Thinking locally, acting nationally

Lessons for national policy from work on local sustainability

Chris Church and Jake Elster

Front cover: The Local Paper for London Project helps offices use paper more sustainably while creating jobs through social enterprise.

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The projects we surveyed are just 17 out of many hundreds that are similar in their aims, all of them working to create better places to live, and all of them helping in one way or another to achieve that elusive goal of sustainable development. We dedicate this report to all the people working locally for that better future.

1 Introduction and background

Background and context

Sustainable development emerged as an international policy concern at the UN Earth Summit in 1992, which produced some key international agreements and Agenda 21, a global action plan towards sustainable development. This broke new ground by stressing the importance of work by *all* parts of civil society, emphasising that sustainability was not something that governments could achieve on their own. For local government, Agenda 21 calls for each authority to produce its own 'Local Agenda 21' (LA21). This has been taken up in all parts of the UK.

The Earth Summit also caught the imagination of many other organisations and communities. The last ten years have seen a steady growth of independent local and community-based work on 'local sustainability'. This has been enabled by many organisations and local authorities, both by sustainability staff and community development workers. Some may never have used the word 'sustainability' but have recognised the need for integrated

LA21: the local agenda for change?

Since the 'global action programme' from the 1992 UN Earth Summit called on local authorities to 'consult with their communities' to produce a Local Agenda 21, over 6,300 programmes have developed across the world. A Regional Government Office survey shows that over 93 per cent of UK councils have produced a document, with widely varying results and approaches (IDeA, 2000).

Although most programmes have remained rooted in an environmental perspective, the map of environmental activity in the UK has been transformed by the arrival of local authorities as more proactive players. LA21 has had an impact. For example:

- Most councils now have programmes and targets for waste minimisation, energy saving (often linked to fuel poverty work), biodiversity and transport.
- Local community groups have been encouraged to take a more overarching view of the issues they are working on (see later case studies).
- Many LA21s have been test beds for new forms of participative activity: an increasing number have recognised the importance of a community development approach.

With over 400 programmes across the UK, many running for five years or more, there can be no doubt that LA21 has done more than any other process to publicise the idea of sustainable development across the UK (Church and Young, 2000).

However, it is also fair to say that in most cases LA21 has failed to engage with the broader community, especially in areas suffering from exclusion. Most significantly, analysis (Church, 1999; Church and Young, 2000; IDeA, 2000; Scottish Office, 1998) suggests that LA21 has not had a significant influence on the policy agenda of many local councils and that an integrated approach based on sustainability is still some way off.

local action to deal with the multiple problems associated with social exclusion.

Poverty and sustainability

Despite the statement in Agenda 21 that an anti-poverty strategy should be 'an integral part of any strategy for sustainable development', the link between social and environmental activity has been the weakest part of many LA21 programmes. The reasons for this have been widely analysed (Church and Young, 2000) and relate in part to clashes between environmental concerns and the economic goals of inclusion and regeneration programmes. The lingering idea that the environment is solely the concern of the middle classes has also played a part (Burningham and Thrush, 2001; Church *et al.*, 1998).

But, in the last few years, things have changed. The growth of the 'Environmental Justice' movement in the USA, and similar developments here, are helping to clarify the links between local environmental degradation, poverty and poor health. Recent mapping work has shown disturbing correlation between areas of poverty, poor transport and polluting industries (Friends of the Earth England, Wales and Northern Ireland, 2001), as does recent research about links between health impacts and toxic landfill sites (Dolk and Vrijheid *et al.*, 1998). The Director of the government's Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, speaking at a Community Development Foundation (CDF)/Urban Forum conference in July 2001, pointed out how those in the poorest communities also regularly suffer from living in the worst environments.

There has also been a new focus on community involvement. The Prime Minister states at the beginning of the UK strategy for sustainable development (HM Government, 1999) that 'the only way we will succeed [in achieving sustainable development] is if we all play our part'. The strategy talks about the need to work together and forge partnerships with business, local authorities and voluntary groups, and the 'many initiatives where industry and local communities are already making a difference'. The strategy includes a chapter on 'Building sustainable communities'.

It remains to be seen how far the new requirement to produce Community Strategies will incorporate the lessons learnt from local sustainable development activity to date.

About the study

This report presents the findings of a research project on 'lessons for national policy from local action on sustainable development'. Its principal concerns were to:

- consider how far local practitioners have been successful in linking environmental concerns with social exclusion issues

- assess the extent to which this work is contributing to the broader sustainable development agenda

- identify barriers to effective local action and how national policy can help in removing those barriers.

There are two major reasons why this work is particularly timely.

First, if sustainable development is to become more than an expression of good intent, then there is clearly a need to see how it works in practice, and how far pressing social needs

can be tackled in ways that also help meet increasingly urgent national and global environmental targets. Recent years have seen a steady growth in the numbers and variety of local projects, some originating within an environmentalist perspective, some from social concerns, but both with aims that appear to relate strongly to sustainable development (see Chapter 2). In the past, most such projects have received little national attention.

Second, in policy terms, there is a new focus on action at the community level. Regeneration initiatives, National Lottery projects and other funding streams have increased the resources available for such work. The government's new agenda for local government also puts a new emphasis on community involvement, and above all demonstrates a concern to revitalise and strengthen local communities. At the national level, too, concerns about low electoral turnouts have prompted interest in questions of how far independent community-focused activity can help rebuild our 'civil society'.

The approach adopted for this research was essentially case study based, framed around the following stages:

1. *A 'call for projects'* that identified themselves as *combining* environmental and social objectives was made through various regional and issue-based networks. Together with some direct approaches to local organisations, this gave a pool of around 100 projects.

2. *A postal questionnaire* was distributed to these initiatives and achieved a response rate of 63 per cent. These projects formed a 'long list' of case studies from which 17 were selected for further investigation.

3. *Selection criteria* included type and size of projects, as well as individual quality and geographical balance. The following were represented in the final shortlist:
   - initiatives in England, Wales and Scotland
   - community-based projects
   - local authority–community partnerships
   - projects linking national environmental non-governmental organisations and local community groups
   - regeneration-based projects
   - health and environment projects.

4. *Semi-structured interviews* were held with key people from the 17 case study projects: co-ordinators, staff, steering group members and community activists. In most cases two visits were made, during the period February to April 2001. The assessment of impact relied on these accounts, supplemented by available information from written sources.

5. *Interviews* were also conducted with representatives of a small number of national organisations with an interest and active involvement in local sustainability. These included the National Federation of Women's Institutes, the Local Government Association, the World Development Movement, Going for Green, Shell Better Britain Campaign and the Countryside Agency.

6. *A moderated electronic discussion* was also held with practitioners during April/May 2001, and *an interim seminar* was

organised for national and local practitioners to discuss the initial findings. This helped to focus on emerging issues for further research and consideration.

7   *Analysis* included an attempt to develop an evaluation framework, based in part on the Community Development Foundation's 'Achieving Better Community Development' (ABCD) framework, and in part on local and national indicators (Community Development Foundation, 1999).

Structure of the report

Chapter 2 outlines the major features of the case study projects and examines the implications of their diversity for the term 'local sustainability'. Chapter 3 specifically examines the working of the social–environmental interface, while Chapter 4 considers both types of impact. Chapter 5 considers support for local projects and some of the barriers they face, as well as giving some attention to their relationships with others. Chapter 6 brings together the conclusions that can be drawn from the study and highlights some of the implications for a range of policy-makers.

A note on terminology

It has been clear for some time that the word 'environment' needs careful use in this context: it refers to the big global issues of climate change, rainforests, etc., but also describes people's local surroundings and day-to-day life experiences. Previous work has also highlighted how people's environmental concerns vary with their economic status (Burningham and Thrush, 2001; Church *et al.*, 1998).

We have therefore used the word 'environment' where a broad focus is appropriate, and the terms 'resource use' and 'natural environment' when referring to the global ecological environment. We have used the term 'local environment' when referring to people's local surroundings (including homes, neighbourhoods and green spaces), and 'local quality of life' in describing the local environmental alongside linked socio-economic issues.

There are, of course, some similar issues when considering the terms 'sustainability' and 'local sustainability'. In this study, we accept the view that sustainable development is that which 'meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs', and we adopt a definition in which environmental, social and economic concerns are integrated (see later in this report). We will return to the issues of identifying local sustainable development in Chapter 2.

2 The case studies

Introduction

As noted in Chapter 1, a central part of this work has been to identify local projects that offered a discernible *combination* of environmental and social objectives. Even with this narrowing down of the full spectrum of local projects, the variety of initiatives is potentially very wide.

This variety is perhaps best understood in terms of examples. City farms, Local Agenda 21 schemes, food co-ops, community energy programmes, recycling schemes, environmental improvement projects and wildlife organisations illustrate the kinds of initiative that may have come from the 'environmentalist' end of the spectrum and are therefore likely to use a more explicit 'sustainable development' language. However, healthy living projects, community enterprises, credit unions, community development trusts and social housing bodies, arising from the 'social' side of the agenda, are often in effect also tackling some aspect of sustainable development, and in doing so are making this field more balanced across social issues.

The case studies selected for detailed study reflected this breadth, as the following summaries show.

Case study summaries

Ashley Vale Action Group (AVAG)

AVAG is a residents' group originally set up to oppose a planned housing development. It is now leading an alternative development on the site, involving housing association homes, self-build housing and small business units. The group is managing the development and will also retain ownership and management of a converted office block, which it will rent out as small workspaces. The income from this will fund other community schemes.

The development is in an area comprising two streets with 36 houses, separated from adjoining streets by a short road tunnel and close to a city farm. Current tenure is mainly owner-occupiers, with some housing association tenants. The development has a number of 'green' aspects including using environmentally friendly building materials, energy efficiency schemes, limiting car use, using appropriate technologies and giving local residents preference for the workspaces. The group also aims to empower the community, increase people's skills and confidence, and offer employment opportunities.

Support has come from Bristol's Sustainable Neighbourhood Fund, European Regional Development Fund URBAN funding and the Shell Better Britain Campaign. The group also received help and advice from Bristol Area Community Enterprise Network in setting up as a non-profit-making company limited by guarantee.

Balaji Temple Sacred Lands Project

This project is creating a 'sacred land' site on 12-and-a-half acres of former landfill around the Balaji Temple, the major centre of Hindu worship in the UK. The land is being developed as a meditation area and community resource, helping to integrate the temple with the local community through events and by providing a new public space. Hindu culture has strong links to the idea of caring for the environment and of 'healing the land', and the project combines philosophical, environmental and community-oriented considerations.

Nearly 2,000 trees have been planted, and annual events range from the opening of the Ganesha Shrine at the temple each May and the Holi Festival each spring to a historical canal walk. The site also acts as a resource for arts and community groups, and there is ongoing outreach to local communities.

The project started in 1994 with support from the Black Country Development Corporation and later from the Millennium Fund. Sandwell Health Authority (which is keen to promote preventative approaches and to stress the social aspects of health) also provides support and other involved organisations include the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers.

Balmoral Good Neighbour Agreement (BGNA), Dundee

The Balmoral Estate agreement developed out of concerns within a local residents' group about the impact of a nearby waste incinerator. At the core is an agreement between the Balmoral Residents' Association (supported by Friends of the Earth Scotland) and Dundee Energy Recycling Limited which runs the plant whose emissions affect the local area. It gives the community some say in how the incinerator operates and facilitates better flow of information between the company and the community. The idea of such agreements originated in the USA (for more information, see http://gnp.enviroweb.org), but this is the first such agreement in the UK.

The project has developed a good neighbours' charter, which covers:

- provision for a liaison group

- community access to information

- access to the incinerator

- accident emergency plans

- reporting of environmental performance

- employment policies for the incinerator

- local economic conditions

- transportation of waste

- biennial review and revision of the charter.

The agreement has enabled the community to negotiate various changes to the way in which the incinerator operates, such as increasing the frequency of monitoring of dioxin levels, and meeting regularly with the operators, with technical support and advice from Friends of the Earth. Local community activists have been closely involved from the beginning, and their time and energy have been the major inputs.

