NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL ADVISERS

- Skills and Knowledge Programme Evaluation -

Background Report 3

Prepared for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (Neighbourhood Renewal Unit)

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Contents

> This report describes the Neighbourhood Renewal Adviser service and its take-up, and presents results from surveys of partnerships on their use of NRAs, and of NRAs. It also draws extensively on analysis of programme monitoring data. Key findings relate to changes and improvements brought about through NRA assignments and ways of improving the effectiveness of the service.

This is one of six background research reports accompanying the main evaluation report, "Seeking the Lessons: Skills and Knowledge Programme Evaluation", all of which can be downloaded from www.neighbourhood.gov.uk. The six are:

- NRU and GO Strategies and Delivery (Background Report 1)
- Findings from the Field (Background Report 2)
- Neighbourhood Renewal Advisers (Background Report 3)
- Neighbourhood Renewal Delivery Skills (Background Report 4)
- Regional Networks (Background Report 5)
- Renewal.net (Background Report 6)

The main report contains a brief description of the overall methodological model, the project bibliography and glossary.

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1   KEY FINDINGS

Some 182 experienced practitioners have been recruited by the NRU as Neighbourhood Renewal Advisers to provide technical assistance to LSPs and neighbourhood renewal partnerships. Over 700 projects - involving over 3,400 days support - had been commissioned by June 2004, mainly concerning partnership governance and strategy development, performance management, and overcoming barriers to collaboration and community engagement. Use of NRAs has continued to grow, and a new role, that of NRA Lead Assignment Manager, has been introduced to manage interventions with partnerships which are priorities for performance improvement support.

Benefits and results for partnerships from NRA support

Changes made to strategies and ways of working

- In more than four out of five cases, partnerships we interviewed had introduced or made changes to strategies and/or projects following NRA assignments. Many examples were directly attributable to NRAs (eg, in strengthening decision making and risk assessment processes; supporting structural re-organisations; introducing greater delegation to frontline staff; and making better use of evidence in planning and project development).
- In three out of five cases, the partnerships had introduced or made changes to ways of working, systems or processes.

Gains in skills and knowledge

- Two thirds had gained skills and knowledge - especially the latter, eg, on policies and 'what works' - along with improved disciplines (eg, in project appraisal, options appraisal and prioritisation, and in the use and presentation of evidence). However, feedback from partnerships (and from NRAs) suggests that there is scope to ensure greater learning transfer.

Actual or planned improvements

- In terms of results from assignments, half of the partnerships interviewed pointed directly to actual or planned improvements to services, and some to specific neighbourhood renewal outcomes, eg, in better housing and in the extent and quality of community participation. For most other respondents, it was too early for them to comment on improvements and outcomes. And few could place any quantified measure on improvements or results.
- Over two thirds considered that they had achieved more, better or faster benefits/ results than they would have without the services of an NRA.

Other benefits

- Other reported benefits to partnerships include: impartial facilitation and brokerage; challenge to partner positions and thinking; a greater appreciation of the 'the bigger picture'; guidance in introducing new systems, eg, on performance management; fresh ideas and evidence of what works elsewhere; specialist expertise not found within the partnership; conflicts defused; reassurance, encouragement and confidence; and a stimulus to change, seen to have Government backing.

Quality of the NRA service

- NRU records show that GOs/partnerships were satisfied or very satisfied for four out of five assignments; very few assignments were rated as poor. Our survey tended to validate this pattern of assessment.
- NRAs were appreciated by the partnerships for their personal attributes, knowledge, relevant skills, independence, and the degree to which some had 'gone beyond the call' in fulfilling their brief.
- Interviews with partnerships, practitioners in our field work areas, GO staff, and NRAs themselves unearthed some concerns (including, eg, approaches to some assignments appearing too theoretical; about commissioning processes and the quality of briefs in some regions; and the possible use of NRAs as an 'easy option' where action could or should be taken by the NRU or GO directly). (Further details have been provided to the NRU to inform operational improvements.)

Benefits from an NRU/GO perspective

- NRU and GO interviewees reported a range of benefits from the use of NRAs which have strengthened their own contribution to delivering the National Strategy. These included:
    - the ability of NRAs to do things GOs/NRU cannot, or do not have the time/resources/ expertise to do (eg, a broker role independent of funding or performance monitoring dimensions; provision of in-depth thematic advice; short inputs of intensive support to resolve specific issues)
    - the panel of NRAs brings very substantial knowledge and experience in the delivery of neighbourhood renewal and partnership development and performance improvement
    - the role of NRAs as a principal mechanism for promoting change in partnerships – and a significant help to civil servants in managing risks in programme delivery
    - a source of valuable feedback from close to the ground

Principal Recommendations

	Action by
1. Make operational improvements to the NRA service (detailed in Section 8), eg, in earlier identification of NRA assignments, and more strategic deployment; matching NRAs, partnerships and assignments; devising briefs; networking GOs, NRAs and partnerships; improving communications)	NRU, GOs, partnerships and NRAs
2. Ensure that the potential learning from NRA assignments is maximised by partnerships, GOs, NRU and NRAs (eg, through building learning objectives into assignment briefs; conduct of assignments; greater sharing of project outputs and exchange of experience across related assignments)	NRU, GOs, partnerships and NRAs
3. Support continuing professional development by NRAs through more briefings and workshops on policy and performance improvement, including techniques for use on assignments	NRU, OGDs

2 Role of Neighbourhood Renewal Advisers

2.1 Background to the NRA service

Some 182 Neighbourhood Renewal Advisers (NRAs) have been recruited to a panel available to support neighbourhood renewal partnerships. They are described in The Learning Curve as *"experienced practitioners and residents to support those who are working locally".* intended to provide *"clear, appropriate and timely advice"* in helping to improve performance and ensuring that action is based on evidence of 'what works'.

When introduced, NRAs were presented as the 'human face' of the NRU's knowledge management system alongside 'virtual' support through Renewal.net. The NRU has been careful to convey that NRAs are providers of technical assistance rather than 'consultants', an important distinction in neighbourhood renewal where many residents and practitioners are highly sceptical of the value of the latter. The inspiration for NRAs had its roots in successful experience in the USA of technical assistance provided in support of Comprehensive Community Initiatives sponsored by foundations such as the Aspen Institute. The NRU saw a need in particular for support for community representatives, noting in their brief for NRAs that *"although they want to be in the lead, they do not have all the answers and need someone to work closely with them to work up the best solutions".* Subsequent thinking recognised that there would be significant needs in promoting effective partnership working and agency engagement:

Purposes of the NRA Service
To support: ▪ effective partnership working, ensuring partnership boards and executive teams can meet the challenges they face ▪ using evidence - help partnerships to become familiar with findings and using evidence of what works and in developing evidence-based strategies that are tailored to specific neighbourhoods/ outcomes ▪ working up evidence-based approaches to ease some of the pain in designing and developing strategies and programmes ▪ reshaping main programmes and co-ordinated approaches to service delivery so they can benefit neighbourhoods ▪ developing relevant skills in partnerships

Source: NRU (2002) Appointment of Neighbourhood Renewal Advisers: Information for Applicants

NRAs have been recruited to advise on the main neighbourhood renewal themes (education, health, crime, employment, housing and the physical environment) and processes (resident involvement, diversity and equality, community cohesion, project design/ appraisal/ management, neighbourhood management, etc). Table 1 sets out the job specifications used in recruiting NRAs in 2003:

Table 1   NRA Task and Person Profile

NRA Task Profile	NRA Person Profile
All NRAs ▪ good understanding of National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal and its context ▪ help partnerships develop analytical/ evidence-based approaches to assessing local situations, improving service delivery and achieving neighbourhood renewal outcomes ▪ offer advice in reshaping main programmes and on co-ordinated approaches to service delivery ▪ work with partnerships to find, analyse and use local data to benchmark delivery and drive priorities ▪ help partnerships access knowledge and experience, connecting them with good and promising approaches (eg, through Renewal.net) ▪ upskill and empower partnerships and communities, especially residents and under-represented groups **Strategic adviser-specific** ▪ assist with partnership and organisational development (especially at senior level in cross-agency partnerships) *or* ▪ work with partnerships, communities and GOs to tackle causes of community conflict and assist them to implement structured approaches to community cohesion **Thematic adviser-specific** ▪ proven expertise in one (or more) of Health; Crime; Education; Worklessness and Economic Regeneration; Education; and Housing/ physical environment	**Essential criteria** ▪ understanding issues faced in implementing neighbourhood renewal, local government and public sector working ▪ strong interpersonal, facilitative, influencing and communication skills ▪ experience of improving service delivery in a multi-agency environment ▪ strong evaluative and analytical skills ▪ problem solving and performance management skills ▪ ability to facilitate organisational change and learning and deliver outcomes ▪ understanding of race equality and diversity issues **Strategic adviser-specific** ▪ experience of working with cross-agency partnerships at a senior, strategic level and communities at neighbourhood level *or* ▪ expertise in different aspects of community cohesion, especially strong facilitative, mediation and conflict resolution skills **Desirable criteria** ▪ proven ability to set up and deliver social/ regeneration/ neighbourhood renewal interventions ▪ familiarity with the aims and objectives of the National Strategy on Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plan ▪ experience of working with service delivery agencies and GOs

Source: NRU (2002) Appointment of Neighbourhood Renewal Advisers: Information for Applicants

Figure 1 analyses the NRU database of NRAs by category. The largest single group are generic NRAs (43%), with 36% addressing one or more of the neighbourhood renewal themes (Typically there are 16 or 17 thematic NRAs for each theme.) 16% are 'senior strategic' advisers, intended for more challenging partnership development assignments. Some 9% have been recruited specifically to deal with race equality, diversity and community cohesion matters, and 10% offer a specialism in performance management support. NRAs many fall into more than one category.[1]

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[1] In autumn 2004, around 20 NRAs were identified as potential Assignment Managers to lead multi-disciplinary interventions with partnerships considered to have 'furthest distance to travel". Their roles include diagnosing problems, building consensus around needs for change, determining support requirements, commissioning and managing inputs from other NRAs, and monitoring progress.

