

Breathing new life into rural communities

A guide for local action





Countryside Agency

The Countryside Agency is the statutory body working to make:

- **the quality of life better for people in the countryside;**
- **the quality of the countryside better for everyone.**

The Countryside Agency will help to achieve the following outcomes:

- **empowered, active and inclusive communities;**
- **high standards of rural services;**
- **vibrant local economies;**
- **all countryside managed sustainably;**
- **recreation opportunities for all;**
- **realising the potential of the urban fringe.**

We summarise our role as:

- **statutory champion and watchdog;**
- **influencing and inspiring solutions through our know how and show how;**
- **delivering where we are best placed to add value.**

The Countryside Agency is funded by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs. Defra is a major customer for our work.

To find out more about our work and for information about the countryside, visit our website:

www.countryside.gov.uk



Hastoe Housing Association

Hastoe is a not-for-profit Friendly Society. The objectives of the Association are widely drawn and allow us to provide housing for letting, hostel accommodation and housing for sale.

Objectives

Hastoe has three main objectives:

- **To provide 'good places for people to come home to'**
- **To work in selected local communities to help create 'better places for local people'**
- **To innovate, and make a difference to the national agenda**

To achieve these objectives, Hastoe aims:

- **To invest in our culture, our staff and the way we do things**
- **To maintain financial strength**



The Housing Corporation

The Housing Corporation is responsible for investing public money in housing associations and for protecting that investment and ensuring it provides decent homes and services for residents. We invest in housing associations to provide homes that meet local needs. Through regulation we seek to ensure that people will want, and be able, to live in these homes, now and in the future.

The Housing Corporation's mission is 'raising the standard for homes and neighbourhoods'. Our key aims are:

- **to regulate to promote a viable, properly governed and properly managed housing association sector;**
- **to invest for the creation and maintenance of safe and sustainable communities;**
- **to champion a resident focus in the housing association sector; and**
- **to be a modern, customer-centred, forward-looking organisation, encouraging change in the sector.**

How to use this booklet

This is one in a series of three booklets providing detailed information on the activities, achievements and findings of Communities First-Suffolk (CF-S). Working with five communities over three years the project helped them to achieve changes to their services and facilities.

This booklet summarises the findings for communities involved with rural regeneration. It is targeted at practitioners – both paid and unpaid – who may be leading a specific project, such as in community transport, or who may be supporting rural regeneration more broadly through initiatives such as community appraisals and community strategies.

The other two booklets, 'Sustaining rural communities: a summary' (CA119) and 'Promoting sustainable rural communities' (CA 118) summarise the key findings for agencies supporting and practising rural regeneration, and provide in depth information about project activities and achievement in each of the five communities.

All three present information from the main report, 'Sustaining Rural Communities' (CA117). For details on how to get hold of a copy of any of these, please see the back page.

About CF-S

The project was hosted by Hastoe Housing Association and implemented during 1999-2002 to work with five communities in Suffolk to explore ways in which they could achieve improvements to their local services and facilities. The report highlights the many lessons learnt by Hastoe.

The project received funding from the Countryside Agency and the Housing Corporation and was supported locally by a steering group of representatives from local authorities, Suffolk ACRE, East of England Development Agency and Otley College.

Attempts were made to work in rural areas that were very different to ensure a broad sample. The project co-ordinator worked directly with the five rural communities, helping and supporting their practical activities. She was also involved in more strategic county level activities that indirectly impacted on these local communities.

Community buildings come in many shapes and sizes



Getting started

Getting started can be tricky for a community, especially if it has little or no experience in regeneration. The box below suggests some initial questions that your new group might ask.

What is the overall objective of your group?

Who should be involved?

Can anyone join?

How often will you have meetings?

What form will the meetings take?

Where will meetings be held?

Who will take the chair?

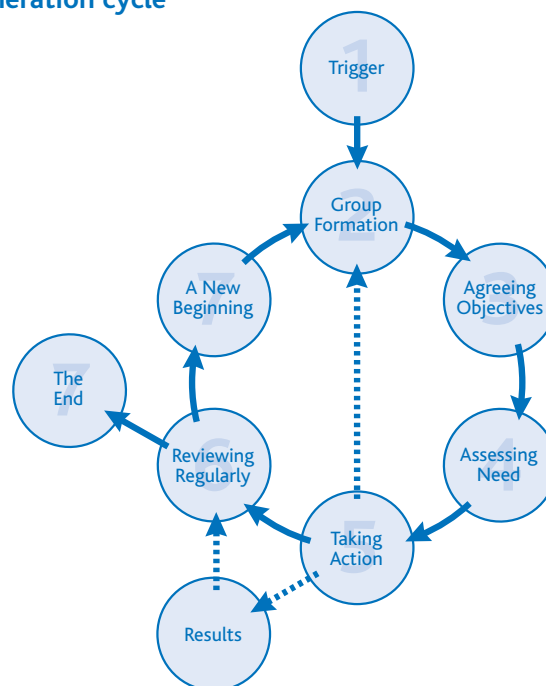
How will you inform others of your activities?

