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Formative evaluation of community strategies

Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation

2004-2007

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Formative evaluation of community strategies

**Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation
2004-2007**

Prepared for:
Local and Regional Governance Research Unit
Communities and Local Government

August 2008

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List of Acronyms

BVPP	Best Value Performance Plans
CPA	Comprehensive Performance Assessment
CSP	Community Safety Partnership
CYPP	Children and Young People's Plan
CLG	Department for Communities and Local Government
DCMS	Department for Culture Media and Sport
DEFRA	Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
DfT	Department for Transport
DoH	Department of Health
DTLR	Department of Transport, Local Government and Regions
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LAA	Local Area Agreement
LDF	Local Development Framework
LEA	Local Education Authority
LGMA	Local Government Modernisation Agenda
LPSA	Local Public Service Agreement
LPT	Local Partnership Team
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
LPSA	Local Public Service Agreement
LSP	Local Strategic Partnership
MAA	Multi-Area-Agreement
MASP	Mansfield Area Strategic Partnership
NRF	Neighbourhood Renewal Fund
ODPM	Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
PCT	Primary Care Trust
PI	Performance Indicator
PM	Performance Management
RES	Regional Economic Strategy
RGO	Regional Government Office
RSS	Regional Spatial Strategy
SRB	Single Regeneration Budget

Summary of key findings

This report addresses the nature and context of plan rationalisation, its development within both central government and local government, assesses progress to date and highlights emerging issues. Detailed information regarding methods can be found in Annex 1. Since the research was a process evaluation, it has focused on the processes underpinning the development of plan rationalisation, including both drivers and barriers, rather than seeking to assess its overall impacts.

Progress regarding plan rationalisation has been marked at local and central levels in some places, but has generally been quite uneven. At central government level, a number of plans have been completely removed, with a range of measures being used to do this including primary legislation, the use of guidance to encourage local authorities to merge plans, and the removal of some requirements in high performing authorities. Research with central government departments showed that there were perceptions in some departments of good progress at a national level in some policy areas. However, the evidence suggests that there was a gap between the views of certain central government respondents and the actual situation. It is important to note that there are a number of new plans that have been introduced during the life of the research. The reduction in the number of statutorily required plans has meant that central government has, arguably, fewer levers available to ensure that local authorities pursue central government priorities. One of the consequences of the reduction in the number of plans is a corresponding reduction in the data provided by local government to central government. In some cases this is unproblematic as data was collected as evidence for the planning process. However, where data is required by central government alternative means need to be found of collecting this.

At the local level, plan rationalisation has had a positive influence in a number of ways in some localities, including reducing the burden of bureaucracy, improving the coordination of planning and improving efficiency. Both understandings and awareness of plan rationalisation have been somewhat variable both within and between authorities, although greater awareness of the process has developed over time. For local authorities, plan rationalisation is more likely to mean better coordination of plans rather than their total removal. The sustainable community strategy is one vehicle through which this coordination has taken place. From a local government perspective a result of more closely aligning plans with the community strategy is the development of performance management systems that are used across a number of different plans and, in some cases agencies, which use a common set of indicators. This is clearly beneficial in terms of reducing the bureaucracy associated with performance management and also the problem of conflicting indicators across different areas or agencies.

An important tension of relevance to plan rationalisation is the balance between central prescription – to ensure that central government priorities are addressed locally – and local flexibility - ensuring that the ways in which policies are interpreted and applied are sensitive to local needs. Plan rationalisation tends in the direction of greater local flexibility.

1 Introduction

Plan rationalisation is an ongoing process, driven by a broad range of statutory and other changes that are associated with the modernisation of local government. As part of evaluative work on the impact of local government modernisation, the ODPM (now CLG) commissioned a national process evaluation of plan rationalisation. This report presents a synopsis of the evaluation results produced by the 2004-2007 study.

This report presents, firstly, a brief review of the study aims and methodology. It then provides an overview of key policy developments of relevance to plan rationalisation. The report then moves on to explore the development of plan rationalisation within central government, before examining plan rationalisation within local government. Lastly, we provide a summary of the findings and highlight key ongoing issues.

It is worth noting that this is a process evaluation and, as such, we have deliberately not focused on the impacts of plan rationalisation per se. The evaluation has focused very much upon the processes underpinning the development of plan rationalisation. The intention to undertake a process evaluation influenced the design of the evaluation and in particular the research tools that were used to gather evidence. It is not, therefore, a summative evaluation and comments and findings relating to impact should be treated as only tentative.

1.1 The process evaluation of plan rationalisation

This is the final report from the national process evaluation of plan rationalisation. The evaluation has been undertaken by the Policy Research Institute at Leeds Metropolitan University and the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University.

The evaluation of plan rationalisation has focused on processes at both central and local government level. The original specification for the evaluation set out the following terms of reference for the evaluation:

1. Evaluate the processes adopted by central government departments and agencies as part of the general move towards a rationalisation of plan requirements on local government.
2. Evaluate the processes local authorities have adopted in response to rationalisation of plans they have been required to produce.
- 3a. Document and assess the extent to which Government Departments seek to achieve the purposes of removed plans through other means.

3b. Document and assess the burden of remaining plan, strategy and data requirements on local government.

4. Develop an analytical framework to enable an evaluation of the impacts of plan rationalisation in the longer term.

This evaluation has been undertaken jointly with the formative evaluation of community strategies. The rationale for this is that plan rationalisation and community strategies are in practice closely intertwined. As two of the key elements of the modernisation process within local government they have closely related aims, in particular giving local authorities new freedoms and flexibilities, recognising the role of the local authority as community leader, identifying new ways to deliver services through partnership and, fundamentally, changing the relationship between central and local government (for example through allowing central government to develop a more differentiated relationship with local government, based on local needs and differences and the most appropriate means to achieve central government policy objectives). In addition, the process of plan rationalisation itself entails subsuming some plans – for example local agenda 21 strategies, local cultural strategies and local library plans – into community strategies.

This report focuses on the process evaluation of plan rationalisation. The final evaluation report for community strategies is published as a separate document. Both reports however draw out linkages between the two initiatives.

1.2 Outputs and dissemination

The emphasis of the evaluation has been on producing regular timely outputs to inform emerging policy in this area. For instance findings from the evaluations have been fed into consultation papers and government white papers, as well as forthcoming guidance. Initial findings from the evaluation have also been presented at academic and practitioner conferences.

The evaluation has produced a number of outputs at regular intervals. A full list of outputs is included at Annex 2, but key amongst these have been:

- A scoping report setting out the findings from the scoping phase of the research and presenting the evaluation framework in detail;
- Annual Reports in 2004 and 2006 summarising key findings;
- Reports of individual elements of the research, including a report of a survey of local government in 2005, and reports synthesising the findings from the main case studies in 2005 and 2006;

- ‘Issues papers’ drawing together findings from across the evaluation concerning plan rationalisation, and summarising findings from additional shorter ‘light touch’ case studies concerning plan rationalisation in local and central government.

All published outputs from the evaluation are available on the CLG website:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/corporate/publications/all/>

1.3 The treatment of Government Department names

During the course of the process of plan rationalisation and the duration of this research several government departments have changed their names and/or organisational structures, sometimes with the effect that policy areas have been split between different government departments. For instance, the initial research underpinning the move toward plan rationalisation was undertaken by the Department for Transport Local Government and the Regions (DTLR). Since then, policy responsibility for local government transferred to the new Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) and again to its successor, the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG). This obviously creates some difficulties in referring to departments and presenting findings associated with them. As such, the approach taken in this report is to refer to departments using the names which were current *at the time to which the findings or discussion are related*. For example, where discussion refers to evidence gained from respondents or to documents from the then ODPM, this is the nomenclature employed. Where evidence is more recent the term CLG will be used. This same convention also applies to other past government departments such as Department for Education and Skills (DfES) which has now been split into the Department for Innovation and Universities (DIUS) and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF).

1.4 Content and structure of the report

This report focuses on the process evaluation of plan rationalisation and draws together and summarises the findings from all parts of the evaluation.

It primarily summarises the outputs from three existing reports, which themselves presented findings from the range of outputs provided by the different strands of the evaluation regarding plan rationalisation¹.

These reports are²:

1 The section on central government and plan rationalisation is entirely taken from Darlow, A., Jassi, S., Percy Smith, J. and Wells, P. (2006) *Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation; Formative Evaluation of community strategies. Plan Rationalisation Issues Paper*. Subsequent sections provide a reference at the end of the material from each report.

2 All published by Policy Research Institute, Leeds Metropolitan University Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University.

Darlow, A., Jassi, S., Percy-Smith, J. and Wells, P. (2006) *Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation; Formative Evaluation of Community Strategies. Plan Rationalisation Issues Paper*

Darlow, A., Fidler, Y., Percy-Smith, J. and Wymer, P. (2006) *Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation; Formative Evaluation of Community Strategies. Report of the May 2006 Survey of Local Authorities on Plan Rationalisation*

Monro, S. and Purcell, M. with Hawtin, M. and Stevens, A. (submitted 2007) *Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation; Formative Evaluation of Community Strategies. Case Studies Synthesis Report (2008)*.

The report discusses the context in which plan rationalisation has been established, and then presents findings regarding the development of plan rationalisation within central government. This is followed by discussion of findings within local government, a summary of overall progress and a statement of emerging issues.

2 Context

2.1 Introduction

This section summarises and reviews the policy context for plan rationalisation. The focus here is on the key developments between 2000 and 2007 which have led to the current position in relation to plan rationalisation.

Central government has traditionally required local government to produce a range of plans relating to different service responsibilities, but especially addressing those areas where central government sought to influence local outcomes. More recently the emphasis has shifted towards an increased focus on local differentiation. As a result, concerns were raised about the extent, nature and appropriateness of planning requirements on local government.

The complex system of plans within local government has emerged incrementally over many years. There have been a number of distinct phases of policy planning in local government. For example, the 1970s may be viewed as a 'boom' period for plan making within local authorities, with one study identifying over twenty policy planning systems linking central and local government³. During the 1980s and 1990s, the emergence of new planning requirements and area based initiatives led to increasing concerns around co-ordination and duplication. For example, research by Brown et al. (2000)⁴ on rural housing strategies found that in some authorities there were in excess of 30 policy plans relating to housing issues.

Clearly plans were developed for a wide range of purposes and have shaped the relationship between central and local government. The extent of the planning burden on local government is considered in the next section.

2.2 The extent of the planning burden on local government

Whilst it was generally recognised that the planning burden on local authorities increased throughout the 1980s and 1990s, there had been no consistent attempt to map out the extent of planning requirements on local government.

In response to this, a DTLR (2002) study reviewed the extent of statutory and non-statutory planning requirements on local government. The aim of the research was to map existing planning requirements and also to assess the

3 Hambleton, R. (1978) *Policy Planning and Local Government* London: Hutchinson and Co.

4 Brown, T., H. Hay, R. Hunt and B. Line (2000) *Developing Housing Strategies in Rural Areas: A Good Practice Guide* London: Chartered Institute of Housing, The Countryside Agency and The Housing Corporation.

scope for and implications of streamlining planning requirements. The DTLR (2002) study was taken forward in a further study for ODPM undertaken by Portico Consulting and the New Policy Institute which reported at the end of 2002⁵. This considered the planning burden on local authorities in terms of the 66 plans identified previously and applied central government principles for achieving plan rationalisation (set out below).

Box 1: Central Government Primary Principles for achieving Plan Rationalisation

- P1. There is a presumption against the imposition of any new planning requirement from Central Government or the expansion of requirements in respect of existing plans.
- P2. All planning requirements must be kept under review and should be subject to regular evaluation against the principles set out in this document. Evaluation should include consultation with representatives of local government.
- P3. A purpose of a planning requirement must be clear and necessary for the delivery of national policy priorities in line with the agreed central/local government shared priorities.
- P4. A plan must not be required where other mechanisms for achieving those purposes would be more effective, particularly mechanisms for performance assessment such as inspection and performance data or for performance improvement such as action plans. Alternatives must also be proportionate to the priority attributed to outcomes.
- P5. The necessity for a planning requirement, and the degree of prescription and detailed reporting for those that are retained should be considered in the context of authorities' performance.
- P6. The introduction and content of any new planning requirement **should be subject to:**
 - the principles set out in this document;
 - consultation with representatives of local government;
 - an assessment of its potential impact on authorities; and
 - a specified period of operation before a formal evaluation and should, wherever possible, be integrated within an existing planning requirement.

