extent, in a state of transition as a result of changes in the broader policy environment.

Figure 1: Progress on community strategies

Objective	Overview of current status
A long-term vision for the area focusing on the outcomes that are to be achieved	<p>In almost all cases the community strategy contains an explicit vision statement. NRF areas were more likely than non-NRF areas to have a vision statement – 100% of strategies from NRF areas contained a vision statement. As was the case in 2005 vision statements vary considerably in length from 1-2 lines to a paragraph or more. In some the vision takes the form of a series of themed aspirational statements rather than a single overarching vision.</p> <p>There is a tendency for vision statements to say quite similar things using quite similar language (which was certainly the case in the previous review undertaken of community strategies in 2005). There is some evidence that the 'place shaping' agenda is beginning to be reflected in at least some vision statements.</p>

<p>An action plan identifying shorter term priorities and activities that will contribute to the achievement of long-term outcomes</p>	<p>Just over half of all the community strategies assessed contained an action or delivery plan with NRF areas more likely to have one than non-NRF areas. However, it should be noted that, as was the case in 2005, the action plan is not always incorporated into the main body of the community strategy; in some cases it exists as a separate stand-alone document. Action or delivery plans may be incorporated into the community strategy itself but increasingly they appear as a separate document with a shorter shelf-life (3-5 years).</p> <p>In a majority of cases the structure of the action/delivery plan was considered to be consistent with that of the strategy as a whole. However, the different ways in which strategies and action plans are organised can make direct comparison difficult. Some have a relatively small number of broad thematic priorities under which are grouped a relatively large number of actions. In other cases there are a larger number of more detailed themes or priorities. Relatively few action plans are as yet fully integrated with the LAA although there is evidence of closer integration between the two.</p>
<p>A shared commitment to implement the action plan and proposals for doing so</p>	<p>Some community strategies provide a statement about partnership working, its benefits and the added value that this brings. In over half the community strategies reviewed, lead individuals or organisations were identified for actions proposed. Few action plans give any detail about how the strategy will be delivered in terms of costs or where resources will come from. Most, but not all, strategies indicate who the partners are involved in the community strategy. Of the 'duty to cooperate' partners those that are most frequently mentioned are the police, PCT, relevant upper and lower tier authorities and Learning and Skills Council.</p>
<p>Arrangements for monitoring the implementation of the action plan, and for periodically reviewing the community strategy</p>	<p>Relatively few community strategies have well-developed performance monitoring frameworks identified in the main document. However it may be the case that the monitoring framework exists as a separate administrative document that is not in the public domain. In a minority of cases lines of reporting or accountability were identified and an indication provided as to how the achievement of targets/actions would be measured. In 15 cases the current community strategy reported in some way on the achievements of the last action plan.</p>

The evaluation highlighted considerable diversity in approaches to the presentation and format of the community strategy. The majority of strategies are available online as an electronic document. However locating

strategies electronically proved a considerable challenge in some instances which raises questions about their accessibility. A small number of the strategies assessed were available in alternative formats.

Most strategies were assessed to have been written in plain English. However their length varied considerably – between 11 and 123 pages; this may be due to differences as to what is included in the main strategy document. This, in turn, reflected differences in views as to the intended audience for the strategy. Many documents are now produced to a high standard with use of colour, graphics and photographs (although this can mean that strategies take a long time to download which reduces accessibility) and are clearly intended for a wide audience. Others are more basic documents perhaps reflecting a view that the principal audience for them is officers in the council and partner agencies.

4.3 Thematic coverage

The content of community strategies has been examined using a variety of methods over the course of the evaluation. The formal guidance did not include specific areas that community strategies should address. Rather it suggests that a strategy should not attempt to *'cover every local issue, but it should affect the delivery of a wide range of services including housing, education, transport, crime prevention, economic development, environmental health, culture and leisure'*.

The lead role and statutory responsibility of the local authority in developing community strategies has meant that there has tended to be an emphasis on service areas that are the responsibility of local government rather than other statutory agencies. Whilst there was a strong feeling amongst some respondents that all relevant themes were addressed equally, in fact the two themes that emerged most strongly were the physical environment, housing and transport, and crime and community safety.

The most recent evidence about the thematic content of community strategies is from the 2007 review. All strategies were reviewed to assess the extent to which a series of policy areas were addressed. This showed that the principal themes covered are health, crime and community safety, employment/economy, physical environment, education and learning and housing and homelessness. In only a small number of strategies were children and young people addressed as a separate theme. NRF authorities were more likely to address a broader range of themes, particularly community safety, health and social well being, economy, jobs and business, education and skills, housing and physical environment and community.

Policy areas such as leisure and culture and transport appeared in a relatively small number of strategies. The LSP formative evaluation explored in more detail the role played by LSPs in relation to transport. This suggested a growing, if still relatively modest, engagement of LSPs with transport issues. A number of barriers were identified constraining LSPs' engagement with

transport issues. These included low participation in the LSP of transport stakeholders as well as lack of guidance on what the LSP should do on transport issues.

Spatial issues continue to be poorly addressed in community strategies. Relatively few with the exception of NRF areas include any geographical references, maps or analysis by area. A critical issue, therefore, is the extent to which strategies can be used as a tool to target or divert resources to areas most in need.

4.4 Cross cutting themes

The evaluation also reviewed the extent to which strategies include cross cutting themes or issues. The most recent review indicated that some strategies simply included a series of overarching principles or values with no indication of how they would be taken forward in practice. Examples of values and principles underpinning community strategies are set out in Box 5 below. Other strategies included cross cutting issues as stand alone themes with their own actions and indicators. The principal cross-cutting themes are addressed in the sections below.

Box 5: Examples of values/principles informing community strategies

Barnsley: Core principles

- Equality of opportunity – everyone able to access services and opportunities
- Equity – fair, reasonable and just treatment for everyone
- Diversity – recognition of the benefits stemming from a diversity of views, cultures and backgrounds
- Tolerance – respect for others with different views, cultures and backgrounds
- Inclusion – building a society of which everyone feels a part, and has something to contribute
- Partnership – combining experiences and resources to meet challenges.

Craven: principles of the community strategy

- Involving communities:
- Consulting on the strategy and reporting on progress
- Addressing the needs of local communities
- Effective partnership working
- Equality and inclusion
- Sustainability.

Western Suffolk: Our values

- Promote equality and value diversity
- Improve access to services
- Encourage people to influence and engage in decision-making processes
- Help people feel valued within their community and encourage a sense of ownership
- Effective management of resources
- Minimise environmental damage.

4.4.1 Equality and diversity

There have been a number of developments around equalities and local government which have implications for the treatment of equality and diversity in community strategies. In particular the Equalities Standard, introduced in 2001, appears to have been a key driver and has been adopted by 90% of local authorities. It was developed primarily as a tool to enable local authorities to mainstream equalities work and is a voluntary Best Value Performance Indicator.

The 2004 review of strategies indicated that around two thirds of strategies addressed BME equality, age equality and disability discrimination to some extent. NRF authorities were more likely to be further advanced in relation to equalities. The 2007 review revealed a similar pattern with relatively few strategies addressing issues relating to gender equality. District authorities were generally less well advanced in relation to a range of equalities, but in particular on age and BME equality.

In some authorities, well-developed structures are in place to support equalities work. Even where these structures are somewhat piecemeal, there

are examples of good practice in terms of community engagement, particularly where community groups have a long and well-established relationship with their local authorities.

A number of authorities have targets and actions specific to equalities in place and performance management mechanisms are also being developed in some cases, although it is acknowledged that it can be difficult to measure the impact of equalities interventions.

Despite evidence of some unevenness, the evaluation indicated that movement is in the direction of more cohesive, mainstreamed, and stronger approaches to equalities. Equalities can still be a 'bolt-on', but this is perhaps less likely now, especially within authorities that are really engaging with the Equalities Standard.

As is to be expected, the statutory and other drivers of equalities work that have been introduced since 2000 (notably the raft of equalities-specific legislation, the Equalities Standard and developments surrounding the 2006 Local Government White Paper) are impacting on the ways that authorities are doing equalities work.

Firstly, there appears to be a greater acknowledgement of the need for equalities work in authorities, even where this has not traditionally been a priority or where there has been little work in the past, perhaps because of demographic factors.

Secondly, there is some broadening out of the equalities remit, to include work around age, sexual orientation and faith – even though this can be very marginalised and fragmented.

Thirdly, the early signs are that LAAs may be having a positive effect and are being used to implement equalities work in a more robust way than was possible via the community strategy alone.

The picture has changed over the period of the evaluation, with a shift towards a greater focus on equalities, and some maturing overall, with movement towards achievement of the middle and later stages of the Equalities Standard in some authorities. There is also work in some areas on actions and targets together with their incorporation into performance management systems. This should help to ensure that equalities work goes beyond the vision statement or rhetorical level.

The extent to which community strategies address issues of equality and diversity (including age, gender, disability and BME equality) have been explored in more detail through the evaluation and these findings have been published in a separate research report²⁰.

²⁰ Monro, Surya (2006) *Equalities and community strategies*. London: CLG.

4.4.2 Environmental sustainability

The extent to which community strategies address environmental and sustainability issues is important if the change to *sustainable* community strategies is to be realised. The Egan Review suggested that to become a sustainable community strategy they needed to set out *'not only the vision for the community.....but also how sustainable development can be used to promote economic prosperity in the area, to promote and benefit social cohesion and enhance environmental quality'* (p. 36). In order to achieve this – Egan suggests – the community strategy (together with relevant documents such as the LDF) should set out details of steps needed to deliver across the sustainable community components including:

- the economic performance of the area and the opportunities for future economic competitiveness;
- major development opportunities that are available to help shape the community, to create neighbourhoods where people choose to live, and when these opportunities will be brought forward;
- the infrastructure necessary to support planned development, the long-term costs, location and timing of capital investment in public services, and the community benefits associated with this;
- specific action needed to help local people access the opportunities and wealth created; and
- people and skills needed to effect delivery, and learning and skill strategies to help local people fill some of the gaps.

There has long been a policy intention that community strategies should have a strong sustainability component: the original Local Agenda 21 (LA21) strategies produced during the 1990s in response to the commitments made at the Earth summit in Rio in 1992, were to be subsumed within community strategies as part of the Government's commitment to the rationalisation and reduction of planning requirements on local government.

Although the assessment of community strategies from a sustainability perspective has not been a central theme within the evaluation, this has been explored to some extent. Reviewing this evidence provides a somewhat mixed picture.

The most recent review of community strategies suggested that the majority have addressed environmental sustainability 'to some degree'. The majority of strategies also included actions or targets on sustainability. The 2004 survey of local authorities indicated that the LA21 strategy had informed the development of the community strategy to a 'significant or moderate extent' highlighting that some of the learning and principles from the original LA21 strategy may have been incorporated into the new community strategy.

Despite this, our work with case study authorities suggested that there was relatively little evidence that the Egan Review had had any substantial impact on community strategies. In particular there was a lack of emphasis on environmental aspects of sustainability, although there were examples where community strategies were effectively addressing economic aspects.

There is also evidence of a lack of clarity around the concept of sustainability. Many strategies pay only lip service to the concept and there was strong evidence to suggest that many authorities felt that environmental considerations are less important than social or economic ones when developing strategies and that where there needed to be a trade off between environment, economic and social objectives, economic and social imperatives were usually prioritised.

Given the potential of community strategies to play an important role in delivering more sustainable communities, it is imperative that guidance sets out clearly how they – and LAAs – should deliver this in practice. Clearly the move to the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) in place of the CPA will go some way to moving sustainability up the local political agenda.

4.4.3 Other cross cutting themes

Social inclusion was a cross cutting theme that appeared in many community strategies, typically framed as either a core principal or a priority. It featured most strongly in strategies for NRF areas. The most recent review of community strategies suggested that around a half of all strategies addressed social inclusion to a great or moderate extent.

The extent to which strategies are rural proofed was considered as part of the review. It seems that rural proofing still has a relatively low priority with more than a half of the strategies not addressing it at all.

4.5 Actions, targets and indicators

The introduction of LAAs over the course of the evaluation has had significant implications for the ways in which community strategies deal with the whole process of action planning. The 2006 White Paper, and forthcoming guidance, has confirmed the status of the LAA as the delivery plan of the community strategy.

The review of strategies in 2004 highlighted a number of issues around the ways in which community strategies addressed action planning at that time. In particular there was a mismatch between priorities, actions and targets in many community strategies with a lack of clarity as to how actions would contribute to the achievement of a priority or target. It also found that targets were more clearly specified in some thematic areas, for instance economy, education and community action.

The 2007 review highlighted considerable variability in the way in which strategies are structured and presented, including the way in which information relating to actions, targets and indicators is incorporated. There is a real tendency with some community strategies to adopt a 'kitchen sink' approach to actions. In other words a large number of actions are specified with no real rationale or evidence to support their inclusion. In many cases they represent little more than a list of things that partner agencies are doing anyway that in some way contributes to the overall theme or priority. This

can result in incredibly complex action plans that constitute a performance management challenge and demonstrate very little real added value.

As is the case with both actions and indicators there is considerable variation in the number and scope of targets set with some strategies containing a very large number and others adopting a more focused approach. As was the case in 2005 there is still evidence of some confusion as to what constitutes a target and what is an indicator resulting in a degree of overlap between the two. Where targets work best is where they are part of a short term action plan and linked to specific actions that are time bound.

Since 2005 the main change has been the extent to which indicators have been selected that relate to national indicator sets, for example Best Value Indicators, LPSA2 targets or Quality of Life indicators. Nevertheless there is still huge variability across strategies. In some cases few meaningful indicators are proposed; in others there are numerous indicators. Also there is variability across themes with some areas such as health having a very large number of indicators and other, often cross-cutting themes, having very few. An interesting development since 2005 is the increase in the number of indicators that have a comparative element either comparing the local area to national indicators or, more interestingly, comparing it to neighbouring areas or statistically similar areas.

Furthermore some indicators are very generic whereas others are more closely linked to the proposed actions, the outcomes sought and the priorities of the locality. The Plymouth strategy provides an example of a limited number of closely specified indicators that relate to the specific actions to be taken; where possible these indicators are linked to Best Value performance indicators or other nationally recognised indicators. A particular weakness of many strategies is the absence of baseline or comparative data from which progress can be measured.

Over the period of the evaluation there has been a general improvement in the approach to the specification of actions, targets and indicators. More generally there is evidence that the targets and indicators have become more sophisticated since the review in 2005. This has undoubtedly been helped by the increasingly common practice of having a separate action plan that provides, usually in tabular form, actions, targets and key indicators. However there is still a tendency to have too many targets and indicators suggesting that there is little real prioritisation and, perhaps, that all the activities of all the partner agencies are being included whether or not they are the outcome of the community strategy process. In other words it is not clear that they represent real 'added value'.

