Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation
Formative Evaluation of Community Strategies

Issues Paper 12: Community Engagement in Community Strategies
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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

This is one in a series of issues papers produced as part of the Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation and Formative Evaluation of Community Strategies. The paper focuses upon community engagement in community strategies, in terms of both their development and their implementation.

The Policy Research Institute (Leeds Metropolitan University), together with Janie Percy Smith (Independent Researcher), has been commissioned by the former Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (now Communities and Local Government) to undertake the evaluations of plan rationalisation and community strategies. Both evaluations have been undertaken between 2004 and 2007 and focus on assessing the effectiveness of the processes which underpin each policy area, as well as linkages between them. A list of forthcoming and published outputs from the evaluations can be found at annex 1.

This issues paper provides further evidence which will inform deliberations within Communities and Local Government on the engagement of communities in community strategy processes.

1.2 Context

The reform agenda of the 1997 Labour Government proposed to initiate a ‘fundamental shift in culture throughout local Government’, with a view to engendering councils which ‘engage directly with their local community … [and] … actively promote public participation’¹ (paragraph 1.8).

Government policy aimed to give local communities ‘real influence and power’² over how they are governed, and asserted that ‘it is right for local people themselves to take the decisions’ (paragraph 2.9). Central to the delivery of their Local Government Modernisation Agenda (LGMA) was public consultation and engagement, and key to this thinking was that:

- service improvement should be driven by a real understanding of public needs;
- understanding these needs will ensure that service delivery will be undertaken more efficiently and effectively;

• public consultation should be used to benchmark and monitor service delivery; and

• citizen/user involvement is important in local decision-making and strengthening Council roles and local democracy more generally.

During the Labour Government’s first term of office, the LGMA and the engagement of the community within these processes was promoted through a number of Acts of Parliament and associated guidance notes for local authorities, including the following:

The Local Government Act (1999) introduced the best value regime with wide ranging provisions to consult generally.

The Local Government Act (2000) made changes to the decision-making structures of local authorities, as well as changes to the decision-making processes for local Government to promote greater openness, involvement and accountability. The Act also placed a duty on local authorities to prepare community strategies to promote or improve the economic, social and environmental well being of their areas, and contribute to achieving sustainable development in the UK.

Guidelines on Preparing Community Strategies (2000) stipulated that community strategies have to meet four objectives, the first one of which was to ‘allow local communities (based upon geography and/or interest) to articulate their aspirations, needs and priorities’. In addition, one of the guiding principles underpinning all community strategies was to ‘engage and involve local communities’, further details of which (as laid out in paras 50-58) asserted that:

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

The National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (2001) initiated significant funding programmes including New Deal for Communities and the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF), which provided additional non-ring-fenced resources for 88 local authorities incorporating the country’s most deprived areas. The requirement to involve and consult with local communities in those areas was paramount, and the Community Empowerment Fund (CEF) specifically provided opportunities for community and voluntary groups to get involved in Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs). The Social Exclusion Unit also emphasised the complex nature of community

involvement and suggested that ‘to do it well’ would include at least the following steps:

- outreach, especially to excluded communities, to make them aware that they have the chance to express their views and directly influence service providers;

- facilitation to pull together the community’s views and procedures for choosing community members of the LSP;

- participation of community members in sufficient numbers on the LSP, for which they might need training and other forms of support (e.g. pre-meetings, briefings); and

- Government Office action if an LSP did not engage with the community appropriately, and does not take sufficient account of community views.

It was further suggested that many of these issues are best approached at the neighbourhood level rather the wider area covered by the LSP, an issue considered later in this paper.

In 2001, the DETR issued a guidance paper for LSPs, which re-emphasised that:

“...involving local people and communities is vital for the successful development and implementation of community strategies and local neighbourhood renewal strategies, and key to achieving lasting improvements.” (paragraph 1.19)

This guidance went on to add that:

“...securing the necessary degree of community involvement will require an imaginative and flexible approach. Attention should be given at an early stage to ensuring that local communities are given the support they need to participate fully and to contribute to the design and delivery of the LSP’s approach.” (paragraph 1.20)

A variety of methods was specified in the guidance, including the following:

- feeding in local people’s views through other partnerships with narrower remits;

- direct consultation;

- ensuring openness and transparency in the way the LSP works, for instance by making information easily accessible and publicising its availability;

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• capacity-building and training to enhance the involvement of hard-to-reach communities (including disabled people, older people, youth groups, and people from faith, black and minority ethnic communities); and

• recognition of the need to facilitate greater levels of participation (implementation, self-management and so forth) at local level where this is being sought.

Consultation and community engagement have continued to form an important part of the modernisation agenda, especially following publication by different government departments of a range of policy documents, including the Local:Vision document Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter, and the Together We Can Action Plan which both seek to support greater involvement of citizens in policies and service improvement.

More recently, the Local Government white paper, published in 2006, set out proposals to empower local communities which include: a Community Call for Action to enable people to raise issues of concern in their community and demand a response from their local council; and strengthening local area agreements to ensure local authorities can respond to the needs and priorities expressed by local communities. The white paper also proposed revising the duty of best value, to ensure that local authorities actively encourage participation of citizens in their activities, including hard-to-reach groups.

In making a commitment to simplifying procedures to enable the co-ordination of consultation on community strategies, Local Area Agreements (LAAs) and Local Development Frameworks (LDFs), the white paper re-asserts that local authorities are obliged to consult and seek the participation of ‘such persons as they consider appropriate’ in preparing community strategies, and commits the Government to extending this duty to include the preparation of the LAA, stating that:

“Our expectation is that local authorities will involve the voluntary, community and business sectors, parish councils, and other local public service providers in both the design and delivery of Sustainable Community Strategies and LAAs.” (p100)

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 gained Royal Assent on 30 October 2007. It aims to promote the sustainability of local communities, based on the principle that residents know best what is needed to promote the sustainability of their community. The Act introduced a number of measures relating to local government and the involvement of local communities including a duty on named partners to cooperate to agree

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the targets in the LAA, and to make sure they are achieved. The Act also amended the Best Value duty placing a duty on Best Value authorities to ensure that local people and/or representatives of local people are ‘informed, consulted or involved in other ways’.

Following the enactment of this Act, the Government published draft statutory guidance\(^{11}\) which they see as central to the delivery of the new settlement as set out in the white paper, *Strong and Prosperous Communities*. Among a range of suggestions it provides guidance on Community Empowerment and the new duty to involve which will come into force on 1 April 2009. Section 3 of the guidance also explains the Government’s intentions to remove the independent examination of the LDF’s Statement of Community Involvement to allow a more coordinated approach to consultation:

> “Local authorities will need to consider how they consult with representatives of local people (including residents and workers), parish councils, local businesses and third sector on their Sustainable Community Strategies given the principles enshrined in the new duty to involve.” (section 3.6)

The statutory guidance also makes clear the LSPs should communicate the progress of LAA targets to local people.

