

Article

## Challenges and Opportunities in Developing Sustainable Communities in the North West of England

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**Abstract:** Origins of sustainable communities lie in agendas set in a motion passed by the United Nations nearly forty years ago. As part of a sustainable development strategy and to tackle negative aspects of post industrial cities, in 2003, the UK government launched a Sustainable Communities Plan, accompanied by regional action plans, of which a major objective has been to implement regeneration projects aiming to improve quality of life in several areas of England, including the North West. This paper aims to review sustainable development agendas and to establish what needs to be done to improve quality of life indicators for communities of Stockbridge Village (SV), Murdishaw (M) and Halton Brook (HB) in Knowsley Metropolitan Borough (MBC) and Halton Borough Councils (BC), which have been identified as the most deprived post industrial areas in the North West of England. An investigation has been carried out by comparing the economic, social, physical and environmental indicators. Study findings reveal existing challenges and highlight problems that need to be addressed when implementing sustainable development strategy.

**Keywords:** sustainability; community; challenges; urban regeneration; North West; England

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Sustainable Development and Sustainable Communities

Sustainable development issues have been raised in the Stockholm Conference and through the General Assembly of United Nations several decades ago [1–3]. These have been pronouncedly reiterated in 1992, when representatives from nearly 180 countries met at the UN Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit) in Rio de Janeiro to discuss how to achieve sustainable development. *Agenda 21*, a plan of action has been agreed with a recommendation that all countries should produce national sustainable development strategies [4]. The United Kingdom was one of the first to publish an Environment White Paper in 1990 [5]. A focus on environmental sustainability has been followed up on with the publication of the first Sustainable Development Strategy in 1994 [6] and revised strategy *A Better Quality of Life: A Strategy for More Sustainable Construction*, published in 1999 [7]. In preparing this strategy, the government has built on the achievements of the 1994 strategy, to which a new approach has been added with emphasis on the social dimension of sustainable development, alongside economic issues, the environment and resource use.

Sustainable development requires an international co-operation on matters such as trade, relief of global poverty, and environmental problems. *Towards Sustainability*, the fifth Environmental Action Programme of the European Union [8] has been especially influential. Therefore, many of the policies in the 1999 strategy [7] have been shaped by EU decisions, for example on the single European market or on environmental policy. This strategy has identified four crucial aims: “social progress which recognises the needs of everyone; effective protection of the environment; the prudent use of natural resources; and the maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment”; and seven priorities for future sustainable development, listed in Table 1 [7].

**Table 1.** Priorities for sustainable development in England [7].

Priorities for sustainable development
1. More investment in people and equipment for a competitive economy
2. Reducing the level of social exclusion
3. Promoting a transport system, which provides choice, minimises environmental harm and reduces congestion
4. Improving larger towns and cities to make them better places to live and to work
5. Directing development and promoting agricultural practices to protect and enhance the countryside and wildlife
6. Improving energy efficiency and tackling waste
7. Working with others to achieve sustainable development internationally

The sustainable development agenda has been shaped by a Sustainable Communities Plan (*Sustainable Communities: Building for the future*) [9], Planning Policy Statements (statements of government’s national policy and principles towards certain aspects of the town planning framework in England) and White Papers (documents produced by the government setting out details of future policy on a particular subject and allowing an opportunity to gather feedback before it formally presents the policies as a Bill).

Planning Policy Statements (PPS) have explained the sustainable development with a particular emphasis on the planning system, housing, waste management, renewable energy and *etc.* [10–13]. For the planning system, six objectives have been recognised as key components that need to be addressed in order to deliver sustainable development [11] (Table 2).

**Table 2.** The planning system with focus on sustainable development, in Planning Policy Statement 1 (PPS1) [11].

<b>Objectives for the planning system</b>
1. Development plans should ensure that sustainable development is pursued in an integrated manor, in line with principles of sustainable development
2. Regional planning bodies and Local Planning Authorities (LPA) should ensure that development plans contribute to the global sustainability by addressing causes and potential impacts of climate change
3. A spatial planning approach should be at the heart of planning
4. Planning policies should promote high quality and inclusive design in the layout of new development and individual buildings in terms of function and impact
5. Development plans should contain clear, comprehensive and inclusive access policies—in terms of location and external physical access
6. In developing the vision for their areas, planning authorities should ensure that communities are able to contribute to ideas about how that vision can be achieved

With regards to the housing, strategic planning objectives are listed in Table 3. PPS3 has proposed that Local Planning Authorities (LPA) should encourage applicants to bring forward sustainable and environmentally friendly new housing developments [13]. Also, when developing and assessing housing provision, LPA should carry out a sustainability appraisal of environmental, social and economic implications, including costs, benefits and risks of the development. High quality housing is a fundamental contribution to delivering sustainable communities [13,14].

**Table 3.** Housing policy with focus on sustainable development, in PPS3 [13].

<b>Strategic objectives for the housing policy</b>
1. Achieving a wide choice of high quality homes, both affordable and market housing, to address requirements of the community
2. Widening opportunities for home ownership and ensure high quality housing for those who cannot afford market housing, in particular those who are vulnerable or in need
3. Improving affordability across the housing market, also by increasing the supply of housing
4. Creating sustainable, inclusive, mixed communities in all areas, both urban and rural

PPS strongly emphasise renewable energy. It has been declared that an increased development of renewable energy is a vital component in facilitating delivery of commitments on climate change and renewable energy [10].

In Local Government White Papers, the government has set intentions to delegate powers to the LPA and to enable further community involvement in the management or ownership of local facilities and assets [15,16].

Taken together, policies and papers published from 1999–2006 have proven that a steadily growing population and competition has necessitated looking for rational planning and community management

instruments, which could allow a better coordination of sustainable development processes in seeking to improve quality of life indicators. Sustainable development strategy has become an undisputable foundation for the administration of local governments and leaders of local communities [17,18]. This notion has also been reflected in the Sustainable Communities Plan and regional action plans from 2003–2004 [9,19]. At present, Planning Policy Statements are set to be replaced by a National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) [20]. Since NPPF reiterates many key points from previous PPS, it is important to evaluate how efficiently previous policies have been in delivering objectives set by the sustainable development agenda and to establish to what extent these policies improved the quality of life for those most deprived communities.