Figure 1   NRAs by Category
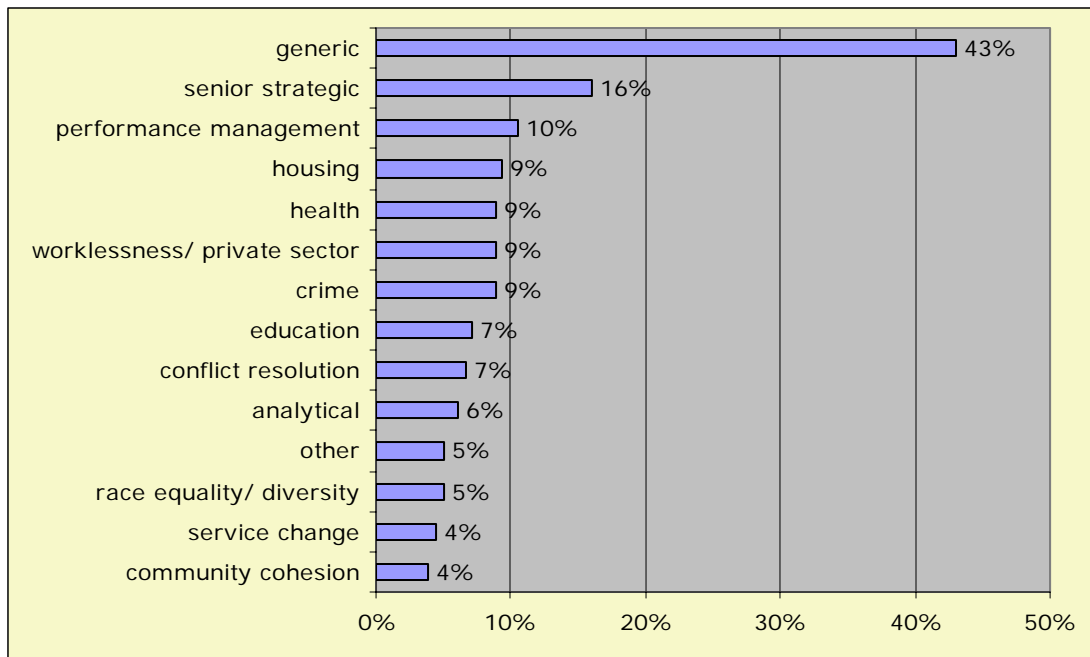
Source: NRA contacts spreadsheet (July 2004). N = 181. NRAs may have up to four categories.

NRAs come from a wide range of backgrounds and are drawn from regeneration practitioners, service providers and resident activists, providing a mix of frontline, project and senior, strategic experience. Most operate in small consultancies or as freelancers, while others negotiate with their employers for time to act as NRAs. They have been recruited in batches, the latest intake in 2004 intended to strengthen regional coverage, increase the numbers of NRAs who are highly experienced in community cohesion and partnership facilitation, and plug specialist gaps, eg, on sport strategies and projects. Some 33 NRAs (18%) are from Black and Minority Ethnic groups, just below an NRU target of 20%.

NRAs have been recruited in four tranches, with 83 (46%) in place by the end of 2002, a further 59 (33%) recruited in 2003 and 40 (21%) in 2004. The largest group of NRAs is based in London (26%), followed by the West Midlands (18%), North West and Yorkshire and Humber (each with 12%) (Figure 2).

Figure 2   Regional Distribution of NRAs (by address)
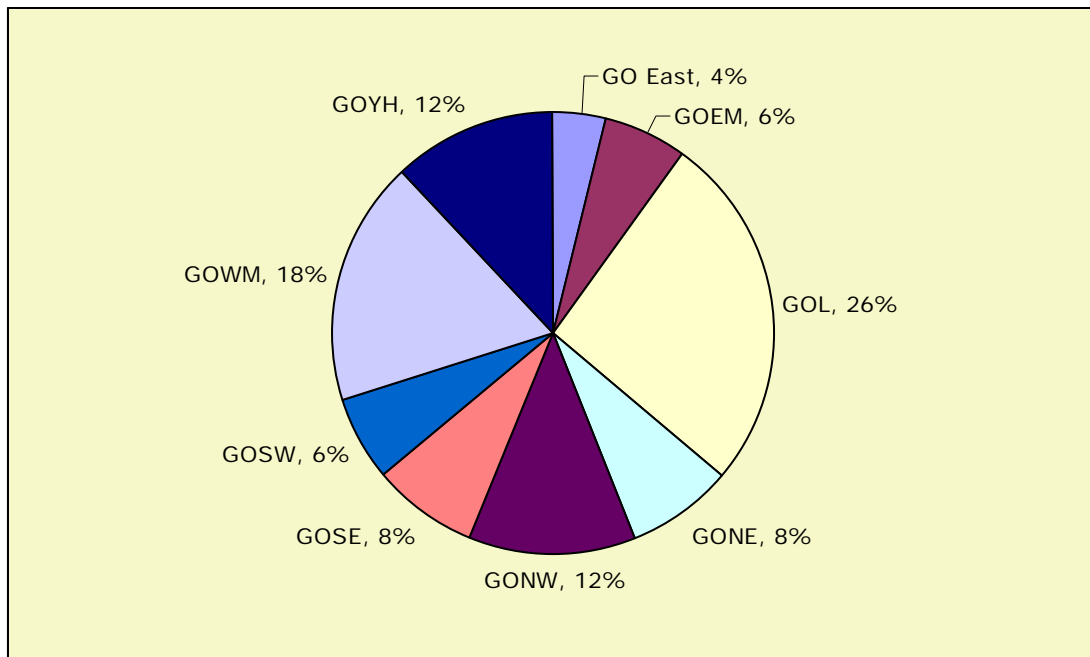
Source: NRA contacts spreadsheet (July 2004). N = 181.

NRAs were originally introduced to support NDC partnerships, and their use has subsequently been promoted to Neighbourhood Management pathfinders, Community Empowerment Networks, Business Brokers and LSPs. As an example, the Performance Management Framework (PMF) guidance for Neighbourhood Management pathfinders recommends the use of NRAs for planning with the partnership how the self assessment will be done; coordinating surveys to gather community/ partner views; facilitating the self assessment process – typically through workshop sessions; and advising on the assembly of evidence. The guidance also envisages a key role for NRAs in supporting performance improvement. Guidance for LSPs similarly makes the point that the *"use of an external facilitator can also help ensure that the you are being realistic about your progress and are not overemphasising failures or talking down success"*.

All NRAs have to attend an intensive induction course on neighbourhood renewal policy and their role - a requirement before they can go into the field as NRAs. The NRU is committed to updating NRAs regularly so they are well prepared to work with partnerships - and is increasingly involving NRAs in new developments (eg, in looking at implications in creating the Single Community Programme, and in supporting performance management and improvement planning). This approach by NRU has sought to ensure that partnerships are confident about the quality of NRA advice, that it is relevant, consistent and up-to-date.

The NRU and GOs share responsibilities for the delivery of the NRA service, as set out in Table 2. Oversight of individual assignments is the responsibility of GOs, though often in practice, partnerships themselves act as the primary 'customer' of the NRA and take closer responsibility for project management.

Table 2   NRU and GO responsibilities in delivering the NRA service

NRU Responsibilities	GO Responsibilities
Skills and Knowledge Team ▪ develop and maintain a database of all NRAs and the NRA 'e-community' (to support networking) ▪ co-ordinate recruitment to fill gaps ▪ organise national induction, networking, and themed-based briefing ▪ manage the NRA programme finances and contract with NRAs and financial management ▪ monitor quality and co-ordinate programme evaluation ▪ manage overall NRA usage/availability ▪ offer advice, support and troubleshooting to GO and NRU Programme teams ▪ work with Other Government Departments to secure their active support in the NRA process *NRU Programme Teams* ▪ contribute to the scoping of programme/partnership advice needs, based on evidence of evaluations and performance management ▪ contribute to induction and theme-based briefings for all NRAs ▪ contribute to NRA recruitment process	*GO partnership contacts* ▪ establish partnership needs and whether NRA support is appropriate ▪ match NRAs to assignments ▪ agree briefs between NRAs and partnerships ▪ commission NRA assignments and manage their entry into work with partnerships. ▪ manage the assignment and exit arrangements (*"GO Partnership contacts should work closely with NR partnerships and NRAs to review progress and make sure any action flowing from an assignment is owned by the NR partnership."*) ▪ review performance and provide feedback to the NRU *GO Skills and Knowledge contacts* ▪ contribute to the review of NRA demand and usage ▪ keep abreast NRA activity in their region, analysing overall patterns of use/ effectiveness and pursuing improvement actions where necessary ▪ organise regional briefing and promotion so that GO staff and partnerships can get to know what NRAs can offer

The budget for the NRA programme in 2004-05 is £400,000, and the NRU roles require the equivalent of 2 full-time staff. Expenditure in 2003-04 was £220,000 (against a budget allocation of £340,000) - which included the cost of NRA recruitment, induction and briefing events as well as the costs of individual assignments. The NRU fully funds NRA assignments, except in the case of longer projects where partnerships are expected to find part of the cost themselves.

The amount of time devoted by individual Government Offices has varied over the period since NRAs were introduced: eg, initially Skills and Knowledge leads had to devote relatively more time to promote the use of NRAs to colleagues and partnerships, and subsequently, the input has rested with individual GO programme staff and their ability to devote time to commissioning and overseeing assignments. Most assignments have not involved substantial GO time in project management.

2.2   Evaluating the contribution of NRAs

We have sought to review and assess the contribution that NRAs have made to learning and performance in neighbourhood renewal partnerships. This has involved:

- analysis of 700 NRA projects up to mid-June 2004 (as recorded on the NRU's monitoring spreadsheet and project monitoring returns provided[2])
- a survey of 26 partnerships that had made the most significant use of NRAs[3]

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[2] NRA assignment spreadsheet provided as at 18 June 2004, and all (175) NRA monitoring reports available by 31 July 2004.

- feedback from GO Skills and Knowledge staff
- telephone interviews with 19 NRAs, concentrating on those NRAs who had by November 2003 undertaken the greatest number of assignments
- an on-line survey with 50 respondents, drawn from all other NRAs (June 2004)
- as part of our fieldwork in nine LSP areas (March-April 2004), enquiring into local use of NRAs

We sought information on the nature of assignments, approaches adopted by NRAs, etc, and evidence of skills transfer, changes made by partnerships, benefits and results. We have also gathered feedback on operational issues and suggestions for improving the quality of the NRA service. Findings from each of these components are incorporated below.

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[3] These partnerships had all had NRA assignments lasting five days of more. Between them, they had commissioned over 90 NRA assignments.

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3   More about NRA assignments: analysis of monitoring records

3.1   Assignment types and partnership take-up

We have analysed NRU monitoring records up to the middle of 2004. The following figures and tables summarise this information[4]. Figure 3 presents the proportion of assignments (700 completed, under way *or* proposed) by type of partnership: just over a third have been undertaken for NDCs, which reflects the origins of the NRA initiative and the needs/ readiness of NDCs to engage NRAs. 72% of the total were commissioned during 2003-04, and the trend in use is rising, especially by LSPs (having reached 24% of assignments by June 2004). Other significant users of NRAs are Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders (11%), Community Engagement Networks (CENs - 10%). The NRU has commissioned directly a significant proportion of assignments (including, eg, facilitation of awaydays, research and preparation of guidance, eg, on NDC governance), as have some GOs (eg, involving NRAs in the delivery of networking events, introducing staff and partnerships to Performance Management Frameworks, facilitating consultations, and evaluating network and training activities).

