



Office of the  
Deputy Prime Minister

Creating sustainable communities



Neighbourhood  
Renewal Unit

# Good Practice Note

Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder Programme

## Note 3

### Developing Strategies

Version 1 - May 2004

**Evidence • Analysis • Strategy**

**strengthening strategies through the better use of evidence**

## Good Practice Notes

**Evidence • Analysis • Strategy**

This series of Good Practice Notes has been created for the benefit of the Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder Programme. It aims to provide clear practical advice to partnerships on how to gather, understand and use information and evidence in order to strengthen their work in promoting neighbourhood renewal.

The Notes draw on good practice from the Pathfinder Programme itself and also more widely. They are written for a non-expert audience. More detailed advice and guidance is available from numerous sources.

The Notes presently available are:

Note 1	Creating, Updating and Using a Neighbourhood Baseline
Note 2	Undertaking Local Evaluation
Note 3	Developing Strategies
Note 4	Using Household Survey Data

## Contents

**This note explains the importance of developing strategies based on evidence, and outlines some key principles to follow. The sections of the note are:**

- **Being More Strategic**
- **Part 1 – Developing Plausible Strategies**
- **Part 2 – Realistic Planning**

Further information and advice on evaluation and developing effective regeneration programmes can be found at [www.renewal.net](http://www.renewal.net)

**This Note has been prepared for the NRU by SQW Ltd.**

## Being More Strategic

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The Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder Programme is a new kind of programme. It is trying to do something different. It is testing how effectively the renewal of deprived neighbourhoods can be achieved through the stronger leadership and co-ordination of mainstream services at neighbourhood level, together with closer community involvement.

Developing and delivering neighbourhood management activities is a complex challenge, and the direct resources available to support it are limited. Achieving success in neighbourhood management will therefore require creativity, informed decision-making, a clear strategy and strong partnership working.

This Note explains the importance of developing **clear strategies** in neighbourhood management and how this can be done more effectively.

### Do We Need a Strategy?

A strategy is simply a statement of how you intend to achieve your objectives. It is a **route-map** that shows how you plan to move from where you are today to where you want to be. It provides a rationale for selecting the specific projects and actions that will actually deliver your objectives.

One of the weaknesses of a number of regeneration programmes in recent years has been a lack of strategy, often resulting in reduced impact. We should learn from past mistakes and ensure that Pathfinders benefit from a more strategic way of working. Evidence shows that the advantages of a clear strategy include:

- *A stronger focus on the local issues that really matter;*
- *A better understanding of which actions are more likely to work in addressing local issues;*
- *A more joined up approach;*
- *Clearer criteria for choosing the right projects and 'weeding out' the less important ones;*
- *A more credible and persuasive basis for persuading partners to get involved; and*
- *Greater impact on the local issues that matter.*