BioRegional Development Group (BRDG)

The BioRegional Development Group is an independent organisation working to 'mainstream local sustainability' by developing and implementing innovative, environmentally friendly solutions to consumer demand, based on the principle of local production for local needs.

BRDG is based in Sutton, but works nationally. Its projects include:

- a 'Local Paper' project which links waste office paper recycling directly to a paper production plant

- the 'BedZED' development of 82 'eco' homes and workspaces in south London in partnership with the Peabody Trust and Bill Dunster Architects

Lavender being harvested in South London – a BRDG project reviving local production

- a local charcoal and firewood project to co-ordinate and support local production of these materials as a by-product of woodland management, which supplies national retailers such as B&Q

- BioRegional MiniMills is developing the technology for commercially viable, small-scale, environmentally friendly paper-pulping mills

- 'Local Lavender' is working to revive south London's historic lavender industry, using disused allotments and working with prisoners from the local prison to produce the oil

- BioRegional food networks is a feasibility study looking at the potential to organise a cost-effective, reliable supply of locally produced food to supermarkets.

The organisation was developed in the early 1990s by two individuals who were interested in setting up a business to meet consumer wants and needs in a sustainable way. There are now 18 staff who work with a range of external organisations. There is limited community involvement: the aim is to influence consumer and producer behaviour.

Calstock Development Trust

Calstock Development Trust works with the local community to support the regeneration of a rural area of Cornwall. Calstock has a population of around 1,000, split between incomers, including those who commute to jobs elsewhere, and long-term local residents. The village suffers from rural exclusion and poverty, and, while tourism is an important aspect of the local economy, Calstock has not benefited greatly from this. The Development Trust is the first in Cornwall and does not enjoy the unanimous support of all residents.

Its aims include:

- increasing local employment and training

- improving recreational facilities

- supporting local groups

- enhancing the environment

- protecting historic buildings

- developing an asset base to generate income.

It has run computer training and skills building courses, offers careers and personal development advice, has helped set up a local tourism network and supports major village regeneration work.

The Trust works closely with the parish council and the parish partnership and has set up a community forum. Membership of the Trust is free and open to anyone living locally: there are now some 430 members.

Downham Cycle Taxis

The cycle taxis are a popular service run on the Downham Estate, an area of Lewisham that is poorly serviced. They provide lifts (and therefore social contact) and deliveries of shopping, etc. for older people using human-powered rickshaw vehicles. The service is heavily subsidised but initial assessment suggests that the costs are broadly comparable to those of the 'dial-a-ride' system.

The project emerged from research work on cycling and inclusion on peripheral estates. Lewisham's cycling officer expressed interest in the idea and helped make contact with the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) project at Downham. The project was set up in July 1999 and is managed by the Downham Elderly Health Project. It is partly funded by Downham Pride, an SRB body, and by the Ashden Charitable Trust. It also receives support from the London Borough of Lewisham.

Hartcliffe Health and Environment Action Group (HHEAG)

HHEAG is a community-led charity in the Hartcliffe Estate in Bristol. About 22,000 people live on the 1950s-built estate, one of the most

Community gardening in Hartcliffe to produce healthy food and build involvement

deprived outer city wards in the city, with high unemployment and many single parents. There are some pleasant areas with facilities including a library, clinics and a cinema, but other parts are much more poorly served. SRB5 funding is helping to regenerate the estate.

The project started in 1990 when a GP, health promotion worker and council community development worker started to involve the community in addressing concerns about people's health and well-being and a lack of community activity on the estate. HHEAG works to achieve its objectives by:

- setting up self-help groups to meet local health and environmental needs

- working with the community on issues that affect people's lives

- giving community members a way to influence decision-makers.

The widely used activities range from community swims, line dancing and community walks, through training for employment, a food co-op and the 'Feed your Face' nutrition and cooking project, to holiday play schemes and capacity-building support for local groups.

Funding now comes from Bristol City Council, Avon Health Authority, the Lottery and other sources. The council also runs the basic food hygiene course at no charge and is helping the food co-op's move into new premises. A local farm supplies food at cost.

Heeley City Farm, Sheffield

This is a well established city farm, founded in 1981, which runs a number of linked community enterprises and other projects in

Heeley, a mixed-tenure area with a population of around 40,000, many of whom are socially excluded. Heeley City Farm aims to 'identify, confront and address problems of poverty, inequality, prejudice and lack of opportunity … by supporting and promoting community regeneration and self-help within environmentally friendly and self-sustaining systems, using the background of a mini farm, community gardens and related resources'.

As well as normal farm activities, such as animal husbandry and horticulture, the Farm runs community enterprises including a garden centre and a café. It also provides education, training and New Deal placements, and runs several projects aimed at young people and the community, including an energy advice and efficiency project. The Farm uses a community development approach – starting with local needs – as a way of reaching local people.

As well as earned income, the Farm receives support from many sources including the European Social Fund and SRB money. It works with many other local organisations and is active on the board of the Development Trusts Association and the Urban Forum. It has recently taken over the running of the National Community Composting Network.

Manor and Castle Green Estate Project
Also based in Sheffield, this project is working to regenerate extensive green and open spaces within the Manor and Castle area as part of a major SRB regeneration programme. Manor and Castle consists of about ten neighbourhoods with different characters and ethnic mixes: people do not tend to cross readily from one area to another. The population is around 22,000.

The project, developed and run by the Sheffield Wildlife Trust, aims to:

- carry out physical green space improvements

- engage communities, residents and individuals in the environment

- explore more environmentally sustainable long-term maintenance solutions for green and open spaces.

Work includes activities with young people and schools; regenerating a recreation ground and creating a new district park on derelict land; planning a heritage farm; 'greenbases', which act as a focus for local community work; and initiatives concerned with food, energy and waste.

The project employs 19 people and several volunteers. The annual running cost is £500,000. As well as regeneration funding, support comes from the New Opportunities Fund, Landfill Tax, European sources, Health Action Zone and charitable sources. It has an eight-year plan to build an asset base, including income generated from landscape work, park maintenance and a 'productive land' project. In conjunction with the regeneration programme, it is working to secure community ownership of assets and build capacity to enable the community to maintain the green spaces themselves.

Redbridge Community Agenda 21 Programme
This programme is co-ordinated by Redbridge Council to take the borough's LA21 process down to the local ward level by producing community action plans. The team (two LA21 workers and an external adviser) has produced plans in three areas (each covering two wards), is

working in a fourth area and intends to cover the whole borough. It employs a standard approach, involving questionnaires, a launch, open meetings around key themes identified by local people, production of a draft plan with local people involved in editing and further consultation leading to a final plan. A local group leads on implementing the action plan, with some support from the borough's LA21 team.

Although the programme is informed by the council's LA21, the issues in the community action plans are those raised by the communities themselves. Public enthusiasm and real change have overcome local reservations and, in the last couple of years, the programme has successfully increased the funding it receives. Resources have so far come mainly from the council, although SRB funding is being used for implementation in one area.

Renfrewshire Sustainable Communities Project (RSCP)

RSCP is a local authority-run programme seeking to enable environmental action in areas targeted for regeneration. It uses community development methods in Social Inclusion Partnership (SIP) areas in Paisley to improve local quality of life, contribute to local regeneration and engage communities with sustainable development, through practical local projects, activities and action.

Its objectives include:

- increasing community capacity and influence

- improving residents' competitiveness for jobs

- maximising employment and training opportunities

- reducing poverty/increasing household income

- reducing health inequalities

- creating safe, secure and attractive neighbourhoods/local environment.

The project has expanded from two pilots to work in all 11 SIP areas.

Local action has included: surveys of local need; social activities such as line dancing, bingo, gardening and keep fit; environmental education programmes in schools; road safety campaigning; community garden projects; lunch clubs; and youth and play schemes.

The project began in 1996 after a 'traditional' Local Agenda 21 programme failed to raise much interest. The new focus on local needs and environmental action in deprived areas has led to widespread community involvement and real impacts on exclusion, including getting people into jobs. Its core funding comes from the council but it also receives support from the Scottish Executive and Forward Scotland.

In February 2002, the project won the Scottish Local Authorities award for best social inclusion project.

South Elmsall, South Kirkby and Upton Environment Group (SESKU)

The SESKU Environment Group is a community-led voluntary organisation in South Yorkshire, which runs environmental events and activities to promote, conserve and regenerate the local environment. It is based in South Elmsall, an ex-mining town of 25,000 people. The Coal Board sold off most of the housing stock when the pits closed, some to private landlords. There are now a number of low-income 'estates' with a transient

population, leading to decline and abandonment. Local amenities and facilities such as allotments and sports fields are very run down.

The SESKU group seeks to:

- improve the local urban and rural environment

- improve the local community's mental and physical health

- create job opportunities for local people

- improve the image of the area to boost the confidence of the local community

- promote sustainable transport

- promote biodiversity and wildlife conservation

- support the principles of LA21

- counter social exclusion by creating a community facility owned by, and accessible to, all.

The group started in 1995 as an SRB forum but grew into an independent group and has attracted a lot of members working on local environmental improvement and awareness-raising projects. Funding now comes from many sources including the local authority, lottery grants, rural action and commercial support. Projects have been focused around the SESKU 'Ringway' scheme that involves a 13-mile circular path/country park linking the three ex-colliery communities. The area is showing signs of improvement. Some new housing is being developed and the shopping street has a waiting list for premises.

SESKU's conservation activities work to involve young people

St Anne's Estate 'Monday Club'

The 'Monday Club' is a small project, run by the local residents' association, promoting cheap healthy food and advice to the local community on a marginal estate in Colchester. It serves 780 households on the St Anne's Estate, a disadvantaged area which lies within a prosperous ward. Specific issues there include:

- anti-social behaviour problems with young people and children

- isolated older people

- no bus service, and a lack of local shops and other facilities

- the history and reputation of the estate.

The project provides a meeting place for local residents and services such as a café, a supervised play scheme, school uniform thrift stall, and cheap fresh fruit and vegetables. It has grown from one-off events to a regular weekly programme. Most of the fresh fruit and vegetables come from one farm that is converting to organic production. It also collects

donations from local gardeners and encourages local people to sell food and goods they have made themselves. It has a compost heap, is reusing furniture and uses the council recycling scheme on the estate for waste from the Monday Club.

The St Anne's Residents' Association was formed around 1998 and, although it has no paid employees, it has a number of regular volunteers.

The Vines Centre Trust

The Vines Centre Trust is a charity in Medway that runs a variety of recycling projects with linked training and employment for local unemployed people. It covers a population of 250,000 along the North Kent coast – an area where rich communities are interspersed with poor areas.

In addition to its recycling initiative, the Trust is involved in other community work, including youth work, an after-school club, a parent and toddler group, a credit union and community IT learning centres.

Local people are involved mainly through training and as users of the refurbished materials. The Trust's projects have helped people get employment, supported personal development and capacity building, and provided support to local groups, while diverting materials from landfill.

The Trust has 14 employees and about 40 volunteers/training placements a week. Annual running costs are £400,000. It also collects donations and contributions through its furniture recycling project, to cover transport costs if people can afford to make a contribution, and sells reconditioned computers and generates income from a timber reuse

project. Funding comes from many sources including the local council as well as SRB funds, the Church Urban fund and European sources.

Wai Yin Environmental Vision Project (EVP), Manchester

Wai Yin EVP is a 12-month project to raise awareness about energy efficiency and the environment among the Chinese communities in Greater Manchester, and is one of several projects run by the Wai Yin Chinese Women's Society. It involves interrelated programmes and events including:

- workshops to promote environmental education

- a recycling project

- a poster competition for Chinese children

- developing a permanent environmental exhibition at the Wai Yin centre

- using the project as a base for developing other ideas.

The Chinese community is scattered through the city. Most of the 450-plus members of Wai Yin come from within the city, but many come from outside. The project is a positive step towards raising awareness among an ethnic group with little history of work on environmental issues. It also relates positively to the prevailing culture among older Chinese women of passing knowledge on to their grandchildren. The project has drawn on the expertise within the city council and fits in with the city's LA21 objectives.

