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**Community Strategies in England: reshaping spaces of governance?<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

The preparation of Community Strategies (CS) has been required of LSPs and Local Authorities in England since the passing of the Local Government Act 2000. This paper examines the process and content of two Community Strategies in southern England as part of an ongoing project to understand their impact and explore ways that CSs may be carried through in a meaningful and effective manner. The paper concludes that the two CSs studied illustrate the challenge faced by LSPs in producing Strategies that are meaningful, inclusive and which follow the spirit of the government CS guidance. LAs and LSPs are also posed with a difficult challenge of seeing through an implicitly required transition from a traditional representative democratic structure/process with a more fluid participatory model. Thus we detect that at least two forms of conflict may arise – firstly with elected councillors threatened by a loss of power and secondly between communities and the LAs who are encouraged to problematise local policy and service delivery in the context of limited resource availability.

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## **Introduction**

This paper sets out the initial findings from a pilot study of Community Strategy (CS) development in England. We assess how the two Strategies studied have been assembled and then reflect on the motives and implications of the Strategies. This is done both for the cases and, more widely, in terms of local politics and the way that resources and different communities of interest are assumed and enrolled into local policymaking. Building on previous work that critically assessed government CS guidance (Doak & Parker, 2002) we have looked at how the two areas in focus have translated central government policy into their own political and socio-economic situations. The paper ends with a reflection on the opportunities and issues suggested for the transformation of local governance structures and the development of effective actor-networks. Such associations could tackle issues of importance to local communities as well as bridge gaps between decision makers and those affected i.e. between the planners and the planned.

## **The Emergence of Community Strategies**

Since coming to power in 1997 the New Labour government in the UK has introduced a series of measures aimed at modernising and reinvigorating the structures and practices of local government. Reforms have sought to restructure the relationships between state institutions and citizens, so that the former become accountable to the latter in and through a variety of mechanisms concerning both the processes and outcomes of policy making. One of the cornerstones of this new agenda has been the introduction of *Community Strategies* (CSs)<sup>3</sup> through the *Local Government Act 2000*, and founded on the principle that local decision-making should ‘engage and involve local communities...and be based on a proper assessment of needs and the availability of resources’ (DETR, 2000: 3). All local authorities in England, through their LSPs<sup>4</sup>, were given the complex and challenging task of creating new channels of community consultation and representation through CSs. Figure 1 identifies the key objectives and components of the CS guidelines local authorities are working to.

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<sup>3</sup> Such strategies were first introduced for the 88 authorities defined as the most deprived areas, to ensure that community needs were addressed when government released extra funds to those areas under its Neighbourhood Renewal Programme (SEU, 2003)

<sup>4</sup> LSPs - Local Strategic Partnerships are the structures set up to oversee CSs. These are essentially partnership boards with private sector as well as public and community sector representation.

Figure 1: Key Objectives and Components of Community Strategies

<i>Objectives</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To allow local communities (based upon geography and/or interest) to articulate their aspirations, needs and priorities</li> <li>2. To co-ordinate the actions of the local authority, and of the public, private and voluntary and community organisations that operate locally</li> <li>3. To focus and shape existing and future activity of those organisations so that they effectively meet community needs and aspirations</li> <li>4. To 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</li> </ol>
<i>Components</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A long term vision for the area focusing on the outcomes that are to be achieved</li> <li>2. An action plan identifying shorter-term priorities and activities that will contribute to the achievement of long-term outcomes</li> <li>3. A shared commitment to implement the action plan and proposals for doing so</li> <li>4. Arrangements for monitoring the implementation of the action plan, for periodically reviewing the community strategy, and for reporting progress to local communities</li> </ol>

(Source: modified from DETR, 2000: 2-3; see also Doak & Parker, 2002).

The CS guidance provides LAs with a framework and a general statement about the process to be followed in preparing the Strategies. For example the documents should: engage and involve local communities (citizens, community groups, voluntary sector, businesses, and other public sector agencies); seek the active input of local politicians; create ‘local strategic partnerships’ to prepare and implement Strategies; and undertake a proper assessment of needs and resource-availability (Doak & Parker, 2002). However, the guidance also suggests that there is likely to be some variety in approaches to reflect local circumstances.

The development of CSs represents the latest manifestation of what some have characterised as a broader shift from local government to local governance over recent decades (see Rhodes, 2000; Imrie & Raco, 1999). During the 1980s, local government came under attack from the Thatcher administrations that it saw as a bastion of Keynesian welfarist politics and resistance to central government policies of socio-economic restructuring. The emphasis of policy increasingly became focused on institutional reforms that sought to by-pass local authorities through the expansion and empowerment of non-elected Quango institutions, and a series of measures aimed at reducing

personal dependency by activating new, 'entrepreneurial' citizens to play a greater role in taking responsibility for their own lives and welfare (see Cochrane, 1993; Kearns, 1995; Parker, 2002). During the 1990s, this approach evolved into new forms of community-focused governance, much of it based on emerging discourses of sustainable development and in reaction to the claimed local democratic deficit of the Thatcher years. This advocated the breaking-open of democratic systems of representative government and seeking a new active role for citizens and communities beyond that envisaged by Thatcher (see Meadowcroft, 2000; Parker 2002; Raco, 2003a). In the mid 1990s, for example, the Major administration's review of local government sought to define new relationships between communities and local government and established the principle that local, 'natural' geographical communities 'are probably most commonly experienced and certainly most strongly felt, and so must be the building blocks of larger area communities as required by...local government' (Ball & Stobart, 1997: 141). Similarly, following the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 local authorities were required to develop Local Agenda 21 Strategies in which they considered how social, environmental, and economic sustainability could be integrated into local programmes. This required on the part of the local authorities, a new attention towards processes of engagement and capacity-building with local populations (Doak, 1998).

Since 1997 New Labour has sought to broaden these agendas and bring about a wholesale modernisation of local government (DTLR, 1998). Its reforms have attempted to restructure local forms of democratic engagement, primarily from *representative* to *participative* modes (DETR, 1998; 1999). The latter has not replaced the former entirely and local politics has become something of a hybrid between the two with representative, elected local government now operating alongside a variety of initiatives and institutional structures partly designed to encourage *active* citizens and communities to directly participate in the design and implementation of welfare programmes. In theory, this process is designed to create a synergy between the different types of democracy with local citizens and the institutions of local democracy benefiting from enhanced levels of interest and participation from a wider section of the electorate, making policy making more efficient, equitable, and effective (see Blair, 1996). However, it also has the potential to create new tensions between different interests with the legitimacy, status, and responsibilities of representative structures being undermined by the emergence of participative processes and the enhanced claims of 'legitimacy' and 'representativeness' that they claim to bring. And, of course, such exhortations towards active or engaged citizenship are driven by particularistic and bounded conceptions of citizenship that may limit the types of role and power that citizens may use in participating in policy development as much as providing the 'infrastructure for citizenship' (Parker, 2002; Gyford 1991).

