

School of Public Policy

Community Capacity Building  
in Rural Areas: A First Iteration/Issues Report

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## 1. Introduction

This report is part of a research project that is being undertaken by the School of Public Policy at the University of Birmingham. It is investigating rural capacity building as a contributory element to the Rural Evidence Research Centre (RERC) led by Birkbeck College at the University of London

The purpose of the research is to look at the role of the community and voluntary sectors in rural life and service delivery. Key issues that are being examined include:

- The development of our understanding of capacity building and how it relates to rural areas.
- How to promote capacity within rural communities.
- How governance structures and mechanisms can help facilitate greater community engagement.
- How to enable local communities and community-based organisations to have a meaningful voice in shaping the future of rural areas.

This research looks at the nature, process, promotion and impact of community capacity in rural areas. It examines the rural influences on involvement, the impact of the voluntary and community infrastructure and the importance of building up key skills to promote effective community engagement. The research also identifies and assesses community strengths in rural areas as well as identifying the barriers that rural communities face.

The central research question guiding the study is what are the components of rural community capacity that contribute towards effective and sustainable communities? Within this overarching question a number of supplementary issues are being examined such as what a sustainable community looks like, what interventions by public, private and voluntary institutions can help further engagement and what the key barriers to capacity development?

This report provides the first iteration of findings from the first stage of the capacity building research programme. It helps to set the context for the research that is being carried out. It examines the concept of capacity building in a rural context and then explores the policy background for capacity building in rural areas. The first stage of the research was to conduct a case study of rural capacity building activity in the county of Devon as a mechanism to explore these issues and help inform a conceptual and evaluative framework that would inform subsequent case studies in the later stages of the research. The initial findings from this research are presented and offered as a basis to further explore the issue of capacity building initially in Devon and then wider afield in the subsequent stages of the research.

## 2. What is Capacity Building?

### 2.1 Introduction

This section of the report looks at the concept of capacity building. It will examine how it is defined in the literature, what its key components are, whether or not there are any specific issues about capacity building in rural areas, and a consideration of the factors that contribute toward capacity building in a rural context. It looks specifically at the policies that are aimed at developing capacity building in rural areas, highlights the key organizations that support capacity building and identifies the factors that need to be in place to make capacity building effective in a rural context.

Capacity building as a concept has become firmly embedded in relation to regeneration in both the urban and rural contexts. The discussion around capacity building has perhaps been more developed in the urban context, although this is changing. In urban settings the importance of community involvement and engagement and the mechanisms to make it happen have become firmly established. The introduction of regeneration initiatives such as the New Deal for Communities and the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal are predicated on the importance of communities playing a central role in regeneration activity. As communities are seen to lie at the heart of urban regeneration and renewal so communities are seen as central to the rural renaissance.

In the rural context the Rural White Paper of 2000 acknowledged the importance of communities playing a full and active role in the future development of rural areas. Capacity building was seen to be an essential tool in this process. Chanan's work in the urban sphere for the ODPM (ODPM, 2002) provides some useful parallels of the importance of community involvement in rural affairs. People living in both rural and urban areas have a right to be able to determine their own future and how areas develop.

He identifies some clear principles or purposes of community involvement that clearly underpin and support capacity building activity:

<b>Principle</b>	<b>Objective</b>
<i>Involvement is a right</i>	Improving governance structures
<i>Involvement helps "join-up" different contributions to development</i>	
<i>Involvement helps sustainability</i>	
<i>Involvement reduces alienation and exclusion</i>	Building social capital
<i>Involvement makes communities stronger in itself</i>	
<i>Involvement maximises the effectiveness of services and resources</i>	Improved levels of service delivery

ODPM (2002)

The above demonstrates that community involvement has some clear benefits in terms of improving governance structures, building social capital and leading to improved levels and form of service delivery. These are clear tangible benefits to a local area. However, effective community involvement is a difficult and complex process – a fragmented concept that receives different treatment in different programmes and can be viewed very differently by different social actors. The local authority conception of what capacity building is might be very different to that of the Primary Care Trust or the police.

Community participation is a central theme in the recent local government modernisation agenda. The benefits of community participation have long been recognised as important elements in supporting the quality and legitimacy of governance structures, developing community leadership, improving service delivery and improving outcomes of decision-making processes (ODPM, 2005). There is evidence to suggest that where local governments adopt effective participation mechanisms then communities do respond by getting involved (Home Office, 2004). The degree to which agencies and stakeholders seek out and promote participation can have a dramatic effect on whether social capital is mobilised or remains dormant.

## **2.2 What is Capacity Building?**

“Capacity building” is one of those terms that is widely used yet its definition is often quite difficult to pin down. It is one of those “motherhood and apple pie” terms that sounds positive but can take on a variety of different meanings for different people. It is a concept that operates at different levels – that of an individual, that of a group or organisation and then at a sector level. It also is a term that gets used to refer to other related concepts such as community development, community engagement and social capital.

The *Firm Foundations* (Home Office, 2004) document defines it as:

*“Activities, resources and support that strengthen the skills, abilities and confidence of people and community groups to take effective action and leading roles in the development of their communities.”*

This definition is predicated on the basis of a deficit model of capacity building, i.e. that the community has a deficit of skills, knowledge and resources that effectively prevent them from engaging. There are two potential flaws with this model. The first is that it places all the emphasis on the community to have “its capacity” built. It does not acknowledge that there is a further component of capacity building, namely to enhance the capacity of agencies to engage more effectively with communities. Effective capacity building is a two-way street. Second, there is a danger that this definition overlooks the enormous wealth of talent that often lies out there in communities. Communities are not empty vessels into which we must pour knowledge and skill. They can possess a vast range of talents and skills.

What are the benefits of community capacity building? As the Firm Foundations report (Home Office, 2004) acknowledged there are a range of major benefits from investing in community capacity building. A key outcome is that decisions reached with the involvement of citizens and communities are likely to be more appropriate, relevant, effective and sustainable. It can promote social capital and cohesion that can bring communities together and to develop a sense of purpose and belonging where people of different backgrounds can work together to improve where they live. Moreover, it makes use of the wealth and skills and talent that often lies dormant within the community. This relates to a new concept identified by the researchers involved in this project – the community capacity release model, which acknowledges that community capacity is often there it just needs to be released (Beazley, Griggs and Smith, 2004).

Capacity building also helps to promote the concept of *community self-help* that enables the development of community-led service provision that can be more sensitive and responsive to community needs. It can also help promote *participatory governance* that enables people to have a greater influence on the decision-making structures that make the decisions that impact on their lives. It can encourage *sustainable involvement* where participation in community life becomes the norm rather than sporadic, one-off events (such as elections or consultation exercises).

### **2.3 The Government Framework for Community Capacity Building**

As the then Home Secretary David Blunkett, acknowledged in his Foreword to the Home Office document Firm Foundations, which sets out the Government framework for community capacity building.

*“The active involvement of citizens and communities with public bodies to improve their quality of life is crucial to the achievement of a wide range of Government objectives”* (Home Office, 2004, 2).

This is as true for Government rural policies as for all its other activities. The report sets out a two-pronged approach to capacity building:

- Building the skills, abilities, knowledge and confidence of people and community groups to enable and encourage engagement
- Expanding and developing the skills and abilities of professionals, practitioners and policy-makers to enable them to connect better with citizens and communities.<sup>1</sup>

The report also acknowledges the importance of this taking place in relation to geographic communities (i.e. neighbourhoods and parishes) but also in relation to communities of interest or identity.

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<sup>1</sup> This addresses the concerns addressed above and acknowledges that capacity building is not just for communities.

The report highlighted six key principles that underpin its capacity building approach.

- Adopt a community development approach
- Building on the skills and knowledge that already exists in communities that in the past has often been ignored or has been overlooked.<sup>2</sup>
- Adopting a long-term perspective noting that effective community engagement takes time and does not happen overnight.
- Ensure that support is available at neighbourhood, parish and community level.
- Accepts that ongoing learning is a key element of the approach
- Ensures that the approaches adopted recognise diversity and that responsive and sensitive approaches need to be adopted that respond to local circumstance. There is no ideal blueprint or “one size fits all” approach (Home Office, 2004)

The report went on to identify four key priorities for action:

- The development of learning opportunities for community engagement, both for citizens and communities and for professionals, practitioners and policy-makers.
- Targeting of efforts to build strong and sustainable “community anchor organisations” that can provide a crucial focus for community development.
- The promotion of local action planning as a key tool for involving communities.
- Stronger collaboration and co-ordination at local, regional and national levels by working through networks and partnerships that already exist (Home Office, 2004).

There is already a substantial framework that exists at Government level to promote and support community capacity building. The local government modernisation agenda had recognised that the engagement of more people in decision-making is critical. The Local Government Act 2000 highlighted the importance of community leadership in local government.<sup>3</sup> Since then, as the Firm Foundations document highlight (Home Office, 2004) there has been a range of government policies from all central government departments that see capacity building as a key element:

- ODPM’s *National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal* (2001).
- Defra’s *UK Sustainable Development Strategy* (2005).
- Defra’s *Rural Strategy* (2004)

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<sup>2</sup> This indicates a shift of thinking about capacity building from the *deficit* model to a *capacity release* model. This is a concept that has been developed by the authors and produced as an earlier background paper to this research.

<sup>3</sup> Under the Local Government Act 2000 local authorities were required to produce a Community Strategy to contribute towards the economic, social and environmental well-being of their areas. These were to be produced by seeking the views of the community and other key stakeholders via Local Strategic Partnerships.

- ODPM's *Sustainable Communities Plan* (2003)
- DCMS's *Culture at the Heart of Regeneration* (2004)
- DTI's *Social Enterprise Strategy* (2003)
- ODPM's *Sustainable Communities: People Places and Prosperity* (2005)
- ODPM/LGA *Capacity Building Programme for Local Authorities* (2003)
- Home Office *Strength in Diversity: Toward a Community Cohesion and Race Equality Strategy* (2004)
- Home Office *Together We Can Strategy* (2005)
- Department of Health's *Choosing Health Strategy* (2004)

The *Together We Can* strategy is a government action plan led by the Home Office that was launched in July 2005 and is supported by all major government departments. It is concerned with transforming the relationship between citizens and the state and to transfer more power, control and influence from government to local communities.

“We believe that local people working together with government at every level have the imagination, talent and common sense to solve problems. But more than simply fixing what’s wrong we believe that local people have the capacity to innovate, improve and enhance local services and facilities. The best ideas come from people at the sharp end.” (Charles Clarke and Hazel Blears quoted in the Foreward, Civil Renewal Unit 2005)

## **2.4 Rural Context for Capacity Building**

There is a key question that will need to be addressed during the case study work and that is whether capacity building in rural areas is different to what goes on in urban areas. Defra (2003) have identified a number of factors which have an influence on rural capacity building activities. These include:

- *Dispersal and accessibility* – including spatial locations of people and facilities and issues such as transport and isolation.
- *Small communities* – in that there tends to be a lack of critical mass of community – making it a hard community to serve but also potentially fewer volunteers.
- *High costs* – of the physical and service infrastructure per head of population compared to the urban situation.
- *Different needs and expectations* – rural areas have different characteristics and require different nature of service delivery.

Yates (2002) notes that there are some key differences between urban and rural areas including scattered populations, greater travel distances, lack of service outlets, weaker institutional capacity, culture of self reliance, lack of willingness to accept help, issues of confidentiality, decline in service provision and limited contacts.