Following the sustainable development agenda, an ambition to create sustainable communities by building “balanced places” has been a defining feature of former Labour government. In 2003, recognising needs of the population in England and in order to reduce housing shortage in London and in the East South, to tackle the decline of low income urban neighbourhoods in the North and Midlands, and to provide communities with “decent homes and a good quality local environment in all regions”, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has introduced a programme of action “Sustainable Communities: Building for the future” [9], for which the definition of sustainable communities has been developed in Egan’s review [19] as follows: “Sustainable communities meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, their children and other users, contribute to a high quality of life and provide opportunity and choice. They achieve this in ways that make effective use of natural resources, enhance the environment, promote social cohesion and inclusion and strengthen economic prosperity”. With Sustainable Communities Plan government has continued for more than 50 years enduring top–down activities to create more harmonious, cohesive, and socio-economically competitive places [21,22]. Although the nature of such activities has been modified several times, all changes have been implemented to suppress the extent of urban problems resulting in the development of various urban regeneration programmes: beginning with the predominant approach of comprehensive redemption by changing the physical urban landscape and hoping for social and economic benefits with Liverpool and Manchester overspill towns Runcorn, Warrington and others started to be developed in 1950s and 1960s; continuing with the public welfare settlement in 1970s and with improved governance and institutional arrangements for urban regeneration in 1990s [22,23].

In recent work, Raco [17] offers a critical analysis on the building of sustainable communities and spatial policy process arguing that the definition of “balanced places” is not neutral but socially constructed and involves “power-infused, often normative, visions, and imaginations”, which ultimately affects citizen social status and entitlements, providing a different meaning to the definition of “sustainable communities”. State attempts to meet needs of particular “types” of citizens, such as key workers or highly skilled migrants, increasingly have a spatial dimension [17].

### *1.2. Indicators and Performance Requirements*

Two main documents have been published that are central to the indicators concerned with sustainable communities: *Local Quality of Life Indicators*—supporting local communities to become sustainable [24] and *The New Performance Framework for Local Authorities and Local Authority Partnerships* [25]. The first document has identified three main targets that sustainable communities

should work towards and has introduced local quality of life indicators, while the second report [25] has set out seven key areas where local quality of life indicators need to be improved (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Indicators and performance requirements for sustainable communities [24,25].

<b>Targets</b>
1. Balanced and integral society
2. meeting the needs of existing and future generations
3. respecting the needs of other communities to make their communities sustainable
<b>Areas of local quality of life indicators</b>
1. Community cohesion and involvement
2. Community safety
3. Culture and leisure
4. Economic well-being
5. Education and life-long learning
6. Environment
7. Health and social well-being
8. Housing
9. Transport and access
<b>Areas for improvement (quality of life indicators being addressed are listed in brackets)</b>
1. Stronger communities (Community cohesion and involvement; culture and leisure)
2. Safer communities (Community safety)
3. Children and young people (Economic well-being; education and life-long learning)
4. Adult health and wellbeing (Health and social well-being)
5. Tackling exclusion and promoting equality (Community cohesion and involvement)
6. Local economy (Economic well-being)
7. Environmental sustainability (Environment; housing; transport and access)

Both reports have identified the same areas which complement the overall sustainable development agenda and seven components (social and cultural, governance, environmental, housing and the built environment, transport and connectivity, economy, and services) with respective indicators identified by Egan [19]. The report *Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future* has set key requirements for the achievement of sustainable communities: flourishing local economy, strong leadership, effective engagement, safe and healthy local environment, sufficient size and scale, good public transport, good infrastructure, well integrated mix of homes, good quality public services, diverse and vibrant local culture, a sense of place and the right links with wider regional community [9].

It has been proposed that the local government must be accountable to communities it serves. In the report *Strong and Prosperous Communities: The Local Government White Paper* [15], Prime Minister Tony Blair has stated that local government “provides leadership for local areas and communities, democratic accountability for a wide range of public services”. This White Paper has been aimed to “give more power to citizens and for communities to have a bigger say in the services they receive and the places where they live”. According to the report ‘Sustainable Communities: People, Places and Prosperity: A Five Year Plan for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2005’, local government must offer “local leadership which is visible, representative, responsive and accountable to local people—with mayors where people want them” [26]. Egan has declared that an essential component in

creating a shared vision is engaging the public in thinking about the future [19]. The role of local government as the controlling power has been proposed to increase with the sustainable community agenda. There has had to be a rebalancing of the relationship between central government, local government and local people [15]. According to Egan, local authorities (LA) should have taken a leading role [19]. There has been a requirement for effective communication between neighbouring authorities and local governments as the sustainability strategy of one area needs to complement those of neighbouring areas [19]. In forging these complex partnerships, it has been important for LAs to recognise the priorities, aspirations and expectations of their communities.

The focus on the localism has been continued since the Coalition government has been elected in 2010. It has generated debate on what level of non-government organisation should be given to local level. The *Localism Act 2011* has shifted the power of decision making to the local level, which will be guided by NPPF [20]. However, there is a notion that NPPF has missed to indicate the balance between local and national responsibilities [27].

The main aim of the research in this paper is to analyse the former labour government agenda on sustainable communities and what challenges face communities of Stockbridge Village (SV), Murdishaw and Halton Brook (HB), which have been considered to be amongst the most deprived areas of England during the 1980s, 1990s and at the start of the 21st century.

The key objectives of research were the following: (1) to carry out an investigation on government agenda and policy on sustainable communities; and indicators for the achievement of sustainable communities; (2) to assess the currently known/existing situation in Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council (MBC) and Halton Borough Council (BC) in terms of quality of life indicators and broader government policy; (3) carry out investigations to establish the concerns and aspirations of the residents of SV, Murdishaw and HB.

## 2. Methodology

In order to meet the first objective of the study a literature review was conducted (provided in Introduction). The second objective was achieved through investigation into economic, social, physical and environmental situation using national published statistics and health reports for HB, Murdishaw and SV. Furthermore, statistical analysis of data taken from the National Statistics website, health profiles and Ofsted reports were carried out. An assessment of the communities was carried out using the quality of life indicators (community cohesion; safety; culture and leisure; economic well-being; education; environment; health and social well-being; transport and access) introduced by the Audit Commission [24]. The third objective was achieved through a questionnaire which was applied by one to one surveys to the members of HB, Murdishaw and SV communities with sample size of 50 randomly selected respondents from each community. The questions asked are listed in the Questionnaire 1 (Supplementary data).

Research has been conducted in 2009 involving statistical data from different periods preceding and following the Sustainable Communities Plan.