These tensions are evident in the relationships between communities, citizens, and local government embedded in the enabling CS legislation. For the (New) Labour government, CSs present new opportunities to institutionalise, restructure and re-invigorate local government leadership. Local authorities will play a significant role in preparing and implementing them and the broader LSPs in which they are developed. Local authorities, it is argued by the DETR (1998), are 'best placed to take a comprehensive overview of the needs and priorities of their local areas and communities and lead the work to meet those needs and priorities in the round'. More broadly, it is anticipated that a new set of synergies will be developed between participative and representative democracy. Rather than being on the *sidelines* of local political processes, the decisions and strategies of local authorities and councillors will now take on a new significance so that the representative structures of local democracy will be reinvigorated. As the Local Government Association (2000: 4) contends, local authorities will now be able to 'lead the process' as they are well placed 'to initiate the development of strategic partnerships'. The looseness of the CS guidance also facilitates those local authorities that are keen to shape the process in different ways, thereby giving them opportunities to take a leading role, vice versa it is to be seen how those who are less enthused respond.

It could also be argued that the legislation promotes, and the guidance allows, a vision of local governance in which local authorities play an increasingly minor role concentrated on the facilitation of service-delivery networks and partnerships. In creating active and empowered citizens, who take greater responsibility for shaping their own lives, the role and legitimacy of representative structures may be increasingly eroded so that, in the longer term, participatory processes come to dominate and possibly replace representative systems entirely. This ambition has been put forward by government Ministers as an implicitly desired outcome of modernisation reforms (see Blair, 2003; Hill, 2003). In many ways the proposals, therefore, enshrine a *de-politicisation* of representative local government with broader questions of social reproduction and local economic development marginalized from the remit of local politics. This does depend on the way in which locally elected members react and engage with CSs. In the longer term CSs could actually create a reinvigorated local politics with councillors acting as CS champions. However the possibilities for the establishment of radical or alternative local agendas becomes less likely as local politics becomes explicitly re-defined and restructured featuring a series of debates over instrumental and procedural matters. This trend is further heightened by the 'service-delivery' aspects of CSs, in which governmental funding programmes and sectoral policy agendas shape the construction of local strategies and action plans. The CSs themselves may be constructed to chase available funds by setting objectives and foregrounding issues that are congruent with funding priorities rather than meeting pre-identified or newly raised community needs.

This de-politicisation also extends to the conception of local politics, embedded in CSs, as a *process* of consensus-building between different interests and perspectives within localities (Doak & Parker, 2002). The introduction of a more participative democracy has the potential to bring into the open a wider range of community needs and views so that local politics can become more responsive – if problematised - to local needs. Planning theorists, such as Forester (1995) and Herbst (1994) have argued that opening up spaces of engagement within local politics enables a broader range of views to be heard and more inclusive forms of consensus to be reached. As Healey (2002: 1789) argues, multi-dimensional concepts of place evolve ‘from an on-going and broadly based discursive public realm of debate about the city and its qualities, [and] has the potential to develop the strategic power to mobilise collective effort’. It is said that mobilising active subjects enables more discursive interaction to take place and generates new possibilities for the emergence of consensus (as well as conflict).

However, encouraging direct participation may also create new tensions by establishing new claims to democratic legitimacy on the part of different interests who possess different organisational, representative, and political capacities. It cannot be assumed *a priori* that new spaces for interaction and decision-making will encourage the formation of consensus politics, indeed the very opposite may be the case as the erosion of representative structures produces new configurations of power between different local interests. In some urban centres in England, for example, the new emphasis on community empowerment has been used to institutionalise the power of racist groups intent on persecuting ethnic minorities (see Amin, 2002). Questions concerning the direction that local political processes will take, who it is that benefits from the new arrangements, whose interests become prioritised through new programmes, and how these are played out can only be answered through empirical assessments of practices in specific places.

The introduction of CSs also raises issues over boundaries of local governance and the ways in which they shape the inputs and outcomes of the process. As Taylor (1999: 15) argues modern systems of governance have a ‘predilection to convert places into spaces...efficiency in administrative theory can only be achieved by converting messy places into rational spaces’. Thus it is anticipated that in line with other strategies and plans, CSs seek to create order out of a perceived disorder in local governance and community representation, partly through the representation of place through a particular, strategic construction. It is assumed that existing local authority boundaries are the most effective spatial units for organising welfare service delivery and community representation. As such CSs reflect and reproduce the British tradition of characterising community and local government in

essentially instrumental terms (Barnett & Chandler, 1997: 150). The rationales of such strategies are to establish new 'governable spaces [that] make new kinds of experience possible, produce new modes of perception and invest percepts with affects' (Rose, 1999: 32-33). Local governance becomes a process of drawing boundaries in ways that resolve tensions between *spaces* of state organisation and institutionalisation, on the one hand, and *places* of community identity, perception, and attachment on the other.

The CS focus on local authority boundaries is, therefore, one that raises as many tensions as it seeks to resolve. It is assumed that these boundaries are, in general terms, congruent with imaginations of 'place' and retain some sense of shared or collective identity. However CSs may equally deconstruct preconceived ideas and assumptions about 'community'. Given this we might develop an argument that CSs facilitate a necessary(?) deconstruction of community; exposing the complexities and assemblages of the community(ies) it aspires to serve. CSs may be dangerous for some groups in as much that they are invitations from central government to local groups and individuals to colonise a technology of government that may 'perform' a less than willing local authority.

