



# ... Empowering Communities

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**RCAN Investment Programme – strategic influencing case studies**

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## Overview

The Rural Community Action Network (RCAN) comprises the 38 county-based Rural Community Councils, 8 regional RCAN bodies and the national umbrella organisation, Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE). Defra's RCAN Investment Programme provides funding to RCAN members and aims to ensure that the needs of rural communities are addressed effectively in public policy and delivery.

Most RCAN members have used some of their 2008-11 funding from Defra to undertake work that links community led planning (CLP) with local governance processes, such as Sustainable Community Strategies, Local Area Agreements and Community Empowerment Strategies. While that national policy context is now changing, CLP's scope to inform local policy development remains just as potent, especially given the emphasis being placed on building the Big Society.

Community led planning (CLP) is a structured process which gathers views from as many people as possible in an area, so local communities can identify their needs and develop solutions. Typically, the resulting action plans have some priorities which can be taken forward by communities themselves and others that require input from service providers or statutory authorities.

Information generated by CLP, about community needs and aspirations, can be valuable to statutory partners at both strategic and service delivery levels. It can inform their strategic thinking and can help them to improve service provision.

Case studies on this theme are available on the strategic influencing work being undertaken by RCAN members in:

- *Cambridgeshire* – where Cambridgeshire ACRE align parish action plans<sup>1</sup> with the Local Area Agreement and use a framework to increase the buy-in from statutory bodies
- *Bedfordshire* – where Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity has developed and is now helping to pilot Sustainable Community Plans as a new CLP approach in Bedford Borough

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<sup>1</sup> Community led planning is the current terminology for what used to be called parish plans – a term that is still often used locally.

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- *Nottinghamshire* – where Rural Community Action Nottinghamshire led the review of the county’s Sustainable Community Strategy and developed its Rural Strategy.

A number of common threads can be drawn from these three case studies:

- ***Combining strategic influencing with delivery***: the work of RCAN members to help empower communities has both a strategic element and a delivery element. They support communities to produce community-led plans and they channel the information within those plans to statutory bodies and to partnerships (of which they are members). By doing so they hope that actions requiring statutory body input will be addressed and that evidence from CLP will influence local policy development. The local authorities in these areas value this dual role from their RCAN members; they respect them for their practical help with delivery, whilst at the same time feeling they can engage them on strategic policy issues.
- ***Aligning CLP with statutory processes***: two of the case studies focus on efforts to align CLP and the information it generates with the main local policy documents. In Cambridgeshire parish action plans are being recorded and reported against the themes in the county Local Area Agreement. In Bedfordshire a new CLP approach, with parish or neighbourhood Sustainable Community Plans, is being tested, which fits the Bedford Borough Sustainable Community Strategy framework. In both cases objectives are to produce more powerful strategic information, show how local communities contribute to area-wide policy goals and make it more likely that statutory bodies respond positively to community requests for action. Local authorities say that it makes those requests more realistic.
- ***CLP as an effective means of consultation***: the case studies clearly indicate that local authorities and other bodies see CLP as a very effective means to consult and engage communities. This is partly because it achieves such a high response rate (compared with traditional surveys or consultations). It is notable that a growing range of partnership bodies in the case study areas, such as Police Authorities, are showing an interest in and supporting CLP. Information from CLP is being used as an input to consultation processes such as that for Cambridgeshire’s Local Transport Plan. Of course, this emphasises CLP coverage; the more parishes or neighbourhoods take part, the more powerful an evidence base it becomes.

