

Good Practice In Rural Development

No. 3

Preparing Local Rural Development Strategies: Frameworks for Action

**Rural Research Branch
The Scottish Office Central Research Unit**

and

COSLA

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Foreword

The Scottish National Rural Partnership is charged with the task of promoting rural development. The Partnership comprises of representatives of The Scottish Office, Scottish Tourist Board, Scottish Natural Heritage, Rural Forum, Scottish Agricultural College, COSLA, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Scottish Homes, Forestry Commission, Scottish Enterprise, Scottish Landowners Federation, Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, National Farmers Union of Scotland, CBI Scotland and Scottish Crofters Union.

To take forward the task of promoting rural development, the Scottish National Rural Partnership is publishing a range of titles in a series under the heading '*Good Practice in Rural Development*'. These highlight principles of good practice in a number of aspects of rural development. The good practice notes are intended for the attention of all those involved in rural development, particularly local rural partnerships, as guidance which merits careful consideration. Whether or not to follow the guidance in all cases is, of course, a decision for each local rural partnership or other body to make in their particular circumstances.

This publication is the third of the series, and addresses the issue of developing local rural strategies for action.

Other publications in this series, '*Good Practice in Rural Development*' will also be useful: 'No 1: Effective Partnership working' which provides practical advice on how partnerships can work together and 'No. 2: Community Involvement in Rural Development Initiatives', which highlights ways of involving local communities in the projects and programmes that affect them. A list of relevant publications is contained in the Annex.

Executive Summary

This guide aims to encourage and assist local rural partnerships, and other local agencies and organisations to prepare local rural development strategies to establish the policies, priorities and actions for tackling the key concerns in an area.

The main points in the guide are as follows:

- A strategy is a non-statutory document that describes the current problems and needs of the area; outlines the key issues that will be tackled; and sets out an action programme that describes how action will be prioritised, what tasks will be undertaken, by whom and when.
- The value of a local rural development strategy is that it is: tailored to local circumstances; sets out a co-ordinated and integrated approach to local development; and provides the opportunity for a structured, considered response to individual project proposals. All types of partnerships will benefit from preparing local development strategies.
- The guide takes as its starting point the need to involve the community at every stage in the development of a strategy. Not only is community involvement the foundation for successful rural development, but it is also a key principle of effective partnership working.
- It is helpful to spend time planning how the strategy will be prepared. It is at this early stage that many important decisions will need to be made. Key decisions include for example: what area should be covered by the strategy? What topics and issues should the strategy cover? Who should be involved and when? How should the work be managed?
- Where a number of partnerships exist in an area, covering various geographical areas or specific topics, all should be closely involved in the formulation of a strategy: strategic local rural partnerships need to consult with area and topic based partnerships to consider ways that these partnerships can feed into an overall strategy for an area.
- There are a number of stages involved in formulating a local rural development strategy. These are: identifying the local context ('where are we now?'); considering alternative strategic options and agreeing the best course of action ('Where do we want to be?'); drawing up an action or implementation plan ('How will we get there?').
- Gaining a thorough knowledge and understanding of the current local situation is the first step to formulating a strategy. Carrying out this work will give a better understanding of: local problems, needs and weaknesses; local assets (or resources), opportunities and constraints; external threats and constraints; and policies, projects and actions currently aimed at addressing the problems.
- There are a number of ways to collect information about local circumstances and a range of different tools that can be used. Issues that partnerships will need to consider in this information gathering stage are: what information do we need? What information do we already have? And how will we collect the information we still need? Partnerships will benefit from: ensuring that the data is of high quality; drawing on their local knowledge; considering a combination of methods for collecting information; and thinking about who will collect the information. This last can include partnership members, consultants and local people themselves.

- The choice of issues to be tackled will be influenced by local circumstances, local opinion, the nature of the partnership and its role, the opportunities and resources available. It is on the basis of these key issues that the strategic objectives will be formulated.
- In order to meet these objectives, the strategy must contain an Action Plan in which local solutions for local problems are developed by including ideas for action that build on the strengths and opportunities of the area. The action plan should describe what projects are already planned and the additional projects and tasks required; providing detailed information on these projects including who will be the responsible for undertaking the tasks, the resources required, the outcome expected, and targets to be met.
- It is important to assess progress on the strategy periodically in order to ensure that priorities are being followed as much as possible and to allow any changed circumstances to be taken into account.
- In publishing and disseminating the strategy, partnerships should think about the target audience; maximising accessibility and ensuring a wide circulation, and the need to review the action plan and strategic objectives periodically.

1. Introduction

1.1 What is a strategy?

What do we mean by the word strategy? A strategy is a document that sets out the key concerns in an area and the future action to tackle these concerns. It is a 'plan for the future' that is used to steer a coordinated programme of initiatives and project development.

1.2 Why have a strategy?

There are many agencies, organisations and communities working in rural areas to tackle local needs. Local rural development strategies can help all these different groups work together in an integrated and coordinated way.

1.3 The aims of the guide

This guide provides practical advice and information on how to prepare a local rural development strategy. It aims to encourage and assist local rural partnerships and other local agencies and organisations, to develop a strategic framework for action to address the needs and problems of an area. The involvement of the community is essential in this exercise. Not only is community involvement the foundation for successful rural development, but it is also a key principle of effective partnership working. The guide, therefore, takes as its starting point the need to involve the community at every stage in the development of a strategy. The guide is not prescriptive in the sense that it advocates one particular methodology or uniform model for a strategy; rather issues are set out for partnerships to consider in preparing local rural development strategies.

The document is aimed at all types of local rural partnerships: strategic, area and topic based, because all partnerships will benefit greatly from the development of a strategy for action.

The guide describes what a strategy is and the benefits of formulating a strategy. It provides practical advice on preparing a strategy, by following a step-by-step approach to how to go about it and highlighting key issues to consider at the various stages in the formulation of a strategy. These are: planning the process; identifying the local context; agreeing objectives; and developing an action plan. Advice on reviewing progress and publishing the strategy is also provided.