The first objective of the CS proposals, for example, states that communities can be based upon 'geography and/or interest' but simultaneously defines them all as 'local' communities based on some sense of co-presence. Yet, the extent to which such congruencies actually exist in local authority areas is a highly contingent matter. In all areas there will exist specific, historically-established cultures of community-local authority interaction. As Agnew (1991: 53) argues, local identity or a sense of place is developed through particular cultures constituted by a 'set of practices, interests and ideas subject to collective revision, changing or persisting as places and their populations change or persist in response to locally and externally generated challenges'. In some places, particularly those that are relatively socially and economically homogeneous and have a low turnover of population, there is often a strong congruence between spaces of government and places of community imagination (Taylor, 1999). In others, there may be a very different history of conflictual local politics in which boundaries tend to have an incongruence with place imaginations. Different localities have different traditions of local politics into which the new agendas have been introduced. In many industrial cities, for example, local government has traditionally acted paternalistically as a local provider of welfare services, with limited engagement with participative structures and processes of local democracy. In others, local authorities have long engaged in practices of direct community mobilisation and interaction (see, Cochrane, 1993; Imrie & Raco, 1999). Conversely, many authorities have used less deliberate or inclusionary process such as limited consultation exercises. Alternatively processes of public engagement have been channelled into parallel or

distanced structures such as LA21 (Doak, 1998; Buckingham-Hatfield & Percy, 1999) or 'third way' approaches such as Groundwork (Fordham et al, 2002).

In addition, the CS focus on local authority boundaries may encourage the evolution of new *internally*, rather than externally-focused, governmentalities. As Dean (1999: 32) argues, boundary drawing represents a 'purposive attempt to organise and reorganise institutional spaces, their routines, rituals and procedures and the conduct of actors in specific ways'. Changes to policy and process pave the way for such reterritorialisation (see Sack, 1986). By further institutionalising existing boundaries, local politics may become increasingly concerned with what takes place *within* those boundaries, rather than broader relations with other places and spaces outside. Later we mention how parish level plans are being encouraged and the tensions and linkages being made from those plans to the CSs. This internal focus may, for instance, encourage new local political agendas to emerge that explicitly promote new forms of place competition and rivalry. Another aspect of such internalisation or introspection could well be the undermining of ideas of homogeneous spaces and needs. It may also divert attention away from cross-boundary relationships between local authorities when strategic policy responses to issues such as; transport, environmental protection, and housing require broader levels of interaction and co-ordination. At the same time, the emphasis on developing local community capacities and locally-focused community governmentalities may encourage new forms of parochialism to emerge and a resultant narrowing of political and geographical imaginations and, in a more practical sense, a failure to engage with existing externally-focused community networks.

Shaw (2004) suggests that the early development of CSs has been characterised by the wide-scale adoption of 'local' strategies which primarily reflect the thematic priorities established by central government. As a consequence, he argues that 'most CSs are essentially aspatial in nature...[and] lack local distinctiveness. Take the place names out of CSs and it is often difficult to identify which local authority area they might be referring to' (p.28). However, the discussion above and the conclusions of other recent research work (cf. ENTEC, 2003) suggests that there can be no clear and simple evolution towards new forms of democracy or new political governmentalities. What Dodgshon (1999: 615) terms a 'principle of persistence' will shape the actually-occurring form and character of CS formation as the trajectories of the broader shift from representational to participatory democracy will be refracted through a series of local social, political, and economic relations and will take on diverse forms in different places. It can be argued that participation is, as is the case with representation, an attempt to constitute space and place (Laclau 1990). Therefore questions remain about the appropriate scales of representation and the meaningfulness and benefits of participatory processes. This process of refraction is also significant for broader interpretations



and theorisations of political processes as, in Agnew's (1992: 57) terms, 'rather than seeing local variations as deviations from the national norm, the national norm is meaningless unless seen as constituted out of locally-specific situations'.

These retroductive processes of spatial refraction extend further as European and global discourses and governmentalities are interpreted and reconstituted in the light of local politics and contribute to the structure of those self-same supra-national frameworks. Processes of CS formation are, therefore, developed through a *continuum of top-down and bottom-up* influences and cannot simply be read off from government guidelines and frameworks.

The remainder of the paper examines two in-depth case studies of actually-occurring CS formation and development in the South of England – Reading and West Berkshire. The two local authority areas provide a number of clear comparisons and contrasts. One is predominantly rural in character, the other urban. Their social make up and boundaries vary considerably with West Berkshire's land area being considerably larger than that of Reading (see Fig. 2 appended below). In addition, the two areas have contrasting histories of community engagement with representative democratic structures. Representative Town and Parish Councils, built around settlement communities, play a major part in local politics in West Berkshire. In Reading conversely, there exists longer traditions of participative democracy and direct community mobilisation. We now look at each in turn and begin by outlining the local social and political relations in which CS formation has taken place. We will then assess the processes and outcomes in and through which the CSs have been developed. We will argue that CSs take on very different forms in different places and that they represent the particular constellations, relations and paths existing in those areas (see Law, 1998; Rose, 1999), even though the guidance relates to the national governmental intentions for CSs.

### **Community Strategy Formation in Reading – Consolidating the Third Way?**

#### *Traditions of local politics*

A growth town since the advent of the railways in the mid-nineteenth century, it has been said that the identity and local politics of Reading has been dogged by a sense of placelessness and institutional drift (Pinch, 1989). In some respects this general view is a product of a series of overlapping socio-cultural shifts in the economic history of the town with industrial working class formations layered on top of the remnants of an agricultural market town then blended with further in-migrations and transformations linked to rapid high-tech and service sector growth during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Voting trends in the town consistently reflected its economic buoyancy and hid its social diversity by closely mirroring wider trends across the whole of England. Looking at its changing

social character, national newspapers, such as *The Times* in 1972, characterised Reading as the ‘town without a heart and soul’, as a non-place condemned by its position within wider networks and social and economic relations. With the collapse of its industrial base (large food processing and manufacturing enterprises) at about this time, the local press derided the town as ‘Dragsville’ – a place of relatively little social activity or local associational culture. Alongside this accusation of placelessness, political relations had become characterised by opaque decision-making processes, structures and systems (see also; Alexander, 1985).