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- **Using the rural evidence base:** more generally, these RCAN members have been influential in no small part because of their ability to collate and present the rural evidence base (using information derived from CLP processes and elsewhere). Local authorities and partnerships have been convinced by the strength of the findings from this evidence. In Nottinghamshire evidence laid out in a county Rural Strategy document is intended to inform delivery of the Sustainable Community Strategy.
  - **Developing sound working relationships:** each of the projects is influential and successful because of strong working relationships built up by the RCAN member with local partners, especially with the upper tier local authority. This is time intensive. In Cambridgeshire and Nottinghamshire that relationship has been a long-term one, pre-dating the RCAN Investment Programme. In Bedfordshire the formation of Bedford Borough Council as a new unitary council in 2009 provided the spur to re-forge relationships. RCAN members have built support for their empowering communities work at both officer and political levels. The local authorities view them as trusted partners, who are professional, knowledgeable and able to deliver.
  - **Future financial uncertainty:** in each of the case studies the strategic and delivery work outlined faces some uncertainty going forward. Typically national and local funding streams are up for renewal before next financial year and decisions will be tough in the current economic climate. It is therefore not entirely clear whether or in what form such work can continue. However, the relevant local authorities value the work and express a desire to see it sustained in some shape or form. In one case support from local politicians and officers has already seen the activity survive loss of a grant stream. Funding renewal seems more likely where CLP is seen as main-stream and integral to local service delivery, rather than being viewed as an add-on.
  - **Adapting to a changing policy landscape:** all the case study projects have been developed through a period when the local performance framework of Sustainable Community Strategies, Local Area Agreements and so on, provided the main policy context. In Nottinghamshire a major review of the Sustainable Community Strategy gave the RCAN member a significant chance to enhance its influencing role. Since the 2010 General Election that policy context has altered considerably.



Whilst this presents new challenges, it is generally seen by RCAN members and local authorities alike as an opportunity for CLP. RCAN members have been adept at re-shaping their work to changing circumstances. They can see the potential of CLP to play well with the concept of a Big Society, and the drive for localism and active citizenship.

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## Case study 1 - Cambridgeshire

**The local RCAN member (Cambridgeshire ACRE) had supported the development of community-led plans at the parish level for some time. The issue in 2008, though, was how to get buy-in from local authorities and their partnerships, so the information being generated would inform policy priorities and improve service delivery.**

### Context

Cambridgeshire ACRE has activity on a 'Stronger Rural Voice' in its RCAN business plan. This aims to: influence the county's Community Engagement Strategy; ensure that community-led planning (CLP) is a key part of it; and use CLP action plans to shape public service delivery to rural communities.

CLP is a structured process which gathers views from as many people as possible in an area, so local communities can identify their needs and develop solutions. Typically, the resulting action plans have some priorities which can be taken forward by communities and others which require input from service providers or statutory authorities.

Cambridgeshire ACRE's support for communities undertaking CLP pre-dates Defra's current investment, but as a process it has become more prominent in the county since 2008. This is partly a result of the RCAN member's influencing activities and partly due to community empowerment rising up the policy agenda.

Two factors provided the rationale for this work:

- First, whilst communities were creating some good plans, there was no buy-in from the statutory bodies who could address many of the issues being identified. In Cambridgeshire ACRE's words, *"the plans didn't link up at the strategic level"*.
- Secondly, those plans were variable in format and quality. To be useful to others there needed to be a more standardised CLP process and greater quality control.

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## What happened?

Cambridgeshire ACRE was fortunate in already having a seat on the county Local Area Agreement (LAA) partnership and on the district Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs). Its initial step was, therefore, to make the partnership bodies aware that in CLP they had an existing consultation approach which could input to community engagement strategies.

*“The response rate is incredibly high, compared to anything we could do”* – a Cambridgeshire district council officer on CLP

A breakthrough moment came when Cambridgeshire ACRE got agreement that rural communities with new CLP action plans could present them to the district LSP Boards. They felt this *“brought it alive”*.

LSP partners liked engaging directly with local communities and began to see how they could use the information which CLP generated. Nevertheless, Cambridgeshire ACRE felt more needed to be done to make the information usable. Like many local RCAN members they developed a county-wide CLP database, using their customer relationship management system to log and track CLP actions.

A key feature of the database is that each CLP action is recorded against the appropriate policy theme in Cambridgeshire’s LAA. This makes the information more relevant to statutory partners, clarifying the link with their priorities for the area. The database also flags where CLP actions require input from statutory bodies.

Cambridgeshire ACRE also led the development of a countywide CLP framework. This sets out standards for: communities creating plans; Cambridgeshire ACRE to support that process; parish councils to be involved; and district and county LSPs to respond. Flow charts show the processes for producing and then implementing CLPs. The county and three of the district LSPs have signed up to the framework so far.

At the county level this means a commitment to use the information to inform delivery of the Sustainable Community Strategy. At the district level it means a commitment to help deliver actions which communities cannot address alone. The framework shows the parties where each fits into the process and it tells communities that their action plan will be taken seriously.