The project came about as a result of a successful application for a National Grid Community 21 Award, which funded the workshops, the competition, the open day and

the exhibition. It is also supported by Wai Yin itself and the City Council Housing Energy Team.

West Devon Environmental Network (West DEN)

West DEN is an innovative independent charity, set up in 1994, working on many aspects of rural sustainability with local communities. Its aim is: 'to support those members of the community who wish to conserve, preserve or sustain their social, economic, and natural environments' (West DEN constitution). Its area of work covers a population of around 47,000 in a very rural area, whose economy was being devastated by foot and mouth disease at the time of survey. There is much hidden poverty, including single-parent families and poorer older people.

West DEN has taken a lead in implementing the Local Agenda 21 process in West Devon in partnership with West Devon Borough Council. Major projects include:

- support to community groups to develop action projects, such as credit unions and play areas, through 'community animateurs'

- practical help and training for young people who want to live and work in West Devon (Ley of the Land project)

- drawing up 40 sustainability indicators to measure progress around the 16 principles developed with members of the community

- sustainable food – including a farmers' market, an organic producers' support group / co-op and a local food register

- Europe–India rural links – networking and learning between organisations / individuals working on sustainable development at the community level.

The initiative has received support from the borough and county councils, the Rural Development Commission and the European Regional Development Fund. There are 12 employees, three part-time community animateurs and a number of regular volunteers.

Wiltshire Agenda 21 (WA21)

WA21 is an independent project, funded by local authorities in Wiltshire and managed by the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust (WWT). It runs projects, events and actions to promote and implement LA21 in Wiltshire, covering waste reduction, energy efficiency, fair trade, transport, engaging young people, food and farming, and wildlife and biodiversity.

The work started in 1995 to bring the various council LA21 programmes together: initial work focused on building capacity. The next big challenges are seen as influencing big regeneration programmes in Wiltshire and starting to develop a green economy.

There are four full-time and three part-time employees and on average two full-time and three part-time volunteers each week. The annual running cost is £180,000. The project covers a population of 600,000. Wiltshire is extremely rural and quite a rich area. The main issues are transport and mobility, lack of services and foot and mouth disease.

The project is having some direct environmental impacts, through energy use reduction and household action, but most change is still at the awareness level.

'Junk Swap' days in Wiltshire – "like jumble sales with no money!"

Community involvement is limited to activities and projects on the ground. WA21 is funded by all the local councils and assists them in delivering their environmental objectives, but has much less impact in terms of the economic and social aspects.

Variety and diversity

The outlines above demonstrate how projects are driven by very different motivations, and employ very different tools and approaches to achieve their different ends. The wide-ranging types of action taking place within the case studies fall broadly into the 'types' shown in Table 1, although these are inevitably crude and cannot cover all the variation.

As noted above, these 'types' are by no means absolute and it will be clear that there is often substantial overlap. For example, the community enterprises that Heeley City Farm and the Vines Centre Trust run could also be said to be environmentally friendly solutions to community need. The examples cited above refer to projects' primary activities – almost all have secondary impacts too, of which awareness raising is the most common.

Moreover, as the summaries above indicate, this wide diversity among the case studies chosen was not only in relation to their position on the 'environmental/social spectrum'. It was also evident in the size and scope of their operations, their geographical coverage, their lead organisation, and the nature and depth of community involvement in their leadership or activities. Although this could in part be said to reflect the selection criteria applied (see Chapter 1), this variety was also apparent among those responding to the questionnaire survey.

Size and scope

Those projects responding to the survey (and those selected for more detailed study) ranged from small, voluntary, community-led projects to regional (or in one case national) programmes with several linked projects. In between were medium-sized health and regeneration projects with two or three workers, and significant local social enterprises employing 30 people plus. The overwhelming majority of projects also made use of volunteers to organise or deliver their services. Annual running costs ranged from nothing at all to several thousand pounds.

Table 2 gives some indication of the varying scale of operations.

Table 1 A basic typology

Type of project	Examples
Community/social enterprises with an environmental theme, offering training, employment and personal development to local residents who are unemployed	Heeley City Farm Vines Centre Trust
Projects using community development and local action to engage communities with wider natural environment or sustainable development issues	Redbridge Community Agenda 21 Renfrewshire Sustainable Communities Project West Devon Environmental Network
Projects employing environmentally friendly solutions and tools to meet local need	Green Estate Project Downham Cycle Taxis Ashley Vale Action Group BioRegional Development Group
Projects working to promote, and raise awareness of, ecological environment or sustainable development issues to local communities	Wai Yin Environmental Vision Project Wiltshire Agenda 21
Projects where local people are working to improve their local environment as part of improving their local quality of life or regenerating their area	SESKU Environment Group Hartcliffe Health and Environment Action Group
Projects that are primarily working to address local needs/issues but are having some linked, albeit limited, environmental impacts	St Anne's Estate Monday Club Calstock Development Trust

Table 2 Employees and volunteers

Full-time equivalent employees			Volunteers		
No. of paid staff (full-time)	No. of survey projects	No. of case study projects	Average no. per week	No. of survey projects	No. of case study projects
0	11	3	0	5	2
1	6	1	1–5	10	2
2–5	18	6	6–10	16	5
6–10	5	0	11–20	8	2
11–20	9	4	21–50	5	1
>20	6	1	51–100	1	0
			>100	5	1
Data missing	*8*	*2*	*Data missing*	*13*	*4*
Total	**63**	**17**	**Total**	**63**	**17**

Lead organisation

As Table 3 shows, most of the projects responding to the survey (two-thirds) were being run by community or voluntary organisations. Others were led by various partnership arrangements, half of which involved local authorities. Only a small number were led by large, established organisations (local authorities, housing associations, or businesses).

Nature of community involvement

Virtually all projects reported community involvement and, again, most reported that members of the community were involved at the level of running the project or making decisions about the direction of the project.

Local sustainability – something new or the same old story?

So, what does this breadth and range of activity tell us about 'local sustainability'? There has been increasing use of the phrase in recent years but, as a field of work, it is relatively new and its scope and boundaries are not clear. Much depends on the viewpoint of those discussing the work. The research approached this

Table 3 Type of organisation running/leading projects

Organisation type	No. of survey projects	No. of case study projects
Voluntary organisation	26	7
Community organisation	16	3
'Partnership' (involving local authority)	6	3
'Partnership' (not involving local authority)	4	1
Local authority	2	2
Housing association	2	0
Company/business (for profit/not for profit)	2	1
'Partnership' – not specified	1	0
Data missing	*4*	*0*
Total	**63**	**17**

Table 4 Nature of community involvement

Nature of community involvement	No. of responding projects	No. of case study projects
Running the project	9	2
Decision-making (steering or through consultation/partnership)	31	12
Lead work or activities within the project	4	1
Employed/volunteer in running the project	11	7
Involved as volunteers with specific activities	9	3
Total	**64 reported by 56 projects**	**25 reported by 17 projects**

question in a number of ways. First, interviews with national organisations concerned with sustainable development revealed very different views as to the relevance of local action. Some see community-based work on sustainable development as central to their mission; others see it as rather marginal or merely as supporting their policy goals.

Second, a mediated electronic discussion among practitioners suggested the following facets of a definition of local sustainability practice:

- Work that focuses on local issues and objectives, but seeks to link those local issues to national or global concerns.

- Work that has been broadly focused on environmental issues, but is moving towards developing a socio-economic perspective that makes it more people-centred.

- Work that recognises the importance of improving overall quality of life as well as meeting specific targets.

- Work that is commonly based within a local authority or a community/voluntary sector group and that may involve some degree of co-operative working with other sectors.

- Work that sees the process of engagement of local people as an important part of the work and may well see community empowerment as a key outcome.

- Work that recognises the need to consider how work now affects intergenerational equity and prospects for a better quality of life in the future.

Third, the perspective and experience of the projects themselves. Those surveyed in this study supported the picture presented above to some extent, but not completely. Several of the projects responding to our call had socio-economic issues as their starting point, and some of the smaller community projects surveyed and visited were not overtly considering the 'big picture' of global concerns and intergenerational equity. Nevertheless, they appeared to be making important contributions both to meeting local needs *and* to doing so in ways that were conducive to the environmental aspects of sustainability. This sometimes nebulous interface between the 'social' and the 'environmental' is the focus for the next chapter.

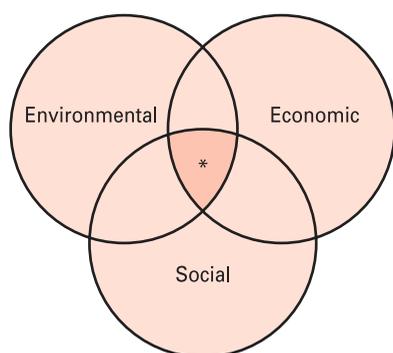# 3 Environmental and social integration – a neglected interface?

Introduction

Central to this research is the relationship between social and environmental concerns. There is a common view of sustainable development as being the integration of social, environmental and economic issues, as represented by the three-circle 'venn diagram' in Figure 1.

The desire for the 'triple bottom line' has meant that the area where all three overlap has been the main focus of attention. Of the areas where just two issues overlap, the socio-economic interface is well documented and much of the work in the 1990s has been to explore the environmental–economic tension. But the social–environmental interface is still unclear.

Even at a local level it is not always clear just where the interface lies. Environmental programmes aimed at integrating the issues and thus mobilising disadvantaged groups have often failed to make any impact, and have been seen by groups on the social side as still being primarily or even entirely environmental. At the same time, some community groups seeking to address basic local environmental issues have reportedly met with some disparagement by national and international environmental organisations.

However, despite some of these problems, the evidence from this study suggests that environmental and social concerns can be successfully integrated at a local level to provide working solutions to local needs.

Linkage and integration: on paper and in practice

This research has consciously looked at how that integration is taking place at a local level and at how far such integrated working is intentional.

The results of the postal survey, presented in Tables 5 and 6, give an indication of how projects themselves defined their aims and purpose, and the extent to which integration of the two aspects was a deliberate strategy.

These varying accounts of aims and purpose can be summarised to show how far the projects were covering both the environmental and the social, and, beyond this, how far they were consciously integrating the two (see Table 6).

As this shows, while almost three-quarters of the projects responding to this question reported that they had both social and environmental aims, two-thirds of these *separated out* these different purposes. Only a quarter of the total number reported explicitly

Figure 1 A common view of sustainable development

* Sustainable development occurs where all three areas overlap.

seeking *integration* of social and environmental aspects, and these included those overtly concerned with LA21 or 'sustainable development'.

Among the case study projects, it was possible to delve a little deeper into their linkage and integration of social and environmental, their original motivations, and their moves across the socio-environmental interface. In fact, *all* of the case study projects demonstrated linkage between the 'social' and the 'environmental', but they had come to where they were through a myriad of different routes. Table 7 – albeit unavoidably simplified – gives an indication of this diversity.

