

**Name of exercises:** Partnership for Sustainability – Local Agenda 21 in County Durham

**Location:** The City of Durham

**Participation exercise**

**under which Article:** *Article 7, Capacity Building*

**Purpose of participation exercise:**

*To develop an environmental protection programme for the city of Durham involving its habitants in the planning and decision-making processes at the local level.*

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**Background**

In County Durham a rapidly growing partnership of organisations and individuals has been working for five years to create a more sustainable future for the region. As a result, across the County an unprecedented level of public participation has developed. Durham is a large, mainly rural County, with several medium size towns. The total population is 491,000, and there are high levels of unemployment owing to the closure of coal mines and the loss of heavy industry. Social exclusion and deprivation are relevant issues across much of the County, and there is not a strong tradition of active public participation. Against this background, the County Council has worked to develop a Local Agenda 21 programme. Based on the fundamental belief that sustainability can only be achieved if every member of every local community has an active voice in the process.

**Participation techniques used:**

The aim of County Durham's Local Agenda 21 process is to ensure that a continuous dialogue takes place across all sectors of society.

Public participation is achieved through:

- Eight roundtable groups, each of which meets every three months, covering the topics of: Economic Sustainability, Transport and Planning, Eco-Schools Forum, Waste and Minerals, Education, Participation and Awareness, Community Action Forum, Natural Resources and Energy.
- Each round-table has a Chairperson from outside the County Council including representatives of community groups, the church, the large private water and electricity companies, and voluntary organisations. This creates a genuine partnership and ensures that decision-making is not dominated by the County Council. All of the roundtable meetings are publicised widely and they are all open to everyone who wishes to attend.
- A Steering Group made up of the external people meets at least every three months and often more regularly. A quarterly newsletter is published. It carries news of developments in the Local Agenda 21 process and is also the mechanism for carrying out consultations on key decisions.
- Questionnaires on specific issues are also sent out whenever it is appropriate to do so. In addition, seminars, working groups, conferences, discussion groups, etc. are held regularly on many different topics.
- The media is very important in the process and press releases are sent out whenever new developments take place.

**Who participated:**

Local Agenda 21 began in County Durham in autumn 1994 when representatives of 50 organisations met together to discuss the way forward. From those early beginnings a partnership has grown which now consists of 1,500 organisations and individuals, and is growing every day. The partnership includes all the County's 311 schools, all 104 town and parish councils, the 7 district councils, community groups, residents' organisations, business and industry, women's' organisations, statutory bodies, NGOs and voluntary agencies, children and young people, as well as hundreds of individuals.

**What information was made available:**

All the documents produced by County Durham's Local Agenda 21 process are accessible to everyone.

**What was the outcome of the public participation exercise?**

As County Durham's Local Agenda 21 process has evolved it has begun to concentrate less on traditional environmental issues such as recycling of waste, protection of wildlife, etc. and more on the genuine integration of economic, social and environmental themes to enable truly sustainable decision making to take place. Throughout the five years, the key theme has been taking action to demonstrate what can be done, rather than simply talking. Over 200 practical sustainability projects have been developed all involving partnerships and all taking a significant step towards a more sustainable future.

The process is intended to create consensus, not conflict, and difficult issues are addressed by inviting everyone involved to take part in the debate and to exchange views. Throughout five years this has been successful, and although many difficult issues have been addressed, there has been no adverse criticism and no damaging conflict.

Outspoken local people and activists are always invited to join the process, and contribute their energy to creating a better future. This means that people are genuinely involved and do not feel alienated from the process.

The Local Agenda 21 Partnership has built a record of not being defensive, but of admitting mistakes and problems, and openly discussing their solutions.

The Partnership is designed to be open and accessible, giving information freely and considering all views.

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