

# Theme 6: Sustainable Communities

A Sustainable Future  
for the South West



The Regional Sustainable Development Framework  
for the South West of England



# Theme 6: Sustainable Communities

**Headline indicator:**  
*Relevant Index of Deprivation.*

*Example: crime and the fear of crime are major factors in reducing quality of life that may be best addressed at community level. In the South West we do not have a crime problem worse than anywhere else in the country, and in some respects it is less of a problem: we have the third lowest burglary rate (after South East and the Eastern region) and the lowest vehicle related theft rate. Violent crimes are around the national average. However, the risks of suffering crime in the SW vary significantly depending on the kind of area in which you live - inner city and council estates have a higher risk than urban areas generally; they, in turn, have a higher risk than rural areas. This applies to all types of crime. Stronger communities can play a key role in reducing crime.*

## Theme 6: Sustainable Communities

### Setting the Scene

The communities in which we live are a rich resource for improving the quality of life. They are a part of the "social capital" of the region, alongside the economic (like railways and factories) and environmental capital (like coastline and countryside). All our regional capital needs maintenance and enhancement, through investment, and to be used wisely to improve prosperity for all - and to do so in a way that does not "trade off" environmental or economic capital for social capital.

Communities start with the place that we live but go much wider. Our colleagues in the workplace form a kind of community, as do the sports clubs to which we belong, the arts centre we use, and so on. We also have wider communities of interest - like the West of England Disabled People Coalition, the South West Racial Equality Councils Network and the Rural Stress Information Network - where people have a common interest in improving quality of life for a potentially disadvantaged community, but where that community is dispersed geographically. The role of the voluntary sector is crucial, particularly the work, locally, of Rural Community Councils, Councils for Voluntary Services and Community Development Trusts; and regionally by the South West Forum, the Council for Ethnic Minority Voluntary Sector Organisations and the Black South West Network.

The involvement of the community, and leadership provided by the community, is now recognised as a key condition for successful regeneration. 'Capacity building' - the investment of resources to develop a sense of community and the ability of the community to act - is one of the buzz-words of modern policy making. But strengthening communities of all kinds is likely to lead to a better quality of life for all. Ultimately, the success of this will be determined by the extent that you and I are prepared to spend time in developing our communities. This is a long term objective. A shorter term objective is to ensure that those communities that are most in need, whether urban or rural, are given the priority in developing and promoting a sense of community, and in getting the resources to enable them to act as a community.

### What are the opportunities for improving sustainability ?

Across the region many communities are developing a strong and cohesive identity. This sometimes happens as a result of a Government initiative. Barton Hill, in Bristol, for example, is part of the New Deal for Communities (NDC) programme and has successfully reshaped local services better to suit the citizens of the community. The Plymouth 20/20 Partnership is a city wide institution with representatives from all the communities and helps target funding to priority areas.

The Government is to set up a new round of many more but smaller scale community based regeneration programmes - Neighbourhood Management Programmes - targeting the poorest wards in the region. The fundamental need is for businesses to be involved in those partnerships to help shape the communities in which they operate and improve opportunities for both prospective workers and the business themselves. Above all, perhaps, the opportunities need to be created to make communities creative, as a means of engaging all parts of the community, especially the disillusioned and dispossessed.

### What are the essential features of a sustainable community?

If we can define an ideal we can measure the extent to which our own communities fulfil that ideal, and the extent to which our community is part of improving sustainability in the region; if it lacks many of the features it is likely to become an unsustainable community and strategic action will be needed.

There are six key features:

- access to essential services, like doctors and hospitals, affordable houses, shops, schools, places of worship, recreational facilities, child care, public transport
- standards of service: how quickly can you get access to those services? What other quality standards need to be in place?
- mixed land use: a balance of residential, commercial and business uses
- a diverse social structure, especially public and private housing tenure
- a safe and secure environment
- vibrant local governance, including access to decision making

A sustainability community index could be used to assess this and could include indicators like length of tenancies, housing turnover, incidence of anti-social behaviour, minimum distance to facilities, etc. Other features could also be considered - eg, a high grade built and historic environment.