The sources from which the guidance has been prepared include: COSLA's '*Guidance to New Councils on the Preparation of Rural Strategies*'¹, the joint advice note of The Countryside Commission, English Nature and the Rural Development Commission on '*Rural Strategies*'², and the guidance issued by AEIDL based on the experience of the LEADER I projects³. In addition, the experience of a number of partnerships and agencies has been drawn on in order to illustrate some successful ways of formulating a strategy.

¹ *Guidance to New Councils on the Preparation of Rural Strategies*' by COSLA (1995)

² '*Rural Strategies*' joint advice note of The Countryside Commission, English Nature and The Rural Development Commission (1992) * available from each of the organisations

³ '*Local Project: Part II: Diagnosis of the area and the mounting of a development project*' by Chanard A, Blanchard A, Cavaco C, Clement F, Moseley M and Soto P, LEADER Coordinating Unit, AEIDL (1994)

*available on the Internet - WWW: <http://www.rural-europe.aeidl.be>

2. What is a strategy?

'Strategic Audit', 'Business Plan', 'Operational Plan', 'Framework for Action', 'Development Programme', 'Forward Plan'.....many terms are used to describe the process of strategic planning and the formulation of strategy documents. The term 'Local Rural Development Strategy', or simply 'strategy', is used in this publication to describe a document that sets out the key concerns in an area and the policies, priorities and actions for tackling these issues.

Every strategy is different since it reflects the characteristics and priorities of the local area, and the choice of what issues to cover in a strategy will depend on local circumstances along with the role and aims of the partnership. A strategy can cover a range of issues that are of concern in an area such as economic, social and environmental issues, or it can focus on one particular issue such as housing or child-care.

Whether a strategy covers a comprehensive range of issues, or focuses on one topic, it is based on a view of what everyone wants the locality to be like, sometimes called a 'vision' for the area. A strategy is a forward looking document that sets out what the area will look like, in say 5 or 10 years time, if the strategy is successful. A strategy that is devised to tackle the issue of housing, for example, may be based on an overall picture of affordable housing for all those who wish to live in the area. The Rural Strategy for Tayside, a strategy that aims to tackle a number of issues, provides a good example of the overall picture for Tayside:

The Rural Strategy for Tayside, developed in 1995 by a partnership comprising of Angus District Council, City of Dundee District Council, Forest Authority, Perth and Kinross District Council, Scottish Agricultural College, Scottish Enterprise Tayside, Scottish Homes, Scottish Natural Heritage, Tayside Health Board and Tayside Regional Council with local community consultation, is based on the following overall vision:

"To develop a sustainable rural economy which will improve the quality of life and environment for rural communities, which addresses problems of rural disadvantage and safeguards and enhances Tayside's rich cultural, historic and natural heritage".

A strategy goes beyond this vision, or 'mission statement' by setting out the means of realising these goals by:

- describing what the current problems and needs of the area are;
- outlining the key issues that will be tackled; and
- setting out an action programme that describes how action will be prioritised, what tasks will be undertaken, by whom and when.

A strategy document provides a sense of direction (where you want to be in X years time and what issues you think it is important to address) and guides action (what programmes and projects will be carried out based on what you think is important).

A local rural development strategy is not a statutory document and does not replace, or duplicate, the statutory plans and programmes required of local authorities and government agencies, such as land use development plans and environmental strategies. Rather, it takes account of existing plans and programmes, draws on them to provide an overview of activity in the area and to identify any duplication or gaps in development activity.

3. Why develop a strategy?

There are many benefits that can be gained by producing a local rural development strategy, and this section explores some of the main reasons why local rural partnerships will find a strategy helpful. These include: tailoring action to local circumstances; setting out a coordinated and integrated approach to local development; and gaining the opportunity for a structured, considered response to individual project proposals. Each of these is described below.

3.1 Local issues, local solutions

Different localities experience different circumstances - and will have different needs and strengths. One area, for example, may need to address the demands created by large numbers of people moving into the area, whilst another may be experiencing difficulties caused by a fall in the population. By analysing the local concerns and problems, a clearer understanding of the range of issues affecting a locality can be gained by the partnership and other local organisations, and an area-based strategy can be developed that takes account of local problems, is more responsive to local circumstances, and builds upon local resources and potential.

3.2 Promoting coordination

The preparation of a strategy by a local rural partnership provides the opportunity for an integrated and coordinated policy response to local circumstances. In any one area, there will be a range of policies and programmes being undertaken by a number of agencies and organisations who are trying to tackle local problems and promote local development, ranging from local rural partnerships, local authorities and local agencies to community and voluntary groups active in the area. The value of a strategy is that it can be used to bring these different groups and different policies together, and effort can be pooled.

This can work in a number of ways: the strategy can form the basis for communication, collaboration and co-ordination between agencies and organisations in order that overlap and duplication of activity is avoided, any gaps in activity identified, and an integrated and holistic, rather than sectoral, approach can be achieved. This is particularly relevant in tackling some rural issues, such as rural disadvantage for example, which do not fall clearly with the responsibility of one particular agency or organisation, and because of the interrelationship between issues: for example, a local factory may wish to expand or diversify, but there may be no suitable housing nearby for new workers. A strategy can also feed into the development of the policies and programmes of individual organisations and ensure that common themes are pursued.

3.3 Dealing with Individual Projects

A strategy will also help local rural partnerships in dealing with individual projects and prioritising actions. Even if a strategic rural partnership does not intend to pursue an action programme itself, a strategy will indicate priorities for action and funding to local level area based partnerships. Area based partnerships will find that a strategy will help set criteria to target action and to guide responses to local initiatives, project proposals and funding applications. A strategy is a tool, therefore, to help partnerships focus on long-term strategic issues rather than adopting an uncoordinated or ad-hoc response to problems and project proposals.

In addition, having a strategy will also help local community and voluntary groups gain an understanding of the issues affecting their locality and how their concerns fit into the action framework. If local community groups have been involved in the formulation of the strategy, there will be community support for the proposed priorities and action, and it is more likely that tensions over individual projects of development will be reduced.

4. How to go about it

There are a number of stages involved in formulating a local rural development strategy. These are:

- planning the process;
- identifying the local context;
- considering alternative strategic options and agreeing the best overall course of action;
- and drawing up an action or implementation plan.