The Defra (2003a) report goes on to highlight that rural communities and voluntary organisations have particular needs, such as:

- Governance and advocacy support
- Improved networking
- Training and ICT support
- Appropriate methods of delivery

Here the report makes reference to NCVO research in Teesdale and East Northamptonshire (Yates, 2002), which highlighted a number of key rural characteristics:

- There were more community organisations per 1000 population than in urban areas
- The majority of rural voluntary organisations have poor levels of financial support.
- They may have a smaller pool from which to draw volunteers but have higher levels of volunteers. In Teesdale, for example, there were 198 volunteers per 1,000 population compared to a national average of somewhere between 22-75 per 1,000.
- There tended to be a lack of awareness of equal opportunities practice, lack of a training culture and low levels of ICT skills.
- Rural voluntary sector groups were more likely to be directly involved in the delivery of basic services that were usually provided by public sector (Yates, 2002).

The emerging view from this research was that community capacity and volunteering were perhaps more important in rural areas both in terms of its value in its own right but also as a necessary mechanism for rural service delivery.

## **2.5 Capacity Building in Rural Areas**

The Government has made it clear through all its recent policy pronouncements that it has a desire for people living in rural areas to be fully engaged in shaping their own future. There is a need for a robust and vibrant infrastructure in place to enable communities to manage issues themselves and to have influence and control over decisions that affect them. Rural communities face particular challenges in terms of engaging in decision-making activities. The dispersed geography of rural areas can mean transport and communication difficulties, low population densities result in difficulties in establishing a critical mass, and strong local community identities can adversely affect participation across wider rural areas.

What are the key elements of community capacity building in rural areas? There are a number of key elements or components that can help to develop the capacity of rural communities. These include:

- **Supportive governance structures** where all levels of government (national, regional, county, district, town and parish councils) work together in partnership to enable local people to have a meaningful role in the governance of local areas. The research by Blackburn, et al, (2003) into rural communities and the voluntary sector highlighted the importance of the local authority role in terms of recognising needs of local groups and providing relevant assistance. Parish and town councils provide a mechanism for local engagement in rural affairs and can play a key role in urban regeneration (Newman, 2005; Moor and Griggs, 2005). There are 8,700 parish councils in England and although their quality varies they have great potential to improve and encourage local democracy and community leadership. The Government is committed to giving them a much more substantial role in local decision-making as seen in the introduction of the QUALITY parish scheme (ODPM, 2003).
- The **Rural Voluntary and Community Sectors** play a key role in supporting rural community initiatives. Research commissioned by the JRF in 2002 demonstrated that the local and community infrastructure was critical to the effectiveness of community involvement in rural partnerships (Osbourne, Beattie and Williamson, 2002). However, the scale of the voluntary sector in rural areas tends to be smaller and less well resourced than their urban counterparts and tends to be less well supported (Blackburn, et al, 2003). Defra (2003a) acknowledge that a vibrant voluntary sector is essential to the effective functioning of rural area to meet local needs and fill gaps in services. There are 38 Rural Community Councils across England that provides a wide range of support to local communities in rural areas. Community Councils can provide advice and support on a wide range of community issues such as transport, finance and fund raising, retention of village services and advice on how to run village halls etc. The sector has received increased levels of support in recent years from local authorities, the National lottery, the European Union Leader + programme, the Countryside Agency, the Local Heritage Initiative
- **Village Halls and community buildings**, which can play a critical role in village life and help to contribute toward a vibrant and cohesive community. Physical infrastructure (i.e. a place to simply hold meetings or house activities) is critical to capacity building.<sup>4</sup> In 2000 85% of parishes had a village hall or community facility. There has been a marked increase in financial support for the building and improvement of local facilities from sources such as the Millennium Fund and Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE).
- **Social enterprise** can play an important role in generating wealth and jobs and in tackling social exclusion, undertake environmental improvement and create better and more sensitive service delivery in rural areas (Defra, 2003b; The Countryside Agency 2003).
- **Rural voice** - giving communities a voice in rural areas is critical. The Rural White Paper (2000) stated that Ministers should be informed and

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<sup>4</sup> Defra have produced consultation paper outlining importance of village hall and meeting places and that they are seen as vital to support and sustain village life

([http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/pdfs/village\\_halls/draft\\_village\\_hall\\_policy.pdf](http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/pdfs/village_halls/draft_village_hall_policy.pdf))

have regular and direct contact with the main rural groups so that they familiar with what is going on and get a sense of what countryside people think.

The Defra (2003a) report on capacity building identifies four key components for effective community capacity infrastructure:

- At least one representative and inclusive forum or network (TRA, parish council, etc)
- At least one “physical hub” for community activity (a community centre, school or village hall)
- Access to community capacity building workers (community development workers)
- Access to small grants to support community activity.

The Government clearly has a desire for people living in rural areas to be fully involved in shaping their own futures. There is a need for a robust and vibrant infrastructure in place to enable communities to manage issues themselves and to have influence and control over decisions that affect them.

## **2.6 Specific policies aimed at capacity building in rural areas**

A review of the Defra literature and the website demonstrate the commitment to the concept of community engagement and empowerment. There is a desire to enable rural dwellers to be fully involved in developing and shaping their communities.

### *Rural Social and Community Programme*

The proposed Rural Social and Community Programme that was set up to develop the capacity of the rural voluntary and community and parish council sectors. The intention is to invite voluntary and community sector-led partnerships to come forward with plans for building sustainable and inclusive communities. The programme is currently in its consultation phase and the intention is to provide £13.5 million annually for this programme.

### *Vital Villages Programme*

The Countryside Agency, on behalf of Defra runs the Vital Villages programme, and enables parish and town councils can apply for a grant to draw up a Parish Plan concerning issues facing the community.

### *QUALITY Town and Parish Councils*

This policy is directly aimed at improving the quality and efficacy of town and parish councils to give rural communities a better chance of helping to shape their own future. The intention is for councils be awarded ‘QUALITY’ status where they can demonstrate they work in effective partnership with other agencies, including the voluntary and community sector, to deliver local services to the community such as litter collection, community transport,

provision for youth activities and elderly care provision. The policy provides grants, training and support to help councils achieve 'QUALITY' status. A number of town and parish councils have used the funding to draw up a Parish Plan that will identify the key issues facing the community.

*[www.UKVillages.co.net](http://www.UKVillages.co.net)*

This website was launched in April 2000 to provide interactive information on each of the 31,000 villages, towns, cities and suburbs in the UK. The website provides opportunities for networking, the sharing of information and the promotion of rural communities.

#### *Local Heritage Initiative (LHI)*

This initiative provides assistance to rural communities to enhance and protect features that make certain localities special or unique. It was launched in February 2000 and is scheduled to run until 2010. The initiative involves a partnership between the Countryside Agency, the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Nationwide Building Society. It provides funds and advice and support to help support, protect and nurture local landscapes, landmarks, traditions and cultures. Grants of between £3,000 to £25,000 are available and by May 2005 over 500 projects had received LHI funding.<sup>5</sup>

#### *European Structural Funds*

The European Union has provided important support to rural areas. The Structural Funds exist to support areas of Europe that are experiencing problems and decline. Funds such as European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund have been used to support a wide range of support and regeneration activity to urban areas. A key fund for rural areas has been **Leader +**, which is a six year European Community Initiative for assisting rural communities to improve their quality of life and economic fortunes in areas that are eligible for this support.

Many rural areas have been faced with declining economies through decline in agriculture and other rural activities. Leader + provides funding for local partnerships to identify development needs within their local communities and to develop new and innovative projects to meet these needs.

Objective 1 funding has provided funding to promote development and structural adjustment to regions where development is lagging behind. The current Objective 1 programme runs to 2006 and three areas of England are eligible for this support: Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, South Yorkshire and Merseyside. Objective 2 funding is a further source of European assistance for the economic and social conversion of areas experiencing structural difficulties. In rural areas the England Rural Development Programme is a

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<sup>5</sup> [www.lhi.org.uk](http://www.lhi.org.uk)

mechanism by which this is delivered and can help promote economic diversity and flexibility.

## **2.7 Key organisations that support community capacity building activities**

### *Local authorities*

Rural local authorities can play a critical role in supporting capacity building (Blackburn, et al, 2003). They can provide financial support, grant schemes, employ community development workers, provide facilities, contract voluntary organisations to provide services and encourage community engagement via the LSPs and Community Strategies. They can also seek to work in partnership with other tiers of local government, both above and below.

### *Government Departments and Agencies*

Support from Government Departments and agencies can support and engage with the voluntary and community sector through service provision, e.g. Primary Care Trusts, Learning and Skills Councils, Sure Start, and Connexions.

### *The Countryside Agency*

The Countryside Agency has a long track record in working with and supporting rural community and voluntary sector activity. The Commission for Rural Communities was established on 1 April 2005 as an operating division of the Countryside Agency. The idea of the Commission is to provide independent advice to government and perform a watchdog role to ensure that rural policy adequately reflects the needs of rural communities and particularly the impact of policy on disadvantage.

The Commission has three key functions:

- **Rural advocate:** the voice for rural people, businesses and communities.
- **Expert adviser:** giving evidence-based, objective advice to government and others.
- **Independent watchdog:** monitoring and reporting on the delivery of policies at a national, regional and local level.<sup>6</sup>

### *Regional Rural Affairs Forums*

Eight Regional Rural Affairs Forums were established as a result of the Rural White Paper in 2000 as a mechanism for communities to give direct feedback to Government about the effectiveness of its rural policies. They are part of Government's commitment to give rural communities a voice and the ear of

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.countryside.gov.uk/CRC/index.asp>

Ministers. The Rural Strategy 2004 reinforces the significance and role of the forums.

### *Rural Community Councils*

These exist in all of the 38 non-metropolitan counties and act as local development agencies to support community and voluntary sector. From their origins in the 1920s they have been broadly concerned with raising the quality of life in rural areas. They vary in size and activity but can provide important source of local support to community groups and organisations and act as a broker between the community and local government. Many RCCS work very closely with their Parish Councils for example. Many RCCs have played a critical role in the development of bids for European structural funds, and involved in the delivery of projects under LEADER II and Objective 5B (Blackburn, et al, 2003).<sup>7</sup>

### *Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE)*

ACRE is a national charity whose role it is to support rural community development. It provides a national voice for its 38 member Rural Community Councils and for other organisations and individuals working at all levels (county, district, and local) towards facilitating greater community activity in rural areas.

### *Councils for Voluntary Service*

These provide a range of support and advice on key issues such as funding, training and governance. Within this there are other voluntary sector groups such as volunteer bureaux, Citizen Advice Bureaux and other agencies provide more specific advice and support to groups.

### *Online Networks*

There has been a growth in the development of online networks to help develop and promote rural activities, such as Networks Online which supports rural networks of practitioners, including the Rural Stress Information Network, Rural UK Online Centres, RCCs, Rural Health Forum, Cornwall Etranet.<sup>8</sup>

## **2.8 Conclusions**

There is little doubt that engaging with local communities is high on the Government agenda in both urban and rural areas. Capacity building is therefore seen as a key element in supporting this. Certainly there are issues about capacity building in rural areas that relate to issues of geography, size of communities, the high cost of provision and the issue of different needs and

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<sup>7</sup> In this regard Blackburn, et al, 2003 make reference to the RCC in Devon as a partner in the LEADER II for South Devon and Dartmoor, and was contracted to South Hams District Council to develop community appraisals with parish councils within the Objective 5B area.