During the 1970s RBC’s leadership fluctuated between the Conservative and Labour parties, often resulting in hung, majority controlled councils. The impact of this instability was two-fold. On the one hand, local political agendas were deliberately kept low-key to avoid doing anything much that would upset the delicate political balance in the town. A political paralysis became associated with local politics making Reading ‘more famous for non-decisions than positive actions’ (Pinch, 1989: 185). On the other hand, the role and power of chief executives and officers increased so that by the mid-1980s commentators in the town were openly talking of the chief executive’s office as the local ‘fourth political party’<sup>5</sup>. As in other places, local politics, therefore, became committee-driven, with decisions made through opaque, inter-subjective deals between chief councillors and officers (see Cochrane, 1993). This is a of a course a charge that has been made against many local authorities in the UK and which has in part provided the impetus to modernise local government. This internalisation and isolation of decision-making processes further eroded the role of place in local socio-political relations. The creation of a second-tier local authority, Berkshire County Council, in 1974 with responsibilities for strategic planning, further reduced the perceived significance of local politics, with powers and decision-making shifted to broader scales. With the loss of major manufacturers in the 1970s and 1980s, local politics was also characterised by limited private sector involvement in decision making (see Alexander, 1985).

However, during the 1990s and 2000s the local politics, particularly in terms of the planning and development of Reading has been transformed. Driven by an ambitious Labour leadership, the town has embarked upon a process of urban regeneration that has involved the replacement of formerly vacant or derelict urban spaces and industrial sites in the town centre with major new retail and leisure developments (see RBC, 2002; Raco, 2003b). Large employers have settled in and around Reading and the Thames Valley, attracted by proximity to Heathrow and London and the new office spaces created in the 1990s. The town has also continued on an ambitious development trajectory.

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<sup>5</sup> Alongside the three major political parties; Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrats.

The underpinning strategy, *City 2020*, aims to establish it as a central gateway between the South East and the wider Thames Valley (RBC, 2000). Its regeneration efforts have been recognised by central government which made it one of 24 case studies for models of successful urban development (ODPM, 2003). Development agendas have also been characterised by the mobilisation of a broad range of partnerships, both in terms of policy formulation and delivery. As a part of this wider process RBC initiated a major community consultation process linked to the development of the town's Local Agenda 21 strategy and to a series of central government funded regeneration initiatives, Reading being one of the few local authorities in the South East (outside London) to receive such attention. In recognition of the Borough's efforts it was awarded 'Beacon Council'<sup>6</sup> status for Town Centre Regeneration in 2001.

#### *The Reading Community Strategy*

It is in this context of a dynamic local policy culture that the Reading Community Strategy (RCS) (RBC, 2004) has been established. Assembled during the period 2002-early 2004, it is an ostensibly pluralist document which seeks to draw together a range of local interests and perspectives and interweave them with central government guidelines and frameworks. The document outlines seven themes that have been developed from a process of consultation with the Board of the Reading Local Strategic Partnership, numerous workshops undertaken as part of the LA21 work (the 'Sustainable Communities Dialogue'), and consultations between local officers, councillors, and the regional Government Office for the South East<sup>7</sup>. The RCS has played an *instrumental* role in acting as a mechanism for bringing together and formalising a range of existing and emerging partnerships in the town. Local officers suggested in interview that the process of developing the RCS involved local actors joining up and bringing together a range of disparate policy initiatives from central government and RBC; re-combining them to suit the consultation findings as well as national policy and local political relations. For example, the RCS drew upon and expanded the work already undertaken in the Borough on sustainability planning and local Agenda 21 initiatives. In the CS legislation there is no requirement to engage these parallel processes, although in the guidance (DETR, 2000) it is recommended that pre-existing experience and partnership skills be used. It was, however, only through a series of local initiatives on the part of RBC officers that connections between those pre-existing initiatives have been made into the CS development. Similarly, existing partnerships developed around issues such as policing (the town's 'safer communities' initiatives) and health care (the 'healthy communities' campaign) are now required to both reflect, and contribute to

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<sup>6</sup> Beacon Councils are intended to act as good practice exemplars for other local authorities.

<sup>7</sup> The seven themes in précis are: accessible spaces, healthy people, inclusive society, learning community, quality environment, safe places and thriving economy

the development of, the RCS so that it becomes a framing document that acts as both a practical and discursive working device.

In this sense the RCS has provided RBC and the Local Strategic Partnership with greater strategic direction over the trajectories of a range of welfare programmes and it has been local actors, working in and through local contexts of action, which have used central government frameworks to suit local circumstances. Local officers and policy-makers have become key nodes within re-configured local policy networks as the form and character of local democracy and accountability has been restructured. As one RBC officer noted in interview, the RCS is “*about making visible the de facto situation*” concerning policy-making processes and partnership networks. It has been used to bring about new forms of accountability to the sometimes opaque and informal processes that characterise contemporary local governance and expose inter-subjective working relationships and networks to greater public scrutiny.

However, the RCS is also heavily imbued with the discourses and ideologies that are found in *national* Blairite New Labour agendas and legislative programmes. Much of the national discussion, for instance, is focused on local degenerate or excluded communities. Rather than defining and identifying community interests through a continuum, Reading’s population is portrayed, if implicitly, as a binary split between the ‘included’ and ‘excluded’. This follows national policy rhetoric which rests almost exclusively on the latter who are encouraged to become more active, engaged and entrepreneurial in order to join the included majority – to be excluded appears to be recoverable from one’s own actions: i.e. through individual effort. In the same way, the RCS explicitly promotes ‘equality of opportunity’, rather than aspiring to equality of outcome. It reiterates the governmental mantras of *sustainable development*, *community empowerment*, and *social exclusion*. It concentrates on the ability of local interests to form consensual approaches to local policy within the frameworks set out in the legislation, thereby structuring and shaping the contours of local political debate. In parallel with New Labour agendas, there is little mention of the needs, expectations, and aspirations of wealthier communities within the town or any criticism of the growing number of ‘gated communities’ of particularly affluent residents that are now emerging, even though such groups can be seen as participating in voluntary exclusion and withdrawal.

In addition, the CS process has been marked by a restructuring of local democratic processes and an attempted shift towards the development of inclusive, all-embracing consensus-driven agendas. The identification of priorities, for example, emerged from negotiations between key agencies on the LSP, RBC, and a range of local community actors. Although it ostensibly appears to be inclusive, the RCS

fails to rank its priorities of action, so that a range of issues are simultaneously raised as key themes and concerns. No attempt is made to identify those that are more important than others, this is for fear of splitting the consensual unity that currently exists. As one RBC officer noted in interview, the clear conflicts between environmental and economic development objectives inherent in the RCS is not pursued and is glossed over by different interests, with little regard for the dilemmas of policy implementation. As he went on to comment in diplomatic terms, “*there is no outright resistance to the CS’ core themes, just a variability in understanding over the significance of the process*”. Some local institutions have experienced difficulties in adjusting from forms of local government to new forms of local governance and it is perhaps only when prioritisation and resource allocations take place, derived from the Strategy, that its sturdiness will be tested.