These steps are described in more detail below, and you will find an illustration of this step-by-step approach overleaf on page 5. In practice, the end of one stage and the beginning of another may not be clear cut, particularly identifying local problems and developing alternative strategies. For example, some community involvement techniques and exercises, such as community appraisals and 'visioning' exercises, may integrate these different stages.

It might be helpful to think about each stage as a step to enable you to answer the following questions:

- Where are we now?
- Where do we want to be?
- How will we get there?

The steps to formulating a Strategy

Planning the process

Participants
Structures
Vision and Objectives
Timeframe

Identifying the local context: Strengths and Weaknesses

Physical Factors
Human Resources
Economics and Social Structures
Cultural Traditions

Identifying the local context: Opportunities and threats

Key Trends
Government
Technology
Competition

Considering Alternative Strategies: Agreeing Objectives

Stability
Retrenchment
Expansion
Combination
Choice

Implementation: Developing an Action Plan

Policies
Resources
Actors
Tasks
Timescale

Monitoring and Evaluating

Targets
Performance
Deviations
Modifications

(Source: Adapted from O'Conneide M and Keane MJ (1990) 'A normative strategic planning model for local economic development' in *Town Planning Review*, 61,4,pp475-486)

4.1 Planning the process

Partnerships will find it helpful to spend time planning the formulation of the strategy. It is in these early stages that many important decisions will need to be made. Key decisions include for example: What geographical area should be covered by the strategy? What topics and issues should the strategy address? Who should be involved and when? How should the work be managed? This section describes some of the main issues that it is advisable to consider at the outset.

What area should the strategy cover?

Local rural partnership may wish to formulate one strategy for the whole of the geographical area it represents. Alternatively, partnerships may wish to consider whether a number of more locally based area strategies should be developed and the role that area based partnerships could play in this. This may be appropriate if the partnerships covers a large geographical area containing a wide range of communities and localities with different circumstances requiring different courses of action. If this approach is adopted, partnerships will need to think about the integration and coordination with the different 'tiers' of strategies.

What issues should the strategy cover?

The topics and issues that will be addressed in the strategy depend very much on the role and aims of the partnership and some may wish to cover a broader range of issues than others. It has already been noted earlier that a strategy provides the opportunity for an integrated and coordinated approach and as a result, it may be helpful for partnerships to think about issues that local agencies and groups are addressing, and whether there are any gaps or duplication in activity.

Who should we involve?

The issue of representation on the partnership is very important, and part of the planning process could usefully include an assessment of the membership of the partnership as a way of ensuring that the range of interests in an area are considered. Membership of the partnership will already represent many of those with an interest in the development of an area, and of course the local community, but partnerships could also consider if any groups or interests are not formally represented on the partnership, and how the views of these groups will be obtained and taken account of. For example, have any new organisations been established recently that should be invited on to partnership? Is there sufficient representation of local community and voluntary groups? Is there sufficient representation of private sector interests, particularly those who may be able to provide funding for future projects?

In considering the range of interests that could usefully be represented, a good starting point is to draw up a list of the organisations involved in rural development work in the locality and existing local community and voluntary groups. If a strategic local rural partnership is taking the lead on preparing a strategy for a locality in which more locally based area partnerships or topic partnerships exist, it is important that these partnerships are actively involved in the development of the strategy. In areas where both local rural partnerships and LEADER Local Action Groups operate, close involvement of the LAG in the strategy formulation is advisable and will help avoid duplicating work and lead to a better coordinated and integrated strategy. *More information on partnership membership is provided in the first of this good practice series*⁴.

How can we involve the wider community?

There are a range of possible ways to involve the community and a number of different tools to help you do it. These can include:

- public meetings;
- exhibitions;
- open days;
- community forums;
- questionnaires;
- and community appraisals.

A review of the way that all the different members of the partnership currently involve the wider community in their work could be a useful starting point. Building upon these existing methods and learning from their experience will help you choose a suite of approaches that will be appropriate for your area.

Whatever methods are adopted, it is important that the local community has a clear understanding of the purpose of the strategy and that unrealistic expectations are not raised. For this reason, it can be beneficial for partners to describe their current policies and programmes at the beginning of any consultation exercise to inform the community of political realities and likely levels of resources. A public meeting or community appraisals exercise can be used for this purpose.

Community participation and consultation exercises are generally time consuming, and partnerships will benefit from allowing sufficient time for this. Allowing adequate time for awareness raising, both of the role and aims of the partnership, and of the purpose of the strategy, will be important given that many partnerships are only recently established. Partnerships will find it helpful to consider the existing levels of community activity in the area as this could influence the amount of time they wish to devote to 'awareness raising': there can often be considerable variation between and within small geographical areas in the level of self-help, organisation and community activity. The 'level of preparedness' or readiness of some communities, and indeed of some local voluntary and community groups, to become involved in the strategy development may require special pre-development work⁵. *The SNRP has published practical advice on this issue in the second of this good practice series*⁶.

Circulating information and discussing options with the wider community can be time consuming, but well worth pursuing. The experience of the European LEADER I groups suggests that it is important that sufficient time is allocated to the preliminary stages of preparing a strategy: "The preliminary information can therefore be widely circulated, local people can be reassured that their opinions are really taken into account, and full discussion of all the arguments will enhance deliberations" (1994, 1).

⁵O'Connell M. & Keane M.J. (1990) Applying strategic planning to local economic development: the case of Connemara Gaeltacht, Ireland in *Town Planning Review*, 61,4,pp475-486

⁶*Good Practice in Rural Development No. 2: Community Involvement in Rural Development Initiatives* by Rural Forum and Rural Research Branch, The Scottish Office Central Research Unit (1997).

How should we manage the work?

