Local Agenda 21 (LA21) is a policy initiative aimed at encouraging local authorities to promote more environmentally, socially and economically sustainable communities. Researchers from the University of Westminster examined whether LA21 has achieved this in some of the UK’s most deprived areas. Drawing on eight case studies, the researchers considered what lessons could be transferred from the local authorities’ past experience with LA21 and their new duty to produce and implement Community Strategies. The study finds that:

LA21 has been a useful tool for local authorities to raise officers’ awareness of sustainable development. However, the LA21 ‘label’ was not generally recognised by local people, although the need to address economic, social and environmental concerns in an integrated manner was clearly understood and supported.

Having an LA21 strategy in place was not necessarily an indication of ‘joined-up’ social, economic and environmental activities on the ground. Other approaches being used by local authorities and their partners were equally or more effective in working towards enhancing local sustainability.

Where LA21 practitioners have linked their work with regeneration programmes there have been successful examples of delivering economic, social and environmental improvements. This link has been vital for engaging local people and basing actions more on what they actually need or want from their area.

Community planning and neighbourhood renewal officers are often unaware of the experiences of their counterparts in LA21 and are duplicating the efforts of previous public involvement exercises in deprived neighbourhoods. Many strategies are overlooking important interactions between the economic, social and environmental concerns of local communities in deprived areas in their policy planning and delivery activities.

Local authorities and other public sector partners are heavily influenced by Government guidance in both their policy development and delivery. The researchers conclude that current guidance needs to be clearer about the importance of achieving sustainable development in deprived communities and the links and tensions between economic, social and environmental policy objectives in the context of regeneration. Without this there will continue to be considerable ambiguity about how to juggle these frequently competing priorities.
Policy background

Agenda 21 was promoted as the global action programme for sustainable development at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. Ten years later, the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) reconfirmed sustainable development as central to the global agenda and strongly emphasised the links between eradicating poverty and protecting the environment.

There is evidence to suggest that many LA21 programmes in the UK have struggled to recruit deprived and excluded communities, black and minority ethnic groups and younger and older sections of the population. This has led to a perception that LA21 is largely a white, middle-class agenda and has little to offer disadvantaged and marginalised communities.

The research examines these assertions in the context of the Local Government Act 2000 and the new duty it places on local authorities to prepare community strategies which ‘improve or promote the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of their areas and contribute to the achievement of sustainable development’. Government guidance indicates that local authorities should make use of existing mechanisms like LA21 when developing their strategies, but has left it up to them to decide how, if at all, their community strategies relate to their LA21 activities.

Some evidence has suggested that many authorities are abandoning LA21 and setting up new structures and procedures for consulting and working with communities. Those advocating sustainable development are concerned that the new plans being produced will either fail to address sustainable development issues or will duplicate past work in this area and fail to draw on the experience and lessons from ten years of LA21 delivery.

The study presents the views of local authority officers and their partners working on the delivery of LA21, community strategies and neighbourhood renewal in eight case study authorities. It compares their perceptions of the role and usefulness of LA21 in encouraging community-based sustainable development activities in deprived areas with the views of frontline workers, volunteers and local people living and working in these communities.

The views of local authority officers

Policy integration

LA21 officers saw more of a need to link environmental policy aims with wider social and economic improvement programmes in the context of regenerating deprived areas than might be apparent in more affluent areas.

"I think we were always acutely aware that if we didn’t tackle the social and economic and the environmental problems on all fronts at the same time, we were likely to fail in the way that initiatives had failed in the past."

Community involvement

There was a sense from some authorities that consulting people on the preparation of an LA21 strategy was manageable, but sustaining their involvement beyond this was difficult.

"We’re very good on consulting on what we’re proposing to do but awful at consulting on how well or badly we’ve done things."

Others reported more success in engaging a broader range of people by involving them in small practical projects in their local area.

"It’s the small projects that actually change things and change people’s lives."

Resources

Some of the officers working in case study authorities had to face LA21 being viewed as a peripheral activity by others because of a lack of basic core funding.

