

Community 21 is a joint initiative between University of Brighton and The Rural Community Council Network led by Action in Rural Sussex. Co-directed by Nick Gant (UOB) and Teresa Gittins (AiRS) Community21 takes the form of an online 'toolbox', social networking and data management system that facilitates community networking and participation, data gathering and innovative community led planning processes. It's primary aim is to practically facilitate sustainability (social, economic and environmental) through methodological approaches that connect individuals and communities in a an 'open innovation', 'multi-local society' of active communities of practice. The project sits within the context of new and emerging 'localism' and planning legislation formed by previous, and the current coalition government, and within participatory, co-design and sustainable design debates.

The project deploys a range of digital interface, participation and content management methods to counteract the unhelpfully divisive, polarised and polemical language and culture of sustainable development and climate change, when presented to everyday people as part of their 'local' development. By engaging communities in a range of processes of self-reflection, participation and collaborative design the project helps to define how communities use agile technologies as part of practical community development and answers research questions relating to how communities can be enabled to undertake their new roles as the 'lay-architects and planners' of their own neighbourhoods under localism. It is also leading to innovative connections and 'interactive management tools' that enable effective communication and efficient provision of services between authorities and communities in times of economic pressure.

The project piloted in January 2011. It tests and evaluates benefit and impact that the system has in augmenting both established and new practices of participatory community led and neighbourhood planning. It also models social networking, 'envisioning' and sustainable development tools with a diverse range of communities across East and West Sussex and Kent, UK. The project aims to evolve, in phase 2, to activate a full working software solution with community development agencies nationally in 2012/13 and currently engages a wide range of stakeholders at local, regional and national level. It also forms connecting pathways between communities and other research groups and service providers in formerly disparate areas such as water, energy and food provision, to emergency planning and wildlife conservation.

The project and its findings has been presented at numerous symposia, forums and conferences including; The Rural Commission (2011) at the West Sussex, Broadband Summit organised by Rt Hon Nick Herbert MP and attended by senior executives from leading broadband providers and Secretary of State Jeremy Hunt (2011), The South East and National Rural Community Council Conference (2011). The Waterwise Conference (2012), The Rural Futures Conference (2010) attended by the then Secretary of State for Environment and Climate Change, Hilary Benn (2010) and directly to the current Minister for Environment and Climate Change, Charles Hendry and Secretary of State

Francis Maude. The project also formed the content of an article for the International Journal of Community Engagement Research, 'Gateways' (published in November 2010) and has fed into policy advisory documents including DEFRA water sustainability.