Table 5 Project purpose/aims

Reported purpose or aims	No. of projects
Improve/develop/promote/celebrate/help regenerate the local environment	7
Encourage/support community involvement in environmental activities and issues (local and wider)	10
Develop/pilot new environmentally friendly approach to needs	2
Promote/encourage/campaign/educate for environmental issues/sustainable development	15
Contribute to environmental sustainability	15
Encourage/support community involvement in meeting community needs	10
Meet community needs/tackle social exclusion/contribute to community development	21
Promote/improve health	7
Encourage and support creative activities	2
Provide/improve facilities or resources	7
Contribute to the local economy	5
Provide education and training	5
Meet environmental and social needs together/contribute to Local Agenda 21 or sustainable development *explicitly*	12
Total	**118 reported by 47 projects**

Table 6 Summary of relationship of environmental/social aspects

Reported purpose or aims	No. of projects
Mixed environmental and social – but with separate aims	23
Explicitly environmental and social together – with same aim	12
Social purpose *only*	9
Environmental purpose *only*	3
Total	**47**

Table 7 Case study projects and the socio-environmental interface

Starting point and movement	Case study examples
Moved into environmental work from a social perspective	Hartcliffe Health and Environment Action Group Wai Yin Environmental Vision Project
Environmental programmes consciously run so as to maximise their social impact	Heeley City Farm Manor and Castle Green Estate Project SESKU Environment Group
Initial issue to be addressed had both social and environmental imperatives	Balaji Temple Sacred Lands Project
Planned from the start to bring together social and environmental aims	Downham Cycle Taxi Service
Social imperative but with environmental 'spin-offs'	St Anne's Monday Club Vines Centre Trust
Environmental imperative but with social 'spin-offs'	Ashley Vale Action Group BioRegional Development Group

Of course, such a summary inevitably masks some of the specificity of local context. The starting point for the Balaji Temple Sacred Lands Project, for example, was the building of a new Hindu temple which was to some extent 'parachuted' into an existing community. This led to the need for community development work to achieve integration and the fact that the temple was located on an ex-landfill site necessitated environmental improvements. In other projects, a key individual played a leading role. The Vines Centre Trust began with a local priest helping an existing small furniture reuse project as part of a desire to address local social needs. Interest from the local council led to the priest setting up the Trust, which has grown into a suite of projects providing training, jobs and affordable goods and services for local people, largely based around recycling.

Also missing from Table 7 are those projects with an explicit concern to take forward the post-Rio agenda of 'sustainable development'.

The LA21 activity in Wiltshire, Redbridge and Renfrewshire are all examples of council employees developing work areas that would have been unthought of and perhaps even off limits before 1992 (although, interestingly, attempts to link up with corporate anti-poverty strategies were sometimes problematic). In the case of Renfrewshire, what started out as a project with a clear environmental perspective has consciously stepped across the interface to prioritise social action. Line dancing and other social events with local community groups make an impact on health and leisure provision, but are also used as a way to engage people *and* build awareness of green issues. Importantly, this approach has also helped get political support and recognition for the work.

The benefits of linkage and integration

The research suggests that 'joined-up working' is happening on the ground, even though it may

not be receiving optimal levels of support (see Chapter 5) and that it sometimes appears to be almost incidental. Moreover, these features do not detract from its potential to deliver lasting benefits.

Most obviously, linkage and integration mean that practical environmental projects are doing their work in ways that also improve local social conditions. This is likely to lead to more community pride and less alienation, which in turn are likely to lead to more care and respect for the environment, thus developing a virtuous cycle of improvements. SESKU, a project working in a community devastated by pit closures, reported this as a notable achievement of its work.

Equally, there are numerous examples of social development projects that are building environmental awareness and action. These seem to be helping to break down some of the

misconceptions about environmental issues and, again, a more attractive environment is likely to be a better place in which to try to create a genuinely sustainable community.

Less directly, integrated working can help develop political and financial support for local action to improve quality of life, as is shown by Renfrewshire (and also by Redbridge). If sustainability programmes can prove their worth to cynical observers by work that has real impacts on local quality of life (by, for example, creating jobs), then programme staff are more likely to be able to find support for larger-scale and longer-term programmes for change.

Whatever the starting point or position on the 'social/environmental' spectrum, projects deriving from both starting points are showing that sustainable development makes sense. But does it also deliver? It is to the question of impacts that the next chapter turns.

SESKU have worked as much to build community pride and involvement as to improve their environment

4 The impacts of local action

Range of impacts

Within the two broad groupings of 'environmental' and 'socio-economic' impacts, there was a wide range of reported achievements. Within the socio-economic category, there was a combination of 'soft' and 'hard' impacts, ranging from increased confidence and self-esteem for individuals to the number of jobs created. Nine separate achievements identified by projects fell within this category (all identified in Table 8), and these were often backed up by cited examples.

Within 'community development and capacity building', for instance, projects were able to point to new community groups developed; support for other community groups; and new skills developed within the community. At the level of individual skill acquisition, examples ranged from writing business plans to planting trees. Local environmental improvement included clean-ups; tackling fly tipping; lighting schemes; park/green space improvements; new seating areas; and renovation of housing. A similarly wide range of examples was evident among reported economic impacts. 'Jobs created' was accompanied by the establishment of new community enterprises or for-profit companies; support for local producers; use of local organisations; funding brought into the area; and money saving for individuals.

Of the 13 impacts reported within the environmental category, there were some direct impacts on resource use and the natural environment. These included, for example, habitat creation, reduced motor travel and associated CO_2 emissions, minimising and diverting waste, and reduced energy use.

There were also indirect impacts, through the projects' work on environmental education and awareness raising. The case study projects were engaging people, both communities and policy-makers, with environmental and sustainable development issues, and were thus having an effect on wider agendas and policies. Some of these local projects have many, even many hundreds of, unconnected equivalents in other localities, for example city farms and furniture recycling schemes. The collective impact of all these must be considerable. Similarly, by developing and promoting 'green' ways of working or providing goods or services, there was the potential to influence and inspire others.

Within the constraints of this study, it proved difficult to assess the impact that local projects were having on the wider field of sustainable development (SD). We developed an evaluation framework (see Chapter 1 and Appendix 1) linking sustainability indicators and community development assessment. Table 8 draws on the framework used. This lists the full range of positive socio-economic and environmental impacts reported by the case studies, and summarises the impacts each project is having.

Young people learn practical skills with West DEN's Ley of the Land project

Table 8 Principal impacts reported by case study projects

IMPACT	PROJECT								
	AVAG	BTSL	BGNA	BDG	CDT	DCT	HHEA	HCF	MCGE
Community development and capacity building	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗		✗	✗	✗
Personal development	✗			✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	
Living environment improvements		✗	✗		✗		✗	✗	✗
Training		✗			✗		✗	✗	✗
Economic impacts	✗			✗		✗	✗	✗	✗
New/improved services/resources/facilities	✗	✗			✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Community consultation/engagement/involvement					✗		✗		✗
Promoting/awareness of community development	✗		✗				✗		
Health promotion/improvement		✗					✗		
Habitats/wildlife		✗		✗			✗	✗	
Reclaiming/reusing derelict land		✗							✗
Waste minimisation				✗					✗
Travel awareness					✗	✗			
Energy use								✗	
Environmentally friendly housing/buildings	✗			✗				✗	
Pollution			✗						
Environmental education and information							✗		✗
Environmental promotion/awareness raising	✗			✗			✗	✗	
Engaging and involving with environmental/SD – community							✗		✗
Engaging/gaining support/changing attitudes around environment and SD – policy level and business	✗		✗	✗					
Inputting into wider policy and planning									✗
Developing and promoting environmentally friendly ways of working or providing goods/influencing and inspiring others	✗		✗	✗		✗		✗	✗

AVAG, Ashley Vale Action Group; BTSL, Balaji Temple Sacred Lands; BGNA, Balmoral Good Neighbour Agreement; BDG, BioRegional Development Group; CDT, Calstock Development Trust; DCT, Downham Cycle Taxis; HHEA, Hartcliffe Health and Environment Action Group; HCF, Heeley City Farm; MCGE, Manor and Castle Green Estate Project.

Table 8 Principal impacts reported by case study projects (continued)

IMPACT	PROJECT							
	RCA	RSCP	SAEM	SEG	VCT	WYEV	WDEN	WA
Community development and capacity building	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗		✗	✗
Personal development	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗		✗	
Living environment improvements	✗	✗		✗				
Training			✗	✗	✗		✗	
Economic impacts	✗		✗	✗	✗		✗	✗
New/improved services/resources/facilities		✗	✗	✗				
Community consultation/engagement/involvement	✗	✗		✗			✗	
Promoting/awareness of community development								
Health promotion/improvement			✗	✗				
Habitats/wildlife	✗			✗				
Reclaiming/reusing derelict land								
Waste minimisation					✗			✗
Travel awareness								
Energy use	✗							✗
Environmentally friendly housing/buildings								
Pollution								
Environmental education and information	✗	✗		✗		✗		✗
Environmental promotion/awareness raising	✗			✗		✗	✗	✗
Engaging and involving with environmental/SD – community	✗	✗		✗			✗	
Engaging/gaining support/changing attitudes around environment and SD – policy level and business	✗	✗						✗
Inputting into wider policy and planning			✗	✗				✗
Developing and promoting environmentally friendly ways of working or providing goods/influencing and inspiring others								

RCA, Redbridge Community Agenda 21; RSCP, Renfrewshire Sustainable Communities Project; SAEM, St Anne's Estate Monday Club; SEG, SESKU Environment Group; VCT, Vines Centre Trust; WYEV, Wai Yin Environmental Vision Project; WDEN, West Devon Environmental Network; WA, Wiltshire Agenda 21.

Assessment of impacts

When looking at the impact of such projects, it is important to consider them within the local context and in relation to their own objectives. Small local projects may seem almost irrelevant at city scale or above but, if wider policies lead to larger numbers of them, there is every reason to expect them, in aggregate, to have proportionate impact. The in-depth interviews and projects' self-assessments on which this research is based at least open up consideration of such projects' wider significance. Given the difficulty of commenting on the impact of small local projects on wide sustainable development goals, we attempted to develop an evaluation framework linking sustainability indicators and community development, ranging from local to much wider impacts (see Appendix 2).

Direct environmental impacts

Direct impacts on resource use and the natural environment appeared to be significant in relation to the overall project in only four of the 17 case studies:

- Ashley Vale Action Group, where the ecological impacts of environmentally friendly building methods and materials, and mixed use development (shorter work–home distances with potential positive impacts on car use) are a significant part of the aims and objectives of the whole project

- The BioRegional Development Group, whose work is focused on environmentally friendly solutions, including sustainable housing developments, paper recycling and local paper pulp production from sustainable sources

- Downham Cycle Taxis, where a mobility and delivery service is provided using non-polluting, human-powered vehicles

- The Vines Centre Trust, where most of its activities are centred around recycling and reuse.

For the others, direct ecological environmental impacts appeared to be minor, even within the context of the project itself. For example, although the Balaji Temple Sacred Lands Project has not been without direct ecological impacts through planting and habitat creation on the former landfill site, it has primarily focused on activities and events to engage people from the local community. Similarly, the Redbridge Community Agenda 21 projects involve community involvement in identifying and taking action on issues related to the local living environment but direct ecological impacts are mainly limited to fairly incidental actions such as the planting of trees and shrubs in urban areas.

This picture is reflected in the interviewees' own assessments. Only one – the BioRegional Development Group – talked about significant impacts, and even then these are to be achieved over a large timescale. Others said that their direct environmental impacts are 'not very much' (Calstock Development Trust); 'tiny' (Hartcliffe Health and Environment Action Group); 'mainly on the land that we manage' (Heeley City Farm).

Of the four with fairly significant environmental impacts in their own context, perhaps two have an effect that might register at the local authority scale. The Downham Cycle Taxi scheme's ecological environmental impacts, relating to just two vehicles, will not register at

Downham Cycle Taxis – a social service with a small but positive environmental impact

this scale, nor will the Ashley Vale initiative. However, the Vines Centre Trust diverts enough waste for reuse to potentially register on local authority-wide targets for recycling/reuse. The BioRegional Development Group's environmentally friendly housing development involves a not unsubstantial 82-home development, and some of BRDG's work has the potential to have significant impacts at the regional and even national and international scales. If it succeeds in developing and bringing into use its 'BioRegional MiniMills', which could produce paper pulp locally using environmentally friendly technology, then this could have an effect on the importation of pulp, often from unsustainable wood sources.

Collective impacts

While individual projects may make only minimal impacts, the growing number of such projects means that their collective impacts may be increasingly significant. There are some 350 community recycling initiatives linked to the Community Recycling Network. This type of work has been going on since the 1970s and is well established. The Vines Centre runs just one

of around 300 furniture recycling projects in England and Wales. Many of these started in the 1980s and are now well established both as training providers and as sources of furniture for those on low incomes.

There are also about 250 projects registered with the UK Food Poverty Network, many similar in scale to St Anne's. Many of these have emerged in the last two years, suggesting that this is an issue where people feel local action can be effective, driven also by concerns about 'food scares' at a national level. There are several other issue-based networks such as the National Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens. These play an important role in supporting project development and offer the prospect of impacts that transcend individual project boundaries.

