

**THE ACHIEVEMENTS AND EFFECTIVENESS OF RURAL
ACTION: AN EVALUATION**

Final report

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THE ACHIEVEMENTS AND EFFECTIVENESS OF RURAL ACTION: AN EVALUATION

1. INTRODUCTION

This evaluation of the achievements and effectiveness of Rural Action has been done to a very tight timescale and can only hope to provide an insight into the achievements of a complex national scheme. The brief for the study and methods used are outlined below, followed by detailed findings, implications and recommendations for the Steering Group and the Team to consider.

Overall, it is clear that Rural Action has achieved an enormous amount in a variety of ways. Nearly 4,000 projects have been successfully completed by thousands of community groups, with take-up increasing significantly in the last 18 months. 40 county networks have been established involving thousands of individual members from hundreds of organisations (including at least 350 from local authorities alone), together with hundreds more advisers available to community projects.

There is substantial evidence of extensive training, advice and capacity building as vital elements of the whole process, including training on projects tailored for individual groups and training courses run by county networks for groups and advisers. There are already substantial, and growing, links to Local Agenda 21 work by local authorities and voluntary organisations, and Rural Action is clearly influencing these other organisations to change their own programmes to be more responsive to community needs and wishes, and to respect the contribution that communities can make on a wide range of issues.

Rural Action is now, after five years, becoming well-established and better known among organisations and among local groups. It has grown into an essential element of the structure of support for sustainable rural development: some have said it is the backbone of that support.

There are inevitably areas where improvements can be made, notably in monitoring its experience and promoting its achievements as evidence of the success of the community-based approach. However, overall, Rural Action must be seen as a uniquely successful initiative: one which will undoubtedly benefit rural people and the rural environment increasingly over the coming years.

Rural Action is clearly at a turning point. Its achievements, and reputation amongst users, is far higher than many comparable schemes and, with a continued willingness to fight for its principles and learn and develop from its own experience, it should be capable of contributing even more to sustainable rural development and the rural environment in future.

Brief for this study

Diane Warburton was commissioned by the Countryside Commission in October 1997 to undertake a swift evaluation of the achievements and effectiveness of Rural Action, to be completed in January 1998, with the final report available by March 1998. The Commission, together with Rural Action's National Steering Group, intended to draw upon the results of the study to devise detailed arrangements for the future operations and development of Rural Action.

The brief for the study indicated that it should build upon previous evaluation studies, rather than go over the same ground. The brief outlined the following areas as priorities for the study to cover:

- To identify and evaluate the achievements of Rural Action (quantitative and qualitative) in terms of:
 - direct outcomes, both on the ground and in other outputs delivered, including:
 - training
 - advice
 - facilitating information exchange
 - awareness raising of broader sustainability issues
 - responding and linking to new complementary initiatives
 - responding to local community level requests and needs
 - national and local promotion of the scheme

- influences on the thinking and operation (at national and, particularly, local, level) of statutory bodies, NGOs, local authorities, and community groups within Rural Action's constituency
- the nature and extent of capacity building, community development and participation amongst the community groups supported
- the extent to which Rural Action reaches and influences a broader range of communities and individuals than those who traditionally participate in such environmental activity.
- To identify and evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of Rural Action in delivering the above and other achievements and, where appropriate, to consider other delivery and administrative structures, systems and procedures which, if introduced, might lead to increased effectiveness and efficiency. It was also required to consider the management and accountability of Rural Action, including its steering arrangements.
- To identify and evaluate the degree to which Rural Action links and contributes to current and prospective developments in Local Agenda 21 and sustainability, at national and local level.

Methodology

Given the short timescale for the study, a process was devised which would allow sufficient access to all those involved at different levels of Rural Action: national level, county level and local group level. It was originally envisaged that a participatory process could be initiated, but it became clear at a very early stage in the study that this was inappropriate for two reasons: firstly, the timescale did not allow sufficient time for initial research to ensure that the interactive events could be properly prepared and, secondly, it was too early in the process of developing future options for Rural Action to widen the debate at this stage.

However, participatory programmes, such as Rural Action, present particular challenges for evaluation processes as they require qualitative as well as quantitative methods. A recent literature review on participatory action in the countryside, for the Countryside Commission, concluded that:

"It has been recognised that quantitative evaluation is necessary but not sufficient, but qualitative evaluation methods have not generally been available. Many schemes which aim for participatory approaches may not be receiving the recognition they deserve because the indicators used to assess their success are designed to collect statistics rather than assess the quality or the relevance of the scheme: 'Quality relates to the *manner* in which the service is provided and the judgement of it by *specific individuals with unique characteristics, needs and aspirations*' (Voluntary Activity Unit 1996, emphasis added)." (Countryside Commission 1997, CCWP 07).

This study aimed to address issues of both quality and quantity in a number of ways. Firstly, a range of quantitative and qualitative criteria were identified:

- Quantitative criteria were identified to measure and judge the extent and effectiveness of the programme, for example:
 - numbers of grants made
 - numbers of groups and projects supported
 - range of activities
 - numbers of people involved
 - physical outcomes in terms of environmental projects
 - geographical variations in activities and involvement
 - types of groups involved (environmental, social welfare, community etc)
 - levels of matching funding achieved
 - activities of networks and the national development team
 - numbers of people receiving training
 - the extent of links to other groups
 - the extent of links between Rural Action and other initiatives.

- Qualitative criteria were developed to describe and interpret the operation and achievements of Rural Action, for example:
 - reputation of Rural Action in providing support locally and nationally
 - nature and quality of network relationships
 - quality of advice provided
 - ease of access to grants and advice
 - appropriateness and usefulness of criteria for grants
 - appropriateness and usefulness of advice available through networks
 - impact of advice and other support on groups (more groups established, existing groups strengthened)
 - other local initiatives established
 - types of relationships between Rural Action and other local initiatives
 - unanticipated outcomes
 - extent of capacity building for individual and groups
 - impact of investment from Rural Action on the quality of life for local communities
 - impact of Rural Action on the changing policy and political context for environmental work, and other work contributing to sustainable development, locally and nationally.

Statistics and other hard data have been sought wherever possible to assess Rural Action's achievements. Given the timescale, existing data had to be used to a large extent; that data being analysed against these new criteria. These results are given throughout this report. Since the assessment of the quality of a participatory scheme must include both objective assessments against specific criteria and subjective interpretation based on individual experience, quotes from participants are used to exemplify and amplify findings.

Developing this methodology has been particularly important to this study as part of the aims of the study have been to consider appropriate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for Rural Action, and to make proposals for the future which will enable ongoing evaluation to provide data both for funders and for the continuing development and improvement of the initiative.

Process for the study

For all these reasons, the process that was adopted was to seek material for the study both in writing and through interviews: interviews were done by telephone in almost all cases (because of the tight deadlines), although some face-to-face interviews were carried out in the initial stages.

The process followed was:

- **Study Steering Group.** This group was made up of Rick Minter and Terry Robinson from the Countryside Commission and Simon Brereton of the Rural Action National Development Team. Three meetings of this group were held: one at the beginning of the study, one mid-way and one to consider the first draft report.
- **Review of past evaluations of Rural Action.** The aim was to build on these existing studies rather than going over the same ground. Four previous studies were reviewed:
 - 1 *Evaluation of Rural Action for the Environment - Three Year Review of Efficiency and Effectiveness*, by Aston University Business School, July 1995. This study was intended "to enable performance measures of value, effectiveness, economy, efficiency and quality to be generated and then used to judge whether the scheme has met its objectives".
 - 2 *Review of the Efficiency and Effectiveness of Rural Action's Administration*, by Baker Tilly Consulting, October 1995. This report for the National Steering Group was specifically to review Rural Action's National Development Team's organisational and operational structure including customer satisfaction; service levels and standards; team organisation and management; efficiency, effectiveness and value for money and performance indicators.

- 3 *Report to Management on the Financial Control Environment Surrounding the Rural Action Initiative*, by the National Audit Office, May 1997. This review was carried out to assess the control environment surrounding expenditure by the Countryside Commission, English Nature and the Rural Development Commission (the funding partners) on Rural Action. The objectives were to accredit ACRE as the Rural Action paying agency of the three partners and accredit the systems adopted by the three partners for the financial management of the initiative.
- 4 *Review of Future Funding Options for the continuation of Rural Action post-1999*, by Alison Millward Associates and Mike Dando, June 1997.

- **National level interviews and data collection.** Interviews were carried out with:
 - Every member of the National Steering Group (NSG): see Annex 1 for full list.
 - The National Development Team (NDT). Numerous meetings and interviews were carried out with Simon Brereton, Rural Action Project Manager. Interviews and information gathering were also carried out with Graham Kirkham (Development Officer); telephone interviews were carried out with Vicky Redding (Development Officer), who left on maternity leave shortly after the study began, and Janet Honey, her maternity leave replacement, and other NDT members. Various members of the team provided a great deal of the basic data which is used in this report.
 - Other relevant individuals, including:
 - Andy Gale, Countryside Commission who, although not a member of the NSG is on its sub-group on future strategy
 - Simon Hodgson, ex-long serving member of the NSG representing both BTCV and the RDC at different times
 - Trevor Cherrett, ex-RDC NSG member, now working for Sussex RCC and Chair of Sussex Rural Action network
 - Jonathan Brown, NCVO Rural Team, to find an external perspective on Rural Action's achievements
 - Tony Hams, LGMB.
- **County level interviews and data collection**
 - Letters were sent to every county network secretariat and project grant administrator (see Annex 1). Network secretariats were asked to send in basic data including lists of network members, examples of materials they had produced and information on network activities: 21 out of 40 counties provided material.
 - Interviews were carried out with as many network secretaries and project grant administrators as possible: out of the total of 40 counties, 35 Project Grant Administrators (PGAs) and 21 Network Secretariats (NSs) were interviewed by telephone.
 - The interviews were based on the questions identified in the letters they had received (see Annex 1).
 - Some network secretariats and project grant administrators sent in written comments; in one county, the PGA and NS discussed the study questions with their network members and sent in a collective response.
- **Local group interviews**
 - Local groups to be interviewed were identified in two ways:
 - Networks secretariats and project grant administrators were asked to recommend groups for interview
 - Gaps in coverage were identified by the study team (in terms of geographical coverage, type of group and type of project) and an additional list of groups was selected on this basis from a complete list of projects supplied by the NDT.
 As a result, 35 projects from 29 counties were interviewed by telephone.
 - The interviews were based on a common set of questions (see Annex 1).

History of Rural Action

Rural Action was devised and launched within a particular political context and from a process of development which have both shaped its subsequent development and current structure and status.

During the 1980s, there had been a movement towards community-based participatory environmental action, based on a questioning of top-down, professionally generated 'objective' scientific solutions for environmental problems, and of the separation of people and nature in much conservation policy and practice. This movement was also stimulated by the development of new interests and new priorities for conservationists: the urban environment became increasingly seen as valuable in itself as well as a refuge for wildlife retreating from an increasingly threatened countryside; and the importance of the commonplace began to be stressed alongside the special in nature and landscape conservation. These developments required a closer link to the public generally, and to local residents in particular, and community action and participation in environmental issues grew in popularity among environmentalists and conservationists as well as becoming increasingly important to the statutory conservation agencies.

Support for local community-based environmental action began to be developed in a number of voluntary organisations concerned variously with conservation and environmental issues and with social and community development. Local authorities also increasingly supported local community action with advice and grants. Further support and advice (and in some cases funding) to community-based environmental action was provided by the Groundwork trusts (from the first in St Helens in 1981 to over 50 in 1997), development trusts (now supported by the Development Trusts Association), community technical aid movement (supported by their national body: ACTAC), city farms and allotments groups, and the changed emphasis of environmental grants schemes such as the Shell Better Britain Campaign (since 1981), and the Department of the Environment's Environmental Action Fund and Local Projects Fund, with their increasing priority for community participation and community-based environmental projects.

The concept that became Rural Action was initially developed within the Countryside Commission, following on from its own highly respected Community Action programme: a series of innovative community action projects in the countryside in the 1980s, which promoted a community approach to countryside management and rural development. The Commission's new initiative became known as Local Countryside Action. An informal group worked with the Commission to develop these ideas; the group included individuals from BTCV, the Wildlife Trusts (then RSNC), NCVO's Environment Support Team (NEST), ACRE and Shell Better Britain Campaign.

These ideas were refined over many months and had been presented by the Commission to the DOE for approval and funding in the next financial year. However, the Secretary of State for the Environment unexpectedly required the Commission to share the scheme with English Nature and the Rural Development Commission, to create a broad rural community-based environmental action scheme.

The other two agencies which became partners in Rural Action (English Nature and the Rural Development Commission) were already working on these issues. English Nature (then the Nature Conservancy Council) had been running programmes which aimed to increase joint working and community-based nature conservation, such as the Partnership in Practice initiative and the Community Action for Wildlife grants scheme.

The Rural Development Commission had run numerous programmes over many years aimed at encouraging and supporting rural community action in social and economic development, including providing grant aid for community development work by Rural Community Councils and other agencies.

Bringing the three agencies together was intended to develop a response to local issues that could cross the statutory boundaries of each agency, and provide the basis for a broad community-led approach. The voluntary bodies which had been working with the Countryside Commission to develop Local Countryside Action were included in the new proposals, and BTCV, the Wildlife Trusts, Shell Better Britain Campaign, ACRE and NEST were invited onto the initial Rural Action steering group.

Rural Action was formally launched by the then Government as part of its Action for the Countryside initiative in February, just prior to the general election in 1992. Progress was then swift: the National Development Team started work in May and the first county networks began to be established in September. The programme was initially intended to run for three years, and the National Development Team had tight targets to set up networks in every English county, and to begin to deliver funding to local community projects.

By the end of 1992, nine networks had been established; by the end of 1993 a further 19 had been set up and by March 1995 there was a Rural Action network in every English county. The numbers of projects also grew very fast: in 1992/93 there were 61 projects, in 1993/94 there were 479 and by 1994/95 there were 1,250 projects (Aston Business School, 1995).

Findings from earlier evaluations

The most comprehensive of the earlier evaluation studies (and the earliest) was the Aston Business School study carried out over two years (April 1993 to July 1995). Aston's report concluded that, even at that early stage, Rural Action had been highly effective in a number of ways, including:

- "in stimulating and supporting substantial amounts of local voluntary effort to safeguard and improve the local environment"
- widening the constituency for environmental action; involving volunteers new to environmental work
- in establishing a foundation for sustainable development at local level
- in stimulating a high level of follow-up activity on projects
- injecting substantial value added into most projects
- supporting BTCV and the Wildlife Trusts involvement in community-based work, and RCCs involvement in environmental work
- establishing a high quality, local, user-friendly grant scheme for projects
- providing an excellent service from the National Development Team to networks.

The Aston evaluation also identified a number of problem areas which needed to be addressed in any future development of the scheme, including:

- staff resources were being over-stretched by the rapid expansion of the programme (E4.14)
- there was a lack of 'ownership' of Rural Action at Steering Group level, resulting in a lack of a champion for the programme (E4.15).

These findings led to a number of recommendations for what was described as "a mid-term adjustment of course", rather than any radical changes to the programme. The recommended changes covered the future scope and expenditure levels of Rural Action, national management arrangements, the operation of county networks, the grant aid scheme, and considering the wider implications of the Rural Action model. Many of these issues remain relevant and are raised again in the report below; the majority of the Aston recommendations have not been acted upon by Rural Action to date for a variety of reasons.

The Baker Tilly and NAO studies focused on the financial accountability and probity, and administrative procedures, of Rural Action. They found highly efficient administration systems and made only minor proposals for change which have been or are being implemented, or are being taken into account in changes being developed in response to more recent contextual changes.

The review of future funding options, by Alison Millward and Mike Dando, focused mainly on priorities for the future and appropriate sources of funding, and was therefore less relevant to this current study although it included a brief overview of Rural Action's achievements, successes and constraints which provided useful insights and background.

The findings of these previous evaluations have been taken into account in devising and carrying out this study, particularly in focusing on achievements and effectiveness rather than issues of financial administration.

Context for this study

This current study is being carried out in a changed context. The current funding regime for Rural Action ends in March 1999 and, following a period of uncertainty about its future, plans are now being developed to ensure its continuation in some form. At the same time, the priorities of the three original sponsors have changed since Rural Action was established, and they are facing new challenges and structural changes.

These issues are being considered by a Strategy Sub-group of the National Steering Group. Rural Action is therefore currently facing not just the need to consider new funding sources, but the opportunity to consider its overall mission and methods of operation.

The remainder of this report therefore focuses on identifying and evaluating the achievements of Rural Action, its effectiveness in influencing the thinking and operations of others, the extent to which it contributes to capacity building, community development and participation amongst community groups, the extent to which it reaches and influences a broader range of audiences than traditionally participate in environmental activity, and the extent of the links to Local Agenda 21 and sustainability. It also considers the effectiveness and efficiency of Rural Action in delivering these achievements, and the management and accountability of Rural Action.

Rural Action's current operations

Principles and objectives

Rural Action has, since the earliest days of its development, been concerned with the *processes* of community-based environmental action as much as the *products*. These principles were spelled out in Rural Action's launch document:

"Rural Action helps people in rural communities take action to protect and improve their local environment. The Rural Action initiative promotes the idea that local people often know what they would like to do to care for the countryside and for wildlife while meeting their own community needs. It seeks to enable them to develop the confidence and commitment, skills and experience to translate their concern for the environment into action and make that action sustainable" (Rural Action 1992 Policy Document).

These principles partly relate to influencing environmental and conservation organisations, with the aim of encouraging more participatory, community-based approaches, and partly to influencing community organisations, with the aim of encouraging more environmental and conservation activity and interest. To ensure that these principles were understood by all those involved in Rural Action, at national and county network level, all participants are required to sign a 'commitment' statement which outlines the principles on which Rural Action operates. This statement is as follows:

"Principles for Rural Action

- Local communities should be able to take a leading role in conserving and enhancing their environment.
- Statutory and voluntary agencies should actively support rural communities in their efforts to care for the local environment.

We commend these principles to all organisations concerned with environmental work at the local level and invite public, private and voluntary bodies to join in this initiative to extend resources and advice throughout rural England.

Formation of county-based support networks will bring together partners to share resources, skills and experience, and provide effective, comprehensive and co-ordinated support for community groups. Through this integration, networks will simplify procedures and accelerate delivery of support for local initiatives.

Delivering Rural Action will require commitment from all who participate. We shall:

- Listen to and recognise the aspirations and capability of individuals and groups within the community, and respect their autonomy
- Encourage people to take long-term responsibility for their local environment, and to raise awareness of this responsibility
- Work collaboratively with other organisations at county and national level in support of local action
- Help communities to manage and maintain their own surroundings, by providing easily accessible support and training, technical advice, information and grants
- Evaluate and spread the word about the success of community-led environmental action, reward initiative, maintain the momentum and encourage further action."

These principles are usually summarised in Rural Action materials as Rural Action having two overall objectives:

- To encourage and enable local rural communities take a leading role, and long term responsibility, in conserving and enhancing their local environment
- To encourage and enable statutory and voluntary agencies to actively support rural communities in their efforts to care for the local environment, through providing easily accessible support and training, technical advice, information and grants.

To achieve these objectives, within the principles outlined, Rural Action has developed a complex structure as follows:

- **A national partnership in a National Steering Group (NSG).** Since 1992, Rural Action has been sponsored by three statutory agencies with responsibilities in rural areas: the Countryside Commission, English Nature and the Rural Development Commission. These three agencies were joined in the National Steering Group by five (now four) voluntary sector partners: ACRE, BTCV, Wildlife Trusts, Shell Better Britain and NCVO's Environment Support Team (NEST ceased operation in 1993).

The National Steering Group meets quarterly to establish the policy for, and to monitor and evaluate, the initiative. The Chair of the Steering Group is taken for two years each by the sponsoring agencies: the Countryside Commission currently has the Chair and provides the Secretariat to the Group. The Group receives performance reports from the National Development Team, covering details of project and network grant spending and an analysis of achievements.

- **ACRE, as contractor to the three sponsors.** ACRE has the responsibility to "administer Rural Action and to deliver a delegated grants scheme and support to local projects" (taken from the contract between the sponsors and ACRE).

ACRE receives £400,000 per year from each sponsor (total £1.2million per year) to cover the costs of the National Development Team, project grants, networking support costs and promotion and training. ACRE takes a fee of approx £22,000 per year for undertaking these responsibilities.

- **A National Development Team (NDT).** ACRE employs and supports the National Development Team, which has the following responsibilities (quoted from the ACRE contract with sponsors, 4.1):
 - arrange distribution of funds for local project grants administration by Rural Community Councils
 - guide and stimulate support networks and administer network support funding
 - take responsibility for and monitor the two grants funds and provide regular reports to the Steering Group
 - publicise the grant scheme and the support linked to it.

In addition to these responsibilities, the contract also states (contract 5.3) that the National Development Team:

"will evaluate and publicise good practice in supporting local environmental action through networking. The National Development Team will make visits to promote the collaboration between Rural Action partners in accordance with the local commitment and to guide the development of planning for Rural Action implementation in each participating county. They will also have a role in helping to resolve any conflicts or problems which may arise in support networking. Networks will identify the types of support already available to meet local needs and gaps that need to be filled and make proposals for filling them. Network work programmes will be considered by the National Development Team and funds for networking allocated accordingly. Activities eligible for national funding could include training events and materials, publicity campaigns, directories of advice providers and secretariat costs."

- **County networks in every English county.** The networks are co-ordinated by locally appointed network secretariats. The network structure is designed to bring together partners "to share resources, skills and experience, and provide effective, comprehensive and co-ordinated support for community groups" (Rural Action Policy Document 1992). They are seen as a way of bringing together existing expertise to provide support and advice for community projects, and reducing overlap between advice providers: to provide improved access to support without creating a new organisation.

Networks are expected to identify and make accessible the support already available to meet local needs, to identify gaps that need to be filled and to make proposals for filling them. In most cases, networks have done this at the establishment phase, and then continued to develop services in response to demand, to changing trends at national and other levels and to priorities identified at county level through network debates and, occasionally, formal research.

Most networks meet quarterly; some hold meetings to which all network members are always invited, some have a core strategy group which meets regularly to plan network activities and also holds larger events to which all network members are invited.