The study set out three broad options for the future:

- **Option 1:** Plan requirements continue as at present, with some rationalisation based on selected removals and mergers.

⁵ Portico Consulting and New Policy Institute (2002) *Plan Rationalisation Study Final Report* London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

- **Option 2:** Radical merging of plan requirements such that a much more limited number of 'broader' plans are required.
- **Option 3:** Over time replace all centrally mandated plan requirements by using performance assessment systems to assess the effectiveness of authorities' planning (as opposed to plans), together with clear communication of national priorities.

Overall Option 3 was the recommended course of action from the study; all centrally mandated plans apart from Best Value Performance Plans (BVPPs) and community strategies should be replaced by performance assessment or management systems. Local authorities would still be required to plan their activities but this should serve local managerial purposes rather than being a central government requirement.

In practice, a hybrid model has been adopted by the government, with elements of all three options - a combination of plans being removed, plans being radically merged into broader plans, and (for top performing authorities at least) the removal of the need to produce all centrally mandated plans apart from the community strategy and BVPPs.

2.3 Policy drivers and development of plan rationalisation

Focusing on policy development over the past nine years, it is possible to identify a number of central Government policy drivers for plan rationalisation which reflect aspects of the broader local government modernisation agenda. An over-reliance on plans runs counter to the local government modernisation agenda, which seeks to give local authorities the freedom to develop local solutions and to put in place the appropriate capacity. The **1998 White Paper *Modern Local Government in Touch with the People*** set out the Government's intention to define a new role for councils, involving the provision of local leadership and offering additional freedoms for high performing authorities.

The plan rationalisation process has also been driven by the community planning process, with the community strategy providing an overarching integrative framework for existing planning processes and a focus on joining up services. In addition, the introduction of new mechanisms, for example **Local Public Service Agreements** (LPSAs) and more recently the roll out of **Local Area Agreements** (LAAs), have been contributing towards a changing relationship between central and local government. LPSAs, designed as voluntary agreements between upper-tier local authorities and Government, started in late 2000. An LAA is a three year agreement between central government and a local area (including the local authority and its partners), predicated on agreed targets and pooled budgets which are aligned with the priorities set out in the community strategy, and seeking to promote flexible service delivery.

The **2001 Local Government White Paper, *Strong Local Leadership – Quality Public Services***⁶ committed the government to reduce and rationalise planning requirements on local government by at least 5%. The White Paper indicated specific plans that were to be subsumed within the community strategy (for example Local Agenda 21 Strategies), a commitment to significantly reduce the number of plans in specific policy areas (particularly education and health), and removal of the requirement to submit certain plans to government once they reach a required standard (for example Asset Management Plans and Capital Strategies). The 2001 White Paper also developed LPSAs giving greater freedoms for higher performing councils and incentives to support the achievement of stretching targets.

In November 2002, following the CPA results for upper tier authorities; an announcement was made by the government around the package of measures that authorities in each CPA category could expect. As part of this a commitment was made to **reduce planning requirements by a further 75%**, to be achieved through a mixture of administrative and statutory action⁷. For the top performing authorities more radical reductions were announced, and there was to be a presumption against any new planning requirements. To aid this process, the Local Government Gateway was established with a remit to examine the case for any new planning requirements, or the scope to retain, or modify, existing ones in order to streamline them and ensure they are fit for purpose.

Subsequent developments were set out in a series of communications from ODPM/CLG. Following a Parliamentary Order in April 2004, those authorities rated as 'excellent' under the 2002 CPA were required to produce only a streamlined BVPP and community strategy, as well as plans associated with land use development and Emergency Plans. Additionally, 'excellent' authorities were required to contribute to plans that are the responsibilities of partnerships rather than the authorities themselves, along with an Accessibility Strategy produced through the Local Education Authority (LEA). For other authorities the announcement set out current requirements and central government intentions to further integrate plans. An update to Council Leaders in November 2004 set out in detail progress to date on plan rationalisation and clarified central government requirements particularly in relation to providing additional freedoms and flexibilities for the top performing authorities⁸.

The Future of Local Government: Developing a 10 year vision⁹ (2004) re-emphasised a more coherent and joined-up approach across central Government with a focus on a partnership arrangement between central and local government that 'delivers results' and instigated an overall push

6 Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2001) *Strong Local Leadership – Quality Public Services* London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

7 Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2002) 'Government Action Following the Comprehensive Performance Assessment'.

8 Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2004) 'Letter to all Council Leaders from Phil Hope MP: Reducing Local Authority Plan'.

9 Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2004) *The Future of Local Government: Developing a 10 year vision* London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

within central government towards reducing bureaucracy. This policy direction was developed initially through a range of means. LAAs were seen as having significant implications for community strategies and in March 2005, 21 pilot LAAs were created and an announcement was made that the Government 'would roll LAAs out across England' over the next two years; LAAs have since been established across the country. In early 2005 there were two further developments in relation to plan rationalisation. First, the **Local Authorities Plans and Strategies (Disapplication) (England) Order 2005**¹⁰ was signed on the 31 January 2005. This removed the requirement for 'excellent' authorities to produce seven statutory plans, including a Local Transport Plan and a Homelessness Strategy. Second, the **Children Act 2004** came into force on 31 January 2005, removing seven statutory and several non-statutory plan requirements which were replaced by the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP). This is not required of 'excellent' authorities. These developments were set out in a letter to Sir Brian Briscoe at the Local Government Association¹¹.

A consultation paper was published by ODPM in January 2006 on the proposed changes to the delivery of local authority freedoms and flexibilities under the new CPA 2005. The Government's proposals were to extend the freedoms given to excellent authorities to 4 and 3 star authorities, which were broadly supported by respondents to the consultation¹². An announcement in September 2006 confirmed that 4 and 3 star authorities would be exempted from the requirement to produce Homelessness Strategies, Youth Justice Plans and Home Energy Conservation Act Reports.

The introduction of flexibilities and freedoms as part of the local government modernisation process which provided the context for plan rationalisation, was considered in a report published by Communities and Local Government in 2006¹³. It was argued that as a result of the number of plan requirements, there were dangers of fragmentation and duplication and resulting bureaucracy and inefficiency. It was recognised by government that it needed to employ planning requirements in a more measured and considered way. Plans have often been seen as a first resort, rather than as one of a range of policy tools and, once introduced, central government departments have on occasion been slow to remove requirements, even when they no longer serve a useful purpose.

The **Local Government White Paper 'Strong and Prosperous Communities'**¹⁴ (2006) set out a number of changes of significance to community strategies. These changes may briefly be summarised as:

10 Available from: <http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2005/20050157.htm>

11 Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2005) Letter to Sir Brian Briscoe from Neil Kinghan: Reducing Local Authority Plan Requirements <<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/doc/133577.doc>>

12 Department for Communities and Local Government (2006) *Consultation on proposed changes to the delivery of local authority freedoms and flexibilities under CPA 2005: Analysis of responses* London: Department for Communities and Local Government.

13 Department for Communities and Local Government (2006) *Evaluation of Freedoms and Flexibilities in Local Government: Baseline Study*. London: DCLG.

14 CLG (2006) *Strong and prosperous communities: The Local Government White Paper* London: HMSO.

- Giving local communities more influence, and rebalancing the relationship between central and local government.
- Putting greater emphasis on service user consultation and participation underpinned by statute.
- A new approach to strategic leadership focusing on delivery plans for the sustainable community strategy being framed via Local Area Agreements (LAAs) – there will be a duty on local authorities and their partners to agree priorities for their LAA and to have regard to these on an ongoing basis.
- A new assessment regime to replace the CPA with around 35 LAA priorities for each locality, out of about 200 outcome-based indicators.
- Other structural changes: [i] Councils will be presented with three different options for leadership (a directly elected mayor, a directly elected executive of councillors, or a leader elected by fellow-councillors with a four-year mandate); [ii] Two tier areas will be able to seek Unitary status subject to meeting certain criteria, and [iii] A 'Community Call to Action' foregrounds the role of councillors and there is encouragement for local authorities to develop Neighbourhood Charters and to manage services at neighbourhood level.

In a further effort to reduce the burden on local authorities in 2006, the Cabinet Office and ODPM published a joint study¹⁵ to identify the consent regimes which government departments can remove or simplify. Consent regimes are the process by which a local authority has to apply for permission from the Secretary of State to carry out certain activities in order to perform their statutory duties. The outcome of the project is a total of 47 actions that government departments have agreed to take, including repealing 21 consent regimes during 2006 and 2007 and reviewing a further 14 regimes with a view to simplifying or removing them.

There have been various other key policy developments affecting the context for plan rationalisation. Some of these relate specifically to sustainable community strategies; these are addressed in the *Formative Evaluation of Community Strategies 2004-7, final report*¹⁶. Some relate to particular areas of policy, such as transport – an evaluation of Local Transport Plans has recently been published¹⁷. Others relate to developments in planning, including the requirement for Local Development Frameworks (LDFs) and LAAs

15 Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Cabinet Office (2006) *Consent Regimes – Reducing Unnecessary Bureaucracy* London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

16 Darlow, A., Hawtin, M., Jassi, S., Monro, S., Percy-Smith, J., and Purcell, M. (October 2007) *Formative Evaluation of Community Strategies 2004-7, final report (draft)*. A paper prepared for: Local and Regional Government Research Unit/Communities and Local Government.

17 Department of Transport (2007) *Long Term Process and Impact Evaluation of the Local Transport Plan Policy. Final Report*. London: Department of Transport.

A range of other statutory developments will impact on the future environment in which plan rationalisation takes place, including **the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act** (October 2007)¹⁸ which enacts many of the proposals in the 2006 White Paper (for example the establishment of a statutory basis for LAAs) and the **'Empowerment Action' Plan'** (October 2007), which addresses various means of bringing about greater devolution and empowering communities. A further development relates to the shifting regional and sub-regional policy framework. The Treasury-sponsored **Sub-national Review of Economic Development and Regeneration**¹⁹ (2007) proposed a strengthened role for regions, emphasising partnership working between local authorities, regional development agencies and regional ministers in setting the strategic policy direction at a regional level. The potential role of Multi Area Agreements (MAAs) was addressed, as well as a strengthened regional role in relation to economic development. The Review suggests greater local authority involvement at the regional level. However, how this will work in practice remains to be seen as it implies co-ordination not only at the regional level, but within the region between the strategies produced at different geographic levels.

Policy development in this area is ongoing and includes the development of the 198 indicators which will form the basis of the new performance framework and revised guidance²⁰ on the next phase of development of LAAs Implementation of plan rationalisation.

2.4 Summary

As part of the local government modernisation agenda there has been a drive to rationalise planning processes in local authorities. The emphasis has been to move away from mandatory planning requirements, reflecting the broader focus on outcomes and performance management rather than planning as tools for monitoring local government's performance. A succession of statutory and other developments has radically reduced the planning burden on local authorities especially those which are assessed as being high performing.

18 http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2007/ukpga_20070028_en_1

19 HM Treasury (2007) *Review of sub national economic development and regeneration* London: HM Treasury.

20 CLG (2007) *Negotiating New Local Area Agreements*. London: CLG.

3 Progress in central government

3.1 Introduction

Plan rationalisation has been driven by a number of statutory developments across central government departments. It has involved the removal of central government planning requirements for top performing local authorities and in some cases, local plans being merged into broader ones. This section explores the processes associated with plan rationalisation within central government. It discusses, firstly, progress with plan rationalisation within central government, before looking at residual planning requirements. It then explores the barriers to plan rationalisation existing within central government.

