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# North Somerset Partnership

## The issue

North Somerset Partnership has worked towards integrating sustainability into both its Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS) and Local Area Agreement (LAA). The key elements of the approach include:

- sustainability assessments of both the SCS and the LAA, drawing on national sustainable development principles, sustainable communities criteria and regional sustainable development principles. The sustainability assessments led to changes in both documents, and in particular to a raising of the profile of environment within the SCS.;
- the use of sustainable communities criteria as a framework for some stakeholder and community consultation for the SCS, although with some limited success;
- the involvement of stakeholders and partners in integration workshops at the start of the process and following consultation on the SCS; and
- early indications that the SCS sustainability assessments and strategy structure is beginning to influence the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) working practices and structures to encourage more integration.

## Background

North Somerset is a mostly rural, unitary area with a relatively straightforward partnership arrangement with one LSP.

North Somerset benefits from a fairly high profile sustainable development focus at regional level championed by Sustainability South West. The South West sustainable development principles influenced the approach taken locally, most specifically through the sustainability assessment process, but no additional support has been sought or offered from this source.

## Who was involved?

The LSP has benefited from some very engaged, driven individual partners, especially the police, the Primary Care Trust and the Environment Agency, who brought clear strategic thinking skills and attitudes, as well as championing sustainable development issues (such as stronger communities and climate change).

The Partnership officer herself has been a key actor (see notes on leadership below). In addition, the Sustainability Coordinator (one of a team of two sustainability officers) provided support and sustainable development knowledge.

## Why it constitutes good practice

Working practices which promote integration have been championed and promoted through the SCS development process particularly through the efforts of the Partnership Officer and of key partners, and through two key elements:

- The involvement of partnership members, and wider stakeholders, in integration workshops throughout the development process. This included a large-scale ‘Stakeholder Event’ held to enable partners and other stakeholders to review all outcomes from the community consultation, across all work areas. This encouraged partners to think beyond their own areas of responsibility;
- The use of the sustainability assessment approach to undertake a gap analysis of sustainability issues and integration opportunities.

One of the key issues raised by both consultation responses and by the sustainability assessment, was the economic pressure for and the potential environmental and social implications of the expansion of Bristol airport. This was overcome by always referencing the airport in both economic and environmental terms so that any future decision making would have to take economic and environmental issues into account on equal terms.

### **The key capability factors which enabled the good practice to happen**

#### **Leadership**

- The Partnership Officer had a very personal passion to ensure that sustainable development and more specifically equality was a central cross cutting theme for the SCS. She led on the move towards integration thinking throughout the process.
- Some key partners (especially the police, PCT and Environment Agency) brought clear strategic thinking, a commitment to integration and a focus on some key sustainable development issues, e.g. stronger communities and climate change.

#### **Attitudes**

The teams responsible for the development of both the LAA and the SCS have been keen to take account of sustainable development from the very start of the process. This has been influenced largely by individual rather than necessarily organisational commitment. However the name change to sustainable community strategies prompted questioning at the partnership level about what this meant in practice and how the process could reflect this. This paved the way for the Sustainability Team to be closely involved in the development of both documents.

#### **Culture**

The process of producing the SCS has gone a long way to further increase the culture of joint working, shared understanding and integration thinking amongst partners. The culture of discussion and knowledge transfer was supported by the working environment for relevant officers at North Somerset. The Partnership Team (responsible for developing the SCS) and the Sustainability Team share a room and so interact on a day to day basis. Much of the sustainability team’s involvement in the SCS process was on this informal basis.

#### **Skills and competencies**

The LSP had traditionally focused work around theme areas which did not necessarily encourage cross-working between sectors and between the different theme areas. The skills to integrate thinking have

been in part brought to the table by the Partnership Officer and by individual partners, and in part developed by the partnership members as a whole through the process of developing the LAA and SCS.

## **Tools**

The main tools used have been:

- Sustainability assessment of both the LAA and SCS, with an appraisal process developed internally, making use of the 5 national sustainable development principles, the national sustainable communities components, and the regional sustainable development principles (10 south west regional SD principles as set out in Sustainability South West's 'Sustainability Shaper').

This process was hindered by having to draw on different sources of criteria, however it was felt that no one source by itself was complete and sufficiently linked to local sustainability.

- Use of the national sustainable communities components and wheel as a framework for some stakeholder and community engagement and consultation (as part of an extensive two year consultation and engagement process).  
The criteria were perhaps more useful for stakeholders than for community-based consultation (using a spinning wheel with the criteria in sections and room for post it note issues to be added). The model proved too complicated and removed from the local reality for community use and it was hard to translate the model to local issues.

No gap analysis was carried out at this consultation stage and issues raised were obviously locally focused. Because wider sustainability issues (especially longer term ones) were not raised through consultation, it was hard to reinsert them as priorities later in the process.

- Other resources

About 10 per cent of the Sustainability Officer's time was spent on this process.

## **The support provided which built that capability**

The process of developing the LAA (which preceded the development of the SCS) was informed by a very supportive officer from Government Office South West (GOSW), who had previously attended a training course run by Sustainability South West to become a Sustainability Champion. His persistent and well placed questioning of the LAA steering group about sustainable development issues and sustainability appraisal raised the profile of these issues. This in turn increased the internal commitment (within both the Council and LSP Leadership) to ensuring sustainable development was integrated into the SCS.

## **Barriers and challenges**

The culture of overwork and overload meant that even the committed officers were less open to increasing levels of complication (for example, as a result of sustainability assessment outcomes).

Whilst there was certainly some senior leadership on sustainable development, barriers to integration were felt more strongly within the Council itself than from partner organisations.

Low initial understanding about sustainable development was overcome by taking time to present the benefits of taking a sustainable development approach (the sustainable communities 'wheel' was a particularly useful tool in this). This approach helped stakeholders and board members to see how their work area fitted in to the bigger 'sustainability picture' and this in turn broadened understanding about the additional benefits that could be achieved through better joint working.

### **Lessons**

- The Sustainability Officer felt that accessible national guidance was needed to illustrate how national sustainable development principles translate to the local level, or how they relate to LSP/SCS work, and to bring them to life.
- The Sustainability Officer felt that a clear national requirement to deliver on sustainable development through the SCS and LAAs was needed, supported by a requirement for LSPs to report on their overall performance against sustainability criteria.
- The sustainability assessment and wider SCS process at North Somerset was hampered and confused by a perceived tension between the Defra National Sustainable Development principles (with implied weighting) and the Sustainable Communities agenda with its wheel of eight sustainable communities components, and references to sustainable communities within the narrow focus of the UK house building programme. This continues to cause problems and confusion at the local level.

### **For more information**

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