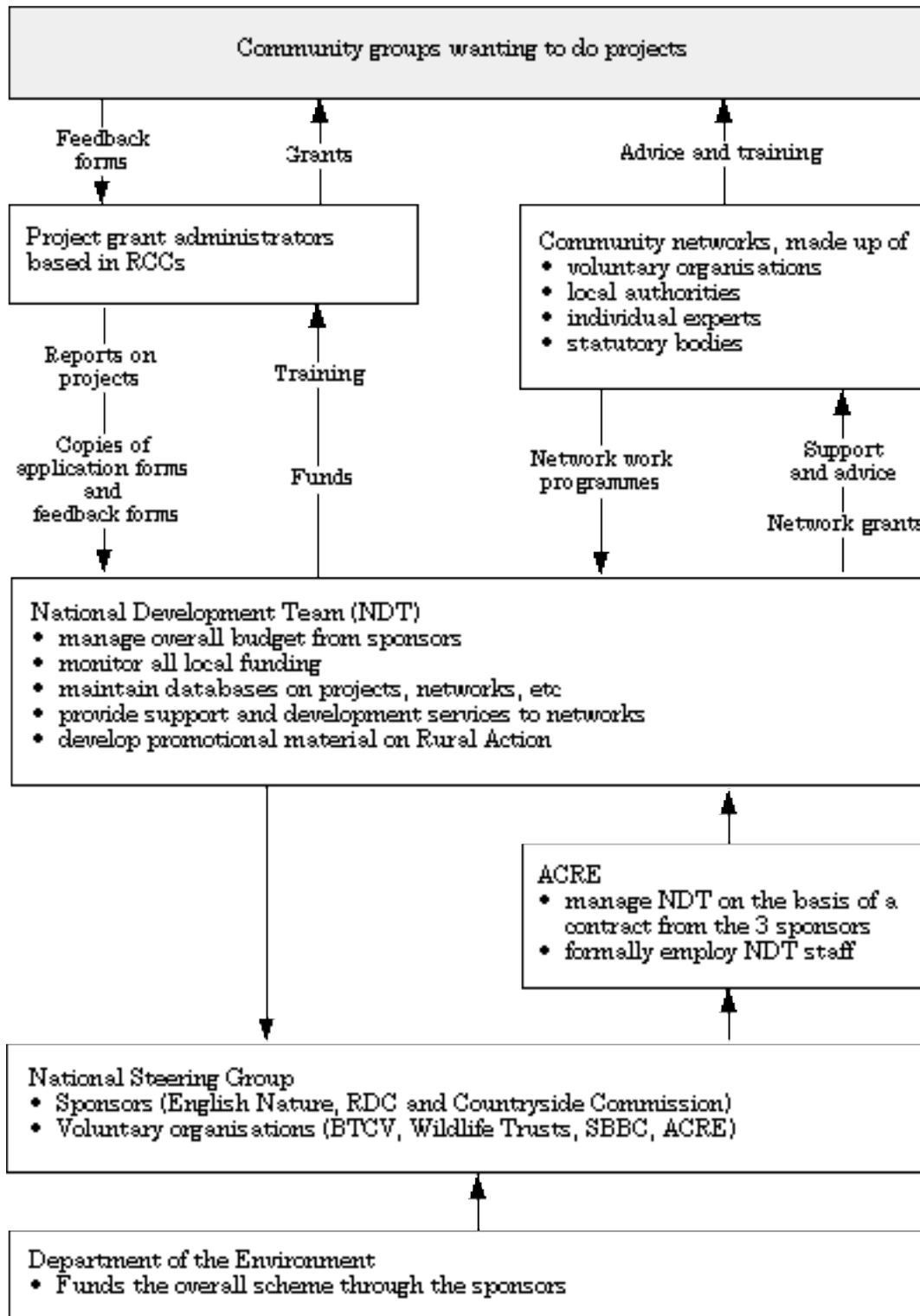
Network work programmes are developed, in theory, on a yearly basis, on which their network support grant is calculated and paid: an average of £3,100 per network per year. Annual work programmes are submitted, although in practice networks develop their activities on a more rolling programme. Full written guidance is provided by the NDT on network grant applications (see Annex 2).

The networks have considerable autonomy in devising their work programmes and budgets, although the two development officers in the NDT are available to provide advice, guidance, support and training (and conflict resolution if needed).

- **Project grant administrators.** Project grants are administered by the county Rural Community Councils (RCCs), and the responsibility for all decisions about awarding individuals grants is devolved to them. The RCCs receive fees of 12.5% of the value of grants made for this administrative role.

The National Development Team is available to give advice and monitor operations (including receiving copies of application forms and feedback forms from the groups), but otherwise the process is carried out locally. The full outline of the grants application procedure is given in Annex 2, together with current criteria and guidelines.

Fig 1. How Rural Action operates at present



- **Advisers.** Advisers give detailed, project related, advice to local groups for which they are paid at the rate of £150 per day, which is costed into project grant applications. Advisers may be network members or other associated individuals and organisations.

- **Local community groups doing projects.** If the group and project are eligible according to Rural Action criteria, they may apply for grants of up to £2000 to cover up to 50% of project costs. This funding may include fees for advice and training. The Rural Action grant can be matched by the value of voluntary effort (costed at £46 per person per day), local fund raising, donations in kind, sponsorship and other grants from certain sources.

The relationships between the different elements of Rural Action are complex and multi-faceted. Figure 1 (above) gives an overall summary of the main links and lines of communication within Rural Action. There are also, of course, many other links and communications between those involved in Rural Action and other initiatives, which allows for constant shifts in emphasis and priorities in response to external opportunities and constraints.

Clarification of terms

The identification and evaluation of the achievements of Rural Action in "encouraging and enabling local rural communities to take a leading role and responsibility in conserving and enhancing their local environment" requires some initial clarification of terms.

Rural in Rural Action is taken to mean communities of less than 10,000 people. The meaning of *local* rural communities is taken to mean action below the level of local authorities, so action by parish councils falls into this category, but not action by district or county councils. It also embraces voluntary action where that is led by local people (*community-led*) rather than voluntary action by volunteers drawn from outside the local community, working on projects identified and managed by organisations based outside the local community.

Rural Action's focus on community-led projects includes building capacity, confidence and skills among community groups so that they can take responsibility for local environmental action. This approach is based, as the principles outlined above point out, on the belief that if people identify their own local priorities, and design and carry out action on those priorities, they will not only learn from that process but be more likely to feel a sense of ownership of the product, which will encourage long term care, concern and responsibility for whatever is created.

Conserving and enhancing the local environment also requires clarification. The definition of *environment* has changed substantially over the past decade, and is no longer seen as purely the *natural* or *green* environment. Environment is now seen as including environmental quality (eg air pollution, litter, design of new developments), and the human and social environment (shared spaces and experiences).

These issues go beyond conventional environmental conservation activity, and are reflected in the sponsors' current objectives for Rural Action. These objectives provide the content (product) framework for Rural Action, and therefore establishes the practical focus for Rural Action's process-focused overall objectives. The sponsors' objectives are stated in the contract under which Rural Action is managed by ACRE on their behalf:

Sponsors' objectives (quoted from ACRE contract with sponsors, 2.1 - 2.3)

- The Rural Development Commission is committed to sustainable development taking place in a way which always respects the environment and wherever possible enhances it, promoting distinctive ways of life. It encourages rural communities to recognise and understand their problems and to enable them to tackle such problems themselves. It also encourages and supports the voluntary sector to expand its role in the countryside.
- The Countryside Commission's duty is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the countryside of England and to help people enjoy it. It seeks to pursue its vision of a multi-purpose countryside, managed so that its environmental qualities are sustained through partnership with local authorities, public organisations, voluntary bodies and private individuals.
- English Nature advises Government on nature conservation and promotes the conservation of England's wildlife and natural features. It aims to enhance the nature conservation value of the whole environment of England and is committed to sharing its knowledge and experience to enable others to play a full and active role. It supports and encourages the involvement of local communities and many voluntary, public and private

organisations, and seeks to ensure that people have the opportunity to appreciate and enjoy their natural heritage.

The extent to which Rural Action has succeeded in achieving these complex and ambitious objectives has been the basis of management reports by the NDT to the National Steering Group over the lifetime of Rural Action. This study touches on these issues, but is primarily focused on the issues outlined in the original brief.

2. THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF RURAL ACTION

Local groups and projects

Statistics on the numbers and types of groups and projects supported and funded by Rural Action are a vital element of any evaluation of Rural Action's achievements.

The statistics presented below are based on data supplied by the NDT. The more recent figures, and overall totals, are still being revised by the NDT as more data comes in from networks and project grant administrators, and there will therefore be some slight inconsistencies in the figures quoted in different sections of the report. These slight differences do not invalidate any of the conclusions drawn from the statistics, not least because only the most conservative assertions are made on the basis of these statistics.

Projects funded by Rural Action

The number of projects supported by Rural Action has grown substantially over the years, and particularly in the past 18 months. Overall, since 1992, the total number of grants and projects is as follows (full figures are available since 1993, and are shown in Tables A and B in Annex 3):

- The total number of projects funded between 1992 and 1997 (inclusive) was:

1992	10
1993	282
1994	750
1995	895
1996	836
1997	<u>998</u>
Total	3,771 projects funded

- The total expenditure on grants over the period 1992 to 1997 (inclusive) was:

1992	£ 11,020
1993	£ 264,712
1994	£ 671,452
1995	£ 738,552
1996	£ 664,220
1997	<u>£ 894,338</u>
Total	£3,244,294 paid in grants

The size of project grants depends on changing local circumstances, including availability of funds from elsewhere as other grants schemes change and appear, as well as trends in the types of projects and groups doing projects. The average grant does vary considerably between counties. For example, the Isle of Wight tends to have a higher than average grant (eg its 1997 average was £1,357) than Wiltshire (eg its 1997 average was £566). It would clearly not be appropriate to simply divide the grants budget by the number of counties, and give each county a fixed proportion of the budget, as the pattern of demand varies so much and the scheme is designed to be flexible enough to respond to different demands at different times. However, the NDT carefully monitors these county variations and takes regular measures to ensure that certain counties are not absorbing more than their fair share of the grant funds.

Overall, the average size of grant per project has remained fairly constant since the beginning of the scheme, at between £800 to £900. The actual figures are:

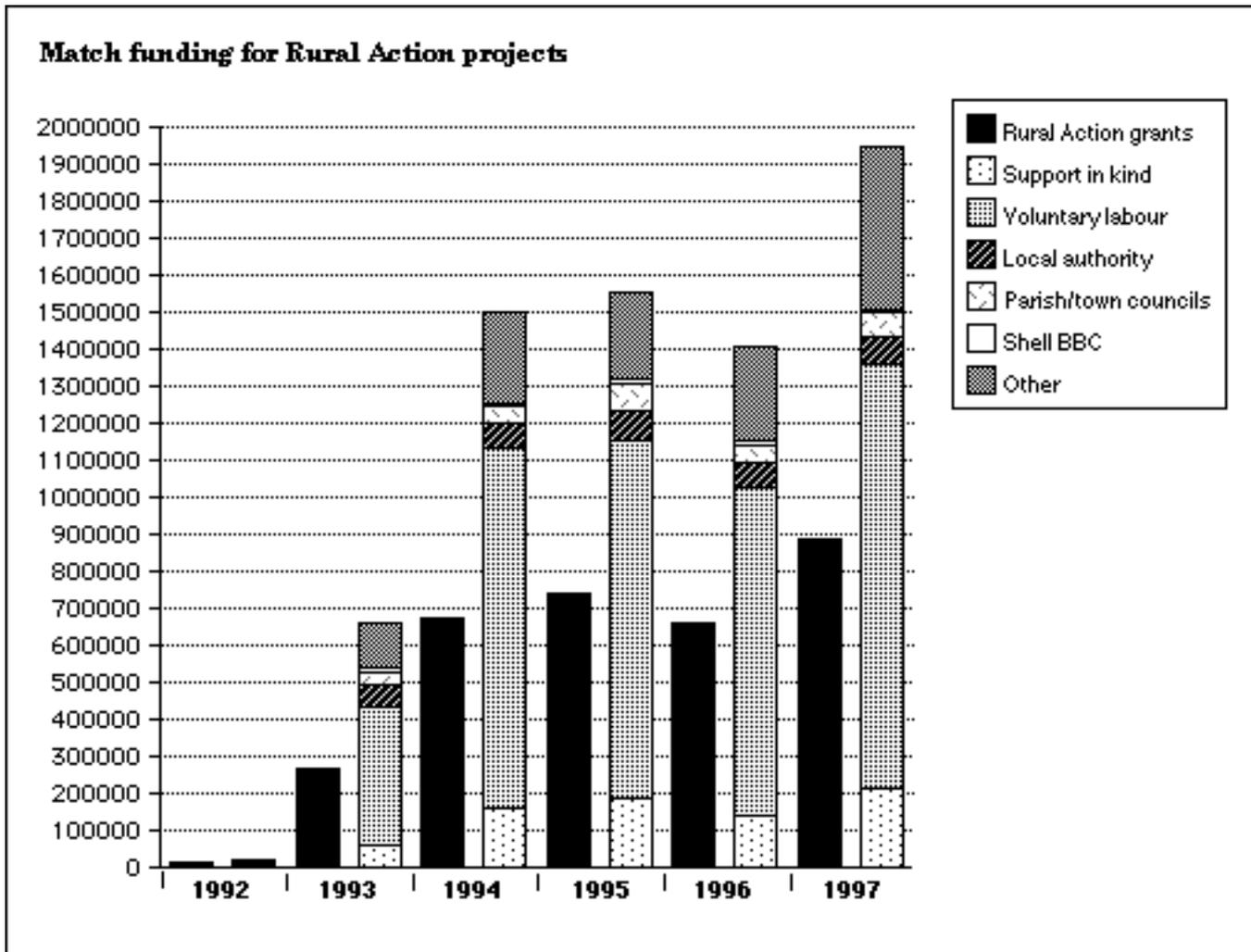
Average grant:	1992	-	£ 1,102
	1993	-	£ 938
	1994	-	£ 895
	1995	-	£ 825
	1996	-	£ 794
	1997	-	£ 897

Leverage of other funding

Rural Action funding is only one element of funding community-based environmental action in rural areas. It must be matched by other resources, including cash, to at least 50% of the value of the project.

In practice, Rural Action funding has been highly successful in acting as leverage on other forms of funding (see Figure 2, and Annex 3 for detailed figures).

Fig 2. Match funding for Rural Action Projects



Overall, just over £3 million invested by Rural Action has succeeded in releasing more than £7 million from other sources: a return of over 300%. Some of this total £10 million of funding for rural environmental action may have been invested without Rural Action. However, Rural Action has clearly played a major role in leveraging substantial funds, voluntary effort and other resources into community-led environmental projects in rural areas.

There are three aspects of these figures on leveraging additional funding for local projects which are worthy of comment (see Table C, Annex 3 for detailed figures):

- In kind support includes donated materials, equipment, facilities and labour; 'other' funding includes local fund raising such as jumble sales, and support from local businesses.

- The substantial amount of voluntary labour invested in the projects. Taking the current figure of £46 per person per day as a guide, this gives a total of almost 95,000 person days invested in community-led rural environmental projects through Rural Action since it began (actual figure: 94,665), with a total value of nearly £4.5 million (actual figure: 4,354,610). These figures must be taken as a bare minimum of voluntary labour invested in Rural Action projects: many groups will not have claimed their time as matching funding at all.

The amount of voluntary labour costed in to projects has increased substantially over the years, from 8,223 person days in 1993, to 24,890 in 1997.

- Matching funds from other sources have increased over the years, with the exception of Shell Better Britain Campaign (SBBC) funding, which has reduced since 1995 when its own priorities and grants criteria changed. This has affected the ease with which groups can match fund certain elements of their projects, especially materials and equipment.

Types of projects funded by Rural Action

The extent to which the sponsors' objectives (already described) have been achieved by Rural Action funding, in terms of the physical changes on the ground by community projects, is regularly reviewed in reports by the NDT to the National Steering Group.

This analysis is done by categorising projects on the NDT's database by a series of types of output according to the sponsors' main priorities, as outlined in the contract with ACRE. Using this analysis, the NDT calculate that for the year ended 31 March 1997 (see Annex 3 for full details of these figures and charts showing the breakdown of issues):

- 85% of projects carried out in 1997 met the interests of the Countryside Commission. The two main types of projects under 'countryside interests' were public awareness (31%) and landscape features (18%). The remaining six types of projects under this category each made up less than 10% of projects.
- 75% of projects carried out in 1997 met the interests of the Rural Development Commission. The three main types of projects classified as dealing with 'social and economic issues' were regeneration and pride of place projects (27%), visual amenity improvement (18%) and involving young people (14%).
- 65% of projects carried out in 1997 met the interests of English Nature. The three main types of projects under this category were nature conservation (33%), trees and woodland (22%) and species, flora and fauna (20%).
- The NDT also classify projects in terms of 'environmental processes', which analyses the types of activities carried out rather than the content of the project or its outputs on the ground. Under this category of projects, the three main types of project activities were restoration and improvement projects (27%), surveys and research (15%) and the creation of new features (13%).

Limitations of this analysis

The method of analysis used to generate the figures outlined above has merits in providing data on the proportion of projects which are relevant to each sponsor's interests: information which has been useful to the National Steering Group in the past. However, there are a number of limitations to this analysis:

- The project categories overlap, and many projects meet the interests of all three sponsors. The figures therefore give no overall sense of the *balance* between different types of projects in Rural Action, not least because the same projects may be included in every list.
- The projects are categorised when they are being added to the database and, for example, only a maximum of three of the 'process' categories can be used, so projects which cover than three more processes will not be fully recorded.

These limits to the number of categories which can be used to analyse any one project affects the results which are produced. For example, skills training, increasing knowledge and group development only add up to a total of 10.6% of projects according to the NDT analysis, whereas the analysis done for this study, using data from the NDT, shows that since 1995 over 50% of projects have received training and advice.

- The project categories being used are quite vague and in some cases reflect earlier priorities for the sponsors, all of whom are constantly updating their main concerns.
- The way in which data on projects is collected is also limited. All projects complete a feedback sheet to show how the funds have been spent. This feedback sheet is an essential element of the system of financial control and accountability. However, these feedback sheets provide little or no information about the actual outputs or achievements of the projects, beyond whether they did what they said they would do and what they received funds for.

New analysis of types of projects

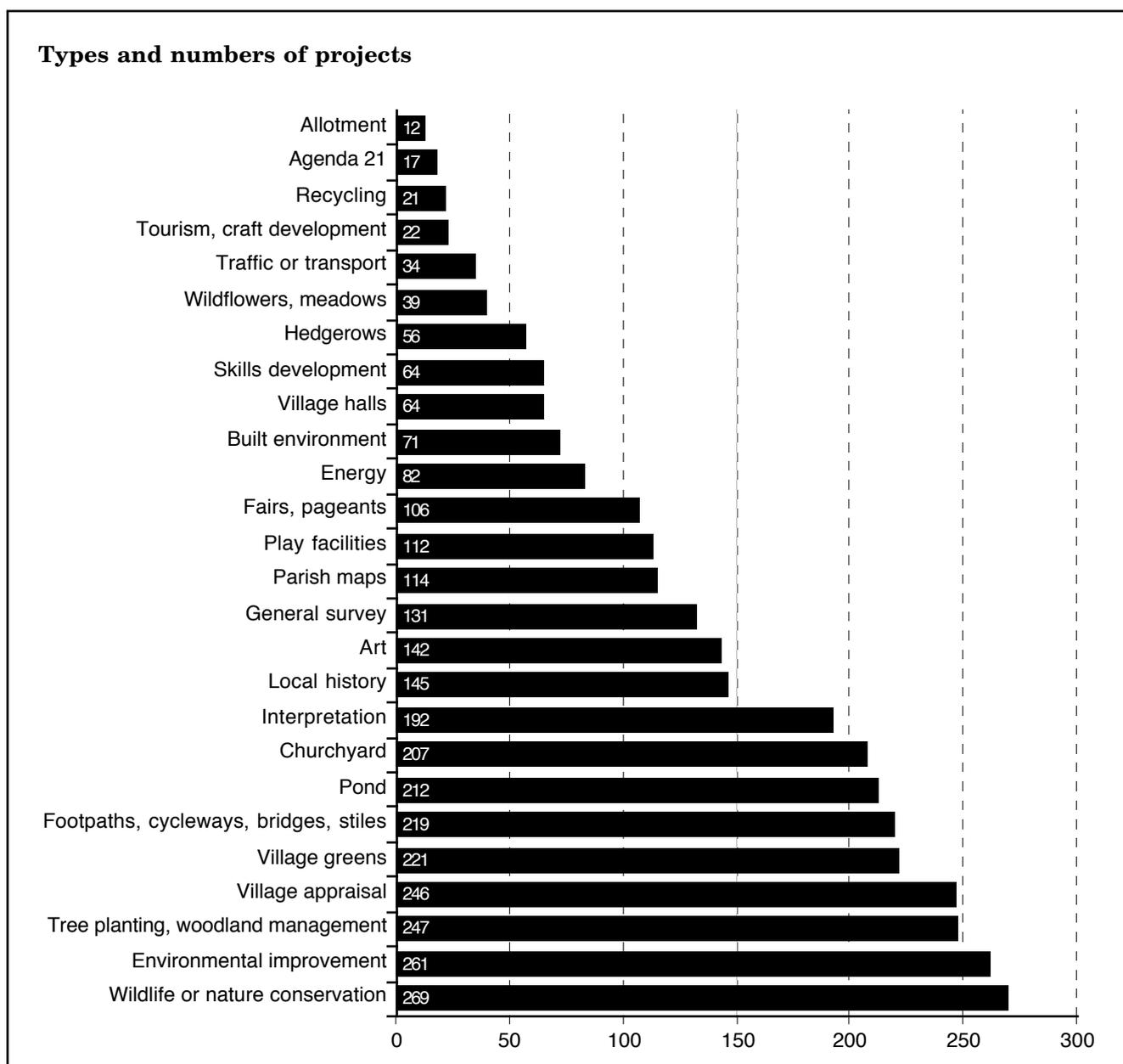
The way the data about projects is collected and stored makes it difficult to provide a meaningful overall picture of Rural Action's achievements on the ground. The sheer numbers of projects successfully undertaken make this very difficult: close to 4,000 projects since Rural Action began. To supplement the NDT analysis of the types of projects funded by Rural Action, a manual analysis of projects has been undertaken for this study from printed details of all projects supplied by the NDT.

This analysis has been done using similar categories to those used by the NDT, but expanding them. Projects were only counted once. Further, the analysis does not cover all projects (only 3306), partly because data was not available on all projects, and partly because some projects were impossible to classify from the information provided. However, Figure 3 below does provide a relatively balanced picture of Rural Action projects; a conclusion confirmed by the NDT themselves.

The short descriptions used in Figure 3 need further explanation as to the range of projects within these categories:

- Wildlife or nature conservation projects include nature reserves, projects on specific wildlife (birds, toads, bats, badgers), wildlife surveys, bird hides and bird boxes
- Environmental improvement projects include regeneration projects, landscaping, amenity land and improving wasteland
- Tree planting and woodland management include coppicing and orchards
- Village greens include projects on pocket parks
- Interpretation projects include information boards, newsletters, trails and trail booklets, village signs, videos and village booklets
- Local history projects (other than maps or appraisals) include oral history projects, restoration of features (such as the White Horse) and booklets
- Art projects include sculpture, drama, embroidery, mosaics, murals, village plays, quilts
- General survey projects include Planning for Real, visioning, information collection for management plans, photographic surveys and archaeological surveys
- Fairs, pageants and other events include open days, exhibitions and action days
- Energy project included village hall energy audits
- Built environment projects include village design, drystone walls, railings, aqueducts, finger posts, village wells and pumps, milestones, village centre improvements and fountains
- Skills development projects include community development, hedgelaying and chipping
- Traffic and transport projects include surveys of traffic, improving bus shelters, traffic calming and road safety
- The Agenda 21 projects only include those specifically named as such.