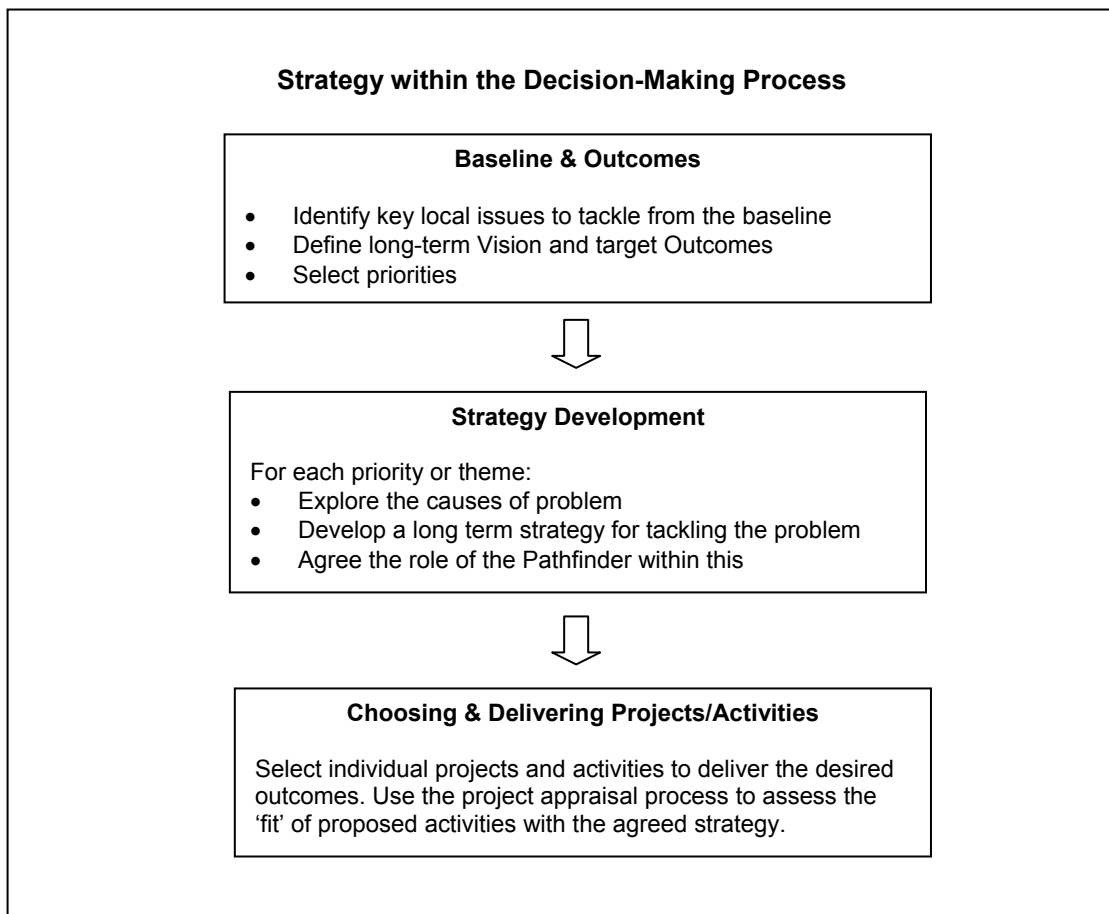
Developing strategies is probably more important for Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders than for most other regeneration partnerships – influencing and supporting changes to mainstream services is going to require a greater reliance on information and evidence, creativity of approach and prioritisation. Developing a clear strategy will help to make your Pathfinder more effective.

### Where does a Strategy fit in?

All Delivery Plans will include a statement of current issues (in the baseline) and a set of target outcomes (where we want to be in 7 years time). They also include lists of proposed projects and activities, set out by theme. What is often missing is the 'bit in the middle' – what is the link from the target outcomes to the selected actions? This is where a strategy can help, by providing a clearer rationale for choosing particular actions. The diagram overleaf illustrates this.

There are some important issues to note about preparing a strategy:

- *Keep it Simple* - Strategies do not need to be long, overly complicated or produced as separate glossy documents. They could (and probably should) be summarised in your Delivery Plan.
- *Use Evidence* – strategies should use whatever information is available about the nature of local problems, and 'what works' in tackling such problems.
- *The Process Matters* – good strategies are not just documents but represent an agreement between partners as to how they will approach a particular challenge. They should be developed jointly with the relevant partners, and reviewed at least once a year. Using working groups during the year can be an effective way of developing strategies.



Developing effective strategies is not easy, but the benefits from moving towards a more strategic approach could be considerable. The underlying challenge is to develop a more informed and thoughtful approach to neighbourhood renewal that is able to use all the tools available to secure its objectives. Pathfinders need to become **thinking, analysing and learning organisations** 12 months a year.

### **This Note**

This Note explains more about some of the practical ways that a Pathfinder strategy can be strengthened. It looks at two challenges:

- Developing Plausible Strategies – the importance of using information about the nature of local problems, together with evidence about 'what works' to design more focused and plausible strategies; and
- Realistic Planning – the benefits of clarifying what a Pathfinder will and will not do, and when, to improve the likelihood of delivering desired actions..

## Part 1

# Developing Plausible Strategies

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In this section we illustrate the steps that could be taken to develop a strategy. The steps highlight where the better use of information and evidence can strengthen your decision-making.