### 1.3 Defining community engagement

The analysis of findings from the research enquiry informing this paper was based on the following working definition\(^{12}\) of community engagement, designed to capture much of the foregoing:

> “... a civil right by which residents can collectively engage in activities which influence the policy and practice of (public service providers). Residents should be allowed influence to the extent they choose through (those providers):

- establishing sustainable structures and processes to enable two-way communications, negotiations with residents;

- supporting and negotiating with independent resident-led organisations with an interest in the roles and responsibilities of the (public service provider); and

- entering into agreements to enable residents to make and implement formal decisions about aspects of policy and practice affecting them.

To be effective, the resident involvement process requires:

\(^{11}\) *Creating Strong, Safe and Prosperous Communities Statutory Guidance: Draft for Consultation* CLG 2007

• mutual understanding of the historic, social, economic, cultural and political context in which it is set;

• all participants to be adequately resourced, informed and supported; and

• a mutual acceptance of key values including a non-directive approach to participation where residents are empowered, prejudices are challenged, and there are full rights of equal access to the resident participation process and the (public) service.”

1.4 Research questions

This issues paper examines the following key questions in relation to the community engagement in the development and implementation of community strategies:

• In what ways are communities involved with the planning, implementation and evaluation of the community strategies?

• What types of consultation have taken / are taking place regarding the community strategies? How have these evolved since the community strategy was first produced?

• How do these processes link with other key consultative requirements (e.g. in terms of LAAs and LDFs)?

• In what ways are the above mechanisms representative of the communities in the locality? How are the ‘loudest voices’ prevented from dominating?

• How do you avoid consultation overload?

• Have any mechanisms been developed to co-ordinate consultation/engagement mechanisms within the local authority across partners?

• How are different ‘equalities’ groups represented?

• Who are considered to be the ‘hardest to reach’ groups and how are they involved?

These questions are considered in the subsequent sections of this paper.

1.5 The evidence

This paper addresses the questions set out in section 1.4 by drawing upon a range of data sources from the formative evaluation of community strategies. These include:
two light touch case studies focused specifically on the issue of community engagement in community strategy processes;

the 2004 survey of local authorities (published as a separate report);

the 2005 review of community strategies (published as a separate report);

findings from the main case studies (including fieldwork undertaken in 2004, 2005 and 2006).

ccontributions from participants in a workshop (co-hosted by the PRI and Communities and Local Government) on community engagement in community strategies held in Leeds on 17th May 2007; and

evidence from other elements of the LGMA evaluation framework, notably the national evaluation of LSPs.

The light touch case studies (conducted between January and February 2007) focused specifically on the engagement of the community in the development and implementation of the community strategy.

The light touch case study research involved documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. Interviews were undertaken with key people at different levels of the authorities and other agencies so that a range of issues pertaining to community engagement could be considered. Some community representatives were included in order to gain a community perspective, although full representation of agencies and the relevant communities is outside of the scope of the study. Specific interviewee material has not been identified, as anonymity is important in enabling interviewee openness.

Examples of good or interesting practice have been highlighted throughout the paper.
2 Community engagement in community strategy processes

2.1 Introduction

This section of the paper provides an overview of the process of community engagement in community strategies. It draws upon the range of evidence available through the evaluation to consider the way that community engagement processes are operating in terms of the different stages of community strategy development and implementation. Within the scope of this study we were unable to evaluate the detailed impacts that those processes may have which require a much more in-depth research project.

2.2 Overview of community engagement in community strategies

Findings from the evaluation of community strategies over the last three years indicate that in general terms consultation processes and methods of engagement relating to community strategies have developed and become more embedded in ways of working.

The 2004 survey of local authorities\(^\text{13}\) found that almost a half of respondents (49\%) felt that the public had been involved ‘to a significant extent’ and 40 per cent ‘to a moderate extent’. Interestingly nearly 12 per cent said only ‘to a slight degree’ in the development of community strategies. Reported levels of involvement were generally higher in unitary authorities, those authorities in receipt of Neighbourhood Renewal Funding (NRF) and those rated as ‘excellent’ under the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA).

More recently, the key role of community engagement in LSPs was highlighted by a recent survey undertaken as part of the national evaluation of LSPs\(^\text{14}\). Asked about future priorities for the period 2006-8, LSP co-ordinators identified a wide range of activities, including an emphasis on developing the community strategy and engaging both partners and the community.

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This emphasis reflects the pattern that has emerged from case study research undertaken as part of the national evaluation of community strategies between 2004 and 2006\textsuperscript{15}. This suggests that community engagement in community strategies processes is generally viewed as an essential part of practice.

There is evidence to suggest that the process of community engagement is being viewed more strategically and is often embedded within either corporate processes and/or within the strategy itself. For instance, one of the priorities within Croydon’s community strategy is ‘Increasing Community Involvement’ covering issues such as:

- greater involvement in decision-making (especially young people);
- encouraging active citizens;
- building community capacity;
- developing listening public agencies and a well informed community; and
- improving community spirit.

Similarly, Bath and North East Somerset Council has adopted a set of corporate values, one of which focuses specifically on encouraging community involvement. In this, the Council makes a commitment to ‘actively seeking contributions from parish councils and other community groups and individuals’.

Whilst it is clear that there has been a ‘deepening’ of community engagement processes, in some authorities our research suggested that consultation may have been more limited. For example, in one authority, several interviewees felt that the community strategy was not an accurate representation of local views, with two contributors commenting as follows:

‘…the consultation with the wider community was not wide enough – there was deep criticism about this from the community’.

‘…does the community strategy mean anything to the people it is written on behalf of? Partnership working with certain groups is particularly low’.

The issue of the extent and appropriateness of community engagement process are considered in more detail in section 4.

2.3 Engagement at different stages of community strategies

The original DETR guidance on community strategies acknowledges that: ‘the nature and degree of community involvement will inevitably vary at different stages of the process and according to the issue’; and identifies three considerations for councils and LSPs:

- how community views are going to influence and inform the decision-making process;

- how differences of view are to be aired and resolved within the LSP; and

- how decisions are to be explained to communities.

Evidence from the evaluation suggests that approaches to community engagement do vary depending on the stage of development and implementation of the community strategy. The research findings suggest that local authorities and their partners on LSPs tend to distinguish between two discrete phases of community engagement activities:

1. when they are being initially drawn up (including when they are being substantially revised); and

2. during their implementation (which includes monitoring targets, actions etc.).

These two phases are explored in more detail in the subsequent sections.

2.4 Engagement in the development of strategies

The original DETR guidance on community strategies stated that ‘if community strategies are to respond to public concerns, there needs to be genuine community engagement with the beginning of the process’, especially if they are to be involved in both the ‘long-term vision and the shorter-term priorities for action’.

Evidence from the evaluation indicates that engagement processes within the development of community strategies have focused mainly at the start of the production of the community strategy. In particular there has been a focus on the use of engagement and consultation to inform the development of initial priorities.

Once initial needs have been identified and agreement for the priorities sought, the same level of engagement is not usually reflected in subsequent years unless there have been major revisions to the community strategy. Subsequent consultation and engagement work has tended to be
undertaken at appropriate stages in the development and evolution of the community strategies, for instance when the community strategy has been redrafted or refreshed.

