Communities Count: The LITMUS Test
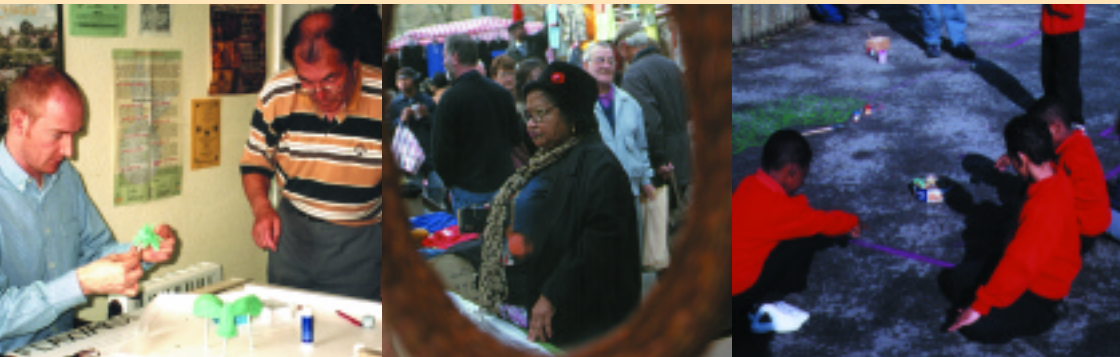
Reflecting Community Indicators in the London Borough of Southwark

by

Sanjiv Lingayah and Florian Sommer
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Acknowledgements

About this booklet

There have been numerous manuals, handbooks and guides to indicators in recent times. These include NEF's 'Communities Count:[1] A step by step guide to sustainability indicators' and the DETR's 'Local Quality of Life Counts'[2]. So why produce another one?

We think that the role of this handbook is different. While it contains elements of 'how to' do local indicators, its main focus is on taking stock and reflecting on the two years of indicators effort undertaken by the LITMUS project (local indicators to monitor urban sustainability). This reflection is timely as indicators are becoming an increasingly important and widely used tool in managing sustainability/quality of life.

The danger is that indicators are collected because this is the 'done thing'. What NEF and LITMUS have worked for are 'indicators for action' – tools that help us to modify action to make communities more sustainable.

We hope that the experience of LITMUS will be useful to a wide audience. This handbook captures lessons of the LITMUS team as a result of their work. It may be of particular value to people working in:

- Voluntary organisations and community groups
- Regeneration Partnerships, e.g. SRB and NDC
- Local authorities e.g. Community Plans, Local Agenda 21.

We do not have all the answers to making community based indicators effective and action-orientated tools. But we do think that the LITMUS experience can inform other use of indicators. We share what LITMUS did and what has been learned and hope that this can inform future practice.

Finally, if readers are interested in more information on 'how to' aspects of community based indicators, we suggest that this handbook be used in conjunction with 'Communities Count', mentioned above, and a new handbook from NEF for Groundwork and Barclays, called 'Prove It! Measuring the effect of neighbourhood renewal on local people'[3].

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The New Economics Foundation (NEF) is a registered charity acting to promote a 'new' economy which delivers quality of life and respects environmental limits. NEF was engaged by the London Borough of Southwark to support the LITMUS process through local awareness raising, training and support of volunteers.

CONTENTS

1. About Community-based indicators

INTRODUCTION

Indicators are everywhere. From the Canary in the mines that warned of gas leaks, to modern favourites like school exam pass rates and hospital waiting lists, indicators are hard to avoid. Their popularity is no accident. Indicators measure, simplify and communicate important information. They tell us where we are and help us to work out in which direction we should be heading. Because of this they are particularly helpful in relatively unknown territory like sustainable development.

Sustainable development can be defined as progress that provides 'for a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come'[4] . This means taking care of important issues like crime, unemployment and the environment. Indicators can help do this in different ways:

'Some [indicators] will help to galvanise political commitment; some are useful in monitoring and managing change; while others may be best at stimulating public participation.'[6]

COMMUNITIES COUNT – EVEN MORE

Indicators of sustainable development or quality of life are used internationally, nationally, in UK regions and communities. In 1998 NEF published the handbook Communities Count: A step by step guide to sustainability indicators. Since then local indicators projects have taken off. NEF and partner organisation Environ recently managed a DETR project involving 29 local authorities – covering seven million people – to develop a local menu of quality of life indicators[6]. The Audit Commission is currently building on this work.

But not all local indicator projects involve the community to any great extent. Some involve the local authority taking a strong lead. Community-based indicators are where local people play a central role in identifying and measuring the things that they care about. This way of working gets local people participating and builds on their expertise.

This handbook outlines a process undertaken by LITMUS involving various, broadly sequential, steps. These are as follows:

- Raising awareness
- Involving people and identifying issues
- Developing indicators
- Monitoring and communicating indicators
- Taking action

THE **L I T M U S** TEST

The LITMUS project took place between March 1998 and March 2000. It was funded by the Life Programme of the European Commission as an action research project to find out more about the use and role of community indicators. In particular, LITMUS wanted to test the following two hypotheses:

The first hypothesis: 'Community sustainability indicators are adaptable tools that can bring about increased environmental awareness and changes in behaviour in urban populations including those where there are high levels of unemployment and social exclusion. As a result, people can take a more active role in the management of their neighbourhoods which, in turn, can help to reduce social exclusion.'[7]

The second hypothesis: 'Community sustainability indicators can be used to monitor the effectiveness of urban regeneration programmes and provide clear direction for improvements to these programmes'.