The notion of community has also been stretched and defined in a variety of ways through the RCS process. The document draws on *eleven* different definitions at various points in the document including; ‘local’, ‘strong’, ‘vibrant’, ‘diverse’ and ‘sustainable’ – this is a marked difference from the West Berkshire Strategy outlined below. In part this reflects the broader diversity of community groups that exist in the area. However, it is also a reflection of the contested politics of the RCS process and the desire for the final document to be overtly inclusive. Community identification has been a partial and incomplete process with RBC officials admitting that their knowledge of Reading’s communities was uneven. As one pointed out “*it is difficult to identify who is out there, we simply don’t know what communities exist...particularly those who do not talk to us*”. Despite a range of marketing techniques such as newspaper adverts, leafleting, and the establishment of a Community Roadshow programme, engaging with the diversity of communities in the town has been extremely difficult to operationalise in a proactive and inclusive manner. The legacies of earlier rounds of community inclusion had a marked influence on the RCS programme, with RBC officers often drawing on established networks and relations and thickening them through discussion and meetings about the proposed Strategy. One officer also noted that *internal* cleavages within communities had severely limited the extent to which community ‘voices’ and perspectives could be articulated without creating more controversy.

Limits on time and resources have also been a constraint on the drive to establish a consensus-based politics in the town. This admission when placed in the context of efforts over the past ten years to ‘get close’ to the local population does not augur well for CS ‘engagement’ in other places. One of the recurring limitations inherent in the shift towards new forms of partnership-based governance has been the resource commitments that private, public, and voluntary actors have been able to give to policy-making processes in order to make them work (Bassett *et al.*, 2002; Taylor, 2000). As one

planner noted in interview *“building a consensus is an iterative process where learning takes place...It is a cultural thing, learning to interact and to compromise”*. Such a ‘learning process’ requires significant inputs of time and resources from actors over a relatively long period of time, something that, whilst it may be appealing to central government is, practically, difficult to sustain and maintain within local partnerships, notwithstanding the increasing pressure being put on local government spending by local populations and central government. In addition, staffing turnovers, particularly of key actors/nodes in the networks, can significantly hinder the process as it is built upon inter-subjective and evolutionary relations . Private sector actors have been particularly difficult to recruit and it is partly for this reason that the roles and responsibilities of the Reading LSP, which oversees the CS, have been formalised into specific tasks, so that new members can fit into defined roles as and when there is personnel change.

## **Figure 2: Reading and West Berkshire in the South East of England (appended)**

In the case of the RCS, the focus on consensus building has pushed agendas towards what are seen as less contentious ‘service-delivery’ issues. The RCS is particularly strong in its emphasis on the ‘better delivery of services’ (p.14) as it is through improvements in these that different interests can unite behind a common purpose and which becomes difficult to challenge or criticise. Quality services appear to lie at the heart of the local (and national) agendas of social inclusion, sustainability, and liveability and it is through this that RBC can *“make sure that there is something in it [the RCS] for a range of players”*. Yet, the focus of the discussion has been on ‘what works’, rather than broader questions over who services are delivered by, what ‘quality’ delivery means to different interests and communities, and what the impacts of policy changes will be. As one RBC officer argued in interview *“the delivery of better, more efficient services for the people of Reading is a benefit to the democratic process – local governance benefits, not just local government as there are better relations with the community as a whole...and with central government”*. However, *better* in this context may mean ‘better funded’ rather than better in a qualitative or consumer satisfaction sense.

In many ways the RCS is characterised by a de-politicisation of local conflicts and trade-offs between different interests and different groups. There has been little attempt to establish, for example, any sense of the make up of representative politics in the town, its traditions and histories of community-local authority relationships. This is especially important given the relative complexity of the social layering that characterises the town’s historical development. This may also in future prove to be a problem as resources are moved around by the LSP / CS.

The tensions inherent in mixing participatory and democratic modes of local democracy have also been evident. The ruling local Labour Party has become increasingly split between those who, on the one hand, embrace the new agendas as an opportunity to re-enforce the power of the local authority and those who, on the other, see the whole process as a threat to the ethos of representative democracy or their sectoral power-bases, which have already been eroded through the introduction of ‘cabinet’ style political management. According to some interviewees, this split reflected the difference between ‘old’ and ‘new’ Labour members on RBC, with the former advocating direct local authority control of local services and the latter emphasising a new ‘facilitative’ role in which RBC acts as a local enabler of service provision and acts as a fulcrum of local partnerships. These latent local tensions have been brought to the fore by the RCS process as it embodies a range of new philosophies about the relationships between policy-makers, state institutions and local citizens. Some councillors argue that their role is to represent local communities and the emergence of new forums of active participation and direct connections between state officials and those same communities, effectively undermines their status and *raison d’être*.

There was some evidence that the requirement to develop the RCS had generated a new, internal Reading-centred focus to policy agendas. Interviewees admitted that it had, for instance, further entrenched the town’s place-competitive agendas by flagging up its key role in supporting the regional economy and its self-declared status as the ‘capital of the Thames Valley’. As one RBC officer noted “*we have tried to ensure that ‘the Reading is not an island’ mentality is reflected in the RCS, which has not always been easy to do...Inevitably there has been a renewed focus on the Reading dimension with the CS*”. Within the RCS itself, connections are made between Reading and broader networks but only in as much as they concentrate on the town’s role as a gateway to other places, in a highly place-competitive manner.

Again, such agendas have been relatively uncontroversial with many key actors supporting explicit pro-growth agendas (see Raco, 2003b). Less focus is made of issues such as Reading’s position within broader polluting and environmentally unsustainable transport networks – indeed the strategy laid out in the RCS is for an expansion of Reading’s international status as a successful location for high-quality, high-technology inward investment. This growth/environment tension has led to some significant questioning from environmental groups, but the subsequent ‘public debate’ on this issue (planned for June 2004) is unlikely to influence the current iteration of the CS, which will be finalised before that debate takes place. The RCS also indicates that it has provided local policy-makers with additional institutional capacities to obtain central government resources. New partnerships are called for that have the clear aim of attracting grants and investments, what Cochrane *et al* (1996)

refer to as a 'grant coalition', which encourages the town to participate more effectively and strategically in place-competitive networks.