Fig 3. Types of projects funded by Rural Action since 1992



From this analysis it is worth noting particularly that

- Although **46%** of projects (1,524) are **traditional practical conservation projects** (on wildlife and nature conservation, landscape improvements, woodland, village greens, ponds, footpaths, hedgerows and wildflowers), that still leaves **54% which are not traditional conservation projects**. This suggests a commendably broad definition of environmental action within Rural Action.
- In terms of achieving community development and capacity building, the projects on skills development, art, local history, interpretation, appraisals, parish maps and surveys, fairs and pageants, and play, can all be considered powerful contributions. This gives a total of 1252 projects, or **38% of projects which can be considered to contribute to community development and capacity building**.
- In terms of linking to broader sustainability issues, beyond traditional conservation, the research and survey projects again can be seen as making important contributions (appraisals etc), as well as projects on the built environment, traffic and transport, tourism and economic development projects, recycling, allotments (for local food and other produce), as well as specifically names Local Agenda 21 projects. This gives a total of 656, or **almost 20% of projects which link to broader sustainability issues**.

These figures only provide an indication of the balance between different types of projects supported by Rural Action since it began. That balance will change year by year as new issues, concerns and opportunities arise. However, it is a method of analysis which could be developed further by Rural Action in future to provide a more meaningful picture of the overall range of projects being supported.

Types of groups receiving support from Rural Action

The existing Rural Action database classifies groups undertaking projects, according to the group's own description of themselves on the application forms. These categories are very broad. Table 1 outlines these categories, together with an analysis from the NDT on the numbers and proportions of different groups receiving support from Rural Action.

Table 1. Types of groups involved in Rural Action (by self-classification)

Type of group	Number	Percentage (%)
Amenity	205	5%
Church	163	4%
Club/society	239	6%
Conservation	790	20%
Elderly	7	0.2%
Parish/Town council	1073	28%
Residents/community association	952	25%
Village Hall Committee	73	2%
Women's Institute	30	0.8%
Youth	92	2.5%
Unclassified	250	6.5%
TOTAL project groups	3876	100%

However, these figures cannot be used as evidence for the numbers of different types of groups involved in Rural Action projects, since they do not show whether the same groups is appearing more than once. Moreover, according to this analysis, the total number of groups is the same as the total number of projects whereas in practice the same group may do several projects.

New analysis for this study

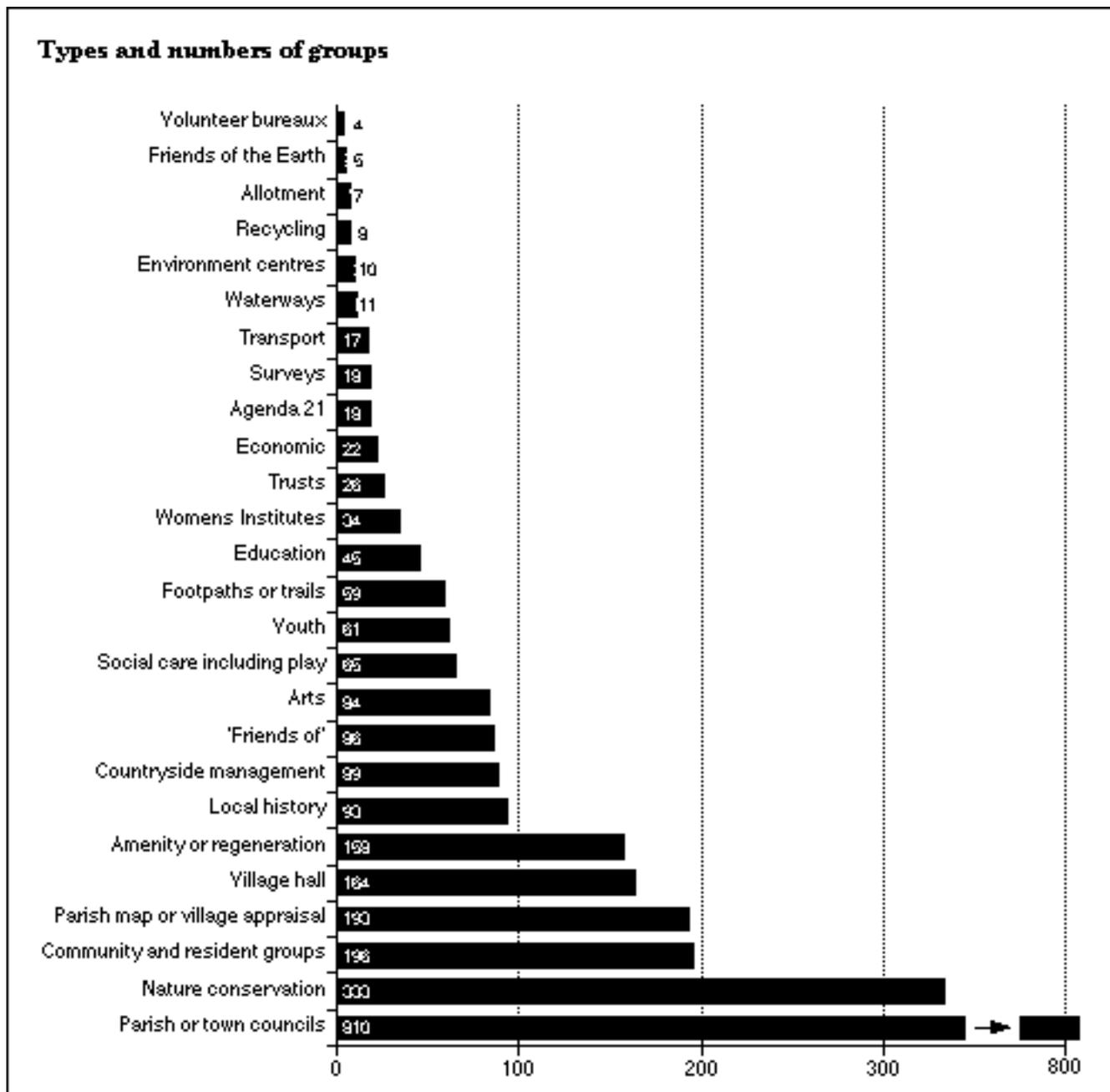
For the purposes of this study, new and more detailed categories were developed to analyse the types of groups which have undertaken projects with Rural Action funding. Using these new categories of groups, and counting each group only once, a manual analysis of groups receiving funds from Rural Action was undertaken.

Based on this analysis, a total of 2,857 groups were identified (see Figure 4; and Annex 3 for details). This is not a complete list of groups doing projects: it was not possible to classify all groups from the information available, and those not classified have not been included. However, this analysis does give a more accurate idea of the range of types of groups which have undertaken Rural Action-funded projects.

The short descriptions used in Figure 4 need further explanation as to the range of group interests within these categories:

- Nature conservation groups include wildlife trusts and conservation volunteers
- Amenity or regeneration groups include civic and environmental improvement groups
- Local history includes heritage groups
- Social care groups include groups for elderly or disabled people, hospitals, Rotary, playschemes, special needs
- Education groups include schools, PTA or colleges
- Trusts include environment trusts, including Groundwork trusts
- Economic groups include tourism, shops, Chambers of Commerce, telecottages.

Fig 4. Types of project groups supported by Rural Action since 1992



Reaching new audiences

A key question for this evaluation was the extent to which Rural Action reaches and influences a broader range of communities and individuals than those who traditionally participate in environmental activity. Figure 4 shows that:

- If those who traditionally participate in 'environmental activity' are defined as nature conservation groups and countryside management groups (total 422), the results would be that 15% of the groups are the traditional conservation activists, and therefore **85% of Rural Action projects are undertaken by groups who do not traditionally undertake these types of environmental activities.**

- The category of those who traditionally participate could be extended to include 'Friends of groups, footpath and other access groups, canal or river groups and FWAGs. Using this definition would give a total of 580 groups, or 20% of the total, are traditional conservation groups. This would still mean that **80% of the groups being funded by Rural Action to undertake environmental projects do not traditionally participate in environmental conservation activity.**
- To extend the analysis still further, it is possible to exclude all groups with environmental interests as main priorities and leave only non-environmental groups. This would leave the following categories:
 - parish or town councils
 - community and resident groups
 - parish map or village appraisal groups
 - church groups
 - village hall groups
 - civic, amenity, environmental improvement or regeneration groups
 - local heritage or history groups
 - arts groups
 - social care groups, including groups for elderly or disabled people, hospitals, Rotary, playschemes, special needs
 - youth groups
 - play, recreation or sport groups
 - school, PTA or colleges
 - Women's Institutes
 - economic or tourism projects, including shops, Chambers of Commerce, telecottage
 - Survey groups
 - transport groups
 - allotment groups
 - volunteer bureaux
 - LETS groups.

Civic, amenity, environmental improvement or regeneration groups have been left in because they are primarily concerned with rural regeneration rather than environmental issues as such; similarly, transport groups have been left in because, in these projects, they have been more concerned with transport as a public service than the environmental implications of transport. Allotment groups, also, have been retained because they tend to be primarily concerned with produce rather than environmental issues.

Using this definition, the total of non-environmental groups undertaking projects funded by Rural Action is 2205 groups, or 77%. If even the three categories listed in the previous paragraph are removed, that still leaves 2023 groups, or 71%.

- In summary, even on the most conservative estimate, **over 70% of the groups funded by Rural Action can be described as non-environmental** - and therefore represent a wider range of groups than traditional participate in environmental activity.

These figures provide an analysis of the types of groups, but not the types of individuals, who are undertaking Rural Action projects. There is no way of evaluating, using current data, whether, for example, council tenants, disabled people, people from ethnic minority communities or other specific sectors of society are participating. This is an area in which it would be useful to undertake further research, to ensure that these sectors are not being excluded. More could certainly be done, within Rural Action, to reach out to new groups, possibly with some specific guidance from the NDT about potentially interested organisations and priority sectors of the community.

Capacity building and community development

The extent to which Rural Action has helped build the capacity of the groups and individuals who undertake projects, and those at all levels of Rural Action who support that community-led action, is more difficult to show. However, five approaches can be used to assess Rural Action's achievements in capacity building:

- the amount of training and advice provided, and learning achieved
- the extent to which groups have developed from their initial projects
- the number of new groups supported by Rural Action
- the extent of participation amongst community groups supported
- personal testimony from those involved.

These approaches are covered in turn in the analysis below.

Training and advice

Training in Rural Action takes a number of forms:

- Training for network members and project grant administrators in running the Rural Action system efficiently and effectively. Respondents to this study valued this training, and there was a demand for more training in networking specifically, and for more opportunities to learn about the experiences of other counties in promoting ideas for projects and providing support to groups.
- Training courses run by networks for their own members and other 'professionals' in the county.
- Training courses run by networks for people who may want to do projects (community groups, parish councils etc) to give them inspiration and ideas and specific skills.
- Training as part of projects, provided by advisers directly to the groups doing the project.

Training courses and advice provision directly to groups are described in more detail below. The effectiveness of all this training and advice provision can be evaluated to some extent by the comments from local groups and others about their experiences of these activities. Comments collected during the course of this study included:

- "A good starting point and guidance for projects who need advice"
- "We had enthusiasm but no knowledge - Rural Action gets people the skills"
- "Rural Action has been an enormous benefit ... giving people the opportunity to learn new skills, become empowered and use these skills for the benefits of their local environment and community"
- Research by the North Yorkshire Rural Action network in 1997 on the operation of the scheme in their area concluded:
"Groups across North Yorkshire have said that the scheme has helped create a new sense of 'community' and local pride and has been instrumental in raising local awareness of environmental issues. Furthermore, the majority of groups who have successfully completed a Rural Action project have indicated that they are planning to embark on future projects. Therefore a substantial level of 'capacity building' has been attained."

Advice provision

The advice work with groups on specific projects is the main location of training and capacity building in Rural Action.

Since Rural Action began, about half the project groups have received advice:

- On average, about 45% of projects have received advice since Rural Action began
- Over 50% of projects have received advice every year since 1994
- Over £840,000 has been invested directly in on-project training, representing 23% of the overall grants payments.

Tables 2 and 3 give more details of the figures, based on data supplied by the NDT from an analysis of project grant applications.

Table 2. Proportion of projects receiving advice and training

Year	Total projects	Projects given advice	% projects given advice
1992	10	2	20%
1993	282	114	40.42%
1994	750	326	43.37%
1995	895	529	59.11%
1996	838	449	53.58%
1997	992	524	52.82%
TOTAL	3,767	1,944	44.88%

Table 3. Proportion of project grants given for advice and training

Year	Total grants	Total advice fees	% of grants given in fees
1992	£ 11,020	£ 1,440	13%
1993	£ 264,713	£ 61,410	23%
1994	£ 671,452	£ 143,996	21%
1995	£ 738,552	£ 213,167	29%
1996	£ 666,383	£ 175,005	26%
1997	£ 887,929	£ 245,863	28%
TOTAL	£3,240,049	£ 840,881	23%

Unfortunately there is no data available on which organisations are providing advice to local groups, so it is currently impossible to assess the breadth of advice given. Some indications can be gained from the lists of advisers held by networks (see below and Annex 4), but this is only advice available, not an analysis of what is actually provided.

The only other source of data on what advice is given is examples drawn from grant applications, provided by the NDT, which suggests that advice has been given on a wide range of topics including on pond restoration, devising a management plan for woodland, designing a permaculture site, supervision in producing a parish map, running a Planning for Real exercise, training in setting up a credit union, designing an exhibition or leaflet, coppicing or landscape design.

The findings from interviews for this study suggest that providing advice directly to groups doing projects has a number of benefits which are valued highly by the groups themselves, including:

- It contributes to improving the quality of the projects by ensuring that they are designed with the benefit of expert advice.
- It contributes to capacity building by developing skills and building confidence.

- It helps to ensure that the group retains ownership of the project by enabling them to control the process by which they take advice. A sense of ownership is crucial if long term commitment and responsibility are to develop.
- It provides training for the groups in working with experts, so they are more inclined to see advice and can work more easily with experts in future.
- Advice on individual projects builds relationships between experts and lay people, allowing for mutual learning and opening up the potential for future joint work.

Choice of advisers

The choice of appropriate advisers for project groups follows a variety of routes.

Most groups make contact with Rural Action after an initial contact through a network member rather than through publicity materials. However, whichever route has led the group to the network, there is no guarantee that their initial contact will be the most appropriate source of advice for their project. Once the initial contact has been made, the group can be referred to a more appropriate adviser in the network (or outside it), if necessary.

Networks often offer a wide range of specialists in different fields. However, the range of project advisers available to projects does vary from county to county. Some networks have directories of advisers (network members and others); others use only network members to provide advice, although even here there may be a wide range of network members. See below and Annex 4 for details of network members and topics on which advice is available. In some cases, the group already knows who they want to give them advice and, subject to the agreement of the grant assessor, this is usually approved.

In most cases, the groups interviewed for this study had received advice from more than one source, and had found the advice had helped improve the quality of their projects. The responses from community groups interviewed for this study on the quality and effectiveness of the advisers, and the advice given, were very positive.

Training courses

Networks run a wide range, and substantial number, of training events and activities for potential and existing advisers, people in other organisations and some community groups. Full details of these activities are given in Annex 4, but they include training on:

- Community action and community development techniques
- Specific techniques and approaches, such as Planning for Real, appraisals, parish maps, community needs research, wildlife surveys
- Specific other complementary initiatives including Millennium Greens, community action plans, Local Agenda 21, village design statements
- Seminars and other events providing ideas for projects including on parish maps, village design statements, village action plans, local distinctiveness or 'greening your village' events where ideas of projects already carried out in the area can be publicised and passed on, and courses on energy conservation, community businesses from waste, composting, recycling
- Management issues, such as management plans, project leadership and health and safety
- Celebrations of Rural Action projects to inspire other groups and raise awareness of potential activity
- Skills development training such as hedgelaying, drystone walling and coppice crafts.

Two specific examples of the scale and content of network training events are given below:

- Sussex network Village Action Plan seminars: two were held and attracted more than 30 people each time (the maximum); these were mainly parish councils who wanted to do their own action plans. Sussex network has also held a seminar on Local Agenda 21 (see below).
- Isle of Wight network seminars on green building and design, village design statements and village appraisals attracted over 70 people to each; one on local distinctiveness attracted over 100 people.

At present, the National Development Team discourages networks from running training courses on specific skills such as hedgelaying or coppicing: the preference is for these types of skills to be developed as part of the community projects and paid for out of project grants.

This is not always a popular approach with the network members who often prefer to run courses so that skills can be passed on to several groups at one event, with the expectation that these skills can then be passed on to other members of the group at a later stage.

It may be that a more flexible approach to training methods at county level can be taken by the NDT in future. The NDT concerns could be addressed by ensuring that, where skills courses are run, they are required to include an element of 'training for trainers' so that individual group members can be helped to develop the skills necessary to pass the techniques on to others.

The training-course approach to training could then be seen as fully contributing to capacity building because although the techniques (eg hedgelaying) would be specific, the training skills would be transferable. Capacity building includes developing the confidence that results from learning a skill and making use of it on projects.

Training courses should not replace the on-the-project advice and training, but could be a useful complement. Courses could also allow opportunities for cross-county initiatives: several counties expressed interest in joint initiatives with neighbouring counties on training and awareness raising.

Other learning experiences

In addition to these direct forms of training and advice provision, Rural Action has enabled a wide range of learning experiences to be developed at all levels including the following:

- Individuals have learned from the exposure to new ideas related to community-led action.

Respondents at all levels, including National Steering Group members, project grant administrators, network secretariats and local group members, stated in interviews that they had learned about concepts such as capacity building and community development from being part of Rural Action forums where these things were discussed.

There remained those who were sceptical about the approach, but many of those interviewed stressed that, to some extent, this process was really only just beginning to take off: those who had been reluctant or suspicious were learning from experience that this approach 'worked' in terms of quality of projects and longer term local commitment, and those who were inclined to support the ideas in principle had found their inclinations and activities supported by Rural Action experience.

- For many participants in Rural Action networks, networking itself has been a learning experience. Indeed, some respondents requested more direct training in networking. Overall, the benefits of networks as a mechanism for learning about each others' work, about the community approach and about other new initiatives and ideas, are now widely accepted.

Extent of group development from initial projects

The extent to which groups develop from an initial project on to more complex and ambitious projects can be used as an indicator of capacity building.

Capacity building is not a finite process, and cannot be easily measured quantitatively. Although feedback forms are returned on 100% of projects (eventually), this information is designed for purposes of financial accountability and not for identifying and evaluating achievements and learning: information which in any case takes much more time to elicit and articulate. Further follow up by the NDT has not been possible because of time constraints: indeed, it has not been possible for the NDT even to follow up the 10% of projects originally identified as a target audit figure.

However, from research done for this study:

- 66% of the projects interviewed (23 out of 35) had gone on to do other projects after their initial Rural Action grant.

Although these groups may have made these advances without Rural Action, it is likely that Rural Action was, at the very least, a contributing factor.

- The proportion of follow-on work is much larger than had been expected from interviews with network secretaries, project grant administrators and National Development Team members. It would be unrealistic to extrapolate the rate of 66% of groups going on to bigger and better projects after a Rural Action grant to *all* Rural Action groups (although the Aston Business School evaluation proposed a figure of 60%), especially as some of the groups interviewed (although well under half) were recommended by project grant administrators who might be expected to recommend the most impressive examples. However, the rest of the groups interviewed were chosen specifically to reflect a range of grant sizes from small to medium.

Research done by Rural Action in North Yorkshire in 1997 found a much lower rate of groups going on to other projects: 23 out of 80 groups in their survey (29%) said they had already started another project or planned to do so. While recognising that planning to do a project is not the same as successfully completing it, even on this more conservative estimate, it could be argued that almost 30% of Rural Action groups could be expected to go on to do further projects, representing a sizeable contribution to environmental action.

Enabling even 30% of groups to have the confidence to go on to larger and more complex - or just more - projects is a major achievement in capacity building. Any other form of community education or capacity building initiative would count 30% of groups continuing to develop as a major success.

- From the projects interviewed for this study, a wide range of examples were identified to illustrate the ways in which Rural Action groups have gone on to develop new projects. These follow-on projects are outlined below and can be seen as evidence in themselves of capacity building as many of the examples increase very clearly in scale and complexity.
 - One group started with a little project, then did a Planning for Real exercise, then created a development plan for the whole village
 - Another first did a pond, then a parish map, then a village appraisal
 - Another first did a pond wildlife survey, then a project to plant new trees
 - A village apple day led to studying maps which led to creating an embroidered wall-hanging showing varieties of local apples
 - A pond project led to a bridge project
 - Work in a coppice wood led, after taking advice, to holding open days for local people
 - The restoration of a swamp was followed by a full village appraisal

- Work on several projects to conserve a woodland wildlife habitat (clearing, hedging and historical research) led on to speaking at a conference about the group's achievements
- Establishing a pocket park led on to creating a nature trail and then to a management study of the whole area
- A village hall feasibility study in which Rural Action paid for architects' fees led on to a successful bid for £330,000 lottery funding
- A parish map was followed by establishing a nature reserve on waste ground
- A small research project led on to the creation of a sculpture project and sensory garden, which was used in turn to create a slide show and tour
- A village appraisal led on to the production of a directory of 'what's on' in the village
- A project to deal with waterlogged allotments led on to the creation of a landscaped pond and bee keeping
- An action day on common land led to restoring the land for wildlife and amenity which contributed to community development to the extent that a presentation was put to Going for Green which has adopted the scheme as one of their projects
- A Women's Institute did a tapestry parish map, which was followed by building a community hall
- A village play area scheme was followed by planting, and then developing plans for improving nearby allotments
- A farm tours project was followed by creating a gate and stile for the footpath and a leaflet for a nature trail
- A tree dressing event was followed by footpath work through the Parish Paths Partnership, tree planting, orchards and landmark trees identified from an aerial survey, followed by the production of information boards and then plans to conserve the biodiversity of the whole parish
- A village appraisal and map were followed by creating a business plan and project development for wider community development, leading to the completion by January 1998 of £30,000 of projects now including the TEC and LEADER funding
- A village appraisal led to a series of art projects.

New groups supported by Rural Action

Recent work on community development (eg Smith and Batson 1997) has suggested that the formation of new groups is a good indicator of successful community development.