LITMUS, set up and managed by Southwark Council (Regeneration, Planning, Policy and Research), developed and used community indicators in two regeneration areas in the London Borough of Southwark: the Peckham Partnership, and Aylesbury Plus area. Both areas are densely populated, urban areas with major social and economic problems. One in four households has an income of under £100 per week and single parents head almost 50 percent of families. The unemployment rate is about 11 percent (double the UK average). Each area is home to about 10,000 residents and two thirds of the households are from black or other ethnic minority groups. Both areas contain a large amount of public housing, including high-rise developments.
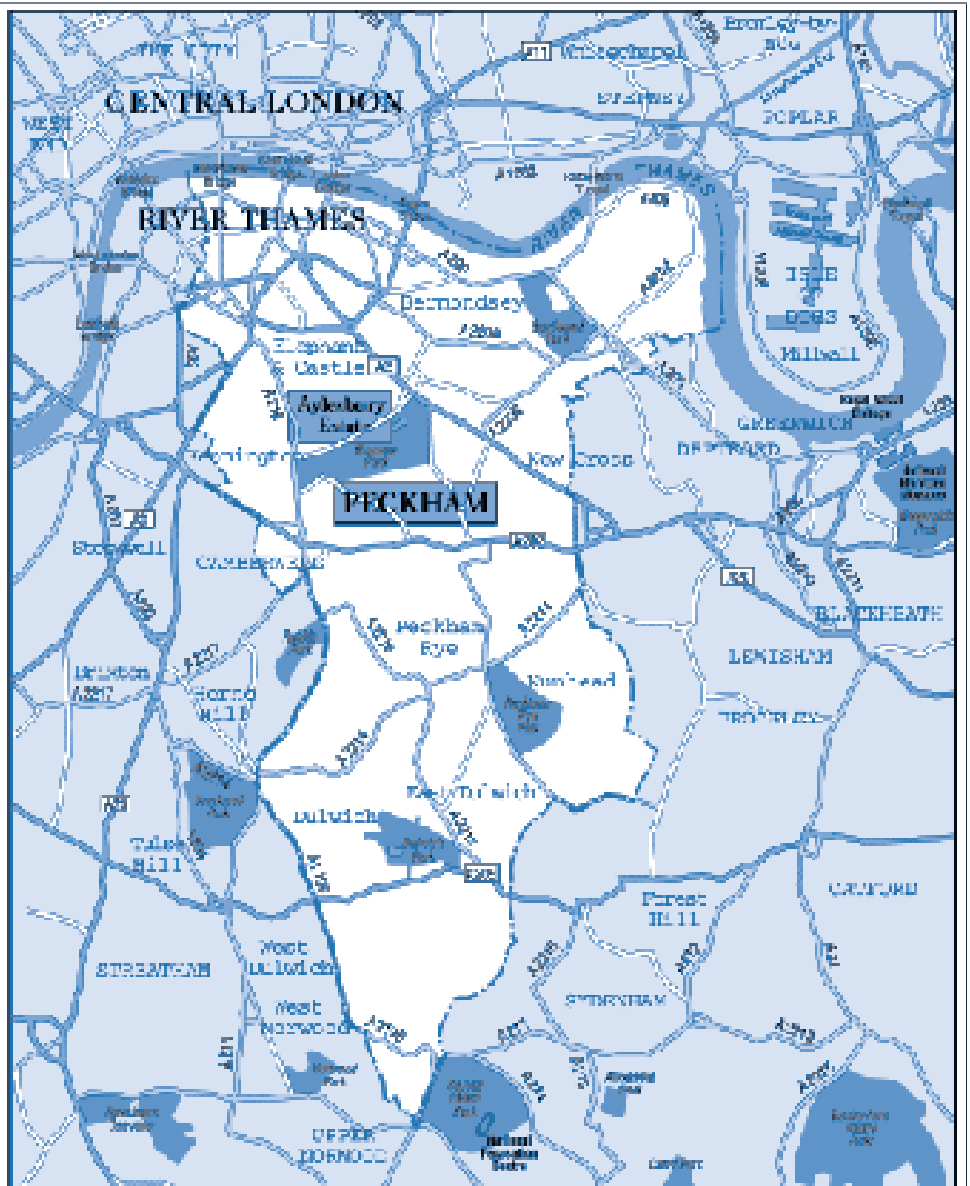
Peckham and the Aylesbury Estate within the London Borough of Southwark

2. Raising awareness

Raise the profile of the project, plan the next stages, and enlist help.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

Community based indicators can't work without the community! But getting the involvement of local people is not easy. This is especially the case when the council takes a lead. In 1999, according to the British Social Attitudes Survey, 40% of people agreed with the statement: 'Councillors don't care much what people like me think'.

Raising awareness helps to get local people interested and involved in the project. There are a number of benefits that involvement in indicators can bring. These include:

● Ensuring that **local concerns** are heard
● Enhancing **local capacity** and skills by getting people to work together
● Tapping into **local expertise** and skills
● Providing **better quality data** because people know what to count
● Developing **practical solutions** by building on local knowledge.

Local people as local experts

Involvement in indicators can be a channel for the skills of local people. One participant in a 1995 focus group said: 'it comes back to local knowledge. People have said that the beaches are more polluted than what they've been for years. I could have told you that. Because I've seen from upstairs for 30 years and looked out the window every day and seen the colour of the sand change colour. Whereas it used to be like everyone imagines sand, it's now a browny colour.'[8]

Before deciding how to raise awareness about the project it is first important to decide who needs to know. A geographical community embraces a diverse range of people of different racial, social and economic backgrounds. They all have something to contribute – but will have different skills and interests.

You may decide to prioritise the involvement of some parts of the community. Such groups might include single parents, ethnic minorities, young people and so on. This depends on what the project is trying to achieve. It may be that a representative sample of the whole community is needed to make the project work. Either way you need to know how the community is made up.

The community might not be limited to local residents. Useful and energetic partners in indicator processes could include local businesses, the Health Authority, schools and local voluntary organisations. This kind of involvement can be especially useful when it comes to getting action taken as the project proceeds.

Narrowing down stakeholders

There are potentially numerous local groups or stakeholders that should be involved in community based indicators.

The following points can help you to think about who to involve:

● Who or what groups are most important?

● Does involvement need to be statistically representative e.g. will results be queried otherwise? Is it a case of broad involvement for many or deep involvement from few?

● Are there people or groups who always get involved - should new stakeholders be attracted?

● Who are most likely to influence the indicator project in terms of gathering information or taking action – should they be in?

● Who you want to get involved affects how you reach them. Different groups from the local community will probably need to be reached in different ways.

THE L I T M U S APPROACH

Initial assessment

When it started LITMUS found out what was already happening in the two target areas regarding promoting sustainable development, using indicators to measure performance, and consulting the local community.