The following examples are illustrative of the varying approaches adopted by authorities when consulting and engaging the community in the development and review of their community strategies. We were not exploring the detailed impacts they may have had on emerging community strategies; impacts are addressed in 4.6 below.

**Box 1: Processes for engagement in reviewing the community plan in Barnsley**

Barnsley undertook extensive consultation and discussion on the direction and priorities for the revised Community Plan:

- A forum of 100 key local agencies was brought together to review the Community Plan and identify areas for improvement.

- A series of focus groups were held to further gauge local perceptions. Participants were selected from Barnsley’s Citizens’ Panel, consisting of older people, young couples with and without children, and ‘empty nesters’.

- A youth summit was also held to gauge the views of local residents aged under 16 years.
In Haringey a 6 month process was launched to review the community strategy, called ‘have your say – Haringey – shape the future’. The consultation process was launched at a conference event for partners to ‘close off the old strategy’ and set the direction for the new strategy.

The main principles of the process were to be accessible, simple and not too technical. The emphasis was on making it as easy as possible for residents to get involved in the process with a focus on inclusiveness. The process was intended to be as wide ranging as possible including existing groups and the general public.

A specially designed colourful logo was designed, which was agreed by partners. As well as producing material in different languages, various versions of materials were produced which were aimed at minority and marginalised groups and at small businesses in the community.

A postcard was produced which posed four questions:

- What are the good things about living in Haringey?
- What three things do you think would make Haringey an even better place to live?
- What should Haringey be like in 10 years time?
- What concerns do you have about living in Haringey?

These were mailed to over 650 voluntary and community groups in the borough encouraging them to distribute the cards to their members. They were also disseminated to a wide range of events around the borough over the summer (starting with the Tottenham carnival). It was also distributed through shopping centres, libraries and carnivals as well as through groups such as the neighbourhood assemblies and other resident, community and voluntary groups. Other means of dissemination include through the local newsletter (‘Haringey People’) and through the LSP website. Other promotional materials (balloons and paper hats) were designed and used to engage people.

Around 1200 responses were received. The responses were analysed but were not intended as a quantitative survey as much as to engage people in the strategy more generally as a two way process of finding out the general aspirations of people as well as informing them about the process of strategy development. As such it served to identify broad areas of concern to the public needing addressing as well as generally raising awareness of the strategy and its relevance to local people.

The revised strategy was put out again to consultation through the website and ‘Haringey People’ newsletter.
2.5 Engagement in the implementation of strategies

Clearly substantial efforts have focused upon engaging communities in the initial development of and subsequent revisions of community strategies. A key issue however is the extent to which communities are engaged in the implementation of strategies.

The original DETR guidance on community strategies states that engagement is not only necessary at the start of the process but also in the implementation phases: ‘local strategic partnerships will also need to consider the part that residents and community groups can play in implementing community strategies’. It points to areas such as the management of social housing where there are ‘well-established ways of involving communities in both the planning and delivery of services’.

In the context of longer term engagement in community plans, the Community Development Foundation\(^\text{16}\) recommends maintaining clear distinctions between:

- activity which represents the community, as users and controllers;
- activity which the community freely chooses to do (or to stop doing) for itself, e.g. mutual aid; and
- activity which bids to deliver some part of the public services by taking on a contract and the systematic accountability that goes with it (p19).

Overall engagement within the implementation of community strategies was less clear-cut. In the case studies, it was found that following the initial development of the strategy, community engagement in its implementation (including action planning, monitoring, performance management) is largely undertaken through LSP structures.

Interviewees suggested that this was appropriate as those residents who were more interested in issues relating to the direct provision of services would be more likely to be engaged with the service provider rather than the LSP in the first instance, and therefore engagement in those issues

should start at that level. Interviewees who were also service providers were generally able to provide examples of how they facilitated community involvement in their own areas of work. For instance, in one case study an interview highlighted the following example:

“We had … a small community group who support elderly people who came to us about uneven paving and we worked with them to sort it out – but the Community Forums would tend to go straight to the services.” (LSP coordinator)

In many case studies community groups had a long history of working with their council. This relationship had become increasingly complex and multi-faceted as trust had developed. Where such relationships have evolved (and of course there are many dangers to this approach such as community incorporation and excluding others), involvement in ongoing activities, for example through LSP structures, is generally at a higher level.

Most LSPs in the case studies felt that their current engagement of the community in the overall operations of the LSP was sufficient to enable people to become involved in the community strategy in an ongoing way. That engagement has been explored extensively elsewhere.17

The most common approach to involving communities in monitoring strategies was through specific thematic areas, which may be led by or through sub partnerships of the LSP. For instance, in one case study authority consultation on the community strategy was undertaken through thematic partnership structures: “...each chapter contains a summary of key targets and actions that will be undertaken for each priority area and these have been agreed by the partnership responsible for that priority.” (LSP Coordinator)

Approaches to community membership of thematic groups and sub-committees of the LSP varied across the case studies. These in the main are drawn from an existing community network which is usually serviced by the local Council for Voluntary Service (CVS). Examples of approaches to incorporating voluntary and community sector interests within LSPs are set out below (again there was no attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of these approaches in terms of their outcomes).

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In Blackburn with Darwen a third of the places on the LSP are from the community and voluntary sectors which are coordinated through the Community Empowerment Network. Within the Network there are a number of forums and sub-groups such as an inter-faith council, a BME network, a disabilities network, older people’s forum etc. they are therefore all seen as having a clear line of accountability.

Similarly, Croydon’s Community Network was established in 2002 to co-ordinate the input of the community and voluntary sector into the LSP. The Network comprises around 250 community and voluntary groups, and continues to grow in size each month. It employs a Network Manager on a part time basis as well as an Outreach Worker. The Network selects representatives to the Strategic Partnership, and supports them in participating in the Partnership’s activities. The Network disperses the Community Empowerment Fund that assists community and voluntary sector groups engage with the Strategic Partnership.

2.6 Summary

The process of community engagement in the development and implementation of community strategies has developed and deepened over the period of the evaluation. Substantial effort and resources were devoted to the initial development of community strategies in terms of informing priorities. Engagement processes have also informed subsequent revisions of strategies.

Engagement in the ongoing implementation of community strategies is less straightforward: Through the operation of the LSP and associated sub groups it has mainly focused on the ongoing involvement of a range of voluntary and community groups rather than residents per se.
3 Approaches to engagement

3.1 Introduction

The previous section indicates that communities are being engaged in different ways within the various stages of community strategy development and implementation. This section considers the approaches that are being adopted to engagement. This includes both the methods of engagement and also the geographical level of engagement.

3.2 Methods of engagement in community strategies

The original DETR community strategy guidance recognises the need for a wide range of engagement methods as ‘individuals belong simultaneously to a number of communities, of both place and interest, and will identify with different communities according to their circumstances and the issues under discussion’. Furthermore, they emphasise that such techniques should be most appropriate to local circumstances.