<sup>8</sup> [www.ruralnet.org.uk](http://www.ruralnet.org.uk)

expectations but many of the issues around capacity building are common to both rural and urban areas. For capacity building to be effective it is possible to identify some key themes and factors that need to be in place. These include:

- Supportive governance structures and the right political/administrative environment in which capacity building can flourish.
- The importance of promoting community involvement and community development activities
- The acknowledgment that it is not just the capacity of the community that needs to be enhanced, but the capacity of the different levels of government and other agencies to engage more appropriately with community and the voluntary sector.
- Effective partnership arrangements that ensure that community and voluntary sector groups have a real voice.
- The need for adequate physical infrastructure to be in place to support community and voluntary sector activity and the need for resources to fund activities.
- The need to ensure that the rural voice is heard and the rural communities can influence what happens to them in their areas.
- The need to learn and share experience and build on what has worked in other areas. There are many examples of good practice where communities have succeeded in turning things around through empowerment and co-operation.

### 3. The Policy Context for Capacity Building in Rural Areas

#### 3.1 Introduction

Rural areas have undergone tremendous change in recent years. Moreover, interest in rural issues has gone through what might be termed a policy renaissance. Rural issues have slowly crept up the government agenda as critical issues facing the future of our rural areas demand serious attention. The setting up of Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) in 2001 signified the importance of the rural agenda to the Government. The Rural White Paper "*Our Countryside: The Future – A Fair Deal for England*" (DETR, 2000) was a significant development in terms of putting rural areas on the map. The Government was seen to be as keen to deal with problems of poor economic and social conditions in rural areas as they were in the urban arena. Reducing the gap between the least well off and the better off, improving the accessibility of services to the people and promoting sustainable and long-term regeneration are as high on the agenda in rural areas as they are in the urban.<sup>9</sup>

It goes without saying that rural areas are not static entities. They are constantly evolving. However in many people's minds the perception of rural areas are often tied up in a traditional 'rural idyll' that tends to romanticize rural life and creates a false idea that masks the rapidly changing nature of these areas. There has been a growing concern that the sense of community in rural areas is under threat due to the changing nature of socio-economic groups and the development of potentially divided communities in some areas (e.g. tension and conflict between 'locals' and 'incomers'). These tensions can manifest themselves in very damaging way such as incomers forcing up housing prices, changing the nature of rural settlements, impacting on local governance structures and so on.

The Census of 2001 indicates that there are tremendous pressures on rural areas brought about by continuing counter-urbanisation trends that show little signs of abating. These place tremendous pressure on the towns and villages in the countryside. Other significant issues include:

- Changing nature of rural economies and continued decline of agriculture and other traditional rural economic activity and the ever increasing interdependency of urban and rural areas;
- Changing demographic and socio-economic make up of rural areas;
- Long-term impact of disease, such as the Foot and Mouth epidemic;
- Problems of social exclusion and persistence of severe levels of deprivation in rural areas;
- Problems of providing adequate services and infrastructure to rural areas;

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<sup>9</sup> This is the explicit objective of the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal launched in 2001. Moreover, the Strategy identified the importance of community involvement and sought to promote it in the 88 most deprived local authority areas.

- Need to ensure vibrant and sustainable communities into the future; and
- Lack of a comprehensive evidence base

The *State of the Countryside 2004* report produced by the Countryside Agency (Countryside Agency, 2004) contains some interesting facts about rural areas. In terms of population in England 14.1 million people live in rural districts, which represents 28.5% of the total population, which means that nearly three out of ten people live in the countryside. Between 1981 and 2002 the rural population grew by 1.7 million, which represents a 13.7% increase. This growth was not evenly distributed though with the rural South West, that contains the first case study in this research, accounting for nearly one quarter of this growth. In terms of migration over the past 4 years approximately 352,000 more people have moved into England's rural areas than have left them and that migration from urban to rural areas is now running at four times the migration from the north of the country to the south. The majority if these migrants tend to be in the 25-44 age groups and those most likely to leave rural areas for urban areas are the young (16-24 year olds) (Countryside Agency, 2004). The increase in population in recent years has brought significant challenges to rural communities and this population growth shows no signs of abating as more and more people will want to move into rural areas in search of a better quality of life. There is likely to be increasing strains on provision of rural services, and increasing rises in house prices fueled by demand so clearly government policy needs to be able to respond flexibly to these challenges.<sup>10</sup>

### 3.2 The Government Vision for Rural Areas

The Government's vision in the White Paper (2000)<sup>11</sup> was of:

- “a living countryside, with thriving rural communities and access to high quality public services;
- a working countryside, with a prosperous and diverse economy, giving high and stable levels of employment;
- a protected countryside, in which the environment is sustained and enhanced, and which all can enjoy; and
- a vibrant countryside which can shape its own future and whose voice is heard by government at all levels”.<sup>12</sup>

In terms of the focus of the research on capacity building in rural areas all of these elements of the vision are important but the key area is the creation of a vibrant countryside where people who live there can shape their own future. The focus was about creating the infrastructure through which this influence

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<sup>10</sup> The recently published *State of the Countryside 2005* report uses the new urban and rural definition to provide a valuable snapshot of rural England (Countryside Agency, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/ruralwp/summary.htm>

<sup>12</sup> There was a perception that emerged from the consultation undertaken for the preparation of the Rural White Paper that people in rural areas felt they were not being listened to and that policy was being developed from an urban perspective.

can be exercised. Key issues here relate to improving local governance, creating active communities, rural proofing and ensuring rural priorities are recognised and responded to by Government processes. A key element of the research will be to assess the extent to which this is happening and how it might be improved in the future.

The Rural White Paper clearly identified that the countryside is an important asset to us all. There has been a long term-commitment in the UK to protecting the countryside. The Committee on Land Utilization in Rural Areas under the Chairmanship of Sir Leslie Scott, better known as the Scott Report and published in 1942 was one of the key wartime committee reports that influenced the establishment of the post-war planning system. The key thrust of the report was that good agricultural land was a priceless asset (particularly in a wartime situation) and required protection. Moreover, the report argued that a planning system should encompass the countryside as well as the town (Hall, 2002). The protection of the countryside therefore became a key objective of the newly established planning system and partly reflected an “anti-urban tradition” that has in many ways characterised the planning system ever since. The post-war period saw the introduction of a myriad of restrictive planning practices that were designed to protect the countryside such as green belts, national parks, nature reserves and Sites of Specific Scientific Interest (SSSIs).

There has therefore been a long-term recognition that rural areas are precious and need to be protected. Moreover, the White Paper acknowledged that rural areas have some special problems that require a direct response, which is in many ways the key focus of the White Paper. Another important factor and again picking up on the Scott Report was that to a large extent “town” and “country” are interdependent and that the needs of one cannot be addressed without the other. In terms of regeneration and renewal there has been a long standing policy interest in urban areas that dates back to the mid-1960s – so it is positive that the needs of rural areas are now being seen on a par.

### **3.3 Policy Developments – Post Rural White Paper (2000)**

The Rural White Paper Implementation Plan was published in March 2001 set out the action on implementation that was required for the delivery of the specific measures announced in the White Paper. A key guiding principle to the implementation of the White Paper was that people are central and must come first and the policies are based on engaging communities in the process of improving rural areas. The Implementation Plan was seen as a working document that would be kept under review. It contained the details of the specific plans referred to in the White Paper of what rural residents could expect. This included the protection of rural services, affordable housing provision, transport, economic development, proposals for farming, wildlife diversity, increasing the enjoyment of the countryside, improved levels of local governance and rural proofing.

Subsequent developments included the Lord Haskin’s Rural Delivery Review and the White Paper Review that were both intended to assess progress on

the 2000 White Paper. The basic intention was to see if the original objectives needed reviewing in light of changes to the Government agenda and to examine the potential to speed up delivery. Moreover, there was concern over the complexity of the delivery arrangements. In November 2002 Lord Haskin's was invited by Margaret Beckett, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to carry out an independent review of arrangements for the delivery of Government's rural policies. He reported one year later in November 2003 in a report outlining 33 recommendations focused around issues of improving accountability, greater devolution of power and a more customer-focused approach.<sup>13</sup>

In March 2003 the Minister for Rural Affairs at the time, Alun Michael, launched the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme to improve the quality of governance at the local level in rural areas. Traditionally, parish and town councils have provided an important mechanism for engaging local communities in decision-making processes. But clearly the type and range and indeed quality of parish and town councils varies widely.

In September 2003, Defra published its report *Community Capacity Building and Voluntary Sector Infrastructure in Rural England* (Defra, 2003a). This policy paper set out how Defra intended to develop community capacity and the voluntary and community sector infrastructure in rural England. It built on the emerging commitment from a range of Government departments towards developing an effective capacity building approach. Defra and other Departments had worked closely with the Home Office Active Community Unit (ACU) to develop policies for supporting community capacity building. The background to this had been the Treasury cross-cutting review of Voluntary Sector's Role in Service Delivery (HM Treasury, 2002) that reinforced the Government commitment to engaging local communities. The ACU was given the remit to put into practice the Review's recommendations across Government Departments.

The key underpinning objectives of the Defra (2003a) report were that everyone should be enabled to play an active part in society by providing support and the facility for engagement. Previous research had noted that social capital and voluntary and community activity were central to the well-being of rural areas (Blackburn, et al, 2003).

Defra then set up the Rural Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) and Social Inclusion programme. The aim of the programme was to "strengthen the ability of the voluntary and community sector to understand and meet the needs of socially excluded groups in rural areas" (Jordan, Newbury and Morley, 2005, 5). An early evaluation recently undertaken has demonstrated that there have been some improvements to VCS working and that the sector is capable of usefully contributing to meeting the needs of socially excluded groups (Jordan, Newbury and Morley, 2005).

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<sup>13</sup> <http://defraweb/rural/ruraldelivery/report/default.htm>

Alongside Lord Haskins' Rural Delivery Review Margaret Beckett, the Secretary of State, had commissioned the Review of the Rural White Paper, to review changes and assess progress since the publication of Rural White Paper in 2000. The purpose was to see if the objectives of the White Paper remained valid and to look for ways to speed up delivery and implementation. The review essentially reaffirmed the broad vision that the Government identified in 2000 and documented the progress made on achieving the key themes identified in the White Paper. It called for greater clarity on what the Government is trying to achieve in rural areas. It restated the importance of delivering sustainable development. It highlighted the need to incorporate the growing regionalism dimension in the rural affairs agenda<sup>14</sup>. It noted the importance of effective partnership. Finally, it reiterated the need for a firm rural evidence base to influence future policy development.

On the theme of creating a vibrant countryside in the original White Paper the review published in January 2004 cited some important developments.

- Rural proofing had been implemented
- The Rural Affairs Forum for England was now established along with Regional Rural Forums to work in conjunction with Government Offices and Regional Development Agencies as part of strengthening regional frameworks.
- Local authorities had an enhanced joined up role in decision making with other local delivery agencies through Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs).
- Role of parish councils had been improved. The Parish Plan Scheme had been launched. The QUALITY Parish and Town Council Scheme was being pursued by ODPM and Defra in conjunction with National Association of Local Councils and the Local Government Association.

The White Paper had also included a clear commitment to community development, but the review noted that this was taking time to develop. Enhancing community development and engaging with local communities remained a key priority.

In July 2004 Margaret Beckett, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs announced radical reforms to the delivery of Government's

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<sup>14</sup> The regionalism agenda had developed significantly since the publication of the original White Paper. The Regional Development Agencies were introduced in April 1999 and had been diligent in preparing regional economic strategies for each of the English regions. Clearly, these strategies have significant implications for rural economies and for the recognition of key regional rural/urban interdependencies. Increasingly rural policy is being driven and influenced by the regional level. The regional white paper *Your Region, Your Choice: Revitalising the English Regions* produced in May 2002 set out a blueprint for how the new regional agenda would be supported and developed.  
<http://www.odpm.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1139487>

rural policies. The intention was to deliver services in a more streamlined and customer-focused manner – with fewer organisations with devolved responsibility to facilitate more effective partnership working.