3.2 Progress on plan rationalisation

For central government, plan rationalisation is an important part of the overall strategy of reducing bureaucratic requirements on local authorities and offering greater freedoms and flexibilities for those local authorities that are performing well. The purpose of, approach to, and principles informing plan rationalisation were initially outlined in a report by Portico and the New Policy Institute (2002)²¹, within the 2001 Local Government White Paper Implementation Group, and in subsequent guidance issued to local authority chief executives. However despite attempts – through these mechanisms – to develop a joint approach across central government, interviews undertaken as part of the evaluation scoping work²² revealed that the approach adopted across departments did vary. In part this reflects the different purposes that plans serve. The Portico report summarised these purposes as:

- A mechanism to influence the behaviour of local authorities;
- A mechanism for raising the profile of a subject; and
- A vehicle for data collection.

A number of measures have been put in place by central government in order to achieve a reduction in the planning requirements for local government. These include:

21 Portico Consulting and New Policy Institute (2002) *Plan Rationalisation Study Final Report* London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

22 Reported in: Wells, Peter, Lynne Dowson and Janie Percy Smith (2005) *Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation and Formative Evaluation of community strategies: Consultation Findings and Evaluation Framework* London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

- The use of primary legislation to remove the requirement to produce certain plans (for example the Children's Act 2004 removed the requirement to produce seven statutory and seven non-statutory plans);
- The use of orders to remove the requirement for excellent authorities to produce a number of specific plans (for example the Local Authorities Plans and Strategies (Disapplication) Order 2005 removed the requirement for excellent authorities to produce a number of plans including a Local Transport Plan and a Homelessness Strategy);
- Removing the requirement to submit plans to central government once a certain threshold has been met (for example, Asset Management Plans and Capital Strategies no longer have to be submitted to RGOs once they are considered to be 'fit for purpose');
- Issuing guidance for local authorities to encourage the merger of plans or specific groups of plans (for example the Drugs Action Team Strategy to be merged with the Crime and Disorder Strategy by 2004/05);
- Merging or aligning plans with the community strategy (for example the Local Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy, Local Agenda 21 Strategy, Biodiversity Strategy, Local Cultural Strategy); and
- Maintaining plans but reducing the frequency of reporting requirements (for example local Housing Strategies to be produced every 3-5 years once threshold has been reached).

Since the original audit of planning requirements was undertaken by DTLR in 2002 it is clear that considerable progress has been made within central government departments in terms of the plans that local authorities are required to produce and submit to central government, within individual central government departments.

The evaluation scoping report showed that departments where plan rationalisation had progressed furthest were those where plans were, in effect, merged rather than abolished altogether (for example the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES), Department of Health (DoH) and the then Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM))²³. For example, the Single Education Plan included the Class Size, Education Development, School Organisation and Excellence in Cities Plans (this later became part of the CYPP). In addition, it was felt that plan rationalisation had a close 'fit' with the wider policy agendas of these departments and, in some cases, mechanisms had been set up to facilitate the process. For example, in DfES, plan rationalisation was taken forward by a Star Chamber that coordinated and limited the bureaucratic burden on LEAs. This was in contrast to DCMS which saw the removal of requirements to produce Local Library Plans and Local Cultural Strategies without there being any alternative requirements on local authorities.

²³ Darlow, A., Jassi, S., Percy Smith, J. and Wells, P. (2006) *Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation; Formative Evaluation of community strategies. Plan Rationalisation Issues Paper.*

3.3 Residual planning requirements

The evaluation of plan rationalisation updated the original audit of local government planning requirements in the light of various policy documents that emerged from ODPM and CLG in particular, and other government departments in general. The guidance from CLG stated that the objective by the end of 2005/06 in terms of separate plans which local authorities would be required to produce and submit are:

- Five major service plans required from non-excellent authorities in addition to the BVPP and the community strategy;
- A small number of plans required for specific purposes or for specified areas; and
- A small number of plans which are the responsibility of a partnership of which the local authority forms a part.

In addition, for the plans that remained, it was intended that local authorities would have greater flexibility in the way in which the plans were produced, regarding whether they were required to be submitted to central government or not, and in respect of the performance management and monitoring frameworks associated with them.

Guidance was also issued giving local authorities flexibility to subsume certain plans within others. For example, Homelessness Strategies could be subsumed within Local Housing Strategies, and Rights of Way Improvement Plans were allowed to be subsumed within Local Transport Plans.

Overall a complex picture emerged of the remaining planning requirements with certain plans removed, key strategies merged or subsumed, and some performance related freedoms enabling excellent authorities to escape the obligation to produce certain plans, though this did not absolve them from the substantive process of planning, merely of the need to submit plans to central government.

It is also clear that whilst guidance has been put in place regarding planning requirements, the specifics of which plans are required by which authority (whether according to its performance or the type of authority itself) is complex. In addition, plans are supported by a series of returns and other reporting arrangements at varying levels of frequency and complexity, and thus unpicking the implications of reducing planning requirements is a considerable task.

Table 1 (below) summarises the state of play in 2006 regarding the planning requirements of individual central government departments against the 66 plans identified by the DTLR (2002) study. The table sets out the number of plans that have been completely removed as a planning requirement by central government, those that have been replaced by other planning requirements, those that have merged with other plans and the number of plans that are no longer required by excellent authorities²⁴.

Table 1: Progress on plan rationalisation since 2002, by central government department					
Department	No. of plans [DTLR study]	No. removed	No. replaced	No. merged/subsumed	No. not required of excellent authorities
DCMS	2	1	0	1	0
DEFRA	7	1	0	5	1
DfES	11	1	7		0
DfT	1	0	0	0	1
DoH	20	19	0	0	0
Home Office	3	0	0	1	1
ODPM	16	3	5	5	2
Other departments	7	3	3	0	1

Table 2 (below) sets out the residual planning burden on local government for excellent and all other authorities, including the new planning requirements that we have identified. This only includes plans where a separate plan is required. Where provisions have been made that certain plans may be subsumed, these have not been included as a separate burden. For example, Homelessness Strategies may be subsumed within Local Housing Strategies, and Accessibility Strategies may be subsumed within any other education plan.

²⁴ It should be noted that plans may be double counted as some plans that have been merged with other plans may not be required at all by excellent authorities. For example Homelessness Strategies are not required of excellent authorities and may be subsumed within Local Housing Strategies for all other authorities.

Table 2: Remaining planning burden on local authorities, by central government department

Department	Excellent authorities	All other authorities
DCMS	0	0
DEFRA	0	1
DfES	1	2
DfT	0	1
DoH	1	1
Home Office	1	2
ODPM	5	6
Cabinet Office	1	1

Since the original study, a number of new planning requirements have been introduced, either as a result of changing legislation, or to replace a series of existing plans. These include the Civil Contingencies Plan, the CYPP, and the set of three documents which form the Local Development Framework (which replaced the suite of land use planning documents including local and structure plans as well as plans for minerals and waste).

A key development has been the increasing role of Regional Government Offices within the central-local relationship. The enhanced role of the regional tier of government takes a number of forms including an increased role in inspection, performance management and monitoring but also encouraging partnership working and providing advice and guidance in relation to a number of policy areas including, for example, Children's Services and housing and policy areas covered by the Home Office including crime and youth justice.

3.4 Perceptions of plan rationalisation within central government departments

Perceptions of progress regarding plan rationalisation at the local level varied across central government departments reflecting, perhaps, the different purposes and priorities that central government departments attached to plan rationalisation. Whilst much of the evidence was *ad hoc*, there was a perception amongst some departments that there had been progress on the ground in *some* areas. For example, in relation to education there was a perception that progress had been made, first with the integration of plans into a Single Education Plan, and subsequently with the development of CYPPs, resulting in a reduction in the planning burden on local government although also, as a consequence, in '*more meetings, more talking*'. However, at the time the fieldwork was undertaken, the then DfES also felt that it did not have a clear picture of how things were going 'on the ground' especially

as the new plan requirements had proved difficult to separate out from the implementation of other aspects of the Children Act.

It appears that at some points a gap has existed between perceptions within central government departments and actual events at a local level in certain policy areas, although some of this delay may have been due to a natural 'policy lag' between central government policy development and implementation at local government level. More generally there was something of a divergence between the dominant central government view – that plan rationalisation is progressing well because of the drastic reduction in the number of plans that authorities are now required to produce and submit to central government – and what is actually happening on the ground, namely that plans are still being produced even though they are no longer required by central government.

The impact of plan rationalisation has yet to be felt fully at the local level; authorities are not (yet) taking advantage of freedoms from plan production (see below). This is a long-term process. However, there is evidence to suggest that there has been a shift in the relationship between central and local government, although this varies by service area.

3.5 Drivers and barriers to plan rationalisation

The drivers of plan rationalisation are outlined above, in the section on context. Overall, plan rationalisation has been interpreted by central government departments as a need to liberate local government from unnecessary burdens and bureaucracy, thus freeing up resources to focus on frontline services and creating more joined-up working at the local level, and also as a need to ensure that departmental mechanisms fit in with and join up with key developments in the modernisation agenda, for example LAAs.

Levels of enthusiasm for plan rationalisation across central government have clearly been varied, and some departments suggested they had been 'pushed into' rationalising plans through the mechanisms put in place by CLG. This reticence is to be expected, given the implications of plan rationalisation in terms of how central government departments work, their changing relationship with local government, and associated shifts in accountability.

Perhaps the most significant barrier remains a perception within departments that the loss of a plan may result in the lowering of the status of that policy area within local government. In the past, plans have been introduced as a means of increasing the profile of a policy area in response to a policy driver or push within central government. This was viewed as a particular issue in departments where plans have been culled and not replaced by other obvious mechanisms or subsumed within other strategies. In general, where there has been resistance to plan rationalisation in central government, it tends to have arisen from a view that associates the existence of a plan or strategy with the priority given to that area of policy; thus to remove the

requirement to produce a plan can be seen as downgrading that area of policy. This is linked to the purpose that plans play locally and nationally and the need to find appropriate alternative mechanisms for prioritising policy areas and monitoring activity. The reduction in the number of statutorily required plans has meant that central government has, arguably, fewer levers available to it to ensure that local authorities pursue central government priorities. This issue emerges particularly in policy areas that are high on the agenda of central government, but do not fit in neatly with local government service areas.

Where certain areas of policy are very high on the policy agenda, there has been a reluctance to abandon plans as means of ensuring that local authorities are delivering. For example, this is a pertinent issue in relation to Biodiversity Action Plans, which are non-statutory plans that were introduced as a result of the National Biodiversity Action Plan. The plans have always been viewed as being marginal to local authorities, but are high up the policy agenda of DEFRA. The intention is that the plans are to be subsumed into community strategies. However, there are strong concerns that because of this, biodiversity issues will be downgraded in importance and will be one competing priority amongst many within the community strategy. It was suggested by one interviewee that DEFRA is 'struggling to find an alternative mechanism for ensuring that local authorities buy in to the national commitment to ensure bio-diversity'. The lack of prescription of what should be included in a community strategy was an issue of concern to some departments.

It was also noted that although local authorities often resent attempts by central government to impose priorities, it is also the case that they sometimes lack the confidence to make full use of the freedoms and flexibilities that are offered. This reflects, perhaps, a historic mistrust of central government, a fear that if they do not do the 'right' thing they will be penalised.

Through our work with central government departments we have looked for evidence of a change in mindset within central government regarding the role of plans. Whilst it is clear there has been resistance within some departments regarding the loss of plans, and that there are ongoing and real concerns about the impact of the loss of plans, in general, plan rationalisation has been accepted as important in terms of reducing the burden on local government and encouraging new ways of working – not just between central and local government, but also between central government departments.

All departments suggested, regardless of how positively they regarded plan rationalisation, that there was a firm presumption against new planning requirements being imposed on local government and this had been taken on board when developing new policy areas, and the majority of departments stated that the guidance had affected the way in which they developed and implemented policy, and the way that reporting mechanisms were designed.

