



Community Auditing is the term that Rural Community Network uses to describe a participative process whereby members of a community are facilitated to assess the needs and resources within their own community as an initial step towards taking action on issues that are important to them and that will result in positive social change.

Reasons for undertaking a Community Audit are numerous and varied but can include all or some of the following:

- To provide a baseline of information about the community
- To hold policy makers accountable
- To evidence a need or needs
- To give feedback to service providers on customer satisfaction
- To inform strategy development, within the local community or on a wider level
- To inform the allocation of resources by agencies
- To evaluate the relevance of activities or services
- To facilitate community development

A Community Audit needs to:

- ⇒ Be comprehensive – issues interact together and a comprehensive Community Audit can help to challenge a piecemeal response
- ⇒ Describe needs and resources (physical and skills) within the community – this will give a true reflection of the community
- ⇒ Lead to an action plan, which seeks to improve the quality of life - otherwise a Community Audit serves no useful purpose in its own right

A People Centred Process

A Community Audit is a process which empowers people, develops skills and confidence and increases awareness of pertinent community issues. It is a

positive experience and builds a sense of community spirit. The more comprehensive and accurate a description of the community is, the better a basis for action it will prove.

Getting people involved in a project or steering group for the Community Audit may mean involving people outside of the current community group. A dedicated audit group, of eight to twelve people, committed to the idea and willing to carry it through to completion, can be established separate from the community group if it is not possible for the community group to undertake this piece of work. The audit group must determine if it has the necessary skills and resources to undertake the Community Audit, for example, report writing, computer skills, etc or if new members who have these skills need to be sought. The group may decide on employing someone to undertake certain audit tasks.

Planning and Preparation

The first step in the Community Audit process is the planning and timetable of the project. Careful and creative planning is essential to a successful process. The optimum timescale for a Community Audit is between six and nine months in total, although fieldwork should not take in excess of six to eight weeks.

When considering a Community Audit, the key questions that the group should ask itself are:

- What is the purpose of the Community Audit?
- How comprehensive is the Community Audit to be?
- To what extent is the community going to be involved in the process?
- What funding will be required to undertake the Community Audit and who will provide it?
- Each one of these questions is central to the planning process and needs to be addressed in a structured way during the early stages of the process.

The audit group will begin by establishing the aims and objectives of the project. These must be clearly stated and specific, understood and agreed by all the members. One of the first things that the audit group will need to establish is the boundary that will define their Community Audit. Within this boundary will be the geographical area that the Community Audit will describe.

Differences within communities need to be recognised and celebrated or challenged, as appropriate. A Community Audit needs to encompass all sections of the community, particularly those who many feel have no stake in that community, for example, minority religious or ethnic groups. Community divisions, for example, race, gender, class and conflicting interests, exist in most, if not all, communities and careful consideration needs to be given to ensuring that the views of all sections of the community are fairly represented in a Community Audit.

Methodology

When considering the methods by which the group will collect the necessary information, the audit group should remember much information regarding their community might already exist. The use of existing information (often referred to as secondary data) will reduce the workload involved, cut down on duplication of work already undertaken and will allow for a comparison of past trends. It will be necessary for the audit group to select, interpret and adapt secondary information for the purposes of the Community Audit. It is important, however, that the audit group checks the validity of secondary data. When this has been agreed, the audit group must then decide what further information not readily available needs to be obtained (this is known as primary data and will be obtained through fieldwork). In considering what information needs to be obtained, the audit group needs to decide how this can best be done within



the available resources and timescale.

All methods of collecting information have advantages and disadvantages. There are no correct decisions about the best methods to use. The audit group must decide on the most appropriate methods, while minimising the disadvantages of the methods chosen. As an overall check, the audit group should continually ask if the methods selected will deliver the information needed in order to meet the aims and objectives of the Community Audit. The chosen method/s of data collection by fieldwork should be specific, systematic and objective as the results must be credible.