### **3.4 The Rural Strategy**

The Rural Strategy 2004 sets out the Government's policy for rural areas for the following 3-5 years. The vision of a living, working, protected and vibrant countryside laid out in the White Paper clearly remained at the forefront of the revised strategy. The strategy identifies three key priorities for rural policy:

- Economic and Social Regeneration
- Social justice for All
- Enhancing the Value of the Countryside

The main thrust of the Rural Strategy was to move delivery of rural policy closer to communities. It allocated additional resources (£10 million over 3 years) to help strengthen the voluntary sector to tackle problems of social exclusion and to promote the role of social and economic enterprise.

A key element of the Strategy was the introduction of the pathfinders programme in line with the Defra's move to develop a more devolved approach to rural delivery. The pathfinders were seen as a mechanism for testing out more joined up service provision, developing innovation in rural development and the delivery of services and the better prioritisation of existing resources. Seven out of the eight pathfinders were announced in October 2004 and include: Dorset, Peak District Rural Action Zone (covering the Derbyshire High Peak and Dales, Staffordshire Moorlands, and East Staffordshire areas of the Peak National Park), Shropshire, Hampshire, Humber Sub-region (covering East Riding of Yorkshire Council, North Lincolnshire and North East Lincolnshire), Lancashire, West Durham and the Fens area of Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Peterborough

These areas vary in size, in population, in the type of authority and in the levels of rurality and economic deprivation.

The eighth area for the North-East was deferred because of the regional assembly referendum but was finally announced in March 2005 and is West Durham (a partnership between Durham and Teesdale Councils). The pathfinders were tasked with empowering local communities to set their own priorities. The early outline business plans released in March 2005 reflect some of the key issues facing rural communities such as affordable housing, post offices, local transport and supporting local businesses.<sup>15</sup>

In May 2005, the Government published the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill that proposed the creation of a new integrated agency called "Natural England." This would act as a body to protect our natural heritage and the creation of the "Commission for Rural Communities" as an expert

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<sup>15</sup> [www.defra.gov.uk](http://www.defra.gov.uk)

advisory body that looks after the interests of rural communities and people, especially those suffering from economic disadvantage and social exclusion. The intention was to promote a rich and diverse natural environment and thriving local communities through modernised and simplified arrangements for delivering government policy. It is essentially a mechanism for delivering the key elements of the Rural Strategy 2004.

In July 2005, there was a Consultation Launch of the Rural Social and Community Programme. This was set up to develop the capacity of the rural voluntary and community and parish council sectors to address key social issues and to tackle the causes of rural social exclusion via a £13.5 million annual budget. The programme would make it easier to gain funding for projects and activities that build the capacity of rural communities.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

Rural areas are firmly back on the Government agenda. The Rural White Paper set in train a whole range of mechanisms and measures to facilitate greater community involvement in rural areas. The vision for rural areas was very much of a vibrant countryside where people who live there can shape and influence their own future. This was a response to the view that emerged during the consultation undertaken for the preparation of the White Paper that people in rural areas felt they were not being listened to and that most government policy was developed from an urban perspective. The White Paper included a clear commitment to community development, but as the Review highlighted, this is taking time to develop.

Community development is critical to the development and sustainable rural policy and the future of rural areas in general. There is a wealth of skills, resources and talents within rural areas that needs to be captured to aid the process of the identification of issues and the identification and implementation of the appropriate policy response.

There have been a number of developments that have facilitated this approach:

- The increasing the focus on communities – driven by the knowledge that local people are best placed to identify their needs and in some cases be involved in the delivery of services that meet their needs.
- The trend of devolution of responsibilities away from central government and better co-ordination between different levels of government.
- The greater use of partnership working
- The enhancement of the role of private and voluntary sector organisations.

Clearly government feels that communities can and should play a much greater role in the shaping of their futures. Communities in both urban and rural areas have often lacked the opportunity and support to do this. The question is how effective is this emphasis on the ground in rural areas. This is

the key objective that lies behind the case study research that is being carried out as part of this project.

## **4. Methods**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This report represents stage 1 of the method set out in the research plan submitted to Defra prior to the inception of the project. It is detailed in brief below.

The research process involves three basic key phases. Phase 1 is an iterative process of data gathering and feedback over years 1 to 3 that gathers relevant data and feeds that back to the community via focus groups and regular community conferences. Phase 2 provides the major case study review of the various capacity building initiatives/regeneration interventions. Finally, Phase 3 is the final reporting phase that collates the findings from previous years to provide the final overall evaluation.

Phases 1 and 2 aim to contribute towards the improvement of the capacity building in operation and to highlight issues regarding, and the likely achievement of, ongoing sustainable regeneration.

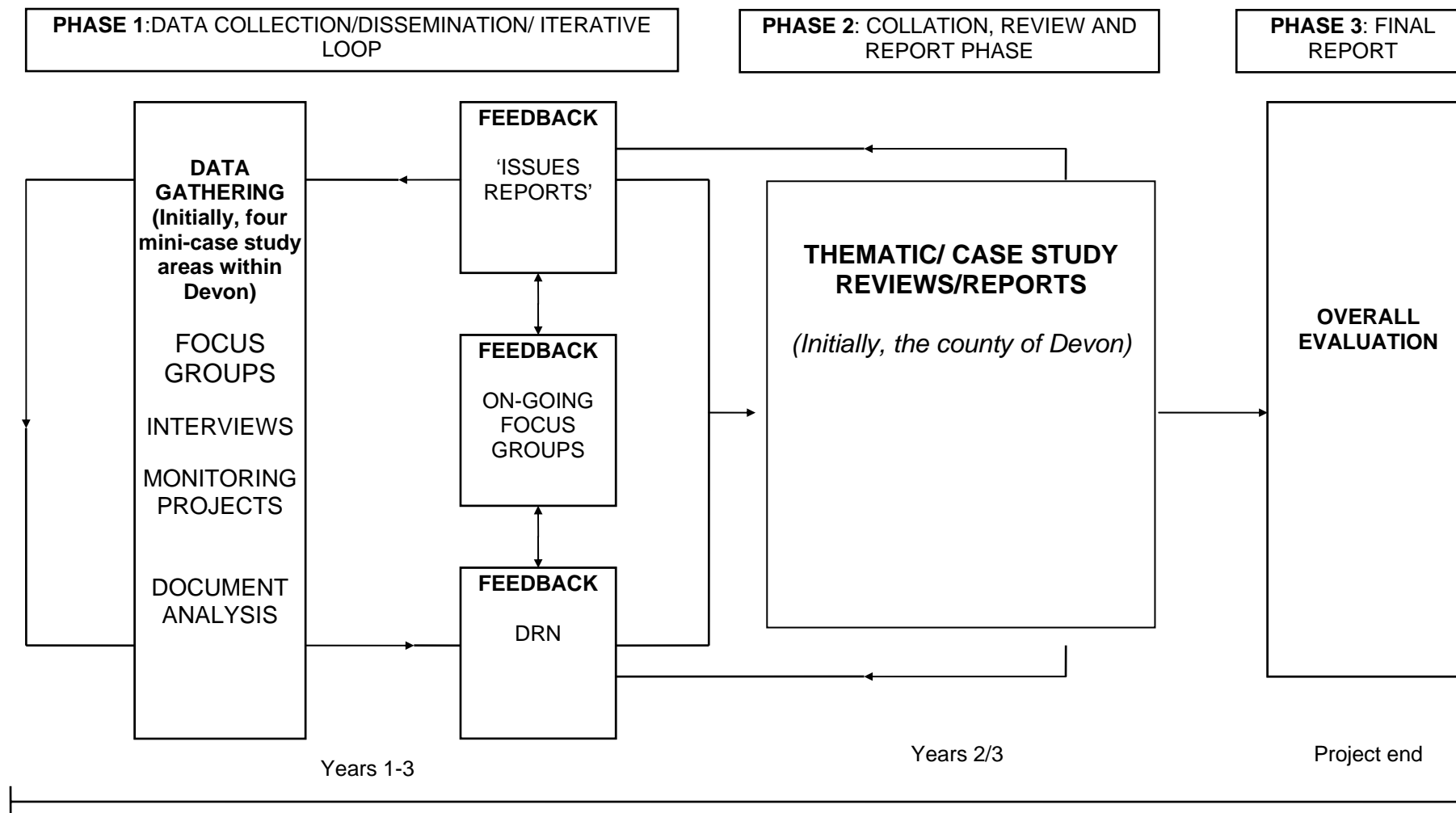
Phase 3 is outward looking that will focus more on what has been achieved during the life of the Centre in this area, and importantly, what still needs to be done in terms of empowering local communities and facilitating tangible benefits to the residents within the case study areas. A particular focus here will be the identification of good practice that might inform future, wider capacity promoting activity.

### **4.2 An Iterative Research Approach**

A schematic model of the iterative research approach is given in Figure 1. below

The advantage of this approach is that it enables those people engaged in the process to share and exchange experience about the programme, but also facilitates the ability of the research programme to adapt and respond to the issues being identified en route to the final assessment.

Figure 1. Schematic Model of Iterative Research Approach



This stage of the research has sought to generate issues and hypotheses for future investigation by employing the following research techniques.

#### **4.3 Semi-structured stakeholder interviews**

A series of semi-structured interviews was undertaken with stakeholders including members from each tier of local government, partnership board members, representatives from umbrella agencies for voluntary sector, community sector, business sector etc. In so doing it was intended to generate a composite picture of the key issues within each mini-case study. These views were supplemented by a limited number of focus group interviews. These focus groups will act as a community-based reference group for feedback of the research findings

#### **4.4 Focus Group Discussions**

The intension is to reconvene the focus group meetings as a reference group for comment and discussion of research findings

#### **4.5 Devon Rural Network (DRN)**

The DRN was approached in order to provide a strategic level reference group for the dissemination and discussion of the research as it develops. It is our intension to request that the iteration/issues report be added to the agenda of the next DRN meeting for discussion.

Key to this stage of the research has been to act through a local agent. The Community Council of Devon (CCD) has provided research support 'on the ground' and has been instrumental in organising field visits and developing a local network of contacts. CCD also produced a 'mapping report' (CCD 2004) that forms the basis of the outline description of the case study areas that constitute the findings section below.

## 5. Devon Case Study: The Overall Policy Context

### 5.1 Introduction

This section outlines and maps the overall county-wide policy context that sets out the policies and initiatives that impact on capacity building activity in each of the mini-case study areas.

### 5.2 Rural Development Programme

The (former) Rural Development Commission (RDP) (now Rural Development Agency) designated 80% of Rural Devon eligible for The Rural Development Programme (RDP). This was a county-wide programme to address social and economic problems of the area. It was a 20 year programme that began in 1985.

There were 6 criteria for selecting the area covered by the Rural Development Area:

1. Unemployment above average for Great Britain.
2. Inadequate or unsatisfactory range of employment opportunities.
3. Population decline or sparsity of population having an adverse effect.
4. Net outward migration of people of working age.
5. Age structure of population biased towards the elderly.
6. Poor access to services and facilities.

The main aim of the Devon Rural Development Programme was to:

*'...maintain and improve the welfare of communities in the rural development programme area and enable adjustments to the fundamental economic and social changes currently being experienced in the countryside.'* (Devon County Council, 1989)

The partnership evolved throughout the process but was initially made up of: Community Council of Devon (CCD), Dartmoor National Park, Devon County Council, East Devon DC, Exmoor National Park, Mid Devon DC, North Devon DC, PROSPER, Rural Development Commission, South Hams DC, Teignbridge DC, West Country Tourist Board, Torridge DC and West Devon BC.