Unfortunately, there is currently no national data available from Rural Action on whether the groups coming to Rural Action are new groups. However, a calculation can be done on the basis of formulae specifically developed for Rural Action. The evaluation study by Aston Business School suggested that two-thirds of groups had not done projects before, based on their sample. Research done more recently (in 1997) by Rural Action in North Yorkshire found that 78% of groups already existed when they made contact with the scheme, and 22% of groups were formed specially for Rural Action projects.

Assuming there has been a minimum of 2857 groups doing projects funded by Rural Action (see page 24), if the North Yorkshire formula of 22% being new groups were repeated across the country, this would mean that **Rural Action had stimulated at least 628 new groups since it started**. If Aston's figure of 60% was used, this would make a total of 1714 groups.

Moreover, if even 30% of the 628 new groups go on to do more than one project (the very least that may be expected), there will be thousands of successful projects over the coming years which would not have happened without Rural Action. The groups themselves will also continue to build achievements and confidence as well as environmental and social gains. These are significant achievements for individuals and groups in rural communities with substantial benefits for the rural environment.

Extent of participation

The extent of participation amongst community groups supported by Rural Action can be evaluated in five ways:

- Number of groups involved in Rural Action (already covered)
- Types of groups involved in Rural Action (already covered)
- Voluntary action person days (counted as matching funding, already covered)
- Numbers of people involved in those groups
- Extent and quality of that participation for those involved

Numbers of individuals in Rural Action groups

It is not possible to give accurate details of the numbers of individuals involved in groups supported by Rural Action as the data is not currently available. The Aston Business School evaluation proposed that each project had about 25 people involved, based on their sample. If this proposition were applied to all Rural Action *projects* to date, it would suggest that a total of about 100,000 people have been involved to date (about 4,000 projects x 25 people = 100,000 people). However, this is not an accurate assessment as the formula should not be applied to projects but to groups. Applying Aston's formula to the figures on *groups* collected for this study, would give a total of **71,500 individuals involved** (2857 groups x 25 people = 71,425 people).

These figures can only be offered as a very rough estimate of the number of people involved in projects: the actual total could be less or could be double that number. This, again, is an area where more accurate figures would be useful, and groups or grant assessors could be asked to provide or collect this information at two levels: core group members (ie regularly involved) and those who might turn out for special events. All community projects will always involve different people in different ways and with different levels of commitment.

The extent and quality of participation

The extent and quality of participation for those involved could be assessed by the amount of follow on work (see pages 31-33) as people will only stay involved, and groups will only survive, if the individuals involved are gaining from the experience directly or indirectly. However, even this will only give a rough indication as community groups come and go for a whole variety of reasons. Essentially the extent and quality of participation for those involved can only be assessed by personal testimony (see below).

Personal testimony

The interviews with members of the National Steering Group and all other levels of Rural Action identified a wide range of Rural Action achievements in terms of capacity building and community. The main areas are outlined below (actual quotes are marked).

- Rural Action builds confidence among groups and individuals in a number of ways:
 - People can achieve something practical to improve the environment, which enables them to build confidence as an individual and as groups
 - Confidence comes from knowing that there is an expert available to help as well as from personal achievement
 - Providing advisers to work with groups allows the groups to be more creative about *why* they want to fund raise, and opens their eyes to potential
 - Training support gives courage
 - "In the best cases, Rural Action lets groups do things they could not do before"
 - Some groups have been asked to talk about their projects at network outreach events: feedback from these people was that they found being asked, and doing these talks, gave them both considerable pride in their achievements and greater personal confidence
 - "Achievement is inspiring", and leads on to other things
 - Rural Action enables groups to customise training for their own needs
 - There is "nothing like being involved but also cared for and watched over"
 - *Tangible* recognition of volunteer expertise and time (to match grant aid) has conferred value on this contribution and given people confidence in their own abilities
 - Rural Action gives volunteers ownership of their own efforts and achievements
 - "People have been surprised at what they can do".
- Rural Action enables existing groups to do new types of projects which bring in new people.
- Groups which are already competent may see Rural Action as providing just grants and access to skills; however, the emphasis on capacity building is stressed to all groups and widely recognised and understood.
- Rural Action has contributed to community development in a number of ways and at various levels:
 - It "brings local communities together"; "bringing communities together to do things"
 - "Encourages communities not to be complacent"
 - "Rural Action is a catalyst for grassroots action"
 - It "links community development and meeting community needs ... pulled groups together"
 - "The centre is very supportive but also stretching potential always"
 - It supports "local cohesiveness".
- Rural Action provides a structure which is permanent enough to provide capacity building support in the long term, but also flexible enough to adapt and change as circumstances and opportunities develop:
 - Groups know they can keep coming back to Rural Action as they develop new ideas; it has become established as part of the local infrastructure
 - It allows groups to move on to other things because they are free to develop in their own direction and at their own pace
 - "Snowball effect"
 - As Rural Action provides funding for training, it allows groups and organisations to look for new opportunities.
- Rural Action has expanded people's view of environmental action
 - Rural Action makes environmental issues accessible because it helps people see how broad environmental issues can be and relates them to local concerns
 - Rural Action raises horizons for groups and helps them think about the future.

- Rural Action has reached new audiences for environmental action (in addition to different types of groups as already described):
 - Rural Action has "enabled very small groups to do things"
 - It "gives people not involved in big organisations a chance"
 - New groups are formed and then go on to other things.
- Rural Action encourages people to look after projects in the long term because it builds ownership by enabling people to manage their own projects and get the advice and support they decide they need when they need it.

Improving support for community-led action

Rural Action has two objectives: the first is to 'encourage and enable local communities' to conserve and enhance their local environment; the second is to 'encourage and enable statutory and voluntary agencies to actively support local communities in their efforts to care for the local environment'.

These aspects have been covered in this report in various ways, but the achievements of the support structure needs further elaboration. This section concentrates on the achievements of the Rural Action networks, and the section after this covers the effectiveness and efficiency of the delivery mechanisms.

Networks

There are now 40 Rural Action networks established and operating fully: one in every English county. This in itself is an achievement as networking is not an easy concept to understand, implement or manage.

Rural Action networks are not separate organisations but act as a mechanism to co-ordinate existing activity, identify gaps in the provision of support for community-led environmental action, development initiatives to provide support where gaps are identified, improve information exchange and communication between network members, and provide a focus for working on approaches which cross traditional organisational and disciplinary boundaries: such as supporting community-led action and networking itself.

The achievements of Rural Action networks can be evaluated in terms of:

- the range and numbers of organisations which are members of networks
- the range and numbers of network activities
- whether Rural Action networks are appropriate and effective mechanisms for providing support for community-led environmental action.

Network members

The people who make up the networks come from a wide range of organisations; some individuals are also members. The membership of networks is relatively fluid, with numerous and frequent changes of personnel and the National Development Team do not keep this information.

For the purposes of this study, however, it was felt to be essential to obtain a picture of which organisations were involved in Rural Action networks, in order to be able to assess the extent of potential cross-fertilisation of ideas and information-sharing. In addition, the network members are usually those who give advice to local projects, and it is important to have an idea of the spread of expertise available. All these aspects are covered in more detail below.

Every network was asked for this information (see Annex 1), and full details were received from 21 out of 40 of the networks. The classification and analysis was done manually, according to the information received, which varied in the detail provided. The data provided is given in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Network membership

	County council	District council	RCC	BTCV	Wildlife trusts	Others	TOTAL
Avon		18	1	3	1	15	37
Beds	23	37	4	3	2	39	108
Berks	2	4	1	2	2	7	18
Cheshire	3	14	2	2	1	17	39
Cornwall	6	7	1	1	1	35	51*
Cumbria	9	10	1	5	2	28	55
Derbys	3	11	2	1	1	16	34
Devon	4	6	1	2	1	24	38*
Durham	5	17	1	3	1	39	66*
Glos	2	2	1	1	1	18	25*
Humbs		6	1	2	2	26	37
I of W	3		1		1	11	16
Leics	3	8	1	1	1	20	34
Lincs	1	7	1	2	1	10	22
Northant	19	33	2	1	5	21	81
Northum	2	7	1	1	1	34	46
Notts	13	7	1	1	1	8	31
Shrops	5	7	1	2	1	16	32
Staffs	6	11	2	3	2	8	32
Suffolk	6	7	2	1	1	20	37
Sussex	8	8	2	3	1	5	27*
TOTAL	123	227	30	40	30	417	867

Notes to Table 4:

- These figures are based on material sent in by 21 networks out of the total of 40.
- Those marked * also have a series of advisers, some of whom are the same people as the network members. These figures are:
 - Cornwall has 62 advisers
 - Devon has 52 advisers
 - Durham has 136 advisers
 - Glos has 46 advisers
 - Sussex has 30 advisers.

Overall, these figures show that, from the data supplied:

- The 21 networks responding had 867 members.
- If these figures extrapolated to all 40 networks (ie an average of 41 members), the result would be that a total of 1,640 people could be members of Rural Action networks, mostly representing organisations.
- Five of the networks which provided figures had additional lists of advisers: a total of 326 advisers, although some of these individuals were also network members.
- The largest single category of network members (apart from 'others') was local authority representatives, with 227 district council and 123 county council representatives on the 21 networks: a total of **350 representatives from local authorities**. This included 19 Local Agenda 21 officers, and representatives from about 40 other departments and sections ranging from arboriculture and arts to transport, waste and youth services. If these figures were extrapolated to all 40 networks, it would give a total of 667 local authority representatives.

The numbers and varieties of organisations, disciplines, professions and interests among network members is very diverse and provides a sound basis for advising local groups as well as extensive opportunities for information-sharing among network members.

There is currently a much stronger representation (in terms of overall numbers) from wildlife and countryside conservation bodies than, for example, community or social development, or rural deprivation, bodies, and very few concerned with economic development. The numbers of bodies concerned with broader environmental issues such as traffic and transport, waste, agriculture and energy, are also limited, although these are to some extent hidden in local authority representation which may include waste and recycling, and RCCs may deal with various transport issues. Nevertheless, these are potential growth areas, and it is one of the main strengths of the network model that there is always the potential to expand the network and/or work with other advisers.

Network secretariats interviewed stressed that recruiting new members is not just a matter of targeting useful agencies: new members then need induction into the Rural Action philosophy and process, all of which takes time from other network activities. However, it was recognised that this expansion of the expertise in the network is a crucial element of network maintenance and development, and required some time to be set aside to achieve it.

The members of networks tend to be activists rather than top level people in voluntary organisations or local authorities. Some respondents felt that it would be easier and more effective in promoting community-based principles if senior people attended as well, but others felt this would distract networks from their primary aim of co-ordinating support for local action. This is a familiar dilemma in participatory support schemes, but it may be that the issue could be addressed by the networks holding special briefings for senior officials on a county basis to disseminate material on the achievements of the networks and local groups: several networks already organise such briefings on specific subject areas.

Overall, the analysis of membership of networks, and responses in interviews, showed that:

- The wide range of individuals involved in networks has provided an opportunity for all network members to share information and learn about other approaches to supporting community-led environmental action. The extent and range of existing network membership enables this peer-learning to take place in a highly effective way.
- Networks facilitate information exchange among a wide range of members, and may be the only forum for doing so in many areas, improving links and relationships between voluntary organisations and local authorities and developing respect and knowledge through better communications.

Network activities

Rural Action networks operate to an annual work programme, submitted to the NDT and on which the network grant is payable. However, in practice networks develop their activities on a more rolling programme.

Network work programmes are currently structured into three categories which are intended to cover all network internal and external training activities:

- **Network development:** to cover things like newsletters for network members, induction and refresher training for network members, directories of members and/or advisors, evaluation days, extending the network through meetings and presentations with other groups, as well as internal costs such as stationery. These activities are essential for strengthening the core network.
- **Promotion:** for activities such as displays, press releases and developing media contacts, advertisements, Rural Action leaflets, newsletters, photos of projects, talks to community groups, action days, mailshots, slide packs, stands at shows, information sheets. These activities enable the support offered by the network to be publicised to groups, and to interest potential new members in joining the network.
- **Outreach:** for activities with groups beyond the network including training events, leaflets, information packs, and other activities in print or through events. These activities are essential in stimulating action from new groups, or new action from existing groups.

The spending on the network work programmes has been accounted for by the National Development Team under new arrangements since September 1996. The national budget for network grants is £220,000: the network grant available to each of the 40 networks therefore averages £5,500. This includes a fixed fee of £2,100 for each network secretariat (to cover costs and time), which leaves a budget of, on average, £3,400 for network activities. In past years, this budget has been underspent but in the year ending 31 March 1997 the full network grant budget was spent for the first time. This is taken by the NDT to be an indication that networks are now becoming fully operational and using the budgets available more fully.

This structure for budgets is quite cumbersome and, in practice, different networks interpret the categories differently, in spite of detailed guidance from the NDT. This reduces the value of any analysis of the spending under each of these headings (although full details are given in Appendix 4, by county). Moreover, since the budgets have only recently been structured in this way, it is not possible to assess changes in priorities over time. However, from feedback collected for this study, this approach to budgeting has succeeded in encouraging networks to think more proactively about their activities, and to consider more outreach work.

Most networks meet quarterly. Some hold meetings to which all members are invited, some have a core strategy group which meets regularly to plan network activities as well as holding larger events to which a wider group of members is invited.

Network meetings are not popular with all network members, some of whom tend to see them as essential but dull business sessions, to do with devising network work programmes in order to obtain network grants from the National Development Team. Some networks try to overcome this problem by inviting speakers to network meetings as well as dealing with the business.

However, regular network meetings are essential to developing the relationships which form the basis of improved communications and information sharing. Most network secretariats recognise that, while it is hard work to maintain the commitment of network members, it is also essential and worthwhile.

The emerging understanding among network members and secretariats of the importance of information-sharing and dialogue with others to improving the quality of support for local groups, as well as increasing the ability of individual organisations to meet their own objectives, is one of the major achievements of networks.

However, network meetings are only aspect of network activities. Most networks have produced directories of members and locally customised publicity material on Rural Action. Some networks have also developed an extensive range of training and other events (see also under Training above), information materials, newsletters and other activities. Full details of network activities are described in Annex 4, but some examples taken from material supplied for this study include:

- Celebration days for rural community environmental action in Avon, Gloucestershire, Nottinghamshire, Shropshire and Northumberland
- A conference in Dorset on how land and buildings can be owned and managed by the community
- 'Greening your village' ideas sessions in Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, Derbyshire, Hereford and Worcester, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Oxfordshire, Shropshire, South Yorkshire, Staffordshire and Sussex
- Training in Devon on evaluation
- Seminars in Hampshire and Cheshire for parish councils
- A sustainable transport day in Suffolk covering cycling, Local Agenda 21, parks, leisure, planting, health and initiatives such as Greenways and Sustrans
- Events to consider projects for the Millennium in Shropshire and Northamptonshire
- A village halls forum in Gloucestershire
- Arts awareness events in Cambridgeshire and Cumbria

- A local transport survey for young people in Dorset, covering especially access to, use of and attitudes to public transport
- 'Wildlife in your neighbourhood' awareness events in Buckinghamshire and Warwickshire
- A leaflet on environmental awareness for yachters and other visitors to the Isle of Wight
- Ideas on community enterprise in Devon including local produce, day nurseries, composting, cultural events, credit unions and LETs.

Network activities are reaching and involving a wide range of people, some of whom are new to environmental action. For example, the Isle of Wight network newsletter is distributed with the local newspaper to 40,000 people. Although not all networks can claim this level of outreach, some of them are increasingly experimenting with events and activities which reach out to new audiences as well as providing opportunities for environmental organisations to experiment with new approaches.

Networks as effective support mechanisms

The feedback from the great majority of respondents to this study was a strong confirmation that the Rural Action networks were essential in providing support for groups: "the only way to go" and "no other way" were common remarks. Existing organisations are overstretched, and being members of Rural Action networks is another call on their time, but they recognise the benefits of this approach rather than setting up another, potentially competing, organisation to undertake these activities.

The feedback from interviews for this study concluded that, in addition to the specific points already made above:

- Networks provide a wide range of training and advice for community-based environmental action, through members, associated advisers, training courses, open days and other events and other activities which have succeeded in building the capacity of groups and individuals.
- Networks are also already linking and contributing to Local Agenda 21, formally in terms of Local Agenda 21 officers on networks as members and LA21 activities undertaken by networks and informally in terms of widening the debate about environmental action and sustainability through their own members and through outreach events for others.
- Any network is only as good as its members but, nevertheless, the system and structure is good and robust. Networks provide a long term mechanism for responding to and linking to new initiatives: the membership can be expanded and changed as circumstances and opportunities develop, while retaining a core network structure which continues in the long term.
- Networks can respond to community level requests and needs, which can be captured and answered in a number of ways, and provide a package of support not available in any other way, especially support for new groups or groups new to environmental action.

As community groups learn and develop, and move on to other areas of interest, their needs change. Rural Action networks have the flexibility to respond to those changes by referring groups to others in the network, or outside it, for advice. The networks can therefore continue to improve the quality of the local projects and add value by providing support, advice and training specifically targeted to the needs of that project and group.

- Through improved communications, networks have influenced local authorities and others, some of whom have changed programmes of support and their approaches to other forms of environmental action as a result.
- The overall consensus from this study is that the county base remains the most appropriate: any bigger and they would be considered too large and impersonal.

The NDT works with the networks to advise and support them. This support is focused around the network support grants, which are paid by the NDT to the networks in response to networks submitting work programmes and budgets. This support and help from the NDT is highly valued by network secretariats.

Comments and suggestions from interviews for this study about areas where additional support would be welcomed include the following:

- More guidance on 'networking' itself
- Investigation of information technology to share ideas for projects and improve communications between counties
- More promotional material and more examples of successful projects.

It is generally recognised that it takes many years to establish new mechanisms in rural areas. Rural Action networks have now reached a stage of development and maturity at which they have achieved and continue to achieve far more than the objectives set for them, and are beginning to develop some exciting and highly innovative new programmes. The level of achievement is not universal: some networks are still showing potential rather than achievement. However, the level and range of network activities outlined above (and in Annex 4) shows the extent to which Rural Action is far from passively waiting to respond to demands from groups, and is proactively disseminating ideas, enthusiasm and access to support.

Extent of Rural Action influence on others

Responses in interviews with networks show that local project advisers often felt pushed by the NDT to expand initial project ideas from groups to include more reflection, skills development, learning and understanding. Some of the network members interviewed explicitly stated that working on Rural Action projects had expanded their own understanding of the importance of capacity building within practical environmental action. Some network members valued this approach very highly, and had promoted it in their work; others felt it just delayed the practical action.

More importantly, there were clearly some network activists who were initially reluctant (and unconfident about their abilities in this area) who had become convinced, through experience of the Rural Action system and approach, that learning and capacity building were contributing to long term environmental care and concern, as well as to personal development for individuals and group development.

Those interviewed suggested that the principles articulated through Rural Action grants criteria have influenced these changes in attitude to be achieved for a number of reasons:

- Rural Action has very wide ranging criteria which allows groups to define their own objectives. Some groups were confused by the breadth of the criteria at first, expecting narrower guidelines, but the Rural Action approach is soon understood.

Experience has shown that some community groups apply for funds for a very specific project or purpose, but Rural Action advisers work with them to widen their horizons and expectations, often very successfully. This influence enables groups to move from small specific projects to much larger, broader and longer term projects within Rural Action, as outlined elsewhere in this report.

- Rural Action specifically funds advice, which builds relationships between groups and experts on particular activities, and gives the experts the opportunity to learn about the abilities of community groups through direct experience.
- Rural Action funds projects such as interpretative or development work, which encourage learning and capacity building and which are very difficult to fund from other sources. The ability to fund these aspects provides an incentive to experiment with a new approach, and develops experience of its effectiveness, which helps to change attitudes.

- Parish councils are eligible for Rural Action grants, which is unusual for this type of grant scheme but which is clearly appropriate for community-led action in rural areas. Rural Action funding has enabled parish councils to do environmental projects, as well as introducing and supporting concepts of capacity building and community consultation.

Parish councils vary considerably in their approaches: some are like mini-local authorities and see their role as bringing in contractors to undertake the practical work; others are much more willing to involve local people in projects and to widen the ownership of local developments. According to respondents to this study, Rural Action has played a key role in supporting partnerships with local people in these projects.

- Rural Action allows volunteer time to count as matching for grant aid. This has been vital both in releasing more funding and, as importantly to those involved, in valuing (in the non-financial sense as well as the financial one) the contribution that volunteers make. The message about the value of voluntary effort has influenced local authorities and others in the establishment of their own grant schemes, as well as in the way they perceive the contribution of voluntary organisations and community groups more generally.

Rural Action grants criteria, and its system, principles and approach, have been seen by respondents to this study as slowly influencing professional practices by increasing awareness and understanding of capacity building and community development through environmental action.

The extent of Rural Action's influence on the work of others, according to respondents to this study, also includes the following:

- Rural Action is now beginning to influence professional approaches in other organisations, especially environmental organisations including:
 - Wildlife and conservation organisations still talk more about community-based action than actually do it, but they are becoming more familiar and comfortable with the community approach and are increasingly integrating it into their traditional activities such as management plans and habitat surveys
 - "Quite recent shift from environmental to more community development in some cases"
 - "It has taken time for some groups to see the relevance of the community approach, but it is now getting through"
 - "Has improved BTCV".
- Rural Action has influenced local authority approaches and practice including:
 - Local authorities have become increasingly involved in Rural Action, initially because of the potential funding available for local action, but the contact with Rural Action has influenced their ways of doing things and they have become increasingly committed to the principles
 - Local authorities are increasingly accepting the message of supporting community-based action, and have developed new ways of consulting and working with communities, partly as a result of their links to Rural Action
 - "Some councillors are beginning to appreciate the value of community consultation and that parish members are usually willing to participate in the activities"
 - "Local authorities have recognised that it is not about doing things *for* people but helping them do things for themselves"
 - There is a growing awareness of the value of community effort, and of community participation, and what people can achieve: where programmes were previously top-down, local authorities now have more confidence in community groups and voluntary organisations
 - There is a growing awareness among local authorities of the value of volunteers and voluntary activity
 - A number of new local authority grants schemes have been established based on the principles of Rural Action, including valuing volunteer time as matching public funding
 - There is more respect between local authorities and voluntary organisations because improved links have led to better communication and growing knowledge of each other.

- Rural Action has helped promote the benefits of the community approach, including:
 - It has raised awareness of the benefits of community participation
 - It "had a significant impact on community development approaches ... trend towards this would not have happened otherwise"
 - "Helps create building blocks ... not just product but process"
 - Rural Action has "achieved recognition of the contribution of ordinary people"
 - Rural Action "gets over the 'nannying' of community groups ... they can do it".
- Rural Action's own participants have been influenced personally, at different levels:
 - The National Steering Group and the county networks provide forums for discussion on improving support for community-based environmental action. This has helped to continually raise awareness and increase understanding of community action, capacity building, community development and participation among the partners in the National Steering Group, and kept the issues in people's minds.
 - The improved communications and opportunities for collaboration provided by Rural Action gives support for those individuals who work on community-based action within organisations which have other priorities, and who may otherwise be quite isolated.
- To promote partnership approaches:
 - Rural Action has made people more aware of the benefits of partnership, and how it can work well at local level
 - "Other agencies want to be partners in capacity building".