3.6 Summary and implications

In terms of progress within central government departments, there has been a concerted focus on reducing and consolidating the planning requirements on local government. Focusing on the 66 plans identified through the original DTLR study, it appears that planning requirements on local government have been dramatically reduced and that the government's intention to reduce planning requirements by 75% has been realised. However, it should be noted that this does not take into account the additional returns and reporting requirements that have been imposed on local government as a response to concerns around loss of data by central government.

Responses to plan rationalisation across central government have been variable and there have been varying degrees of reticence about the loss of plans. Interviews with stakeholders identified a number of barriers within central government, and it was clear that whilst potential benefits to local authorities were apparent, there were significant concerns about the impact on plan rationalisation within central government. More positively, there were many instances where rationalisation had resulted in central government departments working together to positive effect. It has been generally accepted that there is a presumption against the imposition of new planning requirements from the centre, and movement away from the 'culture of planning', which represents a major shift in mindset.

More critical, however, is the issue of the impact of plan rationalisation on central government ways of working and the relationship between central and local government. It is clear that it is still early days in terms of assessing the impact of plan rationalisation, as due to the time lag in planning cycles local authorities are only now producing plans in line with new requirements.

There is some evidence of shifts in ways of working within central government which are consistent with the whole modernisation process. For instance, there were moves, in some policy areas at least, towards the development of shared priorities between central and local government. There is also evidence of the development of new ways of working in relation to monitoring local government activity, performance management and inspection, through for example developing new BVPIs, new inspection regimes, working through RGOs or through an emphasis on local scrutiny.

In terms of actual practice at the local level, there was evidence from central government departments that local authorities are continuing to plan, even where there is no requirement for them to continue to do so. There are many reasons for local authorities continuing to produce plans, which we have identified, and there is nevertheless a need for plans in many instances; local government will need to plan service areas regardless of whether a plan is required by central government. The key issue is whether the additional flexibility that is available to local government in the way that they plan, lifts the planning burden and allows authorities to plan and work in different ways that is more suited to their needs than the needs of central

government. The evidence below appears to point to the appreciation by local authorities of some central government departments however, saw plan rationalisation as a 'one off' activity; the removal by the department of the requirement to produce a particular plan has meant that for them plan rationalisation has been accomplished, whether or not local authorities are still producing plans locally.

Finally, there was some evidence of a changing relationship between central and local government, although this is hard to isolate as being as a result of the reduction in planning obligations, in relation to the wider changes that are taking place as part of the modernisation process. This is characterised by a more differentiated relationship between central and local levels, with greater emphasis on partnership working, as well as an enhanced role for regional government in terms of monitoring and performance management.

A number of issues emerge from these findings in terms of policy development:

- Because of a natural policy lag, and also the long-term nature of some of the planning cycles in local government, the impact of plan rationalisation is only beginning to be felt in central and local government. This is in terms of the loss of information, loss of levers and means of performance managing by central government, and at the local government level in terms of reducing level of bureaucracy and the freedom to plan to different and perhaps more locally relevant ways. This sets the context for any longer term evaluations of plan rationalisation.
- Discussions with central government stakeholders highlight the importance of LAAs in changing the relationship between central and local government in some policy areas. To some degree it is felt that plan rationalisation has been 'done' in central government, and LAAs are very much seen as the new and emerging policy area that they need to get to grips with and which are likely to impact most on central-local relations.
- There is some evidence to suggest that plan rationalisation is having a limited impact within local government, with relatively few authorities taking up some of the newer powers particularly in terms of performance based flexibilities. These findings, and also evidence from elements of the evaluation with local government, points to a lack of awareness of plan rationalisation within local government. There may need to be further clarification of the varying requirements from different central government departments, particularly where formal plans have been replaced by other mechanisms for example annual returns, and where freedoms are performance based.

- Whilst there is evidence of a change in mindset in terms of planning, and a general presumption against the requirement to produce further plans, it should be ensured that this message continues to be reinforced within central government. There may be a tendency for departments to try and introduce planning requirements or other mechanisms for information gathering 'through the back door'.

Overall, perceptions of progress with plan rationalisation at the local level have varied across central government departments reflecting, perhaps, the different purposes and priorities that central government departments attach to plan rationalisation. There has been something of a divergence between the dominant central government view - that plan rationalisation was progressing well because of the drastic reduction in the number of plans that authorities were now required to produce and submit to central government – and what is actually happening on the ground, namely that plans are still being produced even though they are no longer required by central government.

4 Progress in local government

4.1 Introduction

The initial survey and case study work carried out as part of the evaluation in 2004 suggested that progress with plan rationalisation in local authorities was patchy and limited. Whilst progress has continued to be somewhat variable, the later case study and survey work (2006) showed indications of a more corporate approach to plan rationalisation within local government. Plan rationalisation is increasingly seen within the context of wider developments, such as the roll out of LAAs.

This section addresses progress regarding plan rationalisation in local government, followed by a discussion of the relationship between plan rationalisation, sustainable community strategies, and LAAs. We then summarise local government perspectives on plan rationalisation. Lastly, we discuss drivers and barriers to plan rationalisation at the local level.

4.2 Progress on plan rationalisation

Evidence from the first survey and the case study work (2004) indicated that while general *awareness* of plan rationalisation at the local level was relatively high, *understanding* was at best variable across authorities and at worst quite low. While many officers clearly thought that plan rationalisation was a 'good thing', exactly what they understood by that phrase was highly variable. For example, few officers explicitly linked plan rationalisation to the broader local government modernisation agenda; rather the two processes were seen as running in parallel.

At the local level progress has been generally uneven, although it is important to stress that the fieldwork was undertaken at an early stage in relation to the rationalisation process. In some cases, plans were being allowed to run their course before being phased out or merged with others. Nevertheless, as was noted above, relatively few authorities had, at that time, developed a strategic approach to plan rationalisation (14% according to the survey) or accorded it much priority locally. Typically plan rationalisation was either left to the 'big' service departments (e.g. education or social services) or was subsumed within the community strategy process. Around a third of respondents to the survey said that the process of plan rationalisation was linked to the development and implementation of the community strategy, while a higher proportion of cases (77%) reported that

plans had been linked to or combined with the community strategy. The lack of coordination is also evidenced by the fact that almost half of all authorities were unable to respond to a question in the survey asking which service areas had made the most progress on plan rationalisation.

However, there were exceptions to this uncoordinated approach. For example, in one authority a corporate approach was adopted which involved an audit of existing plans – both statutory and non-statutory. Taking account of central government guidance, decisions were then taken as to whether plans should be maintained, phased out or integrated with other plans. As a result of this exercise, 21 plans remained. This highlights the fact that even in authorities where there is a conscious and strategic approach to plan rationalisation it is difficult for authorities to reduce the number of plans purely to those required by central government²⁵.

In the second of our surveys (2006), respondents were asked about the overall progress that had been made in their authority in relation to plan rationalisation. Overall 43% of respondents said that limited progress had been made on reducing the number of plans in their authority during the previous 12 months, and 42% said that a moderate amount of progress had been made. There were no significant differences between types of authority or between excellent and non-excellent authorities. The key findings from the 2006 survey include the following:

- Although relatively few authorities had a coordinated approach to plan rationalisation, over 50% said that their approach was being led from the corporate centre. It was also clear from statements made by respondents that plan rationalisation was beginning to be recognised as a task that needed to be undertaken. Responsibility for this task was increasingly being assigned to a lead officer.
- In terms of progress on plan rationalisation, 43% of respondents said that limited progress had been made on plan rationalisation over the past 12 months, while 42% said that moderate progress had been made.
- Around two thirds of all respondents linked the process of reducing the number of plans to the development and implementation of the community strategy – an increase from 36% in 2004.
- Progress within individual service areas was explored through the survey. Education was the service area in which respondents were most likely to say that ‘a great deal of progress’ had been made during the past 12 months. Excellent authorities were significantly more likely to say they had made progress in relation to education.

25 Darlow, A., Jassi, S., Percy Smith, J. and Wells, P. (2006) *Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation; Formative Evaluation of community strategies. Plan Rationalisation Issues Paper.*

- Although excellent authorities are exempt from the requirement to produce certain plans produced by other authorities, this freedom has had relatively little impact so far with most excellent authorities continuing to produce numerous plans and stating that they were unlikely to stop producing them in the future.
- Where plans continue to be produced locally despite there being no central government requirement to do so, this is typically because they serve a useful purpose in terms of local planning or internal monitoring. This applies to both performance-based freedoms for excellent authorities and to plans that are no longer required of any authority.
- The impact of plan rationalisation is only slowly becoming apparent; just under half of all respondents said that plan rationalisation had had little or no impact on their authority. More positively, just over 51% of respondents thought that plan rationalisation was a key component in the creation of integrated services.
- There is little evidence to suggest that plan rationalisation has weakened the link between local authority priorities and the delivery of central government objectives, with 71% disagreeing or disagreeing strongly with that statement. Equally, there is also little evidence to suggest that plan rationalisation has had, or is likely to have an impact on the relationship between central and local government.²⁶
- In addition 'moderate' or a 'great deal of' progress was also evident in around 50% of cases in relation to Corporate Services and Crime and Community Safety.
- Government guidance on plan rationalisation states that a number of plans may be integrated into the community strategy. Of these plans we found that:
 - 70% of respondents still produce a Supporting People Strategy.
 - 53% of respondents still produce a Local Cultural Strategy.
 - 41% of respondents still produce a Biodiversity Action Plan.

Other plans that are still being produced by more than 50% of authorities that responded to the survey (although they are no longer required by central government) are detailed in the table below:

²⁶ Darlow, A., Fidler, Y., Percy-Smith, J. and Wymer, P. (2006) *Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation; Formative Evaluation of Community Strategies. Report of the May 2006 Survey of Local Authorities on Plan Rationalisation.*

Table 3: Plans being produced in addition to central government requirements (2006)

Corporate and cross-cutting

- Asset Management Strategy – 94%
- E-Government Strategy – 72%

Housing

- Homelessness Strategy – 88%
- Home Energy Conservation Report – 61%
- Housing Revenue Account Business Plan – 58%

Planning and the environment

- Contaminated Land Strategy – 63%
- Waste Recycling Plan – 61%

Transport

- Air Quality Action Plan – 73%
- Rights of Way Action Plan – 53%

Culture

- Annual Library Plan – 40%

Education and Children and Young People

- Teenage Pregnancy Strategy – 75%
- Youth Service Plan – 62%
- Adult Learning Plan – 61%
- Education Asset Management Plan – 57%

Health and Social Care

- Drugs Action Plan – 75%
- Training/Human Resources Plan – 73%
- Vulnerable Adults Strategy – 55%

In the final round of case studies carried out as part of the evaluation, it became apparent that the plan rationalisation process is an ongoing one. Local authorities are at different stages with plan rationalisation, depending largely on whether they had been granted the freedoms associated with excellent CPA status. Progress was also uneven within the case study authorities, with awareness of and engagement in plan rationalisation varying considerably. Although overall there did seem to be some reduction in plans, there was little or no impact in some service areas in some localities. It was clear from the research findings that the authorities continued to meet their statutory obligations to produce plans, and that beyond this some authorities were taking advantage of the streamlined requirements for plans within some services. The need for plans as part of strategic planning and operationalisation, which was identified in previous research in the case study localities remained a common theme.

There was some evidence to suggest that authorities are developing a more corporate approach to plan making, streamlining the number of plans that are being produced, and aligning these with the community strategy and/or corporate plans. In general terms there is a commitment to develop co-ordinated planning processes that are streamlined but also fit for purpose.

Thus the final case studies indicated that plan rationalisation is impacting to a degree in terms of streamlining plans and services. For example, in one unitary authority, contributors discussed the way in which the development of the LAA and associated attempts to steer away from duplication was encouraging officers to focus upon planning. This was felt to be having some effect; for instance the Children's Services Plan had been aligned with the corresponding LAA block. The value of plan rationalisation in contributing to releasing resources to allocate to priority areas elsewhere was well recognised by most. Respondents acknowledged that there was a need to produce relevant and robust plans, while actions (such as that discussed above) to integrate and rationalise plans were seen as 'desirable and potentially beneficial' (local authority respondent).