Raising awareness locally

Members of LITMUS staff liaised with key people in the voluntary sector and Southwark Council and carried out research in order to identify potential partner organisations. The identified organisations (voluntary organisations, several units of Southwark Council, project teams of Peckham Partnership and Aylesbury Plus regeneration programme, local businesses, community groups and key resident groups) were contacted via meetings, presentations, phone calls, or mail shots.

LITMUS adopted three key messages in order to raise awareness among this audience :[9]

● 'Southwark is developing a way to monitor the 'quality of life' of its residents'.
● 'This is an innovative project which will set the agenda for regeneration strategies across Europe'.
● 'Indicators will be used to improve the impact of regeneration'.

REACHING LOCAL RESIDENTS

Mail shots: LITMUS produced a leaflet, which was sent to several hundred local residents.

Street party: LITMUS developed contacts by helping local residents to organise a street party (Wodehouse Street).

Stalls at local events: LITMUS raised its profile through several local events (e.g. Surrey Square Winter Fair, Peckham Fun Day, Aylesbury Plus Open Day, Black and Asian Women's Network and SCCR conference). In most cases LITMUS was invited to participate in events, in some cases LITMUS helped to organise the event.

Publishing articles in local newsletters: LITMUS published short articles in community based and council newsletters.

The LITMUS team approaches local people at an event in Southwark

✔ LESSONS FROM LITMUS

A number of lessons emerged from this early phase of the LITMUS work.

The dangers of jargon

Most local people were not familiar with the term sustainable development. LITMUS identified the following way of explaining sustainable development to local people: 'sustainable development is about quality of life in your community for everyone, today and in the future'.

Local events

Stalls at local events were a good way of raising awareness and meeting people. Playing a part in organising events helped to develop trust and working relationships with other people and organisations involved.

First impressions

First impressions last. It proved important to be clear on what LITMUS had to offer other organisations and people before approaching them. An assessment can be made in advance to identify shared interests.

Knowing the local community

Knowing the local context and its history of community involvement makes life easier. The LITMUS team had only little experience with the local community and voluntary sector. Working with local champions helped them to bridge this gap.

The importance of trust

Trust is crucial. LITMUS was a council led initiative. This caused some problems in developing trust with voluntary organisations, community groups and local residents.

Time and effort is required to build this trust.

The problem of big projects

LITMUS had enough European funding to employ four full time officers for two years. This was a lot of money compared to the funding sources of other local organisations. Some organisations were envious and not keen on working with LITMUS.

Making local linkages

It is absolutely crucial to use every opportunity to integrate a local indicator initiative into the existing networks of local organisations and community groups. LITMUS tried to do that, but it was not always easy because of a lack of credibility and trust.

3. Involving people and identifying issues

Identify and agree on the issues that are of most local concern.
People can get involved through questionnaires, interviews and workshops.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

Once people know about the project it will be easier to get them on board. Getting people involved is crucial to making good decisions. In one Scottish community, the council decided to reopen the local school to re-energise the village and reduce travelling for the children. It turned out that the children wanted to go to the bigger school in the next village. It meant more friends and a nice bus ride. But they just weren't asked!

There are also examples where the local community has been asked about their concerns.

In the London Borough of Brent regular Area Forums take place across the borough. These divide the borough into five manageable chunks of around four wards each.

The Forums allow local people to attend and raise issues with council officers and councillors who are in attendance. The number of people attending the Forums varies but can be as high as 200 people.

The meetings are used to inform council policy and are used in conjunction with bodies such as the one thousand strong Citizens' Panel.

INVOLVEMENT: HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?

There are different ways to involve the community in the indicator project. In many ways, any type of involvement or participation is a positive step and better than the community having things done to them. But there is a rise in cases of 'clipboard' fatigue. This is where communities are tired of being asked by researchers about what they need and simply want to get things moving.

The table below shows different types of involvement. As you go down the table the role of the community grows.

Type of involvement	What happens (or doesn't)	Favoured techniques
Informing	People are given the news about what has already been planned or decided. 'The reason we have chosen route Y is…'	Leaflets, press, television, radio, exhibitions, word of mouth, rumour.
Asking	Gathering information about what people do or want. 'Where do children play?' or 'Which option on the increase in our council tax should we go for?'	Interviews, questionnaires, opinion polls, surveys, public meetings (usually with fixed agendas), focus groups, citizen's juries.
Working together	Helping people to work through ideas and options, encouraging consensus. For example, 'What is your vision for X?' Includes partnership working.	Workshops, visioning processes, community theatre, Planning for Real, stakeholder forums - and more.
Supporting	Identifying exciting community initiatives, then giving appropriate support. This involves real delegation of authority to give citizens decision-making clout. 'We are looking for people who want to start projects to help achieve our Community Plan.'	Advice, access to information and expertise, in-kind support, access to networks, funding.

Source: Adapted from 'We the People', a forthcoming NEF Pocketbook by Perry Walker

It is not always practical or desirable for all community based indicators projects to be at the 'supporting' level of participation. The decision over the amount of participation is likely to depend on a number of factors, including the skills and interest of the local community. Time is also a crucial factor. In one analysis of a community scheme in a Tower Hamlets estate, it was estimated that a timescale of up to 24 months was necessary in order 'that capacity building and contact networks could reach a satisfactory level.'[10]

Perhaps most important is the need to be honest about the degree to which local people can influence the project. If participation is limited to 'asking' then it is counter-productive to allow anyone to think otherwise.

INVOLVEMENT: DOING IT

There are different ways that people and groups will want to get involved in the project. For some people this might be attending a meeting, putting their view and moving on. Others may be happy to participate more formally, perhaps in some kind of steering group or task team (see below).

In Oldham, as part of the LA21 process, the council has fora covering various issues, such as transport, waste and the economy. Membership is made up of interested local residents, council members and officials.

THE BIG ISSUES

As people start to join in, they will be keen to lay out the issues of most concern to them. There are lots of different ways to do this. More formal methods include surveys. This approach has been used in Somerset, where the Sustainable Somerset Group of the Council sent out postal questionnaires in 1995 and 1998 to 10,000 randomly selected households. Over 3,000 were returned and the findings used to develop a list of key sustainable development indicators.