Partnerships will also need to plan how the work will be managed and discuss the different management structures that could be followed. Whatever structure is followed, it should allow for as broad a range of partners and interests to be involved as possible without becoming so large that it cannot operate effectively or the time involved in preparing the strategy will be increased. All members of the partnership may wish to be closely involved in the management of the work, or a smaller strategy working group or steering committee, comprising of representatives of the local rural partnership, and perhaps others, is another way of taking forward the process. Some have found that a strategy group that works through a single person from each partner organisation who in turn networks internally is helpful. Working or 'topic' sub-groups can be established to deal with particular issues and themes, reporting to a core strategy group who collate the individual topic information. These groups could also include representatives and experts from organisations who are not partners. The Moray Firth Partnership has followed this approach:

Moray Firth Partnership

The Moray Firth Partnership aims to “promote the integrated management of the natural, economic, recreational and cultural resources of the Moray Firth in order to retain and enhance a high quality of life for all its residents and visitors”. The partnership has established ‘topic groups’ to assist in the production of management guidelines for the Moray Firth area. These groups contain at least 1 member of the management group, who reports back to the management group, and can include organisations other than those who are members of the partnership. The topic groups include issues of: water quality; recreation; tourism; economic activity; coastal defence; nature conservation; land-use; archaeological and built interest; fisheries, information, education and community involvement. Each topic group is producing a topic paper based on 2 stages of work: (i) a review of data sources and (ii) the identification of key issues and opportunities.

Partnerships may also find it helpful to consider the level of authority and seniority of partnership members in any working group or sub-groups. In England, the Rural Development Commission suggests various approaches. In a two-tier system, a working group of officials prepares the strategy and is responsible for its implementation (usually meeting three to four times a year). The working group in turn reports to a Committee on which elected members and board members sit and which meets less often (usually twice a year). The single-tier approach is similar in that it involves the same officer working group but with only periodic presentations to groups of councillors and board members⁷.

Along with this, partnerships could find it beneficial to pay particular attention to the choice of the chairperson of the steering committee (or sub-group) for the strategy. It may be advantageous in some cases to have an independent chair. During the development of the Rural Strategy for Tayside, for example, an independent chair (Rural Forum) was found to be a useful way of ensuring that no one partner dominated or led the development of the strategy. This approach has also been followed in the setting up of Angus Local Rural Partnership. Alternatively, the group could adopt a ‘revolving chair’ so that a different partner chairs each meeting or different stages in the strategy development.

⁷The future of the rural development programme process (1993) The Rural Development Commission

Thought could also be given at this stage to the personnel requirements: does the partnership employ a community development agent that could undertake some of the work? What might staff employed by individual partners contribute and what relevant skills do they have? The use of consultants might be desirable at various stages of the process, particularly for specialised, technical work: for example, to assist in community involvement exercises such as village/community appraisals; or to undertake feasibility or market research studies.

4.2 Identifying the local context

Once the partnership has discussed and planned the preparation of the strategy, the next step is to gain a thorough understanding of the current local situation. This should help you answer the 'where are we now?' and can be viewed as a stocktaking exercise. This is sometimes referred to as a 'baseline study', a 'local resources audit', or even a 'diagnosis of the area'. Carrying out this work will contribute to a better understanding of:

- local problems, needs and weaknesses;
- local assets (or resources), opportunities and constraints;
- external threats and constraints;
- current policies, projects and actions currently being undertaken to tackle the problems.

It is important to get this stage of the strategy preparation right, because the vision, strategic objectives and the action plan will all flow from this knowledge of the area and "the more that is known about an area, the easier it is to implement a tailor-made development project"⁸. If the analysis of the local context is based on inaccurate or incomplete information, the strategy may not develop appropriate local solutions. Questions that partnerships will need to consider in this information gathering stage are: what information do we need? What information do we already have? And how will we collect the information we still need? Ways of going about answering these questions are explored below.

What information do we need to collect?

There is a wide range of information that could be collected and this will be guided very much by the aims and role of the partnership. A wider range of data will be needed to build up a complete picture of the economic, social, cultural and environmental characteristics of the area, whereas a topic based partnership, for example, may require more specific information.

Experience from the LEADER I rural development groups in Ireland suggests that exploring the local context should include a review of two types of resources:

- "the local 'hardware': natural resources, physical infrastructure, the landscape heritage, and a demographic profile; and
- 'software': technical skills, availability of finance, innovation and business culture, the social and cultural calendar of events, and the level of community organisation"⁹.

Whilst much of the information collected will relate to the local area, the analysis of the local situation will be strengthened by considering the likely effect of non-local or external influences on the area. Non-local factors such as changes in national policy, technology and competition could affect the prosperity of the local area by providing exciting development opportunity to develop or threatening existing employment sources. Such issues should be identified and taken into account in formulating the strategy ¹⁰.

Local rural partnerships may find it helpful to consider the items of information that LEADER Local Action Groups have been advised to collect:

⁸Local Project: Part II: Diagnosis of the area and the mounting of a development project' by Chanard A, Blanchard A, Cavaco C, Clement F, Moseley M and Soto P, LEADER Coordinating Unit, AEIDL (1994)

⁹EU LEADER I Initiative in Ireland: Evaluation and Recommendations by Kearney B, Boyle GE and Walsh JA, Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry (1991) p30

¹⁰O'Cinneide M. & Keane M.J. (1990) Applying strategic planning to local economic development: the case of Connemara Gaeltacht, Ireland in *Town Planning Review*, 61,4,p481

Collecting the data

General area of information that should be covered include:

- geographical constraints and assets;
- specific historical and cultural features;
- demographic data and trends;
- available infrastructure and locally accessible services;
- environmental assets and constraints;
- structure and organisation of, and current developments within, the local economy;
- the global context (national, European or world-wide) in which the dominant sectors of the local economy must evolve;
- development of the labour market;
- existing social problems;
- innovative projects which have already been planned or carried out by local people;
- analysis of the institutional framework of the locality particularly with respect to territorial authority)
- the importance and activities of associations, trade unions etc.

As regards the local economy, it is helpful to distinguish between:

- activities which are dependent on customers from outside the area (in relation to products or services). It will be necessary to make sure that these activities are able to compete on national, European or world-wide markets. This requires 'global thinking', even if the project only aims to 'act locally': developing areas are unprotected from major developments in the world economy.
- activities which aim to meet local needs (housing, local services, etc.). For these activities, the problems of competitiveness are addressed differently.