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Rural Action East (the regional RCAN body) is keen to see other local authorities follow Cambridgeshire's lead. It convened useful meetings with the regional Government Office and Audit Commission regional office, to explain how CLP can link up with LAA processes and support community empowerment goals.

A joint presentation was made, with Cambridgeshire ACRE, to the Regional Improvement & Efficiency Partnership and two notes were produced to promote CLP to local authority councillors and officers.

### **Impacts**

CLP action plans influence statutory bodies in two ways. Regular monitoring reports produced by Cambridgeshire ACRE at county and district levels influence priority setting in the strategies of partnerships, providing them with a summary of communities' wants and needs.

Secondly, presentations from individual communities with a new action plan generate responses to their parish's priorities.

*"You've always got to have practical on-the-ground stuff backing up strategic stuff"* –  
Cambridgeshire ACRE

The importance of CLP is evidenced in the vision document of the county partnership, Cambridgeshire Together, which states *"our communities will have more of a say and influence through a range of options to engage with service providers, such as neighbourhood panels, parish planning<sup>2</sup> and parish arrangements ..."* CLP is now seen as a central plank of the Community Engagement Strategy.

The situation is similar in South Cambridgeshire, where CLP results have influenced priority setting in the district level Sustainable Community Strategy. A district council officer is tasked with looking through CLP actions and pulling out those which require it to respond. The officer takes them to relevant service managers in the council and then liaises with local CLP groups about what can or can't be done.

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<sup>2</sup> Community led planning (CLP) is the current terminology for what used to be called parish plans – a term that is still often used locally.

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In addition, the analysis provided by the CLP database and reporting has provided a useful input to various consultation exercises which statutory authorities undertake. This includes a health services consultation, the local transport plan and a new county rural strategy.

### **Resources**

The set of activities on a 'Stronger Rural Voice' have been allocated just over £100k per year. Almost half of this comes from Defra's funding for the RCAN Investment Programme and the remainder from the county and districts. In practice, the Defra money has underpinned the influencing effort, whilst the local authorities' money has funded outputs used by them such as the database and reporting. Local authority funding also pays for the support provided to communities undertaking CLP.

Much of the time invested in this project by Cambridgeshire ACRE is from its full-time Community Advisers, though it has also required significant input from the Chief Executive and the Head of Business Services.

### **What worked well ?**

Things which worked in the Cambridgeshire ACRE approach have been:

- Using their place on, and reputation with, key partnership bodies to raise awareness of CLP's value.
- Aligning the actions identified from CLP with the themes in the county LAA.
- Developing a CLP database, to permit analysis, monitoring and reporting at various spatial scales.
- Creating the framework document which partners sign-up to, clarifying roles and expectations. The local authorities find it easier to manage a structured CLP process.
- Enabling individual communities to present their CLP findings to district LSPs.
- Adapting CLP to circumstances and opportunities e.g. community engagement strategies, consultation exercises, neighbourhood panels.

Having key allies in the right place certainly helped and the county council – including its Leader – has been a particular supporter of this work. Indeed, all of the local authorities are said to have been supportive. Cambridgeshire ACRE stress that what lies behind this story is the building of relationships and creating an understanding of CLP.

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*“We couldn’t have done this unless we knew our way around these partnerships and had built up the relationships” – Cambridgeshire ACRE*

They acknowledge that they had a head start by already holding a seat on the various partnership groups. Cambridgeshire ACRE was there as the ‘rural specialist’, but – more than that – it gained significant respect as an active partner. Partner organisations emphasise the professional approach taken by Cambridgeshire ACRE, noting that it is very well organised, communicates well and operates strategically.

*“You know that if you engage Cambridgeshire ACRE and do your bit, they’ll do their bit and to a very high standard” – local authority officer*

Of course, this work could not have happened without some local authority financing. As Cambridgeshire ACRE said, *“the CLP database was important, but it was doing something with it that brought in the funding”*. Enabling LSP partners to engage directly with rural communities and offering access to community level data were what sold it.

### **What could improve?**

Despite all the effort to put structures in place, getting statutory organisations to respond to CLP actions is not guaranteed. Those organisations have their own priorities and planning timescales, so it can be hard for them to react on a parish-by-parish basis. This may be especially true for a county council, with its strategic remit.