This quantified approach makes it relatively straightforward to rank the issues in order of popularity. But this approach might not always get to the heart of the matter. One particularly insightful community activist made the following observation:

'People complain about dog mess. But why do people have dogs? It is because they are scared and lonely.'

So in this case, the headline issue – the dog mess may hide deeper issues. A number of methods, including facilitated workshop discussions may be useful in getting at these underlying issues. Only getting to superficial issues is one problem. Another is the tendency to concentrate on the negative and having a good moan about the neighbourhood. 'Imagine' is a participation technique that can address this. Based on Appreciative Inquiry it starts by getting people to talk about what works in their community. On the back of the positive energy people work out a shared vision of how their area might be and develop an action plan to get there.

LITMUS had two priorities during this phase. The first priority was to get a representative picture of which quality of life issues mattered to the community. The second was to get local residents involved in projects and in developing local partnerships. LITMUS made a big effort in order to achieve this, and spent around six months on the activities below.

Local survey

LITMUS commissioned a local organisation (CRISP) to carry out a survey identifying how local residents perceived quality of life. The method of data collection consisted of a face-to-face interview of 722 residents within the two target areas. A paid team of nine surveyors all of whom were local residents carried out the survey. A standardised questionnaire was used in order to allow comparative statistical analysis of the data collected.

Focus groups

Local residents have been invited to a series of focus group sessions, which have been organised by LITMUS, or in partnership with other organisations. By using focus groups LITMUS got a more in depth picture about people's perceptions regarding quality of life. LITMUS involved in the sessions several minority groups such as black women, disabled people, pensioners, refugees and immigrants, and young people.

Working with local schools

LITMUS worked with eight local schools (four primary and four secondary) and supported teachers and pupils in identifying and monitoring quality of life issues. A study pack was produced in conjunction with teachers, including methodology and experiences from different schools.

Supporting local residents

'Community Developers' – local champions from the area - were recruited and supported in acting as facilitators in the wider community in identifying quality of life issues. This was undertaken with support from the NEF, which is based in Southwark. For example, NEF provided training in indicators and facilitation.

Using innovative consultation techniques

Several innovative techniques, such as video diaries and arts were used to identify quality of life issues of young people. Local people were trained to record video footage of their everyday lives. A community artist was employed to discuss quality of life with young people and encapsulate this in a poster. Another technique was a 'quality of life market':

The LITMUS team had prepared sixty cans with images indicating different quality of life issues (e.g. one for crime, one for pollution, etc.). They then handed out paper money to local people at a supermarket, and asked them to buy their favourite quality of life cans. By recording all the sales LITMUS got a good picture, of which issues mattered most to local people.

Quality of life market

RESULTS FROM CONSULTATION

LITMUS consulted about 1800 local residents in total and 55 organisations regarding quality of life. Eleven priority areas were identified as a result of this:

1. Community Safety and Antisocial Behaviour
2. Clean Environment
3. Future Generations and Young People
4. Buildings and Streets
5. Work and Economy
6. Transport
7. Neighbourhood and Community Empowerment
8. Equality / Fair and Just Community
9. Health
10. Open Spaces, Gardens and Wildlife
11. Amenities, Culture and Leisure

Each priority area contains sub-issues. The table below illustrates the sub-issues identified within the Community Safety and Antisocial Behaviour priority area.

- Crime and fear of crime
- Security guards
- Active policing / enforcement
- Drug dealers / users
- Personal harassment
- Entryphone systems
- CCTV
- Improved lighting and maintenance
- Noise
- Graffiti
- Dog fouling
- Littering

✔ LESSONS FROM LITMUS

The four LITMUS workers spent considerable time and energy in getting people behind the project. The results have been mixed. In some cases the commitment of people involved was low with significant numbers dropping out after a short while.

Trust from working together

Research has shown that the initial level of trust between the community and LITMUS was rather low, but it has been building up over time. For example, 64% of the people involved in LITMUS felt that the project took their views and opinions seriously. Comments by local people about the team included 'very committed - tried hard'; 'divorced themselves from the Council'; and 'operated in an atmosphere of free discussion'.

Capacity from involvement

LITMUS sought to develop the capacity of people and organisations involved in the project. Only 18% felt that they did not learn something during their experience with LITMUS. Skills mentioned included: 'how to speak in front of people'; 'how to bring people together'; 'office skills'.

Active involvement is difficult

LITMUS managed to get 40 people and 32 organisations actively involved. Actively involved means joint planning, organising consultation events together, and volunteering for LITMUS. However, only 16 local residents and 9 organisations were actively involved for longer than two months, despite the efforts of LITMUS staff.

The public involvement process of LITMUS has been monitored and evaluated by the London School of Economics. They identified several barriers, which prevented more active involvement:

Lack of understanding: Many local residents had difficulty in understanding the language of sustainable development and the process of developing indicators.

Lack of motivation and interest: Many people saw no immediate benefits from developing and using local indicators. Linking local actions to improve quality of life along the development of indicators might have helped to overcome this. Also, valuing people's time is absolutely crucial when working with volunteers. Benefits rules complicate the rewards that participants can be given. Attaching the process to a Time Bank could help.

Lack of control and trust: Representatives of local voluntary organisation in particular felt excluded from LITMUS. Delegating authority (including funding) might have overcome some of these difficulties.

4. Developing indicators

Develop one or two indicators for each issue. A basic list of criteria of what makes a good indicator will help.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

With a list of issues of concern it is possible to begin thinking about making improvements locally. But the issues only get you so far. A concern about disabled access, derelict land and pollution doesn't tell you how good or bad things are. This is where the indicators come into play. They help to focus in on a concrete element of the issue. For example in Merton and also in Tonbridge, Kent, work has been carried out to measure the percentage of public buildings with wheelchair accessibility. If the indicator is measured again in time, this also helps to prove whether things are better or not.

You can ask people in meetings, workshops or through questionnaires how they would measure, simplify and communicate important issues. The suggested indicators can go beside their issue.