### Your Approach

Before explaining the process, here are some thoughts about how to proceed:

- *Be yourself!* - There are many different ways to develop strategies, so you should develop your own process that works for you and your partners. Here we focus on illustrating the principles of what the process should involve;
- *Involve partners* – good strategies cannot be developed by people working in isolation. They need the input from your service provider and community partners, and they need to be ‘owned’ by your partners;
- *The perfect strategy?* – There is no such thing. The amount of information available will never be ‘enough’. The amount of time available will never be ‘enough’. The fact that the ‘ideal’ cannot be met should not prevent progress being made. We are trying to develop strategies that are as grounded in evidence and as plausible as possible, given available resources. The very process of discussing options and tactics with partners should be valuable. As more information and better understanding becomes available over time, strategies should also improve.

### Key Steps in Strategy Development

The underlying principle of strategy development is to ‘*start with the problem, not the project*’. A strategy is more likely to successfully tackle local issues if it is rooted in a good understanding of what needs to be done, rather than simply being a collection of ‘available projects’. The intention should be to effectively *work backwards* from your selected target outcomes (your vision) to try to identify a route to achieving those outcomes. Some Pathfinders may already be using this process implicitly – the intention is to make it more transparent.

When developing a strategy it may be helpful to break down the process into the different themes or bundles of outcomes, to make it more manageable.

The end-product of the process is a short agreed strategy that should give the Pathfinder a better idea of what it needs to do to achieve its outcomes. The process is as important as the end product, as it should involve service providers and the community and will help to take all involved through a series of discussions and make transparent what needs to be done and why this can or can’t be done.

We have set out below what we believe are the key components of a strategy development process. It is not intended to be prescriptive, but to provide guidance on what such processes should include.

Note that more detailed guidance on many aspects of developing a strategy and programme can also be found on [www.renewal.net](http://www.renewal.net) in the ‘how to’ section. It includes general advice as well as links to more technical advice.

- **STEP 1 - Where are we now?**

*What is the problem that we are trying to solve? What information is available to define the nature and extent of this problem?*

The process needs to start with a consideration of the available information about what the local challenges actually are. Sometimes these can turn out to be different from local 'conventional wisdom'. This is where a **baseline** is particularly important. The problems need to be as clearly defined as possible – for example, not just 'poor health' but 'very high teenage pregnancy rate'. The possible links between different problems should also be explored – for example, if there is a high level of worklessness, how far is this related to the prevalence of ill health locally? Is there a significant link?

- **STEP 2 - Where do we want to be?**

*What are our aims? What outcomes have been agreed, defining the target of 'where we want to be'?*

Secondly, having reviewed local issues (problems and opportunities) the partnership needs to agree what its long-term aims should be. What are the priorities? Following a discussion about 'what matters most' a set of well defined outcome targets should be agreed for the lifetime of the programme. These should follow the SMART principles (i.e they should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-limited).

It is advisable not to set too many outcome targets – typically, perhaps 8 – 15 key outcomes should be selected at most.

- **STEP 3 - How big is the gap?**

*Comparing the present situation (where we are now) and the target situation (where we want to be), try to establish the nature and size of the gap in absolute terms. Just how big is it?*

It is important to have a sense of **scale** and to understand what the **shape** of the problem actually looks like. How many people is it? What do we know about the people affected by this problem – who are they? What other needs might they have? Too many regeneration programmes in the past have not made the connection between the size of the problem, and the size of their available tools/projects. Without this 'reality check', funds can sometimes be invested in projects that turn out to be quite inadequate in scale.

For example, if the aim is to reduce unemployment from 9% (in the neighbourhood) to 4% (the regional average), how many unemployed people would actually need to be helped into work in order to achieve this? Which age groups would need to be supported in particular? Would this require support for the long-term unemployed? What might the implications of this be?