This focus on using the RCS to influence external perceptions of the town is also tied up with references to its 'unacknowledged problems' generated by 'successes' of the past. The RCS emphasises the significance of issues such as housing costs and traffic congestion and uses them to call for the additional government support. In this way, the CS is being used as platform for RBC to call upon more central government resource and possibly different policies as they relate to those issues. This 'bidding' characteristic of the RCS is partly a result of the way that central government has emphasised this role for CSs, and it then forces LSPs to 'sell' (the problems/potential of) their areas and ties their CSs into the government programmes through which these resources are delivered.

There was also evidence that the need to develop a CS had encouraged RBC to engage in a broader examination of best practice from other localities across England. Officers noted that they had examined partnership practices in places such as Croydon (South London) and Salford (Greater Manchester) to explore good practice and to triangulate their own intended approach. This type of learning indicates that new governmentalities have been emerging and being transferred across space through such informal local government networks. These processes are also consolidated through more formal networks, such as the Local Government Association and the dedicated Neighbourhood Renewal web site, both of which provide relevant 'tool kits' for LSP working (see also; DETR, 2001).

Overall, the process of CS building in Reading has re-established and re-enforced the position of the local authority as lead service provider and network builder. They have used it to take a leadership role in co-ordinating more tightly than before a range of spending programmes and partnerships focussed on the delivery of key services. Despite a moderately well developed track record in participative work on Local Agenda 21, efforts at extending participatory democracy through the RCS have been relatively under-developed. By building on existing partnerships, the LSP has recruited most of 'the usual suspects' who have been debating within a framework set by central government policy agendas and service delivery issues.

However, variety and dissonance is always a possibility given the relative openness of the arenas feeding into the RCS, especially the 'Delivery Groups' in which issues and strategy are discussed, refined and then (it is hoped) implemented. Opportunities arise here for extending interest



representation and accommodating (or, at least, hearing) more challenging discourses. In the first iteration of the RCS this has been limited, but there is some commitment (from central government and RBC) to increasing the range of voices within the process. How this extension and evolution of participatory democracy will fit and blend with the representational forms of democracy is to be seen.

### ***Community Strategy Formation West Berkshire – ‘Managing Opportunism’ in Rural England***

#### *Local Context*

West Berkshire (WB) is seen as predominantly a rural, agricultural district. Its main urban centre of Newbury was built on the wool trade, but the area never experienced the heavy industrialisation of the urban centres of Reading and Slough in East Berkshire (Berkshire County Council, 1970; King, 1987). West Berkshire was formed after the reorganisation of local government boundaries in England in 1996. The logic for creating the new boundaries in the area was set out by the *Local Government Commission for England* (1994: 12) which argued that there was need to ‘devolve as much day to day management responsibility as possible to the community level and a need to provide an enhanced consultative role for parish and town councils’. Although WB is by far the largest new local authority in Berkshire, its population is one of the smallest and most dispersed.

Local politics in WB has traditionally been focused on a set of identifiable and imagined local communities with parish-level politics being particularly significant, and embedded within an almost feudal system of local land-owning power and influence. Up until the late 1960s, for example, there was a lack of clear political party identity with a tradition of locally-based independents being elected as local councillors (Davies, 1973). During boundary negotiations in the 1970s and 1990s, local surveys indicated that the area had little ‘in common’ with neighbouring urban areas of Berkshire, such as Slough and Reading and imaginations of boundaries were focused on rural settlement patterns. Traditionally, local politics has been centred on the Eastern Kennet Valley area, this includes the major population centres of Newbury, Theale-Thatcham, and urban areas on the western outskirts of Reading

#### *Community Strategy Processes in West Berkshire*

The *West Berkshire Community Plan* (WBCP) has been underpinned by two interrelated rationales. First, it has been designed to co-ordinate and bring together the activities of a range of partnerships in the district, operating over a variety of scales and for a variety of purposes. Local strategists have seen the CS as an opportunity to rationalise and focus the increasingly disparate and allegedly un-coordinated activities of agencies and communities. Second, the strategy has represented an

opportunity to develop a greater degree of 'bidding-capacity' with national government, emerging regional bodies, and other agencies who increasingly provide funds on a competitively allocated basis – a similar finding to the Reading approach. Again as in Reading, it is also seen as a mechanism for challenging dominant external perceptions of place and highlighting the 'problems' faced by ostensibly affluent locations that West Berkshire symbolises. This enhanced lobbying power also aims to attract additional investment from the public and private sectors and, in the words of one officer, to "*help get money moving into the area*".

The WBCP has, from the outset, been portrayed as both a political and a practical working document. As one interviewee noted "*we write lots of Strategies and, to be honest, they just sit on the shelves and no-one looks at them...That's why we called this a plan, and made sure that we put actions into it from the start*"... (although calling the CS a 'Plan' may not on its own be significant). In carrying through its purpose it has identified only four key themes – *rural issues, transport, housing, and learning* – around which Action Groups and clear policy proposals have been developed. These were selected through a process of consultation, which centred upon a 'launch event' attended by a collection of invited organisations and interests, many of which were members of existing partnerships. The establishment of such Action Groups has not always been a straightforward process. Existing partnerships on training and education, for example, have been resistant to seeing their roles and responsibilities taken over by the CS process. Others were under-developed (e.g. housing) or non-existent (e.g. rural issues). It is interesting that Rural was included as a key theme - most likely a reflection of the imagined identity of the area as opposed to a distinct policy dimension for the authority to focus on.

From the outset one of the stated aims of the WBCP has been to expand and re-direct policy responsibilities away from local government. As one interviewee noted, "*we wanted to make sure that this was not just seen as a council thing*". Furthermore, some senior council officers saw it as a way to activate new forms of *representational* democracy in the district, with a greater role being sought for local councillors as 'community champions' to link-in with other initiatives being developed to enhance place-based planning and service delivery (see below).

In contrast to Reading, WB has developed spatially bounded units of community consultation, around which the WBCP has been devised. Traditions of councillor-community relations have been highly variable and over recent years WB council has, in response to local pressure, established four Area Forums and have entered enthusiastically into a process of preparing Parish Plans to identify and amplify community views from the bottom-up (see Countryside Agency, 2003). The CS has

been developed in this existing context and has in some ways provided the WB with a new opportunity to rationalise and co-ordinate its spatial boundaries of representation. At the same time, however, it has also challenged the legitimacy of the Area Forums, as these forums lacked a wider representation and legitimacy - they fall uncomfortably between the representative and participatory models.

