

Partnership working and sustainability appraisal in Cumbria

Abstract (50 – 100 words)

Cumbria County Council's Sustainability Team conducted a sustainability appraisal on its new LAA at an early stage in the process. This demonstrated how the LAA could better address sustainability. This included:

- Promoting more sustainable communities
- Using the natural environment as an educational resource
- Increasing uptake of broadband technology
- Sustainable approach to job creation

The issue

The County Council's Sustainability Team has developed a sustainability framework for conducting sustainability appraisals which reflects national and regional policies and has been subject to widespread consultation with relevant agencies and organizations including the District Councils and the National Park. It contains 16 sustainability objectives and guidance on testing for compliance with these objectives. The framework is also used to carry out statutory sustainability appraisals under the EU Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive.

What Cumbria did

The sustainability appraisal of Cumbria's LAA was undertaken at an early stage in the process when the outcomes and sub-outcomes were emerging. The appraisal was based on the LAA draft outcomes framework submitted to the Government Office for the North West on in June 2006. This document covers 5 themes:

- Healthy Communities and Older People;
- Safer and Stronger Communities;
- Economic development and Enterprise;
- Children and Young people; and
- Cross-cutting Issues.

The appraisal of the LAA was commissioned by the Cumbria Strategic Partnership and an appraisal panel that was representative of the partnership as a whole was set up – including someone to represent crime and disorder, education and skills, PCT, and the economy. For each appraisal, attempts are made to get representatives from organisations covering each of the 16 objectives in the framework. The County Council team then met the LSP appraisal group, introduced and discussed the framework and how it would work, and asked them to read through the community strategy before carrying out the appraisal. For all appraisals, two separate sessions were scheduled.

The first provided the appraisal panel with an introduction to the sustainability framework and allows participants to familiarise themselves with the framework and begin to make connections between its requirements and the content of the plan being appraised. The second session was the appraisal workshop itself.

The appraisal panel for the LAA used the framework to test each outcome and sub outcome within the LAA against each of the 16 sustainability objectives, and positive and negative scores were recorded and clear recommendations provided, aimed at turning negative effects into positive effects. Each theme identified a number of outcomes and sub outcomes which were set out using bullet points and the briefest of descriptions. Each outcome and sub outcome was discussed and given a common sense interpretation.

The County Council team then wrote up the findings and put together a report with recommendations. The findings presented a challenge about how to address some aspects of a sustainable Cumbria and provided opportunity for the working groups to refine each theme and significantly improve the contribution of the LAA to the development of a more sustainable society in Cumbria.

The impacts

The appraisal process for the LAA highlighted a number of ways in which the draft LAA could better address sustainability, a number of which demonstrate an integrated approach to social, economic and environmental outcomes. This included:

- Promoting more sustainable communities, through consideration being given to a multi-agency approach to urban design and regeneration. This would focus on designing out crime; designing in public transport and cycling routes; designing out social isolation; designing in open spaces, green spaces, possibly including allotments; and designing out environmental factors which traditionally impact on public health.
- Recognising that the affordable warmth and additional public health programmes have the potential to create additional employment and exploring this further in future iterations of the LAA.
- Utilising the natural environment and countryside as a resource for simple outdoor education and skills courses, which could be factored into rehabilitation and socialisation programmes for offenders. The suggested benefits include environmental enhancement and help with the creation and upkeep of community gardens coupled with the possibility of low cost fresh produce.
- Placing more emphasis on increasing the uptake of broadband technology both by business and commerce and public agencies to maximize the numbers of employees who can work from home, with the dual benefit of improving local air quality and reducing carbon emissions from commuter traffic.
- Promoting the links between the range of sustainability objectives on climate change, air and water quality, waste and biodiversity with environmental education.

- In developing access to jobs, health and education services the appraisal recommended that consideration be given to how this might be done sustainably, given Cumbria's rurality and the population distribution. The key suggestion was that the LAA sub outcomes on access should look at utilising public and community transport.
- To contribute more effectively to sustainability and the Government's sustainable communities agenda. It was suggested that consideration needs to be given to introducing 'stretch' outcomes on waste, climate change and biodiversity, each of which was felt to be neglected in the LAA.

Lessons

Because of the success of this process, similar appraisals have been carried out in relation to other documents, including Cumbria's Sustainable Community Strategy. For this strategy, the appraisal process involved several iterations as the strategy progressed, including initial appraisal at a very early stage of the development of the strategy, to ensure that the appraisal had the most influence.

The key capability factors which enabled the good practice to happen

Leadership

Leadership on SD within the County Council is provided by the two officers within the Sustainability Team.

Attitudes/skills

As the sustainability appraisal framework has been applied to a number of policy documents, the members of Cumbria Strategic Partnership have developed knowledge and understanding of sustainable development and skills to use the sustainability appraisal process. In particular, partners have developed a clearer understanding of what sustainable development means and how integration of policy objectives can be achieved. The use of appraisal panels with wide representation is said to have been particularly important in developing integration skills.

This, in turn, has meant that the partnership have increasingly understood the benefits to be gained from using the tool rather than seeing it as a 'hoop to jump through' or a potential barrier to economic growth. This has been aided by the renaming of 'Community Strategies' as 'Sustainable Community Strategies', which is said to have re-emphasised to partners the importance of addressing sustainability issues.

The Sustainability Team are now considering how they can further enhance knowledge and skills in this area through running workshops on SD and appraisal in advance of the appraisal processes being conducted.

Structures/tools

The sustainability framework is a key element of the capability which enabled this good practice. The framework has been developed locally to reflect the local situation and

with the involvement of the stakeholders who are now involved in using it. The framework has evolved over the period of its use. The framework will continue to develop although wholesale change to its content or structure is unlikely. Minor tweaks to the framework will most likely occur to reflect changes in local circumstances within the County. The status of the framework amongst partners is said to be critical to its success, as is the sense of local ownership.

The appraisals are carried out using a Panel, with representatives sought for each of the 16 objectives in the framework. As well as Council officers from various departments, panels have included organisations such as the Environment Agency, Natural England, Chambers of Commerce and voluntary and community sector groups.

More recently the Planit-sustainability tool has been used as a training package for officers charged with redrafting and revising the LAA. This tool is a computer-based learning simulation, used in a workshop setting with a range of partners involved in policy-making, to explore the issues associated with the development of sustainable communities. It utilises the targets and objectives found in Regional Sustainable Development Frameworks.

Resources

The sustainability team developed the sustainability framework but input from stakeholders has also helped to shape the framework. More recently, the need to align the strategy with the SEA Directive and secure support from the statutory consultees, Natural England, the Environment Agency and English Heritage has further shaped the framework's content. The Cumbrian Framework also accords with the regional sustainability toolkit but provides a more robust and appropriate tool for appraisal within the County.

External factors

Historically, Cumbria County Council's work on sustainability appraisal has been driven by statutory drivers, particularly the requirements for SEA/SA in Planning. The sustainability framework was originally developed for use in appraising planning documents but has since been used more widely.

Data / evidence

The Regional Development Agency have acknowledged the framework and promoted it as good practice in the region but the good practice has been particularly reliant upon the capabilities of the members of the Sustainability Team, both of whom have a background in SEA and sustainability appraisal work.

Further information

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