- **STEP 4 - Why are we here?**

*What are the causes of the problem?*

The purpose in asking this question is not for academic interest but to try to identify the key processes that affect it. Again, a 'perfect' answer is usually difficult to achieve, but even an 'informed estimate' is of value. In particular, to what extent are the causes of the situation due to:

- Demographic factors – eg there are a lot of elderly people living in the area due to local social housing policies, explaining to some extent why rates of illness may be higher;
- Social factors – eg. deeply entrenched intergenerational poverty has affected aspirations and left a legacy of cultural problems to overcome;
- Economic factors – eg. weak business base and therefore few employment opportunities in the area;
- Physical factors – eg. poor housing conditions affecting the health of tenants;

- **STEP 5 – What is currently being done to address the problem?**

*What mainstream services are being delivered to tackle the identified problem? How well do the services provided fit the nature of the problem?*

This is clearly a complex question to answer and requires information on the nature of services being delivered. The purpose of asking the question is not to secure 'the right answer' or to just criticise local services but to provide information that helps to shape discussion on what to do next. The discussion needs to highlight:

- Which services are relevant to the identified problem;
- The scale and accessibility of those relevant local services;
- The quality of those services, identified through any existing performance standards;
- The links between different services and how they work together.

This is an important stage for the relevant local service providers to be involved in. They can not only provide valuable information about local needs and how their services tackle these, but also highlight the constraints that they operate under, and any plans for future changes.

Establishing a good relationship with local service providers and being able to have open and honest discussions about what seems to be working, and what does not, can be helpful to all sides. Service providers may be more open to suggestions if they feel that the Pathfinder understands the local situation and is working to help them deliver shared objectives. Being able to identify win-win benefits can be very important in securing agreements with partners.

- **STEP 6 - What needs to happen to get from A to B?**

*Taking the target outcomes, the size of the gaps and what we know of present circumstances and services, what needs to happen to deliver the required outcome?*

The aim at this stage is not necessarily to identify specific projects, but to agree on what would have to happen to deliver the desired outcome. The aim is to identify the basic building blocks of what needs to happen. This will be your strategy.

At this point it is important to consider different **options**, and the pros and cons of each. There are usually many different approaches to tackling an issue. In broad terms, is the challenge one of lobbying/persuading a local service provider to operate differently, or is there a pilot/demonstration project that could be run, are there new organisations that need to be involved, or should the Pathfinder be looking to deliver some services itself? Is there work to be done on preventing the problem in the first place?

This is where using evidence about 'what works' can be of greatest benefit. Most issues have been tackled before in some way – are there any proven methods we can use? There is a growing array of 'evidence-based studies' available, often in accessible summaries. Use [www.renewal.net](http://www.renewal.net) as a place to start; this can point you to recent work done by other regeneration partnerships, government departments, the Police, Primary Care Trusts and the NHS, the Youth Justice Board, Sport England and many other organisations.

- **STEP 7 - What can we actually do to achieve this?**

*What actions can be taken? What role should the **Pathfinder** play in helping to achieve this?*

This is where the Pathfinder agrees a set of actions to move towards delivering its outcomes. These actions may be projects, they may be activities, it may be further research. This is the step where the strategy is translated into specific actions – and included in the Delivery Plan. The work done in thinking through what strategy to adopt should provide a good basis to develop projects from, and will ensure that they are focused on what is needed.

The strategy will also need to be reviewed from time to time in the light of progress being made, and to see if it can be developed further.

## Part 2

# Realistic Planning

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The process of developing a strategy should provide a better understanding of what is required to achieve your objectives. The strategy also needs to be translated into a deliverable action plan. This is a difficult process. In this section, we set out a checklist of issues that may help you in devising a realistic action plan.

The suggestions have all been drawn from evaluations of previous regeneration programmes and the Pathfinder Programme's own National Evaluation. They are therefore drawn from real experience.

### Prioritisation

Clear prioritisation is difficult to achieve, particularly where there are competing pressures for resources, but experience shows that a failure to do this can undermine the effectiveness of a regeneration programme. We must be realistic; it is not possible to do everything at once – so our action plans must reflect this.