The 2004 survey of local authorities indicated that mechanisms for involving residents in the development of community strategies varied widely but the most common means included public meetings, focus groups, citizen’s panels and household surveys was well as through area working structures. The approaches to engagement vary according to the type of authority. For instance, unitary and lower tier authorities were more likely adopt methods such as public meetings. Lower tier authorities were less likely to adopt methods such as focus groups and citizens panels, which may be linked to issues around resourcing. Unitary authorities were more likely to engage people through area working structures. The case study authorities echoed this range of activities which range from consultation over the initial strategy development to ongoing involvement in its structure and monitoring. These methods include:

- neighbourhood partnerships.
- neighbourhood management teams.
- a ‘Think Local’ exercise in which area forum officers talked to local people
- interviews with partners and stakeholder agencies
- citizens panels
- focus groups including with hard to reach groups
- community networks
• consultation with the voluntary and community sector
• community involvement strategy groups
• assemblies (for example district-wide)
• conferences and workshops (including visioning conferences)
• surveys (postal and face-face including surveys specific to the community strategy and use of other surveys, such as best value customer satisfaction surveys)

These approaches may be considered and categorised in a variety of ways, for instance:

• the extent to which they are one off or ongoing/regular methods of engagement;

• the extent to which they seek to be representative of the entire population or focus on specific groups (for instance hard to reach, communities of interest or geographic areas);

• the nature of the consultation, that is whether they are consulting on a range of options or are more open; and

• extent to which they are engage residents in making decisions or discussing options.

In areas that are eligible for NRF it is clear that engagement has been more extensive, with a much greater emphasis on area working. Evidence from case studies indicate that local authorities and LSPs have involved the NRF-funded Community Empowerment Networks in consultations on their community strategies.

3.3 Levels of engagement

Evidence from the evaluation indicates that engagement may operate at a series of different levels. Broadly speaking these fall into two categories: authority wide approaches and neighbourhood level approaches. These two approaches are considered in the subsequent sections.

3.3.1 Authority-wide approaches
At the authority-wide level, many of the case study areas have undertaken a range of consultation exercises as one off or regular events which may be specifically targeted at particular groups or communities of interest.
Examples of authority-wide approaches that have been adopted by case study authorities include:

- an ‘appreciative enquiry’ process adopted by the LSP in generating the Imagine Ryedale document. It is intended that elements were to be repeated early in 2007, in order that local people can contribute to the ongoing development and revision of the community strategy. Consultation of the community strategy has been incorporated into the annual Quality of Life survey in Ryedale, in which the LSP ‘sponsors’ a number of questions to enable them to monitor progress against their targets. Further details on the approach that is adopted by Ryedale are set out in box 5 below;

- in Barnsley, the annual think local exercise involves area forum officers distributing questionnaires across the Borough. A think local exercise has been carried out in 2006 and is an ongoing process. Barnsley Forum, which is open to the public, meets three times per year and provides opportunities to get local people involved. It is advertised in the local press and held in the town hall, is run by key partners and is opened by the leader and chief executive of the council. It focuses on pertinent social issues to inform the public of activities and give them an opportunity to express their views on the community strategy and its processes;

- Croydon has a range of mechanisms to engage local people including; Neighbourhood Partnership meetings; a newly refreshed Citizens’ Panel with an increased number of participants to 1,500 and; customers/residents surveys (including borough-wide questionnaires).
### Box 5: Imaginative approach to consultation

When consulting on the original draft of the community strategy, Ryedale District Council (and their LSP partners) used *Imagine* to assure their citizens that decisions would be made in line with a shared vision of what people had agreed they wanted for the area.

Imagine is a community participation method based on an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach that builds a vision for the future using questions to focus people's attention on success. Using external facilitators, a core group of local activists and officials were trained in the use of AI, and used semi-structured interviews based around questions designed (at two workshops) to encourage people to tell stories from their own experience of what works. Large numbers of members of the community were involved in these ‘conversations’, which were held at various venues across the District and which many participants found to be a fresh, fun and inspirational form of participation.

The core group then identified recurring issues from these discussions and used these to draft a number of ‘provocative propositions’ based around six emergent themes:

- vibrant communities
- strong, safe communities
- access and communication
- health and well being
- landscape and environment
- developing opportunities.

These ‘provocative propositions’ were presented back to participants at a number of workshops and meetings with different stakeholder groups, to test their feasibility and desirability, and to identify whether or not they were happening already. The final workshops were used to refine and adopt the statements, which were then adopted as the community strategy’s vision.

One core group member expressed their belief in the process by expressing: ‘I’m left with a sense of hope that a vision can be dealt with strategically’, while the council officer responsible for overseeing the process describes the outcome as ‘a contract drawn up between the council and the community’, against which progress on implementing the community strategy can be assessed.
3.3.2 Neighbourhood approach

One of the key challenges for community strategies is the balance between authority-wide and neighbourhood-level approaches and priorities. The extent to which the community strategies impact on the neighbourhoods or vice versa is, less than transparent.

For example in one unitary authority which has adopted an area working structure the priorities from the LAA are used to set the priorities within each of the five areas. At the moment, however, priorities are not yet fed the other way from the areas to the LAA: “...they probably will do in time... eventually I see they will be throwing things up that don’t sit within the framework one of the neighbourhoods will say “this is a big issue and here is the evidence and borough-wide priorities don’t reflect it’”. (Voluntary Sector Interviewee)

There is evidence to suggest an increasing neighbourhood approach to engagement of residents in some of the case study areas, which may also be linked to evolving area-based structures. It is anticipated that this will become increasingly important in the light of recent developments outlined in the white paper. The following examples in box 6 illustrate the shift in emphasis to neighbourhood level engagement.

**Box 6: Approaches to area based consultation**

In **Mansfield**, service providers such as the Nottinghamshire PCT are focusing more on neighbourhood level delivery; ‘people can identify with a neighbourhood’. Neighbourhood groupings are chaired by a member of the local community, with a delegated budget and a say in the way a city-wide budget is spent. They also have an input from the 40 neighbourhood wardens.

In **Blackburn with Darwen**, Neighbourhood Partnerships in five areas are seen as key to the engagement process with the community strategy. The Partnerships are regarded as ‘mini LSPs’: ‘the format of the neighbourhood boards is the same as that of the LSP – they involve the private and public sectors too’. Each of the Partnerships has its own distinct engagement strategy.
3.4 Summary

The evaluation indicates that a wide range of methods have been adopted to engage the community within the development and implementation of community strategies. Approaches to engagement need to be relevant to local circumstances, but there needs to be an emphasis on a range of approaches that provide sufficient opportunities for residents to ‘have their say’.