What are the gaps?

These issues can seem tedious, but careful consideration in the early days can ensure a firm foundation for the rest of your activity. For example, the board of the Community Energy Project, a newly funded Single Regeneration Budget project, spent many meetings deliberating over the organisational structure of the different forums and groups that had evolved during the development of the bid. They also discussed at length the procedures for making funding applications. Whilst these debates were time consuming, they were also absolutely vital for achieving a system that would not only work, but from the outset was accountable and transparent to the community in Great Cornard and Sudbury.

Most community groups go through several steps when involved with regeneration. We have identified seven phases, illustrated and described below. Your group may not always proceed as logically as shown, and may jump between stages.

The regeneration cycle



- Closure of services, lack of control, agency initiatives and community conflict can act as triggers for community activity.
- Community conflict should not be ignored.
- When managed appropriately conflict can be the source of creativity.

1. The trigger

Most community activity can be traced back to a specific incident that served as the trigger. It could be the closure of a vital service, such as a school, post office, pub, village shop or local bus service. Or it could be that, as local residents, you feel strongly that you ought to be doing more in the community. The trigger might also be promotion by the community council of a specific funding scheme or community audit tool.

2. Formation of the group

Getting the structure of your group right is very significant for the future success of your activities and may often happen as part of the process of agreeing the groups objectives. The choice of structure available is limitless, but you should give consideration to the task in hand and how the group can relate to your community.

Some questions your group should ask when deciding on an appropriate structure:

- What is the best structure for your group to achieve the objectives of the community – a new group, close links to an existing group/partnerships, a formally constituted body or a loose association?
- Will the structure of your group:
 - a) gain new members and so achieve wide community support?
 - b) identify and engage with marginalized individuals?
 - c) ensure community autonomy?
 - d) allow access to funds when necessary?
 - e) provide adequate skills and knowledge to manage itself and to achieve its objectives?
 - f) benefit from relevant links to other organisations and networks?
 - g) avoid duplication of existing groups?
 - h) minimise pre-conceived ideas and prejudices?
 - i) involve relevant partners?

- Negotiate within your group to agree objectives.
- Objectives should reflect the aspirations of your community.
- Objectives should be clear, complementary, realistic and achievable.
- Objectives can serve as a management tool helping monitoring and evaluation.
- Long term objectives can be broken into a series of short term objectives that include 'quick hits'.

3. Agreeing objectives

Your project group can usefully set objectives at the beginning of its life. This helps to focus the direction of its work and ensures a shared understanding of ultimate aims. Getting to the stage of agreeing a shared purpose can be an arduous process; negotiations may be necessary to reach a position suitable to all. However, it will help to cement relationships within the group and will also provide clear guidance on the nature and direction of your work. Having clear objectives will prevent your group from getting caught up with, or distracted by, the agenda of other organisations, particularly when working in partnership.

4. Assessing need

Most groups undertake some sort of appraisal or needs analysis to identify issues and set priorities. Appraising your community's needs is important so that your group fully understands the extent of the issues it is dealing with. At this phase of sustainable rural regeneration it is worth talking to other communities that have undertaken something similar. This will avoid repetition of mistakes and encourage a well-designed appraisal.

- Integrate full scale appraisals with wider strategies where appropriate.
- Small, specific, one-off appraisals can act as a catalyst or training ground for larger assessments.
- A variety of involvement techniques and organisations can help facilitate the appraisal process in an interesting way.
- Take care that the appraisal doesn't raise undue expectations within the community.

- Achieving meaningful results is important for the community and agencies involved.
- Community action should be an enjoyable experience.
- The skills and confidence of individuals should be developed through their participation in local action.
- Large scale projects can be developed alongside short term 'early winners'.
- Avoid the pitfall of getting stuck at assessing community need; move on to the action phase at the appropriate time.
- Co-opt individuals with necessary skills and experience where suitable.
- Use other agencies and organisations.