Figure 3   NRA Assignments by Programme
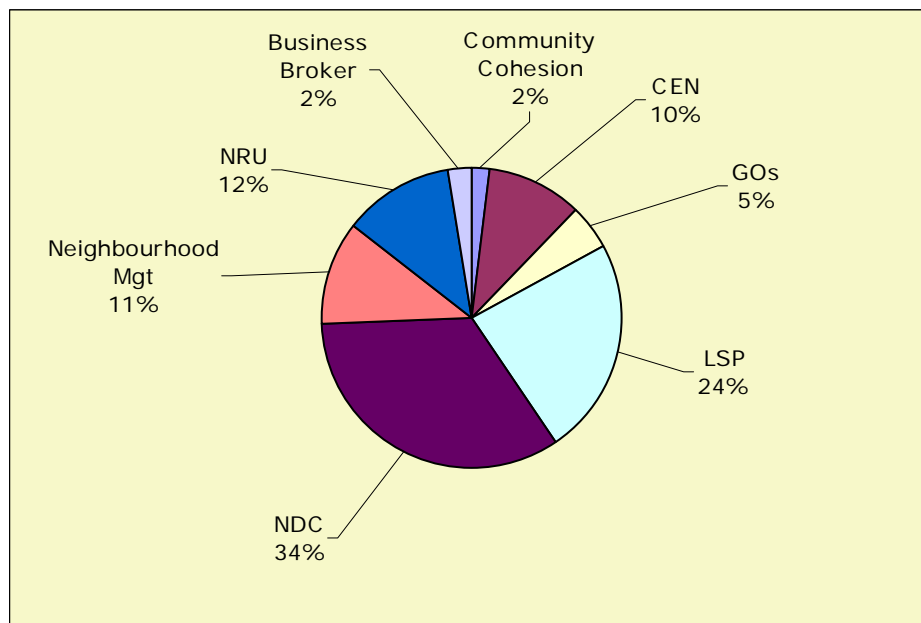
Source: NRU monitoring records (as at 18/06/04)

Typically assignments have been of short duration: the average assignment is just over five days. The shortest assignments have been a half day, and the longest, over 25 days (where NRAs have provided interim management or worked in a partnership 'rescue' operation). Some 3,430 NRA days had been commissioned across the 700 assignments.

The average daily rate for NRAs was £470 (within a range of £400-600/day) and total cost per assignment (including VAT where charged) has been £2,917. The upper limit is capped at £600, and the rates charged appear often to be below rates which individual

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[4] The monitoring reports are submitted by GOs, and we understand that in most cases these represent the views of the partnership *and* the GO.

NRAs would charge for their services to other clients when in open competition (a value for money bonus for the NRU)[5].

The 700 assignments involved 106 NRAs, with half having undertaken five or more assignments. Some of these NRAs had been newly recruited in 2004 - which entails that, of those recruited between 2001 and 2003, at least 40 had not yet had an assignment. Some of these had had the offer of at least one, but had had to turn the opportunity down. However, it follows that a significant proportion - nearly 30% - of those recruited between 2001 and 2003 had yet to be used. Figure 4 shows the pattern in commissioning NRA assignments over time, showing higher levels of use of NRAs from March 2003 onwards, with fluctuations over time in the rate of commissioning.

Figure 4   Growth in NRA Assignments
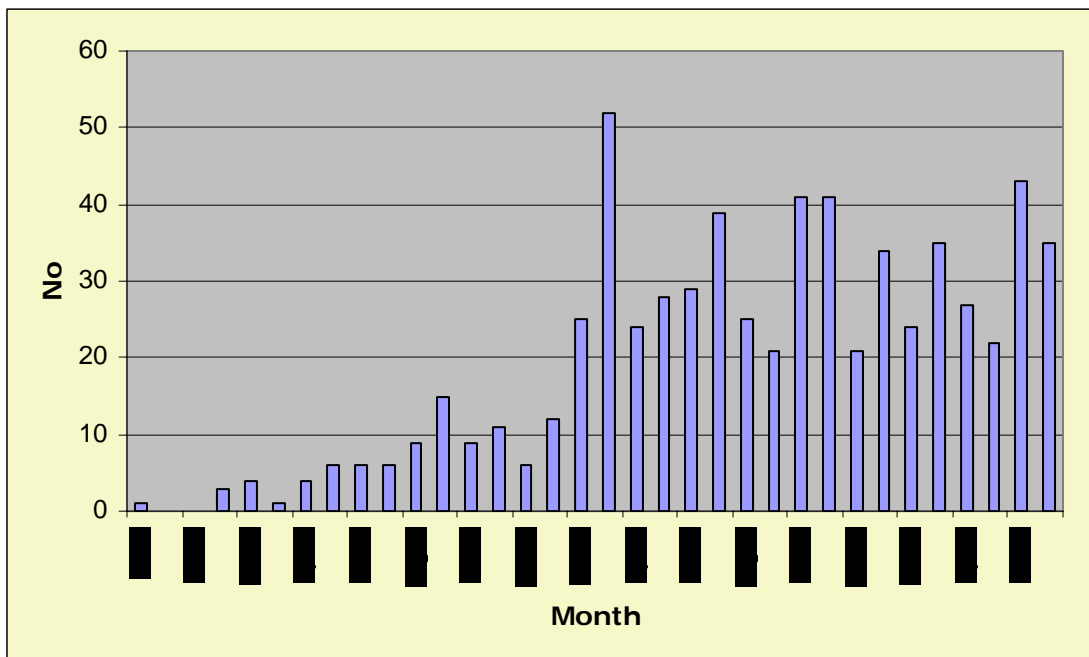
Source: NRA Assignment database
The chart excludes 104 projects where no commissioning data was recorded. Of these 40 were in 2002-03, 55 in 2003-04, and 9 in 2004-05 up to end July 2004.

Figure 5 shows that the most typical assignments have concerned performance management (17%), strategy development (19%), community engagement (13%) and organisational development (11%). In all, thematic assignments (including projects on equality and diversity) have accounted for 16%. More detailed analysis shows that community engagement has been the main topic for CENs (64% of CEN assignments), and performance management for LSPs (36% of LSP assignments), while thematic inputs have been most common for NDCs (32%). For Neighbourhood Management pathfinders, there has been more of a spread, with organisational development, strategy development, performance management and thematic assignments together accounting for 54%.

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[5] NRAs are paid at half rate to attend NRU briefings (though not their induction).

Figure 5   Types of NRA Assignment
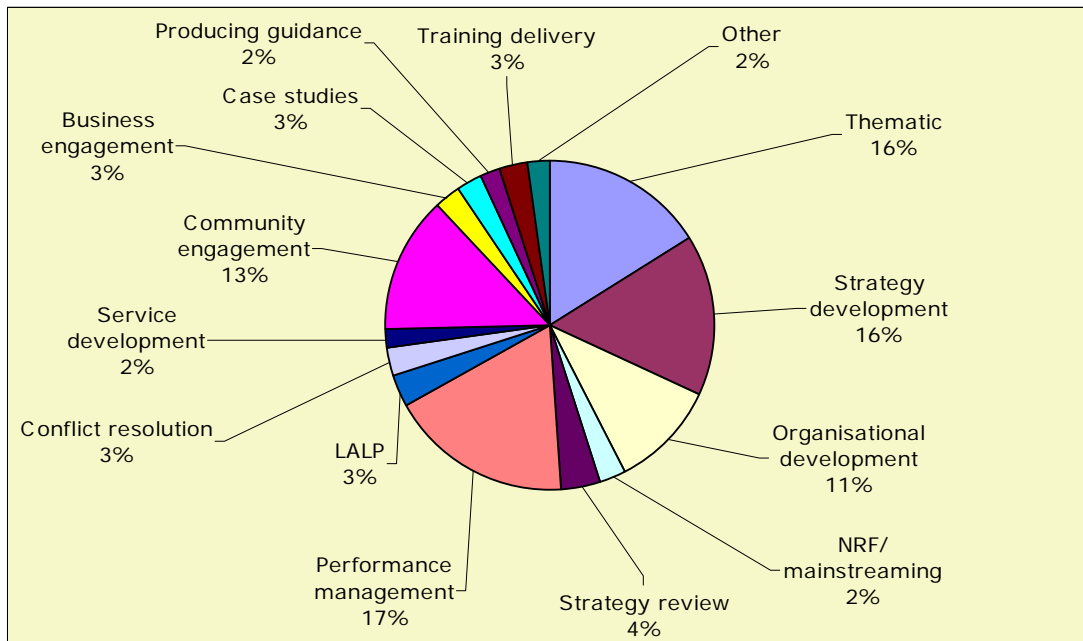
Source: NRA Assignment database.   (LALP = 'Local Action on Learning Plan')

Further analysis of NRU monitoring records suggests that interventions carried out by NRAs typically involve giving advice (36%) and facilitation (28%). Just over 10% have been designated as 'scoping' projects, though many more have a had a scoping element. More generally, projects involve some mix of activities including these, plus project appraisal, delivery of training, conflict resolution or brokerage (in support of effective partnership relationships). In a small number (10) mentoring has been the main form of support - though it is an activity which has featured *informally* in many other assignments. There have also been small numbers of projects involving interim management (where an NRA has been asked to step in as partnership manager until a new manager has been recruited) and 'rescue' operations where teams of NRAs have been allocated in support of partnership turnarounds. Relatively few assignments have been of a notably pathbreaking nature, exceptions including some work on local learning plans and on aligning partner funding in Sunderland.

2.2   Feedback on NRA assignments

GO staff submitting the monitoring forms[6] are asked to rate the performance of the NRA on a scale of 1 ('poor') to 5 ('strong'). Where forms have been completed (175), over a third rate the service provided by the NRA very highly and in all, 81% highly (Figure 6). Very few expressed dissatisfaction through low scores[7]. In only three cases do feedback forms record that assignment briefs have not been delivered, and in five cases, only partially.

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[6] Forms are submitted via Government Offices, usually based on ratings provided by the 'client' partnership.

[7] We note from our GO interviews that there are occasionally differences in view between partnerships and GOs, for example, where partnerships have not welcomed how the NRA has engaged and challenged the partnership.