The Programme also drew on European Funding, Lottery and Local Authority funding. Annual Reviews were produced for the RDP; some key elements of the programme relating to this research include:

- The RDP area was revised in April 1994 incorporated 360 parishes. The Blackdown Hills, Ilfracombe Ivybridge all were identified as priority locations for the fund.

- A Rural Projects Officer was employed in Nov 1998 working to create better synergy between the RDP and European Objective 5b programme.
- In the 1999-2000 plan, the objective to support community development was amended to focus on support for community capacity building in order to assist project development and management longer term. This was to make up 15% for 1999-02 of funding commitment compared with 4% in 1998/99.

There is currently a two-tier structure in place; the Devon Rural Development Programme committee is served by an Officer Working Group. The Committee is made up of representatives from local authorities and agencies. The partnership supports the role of two officers whose role it is to work with local authorities, agencies and business and community groups to bring forward projects consistent with RDP strategic objectives and priorities.

The following 3 projects formed part of the RDP and ran county wide:

#### *Community Action for Rural Devon CARD*

This was a pilot project managed by Devon Social Economy Partnership and delivered by CCD. It aimed to help communities identify and deliver local projects. District Community Development Workers were put in post to provide practical assistance and Project Support Groups were established at District levels to support this process. CARD ran in 4 districts: Torridge, West Devon, South Hams, and North Devon.

#### *The Devon and Somerset Key Fund*

This was a £1.05 million grant scheme administered by CCD and run alongside CARD between 1999 - 2001. It ran in the Objective 5b area of Devon and Somerset and was a pilot 'easy access' scheme for smaller community groups. The aim of Key fund was to 'build the capacities of local people to participate in regeneration activity, thereby improving their quality of life.' Up to 90% of projects costs could be covered for projects up to £25,000; GOSW provided 50% of funds the rest coming from SWRDA, Devon County Council and Somerset Local Authorities.

#### *Community Appraisal Programme*

Administered by the Countryside Agency, this predated the current Parish Plans Programme (from 2000 see below) and provided funding for Parishes to map existing services and facilities and gather data on the social and economic makeup of their areas. Parishes could apply to the programme via CCD and could gain practical support from CCD Rural Officers. From the case study

areas, Chagford and Combe Martin both undertook Parish Appraisals under this scheme.

### **5.3 Devon 21**

The 1992 Rio Earth Summit produced a global action plan for sustainable development; Britain was one of 178 countries that signed up to the Agenda 21 agreement. In 1996 Agenda 21 Plans were produced worldwide and in Britain all local authorities adopted an Agenda 21 strategy to promote and implement sustainable development. In Devon, the 'Devon LA21 Network' was initiated in 1995 to involve the community in this process. A variety of initiatives developed across Devon. Agenda 21 signified a change of thinking on a large scale, in approaches to development, placing communities at the heart of bringing about change in their areas.

### **5.4 Devon Rural Strategy**

The Devon Rural Strategy (DRS) is a key delivery structure through which many of the programmes outlined in this section feed into. It provides a platform for sustainable development through partnership working and is able to play a key lobbying role in Devon. The DRS was established in the aftermath of Foot and Mouth Crisis. At its first conference at the end of 2001 the newly formed Devon Strategic Partnership (DSP) decided that priority should be given to the development of a Rural Strategy. A Task Group was formed under the chairmanship of Professor Michael Winter of the University of Exeter and commenced its work early in 2002. The Task Group contained a cross section of organisations with an interest in rural matters. The purpose of the strategy as designated by the DSP is:

*“To address the problems and opportunities resulting from rurality, by proposing and prioritising projects and interventions and providing a framework for integrated delivery and funding.”*

The final version for the Strategy was produced in July 2003 which set out objectives, priorities and actions, to be delivered through the 'Rural Network'.

### **5.5 Leader**

*‘LEADER+ is a European Union Initiative for assisting rural communities in improving the quality of life and economic prosperity in their local area’ (LEADER+ Network).*

LEADER+ is the third LEADER Programme, and is preceded by LEADER I and II. The LEADER+ programme runs from 2000 to 2006, and its aim is to encourage and support rural actors to think about the longer term potential of their area. It seeks to encourage the implementation of integrated, high-quality,

original strategies for sustainable development designed to encourage experimenting with new ways of:

- Enhancing the natural and cultural heritage.
- Reinforcing the economic environment, in order to contribute to job creation.
- Improving the organisation abilities of their community.

There are 3 LEADER+ Programmes in Devon, 2 of which cover case study areas: North West Devon, Blackdown Hills and Teignbridge.

LEADER+ is administered on a local level by competitively selected Partnerships of local organisations and people throughout the EU. The Groups must comprise a balanced and representative selection of partners drawn from the different community and economic sectors in the local area concerned.

### **5.6 Market and Coastal Towns Initiative (MCTi)**

The MCTi is a multi agency Government sponsored but locally driven approach to the regeneration of market towns of rural England. Overseen by SWRDA (South West Regional Development Agency), there are 15 towns at present in Devon actively participating in the programme. From the case study areas these include Chagford, Ivybridge, Ilfracombe and Cullompton (and Honiton on the edge of the Blackdown Hills area).

An independent organisation has been established to deliver the Market & Coastal Towns initiative (MCTi). The organisation takes responsibility for allocating capacity-building resources to market town communities and supports them in the preparation of their strategic plans.

The organisation consists of a Management Board to provide overall direction, and a dedicated Executive Team that will employ community development workers to work with the towns.

### **5.7 AONB Programmes**

Since the Countryside Rights of Way Act 2000 (CRoW 2000) all Areas of Outstanding National Beauty (AONBs) are obliged to produce plans for how they will be managed and developed by local partnerships. This has meant that AONB programmes, historically funded by the Countryside Agency, have become more central to local regeneration activities, have forged stronger links with local partnerships and are engaged more actively in community led capacity building activities. There are 5 in Devon of 36 nationally: South Devon, North Devon, East Devon, Blackdown Hills and Tamar Valley. In the Blackdown Hills, the AONB has been at the heart of much of the regeneration work since its designation in 1991,

Ilfracombe and Combe Martin are included in the North Devon AONB, and Ivybridge benefits from the work of the neighbouring South Devon AONB.

### **5.8 Parish Plan Programme**

This developed out of the Community Appraisal Programme with a much stronger emphasis on setting priorities and taking action, funded by Countryside Agency up to March 2004, and now taking a new identity (unconfirmed) under Defra programme. The Parish Plan Grants made up to £5,000 available with 75% from the Countryside Agency and the rest from in kind and Parish Council contributions. Currently a number of Parishes in the Blackdown Hills and Combe Martin are in process.

### **5.9 Community is Key Fund (CK Fund)**

CCD delivered the CK Fund between 2002-2004. It provided access to grants, as well as support from the Social Inclusion Officer, to communities facing social exclusion. Working through a multi agency reference group, representing isolated groups CK Fund reached out to communities normally missed out of regeneration initiatives. A 'Local Supporters Network' was developed across Devon, which strengthened long term sustainability of the project. Funds came through SWRDA, European Social Fund, and Global Grant Objective 3. £84k was distributed in awards of between £500 and £5000. The Programme assisted 36 community projects directly.

### **5.10 Conclusion**

This section has highlighted that there is a comprehensive policy context at the county level that facilitates and supports partnership working, community development and capacity building activities. This provides a useful backcloth against which individual capacity building initiatives have developed in each of the mini-case study areas. These will be outlined in the next section of the report.

## 6. The Devon Case Study: Indicative mini-case study areas

### 6.1 Introduction

Four case study areas have been chosen for the research project. This section provides background information on these areas and an overview of capacity building initiatives and regeneration programmes that have occurred over the last decade. Hannah Cameron and Rory Cunningham of the Community Council for Devon undertook this mapping exercise. The areas have been chosen for their contrasting community, social and economic makeup and the differing levels and types of capacity building activities experienced. They are:

- **Ilfracombe and Combe Martin:** a remote urban/rural area in North Devon, the subject of several major regeneration programmes and over the last 10 years.
- **the Blackdown Hills:** a remote deep rural area rural straddling two counties with AONB status.
- **Ivybridge:** in South Hams a large town in close proximity to Plymouth experiencing high growth.
- **Chagford** in West Devon an upland town within the Dartmoor National Park with a high level of community led activity and high incomer rate.

The mapping work is presented in varying detail for the areas, depending on the data available and level of formal programmes that have taken place. For example in the Blackdown Hills there are a number of large regeneration programmes active in the area and therefore a higher level of documented material. In contrast, Chagford is a much smaller area – a single town which has experienced very little in the way of formal regeneration programmes, capacity building initiatives have taken place at a grass roots level and therefore evidence has been far less prolific. The close knit integrated nature of capacity building activity has meant that a small number of groups have initiated projects locally.

### 6.2 Ilfracombe and Combe Martin

#### 6.2.1 Summary Characteristics

*District:* North Devon

*Population:* Ilfracombe -11,303 (Parish) Combe Martin - 2,434

*Indices of Deprivation score:* Ilfracombe central - 46, Combe Martin – 31.

Two Ilfracombe wards rank in the top 10% nationally for indices of deprivation.

#### 6.2.2 Key Local Partnerships/Organisations

'Transform' Theme Groups (Pathfinder Programme), Ilfracombe and District Community Alliance (ICA) Theme Groups (7), North Devon AONB, Devon Youth

Service, North Devon College, Ilfracombe Civic Trust, Sure Start, North Devon Volunteer Bureau.

### **6.2.3 Parish Planning Activity**

Combe Martin carried out a Parish Appraisal in 1997. Combe Martin and neighbouring Berrynarbor currently have Parish Plans in progress.

### **6.2.4 Regeneration History**

Coopers and Lybrand were commissioned to carry out a regeneration study of the town by North Devon District Council in the 1980s. Two key recommendations were made: to set up an Enterprise Agency to support small business and to invite the Civic Trust Regeneration Unit to set up an office in the town. Both were followed.

In the late 1980s Civic Trust set up following initiatives:

- Lantern Community Centre (£0.6 million).
- Heritage Investment Townscape Heritage Initiative.
- Seafront Enhanced.
- Housing Schemes (£3.9 m).
- Victorian Week Channel Arts Aerial Centre cultural facilities.
- Ilfracombe Civic Society.

At this time, the Community College emerged as a driver of community engagement in partnership with the Council (MCTi Strategy Action Plan).

**6.2.5 The Ilfracombe Local Plan** developed in response to earlier initiatives to try and place the regeneration of the town on a more strategic and longer term footing. This provided a framework for regeneration of the town centre and the allocation of additional land for housing and retail. The plan was finally adopted in 1996. In the late 1990s following developments took place:

- Landmark Theatre redevelopment of old Pavilion Theatre £4.7 m.
- Harbour Project - £3m.
- Voluntary Marine Conservation Area along coast.
- Community Office for Town.
- New Life boat Station.
- SW Water Sewage works.

In the Revised North Devon Local Plan, Ilfracombe is within an 'Area of Strategic and Landscape Development Constraint' so major regeneration on green field sites were withdrawn in favour of brown field development.

Combe Martin benefits from many of the initiatives emerging out of Ilfracombe but is not necessarily integrated into the processes. It is covered under the major regeneration programme outlined above, but does suffer geographical barriers as many of the services and provision are located in Ilfracombe. The Community Centre and Village Hall provide the main venues for outreach provision. In 1995 a Working Group was set up to address issues in the town, a Parish Appraisal was carried out in 1997 with support from CCD.

Combe Martin and Berrynarbor are both currently engaged in Parish Plans.

## **6.2.6 Major Regeneration Programmes**

### ***Leader+***

This is a six year £3 million regeneration programme managed by North Devon and Exmoor Regeneration Company. It covers all of North Devon and Torridge EU Objective 2 area (excluding Central Barnstaple). The main focus of the programme is directed towards economic growth of area through community initiatives.