Fieldwork

Primary information collected through the fieldwork can be both quantitative and qualitative. Primary information should reflect:

- The history of the community
- Trends that can be identified over given periods of time
- A real sense of place
- An accurate description of community resources, for example, population, statistics, level of public transport provision and other services
- The level of community needs

When undertaking fieldwork, local volunteers can be used if the audit group considers it appropriate. For example, does the use of local volunteers jeopardise confidentiality? The advantages of using local volunteers to undertake fieldwork includes their local knowledge of the area and their ability to engage with community members who may be reluctant to talk to strangers. If local volunteers are able to make the commitment to undertaking fieldwork, then appropriate training must be provided.

Questionnaire

Questionnaires are probably the best way to get a representative sample of the community. A questionnaire is a way of collecting information in a standard format and can be administered by self-completion (delivered by post or hand) or by interview. It is important to get the design right and only collect the necessary information.

If the questionnaire is not going to encompass the entire population within the boundary agreed upon, then the sample selected must be representative of the composition of the whole community. Sampling can affect the validity and reliability of the information received so a cross section of the population and a geographical spread is necessary to ensure that the sample is representative. RCN would recommend 100% sampling in a Community Audit if at all possible, depending on the population size.

The audit group needs to list the issues to be covered and the information required from the questionnaire. Does the group want facts, attitudes, opinions or suggestions from the survey? The questionnaire can be targeted at either individuals or households within the designated area. Again this is a choice which the audit group needs to make.

The length of the survey questionnaire and its presentation are important. It must be easy to fill out, otherwise people are more likely to discard it. The instructions for completing the questionnaire and a statement ensuring confidentiality must be clearly written on the questionnaire.

Some basic rules for questionnaire design are:

- Simple, clear wording.
- Questions should appear in a logical sequence and should be focused and specific.

- Jargon, acronyms or terminology, not in the public domain, should not be used.
- 'Leading' questions which suggest a particular response to the reader should be avoided. For example, do you agree that further commercial development would destroy the character of the village?
- Questions that are vague, ambiguous, general or ask too much should not be used neither should questions that present a hypothetical scenario to the reader, for example, 'If the community had a leisure centre, would you use it?'
- If using 'filter' questions, clear instructions should be given. 'If the answer to Question 11 is Yes, please answer the three subsequent questions - 12, 13 and 14. If the answer to Question 11 is No, please go straight to question number 15.'
- Questions that combine two separate questions into one should not be asked as it will not be possible to differentiate the replies. For example, 'What do you think of the upkeep of the local park and the village square?'
- Questions that assume the reader already has a certain level of knowledge should not be used for example, 'What do you think of the proposed road bypass?'
- Questions that rely on guesswork should be avoided, for example 'If the population of the area was to double in the next decade, what services would be required?'
- 'Open' questions that allow respondents to wax lyrical on the subject in question should also be avoided as it is difficult to analyse the replies to open questions.



- Questions where respondents have a range of answers to choose from should be used. This will make coding of the survey much easier. See following example.

Which of the following best describes your present marital status?

Single ☐ Married ☐
Widowed ☐ Other ☐

Separate questionnaires for children and young people can be delivered to homes along with adult questionnaires or could be administered through an agreement with the local school/s.

The questionnaire needs to take account of the method of analysis that will be used. The questionnaire must be designed in a way that will make it easy to code, whether analysis will be manual or by computer. Coding a questionnaire is a method that is used to enable the accurate summary of information collected in a manner that is manageable. An example is given below.

Which of the following areas do you think need attention in the locality? Please tick all the relevant boxes.