Indirect impacts

There was also an important range of indirect environmental effects: these may in fact be more significant, both for the local community and for the wider goals of sustainable development. They included:

- environmental promotion, education and awareness raising

- engaging and involving people with environmental and sustainability issues in their daily lives

- changing the attitudes of policy-makers (especially at the local level) with regard to environmental issues

- developing and promoting new services and ways of working that help meet the goals of sustainable development.

All of the case study projects had indirect impacts as above. While it was not possible to quantify these in detail, the projects were undoubtedly playing an important role in building public awareness and engagement. Many of the projects (e.g. West DEN, HHEAG, SESKU) had evidence that those involved were going on to take further environmental action in their own lives, through lifestyle change, increased involvement in community affairs and engaging with national environmental issues. These may well be the most important long-term results of some of the projects.

Learning to cook in Hartcliffe

Engaging and involving people

There were many and varied examples of how people were being successfully engaged and involved. Alongside its organisation of social events, Renfrewshire Sustainable Communities programme has engaged community groups, individuals and schools with action on community gardens, composting, recycling, and environmental education. The SESKU Environment Group attracted a strong community membership and involvement from the beginning in activities focused around developing new public green spaces and improving footpaths in the area. The Manor and Castle Green Estate Project has employed a local resident to carry out some pilot work on a recycling scheme. The good response to Heeley City Farm's recycling scheme is attributed by workers to the raised environmental awareness that local people have got from visiting the farm.

A number of common learning points emerge from this experience.

Start where people are

Many of the projects stressed that their success has been due to 'starting where people are' – engaging people by making links with their immediate environments, lives and concerns, and showing them that things can change. This issue emerged from 13 of the case study interviews. It was contrasted with the approach of some external agencies (both local authorities and environmental groups) that were sometimes seen as coming into an area with an agenda that was not relevant to, or mindful of, that of the local community.

Start simple and build on success

The projects consistently showed how it is possible to start with locally relevant issues and then go on to introduce wider sustainable development issues. The Renfrewshire project engaged local community groups through developing community gardens and has gone on from there

to composting in the gardens and working on recycling. HHEAG workers said that local people are using a council box recycling scheme, buying whole and organic foods, and are talking about the idea of local food growing, whereas a few years previously they had not been interested in these actions and ideas. They felt that this was partly due to the project introducing these ideas through a food co-op and to the environmental day trips they ran.

Make awareness raising a planned outcome
At least eight of the case study projects reported that they have increased environmental awareness and understanding. The Wiltshire Agenda 21 project employs a press officer, and runs specific awareness campaigns and events (such as its 'Fair Trade Fortnight'). It reported a greater understanding and engagement with environmental and sustainable development issues within its local authority, which is something it has consistently worked towards.

Other projects have had a less overt but still significant effect on people's awareness of environmental issues. The SESKU project reported that members of the community involved with the group had become more concerned with conservation issues from a starting point of mainly being motivated by getting more jobs into the area. Workers felt that public attitudes changed after seeing the positive effects of environmental improvements such as tree planting.

There is no doubt people in the communities have some awareness of, and concern about, many wider environmental issues. A member of the tenants' and residents' group that runs the St Anne's Monday Club said that she tries to be 'as environmental as I can', and talked about local people buying dolphin-friendly tuna. A local businessman in Redbridge said that members of the community group are interested in 'doing their bit' as far as wider 'eco'-environmental issues go.

Help provide access to solutions
Many people may fail to act environmentally simply because they lack access to the solutions, whether these are recycling facilities or bus services. In St Anne's, a member talked about being unable to afford organic food. This is an area where local projects can make a big difference. The HHEAG food co-op sells healthy and organic foods at cost price. Friends of the Earth Scotland researched ideas from abroad and gave the Balmoral Residents' Association the idea of Good Neighbour Agreements as a tool for helping address their needs.

Engage policy-makers through positive local action
Action that makes a clear difference to the quality of life of local communities can help win political and policy-level support. Both Redbridge and Renfrewshire reported that their success in engaging local communities and improving neighbourhoods had drawn significant interest and support from initially sceptical local politicians and policy-makers, leading to expansion of their work.

Socio-economic impacts

As with the environmental impacts, the significance of the social impacts should be considered in terms of the project objectives. In this context, they may be quite significant. Heeley City Farm and its linked organisations employ 60 people, a significant number for a low-income area with few local jobs. The Downham Cycle Taxi project has provided a valuable new service for elderly people, some of whom reported that it is their only means of spending time out of their homes. The Renfrewshire Sustainable Communities Project managed to help 35 people into jobs or training.

The majority of funding bodies and statutory agencies continue to emphasise the importance of direct economic impacts and jobs. Yet, these projects are making broader contributions on the socio-economic front and, again, these can contribute to long-term sustainable development in the locality. These include:

- local economic improvements (including job creation for local people)

- personal development and training

- community development and capacity building

- new or improved access to services and facilities

- health improvement

- improved community participation and engagement.

The specific economic impacts are considered here in detail because of the way in which these emerged as having major significance at the local level. They include the following.

Creating jobs

Heeley City Farm itself had 34 staff at the time of interviewing in spring 2001; and the BioRegional Development Group had 18 full-time posts. These are the higher end of the range: more typical would be Hartcliffe Health and Environment Action Group (HHAEG). Numbers of employees here fluctuate around three to five, with the three main people doing the equivalent of about two full-time posts. These are supported by up to seven other sessional workers, and 12 to 14 further volunteers. Calstock has two full-time jobs and a youth worker one day a week. Flexible approaches can be accommodated. Two volunteers in SESKU took on a job share with the organisation, with the salary paid from SRB funds.

BRDG's Charcoal Project creates jobs and provides saleable products using resources that might otherwise go to waste

Helping people gain qualifications and other experience

Social economy projects are in a good position to help people gain formal qualifications. Thus, a city farm can provide vocational training for the horticulture sector; and food-related projects can lay on food hygiene courses. West DEN's Ley of the Land project provided training in a range of countryside management skills. Some projects run courses for local people. Calstock took 100 people through one-to-one IT training and arranged for 24 to get skills training. Such skills can be used in mainstream work or in other projects. Skill transfer has become an increasingly important trend and has grown in the context of schemes like New Deal. Projects are learning to exploit these new opportunities. The Vines Centre Trust has had about 20 young people going through the New Deal Environmental Task Force route at any one time. It has also employed an average of seven people under the Intermediate Labour Market (ILM) scheme, focusing on IT skills, with two-thirds going on into permanent jobs. SESKU, too, has linked ILM jobs to community-led environmental projects.

However, this focus on formal qualifications often overlooks experience that people gain by working as volunteers. The research is rich in material that shows how individuals have gained confidence and experience from working as volunteers, and environmental action can let them do so gradually, at their own pace. In the words of one interviewee: 'People don't feel intimidated by trees'. There are three ways in which this process becomes apparent. First, people move from a minor role within the project to take the lead in developing a new initiative. Second, they 'graduate' to represent a

project in a wider partnership forum – perhaps an SRB Steering Committee. Third, having gained knowledge and confidence from such experience, people move on to work outside the organisation in a mainstream job or with another project. The two SESKU job-sharers went on to work in another job-share in community economic regeneration in a different SRB area.

Volunteers 'graduating' in such ways do not receive formal qualifications that can be counted. But, collectively, they make a significant and growing contribution to assumptions about the future of community development and regeneration programmes, and to the growing focus on 'bottom-up' perspectives. The way in which they 'train' by being involved as volunteers is frequently taken for granted.

The rise of the 'social entrepreneur'

In recent years, several writers have drawn attention to the importance of social entrepreneurs. These are described as energetic and charismatic people who develop entrepreneurial skills, which they use for the benefit of the community. The ones that have cropped up in this research project have had two characteristics in common. First, they have a sense of vision, which they use to think laterally, develop ideas and inspire and enthuse others. Second, they have a dynamism and energy that infects others.

The lesson here (which appears to be borne out by other studies, see Macgillivray *et al.*, 2000) is that it is important to recognise that such individuals have usually developed their skills *within* community organisations. Local action, usually project-focused, provides an

important training ground. It is here that they gain the breadth of experience that they need to give them the rounded view that is indispensable to leadership in the social economy.

Conventional trading and mainstream economic activity

Many projects operate in the mainstream economy selling goods and services in a conventional way. Small projects can earn a little income to supplement other funding sources. Several of the case studies ran cafés or sold food.

Others now have a significant presence in their local economy. In 1993, a consultant's report estimated that more than 100,000 people visited Heeley City Farm annually, spending money in the café and the garden centre, and making it the biggest visitor attraction in Sheffield. Heeley is also just one example from the case studies of an organisation competing with local colleges to provide training programmes. It has now successfully recruited people from local authorities and social housing providers onto its energy efficiency courses.

Other projects relate to the emerging needs of other sectors. The BRDG, for example, researched the sustainability aspects of the charcoal sold by B&Q and of paper-making processes used by UK firms. It is also investigating less environmentally damaging processes of paper production for use in the UK.

Meeting local economic needs

Some projects provide goods and services explicitly to meet local needs. HHEAG has developed healthy-eating packs for teachers to use in local schools and has helped people learn how to grow their own food (there is no local shop). Other projects have organised community composting schemes (partly to get the compost recycled back onto vegetable plots), and several have begun to offer advice to local people on energy efficiency, or to initiate recycling of one type or another.

Trading and exchanging in the local social economy

Strong networks between community-based organisations have become a well-established feature of the social economy. People running projects respond to inquiries and share their experiences. This supplements the role of national-based organisations like the Development Trusts Association.

Recently, a more radical approach to local economic activity has begun to emerge, as organisations in the social economy start to trade and exchange between themselves. Co-operation between small groups brings shared information, publicity for each other's events, links and other mutual benefits. SESKU's contact with Yorkshire Arts' Circus led directly to the 'Walking on Cold Coal' project, a series of outdoor arts events encouraging people to use a green space newly released (after a century behind a colliery fence!) for public enjoyment. Bigger organisations like the Vines Centre Trust have successfully helped three smaller groups write funding applications for online centres, and then helped them learn how to run the projects. Similarly, those involved in SRB-type programmes share expertise and learn from each other.

Another aspect of this is the way that new organisations grow off from established ones – rather as a clove of garlic grows. Heeley City Farm helped establish Heeley Development Trust and Sheffield Environmental Trading, and

is setting up a twinning arrangement with an estate the other side of the city. The BRDG has also given birth to a number of projects as a result of its core activity, while HHEAG spun off a separate mental health project.

The significance of local action

So, what does the above tell us about the significance of local action? In the past, cynical national commentators have suggested that local action remains irrelevant in the national context. The picture painted in this research – of projects that are improving the living environment, involving and engaging communities, and impacting on people's health – does not bear this out. The evidence above suggests that, while the direct environmental impacts of most local projects are indeed limited and are mostly restricted to improvements in

their own localities, this is by no means the end of the story.

First, the socio-economic impacts of such projects are frequently more significant, and include job creation, training and community development – reasons in themselves to encourage this type of work. Moreover, local projects have important effects above and beyond these immediate impacts. One of the most important such effects is the successful building of environmental awareness and engagement, and the encouragement of individual and collective action that supports sustainable development. Finally, the *collective* impact of such projects on national targets for sustainable development is increasingly significant. Their numbers are growing and, with support, could grow more. It is to questions of support for, and of barriers to, local community projects that the next chapter turns.

City Farms like Heeley can help transform communities and provide new experiences for young people

5 Support for projects and barriers to local sustainability

Support for local projects

Almost all the projects had received some form of external support, with the exception of local authority-run projects, and even these had used advice from other departments, external consultants, etc. This support was delivered in a variety of ways.

Community-level support

Frequently, the support was provided at the community level, often through community development workers. These people were a common source of ideas, advice and inspiration. At Balaji, the health authority's community development worker played a key role in developing outreach activities; HHEAG was started by a council development worker and a health promotion officer; and the St Anne's Estate community development worker was able to introduce food and health issues to the locality.