In Cumbria, the local authority organised a conference for local authorities, NGOs and community groups to put forward ideas about important issues and their indicators. This led to a mass of ideas. These were reduced to a manageable set through voting.

It can be helpful to have a checklist to make sure that the best indicators survive. Criteria for 'good' indicators go by the acronym: **AIMS.**

Criteria	Example
Action focused	Indicators inform action. If you can't imagine what to do with the indicator once you have information on it, then it is not action-focused.
Important	It is only worth measuring what people care about and is relevant to them. What emerges as important depends on who is involved.
Measurable	The data for an indicator need to be collectable. Surveys are costly but important ways of gathering information. Measurability will impact on cost-effectiveness of the indicator.
Simple	Einstein said 'everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.' In Santiago, in Chile, a widely used pollution indicator is the number of days that the peaks of the Andes are obscured by smog.

If indicators have some of the above characteristics it is more likely that they will receive backing in the community.

THE L I T M U S APPROACH

LITMUS organised a workshop for each target area and invited all the people and organisations involved during the first year. At the workshops people voted for the most important quality of life issues and these were grouped under different headings:

- Community empowerment
- Open space and clean environment
- Transport
- Building and streets
- Health
- Waste recycling
- Burgess Park

Each of the issues had a task team assigned to it. On most issues, separate task teams were set up for the Peckham and Aylesbury areas. The task teams met several times after these workshops and started to develop indicators for measuring changes in the quality of life issues.

Each task team received the support of one LITMUS officer as well as the use of office facilities. The frequency of meetings and the number of people turning up differed from team to team. Some task teams, such as the community empowerment team in Peckham disappeared after two meetings as people lost interest in developing indicators. Others such as the Peckham team for 'Open space and clean environment' met every month and managed to keep a core group of six to ten local people. Local people primarily led some teams while in others representatives from voluntary organisations or Southwark Council were more active.

In total 36 indicators were developed by the different task teams during the second year of the LITMUS project. Of these 16 were monitored (see appendix for indicator list). Here are some examples of the 'open space and clean environment' task team (Peckham):

Issues	Indicator
Community gardens	◆ Number of people actively involved
Derelict open space	◆ Number of sites ◆ Total Area of sites
Advice/education on green issues	◆ Number of sources of information ◆ Number of users
Rubbish / litter	◆ Number of bins ◆ Litter survey
Rats and vermin	◆ Number of rat/mouse sightings ◆ Number of rat complaints

✔LESSONS FROM LITMUS

Indicators cook slowly and unevenly
The indicators work in LITMUS started only after a year of awareness-raising and identifying issues. The remaining time was not really long enough to see what indicators can do. Some task teams developed indicators and began with monitoring within three months, others needed more than eight months for the same thing.

Additions to the menu of indicators
New indicators around health and waste recycling were developed within the last four months of the LITMUS project as new ideas and energy began to develop.

The 'just right' indicator
The LITMUS participants who got involved in the task teams had the authority to decide what kind of indicators should be used. Many LITMUS indicators failed in matching important criteria, such as measurability and importance. A more robust quality control mechanism would have ideally been in place.

5. Monitoring and communicating indicators

Identify and draw on sources of data for the indicators and let the results be known. Communicate in ways that suit particular audiences.

Gathering data

Once you have a set of indicators, you need to see how the area scores on them. Collecting data can be both a tricky and exciting phase of the project. There are different sources of data for indicators. Some indicators might be available 'off-the-shelf'. An example of this is kilograms of household waste collected per head in a local authority. Every local authority is obliged to collect this information. But many of the interesting things that you might want to know about the local area are not available in any publication. They require a data hunt.

There are basically two ways to gather new data. The first is to ask people or **survey**, the second is to **observe**.

People can be asked for their opinions, e.g. whether their neighbours are trustworthy. This can be done by post or by telephone or face-to-face. The amount of feedback and quality of response is likely to be better with the face-to-face approach if interviewers are trained. But it can be a bigger drain on resources.

Surveys need to be carefully handled. If you want to find out what local residents as a whole feel about something then you must have a large enough random sample. Citizens' panels set up in local authority areas are becoming popular for this kind of survey as they are designed to be a representative sample of the community. The table below shows the types of numbers involved:

How many people are involved?	How many to survey?	Sample
100	50-100	Everyone or 1 in 2
1,000	200	1 in 5
10,000	500	1 in 20

Observation is also an important way of collecting new information. Both surveys and observation lend themselves to community involvement. The best bird population statistics draw heavily on information provided by Birdwatchers. Pupils at Wyvern School in Eastleigh have been collecting and analysing data from commuter surveys for local employers as part of their coursework.

Communicating

By the time an indicator initiative is past the data collection phase, it is tempting to think that the hard work is done. As a result communication of what the indicators actually say about a local area suffers. But communication is crucial to making indicators a tool for change. The Government publishes the length of waiting lists for hospital operations and exam results for schools because the resulting pride or embarrassment makes improvements more likely.

To communicate well it is worth thinking about three questions: what, who and where?

WHAT	… is the message that you will communicate? This largely depends on whether the indicators show that things are going well or not locally.
WHO	… should be communicated with and should do the communicating? Those involved in the project must be involved, so keep a running contacts list. You may also want to target groups that were not involved in the earlier stages, like local councillors or businesses. Ultimately, the community who have been involved in the project may be best placed to share the results to others in a way that is understood.
WHERE	… should information about the indicators be placed? The public might rather look at a poster than read a report, but this might not be true of the local chamber of commerce. Some in the community may have difficulty with reading and numbers and they need to be catered for. Oldham has employed a sustainability bus (SusBus) to take the quality of life message to people.

THE ⬤L ⬤I ⬤T ⬤M ⬤U ⬤S APPROACH

The LITMUS task teams monitored 16 indicators (see appendix), and communicated the findings of eleven indicators within the lifetime of the LITMUS project. Here are two examples of the approach taken:

Number and diversity of bird species

The Burgess Park team, made up of four local people and a Park Ranger monitored this indicator three times using bird observation. Each time the team walked the same route in the park and counted selected bird species. The findings were given to the London Ecology Unit for further analysis.