Source: *Local Project: Part II: Diagnosis of the area and the mounting of a development project* by Chanard A, Blanchard A, Cavaco C, Clement F, Moseley M and Soto P, LEADER Coordinating Unit, AEIDL (1994)

When considering the type of information required, partnerships will also need to think about the quality of the information. In particular, is it

- Accurate: how has the information been collected? has the information been obtained from a reliable source? Who was involved in the process (and who may have been excluded)?
- Unambiguous: does it mean the same to everyone? Do people feel something is a problem for the same reason?
- Up-to-date: data may be published some time after it was collected. Is it still relevant or have circumstances changed?
- appropriate for a rural area: does the information reflect the rurality of the area? Is the data and indicators used appropriate for a rural context: for example, census measures such as overcrowding and sharing amenities have an urban bias. Similarly, area based measures may not adequately reflect the dispersion of rural needs, and tend to reflect urban problems through the spatial concentration of needs.

Partnerships will also find it helpful to think about the future use of the information as the 'baseline' information will form a valuable reference point against which future action can be measured, both for monitoring progress and reviewing the strategy. This issue is explored later in the guide.

Once there is a clear idea of the type of information that is needed, the partnership can explore:

- what information have we already got?
- what information do we still need and how will we collect it?

What information do we already have?

Much data may already be available from a variety of sources, particularly existing strategies, associated surveys and studies, published data (e.g. census), and locally available data such as the operational databases of the partners themselves.

Pulling together information from all the existing strategies and organisational programmes that currently exist for an area can be a useful way to begin and will also provide the partnership with information on the proposed activity in the area. Often areas are covered by a number of strategies and plans developed by a range of individual organisations and agencies. For example, in their application for registration as a Strategic Local Rural Partnership, Dumfries and Galloway Partnership proposed the development of a shared rural strategy for the Dumfries and Galloway area and noted that 36 associated strategies, plans and programmes were currently in existence including Housing Plans, Local Plans, Business Plans of the Local Enterprise Company, Community Health Trust, Tourist Board, CVSs, Forest Enterprise and EU programmes.

The partnership may decide that the information currently available is sufficient, and that rather than collecting more information, what is required is a better understanding of what is already held. The partnership could consider analysing the existing information itself, although this is likely to be time consuming and may require some specialist knowledge, such as statistical techniques. An alternative may be to use consultants to assist in analysing the data. As part of the process of developing a rural strategy for Fife, for instance, use was made of information already held to examine which areas in Fife are the most vulnerable to disadvantage.

Using information available

Consultants were commissioned by Fife Council to develop indicators of deprivation and availability of amenities to highlight disadvantaged areas in rural Fife. A number of indicators, based on a postcode sector approach, were used to inform each of six themes: economic activity; income; vulnerable families; vulnerable elderly; housing; and access to services. An average deprivation score, or overall index measure for each of the six themes was then calculated and mapped to reveal the areas in rural Fife. In relation to the vulnerable elderly, for example, the indicators used were:

- per cent of population over 60
- percent of households comprising only pensioners
- estimated mortality rate 1991
- per cent of hospital admissions aged over 60
- per cent of pensioners claiming income support

Source: Copus A, Chapman P, Conway E & Shucksmith M (1996) A profile of Rural Deprivation in Fife: Final Report to Fife Council: October 1996.

Partnerships will be able to exploit their strong local representation to develop a list of critical issues and problems affecting the local area. Highland Perthshire Communities Partnership, for example, is drawing on its wide community membership to gain an understanding of the present characteristics of the area, as part of the process of their strategy formulation and to assist in evaluating future project proposals.

Using Local Knowledge

Highland Perthshire Communities Partnership is a local area based rural partnership comprising of 8 community councils, 2 local branches of the SNFU, 5 other local partnerships committed to sustainable development, and also includes representation from the Church, Landowners and Heartland FM, the local community radio enterprise.

A local sustainability model developed by Drew Mackie of Gaia Planning for use by both communities and professionals to 'assess the effects of proposals on the economic, community and environmental sustainability of their area' has been applied to establish a consensus of the current status of the area within the partnership. The model consists of a 3 by 3 matrix in which "the columns represent the 3 components of sustainability: the natural environment; the community and its culture; and the economy. The rows represent various states of these components: robust - little affected by external events; stable - locally well-founded but subject to external 'shocks'; and fragile - locally at risk and prey to external effects."

Definitions of these concepts were discussed, adapted for the local context and agreed by the partnership. The model was a useful tool for the partnership to reach a consensus on the existing position of the area, particularly given their range of backgrounds and disciplines, and its strong local knowledge through its community membership. It is now considering ways in which the model can be used to identify the current situation within a number of smaller geographical areas within Highland Perthshire, as well as for the evaluation of the potential impacts of local project proposals and the partnership's own activity and effectiveness.

Source: Using the Local Sustainability Model by Drew Mackie, Gaia Planning¹¹.

How will we collect more information?

Having examined existing information sources, the partnership may consider that more information needs to be collected. If this is the case, there are a range of possible ways to collect the information and a number of different tools to help you do it. The approach you choose and the techniques you use will depend upon a number of factors, including:

- the type of information required such as basic factual information or opinions;
- expertise among the group such as familiarity with different tools ranging from social surveys to community involvement exercises ; and
- resources (money and time).

Possible methods for collecting the information include: semi-structured interviews with key local organisations and groups, discussion or 'focus' groups, household surveys, public meetings, community appraisals, and 'visioning' exercises based on a SWOT analysis: where 'S' stands for strengths, 'W' for weaknesses, 'O' for opportunities and 'T' for threats. It is likely that a combination of these methods will be needed if a comprehensive picture of the local context is to be built up and the views of the local community obtained. Guidance on using these different methods is given in the second in this series¹².

Using a mix of approaches

Consultants were commissioned by Allerdale Borough Council to assess the extent of disadvantage in Allerdale "as it is perceived understood and experienced by both the people of Allerdale themselves, and by those professionals and practitioners working with issues and concerns related to disadvantage". A combination of methods were used including: "a quantitative, structured approach using questionnaire (300 telephone interviews), together with a combination of qualitative methods, namely, focus groups (3) and semi-structured interviews (30). In addition, feedback workshops were carried out, to ensure that the respondents, the local population, and policy makers were able to discuss the facets of disadvantage being highlighted within Allerdale". The results were combined and presented under 8 themes: rural & urban disadvantage or advantage?; housing; employment, work & changing rural economies; development; income & poverty; service provision; social change & transition; power relations.