There have also been varying approaches to level of engagement. It is clear that a key issue is developing an appropriate balance between authority wide approaches and neighbourhood approaches to engagement and how neighbourhood level priorities are reflected within community strategies. This has become particularly pertinent in relation to the continued emergence of area based structures and the priorities set out in the Local Government white paper.
4 Key challenges and issues for engagement

4.1 Introduction

This section of the paper focuses on some of the key challenges and issues with regard to community engagement within the community strategy process. This focuses initially on the central question of the quality of engagement work being undertaken and the effect of that work on strategies and the community itself. This section then looks at a number of other issues such as consultation fatigue and the co-ordination of engagement and consultation activities, and the need to ensure that all voices within the community are heard, including issues around the inclusion of marginalised groups. Finally, this section identifies two further related issues that the research has raised: the relationship between citizens’ views and other evidence; and their relationship with the views of local elected representatives.

4.2 Quality of engagement

In order to measure the quality or value of an activity it is necessary to identify what purpose it is intended to serve. Although a much-promoted concept – often assumed to be “a good thing” – the purpose of community engagement has a wide range of meanings to different people, and engaging the community in developing community strategies has not been clearly defined. The 2006 white paper\(^\text{18}\) (paragraph 2.11) points to a number of benefits that may arise from involving citizens in local decision-making and services, these include:

- strengthening the democratic legitimacy of government and the civic life of the community;
- more efficient and effective services that better reflect the needs of users and have higher levels of customer satisfaction;
- safer communities and a more attractive built environment that meets people’s needs; and
- strengthening community cohesion.

Although none of these benefits relate specifically to community strategies, some may be implied. The guidelines on preparing community strategies (2000) quoted in section 1.2 above, states that the objective of community

strategies is to “allow local communities (based upon geography and/or interest) to articulate their aspirations, needs and priorities” and says that engagement is “vital to ensure wide local ownership of the community planning process”.

Another major aspect of engagement within strategy formation is about bringing together an understanding of the needs, aspirations and priorities of a community with service planners and providers. As such, it has been found an invaluable aspect not only of planning and forming strategies but also monitoring community strategies; although that engagement extends well beyond the remit only of community strategies. Maguire and Truscott (2006) recently identified the single most valuable outcome of community involvement in strategic partnerships identified by participants as:

“...the creation of bridging links between service providers and the communities they serve. These links enable local area, interest or faith group representatives to access senior managers and policy makers, and inform them of directly experienced impacts of decisions they are making.”

Feedback and involvement in monitoring should therefore be seen as an essential part of the engagement process generally.

The Government’s current policy drive to developing consultation and creating a culture of engagement would imply that LSPs, local authorities and their partners would be developing their policies and practices in this area. However, our research has not discovered a wealth of innovative or systemic engagement activities. The majority of this activity appears to be little more than consultation exercises, designed as much as to inform the public as to inform the strategy, and very little if any, has involved citizens directly in drafting and monitoring the community strategies let alone setting priorities.

4.3 Impact and effect of community engagement

Again, in terms of impact it is necessary to understand the desired impact of engagement before being able to measure what that has been. Benefits of engagement in community strategies may be:

(a) related to people and communities (e.g. their understanding and ‘ownership’ of the strategy, as well as in terms of the resulting outcomes of an effective strategy); and

(b) the more immediate effect on the preparation and the implementation of the community strategy (i.e. did engagement influence the final strategy content or structure? What impact did any

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involvement in the implementation of the strategy have?)
Measuring this is of course problematic without a larger local
qualitative survey, knowing what would have happened without
engagement, and a more detailed understanding of the decision-
making processes within the LSP (e.g. were community views offset by
other important factors? How representative were those views? etc.).
Although difficult to quantify or even qualify, such benefits to be
gained from engagement should not be ignored and it is
recommended that research is undertaken to explore this in
more depth.

Our research indicates that in some areas the consultation process has been
helpful in developing the strategy in that it helped to ground it more fully in
the needs of community. Although it may be argued that consultations rarely
reveal issues that LSPs and their partners (including those from the
community sector) are unaware of, it has been shown above that people not
only appreciate and respond to lively, focused, appropriate publicity but that
some new issues can emerge. For instance, in Haringey it was suggested that
consultation ‘helped us to realise the aspirations, hopes and fears of
residents more clearly’. In one case study authority interviewees highlighted
the effectiveness of their LSP in engaging the local community in the
development of the initial community strategy through the use of an
‘appreciative enquiry’ approach. A recent revision of this community strategy
relied on the same approach (albeit to a lesser extent), and has resulted in
the number of objectives being greatly reduced, in order that the LSP can
illustrate to the local community the impact it has had on the key needs
identified in the community strategy process.

Despite these examples, however, it is clear that LSPs see engagement as
being helpful as a process of needs identification (or, at least, confirmation
of already identified needs), rather than positively embracing the concept of
engaging citizens in developing other aspects of the strategy (such as
prioritising and monitoring issues themes and targets).

4.4 Conceptualising ‘the community’

Another challenge central to the debate around engagement is the varying
conceptualisations and definitions of community that are used by different
stakeholders.

Several examples of the way in which partners are reviewing their approach
to locality working were cited during the interviews, although the
identification of ‘localities’ remained problematic. In many cases there are
difficulties for agencies to use co-terminus boundaries, although partners
appear to acknowledge their responsibility to work more effectively at a
local level and engage with the public. Some respondents acknowledged
that there might be a role for the LSP in helping to develop a common
framework of understanding at what geographic level the concept should
be applied.
Another issue appeared in a minority of localities that whilst there are aspirations to use the community strategy for engaging people locally, the process is not unproblematic. For example, in one locality several respondents identified flaws in the development of the original community strategy; although the LSP was required to produce it using the district as the locus of ‘community’, it is felt that local residents are likely to have a closer relationship with their town or village. It was therefore felt that there is an inbuilt tension to the process of trying to secure community involvement in and ownership of the community strategy.

### 4.5 Coordination with other engagement activities

As outlined at the beginning of this report, engagement activities are neither new nor specific to this area of authorities’ responsibilities. As demonstrated above, there are a wide range of engagement mechanisms that are undertaken by many of the partners and much of this has been undertaken for some time. The original DETR guidance recommends that authorities ‘do not reinvent the wheel’, that wherever possible they “…use existing mechanisms that have already been proved to be effective, rather than setting up duplicatory processes”. The guidance specifically mentions established mechanisms around Local Agenda 21 strategies, the New Deal for Communities, the New Commitment to Regeneration and Parish councils.

Taking heed of previous experience and expertise is not only important in designing future forms of engagement, but it is also important when considering the range of activities that now require consultation to take place. In addition to community strategies, LAAs and LDFs both require local authorities to describe how local people will be involved in determining priorities and actions.

“We didn’t want to reinvent the wheel, we wanted to use existing events and regular meetings for example through our neighbourhood presence.” (Haringey Officer)

Whilst there is widespread acknowledgement of the importance of community engagement – and also the need to continue to develop skills and knowledge to support engagement – there is also awareness amongst case study authorities of the dangers of over consultation or duplication of engagement activities. As a result many of the areas have developed mechanisms to help coordinate such activity. A number of examples of mechanisms to join up engagement processes are set out in box 7 below.