Counting birds in Burgess Park

Number of pupils walking or cycling to school

The transport team used two methods to find out how easy or how difficult it was for local children to get to their school. A questionnaire was developed and sent to three schools local to the Aylesbury Estate. Unfortunately only one school sent the questionnaire back. The second method was to try out journeys to school for real. A cycle tour with around 40 pupils from three schools was carried out and covered by the local media. The findings and experiences were passed to the Transport Unit of Southwark Council.
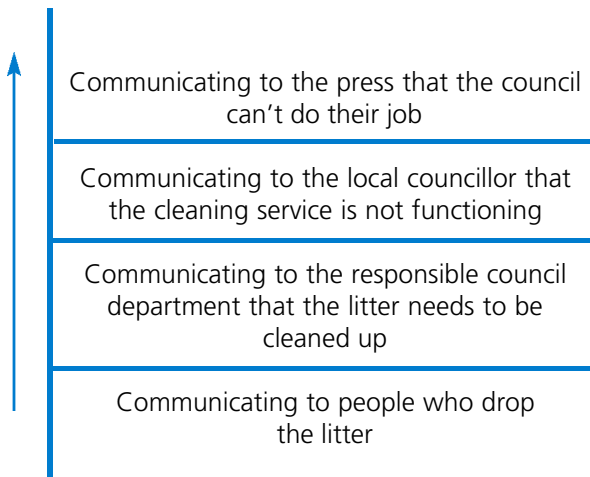

Checking out how to cycle to school

✔**LESSONS FROM LITMUS:**

Communicating with different audiences
LITMUS identified different audiences as important in enhancing local quality of life. The LITMUS waste team gathered data to show that the condition of the street recycling facilities (cleanliness, frequency of emptying and cleaning) was very poor. They communicated this to different audiences.

They started at the bottom of the ladder below, with local people - the cause of the problem - and worked their way up to the council and the media.

| Communicating to the press that the council can't do their job |
| Communicating to the local councillor that the cleaning service is not functioning |
| Communicating to the responsible council department that the litter needs to be cleaned up |
| Communicating to people who drop the litter |

Communicating as you go
The cycle tour with 40 schoolchildren is an example where monitoring and communicating happened simultaneously. The cycle route to school was monitored while making a 'song and dance' and lots of noise for the local media to pick up on.

6. Taking action

Challenge local people, businesses and local government to take action based on the indicators.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

Where they point to the need, indicators should promote action. Just as with communication, this has been a stage of the process that has been somewhat neglected.

Of course, action does not have to wait until the end of a project. It can take place at the most appropriate time. These types of 'quick wins' can build confidence in an indicators project. LITMUS helped interested local people to set up a gardening club before measurement took place. LITMUS provided office space, liaised with relevant organisations, and worked with them to develop a constitution.

It is often difficult to show clearly how an indicators process changes action - so many things affect action and quality of life. (If you believe the chaos theorists a butterfly flapping its wing can have a powerful impact). Perhaps it is better to think of what the situation would be without the indicators. One community activist labelled indicators as the 'hard evidence' for a certain course of action.

It is the impact of the indicators process that is also important – not just of the indicators. The indicators process behind LITMUS and other projects is an exploration, it helps people to engage with and understand their local area and community – good, bad and ugly. This engagement can change attitudes towards the area and the ability of the people to get things done.

The following is an example where indicators helped to get things done.

Started in 1996, the community indicators project in West Devon has taken the information provided by indicators and turned it into action. Initiatives to flow from the indicator findings include the following:

● 'Cut the Cars': a traffic reduction exercise at Tavistock and Okehampton Primary Schools. By encouraging parents to consider alternatives to the car, a total of 247 fewer journeys were made over a week.
● 'Local Food for Local People': a six month project that examined the sale and demand for locally produced and organic food in West Devon.
● 'Sustainable Schools': With funding from the Environment Agency, this project assists eight West Devon Primary Schools with environmental initiatives such as a waste audit, composting and creation of environmental areas.

And the indicators work continues to prove and improve what is happening locally.

Giving action a hand

Targets can help to make action more likely. They are quantified objectives to be achieved by a certain time. The Government is keen on targets, for example 85 per cent of 19 year olds in England will have 'level 2 qualifications' (the equivalent of 5 GCSEs) by 2002. But there are dangers in an overemphasis on targets. One London council officer said 'I'm sceptical about a target-led approach – it's a bit like the cart leading the horse!'

Perhaps the most important aspect of targets is that they need to be as inclusively developed as indicators themselves. In this way those who can make a difference are involved in making targets meaningful and achievable.

Taking action to improve derelict open space

The open space and clean environment team (Peckham) used observation, photographic survey and video evidence to collect information on derelict sites in the Peckham Partnership (Regeneration) area. Two derelict sites were found, one with a low health risk and one with a very high risk right in the heart of Peckham (called the Flaxyard site). Tonnes of litter and several drug needles were found on the site. These findings were presented to the Management of the Peckham Partnership. After some persistence LITMUS managed to get the Peckham Partnership to agree to clear the site up. An alternative use is now being considered.

Influencing the Management of Southwark Council

LITMUS influenced the management of Southwark Council. The Council's community involvement strategy team consulted the LITMUS team over their draft strategy. After two years LITMUS were experts regarding community involvement and able to make constructive suggestions for the strategy. These suggestions were taken on board.

Another important impact has been on appraisal systems. LITMUS has been a main actor in developing the environmental appraisal systems for the Unitary Development Plan, and helped to develop a sustainability appraisal system for the regeneration programme in nearby Elephant and Castle.

Encouraging active citizenship

Many people involved with LITMUS were encouraged to become more active in their local neighbourhood. Here are some reasons given:
- 'I feel I can persuade some people'
- 'I am involved in bird counts, and in the Peckham Accessibility Forum. I am more able to think about what I would like to see'
- 'LITMUS helped us to make contacts with a lot of local organisations'.

These impacts are crucial to generating social energy in the areas. This is the willingness and ability of local people to act together for common purpose. It is this energy that can help to sustain improvements started by regeneration projects.