Figure 6   Satisfaction with NRA Performance (1-5, where 5 is high)
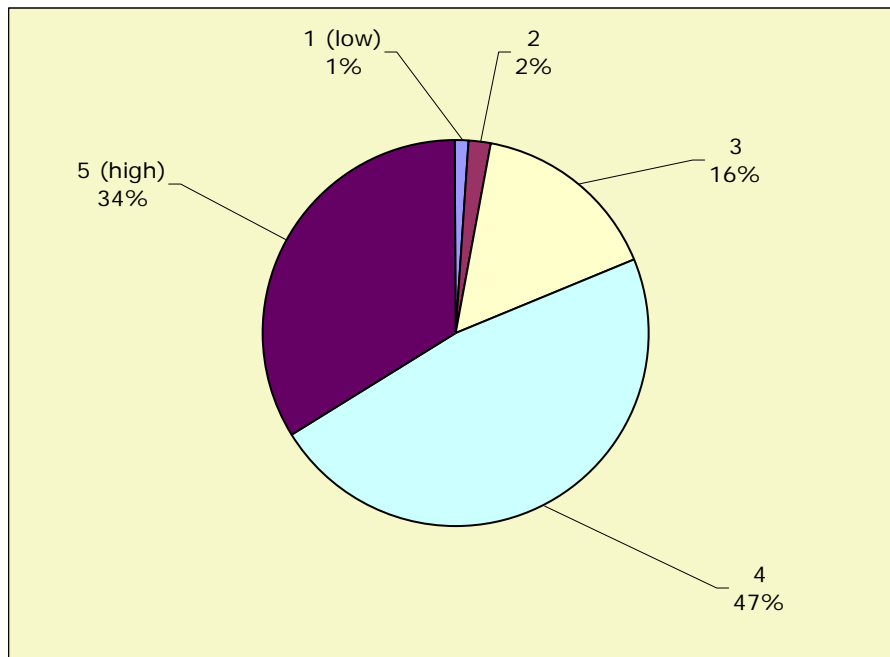
Source: 175 completed NRA monitoring reports (to 31 July 2004)

The completed forms also indicate that respondents consider that learning has been transferred to the partnership in 94 cases (54%), and that at least a quarter of assignments are considered to offer learning relevant to other neighbourhood renewal partnerships[8]. In at least 53% of cases (93 replies), actions had been taken forward following the NRA assignment, and in only four cases was it stated that no actions were taken. A need for further support from an NRA (as a direct or indirect follow-up) was identified in 54 cases (31%).

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[8] Respondents, however, have rarely provided specific comments in support of their answers on this and a number of other questions in the monitoring form, which led us to recommend some changes to the form at our Interim Report stage. We also advised on NRU plans to follow up assignments after a number of months for evaluation purposes.

4 Survey of Use of NRAs by Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships

We undertook telephone interviews with 26 partnerships in November 2003. Partnerships were targeted where they had had assignments lasting five days or more, completed by August 2003 - and thus offering a period during which implementation was likely to have occurred and benefits and results found. Most of the partnerships were NDC partnerships (20), the remainder comprising neighbourhood management pathfinders (2), LSPs (2), a Business Broker and a Community Cohesion pathfinder[9]. Between them, these partnerships have commissioned over 90 NRA assignments[10]. While interviews concentrated on the completed assignments as intended, interviewees added comments from their wider experience of using NRAs where relevant. Interviewees also made some comments on assignments *not* recorded on the NRU system, where the partnership separately funded an extension of the original NRA commission. Some NDCs now have experience of using NRAs over a reasonable period (from January 2002), while the use by others of NRAs has been more recent.

4.1 Nature of assignments

The assignments undertaken by the NRAs and which were the focus of our interviews with partnerships concerned[11]:

- organisational/ partnership development (governance, systems and procedures, processes for engagement, etc) (21)
- support in introducing Performance Management Frameworks (14, of which three largely concerned briefing and 11 provided support for self-assessment)
- thematic projects (of which housing and the physical environment accounted for seven, and equalities and community cohesion for five)

Three concerned partnership-wide strategy development/ review, two were concerned with the planning and use of NRF. The remaining two concerned engagement of young people and the voluntary and community sector.

Table 2 sets out what the NRA did for the partnership, as described by the partnership interviewees:

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[9] Respondents were almost all Chief Executives (or equivalent). Exceptions were the two neighbourhood managers, one Business Broker, a local authority head of service (Community Cohesion pathfinder), an LSP co-ordinator and an LSP capacity building co-ordinator. The partnerships were distributed by region: EM 2; London 5; NE 4; NW 2; SE 1; SW 3; WM 6; and YH 3.

[10] These represent 27% of all assignments commissioned by mid October 2003. Monitoring records do not allow us to establish the percentage of completed assignments by this date, but we can be confident that the proportion is reasonably high.

[11] Numbers add to more than 26 because some respondents insisted on discussing more than one related assignment, and some assignments combined aspects which could not readily be separated.

Table 2   Nature of tasks undertaken by NRAs

Type of NRA input	Examples of tasks undertaken
Advice (10 assignments)	▪ methodology and research methods in developing partnership learning plan ▪ handling meetings ▪ partnership governance ▪ to theme coordinators (housing, employment, crime, education, health …) ▪ identified areas where further expertise/ action needed, eg, measurement of health impact ▪ strategic options ▪ presenting a case to a sceptical board ▪ working with volunteers
Facilitation (11)	▪ internal management and board discussions ▪ developing a protocol with LA ▪ developing Codes of Conduct ▪ PMF processes ▪ improving relations with local BME groups/ forum ▪ awaydays, including presentations of findings
Information (2)	▪ gave contacts for specific advice ▪ highlighted good practice elsewhere
Research/ Reviews (5)	▪ preparation of action plans and strategies ▪ contribution to review on Community Safety ▪ interview with partners on obstacles, options for partnership structures, etc
Strategy development (8)	▪ options review and advice, eg, on strategies for young people; housing; environment; and education
Training/ capacity building (9)	▪ developing management/ board/ teams ▪ training in chairing skills ▪ roles and responsibilities exercises for managements and boards ▪ coaching (eg, in use of statistics) ▪ general mentoring
Support package (2)	▪ partnership turnaround (team of NRAs involved in one NDC) ▪ interim management

In 19 cases, the assignment was considered by the interviewee to have been a planned intervention, and in three cases was a crisis response. Some 11 assignments were arranged at the specific suggestion of the GO, and three following personal recommendation from another partnership. In nine cases, the stimulus came from recognition of a job to be done but where the partnership was lacking management or staff capacity.

4.2   Changes made as a result of assignments

We asked interviewees to say if they had made changes to their (a) strategies or project plans; (b) services; and/ or (c) ways or working, systems or processes. In more than four out of five cases, they had introduced or made changes to strategies and projects, and three out of five to ways of working, systems or processes. Many qualified their comments by saying that it is still 'early days yet' in implementing these, and that the future should see further changes, *not least as work on strategies is carried forward in service improvements on the ground*. Some form of change has been made as a result of all assignments, even where the partnership was not entirely satisfied with the work undertaken by the NRA.

Changes made to…	YES
a) strategies or project plans	21
b) services	11
c) ways of working, systems or processes	16

N = 26

In relation to changes to strategies, many of the comments related to PMF assignments which had succeeded in making partnerships focus on areas of possible weakness and consider how to address these. Most feedback suggested how much the partnerships valued having someone competent to lead them through the process, designed to encourage strategic thinking about how well the partnership is geared up to achieve its objectives. In other cases, assignments featured very substantial involvement in helping to develop thematic strategies, eg, on housing, and help mobilise community ownership[12].

> *"The NRA's input has led to us conceiving a different strategy for the future ... the whole partnerships business has been changed as a direct consequence of this assignment. The PMF itself has made us look at how we do things and focus on areas of possible weakness. Going through that process has made us change everything."*
> NEIGHBOURHOOD MANAGER 2

On changes to services, interviewees highlighted how NRA support had helped them pick out critical matters and refocus services. We discuss more of these changes in the sub-section below on Outcomes, including how they relate to prospects of greater impact on neighbourhood renewal targets.

There were many comments about **changes in ways of working**, typified by comments along the lines of *"we have made changes in a big way in how we do things, rather than to individual projects"*. Specific changes in ways of working include:

- decision making ("In terms of the governance committee, the whole delivery of our services has been enhanced… streamlining and defining the decision-making process.")
- reorganisations ("We have completely restructured the whole Partnership structure"; "staff can see how their role contributes to the strategic objectives. I like to think we have a better structured team.")
- risk assessment procedures
- more discipline in the use of evidence ("We have learned more about what is considered to be evidence.")
- greater delegation to staff

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[12] The NDC Evaluation 2003-04 Programme-Wide Annual Report (Lawless and others, 2004) also comments on the NRA assignments in improving NDC delivery. The authors found that NRAs were making a markedly greater contribution to assisting NDC delivery in 2003-04 than in 2002-03, rated not far behind community involvement, GO support and partnership working as critical factors. The report notes thematic contributions on health, encouragement of the use of Service Level Agreements, and a particular case of support for Newcastle NDC in negotiating with the City Council on the formation of an Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) for housing.

- introduction of partner protocols ("The NRA was able to get people in a room who formerly wouldn't agree to sit together.")
- more effective working across themes ("We have a much better interaction with our theme groups now and we have made all the links that were not there before.")

One underlying theme is how much the NRAs had helped interviewees see the bigger picture, raising their sights and encouraging them to reflect on ways through tricky challenges. There were a number of appreciative comments, such as *"the NRA made us look at things differently…challenging us"* and *"there's been one big step-change in mood, commitment and attitude"*.

4.3   Implementing changes and dealing with obstacles

Many of the interviewees (20 out of 26) were still in the process of implementing the NRA-related actions they described. Others had completed work relating to one NRA assignment, and had proceeded with another NRA assignment. Many of the actions in hand included delivering the action plans devised with the NRA. For instance, if the involvement included a strategy reappraisal, it would almost certainly still be 'in hand', because the strategy would have a timescale of several years.