Source: Skerratt S, Chapman P and Shucksmith M (1996) 'Disadvantage' in Rural and Urban Allerdale: A report to the Borough of Allerdale Council

The use of community appraisals or village audits could be particularly helpful for partnerships to obtain both factual information and the views of local people about the issues and problems in the area, as well as its strengths and development opportunities¹³. The Dalmellington Working Party partnership and East Ayrshire Council local area committee, for example, are examining ways of engaging the local community in formulating a regeneration strategy for the area. Following a pilot exercise held recently in the village of Muirkirk, the local partnership and area committees are now considering the preparation of Local Integrated Strategies for individual communities throughout the Doon Valley area.

Community appraisals

The seminar was organised by the Muirkirk community and facilitated by The Corrom Trust, with assistance and funding from East Ayrshire Council through the Community Grants Scheme. The main aims of the community seminar were to provide an opportunity for the local community to discuss:

- its present circumstances;
- its vision for the future and ;
- the possible processes by which that vision may be achieved.

In general, the seminar was felt to be well attended (an estimated 70 people out of a population of 1400 attended) and valuable way to engage the local community.

A number of important points have been learned from this pilot exercise, which would feed into any future community seminars:

- Although it was felt that there was ‘a realism in terms of understanding what can be achieved and an enthusiasm to progress in partnership’ in the pilot exercise, any future community seminars would need to be based on a two-stage approach in which an initial seminar would explain the role of the partnership and the strategy development and ensure ‘there is a realistic expectation as to what might be achieved’. This is helped by involving partners and stakeholders;

- It was also felt important that an action plan was developed as part of the community appraisal, so that local people’s hopes were not raised without any attempt to meet these expectations. The community seminar in Muirkirk has already led to the development of a number of partnerships between agencies, and between agencies and the local community;

- Young people could have been represented more fully, including people with young children, and the provision of creche facilities at future seminars may help to encourage their participation.

As well as thinking about what method will be the best to gain the additional information required, partnerships should think about who will collect the information. For example, consultants could conduct exercises such as community appraisals and provide advice on issues such as questionnaire design. Partnerships could also think about how local people could be involved in gathering the information, such as in administering questionnaires. As part of the Douglas and Nethan Valley Initiative to regenerate communities in South Lanarkshire, a Douglas Valley Transport Working party was set up comprising of volunteers from the local community. This group carried out its own research into their transport issues and potential solutions through community survey work and undertook 'desk research' by conducting a mapping exercise of existing provision and policies, and examining work that had been carried out by others¹⁴. Another approach is that of South Lanarkshire Rural Partnership:

Involving the local community

South Lanarkshire Rural Partnership is an area based local rural partnership comprising of South Lanarkshire Council, Lanarkshire Development Agency (LDA), Scottish Homes and the Association of Local Voluntary Organisations (ALVO). Its aim is to 'identify, highlight and address the opportunities and problems related to the provision of and access to information, advice and services in the rural areas of South Lanarkshire....'.

Information on access to services and employment, housing, and social welfare is being gathered for each of the 19 wards representing rural South Lanarkshire from published statistics such as the census, and additional information from questionnaires and community audits. The questionnaire is being undertaken in two stages: firstly targeting approximately 300 local community activists, and secondly addressed to approximately 8,000 local people. A small team of long term unemployed people are being employed and trained as local agents to help in the data collection and analysis, and the preparation of the 19 community profiles, through a joint LDA/Council initiative 'The Intermediate Labour Market Fund'.

Many partnerships have used imaginative and innovative ways of gathering information on the local area. For example, Perth and Kinross partnership wanted more information about population movement in and out of the area and its effects. They found out that The Scottish Office had commissioned a research project on migration in rural areas which involved carrying out household surveys in a number of different locations throughout rural Scotland. For a very modest sum, the researchers agreed to carry out additional interviews in Perth and Kinross and to produce a report for the partnership comparing the area to all the other locations in the study.

4.3 Agreeing Objectives

A clear picture of the strengths and weaknesses of the local area should have been obtained in the information gathering exercise, and you will be able to answer the question, "where are we now?". The next step is to explore, "where do we want to be?" and "what do we feel it is important to tackle?"

It is important to recognise that there is a choice over the issues to be tackled. This choice will be influenced by the local circumstances, local opinion, the nature of the partnership and its role, the opportunities and resources available.

Possible choices or 'strategic alternatives' include

- "(a) continuance as before (stability);
- (b) curtailing or abandoning some activities (retrenchment);
- (c) adding new functions and enlarging other activities (expansion); and
- (d) undertaking some combination of (a), (b) and (c) simultaneously or sequentially"¹⁵.

In making these choices, it is helpful to agree on an overall 'vision' for the area: what everyone wants the area to be like in the future, normally within a timescale such as 5 or 10 years. This will provide the direction for all the action and effort which the partnership will employ. Existing partnerships may have agreed their overall direction when they were established and their statement of purpose, such as that given in its registration with The Scottish Office, should give a clear picture of the end result of the partnership's work.

Once the overall direction for action has been agreed, a number of 'strategic objectives' can be identified and agreed. These describe in greater detail the intentions of the partnership and the key issues and topics it proposes to tackle. The strategic objectives should reflect the current problems and needs, and take account of the priorities and aspirations of the partnership, local agencies and organisations, and the local community in addressing them. In addition, they should be based on an assessment of the information gathered including the local assets (or resources), opportunities and constraints; the external threats and constraints including any changes to national and European-wide policies; and the likely level of resources. Using the 'SWOT' analysis approach as a basis for formulating objectives will ensure that they are appropriate for the local area and have a realistic likelihood of being achieved.