✔LESSONS FROM LITMUS

These lessons on action are somewhat harder to generalise. Many factors contribute to making indicators action-orientated. Ultimately the LITMUS experience seems to suggest that:

● The indicators need to be robust and convincing in order to trigger actions.

● Some actions aimed at improving the quality of life require some funding. LITMUS allocated limited resources to community led action projects. That made it difficult to tackle the bigger challenges.

● Good local relationships need to be at the centre of the process so that the council and others draw on expertise in the project.

● The skills, confidence and social energy generated amongst local people are part of the outcomes of indicators projects. These by-products make possible powerful 'knock-on effects' and action in the local area.

7. Conclusions

People who got involved in LITMUS wanted to get on and make their area better. They did not necessarily want to measure. One of the LITMUS Community Developers said early on in the project: 'we know what needs to be done, why do we need indicators?' In some ways she was right. Local people have good instincts about what needs to be changed. But sometimes even these instincts can play up. How many residents of Peckham would have guessed that there were only two pieces of derelict land in Peckham?

There remains a need for indicators: to get the 'hard evidence' to see how good or bad things really are; to provide an early warning; to provide a sound basis for action and to track change over time. But the understandable temptation is to 'get stuck in'.

The evaluation of LITMUS looked at the extent to which the indicators were used as a management tool (hypothesis 2) and their role in raising local awareness (hypothesis 1).

Conclusion: Hypothesis 1
The environmental awareness of people who participated in the process of developing and monitoring indicators increased to some extent. Participants had some existing knowledge about the environmental issues.

People have been encouraged to become more active in their local community, but did not change their household habits or behaviour.

Many people have been enabled to take a more active role in managing their local neighbourhoods. They learned valuable skills and gained access to resources while participating in LITMUS.

The process of developing and using community indicators has given people hope, increased confidence, brought people together, and helped them to make contacts with other people and organisations. These changes may have a long-term impact on social exclusion although participants in LITMUS did not feel that LITMUS directly reduced social exclusion in their neighbourhoods.

Conclusion: Hypothesis 2

The set-up of LITMUS outside the management structure of the regeneration programmes, the timing of indicator development, and the low score of some LITMUS indicators against management criteria have constrained LITMUS from having any significant impact on regeneration programmes.

The impacts generated by the LITMUS process, such as information, networks, trust and skills, have been much more important in influencing the regeneration programmes than the indicators themselves.

Thoughts from a local voluntary organisation - CRISP

The LITMUS project is regarded as significant in its innovative approach towards encouraging and engaging local communities in consultation and participation around issues influencing the quality of their lives. In this respect LITMUS can be regarded as successful in its own terms, as a piece of 'action research'. The project managed to generate considerable interest and support not only within Southwark but also throughout Europe.

The LITMUS project was less successful in realising 'real changes' either within the providers of services or in the attitudes and actions of the local community towards quality of life issues. The project injected considerable resources towards investigating its research hypotheses and engaging the local community, however the long term sustainability of its work was compromised by a number of difficulties, the most significant of which were:
- In establishing links with existing community consultation processes in the study area
- In working with already established long term regeneration processes
- In making links and resourcing existing local community and voluntary sector organisations. LITMUS took a long time to understand the context in which it operated and in establishing working networks
- In being seen as too closely related to the Local Authority and being time limited
- In building the trust of the local community and voluntary sector organisations.

Against these considerable disadvantages the achievements of the LITMUS project can be viewed as a limited success. It is recognised that the experience, lessons learnt and successes of this innovative project are incorporated into Southwark Council's development of existing and future urban regeneration programmes and other project work, as part of the Vision of Sustainable and Environmental Development in Southwark and its priorities and themes.

If we did it all again

It is fair to say that the impact of the indicators process has been mixed: strong on process and weaker on direct impact of the indicators. Below are a number of things that LITMUS might have done or recognised with perfect hindsight.

- Action can be intertwined with steps of the indicators process to build momentum for the project essential to getting and keeping local people actively participating.
- The purpose determines the nature and the use of indicators. The criteria of 'quality' indicators need to be stated explicitly and the indicators tested against these - e.g. importance, measurability etc. This should be done by local people and by drawing on local indicator expertise.
- Where sustainability indicators are to be linked to regeneration programmes timely into the planning process is vital.
- The success of community-based indicators is as much about the social energy from the participatory process as the effects of the indicators themselves.

A final word

Southwark has decided that it is important that there is a continuity of support and assistance available to those members of the local community who have become actively involved in LITMUS. At the end of the LITMUS project CRISP, a local voluntary sector organisation, was asked to provide a forward strategy for the Community Consultation and Indicators work undertaken by the project in the Peckham Partnership and Aylesbury Plus regeneration areas. CRISP has also been asked to support the indicator work currently being undertaken by the European funded PASTILLE project on the Elephant and Castle SRB. CRISP's contact details are:

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As with all the ideas in this document we hope that readers will use or discard them according to their own needs. Ultimately the LITMUS experience shows that trust, technical skills and connection to decision-making are central to making indicators work. The challenge for the future is perhaps to have these qualities and retain the participation of ordinary people that has been the greatest strength of LITMUS.

Appendix 1: Resources

Resource name	What's it all about
● Community Indicators for Sustainability: A European Overview. Environ, 2000.	Highlights the experiences of various community indicators projects across Europe.
● Prove it! Measuring the effect of neighbourhood renewal on local people. Groundwork and NEF, 2000.	Describes and highlights Groundwork's and NEF's experience of evaluating the effects of 17 Groundwork projects on local communities.
● Local Quality of Life Counts. A handbook for a menu of local indicators of sustainable development. DETR, 2000.	Illustrates 29 local quality of life indicators, and describes how to measure them. The handbook is based on the experience of 30 local authorities, which have used the indicators.
● Quality of Life Counts. Indicators for a strategy for sustainable development for the United Kingdom: a baseline assessment. DETR, 1999.	Set of 15 national headline indicators of sustainable development plus around 135 supplementary indicators. The indicators support and monitor the UK's sustainable development strategy.
● Communities Count! A step by step guide for community sustainability indicators. NEF, 1998.	Describes in detail how to develop and use community sustainability indicator. Can be downloaded at www.neweconomics.org.
● Audit Commission. Performance indicators for measuring quality of life. www.audit-commission. gov.uk/ac2/PIfirst.htm.	An initiative by the Audit Commission to develop and test voluntary Quality of Life Cross-cutting Indicators for Local Authorities.