### *2.1. Case Study Areas and Their Status*

Stockbridge Village (SV) is an area in Liverpool, UK, and belongs to Knowsley Metropolitan Borough. It has been established in 1983 following the regeneration of the former housing estate, which was originally build during the 1960s but deteriorated rapidly due to crime and unemployment. Halton Brook (HB) and Murdishaw are areas in industrial town and cargo port Runcorn, North West of England, within the Borough of Halton. According to 2001 Census HB, Murdishaw and SV were considered as most deprived areas in England and North West. Presently, new fifteen year sustainable community strategies are established for Knowsley Metropolitan Borough (since 2008) and Halton Borough (since 2011). Multimillion pound investments have been put forward by Knowsley and Halton Partnerships.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

### *3.1. Data Obtained through Statistical Analysis*

In order to evaluate the situation in chosen areas for improvement set in [25], which have also been identified by new NPPF [20], and to evaluate the progress since introduction of sustainable communities agenda and how this reflected in quality of life indicators [24] the data published prior and after introduction of the Sustainable Communities Plan were analysed and, if available, compared. Several indicators for the local quality of life in nine different areas (listed in Table 4) were evaluated particularly focusing on areas for improvement (Table 4).

#### **3.1.1. Community Cohesion and Involvement**

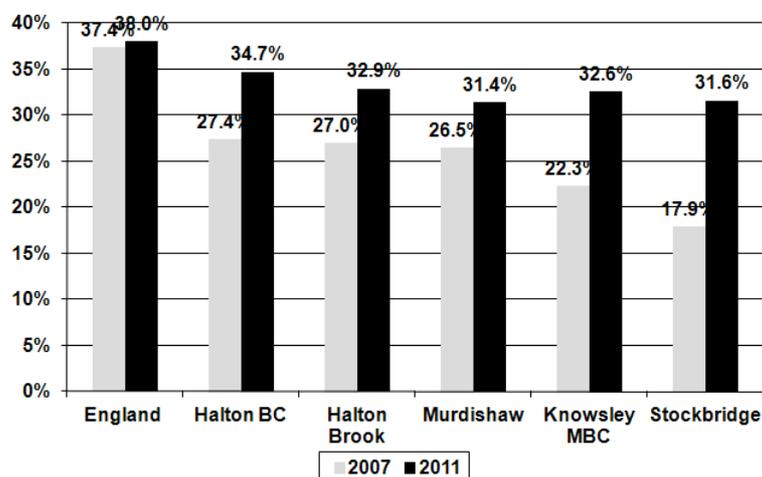
According to the Audit Commission [20], community cohesion and involvement can be measured in terms of election turnout and residents opinion on ethnic origin, religion and community activities. The election turnout figures were obtained from the Election Offices of Knowsley MBC and Halton Borough Council reflecting on the turnout for local elections in 2007 and 2011 (Figure 1). All three areas showed significant improvement in election turnout for 2011, While SV has not even reached the half of England average and showed the lowest level of election turnout at 17.9% in 2007. The local election turnout nearly doubled in 2011 and almost matched average turnout in Knowsley MBC. These data demonstrate that in all three case study areas residents have increased their interest in making decisions relevant to their communities.

#### **3.1.2. Community Safety**

As one of the indicators community safety can be measured with the help of crime figures. Data on crime figures was collected from the Home Office [28] for Knowsley MBC and Halton BC. Figures for HB, SV and Murdishaw were provided by Cheshire and Merseyside Police (data not shown). It revealed that violence was still a massive issue in 2007 and Merseyside Police has published special policing priorities for SV. In Knowsley MBC and Halton BC areas overall crime figures were significantly higher than the national and North West regional average. More thorough analysis is needed to evaluate whether quality of life indicators relevant to the community safety has improved in

areas of survey since introducing Sustainable Communities Plan in 2003. However, the study shows that, when implementing sustainable community strategy, special actions need to be put forward to improve communities' safety in all three case study areas.

**Figure 1.** Election turnout.



### 3.1.3. Culture and Leisure

It has been proposed that communities culture and leisure can be assessed through such quality of life indicators as (1) the percentage of the population within 20 minutes travel time, urban—walking, rural—by car of different sports and leisure facility types; and (2) the percentage of residents who think that for their local area, over the past three years the following have got better or stayed the same (a) activities for teenagers; (b) cultural facilities (for example, cinemas, museums); (c) facilities for young children; (d) sport and leisure facilities; and (e) parks and open spaces [24].

For SV there is the Heatwaves Leisure Centre in the central part of the area. The furthest that a resident of SV would have to travel would be 2.5 miles. For Murdishaw, the nearest sports centre would be the Brookvale Recreation Centre which is 1 mile from the most outside edge of Murdishaw. For HB the nearest leisure facility is Runcorn Swimming Pool and Gym, which is 1.6 miles from the furthest point of the area. However, only these facilities were available for cultural and leisure activities in 2009.