		Coding
Footpaths	<input type="checkbox"/>	A
Street Lighting	<input type="checkbox"/>	B
Road Signs	<input type="checkbox"/>	C
Speeding	<input type="checkbox"/>	D
Crime Prevention	<input type="checkbox"/>	E
Street Cleanliness	<input type="checkbox"/>	F
Other, please specify	<input type="checkbox"/>	G

Data can be stored or analysed manually or by computer. If using a computer it is necessary to have the appropriate hardware, software and skills to undertake the task in hand. If a software package is being used to analyse data, the audit group should get expert advice and support regarding that particular package.

Always pilot the survey to check out the questionnaire is appropriate. Issues which need to be checked include:

- Accuracy
- Potential misunderstanding, misinterpretation or ambiguity
- Need for additional categories attached to certain questions
- Need for fewer categories attached to certain questions

To aid the pilot, respondents should be asked additional questions which will provide this information. The type of questions which pilot respondents should be asked include:

- Was this questionnaire too long?
- Did you understand all the questions asked?
- If no, which question/s did you not understand? Why did you not understand the question/s?
- Have you any suggestions for improving this questionnaire?

Before and after the pilot questionnaire takes place, the audit group should edit the questionnaire for obvious mistakes, for example, spelling mistakes or question numbers in the wrong sequence. When any amendments identified by the pilot have been made, the questionnaire is ready to be distributed to community members by the chosen method. If the questionnaire is to be administered by interviewers then it is important to recruit and train people (whether voluntary or paid) to an appropriate standard to enable them to undertake the necessary tasks.

When the deadline for return of questionnaires has passed, the audit group (or person employed) needs to code all the completed questionnaires, input the data and collate the results. The audit group will then analyse the collated

results, highlighting particular trends or issues, as appropriate.

Presentation of Results

The results of the Community Audit must be presented back to community members for their consideration. The audit group must make its own decision about the most appropriate way to present the results of the Community Audit, taking into account the target audience and resource constraints. The most popular option for presenting the results of a Community Audit is in a written report. A Community Audit Report must be written for the intended audience, even if this does require different versions with a slightly different focus.

When designing the Community Audit Report, it is important to remember that the quality of information and presentation are both important in gaining the reader's interest. The structure of a written report is likely to follow the broad headings listed below:

- Title/cover design
- Aims and objectives
- Acknowledgements
- Contents
- Preface or Foreword
- Methodology
- Introduction
- Findings
- Conclusions
- Recommendations
- Appendices, for example, Questionnaire
- Bibliography/References

The report may also include a summary of the findings. Presenting the information in a report format must be done clearly. For example, all tables, graphs and charts should be in a standard format, labelled appropriately and, if necessary, accompanied by explanatory text.



The audit group needs to decide who will write which sections of the report and set realistic deadlines for this to be completed. If a number of people are writing separate sections of the report, it is important that the writing styles are consistent throughout. The report needs to be edited by one person to ensure uniformity between different authors. The report will also need to be proof read for any errors, for example, mistakes in punctuation or grammar.

The audit group also needs to decide on the following issues before the report can be printed.

- What will be the overall design and layout of the report?
- What illustrations, graphics or photographs are to be used in the report? (ownership of any such material or secondary data must be properly credited in the report)
- How many copies of the report will be required?
- How much will printing the report cost?

A final copy of the report produced by the printers will need to be agreed by the audit group before the printing takes place.

The audit group should put a plan in place to promote the Community Audit Report when it becomes available. The most effective methods of distributing the report will depend on the target audience/s, for example, community, statutory organisations. The audit group may decide that meeting with certain agencies or organisations to discuss the results of the Community Audit is the most effective way to influence change within that organisation. It is important that every household in the community receives a copy of the findings of the

Community Audit, if resources allow. This can be achieved in a number of ways and a combination of methods will probably be most effective, some examples follow.

- A public meeting or social event to launch the report
- Delivering a copy to every household in the community
- Making copies available in local shops and community venues
- Ensuring that every organisation, agency or service in the community receives a copy
- Advertising the availability of copies in the local press
- Making copies available at community or social events

On completion of the Community Audit process, action planning for the community should take place.