Just over three in five partnerships have encountered obstacles in implementing actions and changes relating to NRA assignments:

- *resourcing* issues - time, money and/ or capability - which may relate to the partnership's own staff or wider within the partnership (*"Almost every time we have had an NRA there are problems with [our] capacity"*)
- *leadership* issues, eg, where a chair did not agree with officers' and NRA's joint recommendation, and instances of insufficient consensus (*"We have a few board members who still pursue their own agenda and try to destabilise the Chairman and myself …"*)
- *perceptions of NRAs*: in some cases there were initial obstacles where community representatives were sceptical of well-spoken, professional, middle-class NRAs, but these have tended to be overcome fairly readily ("*…but the NRAs have all worked around it to surmount that problem*").
- attitudes and priorities amongst partners and mainstream agencies - illustrated by comments such as:

> *"How we work with mainstream agencies… we need to have a change in the way they respond to local needs… They don't feel it is a priority for them in what they are trying to achieve."*
> NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 1

> *"The whole process is about delivering things through mainstream agencies and it is about getting them on board."*
> NEIGHBOURHOOD MANAGER 2

> *"Culture change to tackle - senior people with 'nothing to learn' and macho behaviours."*
> NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 11

Many of the partnerships appreciate how NRAs have helped them deal with these obstacles. Several remarked on how the NRA had added credibility (eg, in helping to encourage the LSP to give more commitment to the development of its learning plan).

4.4   Skills and knowledge transfer

We explored with the partnership interviewees what skills, knowledge and capabilities they had gained from their work involving the NRA. Nearly two thirds (18) considered they had gained skills and knowledge, and the remainder did not. In two of the cases, the interviewee did not want to give the impression they were lacking in any way, other than in resource (arguing that they were seeking extra help rather than improved capability), though from their replies it was clear that they *had* gained something more.

Examples of new and enhanced skills or knowledge included:

- board and management team more/ better informed: eg, about strategy options, policy developments, how best to work with volunteers

    "Everyone has benefited from his approach and style, studying his way of thinking. His role has been critical in advising us what an effective strategy can contain."
    NEIGHBOURHOOD MANAGER 2

- practical advice on how to design leaflets and use the right wording in publicity
- thematic knowledge, eg, on housing renewal, health
- specific organisational knowledge, eg, on charitable structure

Other comments reflected the scope that partnerships have had to draw on NRA experience:

    "She was four or five years ahead of us and we were able to benefit from that experience."
    NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 3

    "In the region of 15 to 20 staff have direct contact with NRAs and are therefore benefiting from their help and guidance."
    NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 7

Enhanced organisational capabilities relate to processes such as strategy development, risk assessment, and decision making. Several comments indicated that partnerships were applying more discipline in their approach to various topics:

    "Being more analytical, always asking, 'what is the neighbourhood renewal dimension?' when looking at partner plans and the scope for joining up."
    LSP MANAGER 1

    "We present evidence better." (eg, in context of performance review)
    LSP MANAGER 2

    "Now we prioritise things that matter … more sophisticated decision-making and quality of debate."

NEIGHBOURHOOD MANAGER 1

Some have recognised that they can transfer what the NRA has done across various activities and projects, eg, risk assessment, basic partnership skills, governance and knowledge management - which is indicative of progress in becoming 'learning organisations'.

Individual interviewees pointed to personal or staff benefits through the NRA acting in a coaching or mentoring role, eg, in explaining the appropriate use of statistics, on presentation and on facilitation.

In two cases, interviewees made plain that the main learning benefit from the NRA was by default, in that the NRA *"demonstrated how **not** to do it".* There were a few concerns about NRAs lacking specific knowledge about the locality, although interviewees did acknowledge that the NRAs' skills, eg, in analysis or relationship management were important.

In responding to the questions on skills, knowledge and capabilities, interviewees also pointed to the benefits of NRA helping to:

- ratify what manager was already doing (ie, moral support - easier to take advice from an outsider, etc)
- bring fresh ideas and encourage cross-fertilisation
- reassure staff about their approach: "independence is valuable in that sort of process because it stops you assuming things"; "It's still early days, but helps that NRA is upbeat and positive".

4.5   Use of evidence

Almost all (24) of the interviewees stated that their NRAs had had made use of evidence of what works or doesn't work elsewhere or had drawn on relevant research findings. Much of the 'evidence' was seen as coming from the NRA's personal experience.

> *"They said, 'We tried this before and it didn't work well, but we have done*
> *this in another partnership and this was the best model… This meant that*
> *the time we did put in was well used."*
> NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 1

Otherwise, NRAs have drawn on evidence, eg, to:

- demonstrate what has worked elsewhere, and what has not:

> *"[The NRA] referred to partnerships in other areas where things had gone*
> *well and not so well, what worked and what didn't."*
> NEIGHBOURHOOD MANAGER 1

> *"He is very experienced and is forever bringing us examples of things that*
> *have happened in other NDCs and other Housing Market Renewal*
> *Pathfinders."*
> NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 6

- help interpret the relevance of research to particular area:

    "They'll say, 'Are you aware of this piece of research that such-and-such University have done?' What they are very good at is debunking that and getting it in a usable, tangible form for the board members to understand."
    NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 10

- boost morale:

    "That was one of their most valuable assets because our people had had the heat of adverse publicity and been very conscious they had been 'blacked' in the press, so they had lost their nerve and confidence and to gradually pick up … it was useful to have NRAs coming in and saying 'You are not unique. They faced this problem at So and So … and how they dealt with it was so and so.' That was very helpful to be reassured."
    NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 12

A third (9) of interviewees were aware that their NRAs had made use of Renewal.net in the course of their assignments, and slightly more (10) did not know if this had been the case. Others felt that Renewal.net was not appropriate to the nature of the assignment (eg, one involving negotiation around housing strategy, demanding high quality interpersonal skills, *"things you can't learn out of a book"*), or had limited value (doubts about the quality of content; also contrasting reasons: too much information or not enough in-depth to meet requirements). Nearly two thirds of interviewees (16) also noted that other sources of information and advice had been accessed, but no pattern emerged from their replies: the main source of information and advice appeared to be the NRA themselves.

4.6   Outcomes of NRA assignments

Though for many partnerships and NRA assignments it was likely to be the case that outcomes (performance results and other benefits) would take time to show, we asked interviewees for their views and evidence (quantified if possible) on improvements in service delivery, partnership/ organisational performance, and specific outcomes for local people and communities.

Improvements in…	YES
a) service delivery	13
b) partnership/ organisational performance	18
c) specific outcomes for local communities	14

N = 26

Half said 'yes' when asked about **service improvements** made, though only a fifth of interviewees could point to specific tangible improvements. The others were considering improvements in their internal processes and/ or identified potential for improvement of services once certain changes had been implemented. The ones who replied, 'no' were not precluding improvement, rather they were saying, *"not yet"*. (One replied that this question was not relevant to their purpose in employing the NRA.)

> *"Making links between the learning plan and what has to be done about delivering services, eg, for asylum seekers, has meant that people are working better together and we now have almost totally joined-up delivery."*
> LSP MANAGER 2

> *"We are actually delivering now. The Board are making decisions, and before the NRA came and did this work the previous Board could not reach decisions. It is that fundamental."*
> NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 15

Practical changes (eg, lettings policy/ getting rid of abandoned cars and making changes to refuse collections) and other improvements by Environmental Health Departments were mentioned by two interviewees. On housing, one NDC noted that they had approved work on 600 properties and 200 of these projects had been undertaken. Another remarked on positive feedback from the local community resulting from an assignment involving local health service providers.

Not all respondents noting improvements could be specific about these:

> *"It would be difficult to track it back to improvements in services… but the effectiveness of our service delivery has been improved by an improved decision-making process."*
> NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 5

Examples of **improvements in partnership/ organisational performance** included:

- improvements in partnership working - eg:

> *"We have higher levels of participation on the LSP management group and Economic Prosperity sub-group. And we have agreed on the need to get success measures clear."*
> LSP MANAGER 1

> *"We are getting more done… and there is less loss of valuable input from members of the partnership who were offended. It is less confrontational and more effective."*
> NEIGHBOURHOOD MANAGER 1

> *"Having someone who was not emotionally involved enabled a lot more constructive discussion."*
> NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 1

> *"We have made better decisions and been able to avoid reinventing wheels."*
> NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 3

> *"We now have consensus around protocols, processes, conduct of the board and the staff team. We are moving in the right direction."*
> NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 11

> *"Implementation of a complaints procedure provides a better framework for the board to resolve their issues."*
> NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 14

> *"Considering where we were this time last year, it's amazing."*
> NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 15

- increased confidence within the partnership

> *"The NRA gave BME residents and staff who were involved far more confidence to do things and a bit more structuring to enable them to do it. That's probably far better than getting them to do something they would never have wanted to do."*
> NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 4

> *"We have introduced a more robust form of management system and a higher quality service improvement plan. Definitely the confidence of having independently addressed strategies leads to greater plausibility and… joining up across themes."*
> NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 7

When asked about **specific outcomes for local people and communities**, interviewees tended to cite relatively intangible results. This, however, reflects the nature of NRA assignments, predominantly concerning strategies, performance review and partnership working. There was reference to progress in implementing strategies for housing and environmental improvement (eg, *"Cleanliness of area and involvement of residents in discussing issues"*) and to local awareness of progress made (eg, *"As a result, we are celebrating success rather than trying to find problems, and people recognise that progress has been made"*). Most comments referring to community outcomes related to greater or better community participation, including from BME communities.

> *"Local people fully participating in the decision-making processes."*
> NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 5

> *"They [the BME forum] have just submitted an application to us which for them is a mammoth step. That was something that was never going to happen without NRA help and is something we should be able to action now quite quickly."*
> NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 9

> *"We had more than 150 residents at an open evening which is testament to the way the board is starting to communicate."*
> NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 15

> *"The Community Development Network now has very good engagement, helped by delegating down from focus groups. This has all happened much more quickly."*
> LSP MANAGER 2

> *"80 - 90% of those involved from the community have become more effective in the way they are involved and the way they interact with others."*
> NEIGHBOURHOOD MANAGER 1

> *"It's probably about 20 people, which given we have a total BME population of about 100 is a pretty huge percentage."*
> NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 4

> *"We now have 12 community board members and all 12 have been involved."*
> NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 5

We also asked about **unexpected benefits** as a consequence of NRA assignments. Many were raised by interviewees - though not all in relation to the specific survey question. Unexpected benefits included:

- better internal relations, with staff better aware of everyone's roles and responsibilities
- making linkages (people and concepts), and challenging staff preconceptions
- providing *"a certain gravitas"* making it easier to enable change.

> *"I didn't expect the level of professional support. It was far in excess of what we were expecting."*
> NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 6

4.7   Additionality of NRA assignments

We also explored the extent to which interviewees felt that the results/ benefits would have not been achieved without the NRA. Over two thirds (19) reckoned that they had achieved more, better or faster results, and of the eight who did not, a further three *did* provide evidence of additionality (primarily through being able to apply an additional resource). One respondent thought it too early to say.