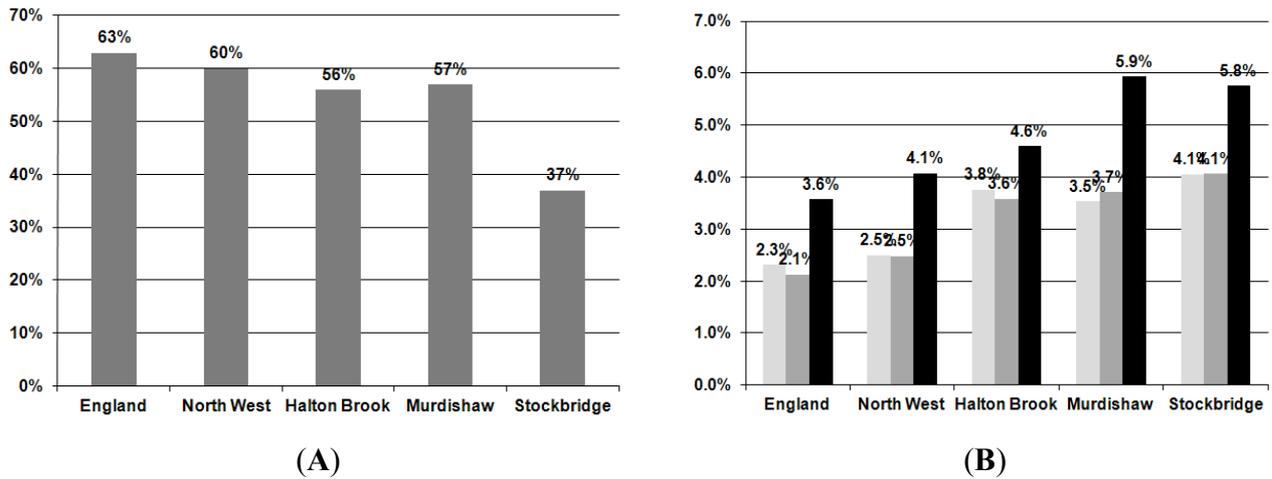
### 3.1.4. Economic Well-Being

Figure 2(A) shows a percentage of population in employment for each of three case study areas in comparison to the percentage for the North West and England in 2001. Data were taken from database at [www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk). It does not indicate a level of unemployment as it does not take into account a percentage of people on long-term sickness benefit and people in full-time education. There were a high percentage of people not in employment in SV. The percentage of people out of employment in HB and Murdishaw are closer to the regional and national average than SV.

Figure 2(B) shows that economic well-being has not significantly improved by 2007 or 2010 for certain groups of people since the introduction of the Sustainable Communities Plan. The areas of SV, Murdishaw and HB are experiencing significantly higher numbers of claimants than the regional and

national average. However, very slight improvement can be noticed in HB. It should be noted that numbers of unemployed people in 2010 were elevated in all areas of England due to the world wide spread financial and credit crisis of 2009. Overall, it is obvious that economic well-being is another critical area that needs to be significantly strengthened in all three case study areas.

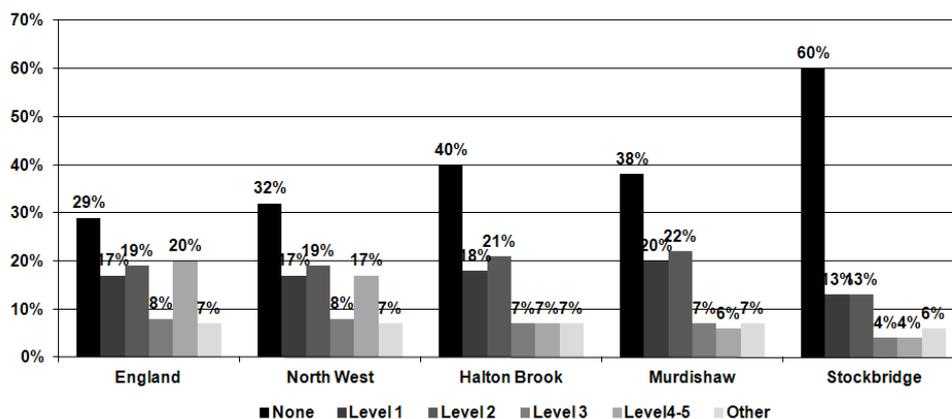
**Figure 2.** Economic well-being. (A) Employment rate of people aged 16–64 (males); 16–59 (females); (B) Percentage of economically active people aged 16–64 (males) and 16–59 (females) who claimed jobseeker’s allowance in 2003, 2007 and 2010.



### 3.1.5. Education and Life-Long Learning

The level of residents’ education prior to introduction of the Sustainable Communities Plan was measured using data from the UK Statistics Authority. Figure 3 shows the levels of qualifications held by residents in all three areas in 2001. Sixty percent of residents in SV had no formal qualifications. Murdishaw and HB had higher numbers of people without any qualifications than England’s average. In all three areas of survey, members of communities had fewer qualifications at all five levels of primary education than the average in England and the North West.

**Figure 3.** Qualifications held. Level 1 qualifications = 1 GCSE or equivalent; Level 2 qualifications = 5 + GCSE’s or equivalent; Level 3 qualifications = 2 + A’ Level’s or equivalent; Level 4 and 5 qualifications = First degree or equivalent; Other = other nationally recognised qualifications.

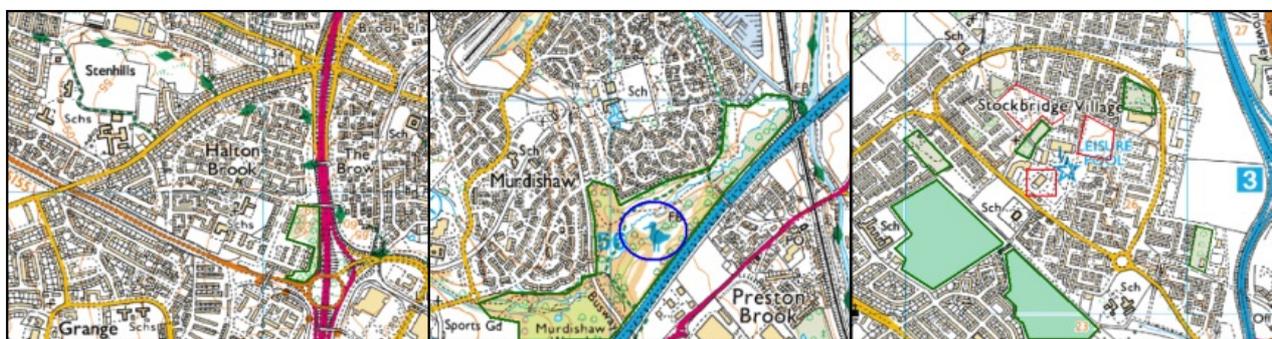


The following school inspections resulted in similar findings: the Holy Spirit Catholic Primary School in HB; Castle View Primary School in HB; Gorsewood Primary School in Murdishaw; West Community Primary School in Murdishaw; Brookside Primary School in SV. The schools were stated to be serving in areas of social and economic disadvantage. In all of these schools, attendance was a highlighted issue. Overall, data show that in all three case study areas the number of residents without formal qualifications was higher than in the North West and England in 2001. Especially a serious critical situation was observed in SV.

### 3.1.6. Environment

With respect to environment in all three case study areas, an investigation was focused on the derelict land and urban green-space to measure the environmental quality for each survey area. The maps presented in Figure 4 identified areas of derelict land and urban green-space. The maps illustrate that SV and Murdishaw have the largest areas of green space and HB has the least. Murdishaw also benefits from a marina village and canal system circled in blue on the map. This provides relief from the urban form and areas for recreational activity.

**Figure 4.** Environment in Halton Brook (HB), Murdishaw, and Stockbridge Village (SV). Area of urban green space encircled in green, area of marina village—in blue, area of derelict land—in red.