Clearly the roll out of LAAs to all upper tier authorities and a clarification of the relationship between community strategies and LAAs will lead to further restructuring and alignment of community action plans: indeed action plans and LAAs should become one and the same across all authorities, where this is not already the case. A critical issue will be the extent to which the

priorities and themes identified within community strategies are articulated into the targets set out in the LAA.

4.6 Summary

Overall there has been some improvement in the structure and content of community strategies over the period of the evaluation. Whilst community strategies do typically contain a vision and a strategy, the approach of community strategies to action planning is highly variable.

In terms of thematic coverage, strategies typically cover quite a diverse range of areas, which largely reflect the service responsibilities of the local authority. Policy areas that were perhaps less well covered include culture and leisure and transport.

Equally variable was the treatment of cross cutting themes, although there was perhaps some (limited) evidence that the ways that these have been addressed within strategies has improved over the course of the evaluation.

A continuing challenge is the incorporation of sustainability within community strategies and this was one areas where there needs to be further work if the policy intention of moving towards sustainable community strategies is to be realised.

The implications for **policy** are:

- Forthcoming guidance on community strategies needs to be explicit about the treatment of sustainability within community strategies. There needs to be greater emphasis on prioritisation of environmental considerations alongside economic and social ones.
- If community strategies are to be key drivers of sustainable communities there needs to be greater consideration of transport issues.
- The relationship between the community strategy and its associated action plans and the LAA needs to be more clearly specified. Many community strategies are at the moment too bland to adequately provide the necessary framework for the development of LAA priorities.
- Consideration should be given as to whether all community strategies should be subject to a strategic sustainability assessment.

The implications for **practice** are as follows:

- In refreshing their strategies LSPs need to consider the purpose of the document and their intended audience; this will help determine what needs to go into the main document and what is better dealt with in separate, more technical documents.
- The relationship of the community strategy to the LAA needs to be thought through and made more explicit. This has particular implications for action and delivery plans.
- In refreshing their vision statements, LSPs should consider how they can frame their aspirations for the locality to reflect their 'place-shaping' remit.
- LSPs need to better incorporate cross-cutting issues and/or overarching principles and determine their status within the strategy.
- Localities could make better use of maps to help determine priorities and to target interventions.
- Considerable work needs to be done in many areas to tighten up the linkages between actions, targets and indicators. The publication of the new national indicator set should help with this process.
- Sustainability issues are currently not adequately addressed. If strategies are to become *sustainable* community strategies then further consideration needs to be given to this issue.

5. Community strategies working at different levels

5.1 Introduction

This section addresses the issue of how effectively community strategies are operating at different levels of governance. Central government requires that all local authorities – whether unitary or two tier areas – prepare a community strategy. This presents a number of challenges in two tier areas which have been further complicated by the emergence of LAAs. This is playing out in different ways in different areas and is particularly important in the light of recent announcements regarding new structures for local government in some areas.

The rationale for community strategies is that they should be the key strategic document at the local level, setting out a vision and identifying priorities for the area. As such the intention is that community strategies will develop linkages upwards to key regional strategies including Regional Economic Strategies (RES). The regional agenda is becoming increasingly significant – particularly in the light of the Treasury-sponsored *Review of Sub National Economic Development and Regeneration* which was published in July 2007²¹.

This section explores how these aspects of community strategies – in two tier areas and the upwards linkages to the regional level – are playing out in practice.

5.2 Community strategies in two tier areas

All local authorities – whether unitary or two tier areas – are required to produce a community strategy. The original DETR guidance on community strategies emphasised the importance of counties and districts ‘working together’ in order to reduce duplication, avoid conflicting priorities and ‘consultation/partnership fatigue’. The guidance suggests that district level strategies could ‘nest’ within a broader vision and framework set at county level.

Findings from the evaluation indicate that there is **variation in progress on community strategies between upper and lower tier authorities**, and in the approaches that have been adopted. Nevertheless on the basis of the evidence that is available we have identified some broad themes and overall findings.

21 HM Treasury (2007) Sub national review of economic development and regeneration. London, HM Treasury. www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/9/5/subnational_econ_review170707.pdf

The evaluation has highlighted **significant variations in the development of community strategies at the district and county level**. Districts tended to develop their community strategies more quickly than counties. The 2004 survey of local authorities indicated that over a half (53%) of districts had adopted their community strategy at least 20 months prior to the survey in December 2004 compared to 41% of counties.

Key differences between the ways that county- and district-level strategies have developed include: the nature of partnership working; the use of evidence; the ways in which residents are consulted and engaged; the level of resources available to support development and implementation; the priorities and themes within strategies; and self reported progress towards targets.

In terms of **engaging partners in the development of community strategies** the survey findings suggest there are differences in the partners that counties and districts tend to engage with. Counties tend to be better at engaging with organisations that operate on a geographical unit greater than the district level, for example JobCentre Plus (JCP), Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs), Higher Education (HE), and RDAs. In terms of the district level partners that are more likely to be engaged include the Strategic Health Authority, Primary Care Trust (PCT) and the Police.

The survey also provides evidence about **the nature of partnerships working through the community strategy**, and how effectively partners are engaged at the county and district levels. At the district level, the community strategy is more likely to have stimulated budget pooling between partner agencies and the establishment of joint target setting as well as mapping spend and activities by area. At the upper level, there was more evidence of data sharing between partners and integrating strategies across partner agencies.

Other key differences emerged in terms of the **use of evidence to inform strategies**, with counties more likely to say they make extensive use of consultation findings and local data. For example 76% of counties said they used local data to a 'significant extent', compared to 54% of districts.

This may reflect differences in the levels of **resources available to support community strategies** at the district and county level. This emerged as a clear theme in the survey findings and also in the case study work. Resources, here, refers both to the level of staffing and the availability of financial resources.

Evidence from the survey also suggests that districts are more likely to undertake **extensive consultation and engagement work with their residents** around the community strategy. For instance almost a half (47%) of districts who responded to the survey agreed strongly that they involved the public to a 'significant extent' in the development of their community strategy, compared to less than a quarter of counties (24%).

In terms of the **substantive content of community strategies**, our evidence does suggest that the focus of community strategies, perhaps unsurprisingly, largely fell along the lines of the principal service responsibilities of counties and districts, with counties more likely to focus on crime and community safety, local economy, education and learning and children and young people, and district level strategies more focused upon physical environment, housing and transport, health and social care and jobs and worklessness. Urban renaissance had a much stronger focus at the district level and 'rural proofing' was more evident at county level, patterns which may broadly be expected.

Whilst districts tended – at the time of the survey – to be more advanced in terms of community planning, there was evidence to support the hypothesis that **at the county level community strategies play more of a strategic overarching role** and are more clearly regarded as an expression of the authority's leadership role. For example 59% of respondents from counties agreed strongly that their community strategy was an expression of the authority's strategic community leadership role, compared to 33% of districts.

The more strategic role of the strategy at county level is also supported by other findings which indicate greater levels of awareness amongst officers and members of strategies at the county level. In line with this finding, district level community strategies were also more likely to be viewed as **stand-alone documents**, and were less likely to be used to inform service plans.

It was evident, however, that at the district level there was a greater emphasis on the role of the strategy as an **expression of local need** and in articulating local need to central government. This is in line with other findings which indicate the greater emphasis placed on engagement with the community at the district level.

In terms of **progress towards community strategy targets**, we found that districts are more likely to report that they have made significant progress on the targets set. However this may just reflect the fact that districts tended to develop their community strategies earlier than counties and are therefore further along the delivery road.

There are also some differences in progress on implementation in two-tier areas and also in terms of the **added value** created by the community strategy as identified by counties and districts. For instance counties were more likely to perceive added value in terms of reducing levels of bureaucracy and encouraging more strategic planning, again emphasising perhaps the more strategic role the community strategy appears to have at the county level.

The evidence, therefore, suggests that there have been some differences in the approach adopted towards the development of community strategies between districts and counties. A further question, therefore, is **how have**

counties and districts in two-tier areas developed working relations?

The case studies and review of strategies provide evidence about how the relationship between districts and counties has emerged in practice and some of the drivers and barriers to two tier working.

The review of strategies highlighted that on the whole there was **little direct reference to county strategies within district community strategies**. Some made reference to neighbouring authorities, even if they did not elaborate on what this might involve. There was, for example, considerable evidence of joint planning and action in domains such as education and waste management.

The case studies highlighted issues around the **practicalities of implementing community strategies in two tier areas**. Whilst we found little direct reference within the community strategies themselves to community strategies at other levels, the case studies did highlight that districts and counties have developed some shared mechanisms which link their community planning processes. Examples of these are set out in Box 6.

Box 6: Examples of shared mechanisms between counties and districts

Shared mechanisms between county and district level strategies include:

Collection of evidence:

- Establishing joint data collection and sharing between county and district, for example on issues around community safety.
- Developing joint district and county data collection strategies with key partners, for example the Police.

Consultation with residents:

- County and districts running joint consultation exercises, for example citizens' panels and joint commissioning of surveys.
- Co-ordination of consultation exercises on community planning.

Resourcing community strategies:

- Counties providing direct financial support to districts to support community strategy and LSP development.
- Counties providing staff time to support engagement and participation at the district level.

Performance management and monitoring

- Establishing a county-wide performance management group, with districts buying into an electronic performance management system.

A lack of guidance on two-tier working in relation to community strategies was highlighted as a key barrier. This has meant in some cases that counties have down played their role, or indeed held back in developing their strategies until after district strategies have been developed. It was also clear **that counties felt that they needed to be 'sensitive' to their district councils**, and this contributed to many upper tier authorities waiting until lower tier strategies were in place.

It is apparent that **processes have tended to be either bottom up**, with county strategies drawing on district level strategies and the priorities

identified within those, **or top down** with county level priorities as the starting point.

A key issue is the extent to which county and districts **share the same priorities** and how these are determined. This has depended in part upon the approach that has been adopted in terms of whether this has been a bottom up or top down process²². It is clear that in many areas this has been an iterative process and that county and district strategies are being further aligned through subsequent revisions.

Community planning in areas where there are 'county holes'²³, provide an additional layer of complexity, although these authorities are used to dealing with planning more generally under these circumstances. Community planning is no exception, and the evidence we have suggests that whilst there may be little formal engagement around community planning, there may be many more informal links and processes on a whole range of other service or planning issues.

A final issue is the impact of the emergence of LAAs on two tier working. Counties take the lead in the preparation and implementation of LAAs, but the intention is that county and district priorities should be reflected in the agreement of improvement targets. The evaluation has highlighted some challenges in relation to this process, in particular differing district and county level priorities, political tensions between the two tiers and the speed at which LAAs were introduced²⁴. Nevertheless as LAAs start to 'bed down' **they have had an impact on the development of more co-ordinated community planning processes between districts and counties**. These include the development of joint planning between districts and counties, the development of a shared evidence base and aligning community planning timescales with LAA refreshes.

In summary, the links between community strategies in two-tier authorities appear to be under-developed. The evaluation suggests there may be a number of reasons for this:

- The strategies may have been **developed at different times and with different time horizons**.
- There may be **conflicts between tiers**, with lower tiers wishing to emphasise their distinctiveness within the county.
- In a similar way to central government priorities being underplayed in community strategies, **the integration of strategies across tiers may not have been seen as a priority when they were prepared**.
- At district-level, there appears to be a **perception of counties as distant and set apart, and of lacking awareness of local issues at community level**.

²² The various models of community strategies that have emerged in two tier areas are set out in more detail in *community strategies: working at different levels*, CLG, April 2007 www.communities.gov.uk/pub/554/CommunityStrategiesWorkingatdifferentlevels_id1509554.pdf

²³ A county hole is a unitary authority within a two tier county.

²⁴ See for more information: *The relationship between community strategies and LAAs*, CLG, to be published.

- There is some evidence to suggest that **uncertainties around the future structure** of two tier areas has shifted the focus away from work on community strategies in some two tier areas.

5.3 Upward linkages to the regional level

The original DETR guidance on community strategies highlighted the importance of the regional tier of governance and indicated that authorities should consider how best to involve [regional bodies] in the preparation of their community strategies'. In addition the vision that is set out in regional strategies – including RESs, Regional Spatial Strategies and Regional Sustainable Development Frameworks – needs to be 'part of the framework of local activity which LSPs will want to take into account when they prepare community strategies'. More recently the role of the region and city region has been strengthened through the publication of the review of sub national economic development and regeneration.

Evidence suggests that that **linkages between community strategies and regional strategies have been somewhat 'patchy'**. For instance the 2004 survey of local authorities considered the extent to which RDAs were engaged in the development of community strategies. Overall only 10% of respondents suggested they had been involved to a 'significant extent' in the development of their strategies. RDA involvement was likely to be more significant for upper tier authorities and NRF-funded authorities.

The 2005 review of all community strategies found that links to regional strategies are evident in many community strategies. However, there is little information as to what form these links take or to what extent regional priorities are informing local priorities within the strategies themselves.

Barriers that have been identified through the evaluation to greater engagement with regional issues and institutions are as follows:

- The rapidly **changing and complex nature of the regional policy arena** means it is difficult for individual areas to engage with this agenda.
- The region is viewed by some as having the potential to **'dilute' the impact of community strategies**.
- Issues around **duplication and possible areas of conflict between regional strategies and community strategies**, for example in relation to spatial planning and the relationship between the Regional Spatial Strategy, the Local Development Framework and the community strategy.

Nevertheless there is some evidence from our case studies to suggest that **community strategies are starting to engage more effectively with the regional agenda**. In particular there appears to be evidence that community strategies are, in some instances, starting to be more closely aligned with regional strategies, which was supported by findings from the 2007 review of community strategies. The RES in particular appears to be influential in terms of the economic dimensions of community strategies.

A key issue is to what extent there is added value in developing a closer relationship between community strategies and regional strategies. Community strategies exist in a complex policy and organisational environment and have a number of (sometimes competing) agendas to contend with. These include two tier working, county holes, parish and town council structures, interaction with a range of partners with differing geographical and institutional bases, and responding to a range of local needs while at the same time balancing these with national policy priorities.

The regional agenda and infrastructure is rapidly developing, with RDAs taking on additional responsibilities, and the regionalisation of central government policy gathering pace. This is an additional layer of complexity within which local government, LSPs and in particular community strategies are situated. Addressing all of these agendas is a difficult task, and in particular when local policy, in relation to for example LAAs, is also evolving.

Overall, it was felt that regional and supra-regional links add value to community strategies by being **directional and providing a 'strategic framework' for their development and that effective community strategies should reflect wider regional priorities.**

The RES is the key regional policy document that community strategies allude to, but despite this, the nature of the relationship with community strategies is still unclear. The varying geographical scales of regional and community strategies, and particularly the smaller districts, means that substantial and clear links are difficult. Nevertheless, it was acknowledged and widely supported that regional strategies should provide a broad framework and context for community strategies.