5. Taking action

While paying attention to procedural issues is clearly important, your group must not lose sight of the fact that it has come together for a reason – often to change something, however great or small. It is therefore important that your project achieves results that are meaningful to your community. There is a balance between how things are done and actually achieving results. Successful local action improves the quality of life, be it in social, economic or environmental terms. Meanwhile the actual process of local action builds experience and knowledge within the community so that it can successfully undertake more complex activities later. It also provides enjoyment and satisfaction for the people participating; a simple fact that can often be forgotten by community leaders and professionals.

Local action can deliver improved services like this library



6. Reviewing regularly

It is good practice for any group to take some time to review its activities and progress as it moves ahead. A review doesn't have to be time consuming and can be as simple as a quarterly or six monthly summary of group achievements – what has changed and what action has taken place due to the work of your group. This should be measured against your pre-set group objectives as described in number three above. Taken together, this information can be used to evaluate your actions overall – this may be necessary if you have to report back to a supporting or funding organisations.

- Aim to review your project regularly from the start of its life.
- Regular reviews can form part of a larger evaluation of your activities.
- Use milestones and achievements to celebrate success.
- Communicate regularly with your community.

- Recognise that your group has a limited lifespan.
- Don't be afraid to end your existing group to create space for a new body.
- Creating a new group can instil enthusiasm and attract new members.

7. The end or a new beginning?

Ending the life of your group is probably one of the most difficult aspects of rural regeneration. It can be particularly difficult for some members, such as those who have championed the whole process and are reluctant to see their pet project end. Often individuals who kick-start a process, or have the initial idea, are not appropriate to lead the group right through to project implementation, or the structure of the original group may not be fit for the new purpose.

A checklist of key issues

Some issues cut across the seven phases outlined above and will need to be addressed, revisited and reviewed constantly:

- The community boundary
- Representation
- Joining the group
- Maximum participation
- Publicity
- External assistance
- Community leader
- Working together
- Meetings
- Developing skills and gaining experience
- Training
- Diversity

The future

CF-S was a three year project. However, Hastoe is dedicated to this area of work and this project represents part of a longer term commitment. Further initiatives contributing to regeneration are envisaged.



Much of the project's work was at grass roots level

Recommendations

As you move between the different phases of rural regeneration your community may wish to consider the following tips:

a. Money and success

Lack of money can be a problem but is not always a barrier to success. You should concentrate on getting wide representation from your community – skills such as fundraising usually exist within a wider group. Try also to develop a close working relationship with an individual from a supporting agency, who has time to commit to your project – you will be able to tap into knowledge and expertise as well as being signposted to other sources of support.

b. Having fun and developing skills

Individuals invariably get involved with projects because they would like to see an improvement to some aspect of their community. They are most likely to remain involved if they value and enjoy the experience. Developing skills and encouraging fun are key factors in achieving this.

c. Participating and communicating

Use a variety of techniques to achieve maximum

participation from all of your community, including diverse individuals and groups. You should aim to communicate on a regular basis, constantly providing opportunities for, and inviting people from, your community to get involved. Early winners can be helpful publicity for your group.

d. Group dynamics

Individuals are vital for successful regeneration. Your group should support the involvement of a diverse collection of individuals. You will, therefore, need to: ensure that meetings have a real purpose; consider the culture of your group; and nurture an environment that actively encourages individuals to take part.

e. General objectives

Remember making meaningful changes and improvements to your community takes time. But never be afraid to ask for help. Even if you do not have the knowledge, skills or expertise you should be able to access it from elsewhere. If in doubt contact your local authority or community council in the first instance.

Acknowledgements

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Finally, I would also like to thank everyone who gave me advice and support over the life of this project.

Suffolk, May 2002



In a changing world the pub is still an important part of village life

More information

This is one in a series of publications highlighting the work of Communities First-Suffolk. The full series is made up of:

- **Sustaining rural communities - A guide to regeneration for communities and agencies (CA 117) £15.00**
- **Promoting sustainable rural communities - A guide for housing associations, local authorities and community leaders (CA118) Free**
- **Sustaining rural communities - A summary of a Suffolk rural regeneration project (CA119) Free**
- **Breathing new life into rural communities - A guide for local action (CA120) Free**
- **Made to measure - How to measure the success of local community action (CA 139) Free**

These are published by the Countryside Agency and are available from:

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