It is possible that the exercise of trying to agree objectives will reveal a lack of consensus or unity of purpose in the partnership. Similarly, there may be differences of opinion on issues amongst members of the local community. It will be important to gather views on the priority attached to key issues and required action to assist in the decision making process: the use of tools such as community appraisals and 'scenario' analysis, will be valuable in obtaining the priorities of the local community. Recognition of any differences, discussion and negotiation will be required and inevitably, the choices and decisions made on objectives will have to be based on a majority view. Some guidance is provided on this by the LEADER Coordinating Unit¹⁶ and the SNRP intend to commission research on consensus building shortly.

¹⁵O'Cinneide M. & Keane M.J. (1990) Applying strategic planning to local economic development: the case of Connemara Gaeltacht, Ireland in *Town Planning Review*, 61,4,p481

¹⁶*Local Project: Part III: Managing the Local Project* by LEADER Coordinating Unit (1994) *available on the Internet <http://www.rural-europe.aeidl.be>

When agreeing strategic objectives, partnerships should try to avoid vague statements that may be interpreted in different ways. This will also assist in the monitoring and evaluation process: in order to assess whether progress has been made, or an objective met, there must be a clear understanding of what action is trying to achieve. For example, whilst a strategic objective might be agreed as 'to tackle rural disadvantage', a number of more specific operational objectives could be defined such as 'to increase average income levels' and 'to improve the provision of rented housing'.

Consider for example, the strategic objectives set by The Uist 2000 strategy, a community initiative set up in 1993 because of local recognition of the need to diversify the local economy:

Uist 2000

Based on an economic study of the area that had highlighted "a lack of manufacturing, high dependence on imported goods, and a relatively undeveloped tourism sector compared with other parts of the Highlands and Islands" the Uist 2000 strategy was developed which "focuses on diversifying the economy of Uist, with the aim of giving the islands, by the year 2000, a broader and stronger base from which subsequent growth can be achieved". Objectives and priorities are documented for a number of sectors, termed 'sectoral strategies', including tourism and travel, manufacturing and processing and marine enterprises amongst others. In relation to tourism and travel, for example, objectives are:

- to publicise Uist to potential visitors from the UK and overseas more extensively and effectively than at present;
- to develop visitor facilities, especially capitalising on the islands' distinctive culture and heritage;
- to promote the development of Gaelic-related tourism;
- to encourage the provision of wildlife and nature holidays and other packages;
- to lengthen the stays of existing visitors and promote return visits and recommendations;
- to obtain fare reductions on ferry and air routes;
- to ensure the growth is not constrained by access transport capacity;
- to improve the visual appeal of the Uist landscape.

4.4. Developing an Action Plan

You now have a clear idea of what the relevant local issues and the priority assigned to tackling them. You now need to take the necessary steps to help you answer “how are we going to get there?”.

This part of the strategy, which identifies how the objectives will be met, is sometimes called an ‘Action Plan’, ‘Business Plan’, ‘Operation Plan’, ‘Action Programme’ or ‘Task/Work Schedule’).

The information already gathered will provide the basis for developing the action plan by highlighting the local assets (or resources) and opportunities that can be drawn upon. Indeed, in developing the action plan, it is important to create local solutions to local problems by including ideas that build on the strengths and opportunities of the area. This consideration of responses tailored to local circumstance is crucial to ensure their success: the evaluation of the LEADER I projects in Ireland concluded that “strategies that attempt to replicate or imitate successful initiatives in other places may not succeed if they are not adequately adjusted by the local community in collaboration with key government and business leaders”¹⁷.

In developing the action plan, give consideration to:

- the current and programmed initiatives;
- the additional projects and tasks required;
- the priority and degree of urgency of tasks;
- responsibility for undertaking the tasks;
- the contribution and collaboration required both by partners and external agencies and organisations;
- the resources required and their source;
- the timescale for implementation;
- and the outcome or results expected.

The action plan usually flows from the strategic objectives and priorities with issues of greatest concern and highest priority tackled first, although there may be some circumstances in which this differs:

- certain high priority actions may have to wait until all the necessary conditions have been met (creation of the infrastructure, training, etc.)
- some lower priority actions may be scheduled earlier simply because they are highly visible and give credibility to the process undertaken;
- implementation of projects must also take account of the need to balance the long-term structuring actions and calls by the population for one-off projects¹⁸

¹⁷*EU LEADER I Initiative in Ireland: Evaluation and Recommendations* by Kearney B, Boyle GE and Walsh JA, Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry (1999) p31

¹⁸*Local Project: Part II: Diagnosis of the area and the mounting of a development project* by Chanard A, Blanchard A, Cavaco C, Clement F, Moseley M and Soto P, LEADER Coordinating Unit, AEIDL (1994)

A strategy should set out a timetable for the work. The action plan section of the strategy covers a shorter time period than the long-term 'objectives' section. The LEADER Business Plans usually cover a period of three years, other action plans in strategies range from one year to five years. As a general rule, action plans are reviewed and updated annually. Some organisations provide a more detailed list of actions, tasks and targets for year 1, and a more general statement of action for years 2 and 3.

Project information contained in the Action Plan should include:

- a brief description of each activity
- the relationship to strategic objectives and other projects
- the lead agency and other partners involved
- estimated costs and funding sources
- the envisaged timescale and measurable targets.

The Action Plan developed by Dalmellington Working Party, for example, illustrates the information that can be included for each proposed action:

An Action Programme

The Dalmellington Working Party Strategy contains an Action Programme. For each project there is a brief description, an appraisal and justification including compatibility with other strategies for the area, the linkages with other projects, the priority, the lead agency, the recommended action, the estimated costs, and a current status report on each project. In addition, each action is incorporated in a programme chart summary sheet in order to identify linkages between projects and to objectives.

In relation to Project 'DA1', for example, the establishment of a new local agency to provide training and employment guidance, the Action Plan included the following:

- an appraisal and justification for the action and the proposal was noted as being in accord with a number of strategic objectives in the strategy, in line with the 'Training Strategy for Cumnock and Doon Valley District' and other strategies covering the locality; given a high priority;
- the cost was estimated at £20,000; and the lead and funding provided by Strathclyde Regional Council.
- Recommended action was described as 'implement detailed discussions with SRC regarding establishment of dedicated Jobs Access Training Counsellor within Dalmellington'.