This personal testimony from those interviewed for this study is sufficient evidence of influence, according to the evaluation criteria established earlier. However, it is not possible from these interviews to assess the proportion of organisations or individuals which have been influenced. There is also no evidence from this study of institutions changing their overall operations towards a more community-based, process-focused approach as a result of Rural Action, even within the national partner organisations.

However, there is evidence (from interviewees) that there have been changes in the thinking of individuals. These people feel they have learned about the principles and achievements of the community-led approach. Only monitoring of the future programmes of the agencies will show the extent to which these individuals influence overall policy priorities. It would therefore be useful for future research to investigate these changes of attitude by following up with interviews within the local authorities and other organisations, and analysis of actual operations in those bodies.

Rural Action, Local Agenda 21 and sustainability

The third key element of the evaluation study was to examine the degree to which Rural Action links to Local Agenda 21 and sustainability. All local authorities in the UK are to adopt Local Agenda 21 strategies by the year 2000 (speech by Tony Blair to the UN General Assembly in June 1997).

Recent Government policy guidance on effective Local Agenda 21 strategies, *Sustainable local communities for the 21st century* was published by DETR, LGA and LGMB in January 1998. Rural Action projects are already working towards creating many of the characteristics of a sustainable society outlined in this policy guidance.

The policy guidance was launched with a message from the Prime Minister which concluded:

"The message of Local Agenda 21 is that local action by individuals - stimulated and harnessed by their local authority - can make a significant contribution to ensuring that progress today does not mean a degraded environment tomorrow" (Tony Blair, January 1998).

The checklist of characteristics of a sustainable society given in this document are outlined below.

"A sustainable society seeks to:
(*protect and enhance the environment*)

- use energy, water and other natural resources efficiently and with care*
- minimise waste, then re-use or recover it through recycling, composting or energy recovery, and finally sustainably dispose of what is left*
- limit pollution to levels which do not damage natural systems*
- value and protect the diversity of nature*

(*meet social needs*)

- create or enhance places, spaces and buildings that work well, wear well and look well*
- make settlements 'human' in scale and form
- value and protect diversity and local distinctiveness and strengthen local community and cultural identity*
- protect human health and amenity through safe, clean, pleasant environments*
- emphasise health service prevention action as well as care
- ensure access to good food, water, housing and fuel at reasonable cost
- meet local needs locally wherever possible
- maximise everyone's access to the skills and knowledge needed to play a full part in society*
- empower all sections of the community to participate in decision-making and consider the social and community impacts of decisions*

(*promote economic success*)

- create a vibrant local economy that gives access to satisfying and rewarding work without damaging the local, national or global environment
- value unpaid work*
- encourage necessary access to facilities, services, goods and other people in ways which make less use of the car and minimise impacts on the environment*
- make opportunities for culture, leisure and recreation readily available to all.*

At the simplest level, Rural Action projects are already working on all those elements marked *, as can be seen in the earlier analysis of the types of projects funded. More generally, Rural Action meets the policy priorities of sustainability and could be seen as an example of good practice, not just in practical application of Local Agenda 21 principles, but in the processes necessary to achieve sustainable development in the long term by increasing community participation and involving voluntary organisations alongside local authorities.

More specifically, Rural Action is involved in Local Agenda 21 in six main ways:

- Through Rural Action principles and process, which focus on community-based action, participation, collective action, partnership (in networks and the National Steering Group), capacity building and empowering individuals at all levels in relation to activities to benefit the environment.
- Through work at national level by the National Development Team:
 - Production of a booklet giving *An update for Environment Co-ordinators and other local authority staff in Local Agenda 21*, covering relevant Rural Action projects. These include visioning and planning for real projects, local indicators projects, recycling and energy action projects.
 - The NDT is becoming increasingly involved in national policy discussions on sustainable development including attending national conferences to make presentations and run workshops on community participation in sustainable development, based on Rural Action experience. The NDT is also a key member of the national Sustainable Communities Action Network (SCAN) which holds regular meetings and policy debates.

- Formally, through representation on networks and other organisational links (19 LA21 officers are members of the 21 networks which responded to this study alone). Other network activities on LA21 include the following:
 - Sussex network did a Local Agenda 21 leaflet to offer a one-stop shop in the county for LA21 activities. This was followed by a seminar in January 1997 which was heavily over-subscribed: 30 were expected; 50 arrived from a wide range of local authorities and other organisations including the police (community crime prevention), youth clubs, Age Concern, race equality council, citizens advice bureaux and others.

The seminar led to new priorities for the network, including inviting SALC into network membership to support work on socio-economic issue and projects, and making links with (but not expanding into) urban areas on issues of common interest.
 - Gloucestershire network is closely linked with Vision 21; a county-wide initiative on Agenda 21 and a wide range of sustainability issues. For example, a biodiversity forum has recently been established with plans to ensure that Biodiversity Action Plans in the county will have a strong emphasis on community participation.
 - Feasibility study in Longmore about awareness of LA21 to assess community interest in a pilot project for local action
 - Suffolk network did a roadshow on LA21
 - Dorset network did an exhibition on LA21, and grants have been given to a local group to design an LA21 action plan
 - Hampshire network, with Hampshire Federation of Women's Institutes, had a conference on LA21 attended by 983 delegates.
- Through local groups working on projects, which are working towards establishing the characteristics of the sustainable society.

These are the most obvious links between LA21 and Rural Action, although many other Rural Action projects would meet most criteria of sustainable development.

Rural Action has already established the conceptual links between people, participation and environmental quality, which provides a basis for broadening activities into improving quality of life. It has also begun to broaden the definition of *environment* for many environmental organisations, as well as introducing environmental action to many non-environmental groups. These are important contributions to sustainable development.

The coverage of LA21 issues within Rural Action is patchy: some counties have grasped LA21 as a central theme to the work of the county network and project support; others have seen it as a lower priority. In some places, LA21 activity and the Rural Action network has been running in parallel, and more links need to be made.

However, the NDT see LA21 as a priority for future work, as do several county networks and individuals in some parish councils and community groups. The NDT can continue to provide guidance on the practice and principles of Local Agenda 21 and sustainability for local networks, and continue to promote Rural Action activities and achievements in these areas. Future developments will need to be carefully monitored to ensure they contribute to the characteristics of a sustainable society outlined above.

3. EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFICIENCY OF DELIVERY MECHANISMS

Rural Action operates to deliver support, made up of grants and advice, to community groups at local level. It also works with the local agencies who can provide that support to improve the ways in which those services are provided.

As already described, the main mechanisms used for delivering support to local groups are the county networks. The main mechanisms for delivering funding are the project grant administrators, based in RCCs. These are supported by the National Development Team, which is based in ACRE. ACRE provides the overall project management on behalf of the sponsors. The sponsors, and four voluntary agencies, are represented on the National Steering Group which provides overall policy guidance on Rural Action. These processes are closely intertwined, as outlined earlier in Figure 1, and the current responsibilities of each level of the structure are outlined on pages 12 to 16.

This section covers the effectiveness of:

- The National Steering Group (NSG)
- ACRE as contractor to the sponsors
- The National Development Team
- The county networks
- The project grant administration.

The National Steering Group

The National Steering Group (NSG) is the main focus for the national partnership at the heart of Rural Action. It has been successful in:

- Developing and strengthening a national partnership to support community-based environmental action.
- Facilitating information exchange and improving communications and relations between partner organisations during Rural Action's five years of operation.
- Overseeing the extension of Rural Action's Government funding from an initial three years (due to finish in 1995) to a total of seven years: up to March 1999.
- Providing a forum for Rural Action partners to raise matters of strategic policy related specifically to the scheme itself.

However, interviews and discussions with NSG members (past and present) identified that, alongside these achievements, the NSG has faced a number of problems, some of which were also identified in the earlier evaluation studies:

- There has been a lack of clarity about the Group's powers and role, leading to uncertainty about its ability to provide strong policy leadership for the scheme.
- The difference between the roles and responsibilities of the sponsors and those of the voluntary sector partners in the scheme has been reflected in a lack of clarity about their respective roles and powers on the NSG. Similarly, the sponsors have clear contractual relationships, via ACRE, to the National Development Team, but the role of the NSG itself, and its other members, in that relationship is less clear.
- Steering Group meetings have tended to take the form of formal committee meetings considering management control issues, with little opportunity for debating and working through major policy issues, many of which are in any case often resolved privately outside the meetings: this contributes to the lack of clarity about the Steering Group's role.

- There has also been a lack of continuity. Although some of the present members were involved at earlier stages, only one (Peter Woodward, Shell Better Britain Campaign) has remained a member of the Steering Group throughout Rural Action's existence. The frequent changes in personnel have made the development of cohesion in the Group difficult, and weakened its ability to act collectively in the overall interests of Rural Action.

Similar questions about lack of continuity have been raised in relation to the practice of rotating the Chair between the sponsors, but it is generally agreed that this has been preferable to one agency taking the Chair throughout. In addition, the seniority of the person taking the Chair is seen as an advantage for Rural Action overall in that it has ensured that each agency has made a commitment of senior staff time. Overall, the NSG members tend to be drawn from the level of their organisation most concerned with community-level action, and this is not always the most senior staff. This becomes important when organisational commitments are required; for example, input from local or regional staff to Rural Action.

- The lack of continuity and any sense of cohesion have weakened the Group's ability to act as a champion for Rural Action, either within individual organisations or more widely. This has severely limited Rural Action's influence on new developments within these organisations, and in other organisations in similar fields.

Steering Group development

It is clear from interviews with NSG members that they fully recognise the structural problems with the overall governance of Rural Action. However, over recent months there have been renewed efforts to address the problems and NSG members feel that in recent meetings the NSG itself, and its Strategy Sub-Group, have been working together more positively and are developing a more collective view on the future of the scheme.

There have been a number of discussions about the future role of the NSG in order to build on its strengths and overcome the problems raised above. The appointment of an independent Chair has been proposed, to oversee Rural Action's transition to the next stage of its development and there is a consensus among NSG members that this would be a positive step.

There is considerable potential for the NSG to develop a more strategic leadership role in Rural Action in future, as current contractual arrangements come to an end. The form this should take will depend on the objectives and priorities finally agreed upon for the new phase of Rural Action (form follows function). It would not be appropriate to devise management or leadership functions in advance of those decisions.

However, it is possible to suggest that the Group may need to develop into more of a Board or management committee, which would enable it to champion Rural Action and the community-based approach through which it works. An independent Chair could help to ease this transition.

In terms of the membership of the Group, the wildlife and countryside conservation issues are well covered by BTCV and the Wildlife Trusts as well as English Nature and the Countryside Commission. The RDC and ACRE bring a community focus to the discussions and allow the consideration of social and economic issues alongside their environmental implications. The Shell Better Britain Campaign has considerable experience of working on community-based programmes at local level and of promoting these ideas at national level, as well as being able to contribute to debates about environmental and conservation priorities and action and how those can develop into action for sustainable development.

It may be that, given the centrality of local government to the networks and to work on Local Agenda 21, local government representation on any re-formed NSG could be considered. Other extensions to the membership of the NSG, of organisations and individuals, could also be beneficial, but these will again depend on emerging objectives and priorities.

The sponsors

The ambivalence about the role of the National Steering Group is seen to be a result, to some extent, of what some sponsors see as the imposition of the scheme on them by the Secretary of State in 1992. This continues to generate some resentment, not least related to sponsors seeing elements of their budgets as being outside their control (ie ring-fenced for Rural Action). These negative feelings have been expressed least strongly by the Countryside Commission, which was to some extent the moving force behind the original concept of Rural Action and which therefore had perhaps to make the smallest adjustment to its existing priorities to accommodate the new scheme.

All the current sponsors are keen, in principle, to involve more people in local communities in environmental and conservation action, although in practice other organisational programme priorities may tend to be placed above community-led action. However, support for community-based approaches is more than an issue of changing organisational policy priorities, it is also an issue of changing organisational operational methods. Policy choices in public agencies are usually made on the basis of research, experiment and then the establishment of a programme. Rural Action operates differently in being responsive to demands and priorities from local groups and county networks. However, the Rural Action mechanism could be of considerable benefit to existing and future sponsors by providing a long term and direct communications and feedback link to grassroots action and priorities.

Overall, the role of the sponsors is likely to change considerably as a result of planned structural changes within and between the agencies, and because of the ending of the current funding arrangements in March 1999. It may not be appropriate for future sponsors to have the same role on the NSG as the current three agencies.

Voluntary sector partners

The voluntary sector partners are in a different position from the sponsors, and feedback from interviews suggests that they feel that Rural Action meets many of their needs, expectations and interests for a number of reasons:

- Firstly, they were involved in the initial discussions with the Countryside Commission about Local Countryside Action, and felt that sufficient elements of that original scheme had been retained in Rural Action to make it worthwhile remaining involved. Their involvement was therefore without the element of coercion felt by some of the sponsors at the outset of the scheme.
- Secondly, most of the voluntary organisation are sufficiently involved in community-based environmental action to see Rural Action as a natural extension, and indeed support, for their existing work. This does vary across the agencies and over time, and depends to some extent on the commitment and interest of the individuals on the Group, as well as changes to their own organisation's priorities.

Most currently see community-based action as an essential element in their own work. Some (notably the Shell Better Britain Campaign) have expanded their own priorities from environmental action into broader sustainability issues, beyond the original environmental priorities of Rural Action, while retaining their interest and commitment to environmental action and the community-based approach and therefore to Rural Action.

- Thirdly, there are tangible financial benefits for some of the voluntary sector partners from participating in Rural Action: BTCV, the Wildlife Trusts and the Rural Community Councils (RCCs) all gain financially at local level from the operation of the scheme, and the Rural Action programme supports their local work to some extent. This could be interpreted as a conflict of interest for these organisations as steering group members, as has been identified in previous evaluations (eg NAO 1997, 3-4), and needs to be recognised.

ACRE's position is different from the other voluntary sector partners on the NSG, as it has been awarded the contract to deliver Rural Action. The implications of ACRE's position are described below.

ACRE as Rural Action contractor

ACRE takes a different role from other voluntary sector partners on the NSG as it is formally contracted to the sponsors to "administer Rural Action and deliver a delegated grants scheme and support to local projects" (taken from ACRE contract with the sponsors).

In 1992, when Rural Action was established, it was based at ACRE for a number of reasons of both principle and practicality:

- ACRE's links to social and community development, through the Rural Community Councils (RCCs), focused attention on the *community* aspects of Rural Action, providing a balance to the primarily *environmental* priorities of most of the other partners.
- The sponsors were able to have a contract with an existing voluntary organisation to manage the project, rather than attempt to set up a new organisation for what was expected to be a three year programme. ACRE was acceptable to other partners because it is not primarily an 'environmental' organisation.
- It had been agreed that project grants would be administered at local level by the RCCs, and it made sense for the Rural Action national office to be located near the RCC's umbrella organisation (ACRE) to ease communications.
- ACRE had good office space available, and as the first Director of Rural Action was previously employed by ACRE, proximity enabled operations to begin quickly.

When Rural Action was initially located in the ACRE offices, the understanding was that Rural Action was an independent initiative: based at ACRE but separate. Over time, the relationship has grown closer and Rural Action is increasingly presented by ACRE and others as an ACRE project, albeit with an independent steering group.

To date, ACRE has provided a useful umbrella structure. It has provided management support and has saved Rural Action the considerable time and effort which would have been needed to establish an independent organisation or a new office base. Equally, Rural Action has provided ACRE with an environmental dimension to its work, and enabled them to make stronger links with Local Agenda 21 and sustainable development. ACRE and Rural Action share a commitment to community-based work, capacity building, community development and participation which can provide mutual support.

However, the current close relationship between Rural Action and ACRE raises a number of issues for Rural Action in planning its future role, structure and activities including:

- Rural Action will need to consider its identity and image as an ACRE project, both in relation to publicity and promotion and in relation to raising funds.
- Discussions about Rural Action's future scope have included the potential for working in urban fringe and even inner city areas; the implications of being based at ACRE for these potential developments will need to be considered.

These issues will need to be fully and openly debated in the NSG as part of the debate about the future structure and funding of Rural Action.

National Development Team (NDT)

Earlier evaluations have all found that the NDT manage and deliver the Rural Action programme in a highly professional way, with few problems in terms of efficiency, effectiveness and financial accountability. All the required checks and balances have been found to be highly efficient, and the staff have been highly praised for their contribution to the success of the scheme. This high degree of satisfaction continues among the users of Rural Action at all levels interviewed for this study.

The make-up of the Team has changed several times over the last five years, resulting in the current structure in which there is an overall project manager, two development officers, an administrator and an administrative assistant. Interviews with the staff and with users of the system show that the staff work effectively as a coherent team, with roles and responsibilities clearly defined.

The NDT's objectives of establishing 40 county networks and a project grant system have all been met. It is worth noting again the achievements of the staff in establishing this complex, multi-layered scheme in a very short timescale, and in doing so in a way which has ensured that future development prospects have remained open. Where problems have arisen in the field, the staff have shown considerable ability and sensitivity in dealing with them and the feedback from this study shows that the NDT is widely praised and respected throughout the county networks and local projects: an unusual and admirable achievement for any voluntary organisation.

In many ways, the achievements of Rural Action are also the achievements of the NDT in that they have created the support and development mechanisms, and provide the resources, which allow the local activities to take place. However, in the best community development traditions, the Team ensures that any publicity gives the credit to the networks, the project grant administrators and the local groups themselves.

The previous evaluation by Aston Business School suggested that consideration be given to the tasks of the National Development Team being eventually devolved entirely to the county networks. However, although much of the establishment work on Rural Action has now been completed, there remain tasks which need to be undertaken at a national level:

- Firstly, there remains a continuing need for national financial and performance monitoring as long as there are national sponsors or funders.
- Secondly, there remains a need for communications between the county level operations of Rural Action to be developed, to improve the quality of the support offered by enabling participants in different areas to learn from each others experience.
- Thirdly, and most importantly, the development and promotion of messages about the overall principles and achievements of Rural Action and its approach must be carried out, or at least co-ordinated, at national level by a National Development Team if Rural Action is to participate in national debates and influence national policy to improve the support for community-based action. Rural Action has a powerful message to offer, and these messages must be articulated and disseminated at national level as well as at county and local levels. These communication issues are covered in more detail below.

There are, therefore, powerful arguments for retaining a national development team. However, the structure and priorities of the NDT may need to be developed in the light of plans for the future.

Monitoring and communications strategies

The NDT currently undertake a range of monitoring, internal and external communications activities.

Monitoring

Current methods of monitoring local activities, classifying and recording data, were designed primarily for reports to sponsors and the NSG to meet the objectives set out in the ACRE contract.

The aims of current monitoring activities are mainly in relation to financial control to meet the financial reporting requirements of the sponsors, and to improve the performance of the scheme at local level. It is quite correct that this should have been the priority during the establishment phases of the scheme. The efficiency and effectiveness of these systems have been reviewed in earlier evaluations (NAO 1997 and Baker Tilly 1995), and were found to be excellent. This current study confirmed that this is also the view of those using the system as grant administrators and recipients of grants.

The current monitoring mechanism on project grants involves the completion by the local group receiving a grant of a feedback form, to be returned to the project grant administrator within a six month period. This form is intended to check that the money has been spent, and has been used for the purposes specified in the original application. Project grant administrators have to spend a considerable amount of time chasing these forms - highly successfully since the return rate is 100% (eventually).

Different administrators use different methods to ensure the return of the completed forms, and the most effective methods seem to be twofold:

- Firstly, some administrators withhold a percentage (say 10%) of the grant until they get the completed feedback form. Although this may cause some cashflow problems to some groups, it does seem to be effective, and not particularly resented, and could be suggested for wider use by other administrators.
- Secondly, it is a general rule with the grants scheme that groups cannot get a further grant until they have completed the feedback sheet on the first grant. This is also effective in encouraging the return of forms.

It was originally envisaged that, in addition to the feedback forms, the NDT would 'audit' 10% of all groups receiving grants in terms of quality of process and product. This has not taken place because of pressure on staff time.

Examples of good practice for promotional purposes are currently identified in three ways:

- Some local project grant administrators actively monitor projects to the extent that they will tell the NDT about any particular examples worthy of note.
- Some local groups keep in touch with the NDT directly: sending in press releases, cuttings and other information on activities.
- The NDT may identify interesting examples when loading data on to the database.

Unfortunately, since there is no comprehensive monitoring of the quality of projects, it is difficult to find convincing data, beyond the anecdotal, to show how Rural Action has made a real difference to these projects either in terms of their environmental impact or in terms of capacity building.

At present it is not even possible to show whether a group has received more than one grant from Rural Action to illustrate a process of development: one grant leading on to another. Even though the potential for funding different phases of the same project is well known and considered by respondents to be one of the advantages of the Rural Action grant scheme, it is not usual for follow-on projects to be named as such. In addition, there may be a time lag between projects, they may be quite different and the group may have changed its name. There is therefore no way of knowing at present whether a project is part of a developmental process for a group.

It would undoubtedly help Rural Action to promote its achievements and its approach if, as well as ad hoc examples, it could present more comprehensive data on the proportion of projects which go on to other environmentally useful projects, and whether and how the Rural Action approach has made a difference to the quality of the project, to building the capacity of the group and to the development of sustainable communities. This type of data will be increasingly necessary if Rural Action is to continue to obtain substantial funding and to be able to influence policy based on its experience.

However, the use of such data to promote Rural Action and its approach externally is only one (if vital) reason for improving monitoring procedures. Internal monitoring and evaluation is essential if performance is to be improved by participants at all levels: participants like to know what they are achieving and whether these achievements are meaningful to wider objectives.

The people best placed to record and interpret this sort of achievement are project grant administrators, project advisers and project assessors, in partnership with the NDT. There is considerable evidence from elsewhere that indicators set in a participatory way can act as a spur to defining success and developing appropriate new directions which are supported by everyone involved.

It is therefore recommended that project grant administrators, advisers and assessors are invited to participate in a planning exercise to devise and implement a system of indicators of achievement in capacity building and impact on quality of life. They can also help to devise ways of collecting and presenting this qualitative data which are useful for them, and which can help provide evidence of the success of Rural Action's approach and contribute to the future development of Rural Action.

This process will need to include changes to the methods and categories by which data is classified and stored. The NDT fully recognise the need to update the data classification scheme, and would welcome the opportunity to do so. It is recognised that any classification scheme will 'flatten' understanding of the range and diversity of local projects by putting them into broad categories, but new categories need to be identified which are more meaningful than those used at present. It may be that a keyword system, which allows the analysis of project categories to be changed over time, would allow for a more sophisticated analysis of projects.