The RDA's Single Regeneration Budget targets poor areas for regeneration. The latest (and final) round, has been redesigned by DETR to reflect the importance of capacity building and community participation. From 2001 the budget is rebadged and will be completely reformed to reflect much more the RDA's strategic priorities (including market and coastal towns). The redesign of the programme offers a substantial opportunity to develop two further reforms: the importance of community leadership and owning of community assets, and the use of capital expenditure to act as a catalyst in the re-engineering of mainstream services.

The Housing Corporation in the South West has done a lot of work on sustainable communities and this shapes its programme of funding social housing providers. The Regional Housing Forum brings together housing associations, local authorities, the regional umbrella group for housing associations and the construction industry, and offers an opportunity to co-ordinate policies on sustainability throughout the social housing sector and improve links between planners. The Regional Housing Statement will, in future, be rooted more firmly in the work of the Forum and again offers the opportunity to further the sustainability agenda. Similarly, English Heritage has Conservation Area Partnerships to invest in the buildings of cities, towns and villages.

But most communities develop as a result of one or two key people who have a vision and a sense of purpose - we can all probably think of one. We need to be ensure that those people get the support they need

to be able to build better communities. This can be done in a small way by the Government's Community Champions Fund. But the linking of community activists and social entrepreneurs to local Government and public service providers is essential to building sustainable communities.

Indeed, local Government, in many areas of the region, is becoming more responsive to the interests of the communities it serves. Local Authorities now have a duty to prepare a Community Strategy to promote the achievement of economic, social and environmental well being of communities within their jurisdiction.

Inevitably this is where the difference in life between rural and urban areas is thrown in high relief in a region with the biggest proportion of countryside of any English region. In particular, the issues of affordable housing and access to transport are starkly illustrated in many rural areas. The opportunities to improve sustainability here will depend on the extent to which agencies like the Housing Corporation and local authority departments - especially planners - actively contribute to Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), and their sub-groups, in rural areas. We must recognise that many rural areas need LSPs: the new Index of Deprivation, which has captured the issue of rural deprivation much better than its last incarnation, still has to use wards as the basic geographical unit. This means that pockets of rural deprivation in otherwise relatively affluent wards may not get the attention they need. However, the Countryside Agency is developing a strategic approach to identifying and tackling rural social exclusion, in the wake of some research done earlier this year. The approach should consider how community strategies and changes to mainstream services can help in targeting what may be a few households in a village, rather than a great swathe of urban housing estates. The Rural White Paper sets out the context for improved service standards in rural areas.

New housing, of course, sets up a challenge: how can we win on both fronts of maintaining environmental capital, like green fields and heathland, and increasing housing (which combines social and economic capital). The integration of these two aims can be addressed through the planning system - at regional level and local level - in ways that minimise the loss of environmental amenities. But to do so means gaining the support of communities; it may mean that local and regional authorities need to reach out and communicate with communities in radical and innovative ways; and it will certainly mean that within local authorities, and between local authorities and communities, the planning officers, the housing officers and other service providers must work more closely together than they do now.



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## What are the objectives for improving sustainability in the South West?

Objective	Examples of how it might be achieved	Links to potential partners and processes
Promote stronger and more vibrant communities in the South West	The setting up of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) and the development of Community Strategies. More active citizenship at all levels - eg, how many parish council elections are contested?	LSPs will bring together local authority members and officers, service deliverers and commissioners, the voluntary sector and the community, including the business community
Provide safe, affordable and suitable housing to everyone	Each Community Strategy sets targets for the provision of affordable housing	Partnership working between local authority planning and housing departments, plus the Housing Corporation, local Registered Social Landlords and the construction industry
Provide a safe environment in which people feel secure	Change the way policing is carried out to reflect the needs, aspirations and priorities of the community	LSPs will include police, probationary services, the youth justice system, etc. A key aim of the LSP process is to see how mainstream services like policing can be reshaped better to suit local circumstances



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