Since the Action Plan component of the strategy is likely to require frequent updating, you should consider preparing it in the form of a 'stand-alone' document or as an Annex, making clear the links between the action plan and the strategy document.

The action plan for the Tayside Rural Strategy, for example, has been produced as a stand alone document which clearly refers back to the objectives of the strategy. Illustrations from the action plan are shown below:

Tayside Rural Strategy	
<i>Strategy Objectives</i>	<i>Action Objectives</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• to improve access to services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- provision of Shopmobility schemes in Perth- funding and promotion of local community transport schemes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• to achieve and maintain a balanced population structure throughout the rural area	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- funding of affordable housing for rent and ownership- identifying sites in Local Plans for special needs and affordable housing for rent or sale

5. Putting pen to paper

Once the partnership has followed through these stages, you will be ready to prepare the written strategy document.

A local rural development strategy will be unique given that it reflects local characteristics and priorities, as well as the different aims of local rural partnerships. Partnerships will wish to develop their own format for a strategy document: objectives may, for example, be grouped in an introductory section or placed in individual topic sections tying in their relationship to proposed actions. Similarly, topic areas may be wider or narrower in coverage than those included as examples here. Whatever format is adopted, the strategy should clearly identify key issues, objectives and proposed actions, and explain why the aims and objectives have been selected. The document should also describe the process adopted in the preparation of the strategy, including the community participation.

Consideration should be given to the target audience in the preparation of the strategy: the document itself should be concise and easily read, and avoid the use of technical jargon if possible.

The Countryside Commission, English Nature and the Rural Development Commission examined the common features contained in published rural strategies and these are shown on page 23. Partnerships may find it helpful to look at some strategy documents produced by other partnerships and organisations.

Publishing the strategy

Once the strategy has been written, partnerships will need to think about ways of publishing and disseminating the document.

The final written report could be produced in two formats: a full version, containing statistical and technical appendices and a shorter, easily accessible, inexpensive version in order to maximise accessibility and widen circulation. As described earlier, it is worth considering publishing the Action Plan component of the strategy as a separate document. The publication of summary leaflets and posters may also be useful, and can be distributed widely¹⁹.

A conference or exhibition could be held to launch the strategy, along with local media coverage.

¹⁹ *'Rural Strategies'* joint advice note of The Countryside Commission, English Nature and The Rural Development Commission (1992) * available from each of the organisations

Format of rural strategies

An *introductory section* will include:

- a **shared vision for the future;**
- the **aims of the strategy;**
- the **bodies involved;**
- the **status of the document and relationship to statutory plans and sectoral programmes;**
- the **partnership and consultation processes used in its preparation.**

The *core of the strategy* can comprise:

- a **statement of the present countryside profile** - this should include key information on
 - social, economic and environmental characteristics and trends
 - current assets
 - national and regional influences
 - conflicts and opportunities
- a **statement of shared objectives for the area;**
- **topic statements** highlighting key issues and recommending policies and action - individual topic areas may include:
 - rural economy and employment
 - rural housing
 - rural services
 - environment
 - countryside access, recreation and tourism.

An *implementation and review section* will provide a framework through which policies and proposals may be translated into action 'on the ground'. It may refer to:

- **responsibilities and resources** - bodies which can progress elements of the strategy, and potential sources of finance and other support;
- **implementation** - drawing together the individual programmes, projects and priorities agreed by the participating bodies to forward the aims of the strategy;
- **monitoring and review** - procedures for monitoring progress and reviewing the strategy.

Source: *Rural Strategies :Advice from the Countryside Commission, English Nature and the Rural Development Commission (1992).*

6. Monitoring Progress

It is essential that the strategy remains relevant, both locally and in a wider context. Although a great deal of effort will have gone into the development of the strategy and associated action plan, unforeseen circumstances can arise and setbacks occur. For example, account may need to be taken of the sudden closure of a major local employer, or a new opportunity arising through a new housing development. Similarly, there may be changes in external circumstances that affect the area, such as a change in national policy.

It is important, therefore, to review progress periodically in order to:

- ensure that priorities are being followed as much as possible;
- ensure that activities are contributing to the achievement of objectives;
- establish any policy failure or implementation failure;
- confirm that these objectives and priorities remain appropriate;
- adapt to changed circumstances;
- and assist in the resources allocation process.

Action Plans are usually reviewed annually, and the entire strategy document reviewed within a three to five year period. The action plan will contain specific goals and targets against which progress can be monitored, and the review should show the output to date and progress in relation to the targets set and the overall objectives. Monitoring key indicators developed from the 'baseline' information will show whether local circumstances have changed and therefore whether the strategic objectives are still appropriate. For these reasons, it is worth considering how progress will be measured at the information gathering stage.

The strategy should include a formal statement on how the partnership intends to monitor and review the operation of the strategy, as well as who will take on responsibility for this. Details of how the outcome of the review will be reported back to partners and the local community should also be included. If topic groups or working groups are used in the process of developing the strategy, consideration could be given to how these groups could assist in monitoring and reviewing the strategy. This may be a particularly useful approach to ensure ongoing community involvement in the management of the strategy, and to provide a feedback mechanism to keep local people informed on progress.

More information on monitoring and evaluation, in relation to both strategy development and individual programmes and projects, will be published in a forthcoming guide in this series. Publication is expected in early 1998.

Scottish National Rural Partnership: Practice Guidance Publications

'Good Practice in Rural Development' Series

No 1: Effective Partnership Working by Bill Slee and Patrick Snowdon (with Robert Gordon, Bill Marshall and Andrew Wells), University of Aberdeen (1997) ISBN: 0-7480-6440-0 £2.50

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Other Relevant Rural Research Branch Publications

Services in Rural Scotland by Mackay Consultants (1996) ISBN: 0-7480-51190-2 £10

Scottish Rural Life Update: a revised socio-economic profile of rural Scotland by Nick Williams, Mark Shucksmith, Helen Edmond and Andy Gemmell, University of Aberdeen (1996) ISBN: 0-7480-5486-3 £10

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