5.4 Summary

The evaluation has studied the emerging relationship between counties and districts within two tier areas. Developing effective working relations with respect to community strategies has been a challenge for many localities. County and district community strategies have developed at different rates and there has been some variation in the focus and approach that has been adopted at each level. Some of the differences can be accounted for by the level of resources available to support community planning, the different service responsibilities at the upper and lower tiers of local government and a (perceived) lack of guidance on two tier working from central government. It also reflects some of the political tensions in relation to two tier areas and uncertainties as a result of local government restructuring.

Nevertheless it is clear that closer working relations in two tier areas have developed over the period of the evaluation. This has been facilitated, to some extent, by the development of LAAs. Nevertheless a lack of guidance in relation to two tier areas means that there remains significant duplication of effort and a lack of clarity about the respective roles of community strategies at district and county level.

The increasing importance of the regional tier is likely to have significant implications for community strategies. The evaluation has highlighted the relatively low level of engagement with regional issues and institutions and a lack of clarity about how local priorities should reflect or be underpinned by regional priorities. This task is made more difficult because of the recent and current changes in relation to regional, sub-regional and supra-regional structures.

The implications for **policy** are as follows:

- To ensure community strategies within two tier areas are 'fit for purpose', there is a need to clarify the respective roles of community strategies at the district and county level and the relationship between the two.
- As sub-regional, regional and supra-regional structures change, guidance needs to be given to the implications for the development of community strategies and the mechanisms for developing and consulting on shared priorities and targets.

The implications for **practice** are as follows:

- There are considerable benefits in developing joint mechanisms for the development and implementation of community strategies between districts and counties. These could include for example joint consultation events, the development of a shared evidence base, counties supporting the resourcing of district community strategies and the development of joint performance management and monitoring. LSPs need to be open to joint mechanisms of this kind.
- Greater alignment on timescales between district and county community planning cycles and LAA refreshes would facilitate joint working and the alignment of priorities at the district and county level.
- LSPs need to increase their awareness of sub-regional, regional and supra-regional plans and how these relate to their local priorities.

6. Community, governance and representation

6.1 Introduction

In this section we summarise the evaluation findings on the extent to which, and how effectively, the processes of developing and implementing community strategies have engaged local communities. In so doing we also highlight the challenges faced by local authorities and LSPs in trying to facilitate community engagement.

6.2 Statutory requirements and guidelines

Government guidance on the development of community strategies has emphasised the importance of engaging communities. The original DETR guidance stipulated that community strategies had to meet four objectives, the first one of which *is to 'allow local communities (based upon geography and/or interest) to articulate their aspirations, needs and priorities'*²⁵. In addition, one of the guiding principles underpinning all community strategies was to 'engage and involve local communities', further details of which suggested that:

*'The process by which community strategies are produced is as important as the strategy itself. The preparation process will be the means by which local people and organisations can be drawn into democratic decision-making. It will be vital to ensure wide local ownership of the community planning process, which should therefore be predominantly 'bottom up' rather than 'top down'*²⁶

Consultation and community engagement have continued to constitute an important part of the modernisation agenda, especially following publication of a number of policy documents by different government departments. These include the Local Vision document 'Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter'²⁷, and the 'Together We Can Action Plan'²⁸ which both seek to promote greater involvement of citizens in policy development and service improvement. In making a commitment to simplify procedures to enable the co-ordination of consultation on community

25 DETR (2000) *Preparing community strategies: Government Guidance to Local Authorities*. London: Department of the Environment, Transport & the Regions.

26 DETR (2000) *Preparing community strategies: Government Guidance to Local Authorities*. London: Department of the Environment, Transport & the Regions, para 50-58.

27 ODPM and Home Office (2005) *Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter* London; Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

28 Civil Renewal Unit (2005); *Together We Can Action Plan*; London; Home Office.

strategies, LAAs and LDFs, the 2006 Local Government White Paper re-asserts that local authorities are obliged to consult and seek the participation of 'such persons as they consider appropriate' in preparing community strategies, and commits the government to extending this duty to include the preparation of the LAA, stating that:

'Our expectation is that local authorities will involve the voluntary, community and business sectors, parish councils, and other local public service providers in both the design and delivery of Sustainable community strategies and LAAs' (p. 100).

More recently, government proposals on renewing the governance arrangements for all levels of government²⁹ incorporate further commitments to explore ways to:

- better enable local people to hold service providers to account
- place a duty on public bodies to involve local people in major decisions; and
- assess the merits of giving local communities the ability to apply for devolved or delegated budgets.

These proposals include a commitment to consult on the following areas:

- extending the right of people to intervene with their elected representatives through community rights to call for action;
- duties to consult on major decisions through mechanisms such as citizens' juries;
- powers of redress to scrutinise and improve the delivery of local services; and
- powers to ballot on spending decisions'.³⁰

Some of these commitments to enhanced community engagement have been taken forward with the publication in October 2007 of 'Action Plan for Building Community Empowerment Success'³¹. The Action Plan outlines proposals in relation to three areas: widening and deepening local empowerment opportunities; supporting and enabling people to take up empowerment opportunities; and strengthening local representative democracy. One of the actions proposed involves measuring empowerment and making it visible with the intention of encouraging empowerment through the development of LAAs and the Audit Commission's new CAA framework.

6.3 Community engagement

The evaluation indicates that, overall, methods of engagement on community strategies have developed and become more embedded. Community engagement in community strategies is generally viewed as an

29 Ministry of Justice (2007) *The Governance of Britain*. London: Ministry of Justice.

30 Ministry of Justice (2007) *The Governance of Britain*. London: Ministry of Justice, p49.

31 CLG/LGA (2007) *Action Plan for Building Community Empowerment Success*. London: CLG

essential part of practice, and is coming to be seen more strategically by both local authorities and LSPs. There is evidence that, as well as becoming more prevalent and systematic, community engagement is also becoming increasingly action-focussed.

During the development stage, community engagement tends to take the form of consultation, with evidence from the evaluation suggesting that a wide range of groups are consulted in some way when strategies are being drawn up. This level of engagement is generally not sustained in subsequent years.

At an authority level, many LSPs have some form of community engagement sub group (often related to work on drawing up the LAA). There is also evidence to suggest an increasingly neighbourhood-based approach to engagement, which is linked in some cases to area-based structures. It is anticipated that this will become more important in the light of proposals in the 2006 Local Government White Paper.

Following the development of the strategy, community engagement is largely focused on monitoring and discussions of broader issues related to implementation. The most common approach to involving communities in monitoring is through the work of thematic groups, community representation on which is often through a community network usually serviced by the Council for Voluntary Service (CVS). Other mechanisms for involving the public varied between authorities and LSPs, but the most common were public meetings, focus groups, citizens' panels and surveys.

Findings from the evaluation indicate that there is some variation in the nature and extent of community engagement. Firstly, community engagement varies depending on the stage of development and implementation of the community strategy. Furthermore, it is undertaken in two principal ways: through consultation on the strategy; and through involvement in LSP structures and decision-making processes.

Variations in approach to community engagement appear to be dependent upon a number of factors, including the overall commitment of the local authority or LSP to the process. For example, in areas where there is a long history of community groups working with the Council there was evidence of significant degrees of trust and effective relationships which greatly facilitated the process of community engagement in relation to the community strategy. The evaluation highlighted differences in relation to the main focus of community engagement activities. In some areas the principal focus was service delivery issues and in others it was higher-level strategic planning.

A number of barriers to effective engagement in the community strategy process were identified throughout the evaluation. The principal ones were:

- **Continuing confusion about what is meant by the term 'community'**. Differing definitions and approaches are being applied by different authorities/LSPs. Also local residents are more likely to apply the term at a geographical level smaller than that on which the LSP operates.
- **The lack of capacity within communities to participate at all levels.** Community groups and their representatives lack the capacity to engage effectively both at the strategic level with LSPs, local authorities and other partners as well as with groups and agencies operating at the community and neighbourhood level.
- **The lack of resources** including staff time and capacity available to local authorities and LSPs to promote/facilitate community engagement.
- **The effect of consultation overload** on communities' commitment to and enthusiasm for the process.
- **Perceptions that community strategies have little direct impact on neighbourhoods**, and that reasons to become engaged in their development/implementation are, therefore, limited.

This last point highlights a further concern identified during the evaluation, namely that there remains a significant lack of awareness and understanding of community strategies. Local and national government have been widely criticised³² for sometimes creating documents that are insufficiently grounded and so create an expectation gap. In some case study authority areas, participants in the evaluation confirmed that this problem persists, identifying the community strategy as one of several seemingly similar strategic documents applying to their area (including NRF strategies, local development frameworks, LAAs).

Similarly, one of the main challenges identified in the evaluation was the complexity of ensuring appropriate representation in any community engagement activity, and the difficulties experienced by authorities and LSPs in engaging people other than the 'usual suspects'. There was evidence to suggest that authorities and LSPs have achieved varying degrees of success in making their processes and structures inclusive, and that there is significant variation in how successful these processes are perceived to be by different stakeholders, especially between authorities and community groups. A specific problem for authorities and LSPs in trying to ensure inclusiveness of their structures is the need for this aim to be balanced with practical considerations, such as keeping their governance structures to a 'manageable' size.

A range of approaches has been developed to try to overcome these challenges, focussing on work both with individuals and collective groups (including existing groups and those established by the authority or LSP for a specific purpose). Examples identified through the evaluation of the kinds of techniques used by different authorities and LSPs can be found in Box 7 below.

³² Maguire, K. & Truscott, F. (2006) *Active Governance: the Value Added by Community Involvement in Governance through Local Strategic Partnerships*. Future Perspectives Co-operative Ltd. First published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Box 7: Examples of community engagement techniques

The evaluation has found a range of different techniques used by local authorities and LSPs to facilitate community engagement in their structures and community strategies. These have been targeted at different levels (e.g. district/town/neighbourhood); stages (e.g. development of community strategy/implementation of action plans); and people (i.e. individuals/existing community organisations/new, purpose-specific groups). The following examples illustrate the range of techniques in operation and their diverse applications:

Identifying Community Needs/Priorities:

- Barnsley MBC ensured the priorities within their community plan reflected the views of all interested parties by establishing a forum* of over 100 local agencies and running several focus groups made up of members of the local Citizen's Panel and a youth summit.
- *Have Your Say*: Haringey was run over a six-month period, starting with a community conference, and using the responses to a series of four questions (printed on postcards and distributed widely through the Borough) to draw up the priorities for inclusion in the community strategy.
- Nottinghamshire County Council used a variety of techniques to generate the priorities for inclusion in their community strategy, including a MORI survey (based on their 'liveability' index), a visioning conference and focus groups with hard to reach groups.
- *Imagine Ryedale** – an 'appreciative inquiry' process – was adopted by the Ryedale LSP to facilitate the input of a significant proportion of the resident population through the use of a variety of creative approaches.
- Elected members at Wealdon DC conducted interviews with over 600 citizens (including adults in their homes and children in schools) to secure their views on local priorities.

Publicising the community strategy:

- Various LSPs (including Bolton and Manchester) convene annual community conferences to promote and report on progress of the community strategy.
- Sheffield One LSP runs regular neighbourhood roadshows to promote its work.

Representation on LSP Structures:

- A third of places on the Blackburn & Darwen LSP Board are reserved for representatives of the voluntary and community sector. Places are filled by election of representatives from the Community Empowerment Network.

- Neighbourhood Committees/Partnerships oversee the delivery of community strategies in a number of areas, including Liverpool and Mansfield.

Performance Monitoring

- Many LSPs have community representatives on sub groups responsible for monitoring performance against targets included in community strategies and their associated action plans.

* These initiatives have been repeated in the marked locations.

6.4 Role of Councillors

The evaluation has shown that Councillors play an important role in the development and implementation of community strategies, although there is considerable variation in their contribution across local authorities, often as a result of the types of structure put in place to facilitate their input.

Executive members have been found to play more of a central role in the development of community strategies, principally through their involvement in LSP Boards. Backbench councillors are involved in more practical activities related to the community strategy, but opportunities remain for them to exert influence over the development and implementation of the community strategy and LSP structures more generally.

Elected members perceive community strategies as a means of representing the interests of the communities they serve, but they also feel that community strategies cannot replace other aspects of their work. Additionally, a large proportion of councillors chose not to make explicit reference to community strategies in their dealings with their electorate, as they feel local residents are more concerned about outcomes than processes, especially when strategies are involved.

Likewise, while community strategies allow elected members to engage in the exercise of power at a local level, they are perceived in many quarters as a complicating factor in the local democratic processes. While many councillors fulfil multiple roles locally, their involvement in community strategies can add to the complexity of accountability, and some express concerns that community strategies and LSPs have been promoted with the intention of undermining the democratic process.

Elected members are involved in LSP structures in the majority of local authority areas, with executive members participating in higher-level governance structures, and in several cases chairing the LSP. However the extent to which councillors wish to be seen to be driving the LSP varies; in many areas the council has wanted the LSP to develop a separate identity to the local authority. Similar variation is evident in the extent to which councillors are seen as being able to influence their council in light of decisions about the community strategy, with those from NRF areas

perceived as being more effective in this regard than their counterparts in non-NRF areas. This variation usually reflects structural issues within individual local authorities, with many elected members choosing to focus their efforts in areas other than the community strategy which they think are more relevant to the needs of their constituents. The evaluation suggests that the developing overview and scrutiny role is providing more opportunities for backbench councillors to exert influence over the way in which community strategies are being developed and implemented.

There is evidence of widespread cross-party working on community strategies, with councillors from all political backgrounds engaging in the process. In some areas, political differences are seen as less important than personal qualities; in others, where there may have been difficulties in securing cross-party working at a strategic level, there is usually evidence of this happening at a more localised or operational level. Many elected members have said that they participate in the community strategy process in spite of reservations about the impact it is having on local democratic processes. Additionally, backbench members in particular recognise the role that they have in sharing their insights into local conditions and issues in the development and implementation of the community strategy (see Section 2.9), and are willing to be involved as they see community strategies as a means of strengthening their position in attempting to address these issues.

Although it is recognised that community strategies help councils address economic, social and environmental issues, there is some doubt about the extent to which they are used systematically by councillors to implement local authorities' wellbeing powers. At the same time, elected members acknowledge that implementation arrangements for community strategies have often made it easier for them to ensure that the needs of their communities are addressed. Whether through the use of creative and inclusive approaches to generating strategic priorities, or through the provision of support to local action plans as part of their implementation, elected members from across the country have been able to cite a range of ways in which community strategies have helped local communities.