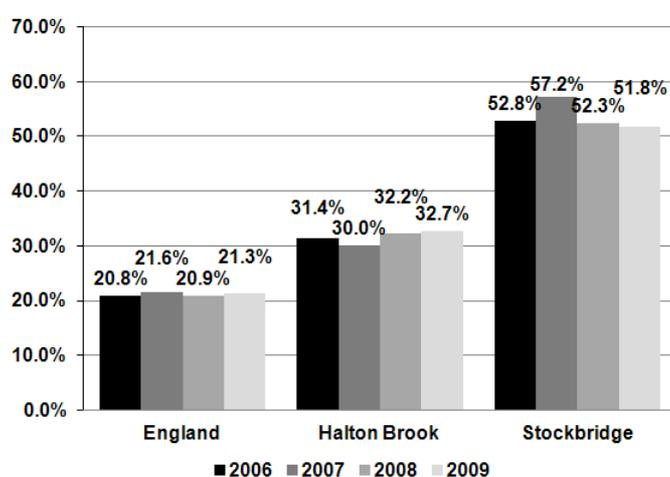


### 3.1.7. Health and Social Well-Being

To access health and social well-being indicators data were taken from the Health Profiles for Halton and Knowsley from the Department of Health and the Association of Public Health Observations in 2005–2007 (Table 5). Knowsley showed results matching England's worst in areas of: healthy eating adults, and deaths from smoking. Knowsley's figure for female life expectancy is extremely close to the worst in England: 78.1 years of age was the worst in England and Knowsley's figure stands at 78.4 which was only 0.3 higher than the worst. In Halton the female life expectancy was at 78.3, only 0.2 higher than England's worst. Data revealed that the health of Knowsley and Halton residents was significantly worse than the average area in England. Child poverty statistics from [http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/stats/personal-tax-credits/child\\_poverty.htm](http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/stats/personal-tax-credits/child_poverty.htm) revealed that there was no significant improvement in reducing the number of children living in poverty in HB and SV with 1.5 and 2.5 fold higher level in these two areas than England's average (Figure 5).

**Table 5.** Community health and social well-being indicators.

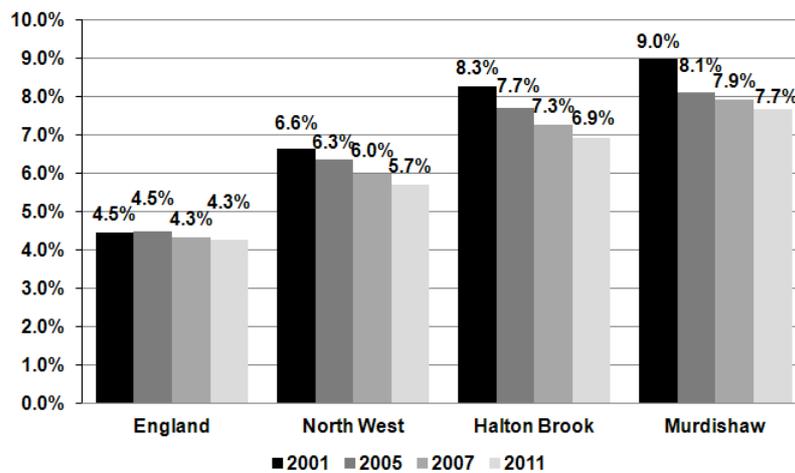
Indicator	Halton BC	Knowsley MBC	England	England Worst
Teenage pregnancy	45.1	45.7	42.1	<b>95.3</b>
Binge drinking adults	23.8	25	18.2	<b>29.2</b>
Healthy eating adults	15.3	<b>11.4</b>	23.8	<b>11.4</b>
Life expectancy (male)	74.5	73.9	76.9	<b>72.5</b>
Life expectancy (female)	<b>78.3</b>	<b>78.4</b>	81.1	<b>78.1</b>
Deaths from smoking	327.2	<b>366.5</b>	234.4	<b>366.5</b>
Infant deaths	6.2	4.9	5.1	<b>9.9</b>

**Figure 5.** Children in poverty in HB and SV.

‘Teenage pregnancy’ is expressed in number per 1,000 people population aged 15–17. ‘Binge drinking adults’ is expressed in percentage of population. ‘Healthy eating adults’ is expressed in percentage of population. ‘Life expectancy’ is expressed in years. ‘Deaths from smoking’ is expressed in number per 100,000 people population over 35 years old. ‘Infant deaths’ is expressed in number per 1,000 births. Worst indicators are shown in bold.

‘Children in poverty’ is expressed in percentage of low income households. ‘Teenage pregnancy’ is expressed in number per 1,000 people population aged 15–17. ‘Binge drinking adults’ is expressed in percentage of population. ‘Healthy eating adults’ is expressed in percentage of population. ‘Life expectancy’ is expressed in years. ‘Deaths from smoking’ is expressed in number per 100,000 people population over 35 years old. ‘Infant deaths’ is expressed in number per 1,000 births. Worst indicators are shown in bold.

A percentage of people suffering from a long-term illness is an indicator of the health of the community. Figure 6 illustrates the percentage of people that claimed incapacity benefits in 2001, 2005, 2007 and 2011 for HB and Murdishaw. It shows that in the past decade there was significant improvement in reducing this percentage in both areas of study and in North West overall.

**Figure 6.** Percentage of people claiming incapacity benefits.

### 3.1.8. Housing

Housing has not been investigated in this particular study. However, relevant material can be found in [14].

### 3.1.9. Transport and Access

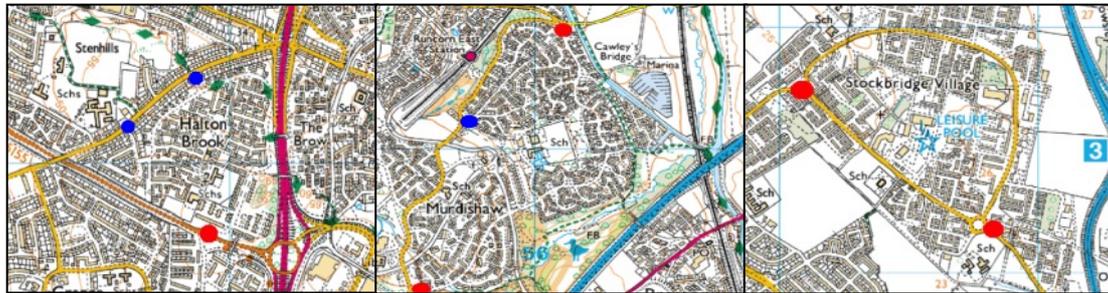
According to the maps presented in Figure 5, there is a common feature to all of the three case study areas. These areas appear to be a network of cul-de-sacs and narrow roads that do not connect to the surrounding areas. In all three areas there is only one route in and one route out of the communities leaving the area feeling isolated and cut off from the surrounding area.