Typical of positive responses were:

> *"No. I think it would have been more difficult and more expensive. Higher cost and higher risk."*
> NEIGHBOURHOOD MANAGER 1

> *"I don't think we'd have made anything like the progress."*
> NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 6

> *"It's much easier for us to say, 'we are having this independently assessed by a free service provided centrally by the government'."*
> NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 7

> *"We didn't have the time to do it ourselves."*
> NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 10

> *"We didn't have the staff…It was a crisis response…If we had tried to do everything on our own the fighting would have torn us apart."*
> NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 12

> *"Because we have so many different stakeholders, I thought it would be best to get unbiased, objective assistance from someone who had no funds at stake."*
> NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 14

Other interviewees commented on the independence of NRAs, and on the value of the NRA's specific specialism as not something they were ever likely to have in-house.

Several respondents noted the fact that the NRAs are, in effect, 'free' (ie, paid for centrally by the NRU).

Five strongly felt they *could* have achieved the same or better results in other ways, given the resources (time themselves and/ or money to pay for consultant of their choice). One acknowledged, however, that while they would have preferred to use a consultant, this alternative would have had less credibility: *"it wouldn't have had such weight with government; they'd have wanted to know who these people were"*. In two cases this related to the nature of the assignment and how it had been set up *("We were trying to think of things for him to do"*, and *"The NRA came with a confused brief from GO")*. In another case, the NRA had a personal interest in the area and was not impartial - the interviewee felt that the conflict of interest was too great and skewed NRA's advice.

Looking to the future - and reflecting on the comments of some interviewees - it will be important to avoid any tendency for partnerships to come to depend on NRAs, and to ensure that partnerships and NRAs take steps to maximise and evaluate the transfer of skills and knowledge.

4.8   Quality of NRA service and likely future use

We asked interviewees to rate the quality of the work undertaken by the NRA (on a similar basis to that used in the NRU's monitoring forms, completed by GOs or partnerships). Interviewees gave scores for 42 assignments in all, two thirds of which drew very satisfied ('4') or excellent ('5') scores. These scores are not quite as favourable as those recorded by completed NRU monitoring forms (see Figure 5), with two-thirds rating the NRA as 4 or 5 (compared to four fifths)[13]. Four allocated the lowest score, compared to two out of 175 NRU monitoring forms.

NRA assignment rating	Numbers
1 (poor)	4
2	2
3 (satisfactory)	8
4	15
5 (excellent)	13

Other indicators of the quality of the NRA service include whether or not the interviewee had recommended the use of NRAs to others (12 cases) and their likelihood to use an NRA in future. No one would not consider using an NRA in future, and 19 felt that they were very likely to require their services (with two others saying 'likely' and five, 'maybe').

Reasons for higher ratings included many of the benefits illustrated above - such as much improved strategies, appraisal processes, partner relationships and confidence and morale within partnership teams. Several interviewees commented on how much they valued the

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[13] Interviewees were not necessarily the same people who completed the NRA monitoring forms. We interviewed partnership chief executives or operational managers who acted as 'client' within the partnership. Many of the forms, however, were completed by GO staff, normally in consultation with the partnership concerned - helping to explain the slightly different pattern of responses.

personal attributes of the NRAs, their flexibility, their independence, how supportive they were, and how some went way beyond the call of duty/ contracted days to help them.

The few giving lower scores commented on insufficient impartiality on the part of the NRA, their failure to read the brief and understand the nature of the assignment, and a feeling that the partnership could do the task better itself if only it had the resources. Other concerns included:

- a lack of confidentiality: one NRA describing what other, named partnerships had done wrong
- poor management of a PMF process
- weak recommendations (where the partnership manager wanted arguments for change)
- failure to draw on good practice elsewhere or to suggest options

4.9   Suggestions for improvement from partnerships

Finally, in our partnership interviews we sought suggestions for how to improve processes of commissioning, managing and closing NRA assignments. We note that individual GOs have not undertaken their roles in the same ways, some have been more active than others in recommending that partnerships use NRAs and occasionally directing them to do so.

Suggestions for actions which GOs and the NRU might take included:

- publicising possible uses of NRAs, and what they have achieved elsewhere - and explaining consistently what forms of support are available
- requests to GOs to help ensure a better match between NRA, partnership and assignment by making more detail available about the NRA (skills, experience and availability), and offer a list of all relevant NRAs, not just those in the particular region. References from previous clients could help:

    > *"If our Chair could hear that another resident chair or member was very comfortable with the services of an NRA, that would go a long way with him."*
    > NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 11

- ensuring prompt responses during the commissioning process and beyond (*"Even a small delay in response by GO can put whole process back weeks…"*)

- ensuring that NRAs are working to sound briefs. There were suggestions for a two-stage process, including an initial investigative, scoping stage where the NRA would work with the partnership to devise a tighter brief. *("It's one thing giving them the spec but it's nothing quite like them coming back, setting out more clearly what they are going to do.")* We understand that this has always been envisaged as an option. This issue also arises in feedback from NRAs - see section 6.8 below. There were also suggestions to build in review points, relevant to longer assignments

- strengthening arrangements for closing assignments (including a preference for a closure meeting involving the partnership, NRA and GO, to clarify benefits, lessons from the assignment, further action needed, etc)

There were also suggestions for actions by partnerships themselves, including the need to plan early meetings to get everyone on board, and keep in view the core purpose of NRAs (*"We have to be mindful of the danger of the NRA becoming part of the fixtures and fittings"*). A number of partnerships reflected on their ability to manage an NRA on assignment, reckoning that degree of success is dependent on the partnership itself: *"The assignment's only as good as we are"*.

> *"We should have managed them better but we were fire-fighting, feeling we needed 48 hours a day. The reality was we did our best with the energy and time available. I'm sure the NRAs would say they should have been better managed, but we did the best we could."*
> NDC CHIEF EXECUTIVE 12

Findings from the Fieldwork Areas

Our area case study interviews provided opportunities to explore use of NRAs from the point of view of participants in NRA assignments as well as from that of partnership managers. Around 10% of interviewees made direct reference to NRA assignments.

The NRA Assignment Database shows that 56 assignments had been commissioned in the nine areas up to mid June 2004 - a number after we had completed our interviews. These included:

- support to Basildon Neighbourhood Renewal Pathfinder
- advice and support on PMF implementation (Bolsover, Derby, Great Yarmouth, Luton, West Cumbria)
- scoping and facilitation of LSP awaydays (Bolsover, Leicester)
- support for preparation of LSP learning plan (Bolsover, Derby
- thematic contributions to partnership events (Bolsover, Luton) and to NDC strategies (Luton)
- support in introducing NRF commissioning process (Bolsover)
- advice to NDC board (Derby Derwent, Leicester Braunstone NDCs)
- input to GOEM funded research on community cohesion (Leicester)
- series of turnaround assignments for Leicester Braunstone NDC, including development of personnel strategy and systems
- facilitation of events on voluntary and community sector engagement (one on BME engagement, another exploring the potential of NRF to the sector) (Leicester)
- review of an estate agreement model and its potential for replication elsewhere (West Cumbria)

Most feedback from interviewees was very positive, in many cases relating to the value of having an impartial facilitator, able to help partners make progress in addressing particular obstacles, and in helping them introduce new methods or structures. NRAs were complimented for their ability to draw on practical experience and 'what works' elsewhere and for how they had helped partnerships understand national policy priorities and their relationship to local issues. There were some specific commendations, eg, on the quality of financial and project management advice. There were relatively few comments, however, on assignments leading (as yet) to improved performance, though the most substantial evidence of improvement is the case of Leicester Braunstone NDC. This was one of the partnerships we surveyed in November 2003, where NRAs had assisted in turning the NDC round. Our fieldwork interviews confirmed that further progress had been made.

Where there were criticisms, these related to perceptions that the advice offered was too theoretical and that the NRA had not been able adequately to interpret what was happening on the ground. There are typical practitioner concerns that *"anything that is coming out from the NRU or from NRAs is not helping them with that in the sense that it is telling them in theory what needs doing, which most of the time is very different to what happens in practice"*, which need to be addressed when introducing new initiatives and guidance.

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5 NRU and GO Use of NRAs

5.1 NRU use of NRAs

The NRU has itself made extensive use of NRAs for a range of purposes, commissioned by Skills and Knowledge team members, policy leads or programme staff. As we noted in 2.1 (Figure 2), the NRU have directly commissioned 12% of assignments (though this figure overstates the number of projects, given that many have involved two or more NRAs working together, eg, in facilitating events or researching good practice. Examples of assignments include:

- input to development and delivery of the NRA induction programme
- facilitation of NRU events (eg, meetings of the Community Forum, NRA networking days, briefings on PMFs)
- delivery of training to GO and NRU staff, eg, on Project Cycle Management and conflict resolution
- analysis of baseline data relating to the Community Empowerment Fund
- drafting a booklet on crime reduction and neighbourhood renewal
- producing guidance, eg, on performance management, on governance of partnership boards, on appraisal for capital projects
- researching project on failing localities (joint project involving DfES)

From our NRU interviews we found that feedback on these activities has been largely positive, with staff actively looking to make use of NRAs to support future tasks. The Skills and Knowledge team have sought to promote the use of NRAs across NRU activities, working with both programme and policy staff. Programme staff have been increasingly committed to promoting the use of NRAs. For example, the NDC team has provided funding for up to six days of NRA time per NDC to support the annual performance review, especially in strengthening the focus and content of improvement planning. Policy staff have made varying use of NRAs, and generally want to increase this, eg, in areas of neighbourhood renewal policy and practice gaining greater priority such as economic regeneration and private sector involvement. They have worked with the Skills and Knowledge Team to promote NRAs to other government departments and agencies, where there is scope to use their channels to promote NRA use on particular themes. The NRU worked with the Home Office to provide NRAs in support of action planning by Community Cohesion pathfinders (seen as a success), and the Education NRAs were jointly commissioned by the NRU and DfES to identify good practice in 'interventions outside the classroom' to help DfES focus resources on 'failing communities'. This latter project provides a good example of the type of small-scale assignment that, capitalising on the experience, contact and skills of thematic advisers, can be quickly commissioned and completed in order to produce timely inputs to policy making and wider dissemination. There may be other similar scope: we note that OGDs have an interest in how mainstreaming is working in practice, and on how neighbourhood renewal policies are having an impact on their own departmental priorities.