However, although community development workers were often an important conduit for support to community organisations developing new projects, there were no clear information networks through which such staff received information and ideas about what kind of local projects meet local needs. Council staff in St Anne's, Renfrewshire, Hartcliffe and elsewhere have been instrumental in promoting environmental activity by deprived communities, but, in many cases, such staff may lack a clear overview of developing good sustainable development practice. This is especially true if they are community development workers rather than LA21 practitioners.

The lack of any planned information base is likely to lead to unnecessary duplication and may mean local projects founder because of the lack of informed support. Increased availability of advice to community development workers on sustainability programmes that work could be a valuable step forward.

Support from national organisations

Intermediary agencies might also be playing a supportive role. Issue-focused networks tend to be run by their members in ways that provide the support that is needed and may be a source of the technical support that is also needed for projects to develop.

The development of issue-focused intermediary agencies has been an aspect of work on sustainability in the 1990s that has been going on with relatively little national recognition. Examples would include the Community Recycling Network and the Foundation for Local Food Initiatives: projects that have received support in this way include Calstock (from the Development Trusts Association) and Heeley City Farm (from the National Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens).

However, while some small projects found useful links early on (e.g. SESKU, HHEAG), others did not appear to be well plugged into networks that might have supported them (e.g. St Anne's, AVAG). The stage at which such linkages took place is potentially important since there seemed to be some evidence that intermediary agencies were best suited to supporting smaller projects. As the projects grow and develop, so the network may be able

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to offer less and even start looking to the project itself for support. This appeared to be the case for Heeley's activity within the City Farms network.

For other projects, national environmental groups were delivering support. Friends of the Earth Scotland provided crucial support to the Balmoral Estate project, Wiltshire Wildlife Trust is at the centre of Wiltshire Agenda 21 and the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers has been actively involved in the Balaji Sacred Lands project.

Other support routes

For some, technical support came through other larger bodies. Help came from SRB programmes (as with SESKU); from the private sector (some of the BRDG's projects); or from specialists in certain professions (health sector support given to HHEAG). Some of the larger projects studied (Heeley, West DEN) were themselves providing support to smaller new projects.

Learning and networking

The ways in which the local projects learned were varied, but with several common routes. Most seemed to rely heavily on personal contact: few projects reported using 'good practice' networks or guides; and electronic databases are probably only of interest or available to larger groups. Direct group-to-group visits and exchanges of experience were reported as important to almost half the groups and could be directly supported by larger organisations. In Redbridge, for example, council staff took two newly formed community groups to visit a similar project in a neighbouring borough.

Networking is central to the spread of ideas, and its role – formal and informal, local and national – came up repeatedly. However, the lack of capacity among smaller projects arose frequently as an issue. Several (notably St Anne's) mentioned the way in which getting involved in networks could help a project gain new insights. Yet, networking takes time and resources: it can add extra stress to key workers who see the potential value but are already working long hours and may not wish to travel at anti-social hours. Some projects reported that a lack of resources meant that they were not making links with networks that might be able to help them in the longer term.

Problems and barriers

Local projects exist within a complex environment, with many factors affecting that environment outside their immediate control. These can easily become barriers to success or further development and the case study interviews attempted to get a clear picture of these. Table 9 presents the main categories of problem or barrier cited by people interviewed.

The problems highlighted by case studies can be usefully compared with the 'barriers to local sustainability' identified by a six-nation European survey of Local Agenda 21 programmes (ANPED, 2001). This identified the key issues as lack of support, information and resources; lack of a clear national strategy for sustainability; and difficulties in linking local work with national priorities.

As Table 9 demonstrates, the most reported problems among our case studies were funding related. These included:

Table 9 Cited problems and barriers

Problem/barrier	No. of times reported
Problems related to funding	25
Organisational and general project working issues	18
Problems related to the area, or the nature of local work	18
Problems associated with working with the local community	13
Problems coming from the external/policy context	9
Problems related to working with volunteers	8
Problems with working with the local authority	6
Winning support from within their own organisation	5
Problems associated with the field of sustainable development	2
Total	**104 reported by 17 projects**

- lack of funding

- difficulty in accessing certain sources of funding

- lack of understanding of sustainable development by the funders

- cash flow problems/dealing with funding paid in arrears.

Problems specifically to do with the area of sustainable development were cited less frequently, but included:

- the lack of political commitment

- the lack of 'joining up' at the policy level

- the lack of understanding and the problems inherent in trying to reconcile a global issue with local action

- problems with local government related to claims about their 'obstructive' nature and their resistance to change.

Other issues raised were:

- problems relating to the areas in which the projects were working, such as

vandalism, racial tension, dispersed rural populations and the mix of different local needs

- organisational and project working problems, such as the need for specialist skills and the problems of partnership working.

The case study projects were also asked what changes or support would make their task easier. Table 10 summarises the results.

As this shows, the change that the case study projects most often cited as potentially helpful was a more supportive policy context and action at the policy level. Specific suggestions included:

- clearer national strategy and policy frameworks

- more joining up at the policy level

- a greater shift by government towards embracing sustainable development

- greater incentives for people to work at the local level

Table 10 Support/changes called for

Support/change wanted	No. of times cited
Supportive policy context and action	19
Funding and resources	14
General organisational/working issues	8
More support from the local authority level	6
More effective/relevant national publicity	3
Broker to help improve relationships and co-working	2
Support for workers	1
Total	**53 requested by 17 projects**

- more concerted, effective and targeted publicity/'propaganda' campaigns from government

- more support for small organisations to reach more people more effectively.

Changes in local authority attitudes were also called for, such as:

- a more open and positive approach

- greater co-ordination within the local authority

- better co-working between the local authority and external practitioners.

Partnerships and relationships

Any analysis of relationships in this field needs to take into account the continuing changes that are taking place. These can be personal or local – the departure of key staff or activists – or they can be related to major changes, such as the development of the new local government agenda of Community Strategies and the perceived 'winding down' of LA21. There is therefore a need for a more detailed review of local support structures to consider how they can help resolve these issues.

One of the key concerns that emerged at an early stage in the research was how local programmes and projects related to other organisations in their area: this was clearly linked to how the projects learn and develop. It was expected that one of the key relationships would be with local government. This proved to be the case for several but not all of the case studies. For some, other relationships also came to the fore: these included community organisations working with other groups at a local level and local voluntary groups receiving support from larger organisations or professionals.

All the projects assessed were supported, and to some extent defined, by a set of relationships with other organisations and with those they help and support. The nature of such relationships appears to be one key to the success of local sustainability practice, and any evaluation of the success or potential of a project needs to assess not just what the project does but also how it relates to others. Relationships with larger organisations play a major part in the work of almost all community projects. Smaller projects may rely on the local council for external funding, giving the larger organisation a greater role than the project might desire.

Working relationships can initially be assessed as *horizontal* (relationships with organisations of a similar size or nature, usually within the same community of locality or interest) and *vertical* (relationships with smaller or larger organisations). Unsurprisingly, the smaller projects tended to have smaller networks and some (e.g. Downham, St Anne's) felt that they might benefit from a wider range of contacts with like-minded groups but lacked the time and resources to build such relationships.

A hierarchy of relationships

In describing the relationships that exist between local projects of one sort or another and other bodies/organisations, the word 'partnership' is often used. However, consideration of the relationships held by the case studies suggested that this catch-all phrase may be obscuring a much more complex pattern of relationships. Partnership implies a degree of equal standing on both sides of the relationship, which in most cases did not exist.

In fact, the following hierarchy of relationships could be distinguished within the case study projects.

Client relationship

Smaller projects frequently seemed to be in a *client relationship*, depending on their own internal resources and on support from the local authority or some other large body. Such support may be financial but may also be in the form of staff time, whether for a designated worker (St Anne's) or for advice through an LA21 officer or an environmental co-ordinator (Redbridge).

This level of relationship is often uneasy: distrust for local councils was reported in four

of the smaller projects and there may be little recognition on either side of the problems faced. This is more likely to be a concern where social problems are a big issue (St Anne's again) and less so where there is a clearly defined project and an agreed set of outputs (such as Downham).

Supported relationship

As projects develop, so they acquire a degree of self-reliance and can bring in resources from elsewhere. They may thus be *supported* by the larger organisation but be developing networks of contacts and funding sources that will be broadening their horizons. This may lead to them having a greater social identity and a clearer understanding of their own priorities, which can mean they are less keen to be guided.

Local authorities are by no means the only large agencies supporting local work. Regeneration 'partnerships' are a major source of such support although how far this route will work for local sustainability is as yet unclear. Among the case study projects, Manor and Castle was an example of a project working in this way, while HHEAG has received consistent support from health sector bodies.

Co-operative relationship

A further stage gains ground as a more balanced approach emerges with both sides having a clearer idea of how the other works. Some stronger local projects have developed mutual working while maintaining their own identity. Examples might include West DEN and Calstock where a strong local project has a good relationship with the local authority but is clearly independent of it. Other cases where a local project is occasionally working with, but is not guided by, a local authority would include

Ashley Vale, SESKU and the BioRegional Development Group (BRDG).

Co-operation is also a key factor in horizontal relationships. This can include informal and formal relationships within local communities or more formal relationships between larger local projects and major local agencies (such as the relationship between the Manor and Castle project in Sheffield and the Regeneration Partnership).

Partnership

As noted above, the term 'partnership' implies some equality of stature and perhaps a formalised working agreement. This can be seen in some of the projects covered, notably those set up by local authorities (Redbridge, Wiltshire). However, such formal partnerships appear to be the exception rather than the rule in environmental work at the local level. Such arrangements may be a valuable mechanism for managing larger projects and providing an overview, but do not seem to be so relevant when it comes to day-to-day working at a local level. At present, the term is loosely used and may distort the power relationships that actually exist.

Moreover, the complexity of these relationships is deeper than the categorisation above implies. Relationships between local projects and larger local (or national) agencies are not always easy. Simple distrust (as with community organisations blaming the council for failure to improve services) or personal animosity may cause this, but it can also be related to the potential power of the project itself. Larger and successful projects can have difficult relationships, not least because the project can become an influential critic of others'

activities. In such cases, relations may become guarded and even confrontational.

A final aspect of local relationships is the way in which local projects are 'budding off' from others. Examples would be the way in which the Hartcliffe project has led to the establishment of a separate mental health project and the launch within Redbridge of two independent but supported neighbourhood-level action groups. Others – notably the BioRegional Development Group – consciously exist as a mechanism to set up and develop new initiatives.
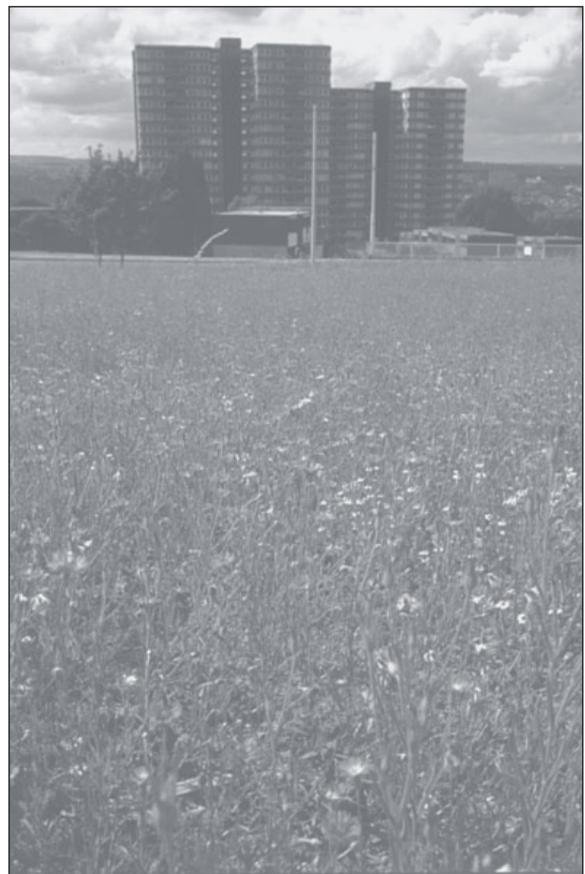
Wildflowers meadows around tower blocks – an unexpected benefit of effective co-operation in regeneration (© Harry Dillon)

6 Conclusions and recommendations

Introduction and context

National programmes for sustainability face major challenges over the next few years. Significant public lifestyle changes will be needed, including:

- major increases in recycling and waste minimisation, as landfill policy changes

- modal shifts in transport, where consumer resistance is already apparent

- massive development of energy conservation practice in every part of human activity to help meet longer-term climate change targets.