In some localities authorities continued to build on the progress that had been made in previous years. For example, as reported last year in a further unitary, the Council had devolved responsibility for responding to the flexibilities offered under the plan rationalisation process to each individual service area. However, progress on plan rationalisation was in some cases due to other factors. For instance, in one authority it was felt that progress in 2005/6 on plan rationalisation had been achieved partly because policy officers had been *'far too busy (with the LAA process) to write plans'*. It is more likely, as the same respondent confirmed, that this move away from generic plan-making reflects a shift in emphasis from 'fund-chasing' plans (for example to secure RDA funds such as the Market and Coastal Towns Initiative, Rural & Urban Renaissance Funds and so on) to 'broad topic' plans (such as the Local Transport, Community Safety and CYPs). This has resulted in a more streamlined corporate planning process, with fewer single-issue plans being required overall.

Whilst there is evidence that plan rationalisation has had an impact in some case study areas, it is important to note the limiting factors and also some of the concerns about plan rationalisation. Doubt was expressed by some contributors about the extent to which rationalisation would in fact reduce bureaucracy, and whether it was relevant, or a concept which needed a coordinated response. In one authority, it appeared that awareness of plan rationalisation remained limited to those senior staff in the organisation with responsibility for the plans identified in the table above. Those same senior officers continued to question the way in which the process had been approached, and remained doubtful as to the impact of plan rationalisation locally. They were concerned that claims made about the potential impact of the initiative (specifically in relation to reducing the plan-making burden on local authorities) are 'over-stated'. Also, in some cases there has been an issue about the capacity of officers (both those involved in devising policy and customer-facing staff charged with delivering the new policy outcomes) to cope with the scale and pace of change. While a commitment had been made to ensure that adequate training and support was made available to all staff, it was anticipated that demand for this would exceed what is practical and reasonable for the partners to provide. It was acknowledged, also, that more work would be needed in developing the locality-based approach, and in securing a clearer shared understanding (both between

agencies and with the public) about what exactly is meant by a 'single point of entry'.

From the findings of the final round of case studies, it appeared that plan rationalisation may have decreased in perceived importance at a local level. Local authority players were busily engaged in planning concerning the LAAs and LDFs (see below), and whilst the 'joining up' element of plan rationalisation continued to be central, it was not necessarily termed 'plan rationalisation'²⁷.

4.3 Relationship between plan rationalisation, community strategies and LAAs

One issue that has become increasingly pertinent concerns the coordination of LAAs, sustainable community strategies, and Local Development Frameworks (LDFs) and other planning developments. Authorities varied concerning the cohesiveness of planning processes and the possibility to which it was possible to rationalise these. The future challenge of Multi-Area Agreements was mentioned in a minority of cases.

In the 2006 case studies, authorities showed considerable diversity around the extent to which they were coordinating LAAs, community strategies, and other plans in a way that supported plan rationalisation. Some appeared to be organised and cohesive in their approach; for instance, in one unitary authority there are clear linkages between the Council's revised approach to planning (i.e. reflecting the plan rationalisation agenda) and the planning processes set in place by the LSP to oversee the development and implementation of the LAA and community strategy. Further good practice was apparent in some localities. For example, in one authority work undertaken over the past twelve months in developing an Integrated Housing Strategy was cited by several respondents as an example of good practice highlighting how the Council and its partners had worked together effectively to identify and devise plans to address joint priorities within a more streamlined planning process. This revised strategy has provided the basis of the work behind the generation of the Economic Development and Stronger Communities blocks and the Housing Key Partnership will operate as the Outcome Body charged with overseeing the housing elements that cut across these different LAA blocks.

Despite such evidence of progress regarding plan rationalisation, it was clear that all authorities were experiencing difficulties in coordinating the different plans and mechanisms, even in authorities where progress had been made and a more proactive approach was being adopted. This emerged particularly in relation to certain policy areas.

The arrangement of (some) LAAs around four blocks raised concerns in terms of the impact on those strategies, policy areas and priorities which

27 Monro, S., Purcell, M., Hawtin, M., Stevens, A. (2007) *Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation; Formative Evaluation of community strategies. Case Studies Synthesis Report 2006.*

were addressed within the community strategy but which did not have a clear 'home' within the four blocks. For instance, specific issues were raised in relation to culture and it was suggested that closer alignment with the LAA could impact adversely on that strategy: *'if there is a greater move to only four blocks then the implication is you only need four strategies and that would be a threat to culture'* (local government officer). In addition, a lack of a focus on culture through the LAA process would mean that there would be a reduction in the need to collect data for leisure targets which in turn could lead to a reduction in the importance placed on work in this area. It may be important, therefore, to ensure that culture is somehow built into the LAA in future.

The relationship between LAAs, Local Development Frameworks (LDFs) and community strategies also emerged as a key area of concern. For instance, in one locality, questions were raised about how the LAA linked in to other plans, including the community strategy and the LDF. One officer noted that: *'when plan rationalisation first came out central government didn't quite know how to deal with local planning and I think they still don't. I also don't think that central government 'gets' the relationship between LAAs, community strategy, and LDFs'* (local government officer).

Problems concerning the coordination of community strategies and LAAs were especially marked in two-tier areas. For example, in one two-tier locality one contributor expressed confusion about the relationship between the LAA and the community strategy and noted that they were not well represented on the LAA²⁸.

4.4 Local government perspectives

Those interviewed as part of the early case study work (2004/5) were able to identify the following positive features of plan rationalisation for local authorities, for instance:

- Reduced bureaucracy as a result of having to produce fewer plans, resulting in an increased focus on delivery;
- Improved strategic focus and reduced duplication between plans ensuring that targets were more closely aligned or at least not in conflict;
- Interaction between plans and priorities – rationalising plans provided an opportunity to identify how plans interact with other priorities and targets;
- Greater potential for increased quality control over a smaller number of plans; and
- Improved efficiency in the long-term.

²⁸ Monro, S., Purcell, M., Hawtin, M., Stevens, A. (2007) *Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation; Formative Evaluation of community strategies. Case Studies Synthesis Report 2006.*

Although the case study authorities were able to identify these positive aspects of plan rationalisation, the research that took place in rounds one and two of the case study work indicated that they were not able to identify many positive *examples* of the impact of plan rationalisation. This is in part due to the relatively early stage in the implementation of plan rationalisation. However, it also reflects the lack of a coherent overall strategy for plan rationalisation within local authorities.

There were conflicting views (demonstrating a lack of familiarity with the guidance) as to whether plan rationalisation referred to plans being culled or aligned more closely with the community strategy. There was, perhaps, a preponderance of views in favour of the latter reflecting the general emphasis given to achieving greater integration of services; a half of all authorities responding to the survey agreed that plan rationalisation was a key component in creating integrated services.

While awareness of plan rationalisation as a high level policy priority was relatively good, familiarity with the detail of what was required, or with the guidance was quite poor. The first survey and the first and second round of case studies indicated that knowledge of plan rationalisation and familiarity with government guidance was relatively high at senior and corporate levels within local authorities but rather lower elsewhere, suggesting that guidance is not percolating to other levels within the authority and/or plan rationalisation is not being accorded much priority locally.

In general there was a sense in which, for at least some local authorities, plan rationalisation was, paradoxically, perceived as an additional burden – something else that central government wanted local authorities to do – rather than an easing of the burden. There was certainly considerable scepticism voiced in the case study authorities as to the extent to which plan rationalisation would have an effect on central-local relations. While awareness of plan rationalisation was high – 90% of survey respondents said they were aware of it – understanding of what was entailed by plan rationalisation was relatively low. This is reflected in the fact that in most cases there was no corporate approach to plan rationalisation or identifiable lead officer (only 14% of respondents to the survey stated their authority had a co-ordinated strategy for plan rationalisation)²⁹.

The 2006 survey indicated that as yet plan rationalisation is seen to have had relatively little effect on local authorities. When asked to what extent they agreed with a series of statements about the impact of plan rationalisation, the statement that elicited the highest response was: 'plan rationalisation has had little or no impact on our authority' with 47% of respondents reporting that they agreed or agreed strongly with the statement. By contrast, 59% disagreed or disagreed strongly with the statement: 'plan rationalisation has changed the relationship between central and local government' and 50% disagreed or disagreed strongly with the statement: 'plan rationalisation has allowed the authority to redeploy personnel more

²⁹ Darlow, A., Jassi, S., Percy Smith, J. and Wells, P. (2006) Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation; Formative Evaluation of community strategies. Plan Rationalisation Issues Paper.

effectively to meet key objectives'. This is considerably higher than the figure from the 2004 survey when 27% disagreed or disagreed strongly with the same statement.

More positively, 51% agreed or agreed strongly that 'plan rationalisation is a key component of creating integrated services'. This is comparable to the finding for this question in the 2004 survey when 54% agreed or agreed strongly with the same statement. 71% per cent of respondents disagreed or disagreed strongly with the statement: 'plan rationalisation has weakened the link between local authority priorities and the delivery of central government policy objectives'. This figure was considerably higher than the 56% of respondents last year that disagreed or disagreed strongly with the same statement. Some 58% disagreed or disagreed strongly with the statement that 'plan rationalisation has created significant gaps in data' (compared to 44% disagreeing or disagreeing strongly with the same statement in the 2004 survey)³⁰.

When asked to what extent plan rationalisation was likely to have an impact – positive or negative – in the future, the areas identified where there was likely to be a positive impact were:

- Strategic planning ('slightly positive' [57%]; 'extremely positive' [26%]);
- Delivering more integrated services ('slightly positive' [52%]; 'extremely positive' [21%]);
- Levels of bureaucracy ('slightly positive' [66%]; 'extremely positive' [16%]); and
- Level of resources spent on planning ('slightly positive' [60%]; 'extremely positive' [9%]).

From the perspective of officers in local government, plan rationalisation was not seen as a discrete initiative; rather it tended to be viewed as closely connected to other processes, notably the development of community strategies, enhanced coordination both across the authority and with external partners, and, increasingly, the development of LAAs. The role of the community strategy as an integrating mechanism seemed well-developed, as shown by the two light touch case study authorities discussed above. In the first, the community strategy was the overarching plan for both the Council and its partners (where possible). All plans were linked back to the community strategy by means of key themes. Planning took place through the LSP Board and Theme Groups and there was a clear hierarchy of plans. The second case study – a much larger authority – was in the process of reviewing its plans and planning processes with a view to encouraging better integration and coordination. Although, as was the case in the first example, the community strategy provided the framework within which planning took place, some plans were, nevertheless, kept separate.

³⁰ However it is important to note that in relation to each of the statements, a significant proportion of respondents (between a quarter and a third) said that they 'neither agreed nor disagreed' again suggesting limited impact.

In both cases the emphasis was less on plan rationalisation (interpreted as plan reduction) but rather on better coordination of plans³¹.

Overall, key findings from the 2006 survey included:

- Awareness of the government's proposals for plan rationalisation had increased since the December 2004 survey. All respondents to the 2006 survey said that they were – at least to some extent – aware of plan rationalisation.
- Although 78% of respondents agreed that plan rationalisation was about reducing the number of plans produced, a larger proportion of respondents – 89% – thought that plan rationalisation was about ensuring that local authority plans 'joined up' and were complementary. Some 75% thought that plan rationalisation was about ensuring that local authority plans joined up with those of partners.
- According to respondents, the benefits that were anticipated from the implementation of plan rationalisation included: reduced bureaucracy; freeing up of staff time; improved coordination of plans across the local authority; and better alignment of local authority plans with the community strategy.
- Respondents were asked to consider the likely future impact of plan rationalisation. Reduced levels of bureaucracy and improved strategic planning were the two areas where rationalisation was most likely to have an impact. The relationship between central and local government was the area where it was felt there would be least impact³².