The HB's map (Figure 7) reveals that there is only one major access point into the estate, seen on the map in red. There are two smaller secondary access points towards the north western edge of the estate. Murdishaw is larger in terms of area than HB. However, it has relatively few access points. As seen on the Murdishaw's map (Figure 7), there are two major access roads to the estate (shown on the map in red) and one smaller access point approximately half way between the two more major points (shown on the map in blue). The estate is bordered by a canal network to the east which prevents connectivity to Preston Brook which lies to the east. The SV's map (Figure 7) illustrates the two central access points to the area of SV (shown on the map in red). These two access points are linked by two roads one travelling directly through the southern portion of the estate and the other travelling around the north portion of the estate.

## 3.2. Data Obtained through Questionnaire

In order to establish information on concerns and aspirations of residents of SV, Murdishaw and HB in relationship to five areas of local quality of life indicators (community cohesion and involvement, community safety, culture and leisure, environment and housing), the questionnaire (Supplementary material) was applied in the survey with sample size of 50 respondents randomly selected from each community. The following response and results were gathered in these three communities in 2009.

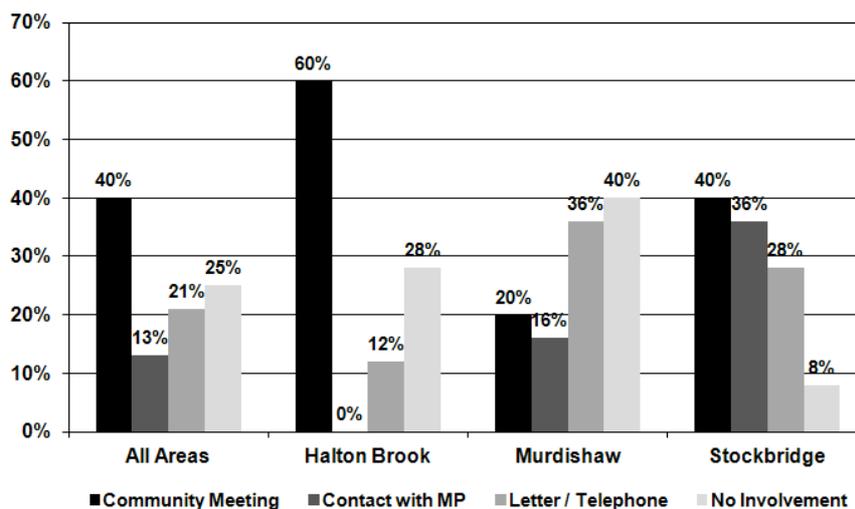
**Figure 7.** Road networks and connectivity in HB, Murdishaw, and SV. Major and secondary access points are marked with red and blue dots, respectively. \*A\* roads are in gold, \*B\* roads are in brown. The M57 motorway is blue.



3.2.1. Community Cohesion and Involvement

For community cohesion and involvement data were gathered on residents’ involvement level in the council agenda and consultation. Some of the respondents selected more than one option as appropriate. As it is seen in Figure 8, HB and SV showed high levels of community involvement using community meetings. However, in Murdishaw, a large percentage (40%) of people asked in Murdishaw had no involvement in council agenda and consultation. Any of the respondents in HB had contact with their MP. A majority of respondents found council representatives to be approachable. However, in HB there is the highest level of respondents having no experience of contact with council representatives.

**Figure 8.** Community involvement and relationship with local authorities. Methods of community involvement.



A Majority of the respondents in all three case study areas stated to be neutral while assessing their satisfaction level on responsiveness of their local councils to their concerns. HB has the highest frequency of respondents who indicated that they were “satisfied”.

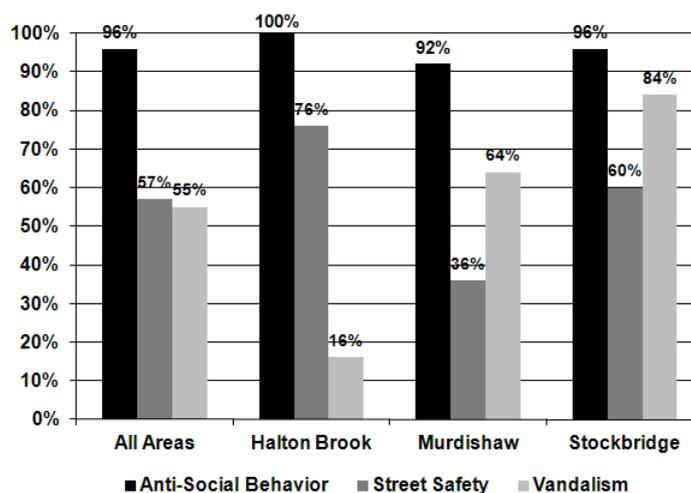
In HB, a majority of the respondents stated that they are informed of developments and proposals for their residential areas. 50% of the respondents in SV indicated to be informed whereas in Murdishaw, majority of respondents stated that they are not informed.

Overall, data show that there was a mixed level of resident involvement in local agendas in all three areas of case study.

### 3.2.2. Community Safety

When residents were asked what issues they feel are most important for their community, the anti-social behaviour was perceived by majority of respondents in three areas as a major problem (Figure 9). More than a half of respondents concluded that the street safety and vandalism were other two critical issues (Figure 9).

**Figure 9.** Community safety.



### 3.2.3. Culture and Leisure

In respect to the culture and leisure quality, the majority of respondents in HB are satisfied with the quality and availability of leisure facilities. In other two case study areas residents suggested that their areas needs more local leisure facilities.

### 3.2.4. Environment

According to findings shown in Figure 10, a majority of respondents in all areas were most interested in improving public services, particularly focusing on the waste management issues.

In all three case study areas, most of the respondents assessed their contribution to reducing carbon emissions as having “some impact”. A majority of respondents stated that they contribute to the reducing carbon emissions by: taking fewer car journeys/car sharing; turning off light switches and electrical appliance; recycling waste (Figure 11). According to the majority of respondents, the local councils did not provide their residents with information on how to contribute to the reducing carbon emission and saving energy in their home.