### ***Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder Programme***

There is a Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder programme based Ilfracombe. It is known as 'Transform', a seven year Programme, working with local people to improve and expand local service provision covering Ilfracombe, Combe Martin and Bratton Flemming. Neighbourhood Management is a new way of working that is being piloted nationally across 35 locations in England. Its aims are to:

- Help to make communities cleaner safer and better managed.
- Find new ways of delivering key services.
- Help service providers improve their services through local involvement.

In particular the programme is required to show how proposals can help to:

- Tackle worklessness.
- Improve health.
- Tackle crime and improve community safety.
- Improve housing and the physical environment.

Ilfracombe and Combe Martin are both included in round 2 of this programme (The Pathfinder Programme) and make up the only area in the south west in round 2. This is an experiment for seeing how the programme could work in a rural area. The bid was won by the North Devon Community Alliance - a district-wide Local Strategic Partnership. The North Devon and Exmoor Regeneration

Company are the accountable body, but it is run by a community based partnership.

### ***Market and Coastal Towns Initiative***

There is Market and Coastal Towns Initiative (MCTi) in place in the area. Ilfracombe and District Community Alliance are responsible for coordinating process. The planning process for the initiative took place between 2000-2004, covering Ilfracombe, Combe Martin, Berrynarbor, West Down, Morthoe and Bittadon. The Plan has developed under 7 themes: The Harbour, Tourism, Culture and Leisure Business Employment Training and Housing Clean Tidy and Safe Infrastructure Skills and Abilities, with 4 cross cutting strategies – Environment and Sustainability, Social Inclusion, Economic Development Strategy North Devon Tourism Strategy.

### ***SureStart***

The Sure Start programme in the area covers Ilfracombe, Combe Martin and Berrynarbor. SureStart is a Government 'Third Round Rural Programme' approved in July 2001 to improve life and well being of young children under 4 through better health, childcare, and educational opportunities. Sure Start has service level agreements with local agencies including the Credit Union and Citizens Advice Bureau.

### ***North Devon AONB***

The North Devon AONB covers the coastal area from Welcombe to Combe Martin. Since the CRoW 2000, all AONBs nationally are obliged to produce plans for how the AONB will be managed developed by local partnerships. North Devon's follows the two heritage Coast Plans produced in late 1990s and the Taw Torridge Estuary Management Plan 2000. The Planning process began in 2001. 650 people out of 12000 participated in events. Community Participation and Education are 2 key strands of the plan with direct capacity building elements activities so far include: community meetings, participation in conservation work, and engagement with young people through youth group consultation projects.

## **6.3 Blackdown Hills**

### **6.3.1 Summary Characteristics**

It should be noted that there are difficulties with collating data in relation to this area due to the cross boundary nature of the Blackdown Hills. Despite this it is important to produce such data as the area is distinct in its socio-economic characteristics and often in conflict with statistics produced by the separate unitary areas. This means there is pressure on authorities to work closely

together and meet challenges of municipal and funding barriers for service provision and regeneration programmes to work.

### ***Area***

There are 40 Parishes of the Blackdown Hills in four districts of South Somerset, East Devon, Mid Devon and Taunton Deane and in 2 counties. It is a 'cross boundary area' yet a sense of community / identity is defined by area within major roads. The area covers 360 sq km, and is 150-310 metres above sea level.

### ***Population***

The total population of the AONB in 2001: 13,300. 10,500 live in Devon and 2,800 within Somerset. Key changes identified in 2001 census:

- A significant rise in the older middle aged 45-64
- A significant rise in the elderly aged 85 and over.

### ***Services***

One GP Surgery, 23 primary schools, no secondary school, limited public transport is supplemented by Blackdown Hills Support Group, East Devon TRIP and community-based schemes.

### ***Key issues to note***

Highlighted in the Blackdown Hills Management Plan (2004):

- Lack of jobs in area; most people have to travel outside.
- Ageing population and outward migration of young people.
- There is no focal market town and the two largest settlements of Dunkeswell and Hemyock are no more than large villages.
- The area is not self sufficient or contained but is reliant on surrounding market towns of Honiton, Chard, Wellington, Cullompton, Tiverton and Axminster with Exeter and Taunton providing sub regional centres.
- Lack of access to services provision (retail, education, public transport).
- Lack of opportunities for young people.
- Lack of affordable housing.

### **6.3.2 Community Participation**

The Blackdown Hills Rural Partnership (BHRP) Management Group is also the overseeing body for the development of the Community Plan and this is supported by the Community Planning Working Group made up of partner authorities. There is regular public consultation within this process; an annual

conference is held in March, the BHRP produce a newsletter and website, BHRP link to parish meetings, village fetes and other community events.

### **6.3.3 Parish Plans**

There are currently a high number of Parishes in the Blackdown Hills working on Community Plans including: Dalwood, Honiton, Yarcombe, Uppottery, Awliscombe, Stockland, Dunkeswell, Membury.

### **6.3.4 Key Regeneration Programmes**

#### ***Blackdown Hills Rural Partnership***

Different funding programmes are well linked through the *Blackdown Hills Rural Partnership*. The BHRP is funded by 6 Local Authorities, Countryside Agency, and the staff team is hosted by Devon County Council. The Blackdown Hills Management Group is the main decision making body of the BHRP and acts as the Local Action Group for the Leader+ funded Local Products Strategy. The Partnership also coordinates the AONB Countryside Agency programme.

#### ***BHRP Community Plan 2004-2009***

The plan seeks to combine 2 strands of government policy - CRoW 2000 -which requires a management plan for the AONB, and the Local Government Act 2000 which asks local authorities to prepare community strategies for locally relevant parts of their communities. The Plan represented a new and important pilot; nowhere else have local authorities worked in partnership to achieve these things together.

The dominant message of the plan is 'to gain a thorough fact-based understanding of the landscape, the community and the economy: the way they are changing and the pressures and influences in them'. There are 5 themes to the plan: Landscape, Natural Environment and Land Management, Living in the Blackdowns, Work and Business and Settlements and Infrastructure.

#### ***LEADER+***

The Local Products Strategy is a 6 year Leader+ programme (2002-2008). The programme aims to promote the longer term economic development of the Blackdown Hills whilst maintaining and enhancing environmental sustainability and social and cultural well being. The programme is structured around 4 main sectors of support for local businesses including services to assist their growth and to stimulate new economic activity:

- Food and drink.
- Tourism and recreation.

- Arts and crafts.
- Woodlands and forestry.

A total of £1.4 million has been secured to deliver the strategy over the 6 years. Half of these funds come from Europe, the rest comes from Defra, Countryside Agency and District and County Councils and private local sources (10%). Target Groups within the programme are young people, women, older people.

### ***Blackdown Hills AONB***

Designated as an AONB in 1991, the Blackdown Hills was one of the forerunners of a new approach to managing and developing AONBs that put local communities at the heart of the process - implemented after the Countryside Rights of Way Act 2000. As a result the work of the AONB team is well integrated and indeed at the heart of community development programmes in the area, with offices based in Hemyock.

### ***Market and Coastal Towns Initiative.***

Honiton is part of the MCTi, and the programme make links to projects in the Blackdown Hills.

### ***Blackdown Hills Sustainable Development Initiative (SDI)***

The SDI was an EU LIFE Consultation / Planning Programme commissioned by Devon County Council running from Feb 1994 to Jan 1996, it preceded the BHRP.

A consultancy firm - Designed Visions were employed to facilitate the process. They had 2 key themes: sustainable development and initiating a community based process for sustainable development 'on the farms' in the Parish of Hemyock. The BSE crises broke out during this process strengthening case for sustainable development of farming. The following agencies were identified for unfolding the initiative: NFU, ADAS, Higher Education Institutions, Devon Youth Council, Hemyock Parish Council, Mid Devon, Councillors, farms, local businesses, the AONB, local schools and the Countryside Commission.

### ***Blackdown Hill Joint Advisory Committee***

As well as the SDI outlined above, in 1992, a fieldworker was employed by the Countryside Agency to research key issues facing local people. A plan was produced shortly after the area was designated as an AONB in 1991. In 1995 the community were engaged in a consultation process initiated by the Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) - a local partnership - which recorded concerns, aspirations and issues and joined together representatives of key local agencies to inform recommendations. BDOR Ltd was commissioned to facilitate a 3 stage

consultation process. They held a series of village meetings and a one day conference and formed 'Topic Groups' namely: Agriculture and the Environment, Community Needs, Planning Development and Access and Movement. The Topic Groups were made up of a mix of local people and agencies. The current Blackdown Hills Management Strategy built on this work to produce the Community Plan (Blackdown Hills Project , 1997).

## **6.4 Ivybridge**

### **6.4.1 Summary Characteristics**

***District:*** South Hams - largest of 4 South Hams Market Towns, in close proximity to Plymouth so has a strong urban influence.

#### ***Population***

12,329 (2001) estimated to be 14,000 at present which is a 28% increase 1991-2001. A high density population experiencing high growth.

The 'Ivybridge Area', which includes surrounding villages, has a population of 32,703. Ivybridge was said to be 'adversely affected by rapid population growth without provision being made for supporting infrastructure.' (MCTi Health Check). Ivybridge has a relatively young population - 17% under 16.

***Indices of Deprivation Score:*** 77.

Ivybridge has a 'Quality Status' Town Council. Coming out of the Rural White Paper 2000, this is a quality standard award designed to provide a benchmark minimum standards for parish and town councils and enable them to better represent the communities they serve.

The speed of growth of the town has led to problems such as maintaining a sense of community with a high turnover of families. There are very few large employers: Tesco, Community College, Stowford Mill, Endsleigh Garden Centre and Western Machinery. The town is far from economically sustainable with most people working outside the town.

The town is currently involved in a major town centre development of a library, offices and apartments.

### **6.4.2 Community Participation**

The town is part of the MCTi programme and has therefore undergone a community planning process and 'Health Check' of services and facilities. There are over a 100 community groups with high levels of membership. There is lower representation among older teenagers and young adults. In general people have

good access to Town Council information and services and there are 40 elected Councillors, but access and communication with County Council could be improved (MCTi Health Check document). Residents can contact town council staff by personal visit to the town hall (open 5 days week) there is a public participation session each month. The District Council have a fortnightly planning workshop. The Library in Keaton Road acts as the main information point for Devon County Council.

#### **6.4.3 Key Local Partnerships / Organisations**

Ivybridge Area Partnership (formed in early 2003), Town Centre Regeneration Group, Ivybridge Community Association, Ivybridge Community College, Life Forum and IMPACT Transport Group. Chapel Place is a major community resource in the town and is managed by the Ivybridge Community Association (an umbrella organisation representing user groups) they recently secured a lottery grant of £45,000 to purchase it from the Town Council and develop it as a Community Centre.

The Town Council is driving much of the regeneration process, the Town Clerk playing a key role but there is a poor level of support and poor relations in general between the Town and District Council. This has been fueled by tensions over spending of Section 106 funds from the recent large Tesco development.

#### **6.4.4 Major Regeneration Programmes**

##### ***Market and Coastal Town Initiative***

*'Generally past initiatives to influence decision making and provide facilities and services have not proved highly successful – possibly as a result of lack of facilitation and support from specialists in this field' (MCTi Health Check).*

This secured funding of £25,000 in 2002 and a 10 year strategy was developed.