Yet the responsiveness of local authorities has steadily improved, with genuine sign up from them at a corporate level. What appears variable is the extent to which that filters through to individual service departments. Then there is a wider challenge, to get more of the remaining LSP partners involved in and responsive to community action plans.

Cambridgeshire ACRE and local authorities have also learnt that local politics can become a barrier if not handled carefully. Some earlier CLPs did not involve the parish council quickly enough or did not feed back to them sufficiently and this created tensions. Now the parish council is approached at the outset. Similarly, the (district) ward councillor is seen as a key player and approached early. Cambridgeshire ACRE says that, in addition to community development skills, its staff must be equipped with political nous and an understanding of the strategic context.

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### Where next?

Decisions must be made about renewing the local authority funding for this work in Autumn 2010. Whilst they are, in the words of one, “*definitely supportive*”, their decision will be made harder by budget pressures and the end of LAA Reward Grant. Funding will probably now need to be sought from mainstream budgets. Despite this, there is hope on both sides that some money can be found.

A change of national Government means that many of the policy processes to which CLP has been linked are being reviewed or disbanded. However, this is nothing new and CLP has been able to adapt before. It has not gone unnoticed that CLP fits rather well with the notion of the ‘Big Society’. As Rural Action East put it, “what we’ve been doing fits the bill quite nicely.” The expressed hope is that the new policy drive towards devolution and local action builds on what already exists and does not re-invent the wheel.

*“It’s reform and enhance, not start again”* – county council officer on CLP

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## Case study 2 - Bedfordshire

**The formation in 2009 of a new unitary council for Bedford Borough proved an opportunity for the local RCAN member, Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity, around community empowerment. The challenge was to explore whether the CLP model could be adapted to align better with the area's Sustainable Community Strategy.**

### Context

Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity (BRCC) has activities on 'Influencing Local Authorities, Local Area Agreements and Sustainable Community Strategies' in its RCAN business plan. The aims are that: rural communities should receive a fair deal from these structures; there is engagement with the civil society sector; and plans for community empowerment should include community led planning.

Community led planning (CLP) is a structured process which gathers views from as many people as possible in an area, so local communities can identify their needs and develop solutions. Typically, the resulting action plans have some priorities which can be taken forward by communities themselves and others that require input from service providers or statutory authorities.

The backdrop to these activities has been local government re-organisation. In April 2009 two new unitary councils were established in Bedfordshire. Prior to the re-organisation BRCC's relationship with the former second-tier authority of Bedford Borough Council could be described as quite weak.

This case study focuses on BRCC's work with the unitary Bedford Borough Council which replaced it. Within its boundaries are the town of Bedford, where there is only one parish, and a rural hinterland, comprising 45 parishes.

### What happened?

In delivering this project BRCC could not rely on existing relationships, since local government re-organisation marked something of a clean break with the past. Rather, the creation of a new unitary authority provided an opportunity.

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This council had ambitions for its performance on partnership working and community engagement, and immediately proved much more receptive to approaches from BRCC. An officer at the council notes that the formal bid to create this unitary was built, to a significant extent, upon the benefits that would accrue in terms of community involvement and devolution of power. It needed to live up to its bid.

When the Bedford Borough Sustainable Community Strategy was produced in Autumn 2009 BRCC spotted that its terminology differed from the language of CLP and parish plans<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, the message from the unitary was clear – to gain buy-in from the statutory bodies communities should come forward with expectations which fitted the Strategy.

BRCC developed the idea for parish or neighbourhood level Sustainable Community Plans (SCPs). These would still be led by communities, but would entail dialogue with the council and its partners, and information would be gathered to match the priorities in the borough's Sustainable Community Strategy. Where parish plans already existed they would similarly be aligned with the Strategy and gaps would be filled.

In September 2009 a paper, written by BRCC and with local authority backing, was presented to the Bedford Borough Partnership Board seeking their agreement to the new approach and, in particular, to some funding for SCP pilots. The paper was well received and the Partnership signed up to its recommendations.

There are now three pilots, which are:

- Wyboston – a rural parish which was about to refresh its parish plan
- Brickhill – an urban parish which has no previous experience of CLP
- Goldington – a relatively deprived urban ward with no neighbourhood governance.

The pilots are due to complete by March 2011 and will be evaluated at that stage. What is yet to be determined is how the pilot SCP documents will be handled by the Borough Council and its Partnership.