Internal communications

There is considerable demand from networks and local project groups for improved internal communications particularly in relation to "what is happening in other counties", both in terms of network activities and types of projects. This is not an easy task: local participants in any national initiative always want to know more about what else is happening locally, but tend to be less enthusiastic about the time involved in actually providing any information about their own activities. However, this is clearly an issue which needs to be addressed.

Recent initiatives by the Team to establish more links between county network secretariats and project grant administrators, through training days and other events, have been particularly welcomed by network members and project grant administrators, and more of these opportunities for county-based staff to interact with national development thinking would be widely welcomed. More opportunities for training at national or regional level would also be widely welcomed.

Another specific and quite widespread demand is for more guidance on ideas and models of projects which can be offered to groups - following the example of village appraisals, pocket parks, parish maps and similar models. This has been resisted, quite understandably, by the Team in the past on the grounds that projects should be developed as a result of local community need and demand.

However, the demand is not just for models from national organisations which may be promoting particular approaches, but also for models based on experience in other locations. There may be considerable potential for Rural Action to develop its own models, based on projects and network activities from its own experience.

These models should certainly never be *imposed* on local communities, but could be appropriate and useful where guidance is sought. This follows the spirit of recent developments in participatory and community-based programmes, where a dialogue approach between national and local, expert and lay people (both of which are fully represented in Rural Action) is promoted, rather than a purist grassroots focus.

External communications

The NDT has developed numerous materials to publicise the local grants scheme and the support linked to it, and has recently been developing new materials and proposals for increasing the amount of staff time for promotion and publicity activities. Criticisms of particular materials the past (echoed in this study) have been taken into account in the production of new project application forms and guidance and new full colour promotional booklets (December 1997 and January 1998).

However, the NDT's more general responsibility to 'evaluate and publicise good practice in supporting local environmental action through networking' (as described in the ACRE contract) have been given a lower priority because of limited staff resources. In particular, Rural Action could develop and promote the evidence of its own achievements, and the success of the community-based approach to sustainable development, much more effectively at national, county network and local project level. There is a major success story here which has not been told sufficiently widely or strongly.

This is not just an external exercise, and could be linked to developing new working methods with the NSG by involving NSG members in the formulation of key messages and the promotion of models of local support and action.

These developments in communications would enable Rural Action to challenge its image and reputation, reported by some interviewees, as simply a small grants scheme. This tends to be the view of people not directly involved, but does need to be overcome if Rural Action's achievements in creating and providing an innovative and powerful support structure for community-based environmental action are to be fully recognised and used more widely by a wider range of groups.

Evidence from Rural Action's experience could then feed into the national policy arenas on community-based sustainable development, in which the NDT is already beginning to participate. There are numerous advocates of community-based environmental action, but Rural Action has the great advantage of being able to gather and produce evidence to prove the efficacy of its approach, based on its own practical experience, and its contribution could therefore be particularly influential.

With 40 county networks and nearly 4,000 projects on the ground, Rural Action has a wealth of material and experienced people to draw on. There are certainly individuals in the county networks, and who have been involved in community projects, who are already experienced in articulating these messages, and their expertise and capabilities could be an extremely valuable resource in promoting Rural Action's message to a wider - and currently very receptive - audience.

Advice and support system

The county networks organise Rural Action's advice and support system: the achievements and effectiveness of Rural Action networks in providing training, capacity building and community development support have already been described.

The following section covers the efficiency and effectiveness of the delivery mechanisms themselves: the initial contact mechanisms, the fees for advisers, the network secretariat role and the administration of network activities.

Initial contact mechanisms

Groups seeking support may make contact with the grants system in a number of ways:

- Through one of the network members who had heard about the group and contacted them initially
- The group may have identified an organisation in the network and approached them directly
- The group may have approached the RCC to find out about grants.

Research by the North Yorkshire network in 1997 into the groups in their county found that most groups (66 out of 80) heard about Rural Action from a network member. This confirms anecdotal evidence from the NDT and others which suggests that most groups come into the scheme through personal contacts rather than publicity material: publicity material tends to be used by the initial contact to supplement personal contact.

Data is currently collected nationally by the NDT on the 'initial main contact' for groups (this information is requested on grant application forms), although this may not relate to the way the group found out about Rural Action. The initial main contact may go on to provide project advice, for which fees are payable, or may recommend another adviser more appropriate to the interests of the project.

Since Rural Action began, the initial main contacts have been as follows:

RCCs	1391 days	on	886 projects
Wildlife trusts	897 days	on	412 projects
BTCV	681 days	on	277 projects
AONB staff	650 days	on	17 projects
Local authority staff	594 days	on	470 projects
Countryside management staff	500 days	on	211 projects
Groundwork trusts	304 days	on	86 projects
English Nature staff	25 days	on	9 projects

However, these figures do need considerable qualification. Although RCCs are recorded as being the initial main contact for the most days and the largest number of projects, the NDT is certain that there are very few cases of RCCs being paid at all for advice, not least because RCCs only have limited time for face-to-face work. In addition, local authorities are not paid for their time in giving advice and training. Further implications of fees for project advisers are considered below.

Fees for advisers

The advice to project groups is one of the central elements of Rural Action's training and capacity building activities. Advisers are often drawn from network members, although a few networks have separate lists of advisers. The adviser may be recommended by the initial contact, or may indeed be the initial contact. In some cases, the group themselves identify an adviser they want to work with.

Fees for this detailed, project related, advice are paid at the rate of £150 per day, and costed into project grant applications. However, fees for advisers are only payable when the group has decided on a specific project. In some cases, the group is not ready to do a project, but wants help and support in developing ideas. This can cause financial difficulties for advisers who are drawn into unpaid advice work.

It may be that the definition of a 'project' could be widened to include these sorts of planning processes, and if the criteria for paying fees could be made more flexible in this way, it could allow fees to be paid to advisers for this earlier (and crucial) developmental work by new groups leading up to a specific project.

Feedback from respondents to this study has shown that the payment of fees has a number of advantages:

- Fees are increasingly crucial for voluntary organisations and others providing advice. In the current context of the contract culture, service agreements have taken the place of core grants, and many voluntary organisation staff not only have targets in terms of practical outputs and outcomes, but also of income generation. If fees were not paid for advice, it is possible that the groups and individuals providing the advice element of Rural Action would find the task untenable: far more so now than when the scheme started in 1992.
- The payment of advice fees by the group to the adviser allows the group to control the learning process they are going through. In some places, the way in which the advice is paid for may be changing, away from the group controlling the payment. It is important that this does not happen (unless the group specifically requests it), or the system could be seen as being open to abuse. As long as the group decides on the advice it wants, and controls the payment for it, there are some controls on the potential for fees to be carved up between a small number of agencies.

There is always the danger that some advisers may take projects over, either in order to obtain the fees or because their organisation is looking for projects to do. However, there is no evidence that this happens. Indeed, given the heavy workloads of most of the people doing this work, they are highly unlikely to take on more projects just for the fees as they usually have more than enough other projects to work on.

In order to identify and evaluate the range of advisers working with groups, an attempt was made during this study to assess the amount of fees going to different organisations. Unfortunately, the NDT only currently collects data on the initial main contact (as already described), and it is therefore not possible to answer this question at present.

It will be increasingly important to collect and monitor data on which organisations are paid as advisers, so that some assessment could be made about the spread of advice given to projects: especially as this is the central focus for Rural Action's training and capacity building work. It would be helpful if this data could be collected in future and be available for analysis.

Network secretariats

The network secretariats ensure the smooth running of the network including organising meetings, distributing information, ensuring work programmes and budgets are submitted. The National Development Team provides full guidance on the role and tasks of the network secretariat as part of the guidance on the network support grant.

Funding is agreed for a specific programme and organisations carrying out activities account to other network members for what they do as well as providing written feedback in order to claim payment. This feedback is passed on to the NDT who monitor it for good practice and any potential problems. The NDT then feed back to the network both by providing advice and in terms of future funding arrangements.

Various respondents commented that the network secretariat role was only a small part of someone's job and was therefore not always a priority. In considering future developments, it could be that the roles of network secretaries and project grant administrators could be reviewed when vacancies occur.

In some cases, the network secretariat is already undertaken by a freelance individual, often someone who has previously been a member of the network as a representative of an organisation. This seems to work well, in that their role in relation to the network is not confused with their responsibilities to their employer. This approach could be considered for further replication.

Alternatively, there could be some benefits in combining the roles of network secretariat and project grant administrator more often: this already happens in a few counties where the RCC does both. This allows a larger amount of money being available in one pot and therefore a larger proportion of one person's time can be made available. It also reduces the need for time and paperwork needed for communicating between the two: lack of time can lead to poor communications and the project grant administrators are in some cases isolated from the network, and vice versa.

The benefits of combining these roles are not recognised by everyone: some argue that one of the advantages of having a separate network secretariat is that others in the network expect to share the workload. Nevertheless, this combination of roles does merit further consideration.

Network activities

Network activities may be carried out by network members, or by other voluntary or public sector bodies or by commercial companies. Network grants cover both staff time, and other expenses such as publicity, room hire and catering. Network members' time is paid for out of network grants, at a rate of £150 per day (£20 per hour), which includes travel and other incidental costs.

Payment to network members is only made for staff time spent on detailed planning or actually carrying out activities, not for attending network meetings, sub-groups etc. Detailed guidelines are provided by the National Development Team on what may and may not be claimed under network support grants, and how the process should work (see Annex 2).

Figures have been provided by the NDT on who undertakes network activities, and therefore receives this funding. As already outlined, the network secretariat is paid £2,100 per annum. This element of network grant spending is currently as follows:

•	BTCV has 15 secretariats	=	£31,500
•	Wildlife trusts have 15 secretariats	=	£31,500
•	RCCs have 5 secretariats	=	£10,500
•	There are 5 other secretariats	=	<u>£10,500</u>
			£84,000

This leaves approx £136,000 for activities (or £3,400 per county per annum). According to figures supplied by the NDT in December 1997:

- BTCV has tended to carry out about 21% of network activities
- RCCs about 18%
- Wildlife trusts about 9%
- Others (including local authorities) about 39%.

This totals 87%: the remaining 13% of network budgets is used for catering, room hire, copying etc. This results in the overall split of the network grant being roughly as follows:

•	BTCV receives about	£ 60,000 pa (approx £1,500 per county)
•	Wildlife trusts receive about	£ 40,000 pa (approx £1,000 per county)
•	RCCs receive about	£ 30,000 pa (approx £750 per county)
•	Others receive about	£ 60,000 pa (approx £1,500 per county)
	Misc costs	<u>£ 30,000</u>
	Total	£220,000

Although these seem like substantial sums for Rural Action partner organisations when considered over the whole country, the figures are much less when seen on a county basis. Moreover, given the quantity and quality of network development, outreach and promotion activities outlined elsewhere, this expenditure can be seen to be good value for money.

However, action may need to be taken to overcome the image of the networks as substantially controlled by the national partner organisations. In practice, the RCCs appear to be accepted as umbrella and facilitating bodies but there is a sense from some interviews that the conservation bodies have too strong a role, potentially excluding even other environmental bodies. Although there is no evidence to support these assertions, it remains the case that Rural Action networks can present this image to potential members and collaborators, which may discourage their involvement and therefore does need to be considered and addressed.

Reviewing fee payments

The whole issue of fees paid for network activities, and for project advice, will need to be carefully reviewed as Rural Action moves into its next stage of development. While there is no suggestion that there is any abuse of the current system, there is currently insufficient data to fully monitor the situation, and this could lead to potentially damaging suspicion, particularly as Rural Action's public profile increases.

It will be increasingly important to have data available on who is receiving fees for advice and network activities to counteract the perception that Rural Action at local level is essentially run by the RCCs, BTCV and the wildlife trusts for their own benefit. This image could be particularly damaging as Rural Action plans to expand its field of operation.

While the three national voluntary sector partner organisations do indeed do a large proportion of the advice, training, network secretariat and network activities, the NDT suggest that this is because few other organisations are willing to be proactive in Rural Action. However, this creates a vicious circle: the more these organisations do these things, the less others will do.

There are other organisations and individuals operating at local level which could do more, including experienced community groups and activists. For these reasons, expanding the lists of advisers, assessors and core people in the networks will need to become more of a priority.

Project grants system

The responsibility for all decisions about awarding individuals grants is devolved to the RCCs. The NDT is available to give advice and monitor operations (including receiving copies of application forms and feedback forms from the groups), but otherwise the process is carried out locally. This system of local grant administration has a number of advantages:

- Groups have a local organisation to contact about grant applications, which they appreciate.
- The relationship between the RCCs and the networks operates closely and effectively in most cases to ensure that assessors are appropriate, because the people know each other personally as well as knowing their organisations.
- Turn around is quick because of the ease of local communications. Some of the most common complimentary remarks about the grants system from the local groups refer to the speed and efficiency of the grants system.
- Groups seeking support are often known to the RCCs, because of personal contact or local reputations. This can help with assessment and in identifying appropriate advisors where needed.

A delegated grants scheme does require a series of checks and balances to ensure financial accountability and that local activities meet national objectives. This could result in a cumbersome and costly system with complex financial reporting systems but, according to earlier evaluations and feedback from respondents to this study, Rural Action has developed a process which is relatively streamlined and appropriate to the funding being distributed (NAO 1997). Overall, the advantages of the delegated grants system currently outweigh the disadvantages, both for users and funders, although the NDT will want to keep this under review.

RCCs as grants administrators

The location of project grant administrators within RCCs works very effectively and efficiently at present, for a number of reasons:

- It makes useful links to broader social and economic development projects, which makes good sense as environmental action increasingly embraces sustainable development principles.
- RCCs own programmes may be influenced by the relationship. For example, although few RCCs have not traditionally been involved in any environmental action, recent research by ACRE found that 25 of the 28 RCCs who responded to a recent survey were involved in Local Agenda 21. Although there is no direct evidence to prove that this was as a result of links with Rural Action, it is a reasonable assumption that the formal involvement of RCC staff with Rural Action networks and groups has increased the likelihood of them taking an interest in LA21.
- The image of the scheme as a *community* as well as an *environmental* scheme is enhanced by the location of the grants administration within RCCs.
- Groups doing environmental projects may be made more aware of potential additional support from RCCs and their traditional constituency.

Fees for grant administration

RCCs are paid a fee of 12.5% of the value of the grants. This has the advantage of providing a sliding scale of funding to provide more administration time needed to deal with more grant applications. However, this system also has some disadvantages:

- The fee is only paid once the project has been approved for grant aid, whereas the RCC (and/or others) may have spent considerable time with the group before that stage.
- Some groups may not require or want a grant in the end; which means the RCC receives no fees for their work with them.
- Calculating the fees on a percentage basis mitigates (theoretically) against small grants. Although Rural Action does allow for small grants to be given to groups (within the maximum of £2000), the percentage payment is a structural disincentive for these: a small grant will take at least as long (probably longer, because the group is likely to be less experienced) than a much larger grant, on which the fee income will be much greater.

Since Rural Action is designed particularly to support new groups, and groups new to environmental action, the impact of this fee system on small grants (say less than £200), must be considered.

It has been argued many times that it can be the first £50 that can make all the difference to a group getting going: this small amount can help cover telephone calls, copying, postage. Rural Action recognises the principle that groups will always need small amounts of funding to get going: the current contract between the sponsors and ACRE states that "smaller grants are preferred" (5.5) - although this preference may, of course, be for other reasons.

However, while there is a structural financial incentive here for grant administrators to encourage larger grants, it does not seem to have happened: if it had, it is likely that the proportion of smaller grants would be getting less, whereas in practice the proportion of small grants has remained fairly static over the years, in spite of rising costs elsewhere. The figures are given in Table 5 below.

Table 5. Proportion of grants, and of total spend, of less than £200

Year	% grants less than £200	% of total spend
1992	10%	0.9%
1993	8.2%	1.2%
1994	10.3%	1.4%
1995	10.5%	1.5%
1996	10.2%	1.5%
1997	7.6%	1.1%
OVERALL	9.5%	1.4%

Note to Table 5:

- Figures provided by the NDT

Although the percentage fee arrangement does not seem to have reduced the proportion of small grants over time, the proportion of total grant spending on small grants is very low (1.4% overall). This could be explained if there were very few new groups coming to Rural Action.

However, the research done in 1997 in North Yorkshire found that 22% of groups were formed specifically to do a Rural Action project; the Aston Business School evaluation suggested the figure could be as high as 66%. Therefore, although the proportion has not gone down, the small number of small grants does need further consideration and the fee structure should be reviewed on this basis.

It may be that an alternative method of paying for the grant administration could be considered which recognises these issues: for example, grant administration fees could be paid within a minimum and maximum level, with the sliding scale operating within these limits. This would provide a guaranteed minimum payment to RCCs which would not only give explicit support to the principle of small grants, but would also provide recognition of the project grant administrators' time not directly attributable to specific grant applications.

Criteria for grants

The criteria established for grant aid from Rural Action have been designed to support practical community-led environmental action at the same time as supporting capacity building for all those involved (see Annex 2 for current criteria). This is not always an easy balance and practice over the five years of Rural Action operations has evolved in response to practical experience and the changing context. Responses in interviews with networks and local groups suggest that the current balance between capacity building and practical action is excellent, and that the criteria were wide-ranging enough to remain generally appropriate.

In particular, respondents interviewed for this study valued:

- The breadth of the criteria
- The ability to fund training and advice
- The ability to fund additional phases of the same project
- The ability to count voluntary labour as matching funding to Rural Action grant aid.

However, the context within which Rural Action operates has changed over the five years since it started, and the criteria for grants may need to be extended to reflect these changes. From interviews for this study, the following issues may need to be considered:

- It is now much more difficult to obtain money for materials and equipment than it was five years ago, with even Shell Better Britain Campaign (SBBC) funding being less easily available (see the decline in matching funding from the SBBC in Figure 2). The limits to this spending through Rural Action may need to be reviewed in the light of these changes, although not at the expense of funding for capacity building and training.
- There was some demand for Rural Action to be expanded from rural areas as currently defined (ie communities with a population of 10,000 or less) into urban fringe or even inner city areas. This point was raised in counties with a relatively small number of communities which met the rural criteria but who felt that the scheme would be valuable elsewhere, and also by a number of respondents who felt that the approach had been so successful that it would be applied more widely.

Overall, the consensus from the sample interviewed for this study seemed to be that, as a model, Rural Action could work extremely well in urban, rural or urban fringe areas and that there was very likely to be a need in other areas for a scheme like this. However, there were concerns that the scale and complexity of urban community needs could swamp the rural element. The tentative conclusion is, therefore, that although respondents believe it would be valuable to have an urban equivalent of Rural Action, any such development should perhaps be kept as a separate initiative.

- In terms of the interpretation of 'environmental' projects under Rural Action, there was an overall consensus that the scheme needed to maintain an environmental focus to avoid being too broad and unfocused.

Expanding the criteria to embrace the environmental aspects of sustainable development were not seen to be a problem, although moving completely away from the environmental dimension into tackling rural deprivation more generally was seen as perhaps too broad a remit. It may be that the Government criteria for a sustainable society, quoted earlier in this report, could provide the basis for a limited expansion of the grant criteria.

Certainly, expanding environment to include 'human environment' as well as 'green environment' would be well understood, as would projects dealing with broader environmental issues such as pollution, quality of life and benefiting surroundings.

- The local interpretation of the criteria for grant aid had led to some instances where only very narrow environmental aspects of projects were considered eligible for funding and, for example, village centre upgrading and churchyard paths were excluded. While variations are to be expected in a scheme where responsibility for decisions is devolved, there may be an argument here for more central guidance and training, and for a greater sharing of information between counties about the projects they have funded so they can compare notes.

There were several specific requests for more of this sort of contact. Rather than centralising the provision of this information, consideration could be given to sharing information via the Internet as more and more rural communities are becoming familiar with new technology.

Feedback from groups

Feedback from groups and others interviewed about the grants process for the study was very positive. When asked "what is the worst thing about Rural Action", the response was an almost unanimous "nothing" (the exception being two comments about the application form being repetitive; the form has since been changed).

The "best things" about Rural Action identified in the interviews with groups receiving support overall were:

- The speed and ease of the grants process
- The valuing of volunteer time so that it could be counted as matching funding
- Getting the money up front
- Advisers available to work with the projects.

Generally the grant-making process was working very well for the groups. Specific benefits of the current system pointed out by the groups interviewed included the following:

- Groups received advice early so they did not waste time applying for the wrong things or at all if their projects were not eligible.
- The lack of bureaucracy was good, and the system was easy for groups with small projects.
- The grants scheme was considered much more efficient and accessible than many others (Local Projects Fund, Lottery, landfill etc) because it was local and quick.
- The whole scheme is 'user friendly': it is designed to be as easy as possible for the group not just for the grant administrators.
- Even where registrations of interest have not gone turned into project applications, these should not be considered failures as some groups may still go on to do a project and come back to Rural Action for funding later or apply for funding elsewhere.
- When the decision is made locally, it is likely to be by someone who knows the group and/or the circumstances.
- Having the money available at the start of the project ('up front') is very popular.
- Allowing grants to be paid for different phases of the same project allows appropriate advice to be provided at different stages, and enables groups to retain contact with Rural Action over time.
- By providing access to technical and specialist help, Rural Action encourages groups to broaden their horizons as well as their skills.

Two suggestions were made by interviewees to improve the grants process:

- It was felt that quite often the person doing the initial visit could help groups fill in the application form on the spot, rather than give a registration of interest card, go away and then be rung up for more help. According to the NDT, this step in the process was introduced partly to allow the group to develop its own skills in making the application, and partly to avoid groups being browbeaten into doing something the initial contact person suggests rather than developing its own ideas. However, the initial visitor and/or the project grant administrator often helps with the completion of the form in the end anyway, so this justification may be less relevant in the current context.
- It was also suggested that shorter forms could be used for later phases of the same project.

These elements of the process could usefully be reviewed to remove layers of bureaucracy, cost and demands on people's time.

Overall, the project groups interviewed for this study were very enthusiastic about Rural Action overall. While groups might be expected to be enthusiastic about any scheme which gives them money and other support to achieve their own aims, experience of other grant schemes suggests that there are usually far more complaints about process, criteria or style than came from the Rural Action groups. This should be recognised as an indication of Rural Action's achievement in meeting local needs effectively.