The requirement to engage in a CS-making process has had diverse influences on local political imaginations. On the one hand, it has entrenched the focus of stakeholders and communities on the politics of the WB district. What one respondent called the “*tendency to navel gaze*” has been exacerbated by the renewed focus on local policy-making structures, frameworks and processes of policy formulation. On the other hand, however, the CS focus on service delivery has made local actors more aware of the networks and influences that take place *across* local government boundaries. As one local officer noted “*the process of working on the WBCP has flagged up connections all over the place that we were aware of but, to be honest, hadn’t really thought much about before*”. This process of increased inter-locality awareness was enhanced by the mutual processes of CS-building taking place in all local authority areas. As the same respondent commented “*our neighbours are at the same stage and going through the same process so we are all beginning to realise the need for joint working*”. These new (govern)mentalities have been forged through the process of identifying the inter-connections between places separated by spatial, administrative boundaries. In WB they have tended to reflect existing government boundaries in which the emphasis of local politics has always been ‘eastward’ towards the rest of the County of Berkshire.

The CS process has also been used by local planners to join-up disparate central government programmes. As in Reading, the process has been linked locally to the authority’s Best Value systems and its existing partnerships and programmes relating to sustainable development. The process has also required a heavy investment of time and other resources. It took WB more than two years to get the Strategy to draft status from its inception in 2001, although Council officers felt that the time and effort was worth it given the importance that the UK government has placed on CSs in future programme planning, bidding and implementation. The early stages of strategy formation also ensured that the community / voluntary services institutions for Berkshire were reorganised with the old CCB (Community Council for Berkshire) being restructured.

The CS process has had a significant impact on the politics of WB. Representative local government has traditionally been relatively rigid, or what one respondent described as ‘feudal’ in character, with elected local councillors strongly influenced or over-shadowed by parish councils, which have often

been controlled by local landowners. The lack of experience of partnership-based working in the district, through programmes such as the Single Regeneration Budget or the New Deal for Communities, has meant that partnership building for the CS has often had to be started from scratch. Relationships between them and parish councillors have, at times, been strained. To complement, if not complicate, the CS development, another participatory planning process has been operationalised across many of the parishes in West Berkshire, namely the Parish Plans programme under the Countryside Agency's (CA) *Vital Villages* policy (Countryside Agency, 2003). This policy vehicle has coincided with CS development and the proposed restructuring of the English planning system (DTLR, 2001). Parish plans are community led mapping exercises designed to engage local communities in assessing their needs and aspirations – a logical link up to both CSs (and to local development plans) can be seen but is yet to be formalised or institutionalised by central government. Given the relative lack of such activity in WB these nascent Parish Plans are being seen as vehicles to inform and develop the WBCP.

In addition, the WBCP has been developed in a political context dominated by Conservative and Liberal Democrat politicians, with the latter regularly possessing a small majority. In this situation of fragile political control, it has been the Council's senior officers who have been able to structure the process in ways they have wanted. This space of 'managerial opportunism' is largely responsible for the significant efforts that have been invested in getting the CS up and running and for the representational structures that have been developed to encourage local councillors to become involved.

These new political processes introduced or encouraged by the WBCP have created new modes of accountability. As policy-making processes and (in)activity have been pushed into the spotlight, so the strengths and weaknesses of existing modes and practices of representation have come under new scrutiny. There was some evidence that policy-making processes had been both accelerated and undergone a change in character. For example, the local authority created a specific new officer post as co-ordinator of Parish Councils. After many years of debating the necessity and utility of such a position, the final decision was made relatively quickly following a strong plea by key members of the LSP who specifically requested it (although also prompted by the funding offered by the CA under the Parish Plans scheme). Similarly the inclusion of developers and other industry partners on the LSP has encouraged new interactions so that new local guidelines for decisions over Section 106

agreements<sup>8</sup> and local planning gain have been established after six years of local equivocation. In addition there is evidence of personnel changes amongst councillors. New individuals have been emerging to stand as councillors, encouraged by their experiences of working within the new partnership frameworks.

For local advocates the CS-building process has been about establishing new *cultures* of working in which, what Macintosh (1992) defines as, 'transformative' partnership relations are established. One aim is that the core components of the plan are adopted by a broad range of public, private, and voluntary stakeholders in the preparation and implementation of their own strategies. This sharing of understanding and policy consensus implies changes in the priorities and practices of partners to fit in with the new 'agreement'. That this could suit some interests/partners more than others may, in time, lead to a new set of conflicts and cleavages which could challenge the current coalition of interest built around the WBCP. In review the WBCP has acted as a catalyst along with other changes in government policy to reinvigorate the local political scene as well as begin a process of wider engagement with the local community. In that process certain new political arrangements have been implemented and these appear to be transforming governance structures in the district.

## **Conclusions**

Focussing on two adjacent areas in England this paper has argued that the processes and practices of CS formation take on specific forms in a variety of local social, economic, and political contexts (see also ENTEC, 2003). The requirement to produce the Strategies has had a range of contrasting and, at times, contradictory effects on the politics of local governance. The national requirement to develop CSs has been refracted through existing local political, social, and economic relations so that in different places, different processes and practices of strategy development and implementation have taken place. As such, the arguments of authors such as Shaw (2004) that CSs across England show little or no sign of local diversity have to be called into question as even the study of two neighbouring authorities in this study shows, quite categorically, that Strategies reflect local diversity and the contexts in which they are developed. Indeed this was a finding of the early ENTEC research commissioned by the ODPM: 'there is wide diversity in the form of CSs, arising from the fact that they are produced under non-statutory procedures, reflect the needs and aspirations of local communities, and the processes under which they are prepared are still evolving' (ENTEAC, 2003: iv)

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<sup>8</sup> So called after the enabling section 106, in the 1991 Planning and Compensation Act that allows local authorities to enter into legal agreements relating to development permissions in order to provide 'additional' benefits for local communities (see, also; DoE Circular 1/97 for details). Such agreements are currently under review by the UK government.

