

Purpose of seminar

The seminar aimed to explore possible criteria for assessing sustainable villages across the county, taking into account not only the village facilities but less tangible community characteristics such as social cohesion and community capacity. The outcomes of the seminar discussions will be used by the LAA operational group to make recommendations for a set of clear and robust criteria that could be used by Planning and Housing professionals across the county when determining which communities should be prioritised for the development of affordable housing. Such a list of criteria would help in the development of a toolkit that could be used to help a village to become more sustainable.

There were two questions that the workshops set out to consider.

- What criteria would be useful in defining a sustainable community?
- What could an “unsustainable” community do to become more sustainable?

A summary of the issues discussed at these two workshops are presented below.

What criteria would be useful in defining a sustainable community?

The definition of a sustainable community should take into account the views of every parish resident not just those who live in the core settlement. It was felt that communities should drive their own sustainability and that a bottom up approach to being sustainable is essential. There needs to be a commitment by residents to live more “sustainable” life styles.

There was recognition that “sustainable” communities can be diverse in character and population. For example, a sustainable community could possibly be a cluster of settlements that share infrastructure. Villages differ in size and function and may interrelate with each other in complex ways. For example movement between nearby villages to access employment opportunities can be complex. Therefore, defining criteria could be different in different settlements. Any measurement of sustainability needs to be flexible and measurable to enable robust and fair assessment.

The following are local services and facilities that were commonly seen as important in a sustainable community.

Local services and facilities / or a solution/alternative way to access these

- Village hall: The village hall was seen to be crucial to a sustainable community as it provides a community meeting facility, a focus for village activities available to the village and surrounding villages. A community building such as a village hall could provide the venue for an increasing number of facilities and activities within the village e.g. post office/ shop/ crèche/library/doctors surgery/mobile cinema.
- School
- Shop
- Transport to services: Regular public/ community/ green transport were seen as key to sustainability of rural settlements. The key points made were that transport facilities could include good public transport links (what is the bus frequency?), car sharing schemes, link cars, volunteer schemes, a

community-run mini bus and central “drop” arrangements for supermarket deliveries.

- Health e.g. doctor and dispensary
- Faith groups
- Social groups
- Sport facilities
- Public open space/recreation ground
- Energy and waste facilities: Under this category were listed local solutions to waste issues e.g. compost schemes, local food products e.g. self sufficiency/local growing and distributors and self sufficiency in services e.g. fuel, wind farm.
- A range of housing provision – tenure/ size and availability of “affordable” housing
- Communication: e.g. Internet/broadband connection and phone boxes

Access to local employment opportunities

One measurement could be the % of population who

1. work within 10 miles
2. work within 20 miles
3. don't work

Demographic balance

- Population profile (subject to fluctuation but one important issue is the number/proportion of households of child bearing age)
- Population size
- What % of those of economically active are employed locally. This measure should include those in self employment, working part-time, home working and casual employment
- A good balance of elderly and young
- Diversity of the community – spectrum of backgrounds

There were mixed views on second home owners. Some felt that second home owners can support local facilities and others that a high percentage of second homes reduced the sustainability of a community.

Community capacity

Community capacity is largely a reflection of the willingness and ability of people to participate in their community. This is in turn affected by the opportunities in the community for interaction. The list suggests how community capacity could be measured.

- Number of groups active in the community e.g. playgroup/brownies/village clubs and societies
- Communication systems for the village e.g. newsletter, village website, notice board
- Active Parish Council/ local development trusts
- Community plan/Parish plan. The production of an informed parish plan and action plan demonstrates the willingness of community to work together.
- Caring neighbour scheme
- Access to service/local service delivery solutions
- Community events e.g. fetes/flower show
- Active faith groups e.g. church/ chapel
- What % of the community is involved in community activity?
- Informal and formal social support mechanisms operating in the community

How do communities become more sustainable?

What does a sustainable community look like? Do local communities understand what it means to be sustainable? It is necessary that communities understand the meaning and opportunities for “sustainability”. To this end it would be helpful if communities are asked to comment on sustainability in their parish plans and this could lead to a local definition. This might encourage local people to live a more sustainable life style and to make best use of existing facilities.

Community development must happen from within. If a community is deemed unsustainable and disagrees with this it should make a fuss

Joint action with other communities

Sustainable successful communities could share information, skills, experience and resources with other less sustainable communities that are trying to become more sustainable.

- Cluster approach a parish could team up with a neighbouring settlement
- Peer support
- Shared resources
- Villages that are “sustainable” could give a presentation to those who aren’t
- sharing good practice

Build social capacity

In order to increase its social capacity a community needs a strong sense of its identity, to be aware of its needs and to use this knowledge to create change. The community will need a common purpose and community vision if it is going to be able to change successfully. Individuals must be motivated by a personal sense of involvement if they are going to involve themselves in the project. One way a number of the participants at the seminar believed was an effective way to start this process is to develop a parish plan. Other suggestions were:

- Community could become more collective e.g. car sharing, composting, allotments etc
- Find innovative ways of providing/delivering their own services and facilities
- Conduct a community appraisal and produce a parish plan to identify the preferred long term goal for the community and an action plan to achieve it.
- Bring the local community closer together e.g. community events to encourage information sharing, engagement and involvement
- Develop community services
- Encourage local people to buy locally and share resources and to work at home as much as possible.
- Market the parish hall or the pub or any other suitable venue as the hub of the community and encourage groups to use this facility.
- Encourage small local businesses – is there an issue about land for business expansion?

Village Champion

A village champion can make a big difference to the success of any enterprise within a community. Any champion will need to be properly supported. It was recognised that not all communities will have someone who has the skills and confidence to take on this role. There is a need to build in support for communities who don’t have one, for instance through skills building and peer support

Skills register

A community could hold a register of people with useful skills or experience or capability who might be able to work together in a team for the benefit of the community. Resources could be identified through a parish plan or news letter.

Funding

Lack of funding can be an obstacle to getting things done.

Social enterprise

Social enterprise is seen to be a positive way for communities to increase the social cohesion. Some suggestions from the seminar are

- community land /property trusts
- Community co-operatives. Inhabitants become share holders in a facility or service.
- Buy land for local benefit
- Asset based community development
- Social capital might be generated by movement towards sustainability.

Parish council

In order to become more sustainable the community will need to get organised and to work together. A dynamic and imaginative parish council can encourage this process. Parish councils need to engage more effectively with their local communities and with local authorities. They need to lobby for local decision making and for flexibility in planning and finance.

Better engagement and communication with other organisations

- Communities need to be more aware of the support and information they could receive from county and district councils, Community Council of Devon and other support organisations
- DCC, district councils and voluntary organisations such as the Community Council of Devon and other organisations can support communities through skills building, networking and sharing information
- Communities could improve their engagement in the decision making process – with community support groups, local government e.g. the Local Development Framework
- Communities need to provide information to district councils etc about what is happening at the local level and feed into Local Development Frameworks.
- Make a case/lobby for the needs of the community

New housing

- New developments should include “office” provision
- When building housing ensure there is a large % of affordable houses (though affordable is different to different people)

Coordinated response to transport

What happens next?

The Local Area Agreement operational group will use the information gathered at this seminar to

1. Develop a more robust measurement of sustainability that reflects the complex nature of the way communities function

-
2. Build on the existing community development toolkit currently used in parish planning exercises to give communities who are seeking to make themselves more sustainable into the future additional assistance.