5.2   GO use of NRAs

In our interviews with GO Skills and Knowledge and programme staff, we explored use of NRAs in their region. Generally, GO staff are very pleased with the evidence of the benefits that NRAs have brought. These include:

- partnerships identifying and acting on performance issues that they had not acknowledged or failed to address effectively
- having an independent field force, able to support partnerships where needed and generally *"helping to reinforce the message"*. This is regarded, eg, by GONE and GONW as having been particularly helpful in relation to the introduction of Performance Management Frameworks
- an ability of NRAs to challenge and support in ways which either the GO could not or do less effectively
- partnerships being more receptive to NRA rather than GO interventions: seen as impartial and having credibility from personal experience
- opportunities for GO staff to learn from NRAs, in participating alongside them in particular projects. (One GO Regeneration Director, for example, noted how much they had gained in this way from a NRA who had been assigned to a poorly performing LSP.)
- evidence that NRAs *have* left something behind in terms of increased partnership capabilities (eg, demonstrated in the quality in delivery or improvement plans, or project appraisals - and in some cases, turnaround or significant improvement in individual NDCs or Neighbourhood Management pathfinders)

> *"Take one of our NDCs where NRAs have made a invaluable contribution. They have helped people work through difficult relationships, and strengthened the partnership's decision making and strategy. They worked on governance issues and on staff development, focusing on management and delivery skills. One is currently mentoring the director, and another, with NDC and GO funding, is running training in handling the media, a big issue for the partnership."*

The extent to which Skills and Knowledge staff have been involved with NRA assignments varies, largely to the extent to which they work closely with programme staff. Some GOs are more proactive in commissioning NRA assignments, while others see their role as more to publicise and prompt. Staff in two GOs expressed concern that they were being deskilled, having had expectations that they themselves would have a role in performing interventions being undertaken by NRAs. However, it seems unrealistic to expect that these possibilities will grow, given practical limitations on GO staff time and experience, and the pressure within the Civil Service to reduce staffing numbers other than at the front line. There may be scope for GO staff to develop their skills by working closely with NRAs on certain assignments, in a 'job shadowing' role or as a member of a project team. One GO Regeneration Director commented on the personal benefit gained by sitting in on some of the induction provided by an NRA for a new LSP manager.

GO suggestions for improving the use of NRAs included:

- reviewing with programme staff the role and potential uses of NRAs and how to make the most of them (with a particular desire to shift assignments towards support for performance improvement rather than specific problem solving)
- organising periodic reviews in the light of experience: of how assignments have gone, which NRAs to use on which assignments, etc
- strengthening monitoring and feedback mechanisms and (eg, through post-assignment review sessions and/ or workshops with NRAs and partnerships)
- making more efforts to ensure that there is learning from assignments

> *"NRAs are an easy solution. Neither we nor the people on the ground necessarily learn much from it."*

> *"We can buy into this resource if it's about sending someone in to help, but it <u>must</u> involve capacity building internally, eg, by someone shadowing what the NRA is doing".*

- providing more opportunities to get to know NRAs and what they can do. There are continuing concerns that GO staff do not know enough about individual NRAs, and can feel quite vulnerable in making suggestions about NRAs to deploy.

There have also been concerns that occasionally NRAs 'go native', seeing the partnership solely as their client and downplaying or disregarding NRU or GO requirements. Some GO staff commenting on this see the solution as demanding closer GO involvement in project commissioning and implementation. In other cases, GO interviewees noted that this can arise where the GO has not been sufficiently clear about its own expectations.

Several GOs are making use of NRAs for their own projects, which is helping build NRAs more into the fabric of GO activity. Examples have included support for the Strengthening Regional Networking initiative in the West Midlands, facilitating the LSP learning network in the North East, and the production of 'Opportunity Statements' (good practice and identification of 'what works' in mainstreaming) relating to Floor Targets in the East Midlands. There are also examples of GO use of NRAs in their own staff development, most notably in the case of GOWM.

GOs have tended to find it difficult to forecast demand for NRAs, and partnerships have sometimes been slow to respond when encouraged to use NRAs (eg, for performance management support first time round). While there remains resistance on the part of some partnerships to the use of NRAs (seeing NRAs as government interlopers or their use as an admission of weakness or failure), positive word of mouth amongst partnerships has been growing such that suggested use of NRAs now gains a readier response. In mid-2004, significant demands were expected for NRAs to work in support of LSP improvement plans. Examples where NRAs could provide further support include integration of thematic partnerships and reviewing the involvement of, and impact on, BME communities. There are also assumptions that demand for thematic assignments will grow (a tendency observed with NDCs) as LSPs and neighbourhood management pathfinders become more established with a clearer sense of both priorities and where outside assistance could be most valuable.

Several GO interviewees would like to be able to use NRAs more in consultancy roles, where it seems that partnerships need more intensive support. This has arisen, for example, where some LSPs have struggled to get to grips with the requirements of Floor Target Action Planning, and have need of in-depth analytical support and extensive work to improve their performance monitoring and evaluation systems.

There are precedents for this (eg, in some NDC and NM assignments), though there are dangers that NRAs could be asked to do tasks which should be undertaken from within partnership resources. One Regeneration Director suggested that there should be accredited organisations as well as individuals providing NRA services, to provide more choice for clients and enable timelier, fuller responses to partnership needs. They acknowledged, however, that this could undermine the established NRA model which avoids perceptions of consultancy companies making money out of deprived communities.

6   NRA Surveys

We comment below on findings from (a) telephone interviews with 19 NRAs, chosen because they had undertaken at least eight assignments by October 2003; and (b) an on-line survey of other NRAs (50 responses). We have combined the replies where relevant. Overall, respondents included four in five of NRAs who have undertaken five or more assignments.

The purpose of the surveys was to seek views on the NRA service, its benefits and results on the ground, and the scope for improvement, eg, in support to NRAs, commissioning work. We explored, for example, how NRAs have sought to transfer skills and knowledge, their use of evidence (and Renewal.net), their personal development, and how best to capture and share knowledge from NRA assignments.

6.1   NRAs surveyed and their assignments

Of the total of 69 respondents, over a third (25, or 36%) had carried out more than 10 assignments, while seven had yet to undertake one (Figure 7). At least 60% respondents had turned down assignments, mainly on grounds of their availability. Some 13% had declined more than five.

Figure 7   Number of assignments undertaken by NRA respondents
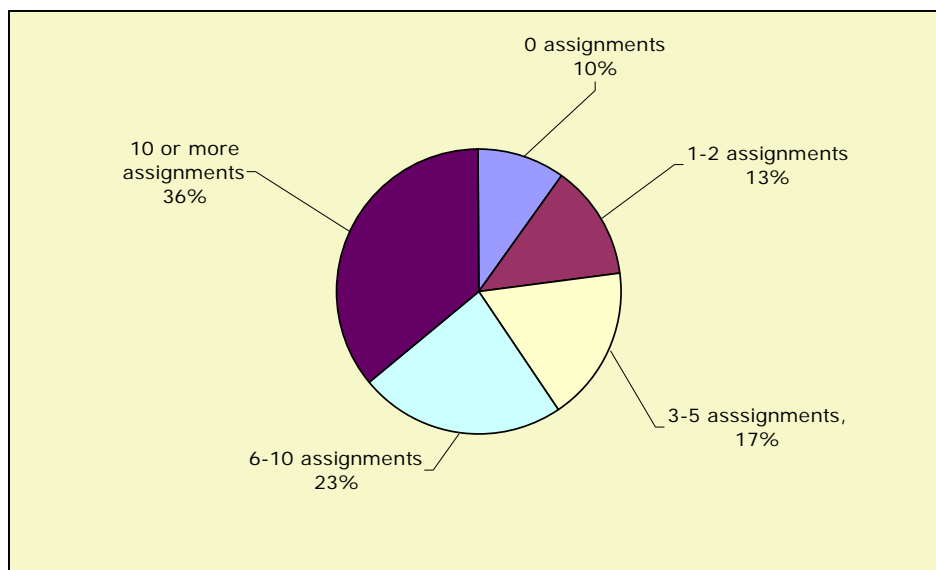
N = 69

Our other survey work has pointed to there being a group of apparently popular NRAs, some of whom find it difficult to respond to the number of approaches they get, and who can find particular difficulty in responding at relatively short notice.

Amongst NRAs who have had few or no assignments there can be a perception that the majority of work commissioned goes to a 'select few' NRAs (*"I haven't been involved so far… I would like to be notified about assignments I could apply for - perhaps that will happen"*).

We note from the NRU monitoring records that the numbers of active NRAs is growing. The figure of 106 (as at mid-June 2004) compares with 83 in October 2003, and the

numbers having undertaken five or more assignments has grown from 25 to 53 over the same period.

When asked to define the nature of assignments they have carried out, strategy development was the most common topic (for 48% NRAs), closely followed by scoping/ diagnosis (46%), performance management (45%), and systems and structures (44%) (Figure 8). Community engagement (28%), conflict resolution (26%) and evaluation (23%) constitute the next group of typical assignment topics. Only 16% relate to service improvement, and 4% to business engagement (the latter all cases of support for Business Brokers).

Figure 8   Types of assignment
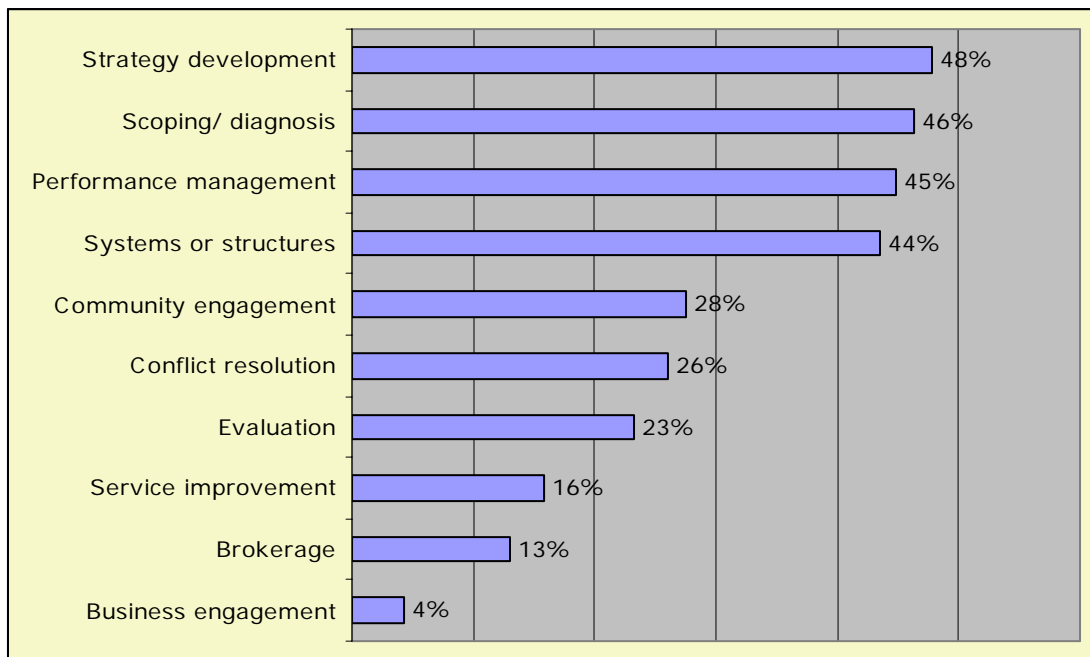
N = 69

As noted above, NRAs have carried out a range of roles in undertaking their assignments (such as advising on strategy development, facilitation and brokering relationships amongst stakeholders and partner agencies). Many of our telephone interviewees felt that frequently they have worked in 'conventional consultancy' mode (eg, a set of interviews followed by report and recommendations), as specific outcomes were expected and they had limited days in which to achieve them. Few mentioned specific techniques used as part of their assignments - referring mainly to 'facilitation' in general. There was, however, a related and strong emphasis on the use of conflict resolution techniques. Some NRAs felt that their roles in practice were less about being instruments of skills and knowledge development, but more as 'shock troops', asked either to help rescue failing partnerships, or ensure that partners take and follow through on tough decisions.