The need for greater co-ordination between consultation processes has been highlighted by the 2006 Local Government white paper. In relation to the necessity to consult over the statutory partnership activities including the community strategy, LDF and LAA, the Government has stated that it believes it is essential that these different processes should be complementary and consider it good practice for a local authority to
produce, with the community, a policy for community engagement across all sectors.

The white paper therefore sets out a commitment to developing community engagement strategies which should rationalise requirements for separate statements of how the community and voluntary/faith sectors are involved in LSPs, LAAs and the LDF.

Our research indicates that LAA and community strategy consultation processes are fairly closely aligned and that LAAs are starting to drive more action-orientated consultation processes. Many LSPs have an engagement sub group and/or an engagement block in the LAA. In Nottinghamshire for example, the Health Communities block of the LAA is now one of the strongest LAA blocks (it is chaired by the CVS), and four out of seven of the district LSPs have got Community Engagement subgroups. In another authority one contributor emphasised that the LAA had strengthened engagement processes suggesting that “...the LAA will have a stronger engagement strategy which looks at the different groups, working closely with the community strategy almost as outreach. It will focus on specific issues, not just doing consultation for the sake of it.”

There is less progress in terms of the linkages between LDFs and community strategies. Our work on LDFs and community strategies indicates that there is potential for great joining up on consultation processes, but this is very much work in progress and that there is a lack of clarity about how to go about integration and alignment and how this might work in practice. There are exceptions to this however. For instance Ryedale has adopted a Framework for Community Involvement, which is being ‘shared’ with the LSP and forms the basis of the LDF Statement of Community Involvement (this is set out in box 8 below).

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**Box 7: Approaches to co-ordinating consultation processes**

In **Haringey** it is estimated that there are around 180 consultations across the council each year, not including land use planning. There are concerns around consultation fatigue particularly amongst community and voluntary groups. Wherever possible joint consultations are undertaken. For example, Haringey undertakes an annual residents survey which is used for a number of purposes including community strategy consultation. In addition, the extensive consultation around the development of the new community strategy also served as the LAA consultation.

In **Nottinghamshire** the LSP have a Consultation Practitioners Forum with the Police, Fire, CVS and so on which addresses consultation across the different partners and strategies and which aims to avoid duplication.

**Croydon** has a Community Involvement Strategy Group, bringing together people in the main statutory agencies that have a responsibility for community involvement in decision-making, with representatives of the voluntary sector. The group helps to plan consultation and involvement, co-ordinate consultation exercises, develop models of good practice, and help identify groups and organisations to be consulted. In addition, there is a forum of community development workers in Croydon that is open to all community development workers from any agency. The Forum links with the Community Involvement Strategy Group.

**Box 8: Ryedale’s Local Development Framework Statement of Community Involvement**

Community involvement is about us working together with local people to address issues that affect them and where they live. It is about the way that we communicate with, understand and involve our community; putting people at the heart of our activities. The term ‘community involvement’ includes a range of different activities. We recognise three key levels of involvement:

- **Informing people**: providing information and raising awareness of local issues and initiatives;
- **Consulting people**: seeking the views of the community, for example on a plan, service or issue, to inform our future decisions; and
- **Involving people**: involving people more actively in decision-making processes and giving them a greater role in shaping plans and documents, for example in identifying priorities or actions.

**Vision**

Our vision is to provide real opportunities for people who live, work and visit Ryedale to be involved, if they want to be, in issues and decisions that affect them by using approaches that are proactive, inclusive and appropriate.

**Principles**

We expect community involvement to:

- be appropriate and relevant
- promote a positive approach
- be genuine and realistic
- be proactive and innovative
- promote ongoing involvement
• be accessible for everyone
• be clear and concise
• build on existing strengths

To improve our approach in the immediate future we aim to focus on the following:
• improving communication and combining the efforts of our different units;
• seeking to involve all of our community by tailoring our approaches and meeting specific needs (focusing particularly on rural communities); and
• learning from experience by developing an effective approach to evaluating our community involvement activities.

Objectives include:
• to involve all of our communities by tailoring our approaches and meeting specific needs and learning from experience
• to provide regular information that is clear, factual and relevant

4.6 Representation of the community

One of the main challenges identified in engaging communities was the issue of representation and the need to engage beyond the ‘usual suspects’. This is a significant challenge for local authorities and LSPs in developing community strategies. An officer in one district authority stated “…one of the difficulties is that we think we’ve got community engagement but it’s only a small proportion – the majority are apathetic or disengaged … we go to the same community representatives each time, which I don’t like because it is not representative”.

On the basis of the available evidence, it is hard to assess the extent to which consultation processes are inclusive of the whole community. It is clear that the perceptions of interviewees suggest that some consultation processes are more inclusive than others. For example, one unitary authority included in the research as a light touch case study was described by stakeholders as being viewed locally as successful in making community planning around its community strategy an inclusive process that helped to identify and secure the involvement of people from marginalised groups. However, the limitations of the research means that it proved impossible to confirm these claims by – for example – interviewing people from all marginalised groups in the locality.

There was recognition by interviewees included in all aspects of the research that a variety of approaches to engagement was required to ensure there was breadth and depth to engagement. The types of activity cited by respondents included representative surveys, in-depth group work
(for example focus groups), public meetings and working with existing groups (for example tenants and residents groups).

A further challenge identified by the research as particularly problematic when LSPs are designing engagement processes is that different groups and communities may not (and in fact usually do not) have a homogeneous perspective. Consequently, the approaches adopted need to account for the extent to which engagement will draw out different responses from different groups, and consideration needs to be given to how these will be reconciled/balanced within the priorities of the community strategy. In one of our case study authorities, for example, it was found that existing groups tended to prioritise service delivery issues (such as quality of care, or the extent to which a particular service reached vulnerable people in the community), whereas the general public were found to be more concerned with wider issues such as crime, shopping and transport.

In relation to involving communities in the decision-making structures of the LSP, many of the case studies pointed out that their authorities had a significant history of community involvement in local decision-making. They felt that this factor was very important in building the mutual trust and understanding necessary to fully involve communities at this level.

### 4.7 Engaging marginalised groups

Work with our case study authorities has highlighted the intention, even if this is not always realised, to engage the wider community within the community strategy process. A key issue, however, is the extent to which more marginalised groups are explicitly engaged in community strategies. The research uncovered divergent views about the extent to which marginalised groups were engaged in processes, and there were concerns amongst some interviewees there are people that remain unheard. Key groups that appear to be less well engaged or represented included Black & Minority Ethnic (BME) Communities; Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, and Transgender (LBGT) people; migrant communities (including travellers, asylum seekers and newly-arriving immigrants, especially those from Eastern Europe); people with mental health problems or mental disability; youth on the borders of criminality; and people in rural areas.

In relation to sexual orientation, a large number of our case studies were only just starting to grapple with this agenda. In one locality, an officer suggested that local people tended to be less open about sexual orientation than elsewhere, and sexual orientation issues are ‘not talked about’.