Direct quotes taken from interviews with individuals from projects funded by Rural Action include the following:

"Provides first crucial bit of funding for groups"

"A lot would not have happened without it"

"Significant amount of activity would not have been done without it"

"Realistic attitude to meeting needs at grass roots level"

"Easy and a pleasure to work with"

"Responsive and realistic"

"Your time is valued and you don't have to raise money first"

"Wouldn't have started without Rural Action"

"Speedy response and friendly grant: helps you do what you want to do"

"Extremely friendly and approachable [but also] well-vetted and professional"

"Cannot be misused"

"Only way to get started"

"Wish others were more aware of it: it is not getting its message across"

"Funding made it [trail leaflet] more professional-looking so people took notice"

"Rural Action funding got us going"

"Couldn't have done it without Rural Action"

"Very straightforward"

"Encourages small projects - helps get things started which otherwise wouldn't"

"Feedback [form] was a good thing to do"

"Nothing else like it - couldn't have done it without them"

"Opens and keeps channels open - always at the end of a telephone"

"People don't realise that Rural Action grants are available and it is extremely useful"

"Key mechanism"

"The fact that we had Rural Action gave us confidence"

"Makes worthwhile projects possible"

"Bringing things back to life"

"Backbone to community support"

"Rural Action is very encouraging and supportive - wouldn't have been able to do the project without Rural Action"

"They are willing to consider more imaginative projects than other organisations, and community development"

"A very helpful user-friendly organisation - ideal at getting projects off the ground - sure that without the initial funding Rural Action gave for the feasibility study, we would never have got off the ground" [project led to £330,000 lottery bid for a village hall]

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This evaluation has shown the achievements of Rural Action in supporting community-based environmental action by local groups, and in establishing a highly effective structure which is not only flexible enough to continue to provide support for those groups as their capacity develops but is also powerful enough to enable Rural Action to influence the approaches and actions of others.

Rural Action has reached the stage where its structure is now fully established and becoming better known. Its achievements are just beginning to be apparent. With the initial investment and establishment completed, Rural Action is now in a strong position to meet the needs of local rural communities wanting to take action towards sustainable development. It would be a serious loss to rural communities to withdraw support at this stage from a successful scheme into which so much investment has been made: not just financial investment from sponsors but personal investment by the thousands of people who participate in Rural Action at all levels.

It is an indication of the success of Rural Action that the complex and challenging principles with which it was launched, of supporting community-led action and linking capacity building with practical action, have remained strong and are increasingly influencing those who come into contact with Rural Action at all levels. It takes many years to establish a support system of this nature, especially in rural areas, and Rural Action is now poised to move forward again, as long as sufficient investment can be found to support future development.

Recommendations

Suggestions and recommendations for developments of specific aspects of the Rural Action system are given throughout this report. Some of these are reiterated below. First, however, there are two overall and linked recommendations: to establish a participatory development process for the future of Rural Action, and to establish a comprehensive communications strategy.

1. Establish a participatory development process for Rural Action

It is recommended that a participatory process is launched as soon as possible, to involve all levels of the Rural Action structure in developing plans for the future. There is no shortage of knowledge, experience and enthusiasm for Rural Action in the local groups, the networks, the RCCs and all the other organisations operating the Rural Action system. It would be a missed opportunity if these contributions were ignored at this stage in Rural Action's history.

A summary of this report could provide a framework for the process. However, if Rural Action is to develop into a structure for support for community-based sustainable development in the next few years, it must listen to and learn from its grassroots constituency more than it does at present.

In particular, there needs to be a much deeper understanding of the scale and diversity of the achievements of local groups and the networks. There is a considerable amount of very innovative work being undertaken at these levels, and Rural Action is the poorer for not bringing this work into the national spotlight and into national policy debates; and especially into debates about its own future.

2. Establish a comprehensive communications strategy

It is recommended that resources are invested in the development of a comprehensive internal and external communications strategy. This strategy should recognise that while local practical action has its own merits, broader lessons about capacity building, community development and learning from experience are also important and need to be drawn out more explicitly and promoted at all levels (local, county and national levels).

To achieve this, there needs to be new monitoring and evaluation processes established which enable good practice, inspirational projects and other successes to be identified and promoted. These processes should be developed in consultation with project grant administrators, project assessors and advisers, and network activists.

Internally, there needs to be more communication between NSG members and network members and local groups to support an external communications strategy, and to strengthen the NSG role as champion of Rural Action. There also needs to be more cross-county communications. This could be done by developing existing events run by the NDT to bring people together, and computer communications could also be considered as a mechanism for improving regular contact and information sharing.

The NDT may need to provide more guidance to networks on new policy directions and how they can adapt to embrace these opportunities. There is also a greater role for the NDT in awareness-raising internally and externally of the current and potential role of Rural Action in complementary national initiatives.

There are also a number of other recommendations already mentioned in this report. In relation to developing plans for the future of Rural Action, the following will be particularly relevant:

- **Governance and administration:**
 - The NSG needs to clarify its role and responsibilities overall, and responsibilities of its individual members, to provide greater leadership as the 'champion' of Rural Action. An independent chair could be considered as one step towards this new role. Membership of the group may need to be expanded in the light of broadened objectives for Rural Action, including the potential for representation from local government.
 - A national development team will continue to be required for the foreseeable future, even though its structure and priorities may need to be reviewed.
 - RCCs remain the most appropriate location for project grant administration. However, if greater flexibility were required in specific areas, a rural CVS could be considered and would offer similar advantages to the RCC.
 - The fee structure for project grant administration, project advisers, network secretariats and network activities should be examined. There is insufficient data to make a firm recommendation that the system needs to be changed. However, steps need to be taken to obtain that data at the same time as widening the recipients of Rural Action fees beyond the organisations which make up the national partnership. This will be particularly important as Rural Action attempts to seek wider support.
- **Training:**
 - Training courses for local groups could be considered for funding where an element of 'training for trainers' is included, so those attending can gain skills as trainers and be helped to pass their newly acquired skills on to others.
 - Training for network members in networking, community development, participatory approaches, models and ideas for projects could be further developed. This could be done through conventional courses, information provision, computer communications and a range of other media.
- **Network membership.** Consideration should be given to extending the membership of networks to include a wider range of environmental organisations, and also non-environmental organisations which are likely to be able to make a contribution to supporting community-based environmental action including tenants federations, youth services, community education, groups supporting participation by elderly or disabled people, health professionals and others.

If these developments can be established and supported, there is every possibility that Rural Action could become a model for community participation in environmental action and sustainable development in the future.

APPENDIX 1

Methodology

This Appendix includes details of:

- The Steering Group members interviewed
- The letters sent to network secretariats and project grant administrators
- The questions asked of project groups.

Steering Group members (interviewed)

Roger Clarke, Countryside Commission (Chair)

Simon Brereton, Rural Action NDT

Steve Dann, Rural Development Commission

Jenny Heap, English Nature

Chris Gordon, The Wildlife Trusts

Nick Jenkins, DETR

Mike King, BTCV

Les Roberts, ACRE

Margaret Robinson, English Nature

Jane Rowell, ACRE

Peter Woodward, Shell Better Britain Campaign

Caroline Worfolk, Countryside Commission

Letter to network secretariats

Dear Network Secretariat,

The Countryside Commission has commissioned an evaluation of the achievements and effectiveness of Rural Action, to contribute to discussions about possible new arrangements for Rural Action after 1999.

The results of this study will feed into the deliberations by the Rural Action Steering Group about the future operation and resourcing of the scheme. The Steering Group is made up of the three funding agencies (Countryside Commission, English Nature and the Rural Development Commission), plus ACRE, BTCV, Shell Better Britain Campaign and the Wildlife Trusts.

We would like to invite you to contribute to the study, by letting us have your comments and views on Rural Action's achievements, and on how effectively the programme has been operating over recent years.

The focus of the evaluation

Rural Action was set up to do two things:

- Encourage and enable local rural communities take a leading role, and long term responsibility, in conserving and enhancing their local environment
- Encourage and enable statutory and voluntary agencies to actively support rural communities in their efforts to care for the local environment, through providing easily accessible support and training, technical advice, information and grants.

This evaluation has been set up to assess the extent to which these original aims have been achieved, and whether any changes need to be made to the types of support which Rural Action provides to meet these aims more effectively in future. It will also look at whether these aims are still relevant five years after Rural Action was originally established.

How you can help

The county networks are a vital part of the Rural Action programme, and you are in an excellent position to give well-informed feedback on how it all works.

We would be very grateful if you could help us in three ways:

- **Background information.** Please could you send us, as soon as possible:
 - The latest list of your network members and advisers
 - Examples of any newsletters, local publicity for Rural Action, and publicity for network events or training sessions, etc
 - Any other bits and pieces you think would help us understand the activities of your network.

I enclose an SAE (with 60p of stamps) for you to use to send this material.

- **Detailed feedback.** Over the next week or so, we will telephone you to ask you a few more detailed questions about Rural Action (it should only take 15-20 minutes). The main questions we will cover are attached, but we would be delighted if you want to make any additional points or suggestions.
- **Suggesting local groups and projects.** We need to make direct contact with a number of local community groups who have received project grants. We will also be making contact with the project grant administrators, but if you can recommend any groups which may be able to contribute to this exercise, please let us know. We will collect details when we telephone.

Next stages

The timetable for this evaluation is extremely short, with a final report required by early February 1998. For this reason, the evaluation is being carried out using both the traditional information gathering and evaluation methods, plus an interactive event to discuss issues in more detail. If you are interested in being involved in the later stages of the evaluation process, please let us know.

Diane Warburton has been commissioned by the Countryside Commission to carry out this evaluation. She can be contacted at 11 Clifton Street, Brighton BN1 3PH, telephone and fax 01273 774557, or email on bluesky@pavilion.co.uk. Do make contact if you have any questions or suggestions for the study.

We look forward to speaking to you soon.

Main questions for telephone discussions with network secretariats:

- What are the three things that Rural Action does that you think have worked best, been most successful and achieved most? And why?
- What are the three things that Rural Action does which you think have worked least well? And why?
- Is there still a need for Rural Action's programme of support (funding, and access to training, information and advice)?
- Has Rural Action succeeded in providing these resources in the most effective and efficient ways for local groups?
- Have the needs of local groups changed over the last five years, and if so, what do they now need that is different?
- What difference does a programme like Rural Action make to the quality of action by local communities?
- Have the county networks been the best way of co-ordinating support for local community action, and of encouraging the relevant organisations to work together to improve that support?
- How relevant is Rural Action to Agenda 21 and sustainable development, both locally and nationally?
- How much has Rural Action influenced the thinking and operations of groups and organisations (including statutory bodies, voluntary organisations, local authorities and community groups)?
- How much has Rural Action contributed to capacity building, community development and participation in the community groups it has supported?
- How much has Rural Action reached out and involved a wider range of groups and individuals than those who traditionally participate in environmental activities?

- From your experience of Rural Action, which three things would you say were the most important to include in a programme of support for local community action for sustainable development?
- Can you recommend any groups, which have received grants from Rural Action, that we could contact to discuss these types of questions?

Letter to Project Grant Administrators

Dear Project Grant Administrator,

The Countryside Commission has commissioned an evaluation of the achievements and effectiveness of Rural Action, to contribute to discussions about possible new arrangements for Rural Action after 1999.

The results of this study will feed into the deliberations by the Rural Action Steering Group about the future operation and resourcing of the scheme. The Steering Group is made up of the three funding agencies (Countryside Commission, English Nature and the Rural Development Commission), plus ACRE, BTCV, Shell Better Britain Campaign and the Wildlife Trusts.

We would like to invite you to contribute to the study, by letting us have your comments and views on Rural Action's achievements, and on how effectively the programme has been operating over recent years.

The focus of the evaluation

Rural Action was set up to do two things:

- Encourage and enable local rural communities take a leading role, and long term responsibility, in conserving and enhancing their local environment
- Encourage and enable statutory and voluntary agencies to actively support rural communities in their efforts to care for the local environment, through providing easily accessible support and training, technical advice, information and grants.

This evaluation has been set up to assess the extent to which these original aims have been achieved, and whether any changes need to be made to the types of support which Rural Action provides to meet these aims more effectively in future. It will also look at whether these aims are still relevant five years after Rural Action was originally established.

How you can help

The project grants are a vital part of the Rural Action programme, and you are in an excellent position to give well-informed feedback on how it all works.

We would be very grateful if you could help us in two ways:

- **Detailed feedback.** Over the next week or so, we will telephone you to ask you a few more detailed questions about Rural Action (it should only take 15-20 minutes). The main questions we will cover are attached, but we would be delighted if you want to make any additional points or suggestions.
- **Suggesting local groups and projects.** We need to make direct contact with a number of local community groups who have received project grants. We will also be making contact with the project grant administrators, but if you can recommend any groups which may be able to contribute to this exercise, please let us know. We will collect details when we telephone.

Next stages

The timetable for this evaluation is extremely short, with a final report required by early February 1998. For this reason, the evaluation is being carried out using both the traditional information gathering and evaluation methods, plus an interactive event to discuss issues in more detail. If you are interested in being involved in the later stages of the evaluation process, please let us know.

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We look forward to speaking to you soon.

Main questions for telephone discussions with project grant administrators:

[similar to those asked of network secretariats]

- What are the three things that Rural Action does that you think have worked best, been most successful and achieved most? And why?
- What are the three things that Rural Action does which you think have worked least well? And why?
- Is there still a need for Rural Action's programme of support (funding, and access to training, information and advice)?
- Has Rural Action succeeded in providing these resources in the most effective and efficient ways for local groups?
- Have the needs of local groups changed over the last five years, and if so, what do they now need that is different?
- What difference does a programme like Rural Action make to the quality of action by local communities?
- Have the county networks been the best way of co-ordinating support for local community action, and of encouraging the relevant organisations to work together to improve that support?
- How relevant is Rural Action to Agenda 21 and sustainable development, both locally and nationally?
- How much has Rural Action influenced the thinking and operations of groups and organisations (including statutory bodies, voluntary organisations, local authorities and community groups)?
- How much has Rural Action contributed to capacity building, community development and participation in the community groups it has supported?
- How much has Rural Action reached out and involved a wider range of groups and individuals than those who traditionally participate in environmental activities?
- From your experience of Rural Action, which three things would you say were the most important to include in a programme of support for local community action for sustainable development?
- Can you recommend any groups, which have received grants from Rural Action, that we could contact to discuss these types of questions?

Questions for local project groups

We are currently doing a study of what Rural Action has achieved, and how well it works. We are contacting a number of local groups who have received grants from Rural Action, to ask them a few questions.

Main questions:

- 1 What was your project about - what did you do?
- 2 Did you get advice from Rural Action?
- 3 Who did you get advice from - the person who first came to see you, or did they recommend someone else? Who was that - do you know which organisation they came from?
- 4 Did you think they were the right people to give you advice?
- 5 Was the advice useful? Did it change your project at all? Did it make the project work better?
- 6 About the grants - did you get funding for what you wanted?
- 7 What did you think of the grants system (what is eligible, how long it took etc)?
- 8 Would you recommend Rural Action to other groups like yours?
- 9 If yes, how would you describe Rural Action to them?
- 10 Will you be going on to do other projects? Do you think the help you got from Rural Action has encouraged you to do other things?
- 11 Would you go back to Rural Action for help with another project?
- 12 What do you think is the worst thing about Rural Action?
- 13 Is there anything else that could be improved?
- 14 What are the best things about Rural Action?
- 15 Anything else you would like to say about Rural Action?

APPENDIX 2

Tables and other supporting data

This Appendix covers all the detailed information gathered during the study which informed the analysis and conclusions of the main report. It includes:

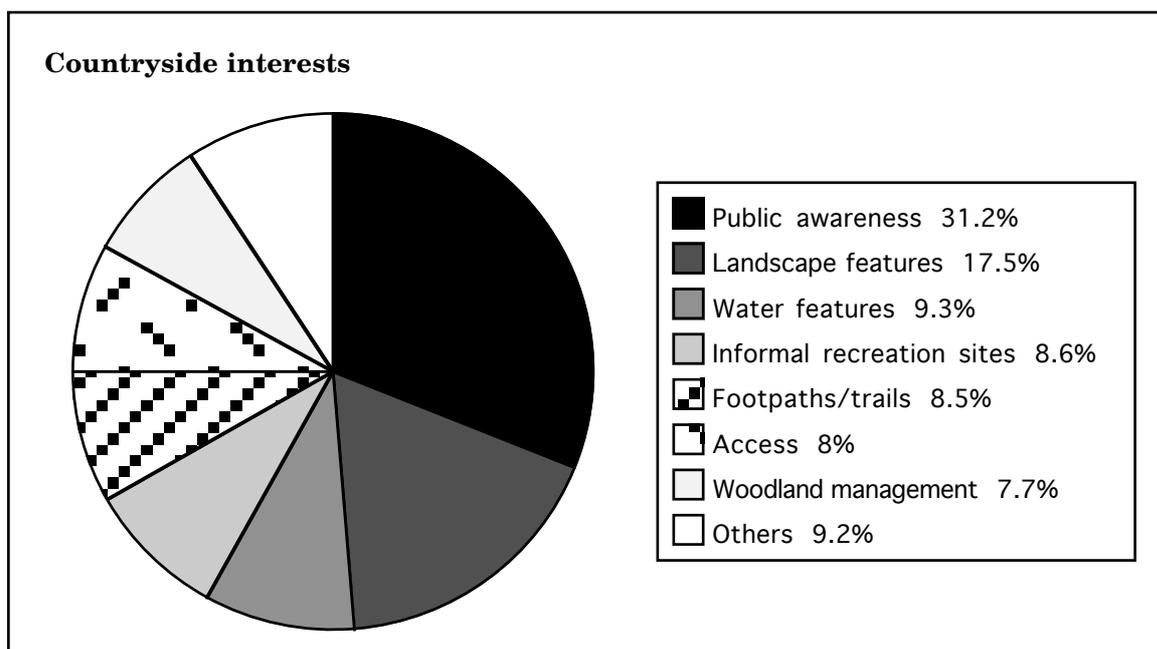
- Types of projects including charts showing types of projects by sponsors objectives
- Table A: Projects per county per year (numbers)
- Table B: Projects per county per year (£value)
- Table C: Matching funding

Types of projects funded by Rural Action

The following analysis shows the types of projects funded by Rural Action, analysed according to the three current sponsors' objectives.

Countryside interests

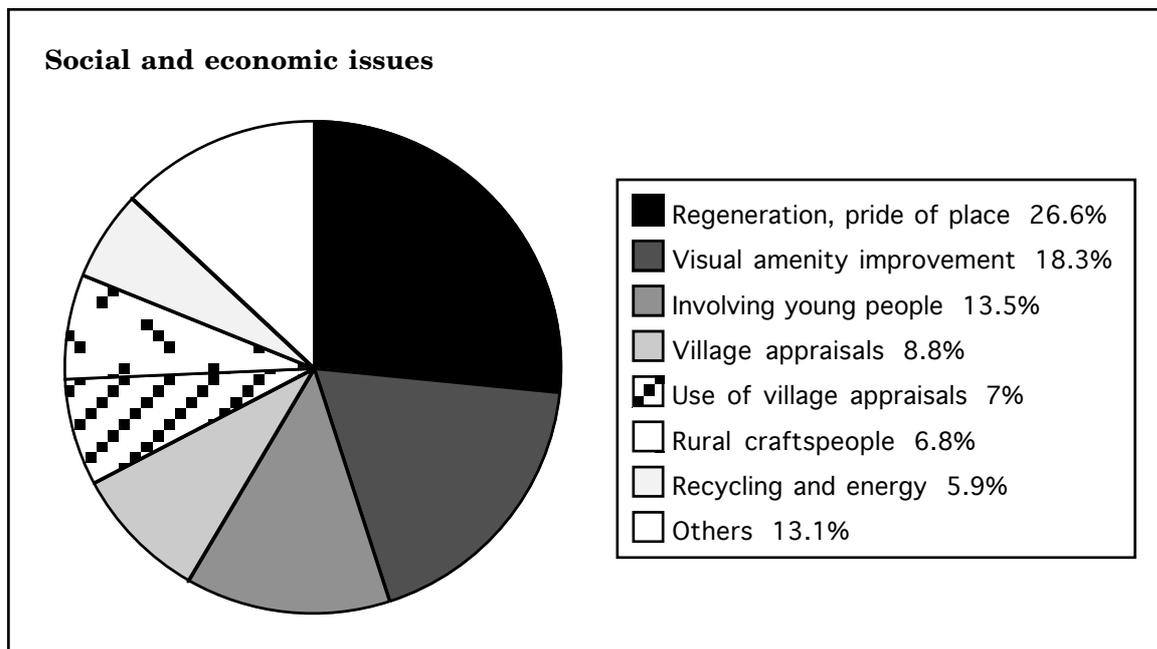
- 85% of projects carried out in 1997 met the interests of the Countryside Commission. This included projects on:
 - Public awareness 31.2%
 - Landscape features 17.5%
 - Water features 9.3%
 - Informal recreation sites 8.6%
 - Footpaths/trails 8.5%
 - Access 8%
 - Woodland management 7.7%
 - Information boards/leaflets 6.6%
 - Litter control/recycling 2.1%
 - Local transport survey 0.5%
 - 100%



Social and economic interests

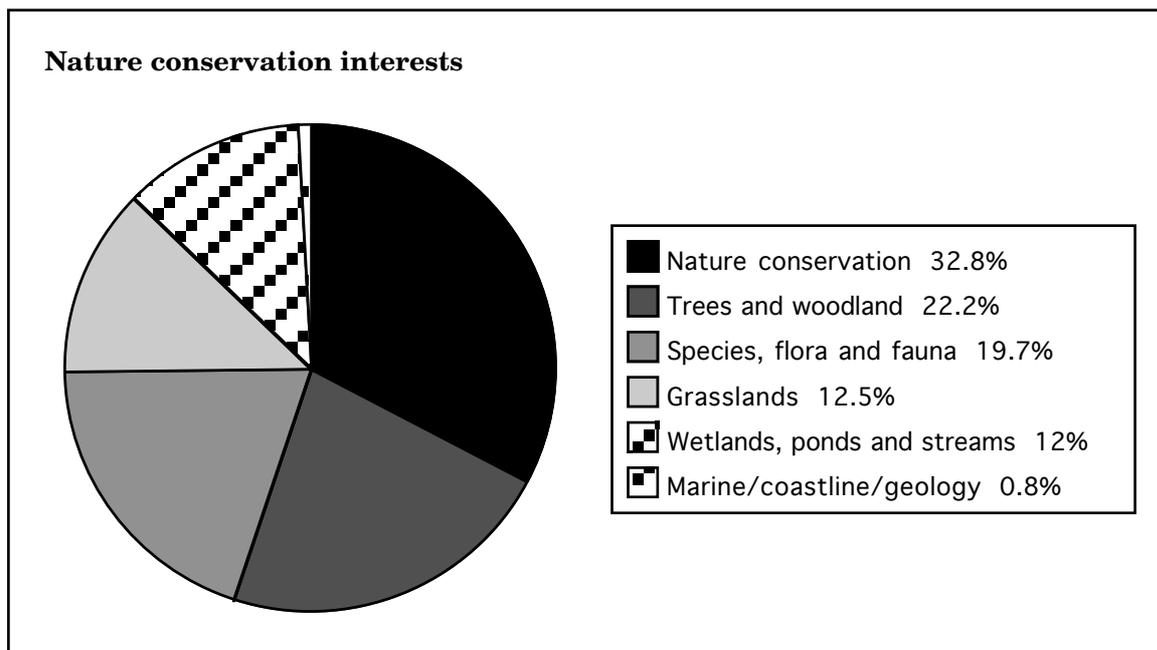
- 75% of projects carried out in 1997 met the interests of the Rural Development Commission by covering social and economic issues. This included projects on:

• Regeneration, pride of place	26.6%
• Visual amenity improvement	18.3%
• Involving young people	13.5%
• Village appraisals	8.8%
• Use of village services	7.0%
• Rural craftspeople	6.8%
• Recycling and energy	5.9%
• Booklets and newsletters	5.4%
• Green tourism	3.2%
• Disadvantaged	3.0%
• Traffic calming/surveys	1.5%
	100%



Nature conservation interests

- 65% of projects carried out in 1997 met the interests of English Nature by covering nature conservation issues. This included projects on:
 - Nature conservation 32.8%
 - Trees and woodland 22.2%
 - Species, flora and fauna 19.7%
 - Grasslands 12.5%
 - Wetlands, ponds and streams 12.0%
 - Marine/coastline 0.5%
 - Geology 0.3%



Environmental processes

The projects are also categorised on the NDT database in terms of environmental 'processes'. According to this analysis, there were projects which involved the following:

• Restoration and improvements	26.3%
• Surveys and research	14.9%
• Creating of new features	12.4%
• Promotion and raising awareness	11.4%
• Design and management planning	9.9%
• Skills training	6.2%
• Art in the environment	5.8%
• Increasing knowledge	3.4%
• Data gathering and recording	3.0%
• Celebration events	3.0%
• Local Agenda 21	2.8%
• Group development	1.0%
	100%

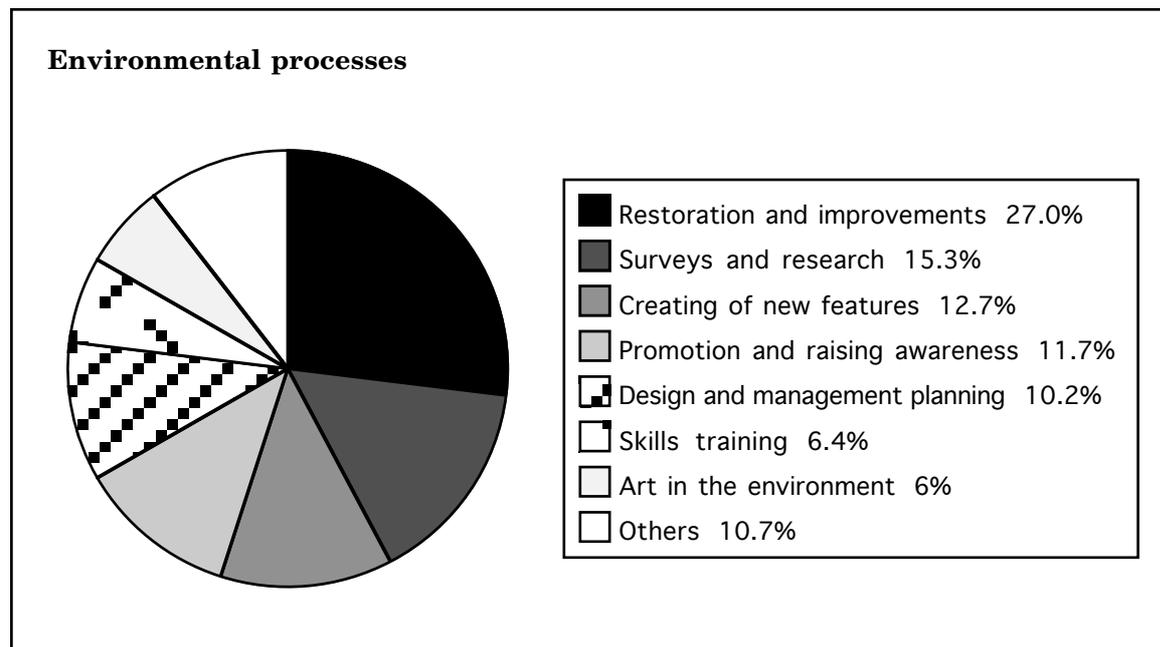


Table A. Projects per county per year (numbers)

	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
Avon	8	33	21	20	35
Bedfordshire	2	18	15	27	11
Berkshire	-	3	7	8	13
Bucks	10	26	13	17	22
Cambs	9	18	41	15	9
Cheshire	-	4	8	9	12
Cleveland	5	7	2	6	6
Cornwall	11	31	24	19	14
Cumbria	12	10	32	41	48
Derbyshire	-	5	11	9	19
Devon	33	29	34	27	24
Dorset	7	26	15	16	14
Durham	-	17	29	33	31
Essex	5	16	15	14	23
Glos	-	7	23	34	34
Hampshire	2	9	11	10	17
Here&Worc	-	-	3	17	16
Herts	3	18	7	11	15
Humberside	-	1	12	5	7
Isle of Wigh	15	52	63	34	36
Kent	32	16	24	9	27
Lancs	-	16	27	21	33
Leics	-	-	8	9	21
Lincs	-	15	23	20	16
Norfolk	20	36	19	18	20
Northants	-	4	20	19	25
Northumb	-	6	14	9	16
Notts	15	26	22	26	25
Oxon	12	24	28	22	31
Shropshire	28	33	63	53	66
Somerset	-	-	3	14	12
Staffs	4	15	9	3	10
Suffolk	6	25	14	20	20
Surrey	9	29	51	31	43
Sussex	15	45	30	33	40
Warks	9	19	18	24	36
Wiltshire	7	87	69	71	81
Yorks (N)	-	1	25	35	48
Yorks (S)	-	-	16	10	8
Yorks (W)	3	13	26	17	14
TOTAL	282	750	895	836	998

Notes to Table A:

- Figures supplied by the NDT
- Figures supplied in January 1998, so not final for 1997

Table B. Projects per county per year (£ value)

	1993 £ value	1994 £ value	1995 £ value	1996 £ value	1997 £ value
Avon	4,800	32,328	17,263	12,059	39,079
Bedfordshire	2,720	11,669	14,428	25,714	6,847
Berkshire	-	662	4,237	4,582	14,173
Bucks	8,590	16,031	11,551	12,647	23,664
Cambs	5,027	14,896	26,217	6,662	9,875
Cheshire	-	5,183	7,418	13,354	14,241
Cleveland	1,830	3,084	1,500	4,752	5,985
Cornwall	8,321	34,217	22,182	15,775	13,149
Cumbria	11,779	7,760	18,433	24,516	32,849
Derbyshire	-	4,317	11,764	9,240	21,369
Devon	29,123	25,989	24,644	24,247	26,693
Dorset	6,891	25,971	13,398	16,494	11,118
Durham	-	17,893	28,687	40,790	39,061
Essex	6,916	8,894	8,962	9,212	13,640
Glos	-	6,606	20,974	32,750	31,026
Hampshire	2,747	5,030	7,785	5,779	15,828
Here&Worc	-	-	2,375	10,298	13,555
Herts	2,641	19,164	9,780	14,385	14,615
Humberside	-	441	13,208	6,087	5,451
Isle of Wigh	23,176	61,319	86,886	45,578	48,885
Kent	32,302	16,476	19,013	7,692	25,674
Lancs	-	23,739	22,397	16,168	30,646
Leics	-	-	4,405	6,811	12,086
Lincs	-	15,600	20,453	15,595	13,888
Norfolk	19,228	27,046	20,149	12,818	18,363
Northants	-	1,582	13,957	12,985	17,921
Northumb	-	5,602	9,735	7,919	17,092
Notts	14,781	18,499	14,905	18,497	26,555
Oxon	7,809	16,022	21,596	15,261	22,748
Shropshire	20,403	17,993	31,847	26,932	39,563
Somerset	-	-	1,523	8,026	12,472
Staffs	3,655	14,543	9,933	1,249	9,180
Suffolk	6,229	22,790	8,420	17,833	12,499
Surrey	8,445	25,150	39,614	28,431	42,609
Sussex	13,669	47,731	25,425	27,272	39,797
Warks	11,802	13,590	10,373	11,115	27,629
Wiltshire	9,396	90,775	58,720	39,164	45,875
Yorks (N)	-	451	18,639	27,611	51,248
Yorks (S)	-	-	15,414	11,985	12,889
Yorks (W)	2,435	11,510	20,347	15,971	14,501
TOTAL	264,712	671,452	738,552	664,220	894,338

Notes to Table B:

- Figures supplied by the NDT
- Figures supplied in January 1998, so not final for 1997

Table C. Match funding for Rural Action projects

	1992 £	1993 £	1994 £	1995 £	1996 £	1997 £	Total £
Total grants	11,020	264,712	672,69	737,16	663,13	887,92	3,236,65
Match funding							
Voluntary labour	8,010	378,27	968,60	966,68	888,68	1,144,97	4,354,61
In kind	1,362	57,51	162,62	186,38	139,16	215,35	762,40
Local authorities	3,750	57,32	67,04	83,50	67,60	73,83	353,06
Parish / town councils	2,216	36,29	47,94	70,51	47,37	64,53	268,87
Shell BBC	650	11,86	9,46	12,84	9,34	5,55	49,71
Other	2,000	119,59	246,88	235,58	255,65	441,49	1,301,19
Total match funding	17,989	660,86	1,502,56	1,554,89	1,407,81	1,945,74	7,089,86
Total project value	29,009	925,57	2,175,25	2,292,05	2,070,95	2,833,67	10,326,51

Notes to Table C:

- *In kind* includes:
 - materials and equipment donated
 - facilities donated
 - labour donated
- *Other* funding includes:
 - local fundraising, such as jumble sales
 - support from local business
- Figures used for Fig 2 in the main report.

APPENDIX 3

Details of network budgets and activities

This Appendix includes details of network budgets, analysis of network members, details of network training and other activities.

Network budgets

Table D. Balance between network budgets for development, outreach and promotion in work programmes between September 1996 and end of 1997.

	Network development	Outreach	Promotion	TOTAL
Avon	860	2,716	1,920	5,496
Beds	2,635	2,330	1,150	6,115
Berkshire	550	3,520	1,495	5,565
Bucks	1,200	2,646	1,105	4,951
Cambs	502	4,378	717	5,597
Cheshire	1,375	-	1,125	2,500
Cornwall	3,653	4,400	1,200	9,253
Cumbria	540	320	3,246	4,106
Derbyshire	3,875	2,053	3,250	9,178
Devon	3,246	4,160	1,850	9,256
Dorset	-	2,385	300	2,685
Durham	2,045	550	4,050	6,645
Essex	200	3,830	985	5,015
Glos	2,852	1,000	940	4,792
Hants	450	3,190	500	4,140
Here & Worcs	1,080	3,750	1,800	6,630
Herts	1,850	1,900	3150	6,900
Humberside	1,140	380	3,687	5,207
Isle of Wight	660	3,240	2,120	6,020
Kent	1,000	5,205	900	7,105
Lancs	2,385	3,145	525	6,058
Leics	818	1,350	1,770	3,939
Lincs	629	4,250	4,660	9,539
Norfolk	1,725	1,000	1,900	4,625
Northants	840	780	3,335	4,955
Northum	590	900	3,039	4,529
Notts	1,700	4,630	1,650	7,980
Oxon	1,366	3,011	741	5,118
Shropshire	230	4,859	1,555	6,644
Somerset	1,220	2,220	2,425	5,865
Staffs	1,945	720	1,155	3,820
Suffolk	387	-	1,485	1,872
Surrey	1,255	1,215	863	3,330
Sussex	2,200	5,510	1,400	9,110

Warks	2,570	2,310	3,659	8539
Wiltshire	2,643	6,025	630	9,286
Yorks (N)	3,773	-	2,985	6,758
Yorks (S)	750	1,680	1,270	3,700
Yorks (W)	2,455	-	3,235	5,690

Note to Table D:

- Figures supplied by the NDT.

Detailed analysis of network membership

Three sets of data follow:

- A breakdown of the local authority departments involved
- An analysis of the 'other' organisations involved
- An analysis of the issues on which advisors can provide help, where these were detailed in lists and directories.

Network members come from a wide range of local authority departments including the following:

- Arboriculture
- Archaeology
- Arts
- Community and leisure
- Conservation
- Countryside (management) advisers
- Cultural and recreational services
- Cycling/pedestrian officers
- Development / Environmental Services
- Ecology unit and ecologists
- Economic development
- Energy
- Engineering
- Environmental health
- Environmental initiatives officer
- Estates
- Forestry
- Green Belt
- Heritage
- Highways
- Land reclamation
- Landscape
- Libraries, Museums and Galleries
- Local Agenda 21 officers (19 individuals)
- Parish paths officers
- Parks
- Planning
- Recycling
- Rights of Way
- Road Safety
- Rural development and planning
- Social services
- Sports and leisure

- Sustainable development
- Technical services
- Tourism
- Traffic
- Transport
- Urban Fringe Countryside Management
- Waste (disposal)
- Youth services

Other organisations involved in Rural Action networks include:

- ADAS (3)
- Adult education (3)
- AONB projects (3)
- Arts organisations (14)
- Church organisations (4)
- Civic Trust/society (8)
- Councils for Voluntary Service (5)
- Country Landowners Association (CLA) (5)
- Countryside Commission (15)
- Countryside projects (19)
- CPRE (10)
- English Nature (15)
- Environment Agency (6)
- Environment trusts (4)
- Environmental networks (5)
- Farming and Wildlife Advisory Groups (FWAGs) (14)
- Forestry Authority/Commission/Enterprise (7)
- Forests: including Forest of Avon, Mersey Forest, Great North Forest, Forest of Dean, National Forest, Rockingham Forest, Greenwood Community Forest, Forest of Mercia (10)
- Friends of the Earth (4)
- Groundwork trusts (16)
- Heritage coasts (9)
- LEADER programmes (3)
- Museums (7)
- National Farmers Union (5)
- National Parks (7)
- National Trust (3)
- Parish and Town Council Associations (9)
- Ramblers (7)
- Regional Arts (4)
- RSPB (5)
- Rural Development Commission (10)
- Silvanus Trust (3)
- Tidy Britain (3)
- Tourist board and partnerships (7)
- Universities and colleges (15)
- Volunteer bureaux and forums (3)
- WI Federations (11)
- Young Farmers Clubs (4)
- Youth clubs/services (7)

In addition, the following organisations were mentioned once or twice in the lists received:

- Canals trust
- Co-operative Development Agency
- Disabled (organisations)
- Ecological Design Association
- Energy organisations
- Environ
- Environmental education
- Police
- Sports Council
- Sustrans
- TEC
- Technical aid centres
- Vision 21
- Water companies
- Woodland Trust
- Youth Hostels Association

The issues on which advisors could provide help, where these were detailed in lists and directories, included the following:

- Agenda 21
- Animal welfare
- Animation
- Arts, crafts
- Biodiversity
- Business, employment and economic development
- Charcoal making and bodging
- Community consultation
- Community development
- Community involvement
- Community transport
- Cycling
- Derelict land
- Drama
- Energy
- Environmental law
- Farm diversification
- Film and video
- Folk arts
- Green tourism
- Hydrological surveys
- Illustration
- Interpretation
- Land reclamation
- Music
- Orchards and apple tree varieties
- Organic produce
- Pollution control
- Railway preservation
- Reminiscence work
- Roadside verges
- Storytellers
- Sustainable development
- Training

- Transport
- Waste (disposal and reduction)
- Working with disabled people; older people; young people
- Working with volunteers
- Writing

Details of network activities

Network training activities have included courses and other events on or for the following:

- Appraisals (*Lincs, Wiltshire*)
 - Bats (*Essex*)
 - Churchyards (*Beds, Wiltshire, Essex*)
 - Community action projects (*Avon, Beds*)
 - Community action training and community development techniques (*Cambs, Derbyshire, Leics, Dorset, Glos, Norfolk, Notts, Shropshire*)
 - Coppice crafts (*Notts*)
 - Drystone walling (*Oxon*)
 - Energy conservation and/or efficiency (*Cumbria, Essex*)
 - Environmental surveys (*Lincs*)
 - Health and safety (*Suffolk*)
 - Hedgelaying (*Bucks, Warks*)
 - Ideas for Action (*Avon*)
 - Interpretation (*Derbyshire*)
 - Landscape (*Essex*)
 - Leading a workday (*Wiltshire*)
 - Management plans (*Essex*)
 - Media (*Durham*)
 - Mowing (*Bucks*)
 - Otter projects (*Hereford & Worcs*)
 - Parish boundaries (*Hants*)
 - Parish trees (*Essex*)
 - Park Rangers (*Cumbria*)
 - Planning for Real (*Beds, Essex, Herts, Shropshire*)
 - Rights of Way (*Essex*)
 - Scrub-cutting (*Bucks*)
 - Tree wardens (*Cornwall, Isle of Wight*)
 - Village action plans: facilitators training (*Sussex*)
 - Village halls (*Wiltshire*)
 - Wildlife surveys (*Warks*)
 - Woodlands (*Hants*)
 - Worcestershire Wildlife (*Hereford and Worcs*)
 - Working with volunteers (*Essex*)
 - Volunteers (*Notts*)
 - Youth leaders (*Cambs*)
- **Events.** Other network events, which are also likely to include training elements, include the following:
 - Action for wildlife (*Wiltshire*)
 - Adopt a Station (*Cumbria*)
 - Apple Day (*Cumbria*)
 - Arts Day (*Cumbria*)
 - Best Kent Village conservation schemes (*Oxon*)

- Celebration days for rural community action (*Avon, Glos, Notts, Shropshire, Northumberland*)
- Churchyard assessment and management (*Bucks, Shropshire, Kent*)
- Community action day (*Beds*)
- Community action plans (*Sussex*)
- Community conference (*Glos, Sussex*)
- Community environment forum (*Isle of Wight*)
- Community group action forum (*Hants, Norfolk, Sussex*)
- Community halls conference (*Kent*)
- Community ownership conference: how land and buildings can be owned and managed by the community (*Dorset*)
- Environmental education workshops (*Cumbria*)
- Environmental happenings event (*Glos*)
- Getting started (*Surrey*)
- Greening the Village Hall (*Lincs*)
- Greening Your Village and ideas sessions (*Beds, Berks, Bucks, Cambs, Derbyshire, Hereford & Worcs, Leics, Lincs, Oxon, Shropshire, S Yorks, Staffs, Sussex*)
- Evaluation Day (*Devon*)
- Jigsaw workshops (*Kent*)
- Living Churchyards (*Oxon*)
- Local action conference (*Lancs*)
- Local Agenda 21 (*Avon, Cambs, Dorset - exhibition, Isle of Wight, Kent, Suffolk - roadshow on issues eg traffic, Sussex - high level seminar for 50 people including local authorities*)
- Local distinctiveness day (*Isle of Wight, Lincs, Norfolk*)
- Local heritage day (*Shropshire*)
- Love Your Lane Day (*Essex*)
- Millennium Greens: promotion and support (*Suffolk*)
- Nature Awareness (*Hereford & Worcs*)
- Noise (*Surrey*)
- Parish councils seminar/event (*Hants, Cheshire*)
- Parish hedge assessment (*Bucks*)
- Parish grounds (*Notts, Oxon*)
- Parish maps (*Berks, Bucks, Cornwall, Hants, Wiltshire*)
- Pocket parks (*Sussex*)
- Ponds (*Cambs, Lincs - for parish councils, Oxon*)
- Pride of place workshops (*Kent*)
- Sustainable transport day: cycling, LA21, parks, leisure, planting, health, Sustrans, Greenways (*Suffolk*)
- Towards the Millennium: ideas for projects (*Shropshire*)
- Tree warden forum (*Hereford & Worcs*)
- Village appraisal (*Bucks*)
- Village design statements (*Suffolk*)
- Village greens and commons (*Cumbria*)
- Village halls forum (*Glos*)
- Village trails (*Bucks*)
- Waymarking (*Cumbria*)
- WI workshop on creating parish walks and trails (*Oxon*)
- Women's Institutes evening (*Oxon*)
- Woodlands Remembered (*Shropshire*)
- Working with young people (*Cambs*)
- Youth groups (*Shropshire*)

- Other network activities, which are also likely to include training elements through events or publications, include the following:
 - Arts in Rural Action (*Cambs - landscapes*)
 - Black poplar conservation (*Bucks*)
 - The Church and the Environment (*Essex*)
 - Church environmental audits (*Kent*)
 - Community action (*Cheshire*)
 - Community business from waste (*Devon*)
 - Community composting (*Bucks, Lincs*)
 - Community Needs Research (*Shropshire*)
 - Community Recycling and composting demonstration (*Devon*)
 - Community open space (*Kent*)
 - Designing Parish Walks (*Oxon*)
 - Energy audits (*Beds, Leics, Suffolk*)
 - Festival of the Coast (*Cumbria*)
 - Grassland Management (*Essex*)
 - Hedgerow campaign (*Kent*)
 - How to make your parish a better place (*Essex*)
 - Local Transport Survey for young people: especially access to, use of and attitudes to public transport (*Dorset*)
 - Parish 2000 (*Northants*)
 - Pond and hedge restoration (*Cheshire*)
 - Pond management (*Bucks, Essex*)
 - Project leadership (*Norfolk*)
 - Recycling network (*Cornwall, Kent*)
 - Tracks and trails (*W. Yorks*)
 - Training needs survey (*Dorset*)
 - Trees, paths and wildlife (*Cambs*)
 - Village action plans (*Sussex*)
 - Village appraisals (*Dorset, Kent, Oxon*)
 - Verge management (*Kent*)
 - Waymarks and signs (*Cambs*)
 - Wildlife in your neighbourhood (*Bucks*)
 - Woodland action (*Lincs*)

- **Leaflets and packs.** Networks also product a wide range of publications designed to raise awareness of issues and provide first steps and ideas for groups, contributing to capacity building and training, including the following:
 - Badger Action Pack (*Durham*)
 - Churchyards management (*Shropshire*)
 - Community action packs (*Wiltshire*)
 - Community conservation (*Devon*)
 - Community enterprise: local produce, day nurseries, composting, cultural events, credit unions, LETS (*Devon*)
 - Community recycling (*Devon*)
 - Community training (*Hants*)
 - Directory of Community Projects (*Suffolk*)
 - Environmental Awareness for yachters and visitors (*Isle of Wight*)
 - God's Little Acre (*Devon*)
 - Grants list (*Beds, Bucks, Staffs*)
 - Grassroots Directory (*Kent*)
 - Landscape Management (*Dorset*)
 - Local Distinctiveness (*Devon*)
 - Parish Action Pack (*Beds*)

- Parish Environmental Survey (*Lincs*)
- Parish maps (*Berks, Bucks, Leics, Shropshire*)
- Practical Action (*Devon*)
- Pride of Place (*Kent*)
- Recycling Newsletter (*Devon*)
- Red Squirrel Slidepack (*Isle of Wight*)
- Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency (*Leics*)
- Tree planting (*Cornwall*)
- Village Appraisals (*Lincs*)
- Wildlife Guide for Groups (*Devon*)