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<sup>3</sup> Community led planning (CLP) is the current terminology for what used to be called parish plans – a term that is still often used locally.

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### ***The Brickhill pilot***

Brickhill Parish was created six years ago in a fairly leafy suburb on the north side of Bedford, which has experienced significant housing development along its boundary.

A traditional parish plan had been considered, but the SCP proposal held more appeal, as it seemed more likely to generate positive outcomes. The short timescale for progressing the pilots was also an attraction. An initial community meeting in May 2010 identified enough volunteers for a SCP steering group.

Early information was gathered by standing outside local shops and asking passing residents what they liked or didn't like about the area. Since then three 'Planning for Real' events have been held. A questionnaire went to every household with the September Parish Council newsletter and findings from this will allow a draft SCP to be developed.

The Clerk in Brickhill Parish hopes it will result in a clear understanding of the priorities for the community and that the community will be encouraged to do more for itself. Critically, they also hope the SCP will improve working relationships with organisations on the Bedford Borough Partnership, which currently feel quite distant.

### **Impacts**

The SCP pilots have not yet had a chance to deliver change on the ground. Whilst progress has been promising, the real test of their value will be whether the Plans generate information which Partnership members (as well as communities themselves) are able and willing to act upon. The aim is to have shared action plans to which the Partnership Board, as well as the relevant local communities, can commit.

*"What will be interesting will be when communities come up with their plans, to see what sticks and what gets through any negotiations ... there's a lot of goodwill to make it happen"* – a council officer on the SCP pilots

Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge what has been achieved so far. The SCP approach has already brought the Partnership Board firmly into the process. As is often the case with CLP, there is also evidence that communities are seeing some early benefits simply by virtue of taking part.

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*“The actual [SCP] process has been very positive. We’ve had lots of community interest and involvement”* – a Parish Clerk in one of the pilots

BRCC has had its profile raised considerably and feels it has carved out a distinct role in the Partnership as a community engagement champion. The work has opened doors for it with Partnership organisations such as the Police Authority and Fire & Rescue Authority. BRCC’s Chief Executive says the SCP work “has helped partners understand what we’re about”.

### **Resources**

Funding for all the ‘Influencing Local Authorities, Local Area Agreements and Sustainable Community Strategies’ activities is around £90k per year. Roughly half comes from Defra under the RCAN Investment Programme, whilst the remainder comes from Service Level Agreements with the two unitary Councils and from the Capacitybuilders Modernisation Fund which funds local consortia activities. However, it must be stressed that the work described above forms only a part of this line in BRCC’s budget.

These activities have taken up a fair amount of BRCC time, including from the Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive.

### **What worked well?**

Things which worked in the BRCC approach have been:

- Seizing the opportunity afforded by the creation of an ambitious unitary local authority.
- Re-inventing CLP so community level plans are structured around the priorities in the area’s Sustainable Community Strategy.
- Ensuring that the area’s (LSP) Partnership Board is signed-up to the approach.
- Using pilots to test the SCP approach under different circumstance – in rural and urban locations and in communities with and without parish plans.

For the Borough Council this approach is largely about trying to ensure that communities come forward with realistic actions. They want to manage expectations, so community aspirations have a good chance of being acted upon by the statutory bodies.

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There is no doubt that BRCC's reputation with the Borough Council and Partnership Board has been an important factor. The Council cites their track record on CLP and on project delivery more generally. An officer adds that, *"they make a strong contribution at both the strategic and delivery levels"*.

The ambition to see the SCP approach succeed is shared by BRCC's main partners. The unitary has been keen to demonstrate leadership on empowering communities and the SCP pilots underway received a public launch by the Borough Council's Mayor (who co-chairs the Partnership Board). This support appears to extend to other members of the Partnership, who recognise it can help them consult and engage communities meaningfully.

### **What could improve?**

Nevertheless, there is work to be done to convince all organisations on the Partnership Board of the value of turning that recognition into positive and direct engagement with the SCP approach. BRCC is still learning the best way to gain the input of key officers to the action planning in particular.

### **Where next?**

The current three pilots are due to run until March 2011. The Borough Council intends to conduct some evaluation of them in order to reach a view about their value.

Two issues then arise. The first is how far the statutory bodies act upon agreed action plans. BRCC would like to see SCP actions published in some form, to give them more prominence. Ward and parish councillors will also be key in holding the Partnership Board to account.