6.5 Engaging partners

The evaluation indicated that partnership engagement is an important aspect of the community strategy process. While not all main case study local authorities would claim that the community strategy has improved partnership working per se, all acknowledge that good partnership working has ensured the quality of the community strategies. In most case study areas, the LSP is structured in such a way that all stakeholders are given the opportunity to participate in theme or sub groups, thereby ensuring that they can make an input in the most appropriate aspect of LSP business, and that action plans arising from the community strategies receive the attention they require from all interested parties.

The 2007 review of community strategies showed that in the majority of the strategies examined (36), details were provided of the LSP members. A number of documents now have sections that detail the role and responsibilities of the partnership and/or the general approach to partnership working (see Box 8. for an example).

Box 8: Example of statements about partnership working (Craven)

Through their involvement in the process of developing and delivering the community strategy, partner agencies will benefit from:

- a more strategic approach to how they plan and deliver their services
- greater integration with other agencies
- a sharing of expertise and good practice
- more efficient use of resources and
- enhanced local knowledge.

As part of their commitment to the community strategy each partner organisation has agreed to:

- Contribute effectively to achieve shared priorities and targets
- Develop clear and achievable action plans for each priority
- Work together to maximise the use of resources
- Publicise the work of the community strategy within their own organisation and in the wider community.

The community strategies were assessed in particular to see if the 'duty to cooperate' partners were mentioned. The police, PCT, relevant upper or lower tier authority and Learning and Skills Council were the most frequently mentioned 'duty to cooperate' partners.

The case study research showed that, in many cases, the LSP structures and governance arrangements have undergone revisions, to ensure that all key partners remain involved and that partnership working continues to be effective and efficient. There is evidence that partners in all case study areas continue to be involved in their LSPs and in overseeing work on the community strategy, attending and contributing to business at meetings. However, there is also recognition that each agency is driven by their own agendas and the priorities set to them by their sponsoring government department, which has the potential to undermine their commitment to partnership working at a local level.

Other complications affecting LSPs' ability to secure effective partnership working around the community strategy include:

- a lack of clarity about the relationships between LSPs and community strategies in two-tier areas;
- the relative priority given to community strategies by different partners, especially as LSPs have assumed responsibility for other initiatives, such as Local Public Service Agreements (LPSAs) and LAAs;
- the size of some LSPs (in one case, membership is over 100), making partnership working impractical;

- the identity of LSP Chair (usually – but not in all cases – the local authority leader, which has advantages and disadvantages particularly in relation to partnership working); and
- the ‘hidden costs’ of partnership working (not least the significant amount of officer time needed to facilitate it).

One contributor noted that: *“partners haven’t necessarily seen the community strategy as the plan of plans for the city, or where their individual plan fits within it – they tend to go back into silos”* (key stakeholder).

6.6 Summary

The evaluation has highlighted the significance attached to community engagement by local authorities and LSPs, and has illustrated the challenges faced by them in achieving this complex policy goal. There is evidence that local authorities and LSPs across the country have accepted their responsibilities for facilitating community engagement in their processes and in the design of community strategies in particular.

However, the experience of communities varies significantly, depending on a range of factors, including: the commitment of the partners to community engagement; the extent to which resources have been made available to facilitate the process; and the capacity of individuals, communities and agency staff to make the process meaningful. As a consequence, the impact communities have been able to have on community strategies has been somewhat limited, and the evaluation has highlighted ways in which local authorities and LSPs might work differently to enhance communities’ influence particularly in relation to implementation.

In terms of the role of councillors there are differing interpretations of their role and the implications of community strategies for local democratic processes and accountability.

In terms of partnership engagement, while not all main case study local authorities would claim that the community strategy has improved partnership working per se, all acknowledge that good partnership working has ensured the quality of the community strategies. However, a number of challenges relating to the complexities of partnership working – and the resource implications of this – remain.

The Local Government White Paper 2006 presents a number of new challenges in terms of the range and extent of the demands likely to be placed on councillors, and there is some concern about their capacity with implications for their ability to maintain an effective input to the community strategy process in addition to carrying out their other council duties.

There are also some concerns about the capabilities of some elected members who, while they are well-equipped to represent their constituents through fulfilment of traditional roles, are ill-prepared for the demands of

the new local governance landscape with its emphasis on strategic level partnership working. This has implications for their participation in community strategy processes and is exacerbated by the fact that many elected members are anyway sceptical about participation in LSPs and are concerned that their involvement in community strategies has the potential to undermine the democratic process.

The implications for **policy** are as follows:

- Greater emphasis needs to be given in guidance to ensure LSPs, local authorities and partners adopt more joined up approaches to community consultation and engagement not only to avoid duplication and overlap but also to encourage innovation in terms of techniques.
- Government guidance needs to more clearly specify the different roles elected members might play in relation to community strategies.
- Future policy should give consideration to the relationship between the representative status of councillors and the shift towards a more participative model. Guidance should provide assistance to LSPs and local authorities in determining how to allocate priorities between issues emerging through these two parallel processes. Backbench members in particular require support in determining how best to engage with the process.
- Local elected members are keen to represent the interests of their constituents, and to ensure that the needs of their communities are addressed. Many recognise that the community strategy process provides them with an additional means of achieving these dual objectives, but concern remains about the way in which many community strategies fail to capture local issues, as (for example) the target-driven requirements of central government departments are seen to be given greater priority by LSP Boards than local needs analysis. Guidance to assist councillors in overcoming this apparent anomaly would be helpful in securing their continued involvement in – and advocacy of – the community strategy process.

The implications for practice are:

- There is wide variation in the level of resources available to facilitate community engagement in community strategies, particularly in relation to the number and capacity of staff. In order for partner agencies to demonstrate their commitment to community engagement – and to derive maximum benefit from their involvement in its promotion – they need to train existing staff or/and employ more practitioners with a background in community work.
- There is an ongoing need for clarification regarding partnership processes and community strategies, given the complexities associated with LAAs, and in two tier areas of localities where the LSP has assumed responsibility for other planning processes.
- Local authorities and LSPs continue to suffer the consequences of inconsistencies in approach in relation to balancing the demand for community representation and direct involvement by groups and individuals in decision-making in relation to community strategies. There should be better co-ordination of approaches to community engagement between local agencies as well as evidence of a greater variety of techniques being applied to this work in all areas.

7. Community strategies as a strategic driver

7.1 Introduction

This section considers the extent to which community strategies are operating as the strategic driver within local areas. Central government expectations are that community strategies form *'the key strategic document setting out the vision for the local area'*³³. A critical issue is the extent to which community strategies are drivers of local policy, as opposed to being simply accumulations of existing policies.

This section provides an overview of the ways in which community strategies have operated at a strategic level over the period of the evaluation. It summarises the strategic role of the community strategy first, before exploring the emerging relations with LAAs, linkages with other strategies, the place shaping role of community strategies, and the role of community strategies in the plan rationalisation process.

7.2 The strategic role of community strategies

The findings from the evaluation indicate there has been – and continues to be – considerable variability in the roles that community strategies have played in localities in terms of setting the overall strategic direction for an area, determining priorities, and driving the content of strategies.

The policy intention for community strategies has always been ambitious. Multiple, complex and challenging roles for community strategies have been proposed. Not only should they be visionary but they should also act as a co-ordinating mechanism; they should shape the activities of local organisations as well as contributing to the economic, social and environmental well-being of their area. The original intention was that community strategies would both drive local policy across a number of sectors as well as providing the necessary means to implement it.

Evidence from the evaluation suggests that the way that community strategies have been conceived, developed and implemented has varied considerably. Nevertheless there is some evidence that the role that they are playing at the local level has both clarified and become more strategic over the course of the evaluation. The changing policy context is of course important and it is clear that the development of LAAs has had implications for the role played by community strategies. The implications of LAAs for community strategies are explored in the next section.

33 ODPM (2005) *Vibrant Local leadership*. London: ODPM.

Findings from the 2004 survey of local authorities highlighted the different roles played by community strategies at the local level. More than nine out of ten respondents agreed that community strategies aim to encourage better co-ordination of service delivery and a similar proportion (87%) suggested that the community strategy informs other strategies in particular the council corporate plan (94%). Nevertheless a sizeable minority (20%) also stated that the plan had been mainly produced to fulfil statutory requirements.

The survey consistently found that certain types of authorities were more likely to be using their strategies in a more strategic way, in particular single tier authorities (perhaps reflecting the challenges of developing community strategies in two tier areas – see Section 5) and also NRF authorities and those rated as 'excellent' by the CPA.

The role played by community strategies has been explored in more detail through our longitudinal case studies. By 2006 there was evidence to suggest that community strategies had achieved a significant place in the local strategic planning process, with many local authorities (and, to a lesser extent, their partners) modifying their corporate planning processes to reflect the priorities identified in their area's community strategy.

In general, plans are being aligned more closely with community strategies, creating a sense of strategic synergy between corporate and partnership activities in many localities. The community strategy was widely viewed as a linking mechanism, bringing together a wide range of plans and distilling out at a higher level the key aspects of other strategies, and in some cases signposting to departmental and service specific plans.

Most authorities appeared to have reasonable frameworks for aligning their planning arrangements with the community strategy. High level partnership plans were increasingly being brought before the LSP for consideration. In some authorities, however, it was not clear how closely the plan-making processes of other partners in the LSP had been aligned with the community strategy.

The case studies also showed that in some authorities there is a clear and direct link between the high level needs and priorities identified in the community strategy and the commissioning of services. More typically, however, the strategy was not seen to be of immediate use to those drawing up specific commissioning briefs and contracts. Some respondents indicated that the strategy is used at present more as a statement of intent, setting the vision and priorities for partners rather than as an action plan informing operational decisions.

Clearly, many of these issues relating to the strategic role of the community strategy are intertwined with the role and effectiveness of the LSP itself. Our final round of field work with case studies highlighted concerns of respondents about the purpose and powers of the LSP and implications for ensuring that the plans and actions of partners are aligned with the community strategy. The LSP formative evaluation has indicated that there was something of a gap between the principle of the LSP and the reality in terms of the extent to which LSP governance structures and arrangements are fit for purpose. Clearly the LSP is central to the effective implementation of the community strategy in terms of influencing the work of partner agencies, and where the LSP is not functioning effectively, this will severely limit the extent to which community strategies can influence the plans and actions of partner organisations.

The introduction of the 'duty to participate' and the wider rollout of LAAs will have significant implications for LSPs and their constituent partners. Within this new framework, the strategic role of the community strategy in setting the vision for the locality, with the LAA acting as the delivery vehicle, should become clearer.

7.3 The relationship between community strategies and LAAs

LAAs formed a key part of *local vision*³⁴, central government's 10-year strategy for local government, which seeks a more mature relationship between central and local government. LAAs aim to improve local services by strengthening coordination between central government, local authorities, and partners³⁵.

As LAAs have developed there have been a number of changes in their design, for example shifts in emphasis, a more developed outcomes framework, the addition of new blocks, the integration of LPSAs into LAAs, as well as the creation of 'single pot' LAAs³⁶.

The 2006 Local Government White Paper set out significantly different arrangements for LAAs. A key change is the introduction of a single set of up to 35 targets (as well as 17 statutory education and early years targets) chosen to reflect local needs from the selection of 198 National Outcome and Indicators published in October 2007³⁷, which are agreed between government and local partners. The government states its intention of '*putting Sustainable Community Strategies at the heart of what local authorities do through the new performance framework*'. The new duty to co-operate will ensure partners work together to deliver the LAA priorities.

34 ODPM (2004), *The Future of Local Government: Developing a 10-year Vision*, London: ODPM.

35 ODPM (2004) *Local Area Agreements: A Prospectus*. London: ODPM.

36 CLG (2006) *Local Area Agreements research: Round 2 negotiations and early progress in Round 1*. London: CLG.

37 CLG (2007) *The New Performance Framework for Local Authorities & Local Authority Partnerships: Single Set of National Indicators*. London: CLG.

The relationship between the LAA and the Community Strategy is also clarified.

Following a period of consultation with local government and a series of what have been 'dry runs' formal guidance on the new LAA process was published in September 2007, *Negotiating new Local Area Agreements*³⁸. Further more technical guidance is planned at a later stage. This most recent guidance sets out the following role for community strategies:

'A strong and ambitious Sustainable Community Strategy, based on extensive engagement locally, agreed by the council or councils and the Local Strategic Partnership, is fundamental to the success of LAAs. The SCS sets out where the area has come from, where it is at, and where it wants to be with social, economic and environmental goals incorporated in a joined up way to contribute to sustainable development. It will set out ambition over a much longer timescale than the three year LAA. The Sustainable Community Strategy should interrelate with the spatial planning for the area, set out in the Local Development Framework' (p. 14)

This emphasises the strategic role of community strategies, in terms of setting the long term vision as well as emphasising the place shaping role of community strategies and linking in with the physical planning framework.

The development, roll out and implementation of LAAs has been reflected in the findings from the evaluation. By the end of the fieldwork period there was substantial evidence of significant impact of the LAA on community strategies.

The case study work indicated that officers generally recognised that community strategies did provide the strategic framework for LAAs and were important in ensuring that local need was addressed by the LAA. LAA engagement and consultation processes were – to a significant degree – becoming linked to community strategy and LSP engagement processes. It was also evident that the experience of the community planning process had aided the development of LAAs.

The final round of fieldwork with case study authorities demonstrated considerable diversity in the extent to which they were coordinating their LAAs and community strategies. Whether or not planning processes for community strategies and LAAs were aligned varied according to:

- the round of LAA; the structure of the LAA (i.e. single pot versus blocks);
- the attitudes of key actors in the local authorities;
- and the type of authority (i.e. whether single or two tier).

In most authorities it was evident that the LAA had been developed on the basis of building up from the priorities set out in the community strategy. Findings from the evaluation highlight that whilst some areas have made significant progress in aligning LAAs and community strategies, this has for

³⁸ CLG (2007) *Negotiating New Local Area Agreements*. London: CLG.

many been something of a challenge. If community strategies are to provide the starting point for LAAs they need to be 'fit for purpose' and there needs to be greater alignment and clarity of the processes.

Our work through the light touch and main case studies, as elsewhere, highlighted the mismatch between the priorities of the community strategy, based around local need, and the targets set out in the LAA. Recent findings³⁹ indicated that officers were attempting to 'patch up the holes' in the LAA by developing supplementary strategic work on certain issues, but sometimes issues highlighted in the community strategy were simply overlooked by the LAA. Divergences between community strategies and LAAs were particularly marked in two-tier areas.

The new LAA framework that is being developed by central government is likely to address many of the challenges and issues that have been highlighted in our work especially the relationship between community strategies and LAAs. How this pans out in practice will be a key issue to be addressed through the ongoing impact evaluation of LAAs and LSPs.