"We weren’t generating results on LA21 for the simple reason that we didn’t have any resources."

Skills and capacities

Effective community participation involves long and unsociable hours and requires a “different set of officer skills and commitments”.

"A cultural change is needed in the way we operate as a council – nine to five as a culture has got to go, community development is a twenty-four hour process."
Transferring lessons
Some officers saw community strategies as a way of getting sustainable development into mainstream practice while others felt that the move signalled an abandonment or side-lining of the sustainability agenda by their local authority.

"The community plan has pushed sustainable development into the mainstream ... you can put an action in the LA21 action plan but you can bet your bottom dollar it won’t happen. Put the identical thing in the community plan action plan and it will. I wouldn't say that we are dumping the LA21. I would say we're dumping the LA21 title."

"Most of the environmental stuff has gone now, it’s all about sustainable communities, anti-social behaviour and those kinds of issues."

Measuring success
The people running case study projects described the difficulties they experience in demonstrating the “real value and worth” of their activities to external funding bodies.

"I wish more people would come out of the offices who grant the money and see what’s going on because then they might understand a bit more about these issues because [otherwise] it’s just statistics and they don’t really understand the wider impact of the work."

Joined-up delivery
One over-riding message from the community level research was that the LA21 label was not widely known or recognised. Nevertheless, the idea that environmental, social and economic problems should be addressed together made complete sense to local people.

"You could talk about the effects of the environment, you could talk about economic problems in the local area, about shopping locally to keep the local shops open … to consider all sorts of different aspects and topics that were about sustainability but that were realistic because they fitted in with hands-on activities."

Conclusion
Looking in detail at the eight case studies, the researchers concluded that the following underlie effective practice.

Motive
There is no better motive than local need - communities will embrace policies and programmes that are responding to their self-identified local needs and reject those that appear to emerge from externally driven factors.

Mandate
Policies work best where they have both member and public support - the best-laid plans and policies can
be undermined or even ruined where this support is not forthcoming.

Management
The structure of local authorities and their management style is an important factor in successful sustainable development policy delivery - the highly departmentalised nature of many local authorities does not lend itself to cross-cutting policy agendas or integrated policy delivery.

Message
Getting the message out is obviously important, but it can be equally important to be a good listener - the message is most resonant when it bears in mind the aims and aspirations of the person who is receiving it.

Money
Policies and programmes cannot be run on thin air, to have any effect they need at least some core funding. The bidding process can be burdensome and time-consuming, so targeting sources of funding that have the greatest relevance to local visions is important.

Means
Other non-monetary resources, such as time, skills and stamina, are often over-looked but are equally important to the successful community-based policies - working on the front-line can be very demanding. Professionals, volunteers and community representatives run the risk of burn-out if not properly supported.

Methods
Projects and programmes need to be better grounded in the methods for achieving them - understanding how to move from theory into successful practice is one of the most difficult challenges facing front-line workers.

Measurement
Measuring the contribution of community-based activity to wider policy objectives can be difficult - often the benefits of initiatives to communities and the area in which they live are hard to quantify and/or do not easily fit into government assessment criteria. The best assessment frameworks are those that are developed to fit the project not vice versa.

About the project
The research was conducted in eight case study areas across the UK: Bolton, Caerphilly, Derry, East Riding of Yorkshire, Middlesbrough, Renfrewshire, Southampton and Southwark. These were chosen as places experiencing significant problems of deprivation, social exclusion and environmental degradation. The researchers undertook in-depth interviews with local authority officers working in the areas of LA21, community strategies and regeneration. Project workers and local residents also took part in a series of discussion groups and one-to-one interviews about the projects and their impacts on the local community.

How to get further information
The full report, What’s in a name? Local Agenda 21, community planning and neighbourhood renewal by Karen Lucas, Andrew Ross and Sara Fuller, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as part of the Reconciling Environmental and Social Concerns series (ISBN 1 85935 080 1, price £15.95).