It emerged that where groups were too small or were under-resourced, they tended to remain disengaged. For example, in one locality Forum of Faith was reported to be very small, with no resources, and limited time to engage in activities. Even though the LSP has tried to involve them, success has been limited. A similar situation applies to BME community representatives in this locality.
Engaging socially excluded groups was recognised by all LSPs included in the research as important, but was also found to represent a significant challenge. While local authorities and LSPs were found to be adopting flexible approaches to meeting the needs of their local communities, there was significant variation in the extent to which they were able to claim success in engaging marginalised groups. Some areas approach engagement of excluded groups thematically (based on forums, public meetings and development of specific community sub-groups); other areas adopted a geographic/neighbourhood approach to securing engagement (e.g. through street representatives and ‘ambassadors’; or a reliance on community associations). In Croydon, for example, a Community Network Outreach Worker identifies hard-to-reach groups and enables them to become involved in thematic sub-groups of the Community Network. The Community Empowerment Fund proves consultancy for such groups to enable them to identify how best to become involved in the Community Network and the Croydon Strategic Partnership.

The issue of equality and diversity within community strategies is being developed in a separate research strand and a research report discussing this issue in more depth is forthcoming from the evaluation.

**Box 9: Haringey’s Approach to involving marginalised groups**

The extensive consultations in Haringey aimed to ensure that all marginalised people had an opportunity to become engaged; this was ensured through a range of methods.

All the publicity was translated into the main community languages and all the responses were translated into English. Although there were not as many replies in other languages as may have been expected, ‘people really appreciated the fact that posters and other publicity were in other languages but … people who’s first language wasn’t English did try to fill the cards out in English.’ (Officer)

In addition, to ensure that other marginalised groups were included a wide range of mechanisms were employed such as visiting self-help or other relevant voluntary organisations such as those for the visually impaired, carers were supported in helping their carers fill in consultation forms, a specific version of their publicity was produced for people with learning difficulties and involved learning support groups.

One of the main findings in the recent Haringey consultation exercise was that individuals and community groups there strongly welcome the diverse nature of the borough and wish to celebrate that diversity. This has given further legitimacy to the strategy’s priorities around this issue.
4.8 Further issues and questions

Two further issues relating to community engagement and community strategies are both addressed more fully in other issue papers in this series, but are discussed here as they highlight the challenges faced by LSPs in taking this work forward.

Putting consultation in context

Those charged with developing and implementing the community strategy have to make wider judgements about the weight that should be attached to the community voice and consultation exercises, as compared to/distinct from the voice of politicians and other leaders, experts and professionals as well as findings from other forms of data and information sources.

As explained in issue paper 5,²² the assessment of 50 Community Strategies revealed that there are generally two main sources of evidence used in developing community strategies: local primary and consultation data; and secondary data, which is often used to contextualise the issues and problems in an area, and doubles as potential measures of progress. Our research found that the activity most frequently used in the development of community strategies is community consultation, which was found to take two broad forms:

- survey evidence, for example through household surveys. Surveys can include questions on satisfaction with public services and quality of life, as well as questions around participation (e.g. levels of volunteering). This may be seen as an important tool in monitoring attitudinal change and resident satisfaction. It may provide both a robust snapshot of the area as well as an indication as to how an area is changing over time; and

- consulting with different groups around priorities. This may be used in a more formative sense to test out and confirm whether priorities are correct and to identify the best way for policies to be implemented. There is less evidence that community strategies have used this approach as a robust mechanism for prioritising issues within strategies.

Issue paper 5 found that “…most consultation evidence is used to confirm and communicate strategies and priorities at their formative stage. They do not necessarily dramatically change the direction of policy but they allow for it to be fine-tuned. Consultations may also help to cement partnerships.” This may be in part due to the way in which the LSP perceives community engagement (i.e. most appear to see it as a means purely of consulting on priorities, rather than facilitating meaningful engagement in the decision-making process, let alone as a step towards engendering community empowerment).

Participatory vs. representative democracy
Work to engage the community in the development of community strategies was found to be politically sensitive in most LSPs included in the research, particularly when considered in relation to the role of local elected members within LSPs. The move towards a more participatory form of democracy does not always sit comfortably with those engaged in more traditional representative democratic processes. For example, many respondents indicated that some councillors perceive community engagement in strategy development as threatening, as it is seen by them as having the potential to undermine their representative role; in addition, community participation in LSP structures – roles that might have been perceived traditionally as the preserve of elected representatives – is seen as a potential cause of tensions and apparent conflicts of interest.

Our research found that the increasing government policy emphasis on community involvement in local decision-making and within LSP/community strategies in particular was exacerbating these tensions between elected members (particularly backbench councillors) and those from the community who wish to participate in work on community strategies. Respondents in one of the case studies spoke of an ‘ongoing tension’ between elected members and representatives from the voluntary sector, with questions being raised by councillors about the legitimacy of non-elected members of LSP Boards etc.; in particular, councillors (and other stakeholders) questioned the accountability of community participants for their contribution to decisions. The research found that in some cases, elected members are perceived as having reacted to this threat to their position by exerting excessive control over decisions on the community strategy, as the following quote (cited in issue paper F) illustrates:

“The problem with having elected members on there playing a stronger role is that they may be accused once again of making the community strategy council-dominated.” (Partner Agency Representative)

However, there is also a widely held feeling among elected members that community strategies should both help agencies address local priorities more effectively and contribute towards a stronger sense of community identity. Generally, elected members perceive community strategies as one of a range of tools that they can use to better represent the interests of the communities they serve, strengthening their hands when raising issues on behalf of constituents with council officers and representatives of other local agencies as well as representing communities within neighbourhood renewal areas. Furthermore, councillors feel they are able to participate themselves in open consultation events.
4.9 Summary

Questions related to the quality of consultation undertaken and the impacts of those exercises are central to the importance of engaging citizens. Both however, are notoriously problematic to measure principally for a lack of a consistent and shared understanding of common concepts, such as the purposes of engagement and who should be involved at what level and when. This research indicates that on the whole engagement is interpreted primarily as consultation, and concepts such as community-led decision-making or empowerment are not applied in most circumstances. Therefore, whereas some LSPs are embracing the concepts of consultation wholeheartedly, and using the results of those consultations constructively, there is less evidence that they are adopting a robust range of activities to encourage engagement in its wider meaning of involvement of citizens. In light of the Government’s commitment to community empowerment, there would appear, therefore, to be an urgent need for further investigation in this area, leading to clarification and guidance of the issues.

Another area of misunderstanding is the conceptualisation and definition of the concept of ‘community’ used by different stakeholders. Even in areas where partners involved in the design and delivery of community strategies have made efforts to better understand the composition and needs of the population resident in the local authority area, the research has found that local people do not necessarily identify with the ‘community’ described in the community strategy. This was found to reflect the fact that most people identify more readily with smaller neighbourhood/parish units and issues rather than local authority wide issues. This challenge was found to be further exacerbated by the fact that partner agencies (especially in larger or county LSPs) do not necessarily use co-terminus boundaries. It was, however, acknowledged that LSPs may have a role in helping to develop a common framework of understanding about the most appropriate demographic definitions and geographic level at which the concept of community should be applied.