MCTi : A Timeline:

- Feb 2001 - Community Planning Day.
- Nov 2002 - Formation of Ivybridge Community Strategy Group.
- and acceptance into RDA Market and Coastal Towns Initiative with funding of £25,000.
- Jan 2003 - formation of Theme Groups for Community Action Planning.
- March 2003 - Public Open Meeting/consultation event for Library Resource Centre Project, Commencement of MCTi Coordinator.
- April 2003 - appointment of Community Agent to develop the 'Community Diary' (Programme community consultation and participation activities).
- June 2003 - award of European Objective 2 funding, £27,000.

Thematic Groups developed: Active Ivybridge, Community Life, Library Resource centre, Town Centre Regeneration, Transport Needs, Youth Issues.

The hinterland area is very important to Ivybridge. The Area Partnership aims to:

*“endorse a number of parish-based projects aimed at increasing the provision of facilities within these smaller communities. At the same time it aims to restore Ivybridge as a vibrant Area Centre for the hinterland.”*

### **South Hams Consultation Strategy 2003 – 2006**

The District Council recently developed a Community participation and Consultation Strategy which aims to increase community participation in the council’s decision making and the delivery of council services. The strategy aims to help coordinate consultation activities to avoid duplication and ensure activities are effective and engaging all groups.

## **6.5 Chagford**

### **6.5.1 Summary Characteristics**

District: Chagford is a parish in West Devon Borough and within Dartmoor National park.

Population: 1,563.

Indices of Deprivation Score: 12.22

Parish Planning Activity: Parish Appraisal carried out in 1998

### **6.5.2 Key Local Organisations/Partnerships**

West Devon Community Planning Forum (facilitated by West Devon BC) hold an annual Community Parliament event. West Devon Community Safety Partnership, WestDen (Environmental regeneration Charity), Proper Job.

### **6.5.3 Major Regeneration Programmes**

Market and Coastal Town Initiative: £81,000 from the RDA was received in August 2003 to develop the Okehampton ‘MCTi Area’ this included Okehampton, North Tawton and Chagford in an unusual combined MCTi Plan. The area covered is 25 miles by 15 miles at its furthest points. The population covered is 16,460 and it comprises 19 parishes, 15 of which have a population density of less than 100 per square mile. ‘Locality Groups’ were established in each of the three areas.

#### **6.5.4 Case Study Capacity Building Projects**

Proper Job, CORA (CCD) 3 Key Fund Projects: Chagford Arts Festival, Business Association, Proper Job carried out a Parish Appraisal in 1998 a steering group was set up to facilitate this process 63% of households took part.

#### **6.6 Conclusions**

This mapping exercise provides the context to help the understanding of the nature of the mini-case study areas and helps to frame the next section of the investigation.

## 7. Key Findings

### 7.1 Introduction

This section presents the findings from the research undertaken to date based on the review of the relevant documentation, interviews with the key stakeholders, and focus group sessions organised in conjunction with the Devon Community Council. These findings are grouped into often inter-related headings that relate to the issues that emerged out of the review of capacity building in Section 2 – definitions, what constitutes an effective community, governance, community involvement and development, partnerships, administrative and institutional support, importance of local access, networking, importance of a rural voice and the need to share positive practice.

### 7.2 Definitions of Community Capacity Building

The research attempted to identify what the key stakeholders and focus group participants understood by the term “community capacity building”. It was acknowledged that it is a difficult term was not easy to define. Various terms were identified with the concept such as tools for learning, networking, cohesion, pooling resources, willingness to get involved and personal resources. The responses generally indicated that the term as they understood it closely reflected the definition used by the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (NRU) within the ODPM:

*“(Community capacity building is) shorthand for a wide range of support, techniques and initiative which aim to build the capacity of individuals or organisations within communities to contribute effectively to regeneration projects.”<sup>16</sup>*

One of the focus groups however was keen to emphasize the need to ‘build upon existing capacity’ and to ‘release capacity’.

### 7.3 What factors contribute to an ‘effective’ community?

This was a direct question posed in the focus group sessions. It raised a number of interesting responses that help to identify important ingredients of an effective capacity building strategy. Factors that were identified included:

- The need for adequate physical infrastructure to support and sustain community activity.
- Community volunteers were seen as an essential ingredient to developing community capacity.
- Time was a factor that had an impact on volunteer capacity.
- Good community leadership.

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.neighbourhood.gov.uk/glossary.asp>

- Properly trained Parish Clerks (Quality Parish Status)
- Community Planning schemes (Parish Plans)
- Geographical location
- The use of ICT
- A ‘willingness to work together’ was seen as essential. In communities with weak infrastructure (Transport, access to services, etc) a willingness to pull together was seen as the most logical way to utilise limited resources and create opportunity.

#### 7.4 A S.W.O.T Analysis

In two of the case study areas a SWOT analysis was undertaken to help understand the potential and the barriers that exist that impact on community capacity building activity:

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Local communication</li> <li>▪ AONB status</li> <li>▪ Good recreation/sports facilities</li> <li>▪ A relatively young population</li> <li>▪ Active local business community</li> <li>▪ Clear identity</li> <li>▪ “Open-minded” community</li> <li>▪ Convergence of ideas and interests</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Weaknesses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Dispersed population</li> <li>▪ Tourism pressures</li> <li>▪ Dependence on external organisations</li> <li>▪ Lack of a defined meeting place</li> <li>▪ Lack of local employment</li> <li>▪ Sustainability of projects</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Opportunities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Local communication</li> <li>▪ Pro-active community</li> <li>▪ Leader+ resources</li> <li>▪ MCTi programme</li> <li>▪ More social enterprise</li> <li>▪ Enhanced parish council activity</li> <li>▪ Developing existing initiatives</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Threats</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Lack of follow-up funding on projects</li> <li>▪ Lack of affordable housing</li> <li>▪ Success of building vibrant communities</li> </ul>

Clearly there are some important strengths that were identified including the quality of local communication, a young population, an active business community, a strong community identity, an open-minded community in terms of change and future development, and an effective convergence of ideas and interests (like-minded thinking). This provides very fertile ground for the development of capacity building activities.

Similarly on the opportunities front good local communication was seen as an asset as was the pro-active nature of the local community. This latter point demonstrates the potential to encourage and support more community groups. Clearly regeneration resources coming into the area was seen as a positive development acting as a spur and conduit for community activity. Further

opportunities were seen in an enhanced role for Parish and Town Councils, particularly through the QUALITY initiative and the preparation of Parish Plans. Encouraging and developing existing initiatives was also seen as a positive opportunity.

On the weaknesses front the dispersed nature of the rural community was seen as a key issue. The pressure from tourism was also seen as problem. In Ilfracombe and similar areas, for example, there are particular pressures on local services that can be “swamped” by the seasonal demands of the tourist influx – the population can expand to 400,000 in the summer months. The dependence on external organisations was seen as a problem, particularly for funding. The lack of suitable and available meeting places was seen as a weakness as was the will to keep the momentum going on the various projects and schemes that were underway. This raises questions of sustainability of existing projects. Lack of local employment opportunities was seen as a weakness. Here reference was made to the closure of a large St. Ivel factory. Fears of creating dormitory communities was raised as people (particularly the young) are forced to find employment beyond their community.

In terms of threats the lack of follow up funding was raised when programmes such as Leader + come to an end. The lack of affordable housing was seen as a key threat which could it was feared lead to the loss of young people in rural communities. Interestingly the success of community capacity building in terms of creating vibrant communities could in itself become a threat in making rural communities more attractive to incomers that would impact on the socio-economic make-up of communities and place a strain on future resources and local infrastructure.

## **7.5 Geographical issues/historical context**

There are a number of factors that were identified by those interviewed that help inform the geographical and historical context for community capacity building in rural areas. These include:

- Cultural change, which is essential to address these complex and deep-rooted social phenomena, is much slower in rural areas.
- Services are rather fragmented and provided from the urban centres this can be hard when there are quite significant distances involved
- Issues of ‘governance inertia’ identified – poor joined-up working at county/district level and limited flexibility of middle managers with tight budgets and targets.
- To these institutional straight jackets must be added the conservative attitudes of those shaping change. The politics of change is highly context

specific and the context is one of landed interests. Devon is a highly traditional county and “these traditions can be powerful constraints on innovation and change”.

- Areas benefit from a clear identity that helps foster and promote local action and capacity building initiatives around common sense of place. Although new ways of working have their own challenges:

*“In this area there was little or no tradition of collaborative working, so much effort had to be expended to address the spatial isolation and atomisation of local businesses for example.”*

## **7.6 Governance**

Section 2 noted that effective and supportive governance structures where all levels of government work together were key elements or components of community capacity building. Local authorities have a key role in terms of recognising needs of local groups and providing assistance. Parish and town councils can provide an important outlet for community engagement and although their quality can vary they have the potential to improve and encourage local democracy and community leadership.

There is clearly a capacity issue with parish and town councils generally. However, where these structures work well and are well run by effective officers they would appear to enhance collaborative capacity. For example, there is a general view that the MCTi partnership in Ivybridge works well in part because of the collaborative arrangements with the town council and further due to the quality and drive of the town clerk. The benefits of this approach are that there is a consistency of approach, issues of legitimacy are mitigated, and all the administrative effort is focused upon projects and outcomes for the town rather than on duplicating structures and administration across two competing institutions

There was a view that emerged that perhaps the parish and town council network was not being maximised, particularly in relation to the introduction of new schemes. The following comments were offered as a criticism of new schemes introduced into rural areas:

*“There is a tendency for central government to work outside existing structures and to invent new ones” (Officer Interview).*

*“They don’t favour parish councils because they’re weak, but only because they’re not adequately resourced”*

There would also appear to be some opinion on the nature of partnership working to the extent that, unsurprisingly, “it’s difficult”. Comments have been

made that reflect both a recognition of the ‘collaborative imperative’ and of the particular pressures and responsibilities of elected partners.

The following comment reflects some of the frustrations that were expressed:

*“There is a willingness to cooperate towards a common agenda, but it is difficult to get agencies to release funding. Partners can be strong on talk and limited on action” (interview with elected member)*

Within specific initiatives there are also issues of tension around competing modes of governance. For example there was an expression of some inherent tension within the MCTi process based on conflicting claims to legitimacy. The MCTi partnership is not elected and not subject to the same democratic disciplines of elected bodies and elected councillors can raise the issue of mandates.

Against this, is the opportunity for a more inclusive range of stakeholder involvement. One of the strengths of the process is that *“you can have an interest (commercial for example) and still participate”* (Local business leader).

The ideal model would appear to be one where the existing structures can work well in collaboration with new initiatives rather than a situation where systems operate in parallel. The Ivybridge case seems to offer an example of good practice where the benefits of both approaches appear to be harnessed. The need for effective co-ordination and leadership is the key lesson here.

Potential hypotheses for further investigation:

***Local partnerships work best through existing institutional arrangements where they exist, in particular effective parish and town councils***

***Nature of governance gives rise to tensions between elected and un-elected bodies***

## **7.7 Community involvement**

*“What’s different about rural communities is that the affluent participate and the poor are excluded” (Partnership Manager).*

Community involvement is seen as a critical element of capacity building as it provides the mechanism to underpin community capacity building by helping to improve governance structures, building social capital and potentially improve levels of service delivery in rural areas. As Section 3 of this report highlighted there is concern however that the sense of community in rural areas is under threat due to the changing socio-economic make-up and the development of

potentially two divided communities. This concern was to some confirmed in the findings from Devon.

There seems to be a general view that Devon because of its attractiveness to incomers is made up of two distinct communities that live side by side: incomers and natives. This is surely an oversimplification, yet it remains a deeply ingrained phenomenon. It is important here because there is a further view that incomers *are the ones who make local communities work through participation:*

*“Newer residents/incomers’ participate more. There is some resistance to change among longer established groups and these are the hardest to engage with. Maybe their attitudes have been forged in past disappointments?” (Partnership member)*

There may be a certain status to being an indigenous ‘local’ but is certainly a perception that it is ‘incomers’ that are the ones who do things. The ‘lack of participation’ among the indigenous community might be explained by their low-income status.