7.4 The relationship between community strategies and LDFs

The original DETR guidance acknowledged that local councils – as the democratically elected bodies in the local strategic partnership – have a 'strong role' to play in mediating between different interests, resolving conflict and helping the partnership to make decisions about priorities. Alongside community strategies runs the power to promote or improve economic, social and environmental wellbeing of each local authority area. It was intended that Local Development Frameworks (LDFs), which were formally introduced in the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act of 2004, should be the spatial expression of those elements of the community strategy relating to land use and development. PPS 12 set out the intended relationship between community strategies and LDFs. Firstly, it stated that there was a need for local planning authorities to take 'account of' a wider range of plans and policies when developing the core strategy. These included *'the community strategy and strategies for education, health, social inclusion, waste, biodiversity, recycling and environmental protection'*.

Secondly the LDF should contribute to the delivery of the community strategy: *'the local development framework should be a key component in the delivery of the community strategy setting out its spatial aspects where appropriate and providing a long term spatial vision. Local development documents should express those elements of the community strategy that relate to the development and use of land'*.

Thirdly there is a requirement for the LDF community involvement statement to indicate how it links with other community involvement initiatives such as those associated with the development and implementation of the

39 Monroe, S, (2007) *The relationship between community strategies and Local Area Agreements*. London: CLG.

community strategy. Finally local planning authorities should seek to integrate their approach to monitoring and survey with other local initiatives particularly community strategies. In particular *'where other strategies share common targets with local development documents, monitoring should be integrated, with the annual monitoring report highlighting common targets and indicators'*.

More recently a number of policy and guidance documents have been published which set out ways of integrating LDFs with other planning mechanisms including community strategies. These include *'Joining Together: Delivering Better Outcomes'*⁴⁰ published by the RTPI and *'Planning Together'*, a practical guide to LSPs and spatial planning⁴¹ commissioned by CLG. *'Planning Together'* aims to improve collaboration between planners and those involved with LSPs by providing explanations of the processes involved, especially to non-planners. According to the Local Government White Paper, there should be 'complete coherence' between community strategies and all other plans for any local authority area, including the LDF.

One of the ways in which the White Paper intends that the conditions for effective partnership working will be enhanced is through streamlining the procedures for involving communities in the creation of sustainable community strategies, LAAs and LDFs, and improving and integrating strategic planning procedures. The overall aim is improved local outcomes realised through the LAAs, the delivery of sustainable development, and the promotion of active citizen and stakeholder engagement throughout.

40 RTPI (2007) *Joining Together: Delivering Better Outcomes* RTPI: London

41 RTPI and Marilyn Taylor Associates (2007) *Planning Together: Local Strategic Partnerships and Spatial Planning: a practical guide* CLG: London.

Box 9: Example of links between community strategy and LDF

In one authority the core linkage regarding the relationship between the LDF and community strategy is engagement and information sharing with the LSP, facilitated by Planning Services.

The LSP has had significant involvement in developing the LDF, and work is being undertaken to continue LSP involvement in the process of preparing the core strategy for the LDF. Several presentations have been delivered to the LSP around the LDF, to raise awareness, and to highlight relevance to the LSP/community strategy. A number of workshops have also been delivered to engage and consult with the LSP to on the LDF's content, and on specific elements of the LDF such as Area Action Plans. Some partners (e.g. education, health) have been individually consulted to specifically gauge what their potential land requirements might be and the impact upon stakeholder groups in the local community.

"The relationship is a close one – one that we're trying to develop through dialogue". (planning officer).

The process of information sharing and partnership working with the LSP is felt to be effective, but it is felt that more work is needed to fully clarify the importance of a developing relationship between the community strategy and LDF. To some extent it is felt that *"the message might not be getting through"* to some partners since planning can be a *"somewhat dry"* subject.

It is clear that there is some understanding and awareness of the need to more closely align community strategies and LDFs. Nevertheless this is still very much 'work in progress' for many authorities. There is a lack of clarity as to how to go about integration and alignment and how this might work in practice. However, there was some recognition of the positive benefits of involving planners more closely in the development and implementation of community strategies.

There was some evidence that community strategies and LDFs do generally 'have regard' to each other although issues emerged around the level at which community strategies were pitched, around scrutiny mechanisms and also the geographical 'reach' of community strategies and LDFs. Approaches that were being adopted to speed up the alignment process included developing a shared evidence base, holding joint community consultations and using community strategy 'refreshes' as an opportunity to align the strategies more closely.

Local authority land use planners and officers responsible for the development of community strategies face a number of challenges in terms of working towards more closely aligned strategies. The local policy environment is complex and the emergence of LAAs as 'the delivery plan' of the community strategy has served to confuse the issue with regard to the role of LDFs as the delivery plan for the spatial components of the community strategy. Engaging partners in land use planning can be difficult, particularly in areas where traditionally there has been relatively little partner

engagement in land use planning and so they regard it as simply not relevant to them. The complexity of arrangements in two tier areas continues to be a challenge and the relationship between community strategies and LDFs in these areas is unclear. This is compounded in all areas by planning cycles that are 'out of sync'.

Box 10: Example of difficulties arising from differences in timing for CS and LDF

In one authority the current version of the community strategy significantly pre-dates the LDF. The Action Plan was produced in 2003 and ran until 2006 and is now due to be reviewed. This process has been delayed partly as a result of a reorganisation of the LSP, and because it was expected that there would be new guidance from central government.

The relationship between the planning cycles for community strategies and the LDF is considered to be particularly problematic, since the two are "out of sync":

'The community strategy is a few years old and was produced without the benefit of the new development plan system. Quite clearly it would be preferable if the new community strategy was being produced in parallel with the core strategy, or indeed slightly ahead of it'. (planning officer)

It was anticipated that work on the LDF would inform the development of the new sustainable community strategy, and that over time the planning cycles would become more closely aligned.

7.5 The place shaping role of community strategies

The Local Government White Paper and the Lyons Inquiry into Local Government both emphasise the role of local authorities as 'place shapers', providing the strategic leadership to bring together various local agencies and groups in order to build a consensus on how to address the challenges facing a locality in a co-ordinated way. Local authorities will fulfil this role in a variety of ways but partnership is a crucial element.

Although place shaping is a relatively recent concept, the extent to which community strategies were already fulfilling this role has been explored through the latter stages of the evaluation.

Our fieldwork with case study authorities concluded that overall, community strategies were not necessarily *perceived* as being central to the emerging 'place shaping' agenda, as articulated by the CLG and others. Place shaping was seen by some contributors as being more concerned with effective service delivery and with partnership working. Overall, there was some scepticism about the term 'place shaping' – which was in a minority of cases felt to be simply reframing what was already taking place – and about the specific role the LAA and the LSP could play in 'place shaping'. One issue is that 'place shaping' is a long term strategic objective, and is not necessarily in line with shorter term mandatory objectives.

There were some exceptions to this dominant view. Some contributors to the evaluation discussed the ways in which community strategies are relevant to 'place shaping' in promoting a sense of community, or place, as well as contributing positively to shaping local plans. The findings also suggested that LSPs and community strategies may be recognised as having a place shaping role although this is not necessarily made explicit.

The most recent assessment of community strategies demonstrates that many do in fact address place shaping, although it may not be described as such. The majority of strategies were assessed as conveying a 'sense of place'. A good example of this is the strategy for Northumberland, which begins with a description of the characteristics of Northumberland and its people. It then goes on to describe what a 'sense of place' means at four different levels:

- the neighbourhood (immediate area where people live);
- 'belonging communities' (places people are most likely to say they come from if asked by others);
- 'characteristic communities' (e.g. the rural uplands, the former coalfields, and the Tyneside commuter belt); and
- and 'association communities' (e.g. the county of Northumberland; the English Borders; and the North East of England).

However despite some positive examples, it is clear that there is a widespread lack of understanding about what the place shaping agenda means in practice at the local level with obvious implications for community strategies. Further clarification and articulation of what place shaping means in practice and how this can be delivered through the community strategy would be helpful.

7.6 The role of community strategies in the plan rationalisation process

Community strategies are closely connected to the plan rationalisation process in a number of ways:

- Firstly, the community strategy should play a role in terms of policy harmonisation, ensuring that all existing local plans and strategies are aligned with the priorities set out in the community strategy;
- Secondly, there are a number of plans and strategies that central government no longer requires local government to produce;
- And finally, there are a number of plans and strategies that may be subsumed within the community strategy itself, for example, Local Agenda 21 strategies and local cultural strategies.

The full policy background and the current requirements in terms of plan rationalisation are addressed in more detail in the final report for the process evaluation of plan rationalisation, which is essentially a companion publication to this report.

Overall, the role that community strategies played in plan rationalisation changed over the course of the study. Our early work indicated that plan rationalisation took some time to register with local authorities in relation to community planning. Initial findings showed that plan rationalisation was linked to the development of community strategies in only some authorities. The 2004 survey demonstrated that around one third (36%) of authorities had linked the plan rationalisation process to the development of their community strategy, although this was more evident amongst NRF authorities. The 2004 survey also asked how plans had been combined with the community strategy. 58% of plans had been combined by ensuring common objectives and targets exist between the plans. 26% of plans had been directly incorporated into the strategy through the creation of a single plan. It was clear from the 2004 survey findings that there was at that stage a great deal of uncertainty around the plan rationalisation process and how this related to the development and implementation of community strategies.

As the strategic role of the community strategy developed so too were links made to plan rationalisation. The 2006 survey of local authorities indicated that around two thirds of all respondents linked the process of reducing the number of plans to the development and implementation of the community strategy.

Detailed findings from the evaluation in relation to plan rationalisation are published elsewhere. However it is clear that many authorities are still producing plans regardless of the requirement by central government to do so, for a variety of reasons, including for strategic, management, and delivery purposes. To a large extent the process of plan rationalisation is viewed as being 'done' at the local level, and there is early evidence of a shifting culture in terms of stripping away the layers of reporting required. This shift in culture is likely to continue as the new arrangements for LAAs together with a new pared back performance management regime bed in.

7.7 Summary

Overall, the period over which the evaluation has taken place has seen the development of community strategies as the central strategic framework – or at least, a central plank of the strategic framework – across localities. Whilst community strategies are not yet seen to have a role in place shaping per se, they do on the whole convey a sense of place and contribute to the local community.

Community strategies have developed in most cases into the overarching strategy, providing vision and an umbrella for other plans. They have provided a means by which local level community engagement and input into strategy can take place, for the coordination of strategic work with partners, and a mechanism for linking into other plans at regional and national level. Whilst considerable progress has been made, these latter aspects of community strategic work continue to provide challenges – local

engagement and interests can get 'lost' in a crowded policy agenda, different policy cycles may clash, and partners have their own remits.

Development of LAAs represent another challenge and opportunity for community strategies. In general, community strategies seem to provide vision with the LAA providing a means of implementation – when they work well together, they can provide a means of coordinating the planning process with regard to both local interests and central government directives. However, there are indications that further work is needed to ensure that aspects of local authority work do not fall through the LAA structures.

The implications for **policy** are as follows:

- Central government needs to understand better the complexities involved in coordinating local planning, including the difficulties associated with the integration of LDFs and planning coordination in two-tier areas.
- Efforts need to be made to ensure that current mis-matches in the timescales involved in different elements of local planning are addressed in order to facilitate coordination of local plans.
- Central government should take steps to ensure that unintended consequences do not occur as a result of integration of the LAA with the community strategy in particular where LAA blocks have been used – the blocks may overlook some areas, and authorities have been attempting to 'patch up the holes'.
- If community strategies are to play their part in 'place shaping' then central government needs to indicate more clearly what this term means and give examples of ways in which community strategies can demonstrate a concern with place shaping.
- Findings from the evaluation highlight that whilst some areas have made significant progress in aligning LAAs and community strategies, this has been a significant challenge. If community strategies are to provide the starting point for LAAs they need to be 'fit for purpose' and there needs to be greater alignment and clarity in terms of processes.

The implications for **practice** are as follows:

- Partners at the local level need to make adjustments in culture, role, attitude and knowledge to facilitate closer working between agencies that have historically not worked closely together. In particular there is a need to raise the profile of the skills that planners have and are able to offer the community planning process, for example in terms of geographical targeting and community engagement.
- The timescales for the development of a range of local plans including community strategies, LAAs and LDFs, need to be considered together to allow for better alignment and integration.

8. Progress and added value

8.1 Introduction

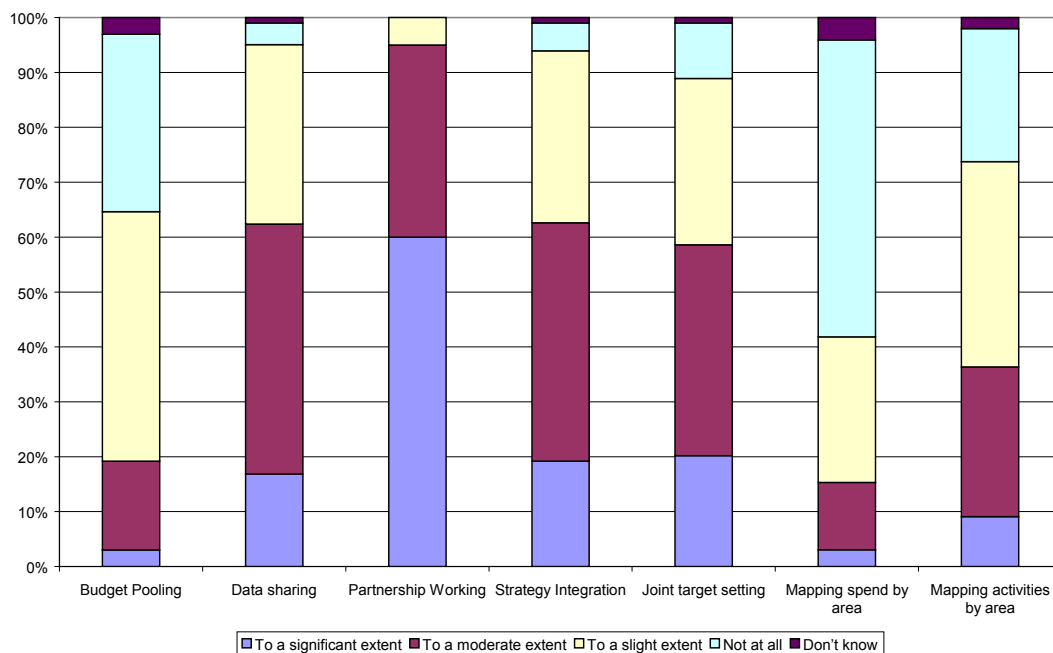
This section considers what value community strategies have added to local processes and outcomes to date and the barriers to progress that have been evident from the evaluation. Where possible and appropriate we also provide a forward look in terms of future development, linking this to the current policy agenda.