The second is whether the SCP approach is subsequently rolled out to other parishes and neighbourhoods.

As yet, there is no commitment to do so and everyone knows that the budgetary situation for 2011/12 onwards will be tight. In principle, though, the approach is seen as consistent with the national policy driver, to grow civil society and local activism.

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## Case study 3 – Nottinghamshire

**The local RCAN member (Rural Community Action Nottinghamshire) has grown its position of influence within the county. This resulted in it leading a review of the county’s Sustainable Community Strategy and developing its Rural Strategy. What made it suited to the role and how is this shaping policy?**

### Context

Rural Community Action (RCA) Nottinghamshire has activities on ‘Influencing the Nottinghamshire Local Area Agreement’ in its RCAN business plan. The aims are to secure a stronger rural voice and sustainable rural communities. However, whilst this case study grew out of that work, it could be said to have developed in some surprising ways.

Nottinghamshire (which now excludes the unitary Nottingham City) has a county council and seven district councils. Just over 30% of its population lives in a rural area, most of it within the three districts of Bassetlaw, Newark & Sherwood and Rushcliffe. It has a strong industrial heritage and some rural places have marked regeneration needs.

The current Chief Executive of RCA Nottinghamshire, Rob Crowder, arrived in 2007. His previous experience included many years as a local government manager in one of the districts and then at the county council. It was immediately clear that establishing strong links with the county partnerships should be a prime objective.

### What happened?

The RCAN member formed a county ‘rural proofing’ group, whose members included local authorities, public sector agencies, a body representing rural businesses, local academic institutions and some regional players. This set about identifying which of the then National Indicators were most relevant to Nottinghamshire’s rural communities, in order to seek their inclusion as targets in the Local Area Agreement (LAA).

That rural proofing group suggested RCA Nottinghamshire seek a position on the Nottinghamshire Partnership Executive, where it might represent the county’s rural communities. At that stage, rural was not high on the local agenda and they were pleasantly surprised when their membership was agreed.

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In Autumn 2008 the county Partnership was planning to review its Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS) – the main vision document for the area – to create a new version for the period 2010 to 2020. It knew this would be a complex and sensitive task, given the mix of county, district and other statutory bodies with a direct interest.

The Nottinghamshire Partnership asked RCA Nottinghamshire's chief executive to chair the review working group. In their words, "Rob emerged as the natural chair" for a variety of reasons:

- RCA Nottinghamshire was perceived as non-partisan and an honest broker (unlike the big service provider organisations).
- It had demonstrated knowledge across a wide range of policy issues and an ability to make connections between them. This matched the SCS review task.
- RCA Nottinghamshire had a track record for making things happen, so there was confidence it could deliver the review.
- The chief executive was a trusted figure and seen as someone willing to take a step back and assess new evidence.

The chair of the Nottinghamshire Partnership Executive says Rob proved very good at encouraging debate and teasing out certain issues which might otherwise have been overlooked. He adds that the joined up nature of much rural policy thinking seemed particularly useful when applied to the SCS review.

RCA Nottinghamshire's chief executive was aware that, as chair, he must not overplay his rural hand. In fact some district council representatives pressed the rural case, possibly seeing the chair as adding legitimacy to it. At a practical level, the chair was able to input a lot of evidence on rural community needs and aspirations collated from his organisation's support for community-led planning.

*"He [Rob] was able gently to promote rural issues"* – a key player in the county partnership

In 2009 the County Council had a new administration (ruling group of politicians) which felt rural issues had been rather overlooked; the challenge of delivering to smaller communities and pockets of deprivation had not been adequately addressed.

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They liked the suggestion from the rural proofing group that a county Rural Strategy should be produced.

The County Council agreed RCA Nottinghamshire was the obvious organisation to lead the work, given its role on the SCS review, knowledge of rural evidence (including information from community led plans), links with local rural initiatives, not to mention

being the rural representative body on the Partnership. It, therefore, commissioned RCA Nottinghamshire to research and write up a Rural Strategy.

A council officer says that “as a piece of work it was a really interesting thing to do – it has thrown up some interesting issues”. This included identifying pockets of deprivation, where they had been missed by earlier ward level analysis.