Contributors to the final round of case studies anticipated that work on plan rationalisation would continue along much the same lines as reported above, with variations depending on local circumstances. For example, in one unitary authority, one key development on the horizon was the fact that the Council's current Corporate Plan would become 'redundant' in March 2007, and there appeared to be no work being undertaken on its replacement. This potentially leaves a planning void, as it has provided a framework within which all Council policies have been delivered for the duration of this case study; and it might result in the breaking of the formal connection between the community strategy and the Council's planning processes.

The future will bring challenges as well as opportunities. A number of new planning requirements have been imposed as a result of recent government policies which some contributors saw as impacting on processes of plan rationalisation now and in the future³³.

31 Darlow, A., Jassi, S., Percy Smith, J. and Wells, P. (2006) *Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation; Formative Evaluation of community strategies*. Plan Rationalisation Issues Paper.

32 Darlow, A., Fidler, Y., Percy-Smith, J. and Wymer, P. (2006) *Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation; Formative Evaluation of Community Strategies. Report of the May 2006 Survey of Local Authorities on Plan Rationalisation*.

33 Monro, S. and Purcell, M. with Hawtin, M. and Stevens, A. (submitted 2007) *Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation; Formative Evaluation of community strategies. Case Studies Synthesis Report 2006 – Draft*.

4.5 Drivers and barriers to plan rationalisation

The drivers of plan rationalisation at a local level were outlined above, in the section on context. The various strands of the evaluation revealed a number of barriers or challenges regarding plan rationalisation, which are outlined below.

The initial survey and case study work indicated that not all authorities had found the process of aligning plans with the community strategy straightforward. A particular issue was that many of the plans that have been abolished are council plans and there was a question mark about the extent to which “council business” could or should be subsumed within the community strategy. In some areas it was clear that the process of rationalising *partnerships* was a necessary first step towards rationalising plans.

In some localities, even once the central government requirement for a plan to be produced was removed, a local service plan was still produced to serve the authority’s own planning, service improvement and monitoring requirements. For example, Blackburn with Darwen stated that they would continue to produce plans for some services as a way of *‘guiding our activity’*. More generally it was felt that in some cases local authorities would see no immediate positive benefit to service delivery as a result of plan rationalisation; in most areas, therefore, it was likely that local authorities would continue with some form of plan arrangements, especially in relation to service delivery.

At the local level, the pressures on local authorities that tended to support the maintenance of existing plans and, indeed, the production of new plans included: the need to focus on performance in order to improve CPA scores, which is in turn linked to the production of action or service improvement plans; LAAs (for example, the development of a LAA Children and Young People block as well as a Council Children and Young Peoples Plan); and devolution from the council to local areas/neighbourhoods which spawned neighbourhood or locality plans. In addition, the view was expressed that the implementation of Local Development Frameworks would lead to a proliferation of plans locally as, instead of having a single Unitary Development Plan, there would be several development plans instead. Some authorities were clearly struggling to align the process of plan rationalisation with other major policy initiatives which seemed to encourage, rather than discourage, the production of plans. These included: Best Value, the CPA process, LAAs and LPSAs.

In some areas and in relation to some issues local authorities feared that they would lose the focus on specific issues of importance to their locality. The most frequently cited example here was Local Agenda 21 strategies and a lessening of the emphasis on environmental issues. More generally a concern was expressed in the case study authorities that rationalising plans might remove the priority and focus from a service area; if there is no plan the issue risks falling off the agenda. This was especially the case for those areas that

sat outside the key service areas of (for example) health, crime and education.

There was a feeling among some local authority contributors that guidance could be better joined-up across central government to ensure that all departments were sending out a consistent message with regards to the importance of plan rationalisation, its purpose and how it should be implemented on the ground. The lack of a formal role for Government Offices in the Regions in relation to plan rationalisation was also commented on.

At a local level it was clear that plans might be produced where an area was highlighted as a priority, or where a plan was needed to organise work. In relation to the issue of reducing the burden on local government, one view expressed was that it was not the production of plans per se that created a bureaucratic burden; rather it was the systems underpinning plans, especially performance management systems where monitoring takes place in relation to a large number of indicators. This provided a further impetus for rationalisation of indicators and performance management systems across plans that are more closely aligned.

A further reason for the failure to reduce the number of local plans was the existence of countervailing pressures. This was the case for both central and local government. One example from central government came from the Home Office where the view was expressed that plans were still being used to measure local performance on certain key issues, in part due to lack of confidence in other performance management frameworks (including LAAs) and in part due to the high profile nature of particular aspects of policy. As a result the Home Office was reluctant to cull plans.

Another issue that appeared to prevent local authorities reducing the number of plans produced was the nature of organisational culture. This partly related to the issue of the purposes for which plans were produced – in many cases a plan is the management tool of choice in local government, to take forward a policy or service improvement priority³⁴.

Findings from the later stages of the evaluation – the 2006 survey and the final round of case studies – tended to reveal similar challenges regarding plan rationalisation to those which emerged from the earlier parts of the evaluation. The survey (2006) indicated that the main barriers to the implementation of plan rationalisation were considered to be the different timescales for plans and the requirements for specific data established by national government or other bodies. These barriers were similar to those identified in the 2004 survey. Respondents were asked to indicate the reasons why plans were still being produced if they were no longer required by central government. The most commonly cited reasons were that 'plans

³⁴ Darlow, A., Jassi, S., Percy Smith, J. and Wells, P. (2006) *Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation; Formative Evaluation of community strategies. Plan Rationalisation Issues Paper*

are still required for internal planning purposes' (91%) and 'plans are still required for internal monitoring purposes' (68%).³⁵

The barriers that were most apparent in the final round of case studies included:

- Organisational cultures that are wedded to planning processes.
- Central government being perceived as 'not being joined-up' by local government.
- The role of plans in prioritising policy areas (particularly where services are not included as part of the LAA).
- The role of plans in allocating resources and acting as a focus for activity: *'you may not need to produce the plan, but you need to know what you are doing'* (local government officer).
- The need for service level plans for co-ordination across the authority: *'Local authorities are big, they have a lot to do and a lot to deliver, they rely on effective structures to make sure we don't lose sight of our respective responsibilities but we don't have to produce a plan for everything. We are maturing and moving to a self inspection'* (local government officer).

As discussed above, the continuing development of LAAs has implications for plan rationalisation within local government, and this emerged through discussions with contributors around the barriers to plan rationalisation. Other difficulties concerned the challenge of squaring plan rationalisation with policy developments such as LDFs, LAAs, and MAAs and Conurbation Area Agreements. For example, an Officer noted that *'CAAs will have implications for what we do and how we deliver services as local authorities will be expected to work together in different ways'*. Contributors highlighted particular issues regarding working with neighbouring boroughs and authorities through the development of MAAs and CAAs. One officer questioned this approach: *'How do you work with your neighbours? How do you work across boundaries? How do you relate to county wide authorities? We have 2-tier authorities all around us – so you have some challenges on the horizon!'*

It seemed that many plans that were no longer required by central government had not been removed altogether but were instead being produced in a way that was more suited to local circumstances. One officer noted that:

'Plan rationalisation has not been about cutting plans, rather it is about bringing together existing work implemented through the LAA. This may replace groups of strategies within District Councils but not the County

³⁵ Darlow, A., Fidler, Y., Percy-Smith, J. and Wymer, P. (2006) *Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation; Formative Evaluation of Community Strategies. Report of the May 2006 Survey of Local Authorities on Plan Rationalisation.*

Council. It does generate partnership organisation – my view is that with partnership work you won't rationalise by removing plans as you need the planning process to coordinate service delivery – 'rearrangement' is a better term.' (local government officer)

4.6 Summary

Overall, there has been progress on a number of fronts regarding plan rationalisation within local government. This has been set within the context of a changing environment for local planning, including the introduction and rolling out of LAAs, LPSAs, and the changes associated with the Local Government White Paper 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' (2006)³⁶ and the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act (October 2007)³⁷, which enacts many of the proposals in the White Paper. This section aims to summarise briefly the key findings from the evaluation regarding local government and plan rationalisation, and to draw out some of the emerging issues.

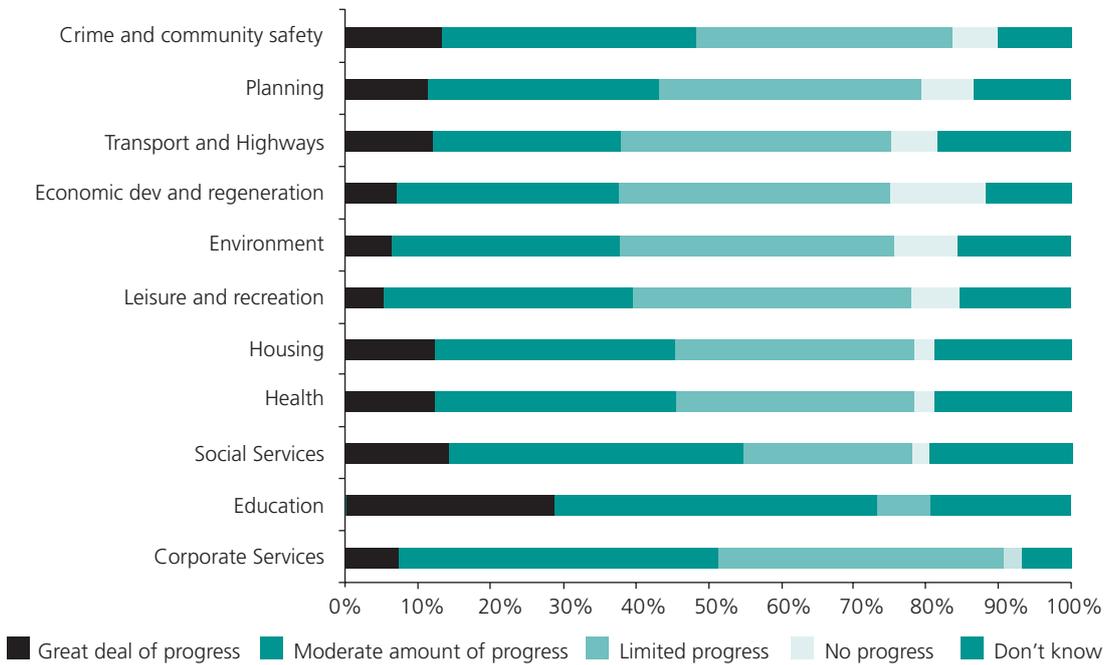
The initial survey and case study work carried out as part of the evaluation suggested that whilst there had been progress with regard to plan rationalisation in local authorities, this was patchy and limited. In some cases plans were being allowed to run their course before being phased out or merged with others. Relatively few authorities had developed a strategic approach to plan rationalisation (14% according to the survey) or accorded it much priority locally. Typically plan rationalisation was either left to the 'big' service departments (e.g. education or social services) or was subsumed within the community strategy process. Around a third of respondents to the first survey said that the process of plan rationalisation was linked to the development and implementation of the community strategy, although in a rather higher proportion of cases (77%) plans had been linked to or combined with the community strategy.

General awareness of the drive to rationalise plans was quite high amongst the local authority representatives interviewed, but there were varied interpretations of the definition of plan rationalisation – some people saw it as a term to describe the coordination of plans, whereas others perceived it to mean abolishing plans or combining them.

In the second survey (2006), respondents were asked about the overall progress that had been made in their authority in relation to plan rationalisation. Overall 43% of respondents said that limited progress had been made on reducing the number of plans in their authority over the past 12 months, and 42% said that a moderate amount of progress had been made. Over half of respondents agreed or agreed strongly that plan rationalisation was a key component in the creation of integrated services.