It should be noted that the original methodology for the evaluation, which included a baseline and follow up survey of local authorities, was changed during the course of the evaluation and as a result no follow up survey was undertaken. This was due to concerns about survey fatigue within local government. The extent to which the evaluation has been able to assess progress towards outcomes is therefore limited. Findings from other evaluations undertaken as part of the meta-evaluation of the local government modernisation agenda have been drawn upon to provide additional context and evidence where appropriate and relevant.

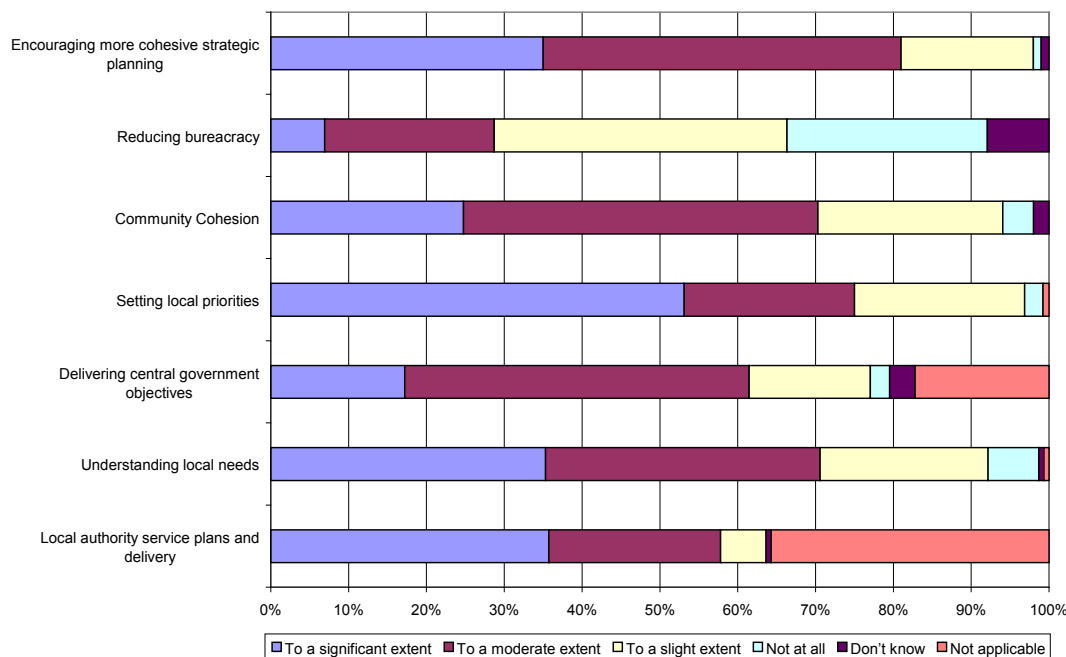
8.2 Progress towards outcomes

The outcomes from community strategies have been explored throughout the course of the evaluation. These can be broadly divided into process and service outcomes. The 2004 survey of local authorities explored the process outcomes realised through community strategies. The principal process outcome that had been achieved was enhanced partnership working. By contrast the areas where there had been relatively little impact included budget pooling and mapping spend and activities by area. Figure 2 below illustrates the extent to which community strategies have stimulated various types of joint working and other activities.

Figure 2: Extent to which community strategies have stimulated aspects of joint working



The survey also examined other ways in which community strategies were considered to have 'added value', for example in relation to service planning and delivery, and understanding of local needs. The area where community strategies were felt to have added most value was understanding local needs and setting local priorities. Community strategies were also felt to have added value in relation to local authority service planning and delivery.

Figure 3: Added value of community strategies

Other process outcomes were explored through the case study research. This identified four broad areas where the process of developing and implementing community strategies had led to positive outcomes:

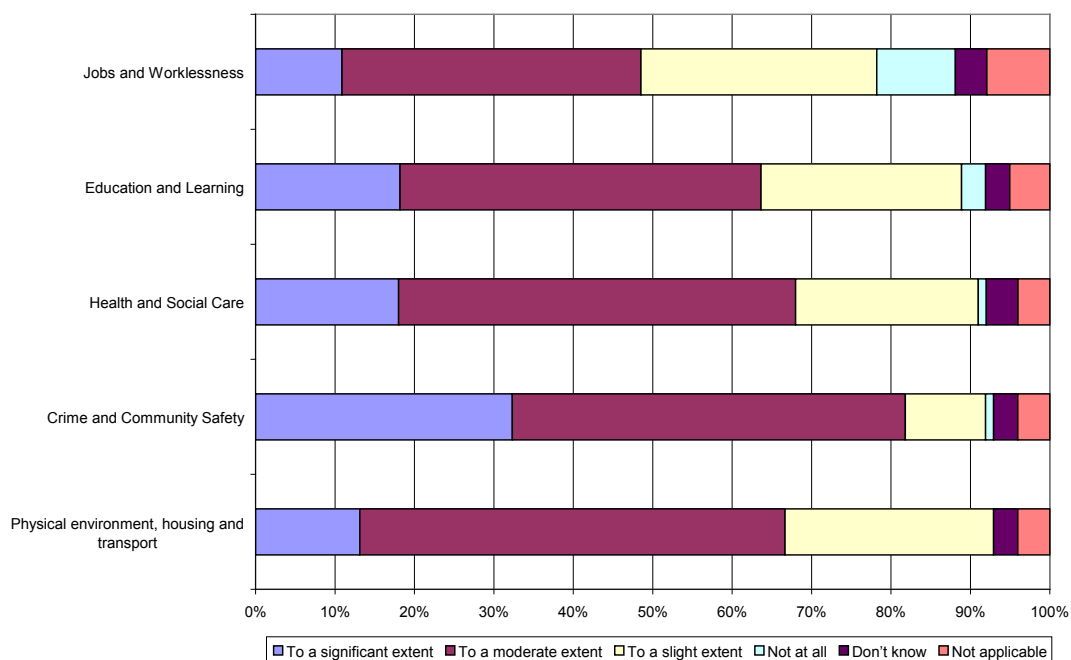
- **The development of more strategic thinking.** By bringing together a range of pre-existing plans and priorities and generating fresh top-line strategic thinking, community strategies can be seen to have added value. In addition they have contributed to the more effective generation of consensus; enabled partners to focus more clearly on shared priorities; and accelerated the strategic process by bringing partners together regularly.
- **Improved partnership working.** Several authorities flagging up improved partnership working as an outcome of the community strategy process. What is less clear, however, is what has been the outcome of this improved joint working. Overall it does seem that the community strategy process has had a positive impact on the culture and practices associated with partnership working and examples were cited where agencies changed their focus and priorities in response to the community strategy. There is also evidence that improved partnership working provided a firm basis for the subsequent development of the LAA.
- **The development of an evidence base for policy making.** This was more developed in some localities than others.
- **More co-ordinated policy and strategy development.** The evaluation evidence suggests that community strategies are resulting in better plan and policy making, with strategies becoming increasingly aligned across partner agencies.

The LSP formative evaluation identified very similar process outcomes in relation to the progress made by LSPs.

The evaluation indicates that community strategies have achieved a range of process outcomes. There is, however, an expectation that community strategies will lead to improvements in service delivery on the ground. Attributing positive outcomes of this kind to community strategies is difficult, particularly in such a complex policy area with a plethora of inter-related and rapidly changing initiatives and with wide variation in the approach, content and aims of strategies.

The 2004 survey of authorities asked respondents to indicate the extent to which progress had been made in achieving targets across five broad thematic areas. Overall the thematic area where it was felt that the most progress had been made was crime and community safety. The thematic area where the least progress had been made was jobs and worklessness. Figure 4 below indicates the extent of progress made across the themes.

Figure 4: Extent of progress towards targets by theme



Many respondents found it difficult to ascribe specific service-level outcomes to their community strategy although this did happen in several instances. In some cases, it was felt that improved performance had resulted and had even helped some stakeholders in achieving enhanced outcomes from external audit (including CPA rating). However, it was not always possible to identify the unique contribution of the community strategy in achieving the desired outcome, which, it was acknowledged, might have arisen simply as a result of better partnership working or parallel and inter-related initiatives.

Even where performance monitoring arrangements have been put in place as part of the work on implementing the community strategy, it is not clear that this has had a more significant impact on service delivery than some other concurrent activity. It is, however, acknowledged that what work on

the community strategy has achieved in such areas is a greater awareness of progress towards these targets, and of areas requiring more attention, as well as setting out (and monitoring progress against) a desired direction of travel.

It should be noted that a small minority of contributors felt that the community strategy had not added value, in one instance, because of insufficiently developed structures, and in another because the issue was seen to be one of delivering change rather than big documents. The box below indicates the range of perspectives on the added value of community strategies.

Box 11: Perspectives on how community strategies have added value

'It has helped develop work with the LAAs – people being signed up to things in the community strategy, and having something in writing that we can refer back to...we did a lot of consultation work for the community strategy before the LAAs were negotiated, so we already have all the information'.

'I would say it's an accumulation of existing plans and it's hard to say it's added value except in building a robust set of community opinion – it is OK that this is written into a community strategy. I don't think it's improved the legitimacy of the Council amongst partners, as most of them want us to come to their partnership not to come to ours'.

'I think the community strategy is useful – the LAA has been the proving of the community strategy because of consultation. If you went back in time, trying to implement the LAA agenda wouldn't have happened – as attitudes were quite entrenched – it would have ended in a stalemate. In terms of processes, added value has been demonstrated – people are working together and the barriers are coming down'

'We have a better understanding of local needs and we are responding – for example the accident statistics. Organisations were writing them differently and they had different base levels, and they didn't talk to each other. This has now changed.'

'It has added value but only if people start to use it. I am not sure we promote it enough. With improved service delivery – I have a pot of money for Community Safety... we are now looking at a joint business plan that specifies who is responsible for doing what. It will be about pooling examples and good partnership work. The community strategy is setting the ball rolling. The culture is starting to change.'

8.3 Barriers to progress

Three major groups of barriers to the development of community strategies have been identified through the evaluation. These are governance, central-local relations and resources, and are discussed in more detail below:

In terms of **governance**, the barriers include:

- **The challenges of partnership working** and the difficulty of getting partners to work towards a joint agenda.
- **The lack of 'teeth' of the community strategy and the LSP.** A common concern expressed by respondents in some localities is that, whilst all the partners are signed up to it, the community strategy remains a statement of intent and incorporates no specific proposals requiring the allocation of and accounting for additional resources by any of the partners.
- **The constitution of the LSP.** LSPs are not constituted in such a way as to require partners to do much more than attend meetings and agree to the broad guiding principles enshrined in the community strategy.

- **Possible local government restructuring.** The uncertainty regarding the future of district authorities is impacting negatively on people's attitudes in those authorities affected.
- **General uncertainty around government proposals for the public sector.** This has a negative impact on the effectiveness of the LSP in driving forward joint working under the auspices of the community strategy. The combined effect of all of these developments has been to create a culture of fear as individuals and organisations, understandably, place self-preservation above co-operation and collaboration.
- **Challenges of working in two-tier areas.** Two-tier relationships remain a major source of difficulty in relevant localities, and some contributors also discussed issues concerning non-coterminous service boundaries and unitary holes. This has been exacerbated by a lack of government guidance on two-tier working in relation to community strategies.
- **Ownership and accountability of community strategies.** This emerged as a challenge in a number of ways; for example in engaging other organisations in the strategy process and balancing the role of the local authority (the legal requirement being on the local authority to produce a strategy whilst not dominating the process). A lack of clarity about the accountability of LSPs to partners and the accountability of partners to the LSP has acted as a barrier because the sense of ownership of the strategy has been lost. The issue of 'silos' was discussed in several authorities, with some contributors noting progress, but others highlighting ongoing tensions.
- **The need for appropriate skills.** There is a need to develop skills in relation to partnership working. It was noted that *'it is mostly people who got where they are by treading on other people, who don't have the interest or skills to share power. There is an inherent tension between their positions and partnership working.'*
- **Balancing priorities** in particular between the needs of different interest groups and wider strategic needs.

Barriers relating to central **government and the central-local relationship** include:

- **The proliferation of new policies and initiatives from central government.** These were felt to hinder the implementation of existing initiatives that have not yet had time to 'bed down'. Strategy and initiative overload also leaves less time for the actual delivery of services. A related issue is the perceived confusion amongst central government players about what the community strategy is for and whether the aim is to really effect transformational change.
- **Confusion about the purpose of the community strategy and the need for it to be both top-down and bottom-up.** A number of interviewees questioned whether the community strategy was really for the community. For example, one contributor said *'the barrier to the community strategy is the politics – it should be about local people and services not central government'*, whilst another noted that *'the problem with [authority] is that it will always try and take what the ODPM [CLG] have set out and then fit around it'*.

- **Tension between central government agendas and locally-identified priorities.** This tension was identified as a barrier in other aspects of progressing the priorities of the community strategy in a number of localities.
- **Lack of joined up working in central government.** This can impact in very practical ways, for example different local agencies working to different central government department agendas, which are felt to be more important than their accountability locally through the community strategy. In relation to health, one interviewee noted: *It's difficult for organisations like the Primary Care Trust (PCT) to co-operate... they have an enormous welter of performance targets to hit from central government, so they actually do not have much flexibility to work differently.'*

Finally a range of barriers emerged in relation to **resources**:

- **Lack of resource.** A lack of resources tied to the community strategy was viewed by some interviewees as an impediment to progress. Respondents felt that the LSP will remain a 'talking shop' unless it is able to secure resources over the allocation of which partners are required to reach joint decisions. This analysis informs the view that the partners are still operating in silos of interest, determined by the need to account for their own budgets to separate government departments and audit/inspection regimes.
- **The short-term nature of many funding schemes.** Many areas are accessing short-term funding to address their priorities. In some instances it was felt that the pursuit of short term funding had 'distracted' the council from its original intentions. Concern was also expressed about the impact of the loss of SRB funding on the voluntary sector and its ability to contribute to the community strategy.
- **Difficulties regarding the ability of partners to pool resources** to fund specific projects due to specific regulations regarding financial accountability.

8.4 Future plans and developments: where next?

The Local Government White Paper goes some way towards clarifying government thinking on the relationship between community strategies and LAAs, suggesting that *'in future [the government] see LAAs as being the delivery plan for the sustainable community strategy focused on a relatively small number of priorities for improvement'* (p. 6). In relation to linkages with other strategies the LSP formative evaluation highlights a need for stronger ties between LSP agendas (particularly community strategies) and regional and sub-regional economic strategies.

The most recent fieldwork with local authorities undertaken through the evaluation in 2006 suggests that community strategies have not been a priority area of activity over the past 12 months. It is clear that authorities are subject to competing demands made on their resources both locally and by central government.