Available evidence to date suggests that delivering these changes will be difficult. The October 2000 review of the government-sponsored 'Do Your Bit' campaign suggested that, while people claimed to be 'doing their bit', there was little hard evidence of the lifestyle changes required.

This then is the context: so can local action help government to meet the challenge ahead?

Environmental and social concerns: making the connection?

One of the central targets for this work was to assess 'how far the links between environmental and social action were being operationalised'. The results of the research suggest that such links are indeed being made, but they are often unplanned and they may face obstacles. Integration can take a number of forms, but the research suggests that it is often of a practical nature linked to local needs. Motivating factors for communities, such as accessing more funding opportunities or improving child

health, offer what seem to be better starting points than 'greener' issues.

This supports the critique that says some of the traditional views that see environmental activities as being the exclusive concern of the middle classes are flawed (Burningham and Thrush, 2001; Church *et al.*, 1998). Throughout the UK, local community-based organisations are seeking to improve their surroundings. If this is not being seen as 'environmental' activity then some other traditional perceptions (including some deriving from the environmental movement itself) of what is and is not environmental are too narrow (Community Development Foundation, 1999). The fieldwork for this study suggests that getting involved in a practical local project is often a key first step both to active citizenship *and* to environmental awareness.

So far, much of this work has been unrecognised nationally, and in some cases locally, by those responsible for promoting sustainability. One reason may be that many such projects make little use of the phrase 'sustainable development'. It is important that those who are self-avowedly working on sustainability recognise how much they may have in common with community and voluntary sector activities dedicated to improving neighbourhoods, and how local project-based action can help make sustainable development relevant to people previously uninvolved.

This is not simply a local issue. The later 1990s saw a progressive change in how environmental organisations work with communities. All the major groups in this field such as Groundwork, British Trust for Conservation Volunteers and the Wildlife Trusts have worked hard to develop and publicise new

'mission statements' or similar documents that highlight their desire to work with people as well as places and issues. However, progress is still patchy in both environmental groups and local government, and seems to be impeded by funding regimes that do not support such cross-disciplinary work. Few social sector groups are committing staff or resources to this work, but the new governmental focus on 'liveability' and local environmental quality may lead to more action.

Sustainability: the value of local action

Our research suggests that local action can play an important part in making sustainable development work. It can lead to:

- practical local improvements that meet local needs

- implementation of measures advocated in local plans

- more individuals taking action to change their own lifestyles

- the achievement of local targets that complement national ones

- development of basic awareness and removal of suspicion

- engagement with people who have previously been uninterested in work on environmental issues or sustainable development.

In addition there may be longer-term, wider-scale benefits. Good local projects can help to:

- build support for national policy changes through increasing public engagement

- give advice on how external or national support could help to maximise local contributions to national sustainability targets.

Renfrewshire's Sustainable Communities project has helped local people design a new playground on the Ferguslie Park estate

Although quantifying the national impact of such projects was beyond the scope of this study, the research indicates that projects are having important impacts within their neighbourhoods. They are improving local 'quality of life', engaging people with environmental issues and action, and linking local environmental work with social and economic issues. In doing so, they are making 'liveability' and sustainable development a working reality. Moreover, there are many hundreds, even thousands, of projects like them across the UK. While individual projects may have limited effects, the collective impact of a large and growing number of such initiatives is likely to become increasingly significant.

Beyond the barriers: moving to more effective local sustainability

The research highlights a number of ways in which better local practice could be helped to develop. Exchange of good ideas needs to be linked with information provision, and appropriate networks, training and mentoring programmes and managerial support are all needed. Funding, training and work programmes need to allow staff and community group members time to learn and appreciate the importance of community-centred work and the principles behind such work. Practical tools and programmes are also needed to help put these principles – and the principles of sustainable development – into operation.

Recognising the value of sustainable development

Sustainable development is not a new discipline but it does offer and require a new way of working. The integration of socio-economic and environmental issues poses professional challenges but offers valuable rewards in delivering solutions that work and in showing how social programmes can play a part in delivering national environmental targets, and vice versa. The new 'sustainability challenge' (CAG Consultants for Friends of the Earth, 1998) is to recognise and work with a much greater breadth of activity and to develop expertise in integrating and linking issues, rather than simply working on the issues themselves.

Most commentators agree that sustainable development remains on the margins of the policy agenda: this seems to be due partly to concerns that this new approach may cut across short-term priorities, partly to a lack of political will and partly to a simple fear of change. However, this issue has so far been explored in more detail at the local and global levels than at the national and regional ones. If the real benefits are to be delivered, and if ambitious sustainability targets are to be achieved, then this needs to change, with more leadership coming from national and regional government.

Recognising the value of local action

As this research has shown, there are good reasons for believing that local community-based projects (and not just those with explicit environmental criteria) are contributing to sustainable development. The protection and improvement of immediate living conditions is a natural focus for many such groups, and the simple fact that they may increase activity and options in a locality may help to limit transport use. More generally, 'social' projects looking for 'economic' solutions to local needs tend to

gravitate to recycling and reuse in the widest sense; to personal networks, volunteering and to optimum use of limited resources, rather than to high-expenditure solutions that are often simply unavailable.

Until recently, there have been few programmes to help more citizens become active or indeed develop the social local identity and social capital that would help pave the way for long-term change. Now such programmes are emerging, aided by support from the Active Communities Unit, with the new Community Empowerment Fund as an example. Local Strategic Partnerships will have an important

Community food growing (here in Hartcliffe) may not change the world but builds confidence and engagement and helps with healthy eating

role to play in making sure that emergent good practice becomes common practice. Sustainable development policies and programmes need to add their weight to such initiatives. National policy-makers seeking to see the changes that their policies require also need to be more proactive in their support for local change.

Simple signposting of the positive links that can be made within sustainable development could help actors at all levels, from community groups to central government, add value to, and join up, their actions. Improving a neighbourhood can also provide training, employment and engagement of young people, and thinking about the local environment when working on health policies can help prevent illness. This should be further linked to practical examples, information and tools to help people unfamiliar with these ideas to realise the links.

Better funding systems

Chapter 5 showed that the most frequently cited problems among projects related to funding. Prominent among these was the lack of funding but, while many projects talked of this, it is also clear that many more funding opportunities (notably those related to the National Lottery and regeneration programmes) have developed in the last few years. It seems that the lack of guidance and support on funding is inhibiting the development of some projects. The first lesson, then, must simply be to work harder to publicise potential funding streams.

Second, while there is clearly a need for funding agencies to ensure that money is well spent, inflexible criteria may well hinder innovation. Any funding system should consider ways to make grants more accessible to smaller groups, perhaps through intermediaries

and simpler processes. Equally, large projects with a good record of reporting and management should not have to get entangled in ever more bureaucracy as they develop more funding lines. It may be necessary to consider opening up new channels for core funding to groups that are ready to develop beyond one-off grants and are clearly making a difference in their locality.

Finally, there is also the sustainability context: funding bodies need to recognise the legitimacy and positive benefits of cross-sectoral integrated work, and indeed to promote such an approach. This implies some changes to current thinking: for example, evaluation systems would need to be developed that recognise and value soft outcomes as well as traditional outputs. Indeed, there is arguably a need for specific new funding to encourage work that is clearly addressing the interdisciplinary sustainability agenda, including work being done by local communities working with local councils.

In Sweden, for example, national government has made a series of 'investments in sustainability' now totalling 800 million euros. This money was made available to local councils as 'match funding' and many of the projects on which money was spent emerged from Local Agenda 21 programmes. There is, however, one potential difficulty with this approach: match funding is of little value to community organisations that cannot raise the other part. One possibility for overcoming this would be to accept costed volunteer inputs as the community organisation's contribution. The Volunteer Investment and Value Audit (VIVA) process (Sullivan *et al*., 2001) shows how this can be done. This would also mean that

community activity in this field would become more widely recognised and valued.

Although information and publicity is important (see below), it is worth reflecting that basic public awareness-raising campaigns such as 'Doing Your Bit' appear to have had limited impact. Diverting resources from this use to investing in 'real-life' good practice that 'starts where people are' and addresses local needs – thus engaging interest and attention – may be a more fruitful way forward.

Better support systems and structures

Funding apart, lack of support comes in many ways – for example, in an absence of:

- recognition

- good quality information

- training and development opportunities

- core resources such as adequate places to meet and work.

These are issues that national and local agencies need to face up to: resolving these problems may not need huge amounts of resources, but it does need long-term commitment and a system that can identify the problems as they arise.

There appear to be very substantial variations in the ways in which community action is enabled and supported by councils, regeneration agencies and other organisations. Community development has been treated with suspicion by some agencies and it has had something of a chequered history. More recent times, however, have seen CDF and others become engaged in developing clear standards and evaluation systems (see Community Development Foundation, 2001). There is a need

to ensure that the efforts of local communities are not disadvantaged by the failure of local agencies to provide adequate support: a system of clear minimum standards for this work – linked to training, development and evaluation – could be one way forward.

Training is now widely available for community groups and mentoring is developing in many areas. Both clearly add value. Yet, there is a risk that smaller projects, especially those outside areas with well developed community infrastructure, may not hear about these opportunities. Voluntary sector networks and councils need to take a more proactive approach to promoting what is available and explaining the potential benefits. This could be complemented by local councils and other agencies developing clear participation strategies to ensure that all work with local communities is done to the same high standards and is routinely evaluated.

Better promotion of information and ideas

If sustainable development is not being more widely adopted, one reason is the lack of understanding of the issues. A new, sophisticated information initiative could target opinion-formers and policy-makers at every level, as well as the general public. There is also a need for a practice-focused information system, aimed at communities and professionals working with communities, that would actively present emerging practice in ways that would encourage and enable its uptake. This might include specific resourcing to allow projects to learn from each other. Moreover, any new programme should specifically signpost, at all levels, the links between different aspects of sustainable development and the positive

benefits of working across disciplines.

Finally, most local projects focus primarily on one area of interest, and the links that integrate the social and environmental aspects of their work are based on that interest. Such issue-based projects need issue-based support and this is increasingly being delivered by intermediary agencies. There is a need for better relationships between such agencies and statutory bodies: agencies need ways to feed into national policy agendas in order that policy-makers can learn from local practice.

Recognising and addressing barriers and their causes

The evidence of this report suggests that creating an environment (nationally and locally) in which local action can flourish is crucial: support is important not just to help projects get off the ground, but also to ensure that they flourish and succeed in delivering their long-term objectives. Of course, there is no one 'correct' way to support or deliver good local action. Rather, there is a need for a common underlying approach that starts with a consideration of local needs and assesses how such needs can be met in ways that also benefit the environment or at least have a minimal environmental impact.

Some of the barriers raised by our case studies – such as organisational problems and issues of working within neighbourhoods – are common to most community-level programmes. They can be tackled first and foremost by good local support staff to guide fledgling projects as they go forward. A commitment to setting minimum standards for community support and development would be a suitable starting point for many agencies. There is also a need to ensure that sustainable development projects

are themselves sustainable (where appropriate) in the long term. This is an issue where external support, monitoring and evaluation can be very valuable.

One of the key issues that local support structures need to be mindful of concerns the 'growing pains' that many projects face. Although many local organisations do not undergo rapid change (CAG Consultants for Friends of the Earth, 1998; Community Development Foundation, 1999) and reach a 'comfort zone' where the resources available and commitments necessary match the expectations of members and users, most of the projects covered by this study were undergoing change and development. Policy changes, new opportunities and new funding regimes mean that significant numbers of groups are always redefining or emerging from their 'comfort zones' and changing and developing their work. This may lead to problems and instability: support agencies need to recognise this situation and help groups plan for it.

