



Research information note

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Introduction

Since 2000, local authorities in England have had a duty to produce and implement Community Strategies, which are intended to guide the improvement of the economic, social and environmental well-being of local authority areas. Recognising that local authorities were implementing an increasing number of plans and strategies (including Community Strategies), the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) produced a circular in July 2003 promoting the rationalisation of plans/strategies within local authorities, including the integration of Local Biodiversity Action Plans (LBAPs) within Community Strategies. In January 2005, Entec UK Ltd was contracted by English Nature to assess how successfully this has been implemented.

What was done

The main element of the assessment was a review of Community Strategies against a Standard drawn up by the England Biodiversity Strategy (EBS) Local and Regional Implementation Group. A search of the websites for the 392 local authorities and/or Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) in England, located 355 Community Strategies that were reviewed against the EBS Standard. In order to rank the performance of Community Strategies, a scoring system was developed, based on the 36 specific questions which define the EBS Standard. In order to 'ground-truth' the findings of the on-line review, ten Community Strategies were selected at random from the 36 'strong' Strategies and another ten from the 36 'weak' ones for more detailed assessment. Telephone interviews with the authors of these strategies were used to draw out information relating to factors that affected the performance of Community Strategies against the EBS Standard.

Results and conclusions

There is significant variation in the extent to which Community Strategies integrate action for biodiversity, and overall that there is considerable scope for improvement. Less than 15% of the reviewed Community Strategies achieved a score greater than 50%; 36% of the Strategies scored less than 25%. Since the ODPM recommended the rationalisation of plans in July

2003, 141 of the 355 Community Strategies reviewed have been published. The review data indicate that there has been no significant change in the incorporation of biodiversity into Strategies since this time. A Local Authority's performance against the Audit Commission's Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) system did not always correlate to the performance of its Community Strategy against the EBS Standard (the CPA system does not, as yet, include specific indicators for biodiversity. There was little regional variation in the performance of Community Strategies against the EBS Standard.

A key factor that emerged is a correlation between the involvement of 'environmental' experts and the score of a Strategy against the EBS Standard ;involvement of a biodiversity 'champion' within the Strategy development process can raise and maintain the profile of biodiversity issues within the LSP/Local Authority.

The review identified that there are 186 Community Strategies which are either being developed now or will be reviewed in the next 3 years, presenting significant opportunities for LBAP partnerships to have a major impact on the way in which biodiversity is considered in almost half of all Community Strategies.

The EBS Standard was developed as an indicator relating to the delivery of the England Biodiversity Strategy. The study highlighted a number of areas where the EBS Standard could be improved and recommendations have been made for a revised version.

English Nature's viewpoint

It is encouraging that many strategies acknowledge the importance of biodiversity, yet many clearly fail to deliver Government aspirations. The high proportion of strategies due to be revised over the next 2 years suggests that good opportunities remain to improve their treatment of biodiversity. The involvement of a someone able to represent biodiversity interests on the Local Strategic Partnership or one of its topic groups has emerged as a key factor, and one which environmental bodies need to address in the next phase of revision.

Selected references

P Ward and P Swann (2003). Reducing local authority plan requirements, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister

Audit Commission website - results of Local Authority Comprehensive Performance Assessments.

<http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/cpa/index.asp?page=index.asp&area=hpcpa>

Further information

For the full report or other publications on this subject, please contact the Enquiry Service on 01733 455100/101/102 or email enquiries@english-nature.org.uk

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