Whilst LAAs may be considered to have detracted from the community strategy process there was recognition that the LAA had the potential to make the community strategy more focussed in terms of outputs and performance measures, and it is expected that the LAA will help to reinforce the links between stated actions and planned/delivered outcomes. The community strategy was viewed as a broader aspirational document whereas the LAA provides the opportunity to look at issues with more focus and detail.

Many respondents acknowledged that the LAA process has the potential to have an impact on the way in which the LSP and partners address resource issues in relation to shared priorities. However, in most cases local areas felt that the LAA is still in its infancy and it is not possible to identify any specific impacts it has had on delivering the community strategy.

Clearly the policy agenda in relation to community strategies is rapidly evolving. There have been a number of major policy developments over the two years, notably the Local Government White Paper (and a number of supporting policy documents and implementation plans), the Sub National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration and the Lyons Inquiry into Local Government, all of which, potentially, have significant implications for community strategies.

Community strategies have remained a central mechanism within the emerging policy framework and there are high expectations of what they can deliver. Based upon the evidence gathered through the evaluation, whether community strategies will be able to deliver on these high expectations – given the level of variability in their approach – remains an open question.

8.5 Summary

Overall, considerable progress has been made in relation to community strategies during the period of the evaluation.

A number of process outcomes can be attributed to community strategies. Key amongst these is enhanced partnership working. Although there have been a number of issues which limited partnership working initially, the most recent research undertaken with local authorities illustrates that relationships between partners has continued to grow and develop positively. For example, the number of joint partnership initiatives increased. Nevertheless there was an ongoing issue about not being able to identify specific service delivery matters that were felt had been improved through work undertaken on the community strategy.

Community strategies will remain central to policy development in the future. However, the roll out of LAAs has, in some areas, diverted attention away from community strategies, at least in the short-term.

Government expectations of what community strategies can deliver remain high. Whether they can deliver on these expectations is, on the basis of the evaluation, an open question.

Box 12: The implications for **policy are as follows:**

- The findings from the case studies indicate that LAAs have been given priority over community strategies. The two processes need to be more closely aligned in the future with the Sustainable Community Strategy, as the expression of local aspirations, given equal priority to the LAA.
- The process of developing the community strategy has resulted in some positive process outcomes. However it is harder to attribute service delivery outcomes to community strategies. This needs to be more of a focus in the future.
- There has, to date, been very little evidence of a move towards *sustainable* community strategies in line with the recommendations of the Egan review.

The implications for **practice** are:

- Performance management, monitoring and review arrangements need to be put in place at the local level that capture both process and service outcomes from the community strategy.
- The actions specified in the community strategy action plan should 'add value' to what partners are already doing. Therefore, it is helpful if a community strategy can specify what is already being done within a thematic group and subsequently identify actions for a specific period for the partnership. This should result in a number of focussed actions that can be more easily monitored.
- It would be helpful if the linkages between the community strategy and other local plans were clearly indicated and common targets and indicators used.
- The issue of resources to support implementation of the community strategy should be addressed by partners and the level of resourcing required for each action identified in the action/delivery plan.

9. Conclusions and implications for policy and practice

9.1 Introduction

This section of the report draws together findings from the evaluation, in particular progress with community strategies over the course of the evaluation and the current state of play. It is worth noting that this is a formative evaluation and, as such, we have deliberately not addressed the impact of community strategies. The evaluation has focused very much upon the processes underpinning the development of community strategies. The intention to undertake a formative evaluation influenced the design of the evaluation and in particular the research tools used to gather evidence. It is not, therefore, a summative evaluation, and comments and findings relating to impact should be treated as only tentative. The impact of community strategies will be addressed through the ongoing impact evaluation of LAAs and LSPs which has been commissioned by CLG.

Community strategies operate within a complex and rapidly changing policy environment. The implications for policy from the evaluation are correspondingly wide ranging. Specific issues relating to policy and practice have been summarised at the end of each section in the report. This section draws these policy and practice recommendations together.

9.2 Conclusions

The first set of conclusion relate to the **structure and content of community strategies**. The evaluation has demonstrated the considerable diversity and variability in both the structure and content of community strategies. Whilst community strategies should reflect the diversity and needs of local areas, this does, nevertheless, raise questions about the extent to which community strategies need some elements of commonality if they are to be the key strategic planning documents for localities.

The content of community strategies generally reflects the service responsibilities of the particular local authority. The evaluation has highlighted that spatial issues are not well addressed community strategies. This includes the spatial aspects of policies (for example geographical targeting), land use planning and transport.

The treatment of cross cutting issues is highly variable with different approaches adopted towards themes such as equality and diversity, social

inclusion and rural proofing. Even where these themes are included there is often a lack of clarity about targets, actions and how progress on these themes should be measured.

Some community strategies have already been renamed as sustainable community strategies in response to the findings of the Egan Review. Nevertheless there is limited evidence as yet that this has been anything other than a re-badging exercise and it is clear that government guidance about how strategies are to become fully sustainable is urgently needed.

The next set of conclusions relates to **the way that community strategies are developed in an environment of multi tiered governance**.

There have been considerable tensions over the way in which community strategies have developed in two tier areas. In many areas, county and district strategies have developed at different rates. There has been a lack of clarity about the respective roles of community strategies in two tier areas and, as a result, a number of different models of two tier working have evolved over the period of the evaluation which have raised questions about how counties and district work together. This has been facilitated to some extent by the introduction of LAAs which, in some areas, have served to facilitate improved joint working. Whilst there is beginning to be greater co-ordination and clarity about two tier working, the production of community strategies at both district and county levels does raise questions about duplication and contradiction.

The evaluation has shown that community strategies are relatively poorly linked into the regional tier of strategy and policy making and there is little clarity about how local priorities reflect regional priorities. As a result of the *Sub National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration*, the regional tier is becoming increasingly important. The extent to which community strategies are able to address all of these – some competing – agendas is open to question.

The next set of conclusions concern the extent of **community engagement around community strategies**.

Local authorities and LSPs have expended considerable efforts in engaging communities in the development of community strategies. However, the experience of communities varies considerably depending on a range of factors including the commitment of the partners to community engagement, the extent to which resources have been available to facilitate the process and the capacity of individuals, communities and agency staff to make the process meaningful. As a consequence the impact that communities have been able to have on community strategies has been somewhat limited.

The next set of conclusions concern **the role of community strategies as a strategic driver**.

Overall, the period during which the evaluation has taken place has seen the development of community strategies as the central strategic framework – or at least, a central plank of the strategic framework – across local authorities. Whilst community strategies might not be seen to have a role in place shaping per se, they do on the whole convey a sense of place.

Community strategies have, in most cases, developed into the overarching strategy, providing vision and a framework for linking other local plans. They have provided a means by which local level community engagement and input can take place, for the coordination of strategic work with partners, and a mechanism for linking into other plans at regional and national level. Whilst considerable progress has been made, these latter aspects of community strategic work continue to provide challenges – local engagement and interests can get ‘lost’ in a crowded policy agenda, different policy cycles may clash, and partners have their own remits.

Another key challenge and opportunity is provided by the LAA. In general, community strategies seem to provide the vision for the locality while the LAA provides a means of implementation. When the two work well together, they can provide a means of coordinating the planning process with regard to both local interests and central government directives. However, there are indications that further work is needed to ensure that aspects of local authority work do not fall through the LAA structures.

The final set of conclusions relate to the **outcomes and added value of community strategies**.

A number of process outcomes can be attributed to community strategies; key amongst these is enhanced partnership working. Although there have been a number of issues which limited partnership working initially, the most recent research undertaken with local authorities illustrates that relationships between partners has continued to grow and develop positively. For example, the number of joint partnership initiatives has increased. Nevertheless there was an ongoing issue about not being able to identify specific service delivery matters that were felt had been improved through work undertaken on the community strategy.

Community strategies are likely to continue to be important for local policy development in the future. However, the roll out of LAAs has, in the short term at least, diverted attention away from community strategies.

Government expectations of community strategies remain high; whether they can deliver on these expectations is, on the basis of the evaluation evidence, still open to question.

9.3 Implications for policy and practice

In this final section we draw together the implications for policy and practice that have been derived from the evaluation findings and which appear at the end of each substantive section of this report.

9.3.1 Community strategy processes

The implications for **policy** are as follows:

- Guidance should be produced that sets out expectations in relation to evidence use and provides good practice examples.
- The need to align LAAs with community strategies should continue to be emphasised.
- Government expectations in relation to performance management need to be clearly stated as should their views on resources.

The implications for **practice** are as follows:

- Localities need to adopt a much more robust approach to evidence use to inform the development, implementation, monitoring and review of their community strategies.
- Evidence should be used to provide a more transparent rationale for priorities and actions.
- A better balance between the use of evidence and the findings of community consultations needs to be achieved.
- Timescales for reviewing community strategies need to be brought into line with LAA processes so that the two are fully aligned.
- LSPs need to consider the resource implications of sustainable community strategies both in terms of secretariat functions and also resources available to support the delivery of initiatives.
- Localities need to consider developing more efficient performance management systems that use a smaller set of key indicators to measure progress. The new outcomes framework should be of help here.

9.3.2 Content, themes and targets

The implications for **policy** are:

- Forthcoming guidance on community strategies needs to be explicit about the treatment of sustainability within community strategies. There needs to be greater emphasis on prioritisation of environmental considerations alongside economic and social ones.
- If community strategies are to be key drivers of sustainable communities there needs to be greater consideration of transport issues.
- The relationship between the community strategy and its associated action plans and the LAA needs to be more clearly specified. Many community strategies are at the moment too bland to adequately provide the necessary framework for the development of LAA priorities.
- Consideration should be given as to whether all community strategies should be subject to a strategic sustainability assessment against a framework which incorporates the key components of a 'sustainable community strategy'.

The implications for **practice** are as follows:

- In refreshing their strategies LSPs need to consider the purpose of the document and their intended audience; this will help determine what needs to go into the main document and what is better dealt with in separate, more technical documents.
- The relationship of the community strategy to the LAA needs to be thought through and made more explicit. This has particular implications for action and delivery plans.
- In refreshing their vision statements, LSPs should consider how they can frame their aspirations for the locality to reflect their 'place-shaping' remit.
- LSPs need to better incorporate cross-cutting issues and/or overarching principles and determine their status within the strategy.
- Localities could make better use of maps to help determine priorities and to target interventions.
- Considerable work needs to be done in many areas to tighten up the linkages between actions, targets and indicators. The publication of the new national indicator set should help with this process.
- Sustainability issues are currently not adequately addressed. If strategies are to become *sustainable* community strategies then further consideration needs to be given to this issue.

9.3.3 Working at different levels

The implications for **policy** are as follows:

- To ensure community strategies within two tier areas are 'fit for purpose' there is a need to clarify the respective roles of community strategies at the district and county level and the relationship between the two.
- As sub-regional, regional and supra-regional structures, change guidance needs to be given to the implications for the development of community strategies and the mechanisms for developing and consulting on shared priorities and targets.

The implications for **practice** are as follows:

- There are considerable benefits in developing joint mechanisms for the development and implementation of community strategies between districts and counties. These could include for example joint consultation events, the development of a shared evidence base, counties supporting resourcing of district community strategies and the development of joint performance management and monitoring. LSPs need to be open to joint mechanisms of this kind.
- Greater alignment on timescales between district and county community planning cycles and LAA refreshes would facilitate joint working and the alignment of priorities at the district and county level.
- LSPs need to increase their awareness of sub-regional, regional and supra-regional plans and how these relate to their local priorities.

9.3.4 Community, governance and representation

The implications for **policy** are as follows:

- Greater emphasis needs to be given in guidance to ensure LSPs, local authorities and partners adopt more joined up approaches to community consultation and engagement not only to avoid duplication and overlap but also to encourage innovation in terms of techniques.
- There is a need for greater recognition of the challenges faced in developing partnership working where partner's agendas may differ, partly in response to the varied range of central government directives.
- Government guidance needs to more clearly specify the different roles elected members might play in relation to community strategies.
- Future policy should give consideration to the relationship between the representative status of councillors and the shift towards a more participative model. Guidance should provide assistance to LSPs and local authorities in determining how to allocate priorities between issues emerging through these two parallel processes. Backbench members in particular require support in determining how best to engage with the process.
- Local elected members are keen to represent the interests of their constituents, and to ensure that the needs of their communities are addressed. Many recognise that the community strategy process provides them with an additional means of achieving these dual objectives, but concern remains about the way in which many community strategies fail to capture local issues, as (for example) the target-driven requirements of central government departments are seen to be given greater priority by LSP Boards than local needs analysis. Guidance to assist councillors in overcoming this apparent anomaly would be helpful in securing their continued involvement in – and advocacy of – the community strategy process.

The implications for **practice** are as follows:

- There is wide variation in the level of resources available to facilitate community engagement in community strategies, particularly in relation to the number and capacity of staff. In order for partner agencies to demonstrate their commitment to community engagement – and to derive maximum benefit from their involvement in its promotion – they need to train existing staff or/and employ more practitioners with a background in community work.
- The development of means to enable the smooth coordination of different processes across different partners, in relation to the range of policy and practice demands will be ongoing.
- Local authorities and LSPs continue to suffer the consequences of inconsistencies in approach in relation to balancing the demand for community representation and direct involvement by groups and individuals in decision-making in relation to community strategies. There should be better co-ordination of approaches to community engagement between local agencies as well as evidence of a greater variety of techniques being applied to this work in all areas.

9.3.5 Community strategies as a strategic driver

The implications for **policy** are as follows:

- Central government needs to understand better the complexities involved in coordinating local planning, including the difficulties associated with the integration of LDFs and planning coordination in two-tier areas.
- Efforts need to be made to ensure that current mis-matches in the timescales involved in different elements of local planning are addressed in order to facilitate coordination of local plans.
- Central government should take steps to ensure that unintended consequences do not occur as a result of integration of the LAA with the community strategy in particular where LAA blocks have been used – the blocks may overlook some areas, and authorities have been attempting to ‘patch up the holes’.
- If community strategies are to play their part in ‘place shaping’ then central government needs to indicate more clearly what this term means and give examples of ways in which community strategies can demonstrate a concern with place shaping.
- Findings from the evaluation highlight that whilst some areas have made significant progress in aligning LAAs and community strategies, this has been a significant challenge. If community strategies are to provide the starting point for LAAs they need to be ‘fit for purpose’ and there needs to be greater alignment and clarity in terms of processes.

The implications for **practice** are as follows:

- Partners at the local level need to make adjustments in culture, role, attitude and knowledge to facilitate closer working between agencies that have historically not worked closely together. In particular, there is a need to raise the profile of the skills that planners have and are able to offer the community planning process, for example, in terms of geographical targeting and community engagement.
- The timescales for the development of a range of local plans including community strategies, LAAs and LDFs, need to be considered together to allow for better alignment and integration.