This study suggests that as groups develop and reach a certain size so a number of major changes can occur (for example, they may become active independent political agents in their locality; they will need funding on a significantly larger scale; and their need for core funding becomes paramount). If these changes occur at around the same time, they can pose serious problems, yet there seems to be little support for larger projects facing this scenario. If a project were to fail to make the transition as a result of this shortfall (as some issue-based networks claimed), then a valuable opportunity would be lost since this may coincide with the potential of the project to really make a difference locally and regionally.

Implications and recommendations

For national policy

• National government needs to make clear the importance attached to sustainable development at the centre. The effective end of LA21 has created uncertainty among many people, and the separation of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) from the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) has added further potential confusion.

• There is a need for clear, joined-up guidance on sustainability that addresses the raft of new measures that have been put in place (Community Plans; Local Strategic Partnerships; Neighbourhood Renewal; the power to 'promote well-being'; etc.). The extent to which implementation of these is addressing local needs and sustainability goals should also be a cross-departmental research priority.

• Specific support from the centre should encompass the development of funding programmes that meet the needs of projects that are specifically addressing community sustainability issues, and repeating some of the successful networking and promotional tools used by LA21 (practitioner conferences, ministerial visits to pioneering schemes, etc.).

• There is an argument to be made for central government 'freeing up the leading edge' when it comes to the development of the social economy and local sustainability (as has been proposed in education policy for the 'best' schools). Simplifying the audit and inspection procedures for bigger, successful projects that have a proven track record of

managing themselves effectively could be an important spur to innovation and could create an incentive for others to join them.

- European funding sources are increasingly important to projects, which would benefit from the government working constructively with the European Union both to bring forward programmes to support the growth of local sustainability, and to widen access by reviewing and simplifying application procedures. This could bring in extra resources, as well as adding new dimensions from the experience of other countries.

For regional policy

- Regional Development Agencies in England should ensure that genuine action on sustainable development is integrated into funding and action programmes. Most of the nine RDA strategies focus, unremarkably, on jobs, technology, inward investment and training. Sustainability and community economic development are usually mentioned but they rarely appear to be a fundamental part of the vision.

- Regional bodies should also consider what action they could take to assist in overcoming some of the barriers identified (the need for premises, suitable sites for expansion, access to professional expertise, etc.). The regional level would be an appropriate level to deal with these issues, particularly in plugging the 'support gap' for projects that are increasing in size and impact beyond their existing locality.

For local policy

- Local authorities should take forward the key role in sustainable development bequeathed on them by LA21 by ensuring that the principles, and the lessons learnt, are linked into their new responsibilities (Community Plans; Local Strategic Partnerships; etc.). They should place a premium on linking environmental and social goals within their local programmes.

- Councils should also place a premium on ensuring that local communities have a real, and properly supported, voice on Local Strategic Partnerships. If such representation can be achieved, then the new Community Plans are more likely to include programmes that support sustainability and relate to local needs.

- Local authorities should give particular attention to their new power to promote 'well-being'. This allows councils to support projects that promote the social, economic and environmental well-being of local people, and is potentially very useful to councils wanting to promote integrated activities. It is intended to promote flexibility, partnership working and participation, and is a power of first resort – a 'can do!' power – so should be used as such.

- Councils also need to recognise the potential value of work with (and support for) independent local projects. Local government has an important role to play signposting work on sustainability, and ensuring that support and ideas are made available to relevant staff and to community groups. Where local expertise exists, councils should

seek to work with well-developed projects and learn from the experience of these groups.

- Recent research (Lafferty, 2001) suggests that there is a genuine shift within local government from a top-down service delivery model to a more empowering approach. If councils and communities choose to co-operate in delivery of local public services then there is the potential for new relationships and for councils to develop their community leadership role at the neighbourhood level as well as at the corporate level. Corporate strategies need to link the 'community leadership' approach to targets for sustainable development and to strategies designed to promote stronger communities.

For national voluntary organisations and intermediary agencies

- Groups in this sector should ensure that they are providing the support networks that are needed. National organisations need to find the tools and structures to facilitate working across social/environmental/community interfaces, to avoid scenarios whereby local action is directed by central policy, and to recognise the long-term benefits of having well developed relationships with local communities. Issue-based networks should seek to provide a structured programme of support, coupled with information and outreach to new projects.

- National agencies need to review their community involvement work in the light of the new focus on 'the local', resulting both from the new local government agenda and from initiatives seeking to support

'localisation' in the face of economic globalisation. Such agencies should ensure that all staff working at a community level are trained in the necessary skills and that this is supported by the development of a set of minimum standards for such work.

- Issue-based intermediary agencies need to look more to how they promote themselves at a national and regional level to ensure both that projects know they are there, and that government and other national agencies recognise their work areas and their expertise.

For community-based organisations (CBOs)

- Local projects should seek to overcome possible marginalisation of their 'softer outcomes' by spending more time on promoting their success. Several projects mentioned councillors and officers coming along to open days or other events, being impressed and becoming more supportive. Such self-promotion may take time but would help both with the councils and agencies and with explaining themselves to local people.

- Networks based around community-based projects should make maximum use of the opportunities presented to them by the new power to promote well-being. There is scope for those involved in social development projects to develop ideas, highlight pioneering approaches and put these to councils as worked-out proposals. There is scope for community-based organisations to take the initiative and press their councils for more enlightened approaches to neighbourhood working.

For research-funding bodies

- Those responsible for funding research should actively promote research that looks across issues and disciplines, and should consider how research findings might be disseminated more widely. If such research is to reach those who may use it locally, it will need to be accessible and written in plain language, which in turn means that resources need to be devoted to post-research promotion and dissemination.

- Evidence-based research has an important role in making sustainable development a reality, yet there are still gaps in what is known about local action. Further research would be useful on a number of issues including how communities learn from each other the value of evaluation frameworks; and the ways in which research projects can work with local agencies to solve problems and to strengthen and support local action.

In conclusion: thinking globally, acting locally?

This phrase has been something of a mantra for environmental organisations for many years. The evidence from these cases, supported by other recent work (ANPED, 2001; Burningham and Thrush, 2001; CRISP, University of Loughborough, 1997), suggests that there is an urgent need to move on from this phrase: it is time to think far more about what is needed locally and how to deliver it through national action. Local action may indeed provide some help in delivering national goals, but work to meet such targets may not always help meet local needs.

Integration of work on environmental issues and anti-poverty programmes is happening in many different ways, but faces a range of obstacles. If local action is to develop its role in sustainable development, then there is a need to tackle these obstacles through:

- developing more supportive policy frameworks

- changes to funding mechanisms and support structures

- greater recognition of the value of community-focused local action.

National and international action on sustainable development currently suffers from a lack of popular support for difficult measures: effective local action can play a part in building awareness of the need for change, winning support for such change and agreeing how such changes may take place. It is in the interests of all those involved to have strong and effective local communities that can help identify and meet their own needs but are also aware of how their community has a wider context and global impacts. This will only happen when we *think locally and act nationally* – when local needs are considered strategically as an integral part of sustainable development strategies, and when those strategies in turn multiply the opportunities, support and recognition for local action.

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Appendix 1

Features of postal survey/case study projects

Table A1.1 Geographical spread

Region/country	No. of responding projects	No. of case study projects
North East	1	0
Yorkshire and the Humber	6	3
North West	6	1
East Midlands	4	0
West Midlands	2	1
Eastern	5	1
South East	4	1
South West	21	5
London	8	3
Wales	3	0
Scotland	3	2
Northern Ireland	0	0
Total	**63**	**17**

Table A1.2 Annual running costs

Annual running cost (£)	No. of responding projects	No. of case study projects
0–500	3	2
501–5,000	4	0
5,001–20,000	4	0
20,001–50,000	8	2
50,001–100,000	9	1
>100,000	16	5
Data missing	*19*	*7*
Total	**63**	**17**

Table A1.3 Population covered

Population covered by project	No. of responding projects	No. of case study projects
<1,000	8	2
1,001–10,000	8	3
10,001–20,000	5	0
20,001–40,000	9	5
40,001–100,000	5	1
100,001–1,000,000	8	2
>1,000,000	8	0
Data missing	*12*	*4*
Total	**63**	**17**

Table A1.4 Longevity of projects

No. of years running	No. of responding projects	No. of case study projects
<1	7	2
1–3	14	5
4–6	13	5
7–10	11	3
11–20	10	1
>20	3	1
Data missing	*5*	*0*
Total	**63**	**17**

Appendix 2

An outline evaluation framework

There is a need for some easily usable form of evaluatory framework, designed to give a thumbnail sketch of the range and significance of impacts of a local project. This could help:

- local organisations to look at areas where they are and are not having an impact, and perhaps identify areas where they could expand their impact

- local organisations to visualise the field of sustainable development in relation to their own actions

- projects to identify impacts that they were not previously acknowledging, and hence potentially access new sources of funding

- people outside the project, and at a wider policy scale, to evaluate the significance of local action in terms of achieving sustainable development goals

- look at ways of adding value to existing action, by considering areas where additional impacts could be realistically achieved

- policy-makers to understand the significance of local projects in this area.

This appendix introduces a possible model for such a framework, recognising that it needs to:

- cover all the social, economic and environmental areas of sustainable development

- be intuitive and easily usable

- give some meaningful indication of the significance of the impacts that a project is having, at a number of scales – from the immediate local scale to a wider consideration of sustainable development

- be treated with care to avoid the distortion of false comparisons.

The impact categories at each level would need some further definition. For example, at the local community level, a minor impact on training could be one that involved less than 5 per cent of the population of that community. Impacts on the natural environment, such as energy use and travel, could relate to targets for per capita energy use or travel, how many people the project was affecting and the changes they were making.

Table A2.1 An outline evaluation framework

SCALE AND DEGREE	IMPACT							
	LC	NegI	NoI	MinI	MajI	*LA*	NegI	NoI
Community development and capacity building								
Personal development								
Living environment improvements								
Training								
Economic impacts								
New/improved services/resources/facilities								
Community consultation/engagement/involvement								
Promoting/awareness of community development								
Health promotion/improvement								
Habitats/wildlife								
Reclaiming/reusing derelict land								
Waste minimisation								
Travel awareness								
Energy use								
Environmentally friendly housing/buildings								
Pollution								
Environmental education and information								
Environmental promotion/awareness raising								
Engaging and involving with environmental/SD – community								
Engaging/gaining support/changing attitudes around environment and SD – policy level and business								
Inputting into wider policy and planning								
Developing and promoting environmentally friendly ways of working or providing goods/influencing and inspiring others								

LC, Local community; NegI, Negative impact; NoI, No impact; MinI, Minor impact; MajI, Major impact;
LA, Local authority; NegI, Negative impact; NoI, No impact.

Table A2.1 An outline evaluation framework (continued)

SCALE AND DEGREE	IMPACT							
	LA ctd	MinI	MajI	*N*	NegI	NoI	MinI	MajI
Community development and capacity building								
Personal development								
Living environment improvements								
Training								
Economic impacts								
New/improved services/resources/facilities								
Community consultation/engagement/involvement								
Promoting/awareness of community development								
Health promotion/improvement								
Habitats/wildlife								
Reclaiming/reusing derelict land								
Waste minimisation								
Travel awareness								
Energy use								
Environmentally friendly housing/buildings								
Pollution								
Environmental education and information								
Environmental promotion/awareness raising								
Engaging and involving with environmental/SD – community								
Engaging/gaining support/changing attitudes around environment and SD – policy level and business								
Inputting into wider policy and planning								
Developing and promoting environmentally friendly ways of working or providing goods/influencing and inspiring others								

LA ctd, Local authority continued; MinI, Minor impact; MajI, Major impact; *N, National*; NegI, Negative impact; NoI, No impact; MinI, Minor impact; MajI, Major impact.