Figure 10. Aspirations of residents with respect to different areas of local quality of life.

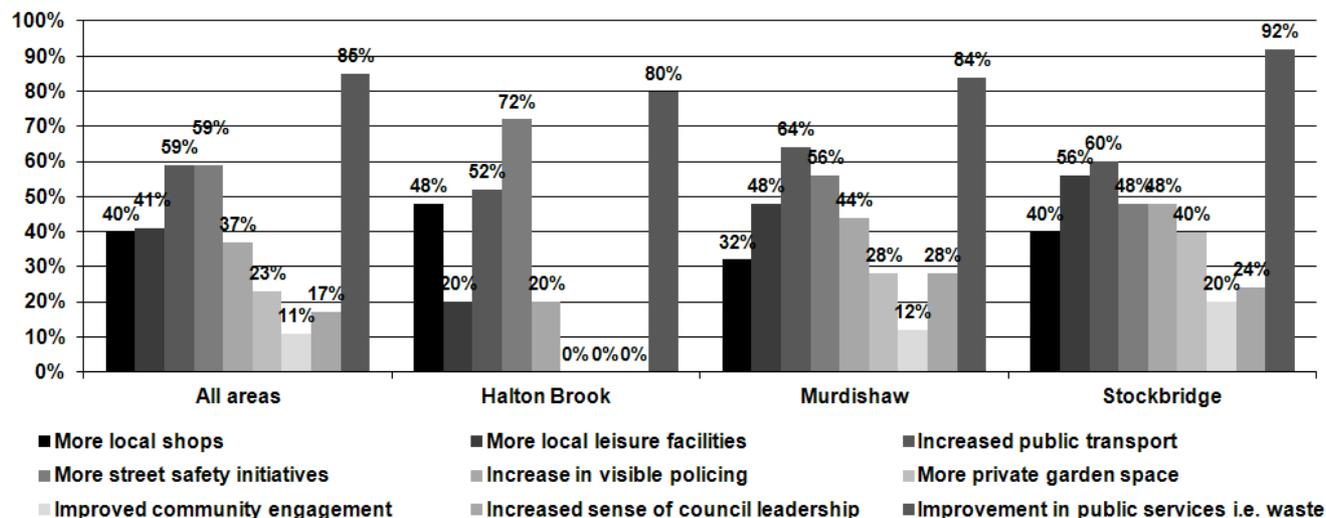
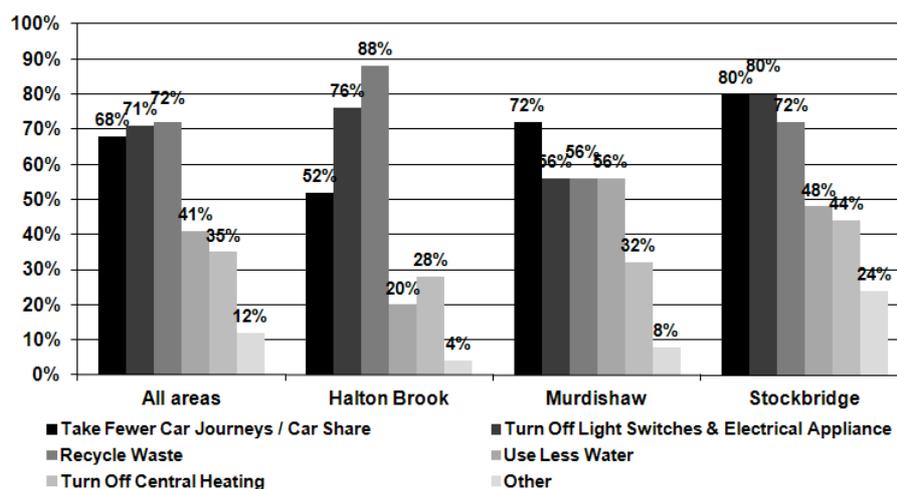


Figure 11. Environment. How residents’ contribute to reducing emissions and saving the environment.



### 3.2.5. Housing

This study looked also at the home ownership status for all of the three areas. In HB over half of the respondents live in housing association owned property. The second largest proportion is council owned housing with only 2 respondent having owner occupier status and 2 respondent renting from a private landlord. This reveals an especially low economic well-being in HB. In Murdishaw most of the respondents live in housing association. 28% of respondents were living in council owned properties. Another 28% were living in council rented houses. The majority of the respondents in SV live in council rented accommodation. 16% live in privately owned accommodation, either by private rental agreement or enjoying owner occupier status.

Figure 12 Housing. Finally, data of the survey have revealed other existing issues (Figure 13) and residents aspiration (Figure 12) in respect to community life aspects (e.g., litter, parking, private and garden space, traffic, local shops, waste, etc.) in all three case study areas.

Figure 12. Housing.