***Rural Strategy priority issues:***

- Tackling the fear of crime.
- Planning that supports farm diversification.
- Providing more affordable homes.
- Providing better access to education and healthcare.
- Responding to the growing demand for older people’s services.
- Countering the closure of rural shops and post offices.
- Improving access to broadband.
- Improving access to green space in arable areas.

The intention is that the Rural Strategy informs delivery of the new SCS, so County Council officers aim to have it formally adopted by the Partnership and by their own politicians.

**Impacts**

One of those most closely involved with these events says the end result of RCA Nottinghamshire’s efforts is undoubtedly a stronger rural dimension within the new SCS. Rural concerns are among its priorities, such as better access to schools, shops and banks, and improving broadband provision.

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The Rural Strategy should develop this further and RCA Nottinghamshire can take much (if not most) credit for the fact it has been produced. The County Council acknowledge that RCA Nottinghamshire's involvement with both documents has strengthened the read-across between them.

One major impact has come from a related work-stream, to address the rate of closure among rural shops and post offices (flagged by RCA Nottinghamshire in the Rural Strategy).

In 2009 they successfully bid for County Council money to fund research on the state of surviving shops. This was a significant piece of work, quantifying their declining turnover and likely closure rate – over half were expected to go within a decade. Particular support needs of rural retailers were identified. Despite tightening budgets the County Council took action, most obviously by establishing a rural shops scheme. Whilst this wasn't exactly what the report had recommended, the County praised the report for its strong evidence base and for demonstrating a clear need for action.

### **Resources**

'Influencing the Nottinghamshire LAA' activities have been allocated around £70k per year by RCA Nottinghamshire. Around £20k of that is Defra money from its RCAN Investment Programme. However, it should be stressed that these activities go considerably wider than the sequence of events described above.

With that same caveat, the staffing allocation has been around 1.3 full-time equivalents, including a sizeable proportion of chief executive time. Pursuing this work is said to have been time intensive, but the RCAN member feels it had to put in the effort around Partnership meetings to build its working relationships and credibility.

### **What worked well?**

Things which worked in the RCA Nottinghamshire approach have been:

- Initiating a rural proofing group to influence key policy processes and documents.
- Obtaining a seat at the table of the Nottinghamshire Partnership Executive.
- Chairing successfully the working group to review the county SCS, acting as an honest broker whilst allowing new or rural issues to come through.

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- Gaining agreement to production of a Rural Strategy which can inform SCS delivery.
  - Producing a convincing evidence base in the Rural Strategy and by commissioning research on rural shops.

A County Council officer says it was a good model, having RCA Nottinghamshire produce the Rural Strategy but with support and input available from the Council. One result was that a great deal of evidence and data held by both parties was analysed.

Links with key organisations and individuals within those organisations have played a significant part in this story. A notable factor is the previous career experience of the chief executive at RCA Nottinghamshire, as a policy manager at a district and the County Council.

The change of administration at the County Council in 2009 could also be seen as helpful. While the new administration was less interested in the SCS as a process, it nevertheless gave a higher priority to rural concerns.

RCA Nottinghamshire has benefited from widespread support within the county and across the region. Even representatives from largely urban districts seemed to support its chief executive as chair of the SCS review working group. He, in turn, is clear about RCA Nottinghamshire being seen as a credible organisation. He also thinks the right balance must be struck between strategic influencing and support or delivery work.

*“Too strategic and you will not be seen as actually doing anything; only delivery and you will just be consulted when the statutory sector wants something done”* – RCA Nottinghamshire chief executive

### **What could improve?**

Inevitably, the financial position for local authorities could be healthier and more certain. At a general level, there is concern that cuts could undermine engagement work. More specifically, it is not known whether the rural shops scheme can have a long term future.

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### **Where next?**

Assuming organisations on the Partnership do soon adopt the Rural Strategy that will help it make an impact by informing delivery of the SCS for the benefit of rural communities.

Initially, the County has commissioned delivery of the rural shops scheme only until the end of March 2011. Like everything else, the subsequent position is under careful review and dependent on the funding position from 2011/12 onwards. However, the scheme has “in principle” endorsement from County Council members and it may be possible to find other external funding sources.

RCA Nottinghamshire concludes that it must continue to demonstrate how its work is integral to mainstream policy delivery in the county and that rural work is not just an add-on.