36 CLG (2006) *Strong and prosperous communities: The Local Government White Paper* London: HMSO.

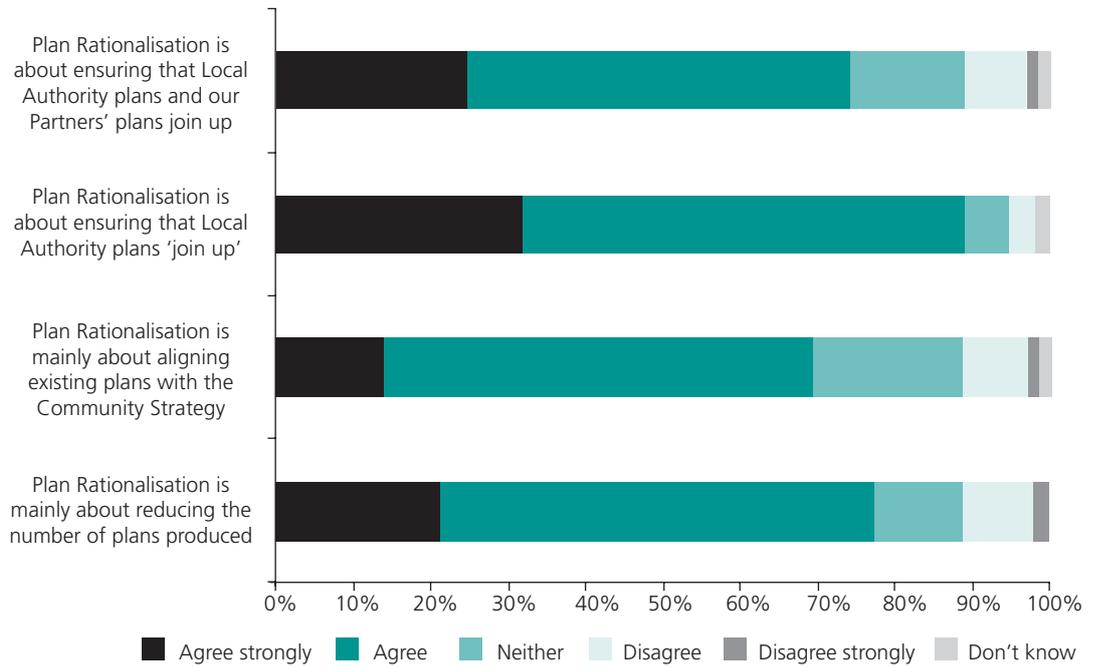
37 http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2007/ukpga_20070028_en_1

Figure 1: Progress on reducing the number of plans by service area 2006

Source: DCLG (2007), *Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation: formative evaluation of Community Strategies, Report of the May 2006 Survey of Local Authorities*, London: DCLG, P28.

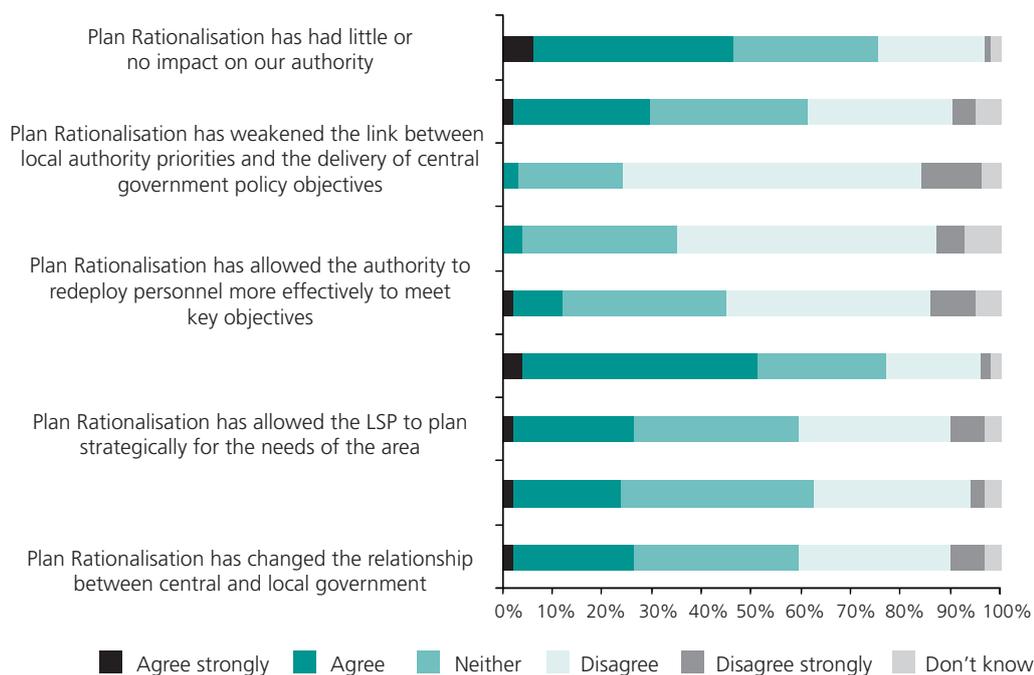
Although 78% of respondents agreed that plan rationalisation was about reducing the number of plans produced, a larger proportion of respondents – 89% – thought that plan rationalisation is about ensuring that local authority plans ‘join up’ and are complementary. Some 75% thought that plan rationalisation was about ensuring that local authority plans join up with those of partners.

Figure 2: Views on the role of plan rationalisation in 2006



Source: DCLG (2007), *Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation: formative evaluation of Community Strategies, Report of the May 2006 Survey of Local Authorities*, London: DCLG, P16.

The 2006 survey indicated that as yet plan rationalisation has had relatively little effect on local authorities. More positively, 51% agreed or agreed strongly that 'plan rationalisation is a key component of creating integrated services'. This was comparable to the finding for this question in the 2004 survey when 54% agreed or agreed strongly with the same statement. Seventy-one per cent of respondents disagreed or disagreed strongly with the statement: 'plan rationalisation has weakened the link between local authority priorities and the delivery of central government policy objectives' in 2004. This figure was considerably higher than the 56% of respondents in 2006 that disagreed or disagreed strongly with the same statement.

Figure 3: Impact of Plan Rationalisation 2006

Source: DCLG (2007), *Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation: formative evaluation of Community Strategies, Report of the May 2006 Survey of Local Authorities, London: DCLG, P16.*

The 2006 case studies indicated that:

- Local authorities were at different stages overall regarding plan rationalisation, depending on whether they had been granted the freedoms associated with excellent CPA status.
- Awareness of, and engagement in, plan rationalisation varied considerably within authorities. Although overall there appeared to be some reduction in plans, there was little or no impact in some service areas in some localities. The need for plans to support strategic planning and operationalisation, which was identified in the earlier research in these localities remained a common theme.
- Contributors identified benefits of plan rationalisation, including reduced bureaucracy, increased efficiency and the better coordination of plans.
- One issue that has become increasingly pertinent concerns the coordination of LAAs, sustainable community strategies, and Local Development Frameworks (LDFs) and other planning developments – authorities varied concerning the cohesiveness of planning processes and the possibility to which it was possible to rationalise these. The future challenge of Multi-Area Agreements was mentioned in a minority of cases.

- It appeared from the findings of this round of case studies that plan rationalisation may have decreased in perceived importance at a local level. Local authority players were busily engaged in planning concerning the LAAs and LDFs, and whilst the 'joining up' element of plan rationalisation continued to be central, it was not necessarily termed 'plan rationalisation'.
- There was some evidence to suggest that plan rationalisation was having a limited impact within local government, with relatively few authorities taking up some of the newer powers, particularly in terms of performance-based flexibilities.
- Case study contributors thought, on the whole, that work concerning plan rationalisation would continue much as before, with variations depending on local circumstances.

A number of issues emerge from these findings in terms of policy development:

- The continued need for plans, for a number of reasons connected with local authority work. Contributors discussed the role that plans play at different levels of the authority, from specified individual work plans at service level to the provision of an overarching strategy that can be used to coordinate the planning hierarchy.
- The place that plans have in coordinating partnership work both within authorities, and across different sectors and areas.
- Difficulties with subsuming large numbers of plans within sustainable community strategies, due to the amount of information.
- Fears about a potential loss of localised focus if there are less plans.
- The status associated with plans and organisational resistance to reductions in numbers of plans because of this.
- Difficulties with aligning plan rationalisation with major policy initiatives including Best Value, LAAs and the new localism. The importance of coordinating LAAs, sustainable community strategies, LDFs and other plans was emphasised in the later stages of the evaluation.

5 Conclusions

This section of the report draws together findings from the evaluation in terms of progress on plan rationalisation over the course of the evaluation and assessing the current state of play.

It is worth noting that this is a process evaluation and, as such, we have deliberately not focused on the impacts of plan rationalisation *per se*. The evaluation has focused very much upon the processes underpinning the development of plan rationalisation. The intention to undertake a process evaluation influenced the design of the evaluation and in particular the research tools that were used to gather evidence. It is not, therefore, a summative evaluation and comments and findings relating to impact should be treated as only tentative.

As plan rationalisation is implemented it is clear that there are or will be implications for the ways in which central and local government work and relate to each other. Plan rationalisation is predicated on the notion that local authorities should be relieved of the burden of producing and, importantly, submitting, plans to central government. The model is one where what matters is performance and the achievement of agreed outcomes thus allowing localities greater flexibility in how outcomes are produced. This is a significant change away from central government closely scrutinising plans to ensure that local authorities were meeting central government policy priorities.

5.1 Progress

Plan rationalisation has had a positive impact in some localities in a number of ways, including reducing the burden of bureaucracy, improving the coordination of plans and improving efficiency. Understanding regarding the meaning of plan rationalisation – and awareness concerning plan rationalisation, have been somewhat variable in different authorities and within authorities, although greater awareness of the process has developed over time. Progress regarding plan rationalisation itself has been marked at local and central levels in some places, but generally quite uneven. Local authorities have, needless to say, competing pressures to negotiate.

At a central government level, a number of plans have been completely removed as a planning requirement by central government, with a range of measures being used to do this including primary legislation, orders to remove the requirement of some plans in excellent authorities, and the use of guidance to encourage local authorities to merge plans.

The research with central government departments showed that there were perceptions in some departments of progress at a national level concerning plan rationalisation in some policy areas. However, the evidence suggests

that there was a gap between the views of some central government representatives and the actual situation. It is important to note that there has also been the introduction of a number of new plans over the duration of the research.

For local authorities plan rationalisation is more likely to mean better coordination of plans rather than total removal of plans. The sustainable community strategy is one vehicle through which this coordination has taken place. For example in one of the light touch case study authorities the decision was taken in 2001 that the community strategy would be the overarching local plan beneath which other plans, of the local authority and partner agencies would be organised. So, in this case it is not necessarily the case that the number of plans have been reduced rather that they are better integrated with each other and with the community strategy.

The reduction in the number of statutorily required plans has meant that central government has, arguably, fewer levers available to it to ensure that local authorities pursue central government priorities. As we have seen, in the case of the Home Office, where certain areas of policy are very high up the policy agenda there has been a reluctance to abandon plans as a means of ensuring that local authorities are delivering.

In terms of performance management, in general, there is greater emphasis on an individualised, differentiated approach to working with local authorities, with excellent authorities largely left to get on with what they are already doing well, allowing a greater focus on those authorities that are performing less well. One apparent consequence of plan rationalisation is that, in the absence of statutory strategic plans in certain areas the focus of audit and inspection will be much more on service delivery and action plans.

From a local government perspective, a result of more closely aligning plans with the community strategy is the development of performance management systems that are used across a number of different plans and, in some cases agencies, which use a common set of indicators. This is clearly beneficial in terms of reducing the bureaucracy associated with performance management and also the problem of conflicting indicators across different areas or agencies.

One of the consequences of the reduction in the number of plans is a corresponding reduction in the data provided by local government to central government. In some cases this is unproblematic as data was merely collected as a by-product of the plans that were produced. However, where data is required by central government alternative means need to be found of collecting this.

An important tension of relevance to plan rationalisation is the balance between central prescription – to ensure that central government priorities are addressed locally – and local flexibility - ensuring that the ways in which policies are interpreted and applied are sensitive to local needs. Plan rationalisation tends in the direction of greater local flexibility.