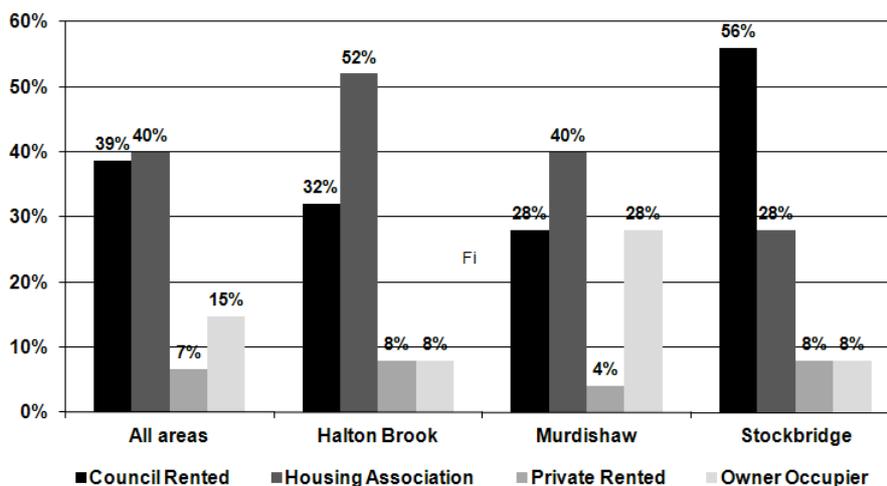
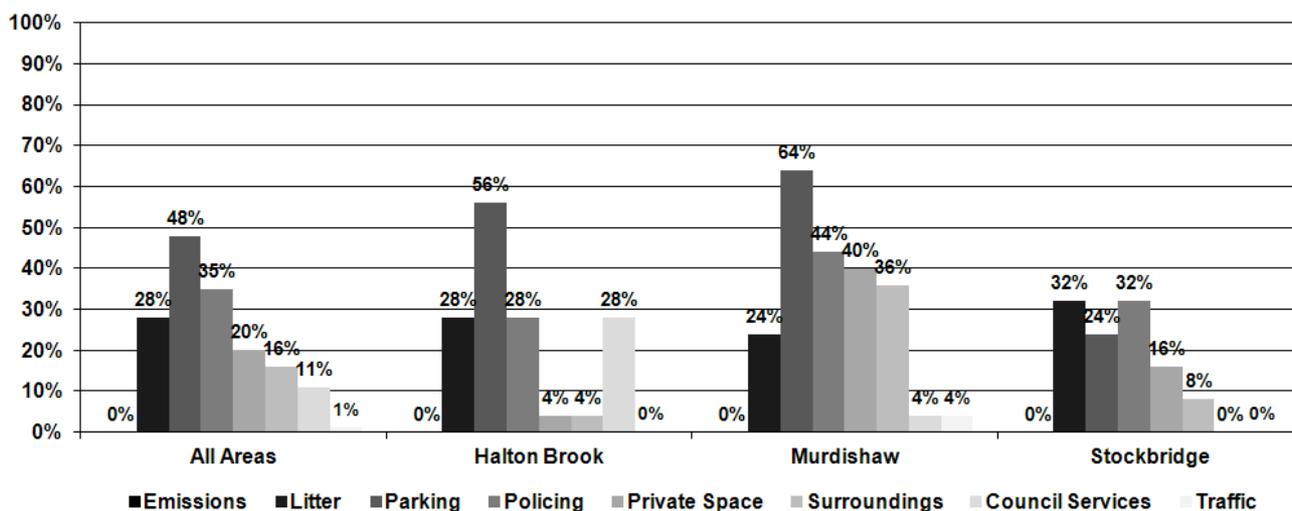


Figure 13. Other important issues raised by respondents.



#### 4. Conclusions

Sustainable development focuses on the economic development, social development, and environmental protection. Agenda 21 emphasizes that public participation in decision making is a fundamental factor for sustainable development [4].

According to [29], sustainability is a process which affects development of all aspects of human life affecting supplies. This involves resolving the conflict between the competing goals and the simultaneous pursuit of economic prosperity, environmental quality and social equality [17,18,30]. Sustainability is a continually evolving process.

From the angle of sustainable development, this study surveys economic, social, physical and environmental indicators in two councils of the North West, Knowsley MBC and Halton BC, and focuses on the communities of Stockbridge Village, Murdishaw and Halton Brook. Through this study we establish key issues that need to be addressed in the sustainable community strategies of Knowsley MBC and Halton Borough Council in the communities of SV, Murdishaw and HB, which are some of the most deprived areas in North England.

Assessing achievements of Knowsley MBC and Halton BC in terms of quality of life indicators and broader government policy, statistics revealed that overall crime levels in Knowsley MBC and Halton BC were higher than the UK and North West regional average in 2007, four years since the introduction of Sustainable Communities Plan [18]. Unemployment rate and the number of Jobseekers claimants were higher than regional and national levels in all three areas of survey. The economic well-being does not seem to have improved significantly, neither by 2007 (before financial crisis in 2008) nor by 2010. Besides, in all three areas of survey the education level was below the national and regional levels. The health and social well-being indicators were also lower than England's average in 2001 or 2007. The consequences of these adverse conditions were reflected in results of the survey conducted for this study. It was established that a majority of respondents in all three case study areas believed that anti-social behaviour was a critical problem. Furthermore, as these areas are suffering high levels of unemployment, high levels of people suffering from a long-term limiting illness, and very few people are owner occupiers. This verifies that there is still a significant lack of economic well-being in all three case study areas.

According to the published statistics, SV had the lowest level of election turnout. A questionnaire survey revealed that the majority of community involvement was expressed by way of community meetings. This would suggest the possibility that residents find it more effective to be involved in other types of community engagement than elections, indicating that residents feel they can make more of an impact by having direct contact with their council officials. Most of the respondents in the three areas stated that council representatives were approachable. However, the majority of respondents stated they were neutral when assessing their satisfaction level on responsiveness of local councils to their concerns.

According to the majority of respondents in the three areas, local councils do not provide their residents with information on how to contribute to reducing carbon emissions and saving energy in their homes. Despite over half of those interviewed having recycle bins, there is a significant lack of people using this facility.

SV has consistently emerged as the worst performing area in a large range of datasets. The data suggest that SV had the highest number of unemployed, suffering from a limiting long-term illness and the highest number of people with no formal qualifications at the time of survey. The area suffers in terms of health statistics in the broader spectrum—high levels of deaths from smoking, low levels of healthy eating adults and low life expectancy in relation to England's averages. Knowsley as a whole has higher crime rates and instances of criminal damage—the concerns of the Sergeant from Merseyside Police mirror these sets of data. Overall HB and Murdishaw are performing marginally better than SV. However they still fall far short of England targets. Council services seem to be lacking in all three areas. Each of the indicators provides areas for concern and improvement. The communities of HB, Murdishaw and SV are a long way off being classified as sustainable communities. However, there are areas that provide encouragement and hope, *i.e.*, the number of 16–74 year olds in education in SV is high and indicates a willingness to improve quality of life indicators within the community.

Overall, economic well-being does not yet match expectations that have been set by the Sustainable Communities Plan. On the other hand, residents in all three areas of survey are satisfied with the quality of their leisure and are provided with sufficient housing according to the survey. However, the

community cohesion and involvement, community safety, and environmental aspects are still a concern for a majority of residents living in all three areas of survey. Therefore, almost every area that defines quality of life in the community needs to be addressed in the process of implementing sustainable community strategies. Sustainable community strategies and partnerships in Knowsley and Halton will be a main driving force for dealing with deprived post industrial urban areas and to improve the quality of life for communities. The strategies that have existed in both councils for 15 years [31,32] are sound economically, but could be difficult to implement under current economic conditions. Hence, developing sustainable communities will be a challenging process and there is still a long way to go in some regions as highlighted in this paper.

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