Local authorities are currently required to describe how local people will be involved in determining priorities and actions in a range of areas, including community strategies, LAAs and LDFs. Furthermore, the Government believes that these processes should be entirely complementary and that local authorities should produce a policy for community engagement across all sectors with the community. We found that there is general awareness of the dangers of over-consultation or duplication of engagement activities, and that – as a result – many areas have developed mechanisms to help coordinate such activity. Particular attention has been paid to coordinating LAA and community strategy consultation processes, with a distinction between strategic (community strategy) and action (LAA) focused consultation processes. However, there appears to be less progress in the linkages between other engagement activities (including LDFs) and community strategies.
Engaging the wider community within the community strategy process was recognised as a problematic issue, including the extent to which more marginalised groups are explicitly engaged in community strategies. There were divergent views about the extent to which marginalised groups were engaged in processes including concerns amongst some interviewees that certain people remain unheard. Engaging socially excluded groups varied significantly by area, although it appears that where groups are too small or under-resourced, they tend to remain disengaged. Approaches to engagement of excluded groups are often thematically based (e.g. around forums, public meetings, specific sub-groups, etc.), or may focus on geographic communities or neighbourhoods.
5 Summary and implications for policy and practice

The process of community engagement in the development and implementation of community strategies has been found to have developed over the period of the evaluation, in response partly to the increasing policy emphasis on citizen participation and involvement. Substantial effort and resources were devoted to involving people in the initial development of community strategies (especially in terms of informing priorities), and similar – although somewhat scaled down – engagement processes have also informed subsequent revisions of strategies.

Engagement in the ongoing implementation and monitoring of community strategies is less straightforward. This has been addressed mainly through the operation of the LSP and associated sub groups and has focused primarily on the ongoing involvement of a range of voluntary and community groups with the LSP rather than engagement of residents per se in the strategies.

The evaluation indicates that the emphasis of engagement approaches has been in most cases towards consultation, with few examples of citizens being empowered to make real decisions about strategic priorities and resource allocation. However, within the consultation approach, a wide range of methods have been adopted to identify community needs to help inform – or at least confirm – the development and implementation of community strategies. This range of approaches demonstrates the need for engagement to be relevant to local circumstances, but also illustrates that there needs to be a range of approaches to ensure sufficient opportunities for residents to ‘have their say’. New and more imaginative mechanisms should, therefore, be sought by more authorities/LSPs to enable the views of local people to influence the prioritisation of themes and targets rather than just seen as a process of needs identification.

There have also been varying approaches to identifying the community and the geographic level at which to seek to secure community engagement. It is clear that a key issue is developing an appropriate balance between authority-wide approaches and neighbourhood approaches to engagement and how neighbourhood level priorities are reflected within community strategies. This has become particularly pertinent in relation to the continued emergence of area-based structures, the LAA and the priorities set out in the recent Local Government white paper.
The original community strategy guidance from DETR acknowledges that “...there is an often untapped pool of ideas, knowledge, skills, experience, energy and enthusiasm among individuals, groups and communities as a whole which, if realised, can be a real driver for change. Community strategies offer a fresh opportunity to put local people at the heart of partnership working and should be grounded in the views and expectations of those people”. Evidence from the evaluation suggests, however, that although most localities appear to agree that engagement is invaluable for a number of reasons, few appear to have harnessed such an untapped pool of enthusiasm and energy. It appears that despite considerable developments in terms of consultation of the wider public, there are few examples where LSPs have gone beyond this and involved local people in new and radical thinking. There are also few examples where LSPs have acknowledged the limits on power, decision-making or influence of the specific processes of engagement used.

Part of the problem for LSPs wanting to fully engage citizens, and also a problem for measuring the effectiveness of such measures, is the lack of understanding and agreement about fundamental concepts such as: why engagement is necessary; who will benefit (and how); what degree of weighting should be given to citizens’ views; what is the right balance between representative and participative approaches; and, critically, what is the “community” to be engaged. Detailed guidance on these issues is lacking, therefore it is left to LSPs’ own interpretations/understanding and aspirations/priorities to implement this central aspect of their work. There are other possible hindrances to implementing quality engagement practices, including: a lack of resources (especially finances and time) and – where this applies – an explicit acknowledgement of the impact this will have on aspirations to facilitate community engagement; and a lack of skills, knowledge and experience among partner agency staff charged with facilitating community engagement (as highlighted by the Egan and ASC Reports, among others).

With an increasingly greater consultation culture in service provision, issues of consultation overload and confusion between different consultation exercises clearly need to be addressed. In acknowledging a ‘tradition of engagement’ among a range of statutory and third sector providers to the LSP, interviewees stressed that consultation processes designed to inform the priorities within the community strategy are increasingly intertwined with other engagement mechanisms in relation to LAAs, LSPs and other policy initiatives. Therefore, in order to operate effectively and to benefit all, community engagement must become a core element of the organisational cultures of LSPs and their partner agencies, and should be central to the planning and implementation of all strategic processes.

The challenges of ensuring the representativeness of the input of individuals engaged in this more participatory form of democracy were highlighted.
repeatedly by participants in this research. Additionally, the research found that some consultation processes are more inclusive than others. It is clear that communities do not usually have a homogeneous perspective, so methods to obtain different responses from different groups are needed, with particular attention given to how these will be reconciled and balanced within the priorities of the community strategy. There was recognition by interviewees that a variety of approaches to engagement were required to ensure there was breadth and depth to engagement. These methods should initially address questions of representation versus direct involvement as well as looking at involvement individually and collectively.

Finally, it should also be acknowledged that engagement processes need to be appropriate to local circumstances. For example, there will be instances where involving the public should not mean targeting ‘everyone’. The community strategy process needs, therefore, to be flexible and transparent enough for those situations in which different degrees of engagement are appropriate can be identified, and resources allocated accordingly. Thus, LSPs should be able to continue to be inclusive, with agencies and communities operating at different levels depending on the circumstances that apply.
Annex 1: outputs from the evaluation

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

**Annual Reports/Evaluation Frameworks**


**Survey Reports**


**Case Study Reports**


**Review of community strategies**


**Issues Papers**

*The Use of Evidence in community strategies Issues Paper* London: Department for Communities and Local Government. [published October 2006]


*Community strategies: Working at different levels Issues Paper* London: Department for Communities and Local Government. [April 2007]
Forthcoming Reports

Community Strategies: The Role of Elected Members Issues Paper
London: Communities and Local Government

Local Development Frameworks and Community Strategies Issues Paper
London: Communities and Local Government

Local Area Agreements and Community Strategies Issues Paper
London: Communities and Local Government

The Role of Community Engagement in Community Strategies Issues Paper
London: Communities and Local Government

Equality and Diversity and Community Strategies Issues Paper
London: Communities and Local Government

Review of Community Strategies 2007
London: Communities and Local Government

Final Evaluation Report
London: Communities and Local Government