● LITMUS project. www.southwark.gov.uk /litmus/	Highlights the experience of the LITMUS in Southwark. The London School of Economics has evaluated LITMUS. All reports, including two evaluation reports can be downloaded.
● PASTILLE project. www.lse.ac.uk/Depts /geography/Pastille	A European Action research project that analyses the effectiveness of local sustainability indicators. The project is co-ordinated by the London School of Economics.
● Towards a local sustainability Profile – European Common indicators. European Commission. http:/ www.sustainable-cities.org/indicators/	An initiative by the European commission to develop a common set of European Local sustainability indicators.
● EU Urban Audit www.inforegio.cec. eu.int/urban/audit/src/ intro.htm	An initiative by the European Commission to do a sustainability audit in 58 European cities.

Appendix 2: The LITMUS indicators

Priority issue	Indicator definition	Monitored?
1. Cultural identity, PP area	No. of multi-cultural events and no. of people attending them	-
2. Disabled access, PP area	No. of buildings with disabled access	-
3. Community support, PP area	Funding allocated to community resources	-
4. Transparency, PP area	Availability of information	-
5. Community involvement, PP area	No. of people attending meetings of Sumner Tenant Association	✔
6. Community gardens, PP area	No. of members actively involved in gardening club	✔
7. Derelict open space, PP area	No. of derelict sites in PP area / Total area of sites	✔
8. Environmental education, PP area	No. of information sources	-
9. Litter, PP area	Amount of litter	✔
10. Water use, PP area	Amount of Water use per Person	✔
11. Rats , PP area	No. of rat complaints	-
12. School transport, AP area	No. of pupils walking or cycling to school	✔
13. Access to information, AP area	Awareness of transport issues	✔
14. Flat size, AP area	Floor space per inhabitant/ Average room size	-

Priority issue	Indicator definition	Monitored?
15. Complaints about noise, AP area	No. of noise complaints per quarter of a year	-
16. Accessibility for disabled, AP area	No. buildings with ramps,lifts,accessible toilets & doors for disabled	✔
17. Safely designed estate, AP area	No. of elderly people who feel safe outside after dark	✔
18. User-friendly design, AP area	No. of ground / 1st floor windows with full net curtains	-
19. Quality of pavements, AP area	No. of complaints for pavement accidents	-
20. Pollution, AP area	Noise levels at Old Kent Road	-
21. Pollution , AP area	No. & level of pollutants at Old Kent Road	-
22. Gardens & Allotments, AP area	No. of allotments in easy reach of people's homes	-
23. Gardens & Allotments, AP area	Amount of green space per person	-
24. Gardens & Allotments, AP area	No. of private gardens / window boxes per person	-
25. Litter, PP area	No. bins overflowing in the Park	-
26. Biodiversity, PP area	Number and diversity of bird species	✔
27. Use of the park, PP area	No. of users and uses in Burgess Park	✔
28. Health, PP area	Obesity rate (information from health authority) and range of food in the local area	-

Priority issue	Indicator definition	Monitored?
29. Health, PP area	No. of people in the Peckham Pulse and the rate of heart disease in local people (health authority) total number of GP visits	-
30. Health, PP area	No of people who know about the services at the Peckham Pulse and the range of activities offered	-
31. Health, PP area	No. of people who find the activities at the Peckham Pulse too expensive	-
32. Waste & Recycling, AP area	Cleanliness of streets, walkways and opens spaces (including under-use and dereliction) and the frequency of cleaning	✔
33. Waste & Recycling, AP area	Cleanliness of common stairs, lifts and lobbies and the end frequency of cleaning	✔
34. Waste & Recycling, AP area	Recording incidents of Vandalism and Graffiti and the frequency of cleaning	✔
35. Waste & Recycling, AP area	The number of litter bins on the street and the frequency of emptying	✔
36. Waste & Recycling, AP area	Use of on street recycling facilities, their cleanliness, and the frequency of emptying and cleaning of the sites	✔

PP = Peckham Partnership area
AP = Aylesbury Plus area

Endnotes

[1] This handbook is available on NEF's website: www.neweconomics.org.

[2] Details of this publication are available from the website of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions: www.detr.gov.uk

[3] This handbook is available on NEF's website: www.neweconomics.org.

[4] DETR, IDeA, LGA, 2000, Local Quality of life counts.

[5] Local Government Management Board, 1995, Sustainability Indicators Research Project, London, LGMB.

[6] This project emerged from the Central-Local Government Information Partnership and has been backed by the Department of Environment Transport and the Regions, Improvement and Development Agency, Local Government Association and Audit Commission.

[7] For a detailed analysis of the two LITMUS hypotheses see Rydin and Sommer (2000). The LITMUS project. The final Monitoring and Evaluation Report is available on the LITMUS website: www.southwark.gov.uk/litmus

[8] Public Perceptions and Sustainability in Lancashire: indicators, institutions and participation, Phil Macnaughten et al., Centre for the Study of Environmental Change, Lancaster University for Lancashire County Council, 1995.

[9] CRISP, 1999, LITMUS project consultation phase report, p13.

[10] Neighbourhood Think Tank Pilot Scheme: A progress report on the pilot project carried out on Teviot Estate, Tower Hamlets, October 1994-September 1996, Neighbour Initiatives Foundation, 1996.

Community based indicators are promoted as effective tools for involving local people in defining, measuring and improving local quality of life. LITMUS was funded by the European Commission in order to test this hypothesis.

This booklet presents the results of the LITMUS test, which is the first evaluation of Community based indicators. It includes the experience and learning of 2 years hard work by the LITMUS team, and lots of local volunteers and voluntary organisations in Southwark.

It is aimed at everyone who is interested or actively involved in measuring local quality of life. We believe it is particularly relevant for Voluntary organisations and Community groups, Regeneration Partnerships (e.g. SRB and NDC), and Local authorities (e.g. Community Plans and Local Agenda 21).

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