9.3.6 Progress and added value

The implications for **policy** are as follows:

- The findings from the case studies indicate that LAAs have been given priority over community strategies. The two processes need to be more closely aligned in the future with the Sustainable Community Strategy, as the expression of local aspirations, given equal priority to the LAA.
- The process of developing the community strategy has resulted in some positive process outcomes. However, it is harder to attribute service delivery outcomes to community strategies. This needs to be more of a focus in the future.
- There has, to date, been very little evidence of a move towards *sustainable* community strategies in line with the recommendations of the Egan review.

- The implications for **practice** are:
- Performance management , monitoring and review arrangements need to be put in place at the local level that capture both process and service outcomes from the community strategy. Capturing process benefits are useful, especially in the sense of supporting mutual learning and improvement between partners.
- The actions specified in the community strategy action plan should 'add value' to what partners are already doing. Therefore, it is helpful if a community strategy can specify what is already being done within a thematic group and subsequently identify actions for a specific period for the partnership. This should result in a number of focussed actions that can be more easily monitored.
- It would be helpful if the linkages between the community strategy and other local plans were clearly indicated and common targets and indicators used.
- The issue of resources to support implementation of the community strategy should be addressed by partners and the level of resourcing required for each action identified in the action/delivery plan.

Annex 1: Evaluation methods

Introduction

The formative evaluation of community strategies utilised a longitudinal, triangulated methodological approach. This section outlines the main research tasks which were undertaken. The section is divided by research task as it was assumed, where possible, that research tasks for each evaluation would be undertaken jointly.

Overview of scoping and feasibility

Scoping and feasibility work was undertaken to develop an evaluation framework for community strategies. It was used to establish a series of baselines of current practice in these areas and to investigate the range of potential drivers and blockages for community strategies. It explored the range of differing starting points in the preparation of community strategies. Different approaches were subsequently reflected in the case study selection. The scoping phase enabled further reflection around the series of key issues for community strategies and how these could be captured in the evaluation design. This provided the basis for the case study topic guides.

As part of the scoping phase of the community strategies evaluation, a literature search and review was undertaken. This focused primarily on the inclusion of community strategies in central government policies. It considered policy documentation (e.g. White Papers, legislation, responses to Select Committee Reports), guidance and good practice guides, policy studies, research and evaluation. It also considered documentation produced by local government agencies (LGA, LGIU and IDeA), local authorities themselves, and independently commissioned policy studies and research.

The scoping and consultation phase of the research also involved interviews with central government departments, regional government offices and with local authorities and local strategic partnerships in all regions of England. Three consultation events were also held: two with local authorities and LSP members and one with central government departments. The local events were held in Leeds and London and were facilitated by Government Office for Yorkshire and Humber and Government Office for London, respectively.

The scoping phase of the evaluation was completed in Summer 2004. The outcome of this phase of the research was a scoping report which was published by ODPM in November 2005. The scoping report contained the findings from the research, the literature review, the responses at the consultation event, together with the development of an evaluation framework for community strategies and Plan Rationalisation. This evaluation framework forms the basis of the research programme which is now being undertaken.

Assessment and review of community strategies, action plans and monitoring frameworks

Two detailed assessments of 50 community strategies (with Action Plans and Monitoring Frameworks) were undertaken in Autumn/Winter 2004 and spring 2007, and a 'lighter touch' assessment of all English community strategies was also conducted in Autumn/Winter 2004.

The first review and assessment of community strategies was undertaken through the following process: A sample framework was developed for the collection of the 50 community strategies. This included the strategies for the eight case studies being used for the evaluation and six strategies suggested by the CLG (then ODPM). All other strategies were selected using a stratified sample to ensure representation by types of authority, political control and CPA performance. The assessment of 50 community strategies was undertaken. Quantitative data was input into SPSS and qualitative data input into a series of tables. Reviewers also made an assessment of each strategy against key criteria.

For the 'lighter touch' review of all community strategies, the documents were collected primarily from the Internet with some through direct contact with local authorities and LSPs. In total 357 documents were collected and these were then reviewed using a proforma. Quantitative data was collected, primarily on the length and structure of the documents. This data was input into SPSS. Analysis for the assessment and the 'lighter touch' review were undertaken in conjunction, and reported in a stand alone report.

The same 50 strategies used for the initial detailed review were revisited in the 2007 round of assessment (clearly, many authorities had revised their community strategies over this period). A pro-forma was used to record the assessment in a standard format; this included both data that was amenable to quantitative analysis and more qualitative data. The analysis was based on the strategies for the 50 areas in the sample that were obtained from the relevant web-sites and partnerships. Findings were reported in a second stand alone report.

Surveys of local authorities

The surveys provided extensive quantitative data regarding the national picture in relation to plan rationalisation and community strategies. The initial plan was to conduct three postal surveys during the course of the research, but this plan was modified due to concerns about research fatigue amongst authorities and two were undertaken, in 2004 and 2006.

The initial survey (December 2004) provided a baseline for subsequent research and the subsequent one enabled some longitudinal analysis. The initial survey was designed in close consultation with the other LGMA framework partners, and in particular the LSP and Wellbeing Powers evaluators. It was designed to obtain information on both community strategies (focusing on progress with community strategies, local

perspectives on the role and function of community strategies, performance management and barriers to progress) and Plan Rationalisation (focusing on progress on Plan Rationalisation, perspectives on Plan Rationalisation and barriers to progress). Survey data was used as a control for Halo and Hawthorne effects in the case studies. Data analysis was undertaken utilising SPSS. Steps were taken to ensure a high response rate to the survey. Where possible the surveys were sent to named individuals in local authorities and preferably to lead policy officers. A telephone follow-up was used to initially chase questionnaires and subsequently to allow for responses to be made for by telephone. A response rate of 60% was achieved. Data obtained through the survey was analysed using SPSS. A separate report on the findings from the baseline survey was produced.

The second survey, conducted in May/June 2006, focussed exclusively on the progress that local authorities were making regarding plan rationalisation. A self-completion questionnaire was designed in consultation with the Local and Regional Government Research Unit at CLG. Because of the varying planning requirements on different local authorities, the questionnaire was tailored by type of authority (unitary, county and district) and also by Corporate Performance Assessment (CPA) rating (excellent and non-excellent authorities).

A key challenge for the second survey was the lack of a database of officers that have lead responsibility for plan rationalisation. In addition, our research to date suggests that in some authorities there is no single officer who undertakes this role, with responsibility for plan rationalisation being split between different officers and departments. Because of these challenges the approach that was adopted was for the survey to be mailed to all Local Authority Chief Executives in England. Non-response to the initial mailing was followed up by telephone. Some sections of the questionnaire required specific knowledge of the current status of plans within key service areas. Where respondents were not aware of progress within a specific service area, contact details of a relevant officer within that service were requested. These were followed up by telephone or email to provide a fuller picture of progress within each authority. A response rate of 33% was achieved. The data was analysed using SPSS, and reported in a stand alone report.

Main case studies

Main case studies formed a central plank of the research methodology which was used. A key task of the case studies was to understand events at the local level, the rationale for these, the processes involved, potential outcomes, and how these could be related to national policy agendas. Qualitative approaches were crucial in obtaining in-depth information relating to explanatory factors which may be sensitive in some respects.

The research team developed criteria for the selection of case studies, and then proposed a shortlist of potential case studies. The criteria included CPA score, political characteristics, type and size of authority, NRF/non-NRF locality, and region. It was intended that the first year case studies would be

undertaken between February and April 2004 – following the completion and agreement of the community strategies evaluation framework. The development of criteria and the final selection procedure were undertaken in discussion with the CLG/ODPM. Care was taken to ensure that the eventual selection is also a good fit with ongoing case study work within the existing elements of the ongoing LGMA meta evaluation. The selection process built on the findings of the literature review and scoping work. The case study areas remained the same throughout the evaluations to allow for process changes and outcomes to be followed through.

The eight cases that were selected were:

- Nottinghamshire County Council.
- Mansfield District Council.
- London Borough of Croydon.
- Barnsley Metropolitan District Council.
- Ryedale District Council.
- Liverpool City Council.
- Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council.
- Bath and North East Somerset Council.

Initial interviews focused on *internal* local authority processes involved in plan rationalisation (primarily on Plan Rationalisation). The second set of interviews included *external* LSP members as well as elected members (primarily on community strategies). Interviews in subsequent years involved a combination of returning to the same respondents and new respondents (e.g. from different stakeholders or with different plan responsibilities). A workbook was designed for the case studies each year to ensure a rigorous approach across them all. In each year of the evaluation documentary evidence was collected in each case study area. This included community strategies and Action Plans, relevant working papers and supporting strategies and results from local consultation events with stakeholders and other local communities. Protocols were used to ensure that similar documentary material is collected in each area.

Case study fieldwork for the baseline was undertaken in late Summer/Autumn 2004. Individual case study reports were produced for each locality. The second round of case study work in eight local authorities undertaken in Autumn 2005 and the third round in Autumn 2006. In the first year, findings were reported as part of the Annual report. In 2005, a stand-alone report was produced which synthesised findings across localities (published in 2006) and in 2006/7 a final synthesis report was produced.

‘Light touch’ case studies

The introduction of a range of light touch case studies to the methodological strategy allowed additional flexibility. They enabled exploration of good practice, specific issues emerging from the survey work and case studies, and wider policy developments. The number of studies and depth of the work

undertaken varied from year to year in line with requirements at any one time. The light touch case studies typically involved three interviews in local areas, or with regional and central government departments, plus relevant document and data analysis but, in some cases where there was a perceived need (for example with the LAA research) more interviews in a greater number of localities were undertaken. Light touch case study visits and discussions undertaken in summer 2005 and at regular intervals throughout the rest of the project. They resulted in a series of Issues Papers and workshops, organised in collaboration with the CLG. Topics included:

- Plan Rationalisation
- Two tier working
- Multi tier governance
- Use of the Evidence Base
- The role of Councillors regarding community strategies
- The relationship between community strategies and Local Development Frameworks
- Community strategies and LAAs

Action Learning Sets

This is an area of work which was undertaken in discussion with the CLG (ODPM at that stage in the research) and the LGMA evaluators. Since the evaluation of community strategies was formative, the development of action learning sets offered advantages as it provided a method for maintaining ongoing contact with a group of individuals representing different approaches, various sets of circumstances and extents of development. It also provided a route through which the research team could continue to monitor progress and potentially continue to develop the plans for the subsequent research. The mechanism enabled an exchange of information regarding topics which are of importance not only to those developing and implementing programmes on the ground, but also to policy makers. The Action Learning Sets maximised the breadth of involvement, drew upon those stakeholders with sufficient experience to contribute, and also complimented (although not duplicate in terms of membership) the case studies.

Two Action Learning Sets were established in 2004. The aim of the Action Learning Sets was to provide opportunities for those involved in developing and implementing community strategies to identify emerging issues, to feedback and test out emerging findings from the evaluation and to work together to find solutions to shared problems. The first Action Learning Set involves participants from the Yorkshire and Humber and North East regions, the second set was is predominantly focused on the East and West Midlands and Eastern regions. The two Action Learning Sets which met throughout 2005 and 2006, resulting in the following output: Issues Paper 4 – Action Learning Sets (February 2006).

Call-off Provision

Additional work was undertaken in line with the arrangements for call-off provision. The call-off studies had a strong policy focus and were commissioned to meet a specific policy demand or requirement. The call-off research that was conducted included:

Interviews with Central Government stakeholders (Spring 2006) and a workshop with central government departments on Plan Rationalisation (October 2005).

Interviews with Regional Government Offices undertaken in Spring 2006.

Research concerning Equalities and community strategies.

This consisted of reviews of existing literature, findings from the evaluation (especially the main case study and the reviews of community strategies), and fieldwork with four local authorities, selected on the basis of demographic characteristics, size and type of authority, and participation in the wider LGMA evaluation framework. A total of 19 people were interviewed, including officers, community representatives, and representatives of partner agencies. This strand of the research resulted in two Issues papers and a stand alone report.

Guidance Portal

The original evaluation specification produced by ODPM made provision for the development of an electronic guidance portal. The purpose of the 'e-portal' was intended to provide a mechanism through which all guidance relevant to community strategies could be collected together and easily accessed by local authorities, LSPs and other local stakeholders. A short paper setting out the options for the e-portal was produced in November 2004. Following discussions with the ODPM in March 2005 it was decided not to proceed with the e-portal. This is primarily because it was unclear how it would add value to existing systems for the dissemination of government guidance (notably info4local and renewal.net).

Concluding note

The integrated programme of qualitative and quantitative research offered significant advantages for the evaluation. It allowed extensive statistical data to be combined with detailed explanatory information covering all aspects of the research. It also enabled a recognition of the linkages both between community strategies and plan rationalisation themselves, and between them and other relevant elements of the LGMA. Various methods of analysis were employed. The methodology, was, overall, sufficiently flexible to allow for the evaluation to be adapted to policy developments that took place over the course of the project (for example the rolling out of LAAs) and for findings to be gathered that could feed into developments subsequent to the Local Government White Paper 2006.

Annex 2: Outputs from the Evaluation

All published outputs from the evaluation of community strategies and plan rationalisation are available from the CLG website (www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1136870).

Annual Reports/Evaluation Frameworks

Consultation Findings and Evaluation Framework London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. [published December 2004]

Annual Report 2004 London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. [published 8 December 2005]

Annual Report 2006 London: Department for Communities and Local Government. [published 6 September 2006]

Final Evaluation Report London: Communities and Local Government. [forthcoming]

Survey Reports

Report of the December 2004 Survey of local authorities London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. [published 8 December 2005]

Report of the May 2006 Survey of local authorities London: Department for Communities and Local Government. [published April 2007]

Case study reports

Interim Case Studies Synthesis Report 2005 London: Department for Communities and Local Government. [published April 2007]

Final Case Studies Synthesis Report 2006 London: Communities and Local Government. [forthcoming]

Reviews of community strategies

Review of community strategies – Overview of all and more detailed assessment of 50 London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. [published 8 December 2005]

Detailed assessment of community strategies 2007 London: Communities and Local Government. [forthcoming]

Issues papers

The use of evidence in community strategies London: Department for Communities and Local Government. [published October 2006]

Plan Rationalisation London: Department for Communities and Local Government. [published April 2007]

Community strategies: working at different levels London: Department for Communities and Local Government. [published April 2007]

The role of elected members London: Communities and Local Government. [forthcoming]

Local Development Frameworks and community strategies London: Communities and Local Government [forthcoming]

The relationship between community strategies and Local Area Agreements London: Communities and Local Government [forthcoming]

Community Engagement in community strategies London: Communities and Local Government [forthcoming]

Equality and Diversity and community strategies Issues Paper London: Communities and Local Government. [forthcoming]

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