There are three ways to prioritise:

- **Now or later?** – Pathfinder programmes are seven years long. It is unlikely that the complete renewal of a deprived neighbourhood can be achieved in this space of time. We should therefore aim to be realistic about what we want to achieve within the lifetime of the programme. It may be possible to successfully tackle some problems, but for others, establishing a positive process of change ('moving in the right direction') may be a more realistic ambition. Being realistic about our ambitions should help us to focus on what we can achieve. What needs to be achieved or put in place by the end of the programme to ensure that the renewal of the neighbourhood can be given some momentum?
- **Lifetime planning** – Within the lifetime of the programme there is also the opportunity to 'stagger' activities over the seven years. Timing matters. For many deprived neighbourhoods, establishing a 'clean and safe' neighbourhood is an essential starting point – it needs to be done first, before moving on to tackling other problems. What are the most pressing priorities in your neighbourhood?

It may help to draw up a broad outline of what the top two or three priorities might be for your Pathfinder in each of the seven years of your programme. Suggestions include:

- *Foundations* - Allow 18 months to firmly establish your partnership, team and systems. Do not attempt to deliver lots of significant projects in this early period – partnership building is an important foundation and requires time.
- *Quick wins* - Delivering some 'quick wins' in the early stages will be important to raise the Pathfinder's profile and provide tangible benefits. But how long should this last? This type of expenditure should taper off.
- *Staging* - Which outcomes/themes do you wish to tackle first? If 'clean and safe' is a local priority, deliver this first. It may be appropriate to delay significant engagement on other themes until after this. It is not realistic to think that a programme with six or seven themes can make equal progress on each theme, simultaneously, each year. Establish priorities for each year for each of your chosen themes – is this year a time of research and information gathering?, project development?, delivery?, mainstreaming?
- **Less is more** – attempting to deliver a large number of projects and activities in any one year will be distracting and could well lead to effort being spread 'too thinly'. It may go against the grain, but delivering a smaller number of larger projects/activities may secure a greater impact in the long run.

## Match Resources to Priorities

The process of putting together Delivery Plans is a complex one, and subject to numerous influences and pressures. When your action plan begins to take shape, an important 'reality check' is to assess the extent to which your proposed actions actually fit your stated priorities. In particular:

- **Proportionality** - If you have decided that 'tackling crime' and 'working with young people' are to be this year's main priorities, check that the money and time being spent by you and your partners matches this. What percentage of your resources are being directed towards these priorities? If a significant proportion of your time and effort is not being directed at your priorities, it is highly unlikely that you will achieve your objectives.

As already discussed in Part 1 of this Note, the *scale of effort* matters in regeneration. Check that the combined package of activities you are proposing seems a plausible match against the problems you are trying to address.

- **Type of activity** – similarly, check the priorities against the type of activities. If your vision requires changes in mainstream services, how much of the proposed programme is actually designed to do this? Is the balance between delivering short term benefits and developing longer term solutions right?

## Risk Assessment

Finally, it is helpful to prepare for the inevitable delays, 'events', accidents and unfortunate happenings that affect every regeneration programme. If you are planning ahead, anticipating such happenings, they are much less likely to have a detrimental impact on your programme.

The evaluation of the Round 1 Pathfinders has highlighted a number of the more common and significant problems that have affected their progress so far. These include:

### Partnership development

- Conflict or tensions between different groups or stakeholders on the Board, often for well established 'historic' reasons;
- 'Over selling' of the vision to local residents, creating expectations that cannot be met, leading to some early disillusionment;
- Failure to engage or enthuse local residents to become involved;
- Delays in recruiting team members;
- Delay in finding suitable office premises;

### Programme development

- Difficulties in accessing data about the neighbourhood;
- Distraction of a key service provider partner by an internal re-organisation;
- Turnover of key personnel ('champions') in service providers;
- Inertia or lack of interest from service providers;
- Sudden change in local circumstances – closure of a major employer, change in control of a local authority, etc;
- Inability to focus on priorities.

Every year's Delivery Plan should include a **risk assessment** of the key projects or processes planned for the year ahead. The main possible risks to each one should be identified and an assessment made of their *likelihood* and *severity*. If high risks are identified, put in place a contingency plan. This may require the allocation of some funds. It may require a 'back up' project.