*“Social exclusion impacts disproportionately in rural areas, particularly in a low wage economy” (Partnership manager).*

This may certainly be true of Ilfracombe where 40% of the population don’t own a car and 25% of central Ilfracombe are dependent upon incapacity benefit. There are drug and alcohol abuse issues with little treatment available. Paradoxically, there are many voluntary and community groups in the area, it is potentially an active community, but there is a problem of particular ‘excluded’ groups who don’t participate and these are primarily low-income groups.

Working within these groups clearly presents a particular challenge: it can be difficult to get people to express a need. The key barriers to involvement within this rural community include: lack of services; high living costs; high transport costs and low transport availability.

But establishing what makes a difference can be problematic: “prevention is difficult to evidence” (Partnership manager). Despite the participation dilemma, there is a consensual view that participation matters:

*“If you want things to change you have to be prepared to get involved. Initially people don’t think they can make a difference; getting people excited about their town is the key.” (MCTi Partnership member)*

*“Key challenge now is to maintain momentum; to find funding for things and to turn talk into action; to keep people involved and promote community ownership.”*

*Potential hypotheses for further investigation:*

***What is different about rural communities is that the affluent participate and the poor are excluded***

***Capacity is promoted by investment in community development. Willingness to invest in this function is influenced by party political attitudes***

## **7.8 Administrative/institutional environment**

*“It is not an issue of how people can engage with providers but how providers can engage with users.” (Partnership manager).*

Apart from supportive governance structures Section 2 also noted that a supportive administrative and institutional environment was an important ingredient of effective capacity building. There are some lingering difficulties as a result of three/two tier local government structures. For example, the county is seen either as supportive (or overly bureaucratic), while the district/s has/have a) a different balance of political leadership and b) a different attitude to and experience of community development.

The strength of local initiatives is in their ability to harness local capacity, this capacity is clearly diminished if the drive and enthusiasm for action is either not shared by all stakeholders or worse actively discouraged by some.

It doesn't have to be like this (see 7.3 above). In Ivybridge as has been mentioned, the key strength has been to present an effective and efficient local position based on collaboration between (primarily) town council, MCTi partnership and county. There is some confusion among the community as to the complexity of the [governance] structures, but partnership is about making recommendations based on consultation with decisions taken through the town council – the two structures, town council and MCTI partnership, work closely together and set out to act collaboratively rather than to compete with one another. The determining factor of success here would appear to be effective local leadership.

The nature of the partnerships can also be complex. The Blackdown Hills Partnership spans the Devon/Somerset county boundary, the funding is across 10 streams, reporting and monitoring is made difficult by the inherent bureaucracy of the processes, and ensuring spending across each area is proportionate can be problematic. Having said that, there are multiple sources of funding to bid into if and when funding is needed, but the bureaucratic nature of funding streams can be a break on enthusiasm.

*“... the bureaucracy of funding streams is a barrier to effective working”*

There are the usual issues of the funding steering the activity rather than the activity steering the funding.

*“Funding has the effect of partly developing the group and partly forcing the group in a particular direction”.*

It was acknowledged that the “key deficit is trust”, not just between politicians and citizens, but also between agencies and various government bodies and levels of central and local government.

In the research questions were asked about what public agencies could do to enhance community capacity. Responses included:

- More financial investment – but less paperwork! Funding for community projects it was said was often accompanied by large amounts of paperwork and written justification. This it was argued could often affect the rate at which projects could move forward.
- In instances where funding was not available more ‘hands on’ input from council officers would be appreciated.
- A variety of communication methods was needed to improve the flow of information between the community and district level organisations. It was noted that not everyone has access to the internet and not all Parish Clerks have e-mails.
- Instil more of a sense of trust. Many communities it was said can treat external assistance with suspicion.
- Hopes and aspirations need to be managed. Community planning was quoted as an example of a process which, in theory, should influence the broader planning policies of District Authorities. There were many instance referred to when community aspirations had not aligned with what was deemed realistic by District Authorities. It was felt that improved communication from the beginning of the community planning process was the best way to explore ‘realistic’ ways forward.

*Potential hypothesis for further investigation:*

***Complexity of administrative/institutional environment is a break on progress***

## **7.9 Community and Voluntary Sector**

A key factor in local governance is the important role that the community and voluntary sector play in terms of supporting and sustaining community activity. Organisations such as the Devon Community Council play a critical role in this regard. The review of capacity building in Section 2 highlighted the important role that the sector plays in supporting local governance structures. Research clearly demonstrates that the community and voluntary sector are the life-blood

of community activity in rural areas. Moreover, as noted above, community volunteers were seen as an essential ingredient to developing community capacity. An interview with the Volunteer bureau in Ilfracombe clearly substantiated this point. The Volunteer Bureau recruited and supported volunteers that undertook a wide range of activities. In rural areas there is a tradition of supportive communities and the evidence demonstrates that people who live in rural areas are more likely to volunteer, but the numbers are still small (Countryside Agency 2005).

*Potential hypothesis for further investigation:*

***An active and well funded community and voluntary sector is a key element in the provision of community capacity building activity***

### **7.10 Networking**

The Firm Foundations document (Home Office, 2004) outlined in Section 2 highlighted the importance of networking to improve co-operation and collaboration at all levels. There was a consensual view among interviewees that networking is important. Participation and social interconnectedness is at the heart of capacity building measures as enacted through local partnership activity.

*“Putting people in touch with other people, facilitating the network is the key to building capacity” (Project manager)*

Some of the networks can be difficult to establish and then maintain and partnership officers see this as an important part of their work:

*“When the network breaks down you’ve got problems – our role is to maintain and develop the linkages as best we can” (Partnership manager).*

There is a role here too for elected members. Research elsewhere (Skelcher et al. 2004) has shown that there is a lack of involvement of elected members within partnerships. And yet the role of partnership builder and ship steedier is locally recognised as key:

*“Falling out [in partnership] happens – with the health sector for example – it’s up to local councillors to put it right” (Elected member).*

Local councillors together with the relevant officers and partnership professionals also have a role in making the structures accommodating of citizen participation. There are the usual barriers to this participation, but community members can add to and learn from joining structures if they are properly facilitated and incentivised.

In Combe Martin, the role of the council as set out by the Town Clerk is to act as a conduit for communications between communities and local government. To facilitate this there is an effective structure of meetings, advertising, a newsletter, and feedback of parish minutes through a village news sheet.

There are clearly real challenges of communicating across a widely dispersed population (which is even more acute in smaller less active parishes).

In a partnership context, much of the effective joint working is on the basis of building, maintaining and utilising personal networks.

There is a key requirement of mapping the links and interactions – as an institutional resource, this is often incomplete

*Potential hypotheses for further investigation:*

***Key role for local politicians in brokering deals/bringing partners together and repairing the damage when partners “fall out”***

**Capacity is about building and maintaining networks**

### **7.11 The importance of local access**

Local access points to build links and bridges with local communities are an essential element of community capacity building. The neighbourhood management pathfinder initiative – ‘Transform’ - is an example of a multi-centred approach that is sensitive to local circumstances in terms of the public access points of the project. Public access is through shop front (Ilfracombe), Town Council offices (Combe Martin), and the local public house (Bratton Fleming). Service access points are organised in the most appropriate local setting to overcome some of the inherent geographical and transport problems associated with this widely dispersed initiative.

In the case of Combe Martin, the town council acts as an outlet for community frustrations and a focus for communication since the district council is too far away in Barnstaple to make every day contact practical. The community all know the town councillors and have access to the clerk and councillors at all times.

There are many practical responses to access and capacity issues that centre around taking the message to the community rather than waiting for it to come to you – the ‘skip day’ event as part of Transform’s work is a good example. This is merely a free skip taken into a location which then acts as a focus for people to gather, dump their rubbish but also raise issues of concern and have a chat about other things that are important to them as individuals and that are happening in the neighbourhood.

*Potential hypothesis for further investigation:*

***Public access is a challenge and needs to be tackled with pragmatism. The key is to offer services and support where it's needed not where it's convenient to organize***

### **7.12 The importance of physical infrastructure to support community capacity building**

A related point is the importance of adequate physical infrastructure in place to support community capacity building. Simply having a place to meet was seen as a basic requirement to support community activity, particularly in relation to the dispersed nature of rural communities.

A pub, village hall and other public community buildings that serve as a general meeting place were seen as clear assets. Bus shelters/youth shelters were cited as important spaces for younger people to meet. These were seen as useful for community consultation exercises.

*Potential hypothesis for further investigation:*

***Community capacity building requires the provision of an adequate physical infrastructure in place to support and sustain community activity***

### **7.13 The importance of a community voice**

Giving communities a voice was one of the key objectives of the Rural White Paper. The extent to which communities have a voice has to be questioned. There appear to be no shortage of mechanisms through which this voice can be used but the question is to what extent is the voice being listened to? Many communities it was argued felt that they were not being listened to properly. The lack of communication, trust and the presence of 'on the ground' community development workers were factors identified that contribute to this.

*Potential hypothesis for further investigation:*

***Despite the plethora of initiatives and programmes, the voice of the community remains muted***

### **7.14 Observations of positive impacts**

Some of the collaborative and capacity building approaches within the mini-case study areas have had beneficial effects in terms of building capacity:

*"We expect to be listened to more now – they've created a monster!"  
(MCTi Partnership member)*

*“Participating has made me feel my opinion is considered and valued”  
(MCTi Partnership member)*

In transformative terms, as a result of the collaboration and consultation, there is a more balanced view of the processes of getting things done, an appreciation of other agendas. And in terms of enhanced participation, the work of the Blackdown Hills Partnership has resulted in increased levels of participation through attendees at meetings and the growth in the number of community groups in the area. There is also an annual community conference that acts as a consultative forum to a wide constituency of residents.

## 8. Conclusions

This report is the first iteration of findings that have emerged out the first stage of the capacity building research programme. It has attempted to explore the concept of community capacity and how it relates to rural areas by exploring the literature that is available on the topic. It then examined the overall policy context for community capacity building in rural areas. The Devon case study was introduced including the overall county-wide context for capacity building activity and a descriptive snap-shot of the four mini-case studies was provided. The report then outlines some of the key findings from the research conducted to date and identifies a number of key hypotheses that will be taken back out into the field for further testing. This will initially be done in Devon before refining the evaluative framework further for adoption in the subsequent case study areas.

### 8.1 Key issues/hypotheses for next iteration of research:

- ❑ ***Local partnerships work best through existing institutional arrangements where they exist, in particular effective parish and town councils***
- ❑ ***Nature of governance gives rise to tensions between elected and un-elected bodies***
- ❑ ***What is different about rural communities is that the affluent participate and the poor are excluded***
- ❑ ***Capacity is promoted by investment in community development. Willingness to invest in this function is influenced by party political attitudes***
- ❑ ***An active and well funded community and voluntary sector is a key element in the provision of community capacity building activity***
- ❑ ***Complexity of administrative/institutional environment is a break on progress***
- ❑ ***Key role for local politicians in brokering deals/bringing partners together and repairing the damage when partners “fall out”***
- ❑ ***Capacity is about building and maintaining networks***
- ❑ ***Public access is a challenge and needs to be tackled with pragmatism. The key is to offer services and support where it's needed not where it's convenient to organize***

- ***Community capacity building requires the provision of an adequate physical infrastructure in place to support and sustain community activity.***
- ***Despite the plethora of initiatives and programmes, the voice of the community remains muted***

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