An ODPM concern has been that the Strategies may be too dissimilar in terms of quality and reflect a worrying unevenness in terms of the process through which Local Strategic Partnerships / local authorities have produced their CSs. The concern being that the CS legitimacy or local ownership may not be strong. The initial research reported here, on the other hand, suggests that CSs can provide a useful vehicle for the fusion of representational and participatory democratic processes in which the CS could be interpreted as the 'evidence base' for 'local manifestoes'. In many ways CSs have heralded a potential re-empowerment of local government in that local authorities have found themselves in a pivotal position in emerging partnerships and processes of strategy formulation. The resources and capacities of local government provide a sense of stability to local policy-making processes, enabling both councillors and council officers to shape the contours of a range of welfare policy agendas in new ways. It would be too simplistic to argue that the new local governance involves a marginalisation of local government. Instead, it involves a restructuring of the latter's relationships with communities, the private sector, and civil society more generally. The form and character of these emerging relationships varies from place to place.

Thus in Reading, for example, the CS has helped to consolidate and allow for a renewed and integrated approach towards service delivery. In WB it has helped to embed and organise a newer LA and invigorate, if not yet transform, a quasi-feudal local democracy. The CS process has been bought into by WB also to ensure that they get a bigger slice of local government funding for their services and local economy. This emphasises the inter-dependency of local processes of CS-building with national (and wider) policy agendas and discourses.

The research also indicates that the implementation of CSs has brought a new dynamism to local politics, with many of the tensions surrounding space-place boundary-drawing and the relationships between representative and participative systems energising local political processes in new ways. In WB this process was particularly evident with new roles, positions and activities being developed alongside the CS.

In both case studies local policy-makers had joined up disparate elements of government programmes at the local level and in so doing had changed the focus of the CS to one of building strategic capacity around a range of inter-related issues. In addition, the process of CS formation has, in some cases, brought about new forms of accountability to existing networks and partnerships by framing their work into a broader strategic context. It must be noted however that in our case studies the wider strategic and cross-boundary dimensions of CSs have yet to be fully worked through, partly

due to the initial perception that CSs were about local needs and issues and that there would be enough effort required to draw these aspects together before looking beyond the locale.

Yet, other aspects of this re-configuration of local politics are indicative of a heavily top-down set of agendas. In particular, there is a Blairite focus in both localities of a new consensus-based conflict resolution-style of politics. In WB these new agendas have moulded into existing political relations in the area, in which consensus-based politics has a long tradition. The CS has, also, generated new conflicts in forcing local representatives to engage with contentious issues, such as planning and development, that had previously remained in the background. However, in Reading the new consensus style has clearly generated new tensions with interests 'forced' into non-conflictual relations.

Our view from our early research is that CSs are certainly necessitating a change in practice and potentially a valuable channel for a range of groups to make their views, and needs known to local authorities and other LSP members. However, one challenge for central government will be to address a lack of will or interest in areas where CS development has been carried through callously, or shallowly, carrying out the letter without the spirit of the law i.e. where the spirit that is the essence of Community Strategies is being ignored. It is certainly the case that the spirit or aspiration of central government to develop a deepened understanding and relationship with communities will require sustained effort and considerable resources over a lengthy period. However, in our view, the Strategies – alongside other changes in policy and new policy vehicles - are encouraging at least some LAs to review how and why they do things and to seek more connection with communities as recipients and potentially as planners for their own areas.

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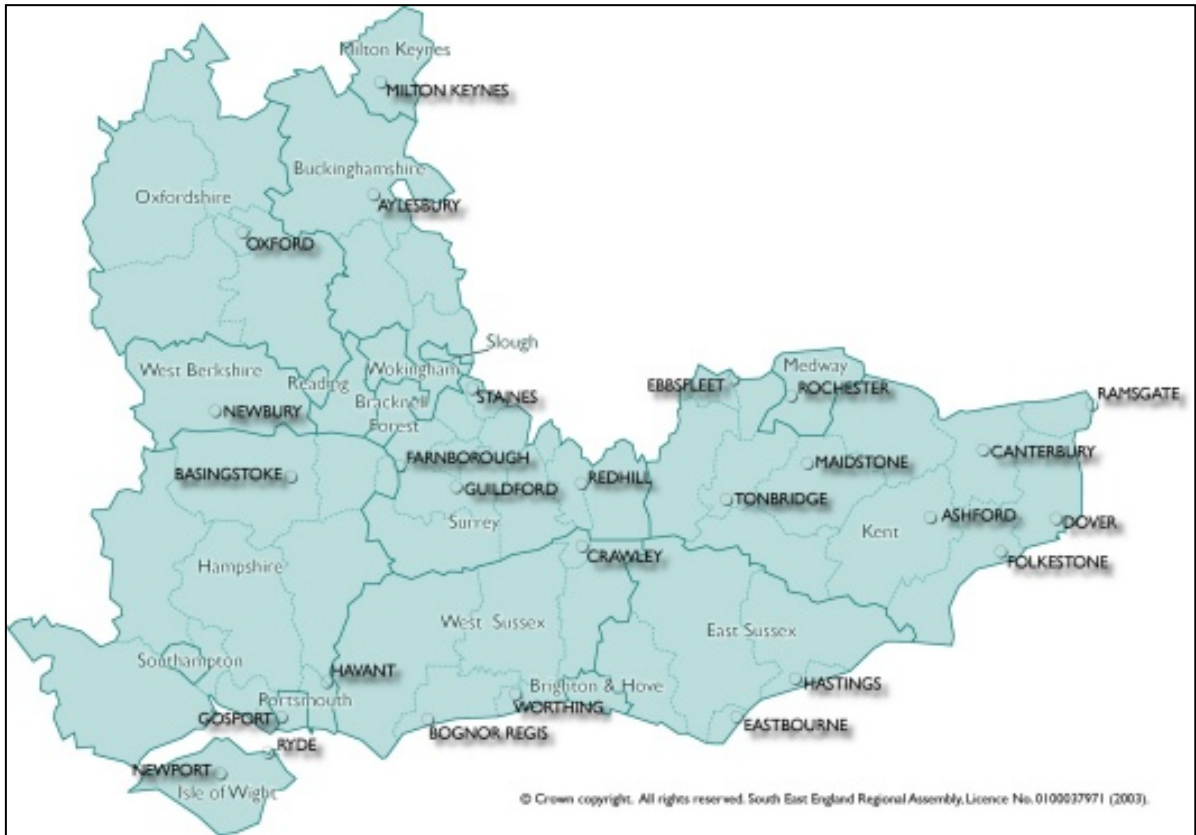
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Figure 2 – Reading and West Berkshire in South East England.



Source: SEEDA