There are important developments concerning the context in which plan rationalisation is taking place. These include the increasing role of RGOs within the central-local relationship. The enhanced role of the regional tier of government takes a number of forms including an increased role in inspection, performance management and monitoring but also encouraging partnership working and providing advice and guidance in relation to a number of policy areas.

5.2 Emerging issues

There are a number of issues regarding plan rationalisation. These can be drawn out of the findings from the evaluation as follows:

- At the local level it is more likely that plans are **being better coordinated** rather than being culled altogether.
- It is undoubtedly the case that a number of factors, including plan rationalisation, is having the effect of forcing local authorities to take steps to ensure that their own plans and those of their key partners are better coordinated and integrated with the community strategy. The reality at local level is that plans are still, to a significant extent, being produced even though they are no longer required to be submitted to central government. This does vary considerably across localities.
- The **long-term nature of the some of the planning cycles** in local government means that the impact of plan rationalisation is only beginning to be felt in central and local government.
- Although, in general, it does appear to be the case that central government departments are not imposing new plan requirements on local authorities, **some new requirements have come to light**. However a new requirement to produce a plan does not always carry with it a corresponding requirement that the plan be submitted to central government.
- Local authorities face ongoing challenges in aligning plan rationalisation with major policy initiatives including Best Value, LAAs and the changes associated with the new Local Government White Paper. The **importance of coordinating LAAs, sustainable community strategies, LDFs and other plans, including regional ones, was emphasised** in the later stages of the evaluation.

- Central government departments typically have only a partial view as to the extent to which progress with plan rationalisation is being made at locality level. There is something of a **mismatch between intention and implementation** insofar as departments, to some extent, regard plan rationalisation to have been accomplished in that the requirement to produce plans has been significantly reduced.
- Plan Rationalisation raises issues about **how to ensure that central government priorities are pursued locally**. Similarly some local authority plans are produced in order to demonstrate that an issue is a priority for action and as a means of ensuring that actions are pursued and their achievement monitored.
- The process of plan rationalisation highlights the **ongoing tension** between the desire (on the part of both central and local government) for greater local flexibility and central government's wish for local government to prioritise key issues and local government's wish for some central direction in order to avoid central government penalty³⁸.

³⁸ Darlow, A., Jassi, S., Percy Smith, J. and Wells, P. (2006) *Process Evaluation of Plan Rationalisation; Formative Evaluation of community strategies. Plan Rationalisation Issues Paper*

Annex 1 – Methods

Introduction

The process evaluation of plan rationalisation utilised a longitudinal, triangulated methodological approach. This section outlines the main research tasks which were undertaken. The section is divided by research task as it was assumed, where possible, that research tasks for each evaluation would be undertaken jointly.

Overview of scoping and feasibility

Scoping and feasibility work was undertaken to develop an evaluation framework for plan rationalisation. It was used to establish a series of baselines of current practice in these areas and to investigate the range of potential drivers and blockages for plan rationalisation. The scoping phase enabled further reflection around the series of key issues for plan rationalisation and how these could be captured in the evaluation design. This provided the basis for the case study topic guides.

As part of the scoping phase a literature search and review was undertaken. This considered policy documentation (e.g. White Papers, legislation, responses to Select Committee Reports), guidance and good practice guides, policy studies, research and evaluation. It also considered documentation produced by local government agencies (LGA, LGIU and IDeA), local authorities themselves, and independently commissioned policy studies and research.

The scoping and consultation phase of the research also involved interviews with central government departments, regional government offices and with local authorities and local strategic partnerships in all regions of England. Three consultation events were also held: two with local authorities and LSP members and one with central government departments. The local events were held in Leeds and London and were facilitated by Government Office for Yorkshire and Humber and Government Office for London, respectively.

The scoping phase of the evaluation was completed in summer 2004. The outcome of this phase of the research was a scoping report which was published by ODPM in November 2005. The scoping report contained the findings from the research, the literature review, the responses at the consultation event, together with the development of an evaluation framework for community strategies and plan rationalisation. This evaluation framework formed the basis of the research programme which was subsequently undertaken.

Surveys of local authorities

The surveys provided extensive quantitative data regarding the national picture in relation to plan rationalisation and community strategies. The initial plan was to conduct three postal surveys during the course of the

research, but this plan was modified due to concerns about research fatigue amongst authorities and two were undertaken, in 2004 and 2006.

The initial survey (December 2004) provided a baseline for subsequent research and the subsequent one enabled some longitudinal analysis. The initial survey was designed in close consultation with the other LGMA framework partners, and in particular the LSP and Wellbeing Powers evaluators. It was designed to obtain information on both community strategies (focusing on progress with community strategies, local perspectives on the role and function of community strategies, performance management and barriers to progress) and plan rationalisation (focusing on progress on plan rationalisation, perspectives on plan rationalisation and barriers to progress). Survey data was used as a control for halo and Hawthorne effects in the case studies. Data analysis was undertaken utilising SPSS. Steps were taken to ensure a high response rate to the survey. Where possible the surveys were sent to named individuals in local authorities and preferably to lead policy officers. A telephone follow-up was used to initially chase questionnaires and subsequently to allow for responses to be made for by telephone. A response rate of 60% was achieved. Data obtained through the survey was analysed using SPSS. A separate report on the findings from the baseline survey was produced.

The second survey, conducted in May/June 2006, focused exclusively on the progress that local authorities were making regarding plan rationalisation. A self-completion questionnaire was designed in consultation with the Local and Regional Government Research Unit at CLG. Because of the varying planning requirements on different local authorities, the questionnaire was tailored by type of authority (unitary, county and district) and also by Corporate Performance Assessment (CPA) rating (excellent and non-excellent authorities).

A key challenge for the second survey was the lack of a database of officers that have lead responsibility for plan rationalisation. In addition our research to date suggests that in some authorities there is no single officer who undertakes this role, with responsibility for plan rationalisation being split between different officers and departments. Because of these challenges the approach that was adopted was for the survey to be mailed to all Local Authority Chief Executives in England. Non-response to the initial mailing was followed up by telephone. Some sections of the questionnaire required specific knowledge of the current status of plans within key service areas. Where respondents were not aware of progress within a specific service area, contact details of a relevant officer within that service were requested. These were followed up by telephone or email to provide a fuller picture of progress within each authority. A response rate of 33% was achieved. The data was analysed using SPSS, and reported in a stand alone report.

Main case studies

Main case studies formed a central plank of the research methodology which was used. A key task of the case studies was to understand events at the local level, the rationale for these, the processes involved, potential

outcomes, and how these could be related to national policy agendas. Qualitative approaches were crucial in obtaining in-depth information relating to explanatory factors which may be sensitive in some respects.

The research team developed criteria for the selection of case studies, and then proposed a shortlist of potential case studies. The criteria included CPA score, political characteristics, type and size of authority, NRF/non-NRF locality, and region. It was intended that the first year case studies would be undertaken between February and April 2004 – following the completion and agreement of the community strategies evaluation framework. The development of criteria and the final selection procedure were undertaken in discussion with the CLG/ODPM. Care was taken to ensure that the eventual selection is also a good fit with ongoing case study work within the existing elements of the ongoing LGMA meta-evaluation. The selection process built on the findings of the literature review and scoping work. The case study areas remained the same throughout the evaluations to allow for process changes and outcomes to be followed through.

The eight cases that were selected were:

- Nottinghamshire County Council.
- Mansfield District Council.
- London Borough of Croydon.
- Barnsley Metropolitan District Council.
- Ryedale District Council.
- Liverpool City Council.
- Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council.
- Bath and North East Somerset Council.

Initial interviews focused on *internal* local authority processes involved in plan rationalisation. The second set of interviews included *external* LSP members as well as elected members (this focussed primarily on community strategies). Interviews in subsequent years involved a combination of returning to the same respondents and new respondents (e.g. from different stakeholders or with different planning responsibilities). A workbook was designed for the case studies each year to ensure a rigorous approach across them all. In each year of the evaluation documentary evidence was collected in each case study area. This included community strategies and Action Plans, relevant working papers and supporting strategies and results from local consultation events with stakeholders and other local communities. Protocols were used to ensure that similar documentary material is collected in each area.

Case study fieldwork for the baseline was undertaken in late Summer/Autumn 2004. Individual case study reports were produced for each locality. The second round of case study work in eight local authorities undertaken in Autumn 2005 and the third round in Autumn 2006. In the first year, findings were reported as part of the Annual report. In 2005, a stand-alone report was produced which synthesised findings across localities (published in 2006) and in 2006/7 a final synthesis report was produced.

‘Light touch’ case study

The introduction of light touch case studies to the methodological strategy allowed additional flexibility. The light touch case studies typically involved three interviews in local areas, or with regional and central government departments, plus relevant document and data analysis but, in some cases where there was a perceived need (for example with the LAA research) more interviews in a greater number of localities were undertaken. We conducted light touch case studies regarding plan rationalisation at both local and national levels.

Action Learning Sets

This is an area of work which was undertaken in discussion with the CLG (ODPM at that stage in the research) and the LGMA evaluators. Since the evaluation of plan rationalisation was processual, the development of action learning sets offered advantages as it provided a method for maintaining ongoing contact with a group of individuals representing different approaches, various sets of circumstances and extents of development. It also provided a route through which the research team could continue to monitor progress and potentially continue to develop the plans for the subsequent research. The mechanism enabled an exchange of information regarding topics which are of importance not only to those developing and implementing programmes on the ground, but also to policy makers. The Action Learning Sets maximised the breadth of involvement, drew upon those stakeholders with sufficient experience to contribute, and also complimented (although not duplicate in terms of membership) the case studies.

Two Action Learning Sets were established in 2004. The aim of the Action Learning Sets was to provide opportunities for those involved in implementing plan rationalisation to identify emerging issues, to feedback and test out emerging findings from the evaluation and to work together to find solutions to shared problems. The first Action Learning Set involves participants from the Yorkshire and Humber and North East regions, the second set was is predominantly focused on the East and West Midlands and Eastern regions. The two Action Learning Sets which met throughout 2005 and 2006, resulting in the following output: Issues Paper 4 – Action Learning Sets (February 2006).

Call-off Provision

Additional work was undertaken in line with the arrangements for call-off provision. The call-off studies had a strong policy focus and were commissioned to meet a specific policy demand or requirement. The call-off research that was conducted included interviews with Central Government stakeholders (Spring 2006) and a workshop with central government departments on Plan Rationalisation (October 2005).

Concluding note

The integrated programme of qualitative and quantitative research offered significant advantages for the evaluation. It allowed extensive statistical data to be combined with detailed explanatory information covering all aspects of the research. It also enabled a recognition of the linkages both between community strategies and plan rationalisation themselves, and between them and other relevant elements of the LGMA. Various methods of analysis were employed. The methodology, was, overall, sufficiently flexible to allow for the evaluation to be adapted to policy developments that took place over the course of the project (for example the rolling out of LAAs) and for findings to be gathered that could feed into developments subsequent to the Local Government White Paper 2006.

Annex 2 – Outputs from the evaluation

All published outputs from the evaluation of community strategies and plan rationalisation are available from the CLG website: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/corporate/publications/all/>

Outputs concerning plan rationalisation are listed below:

Annual Reports/Evaluation Frameworks

Consultation Findings and Evaluation Framework London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. [published December 2004]

Annual Report 2004 London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. [published 8 December 2005]

Annual Report 2006 London: Department for Communities and Local Government. [published 6 September 2006]

Final Evaluation Report London: Communities and Local Government. [forthcoming]

Survey Reports

Report of the December 2004 Survey of local authorities London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. [published 8 December 2005]

Report of the May 2006 Survey of local authorities London: Department for Communities and Local Government. [published April 2007]

Case study reports

Interim Case Studies Synthesis Report 2005 London: Department for Communities and Local Government. [published April 2007]

Final Case Studies Synthesis Report 2006 London: Communities and Local Government. [forthcoming]

Issues papers

Plan Rationalisation London: Department for Communities and Local Government. June 2008

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