6.2   Partnership changes and results

We asked the NRAs whether or not they had evidence of partnerships making **changes or improvements** to strategies, projects and ways of working, as a direct or indirect consequence of their help, inviting them to provide examples where possible. Nearly 75% respondents considered that they *did* have evidence of changes or improvements as

a consequence of their assignments. Other NRAs (14%) observed that it was too early to comment or that evidence was lacking to the best of their knowledge, and less than 10% stated they did not have any evidence. We had anticipated that some NRAs might find this difficult to gauge as they had not been in contact with their 'client' partnerships since the assignment.

According to the NRAs, the most prominent types of change or improvement (Figure 9) made relate to decision making and priority setting (49%) and partnership/ organisational structures or systems (46%). These are followed by capacity to work with or influence others (33%), partner commitment (29%) and community engagement (29%). Innovation in projects or service delivery comes next (20%), followed by use of evidence (19%), and mainstreaming (13%). This order reflects the fact that many partnerships have been more preoccupied with strategies, structures and the basics of joining up partner activities than the next stages of partnership working, in driving innovation and service improvement.

Figure 9　　Types of Change or Improvement Made
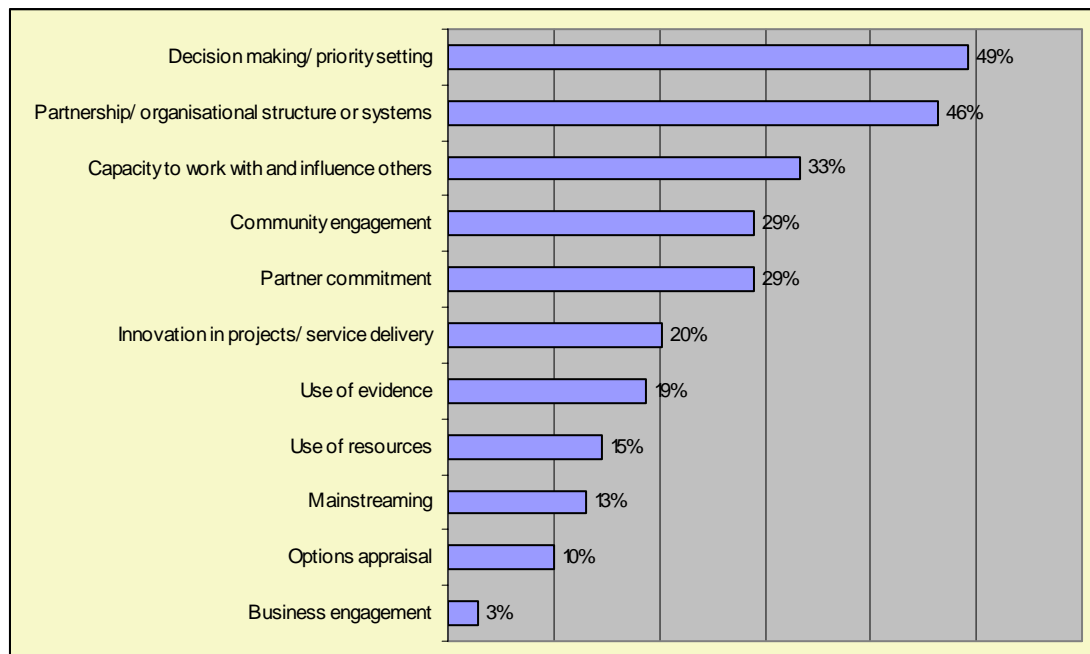
N = 69

Given the nature and timing of many NRA interventions, we also considered it worth asking our telephone interviewees to estimate the ***likelihood of successful implementation*** - the prospects that partnerships would successfully carry out actions arising from the NRA assignments. In considering a range of projects, most NRAs were reasonably confident that this would be the case, rating the prospects on average 3.6 on a scale of 0 (not at all likely) to 5 (highly likely)[14].

As in our telephone survey of the partnerships themselves, we asked these NRAs about ***barriers to implementation.*** Many comments concerned skills and knowledge needs.

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[14] NRAs were asked in the telephone interviews to concentrate for some questions on two specific assignments they had undertaken. This average score relates to 14 NRAs x 2 projects; the other NRAs were 'not sure' or not able to comment.

Some NRAs were keen to stress that these gaps were quite basic, eg, unfamiliarity with government guidance. There were references to shortages of management skills, related to inadequate or non-existent organisational and reporting structures. In some cases this was associated with high levels of staff turnover and recruitment difficulties. There was also recognition many practitioners are exhausted, and talented people may not be in the best place in hierarchies to make as much difference as they could. Other obstacles cited included histories of hostile relations between public agencies and communities; the influence of officials, seen as 'subverting' the preferences of local communities; agencies' difficulties delivering, because of other pressures, demands of the 'day job', lack of commitment, etc; and limited follow-up from GOs or NRU. Several NRAs also commented on the complexity of roles and ambiguous expectations, classically relating to the tensions between the pressures on partnerships to 'spend, spend, spend' *and* be strategic, and between involving the community *and* delivering results.

We also asked the NRAs in both the telephone and online surveys if they were aware of any **results or outcomes** which partnerships have achieved as a consequence of their help. Over half (52%) responded positively, with a further 23% saying that it was 'too early to say'. For many, the 'results' were the types of improvement already identified (eg, in partnership working and the quality of plans produced) which were not readily translatable directly into performance outcomes. Again, NRAs were reasonably confident that these changes would make a difference to performance. Improvements on the ground directly impacting on targets (eg, service delivery, resource issues) were specifically mentioned by five respondents and included:

- mainstreaming of NRF-funded service enhancements
- better use of partner resources
- saving of officers' time, thus improving productivity
- development of a more responsive service
- introduction of Social Inclusion assistants and "consultant teachers" to drive raising standards in schools

6.3   Skills and knowledge transfer

In our online survey, we invited NRAs to comment on **gains in knowledge and capabilities** in the partnerships which could be associated with their assignments, and how they had enabled this. *Partnership working* (61%) and associated categories (community involvement, 30%, managing change, 29%, influencing skills, 28% and communications, 22%) constituted the main cluster of gains mentioned. The transfer of knowledge and skills relating to *use of evidence* (what works elsewhere, 42%; evaluation/ monitoring, 33%; and analytical/ research skills, 16%) appeared a growing area, and more prominent in NRA work than in our telephone interviews at the end of 2003. Several NRAs specifically cited work they had carried out in 2004 relating to Floor Targets.

Nearly one third (32%) of NRAs noted success in transferring knowledge of government policy and requirements (Figure 10). NRA comments show that skills and knowledge transfer has almost exclusively involved strategic and partnership activity rather than work relating directly to individual projects or service delivery.

Figure 10   New or enhanced skills gained by partnerships
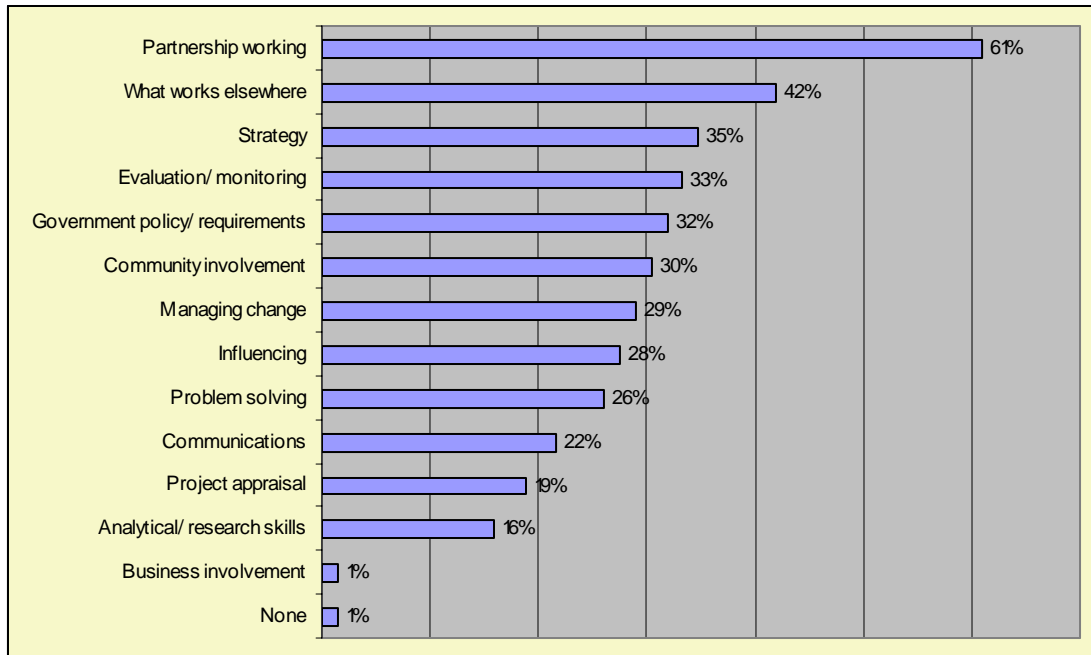
N = 69

The **main method used to help ensure that learning is gained by partnerships** (Figure 11) is the use of facilitation techniques (cited by just under half - 49% - of respondents), 41% have run or contributed to workshops with learning objectives, and 36% have highlighted particular sources of evidence that would be beneficial. Some 30% have built some form of evaluation into their assignments, and similar proportions (29% in each case) have provided coaching or mentoring. (Most of this coaching and mentoring is informal; only a few NRA assignments have had such support explicitly as part of the brief.)

Figure 11   Methods used to transfer learning
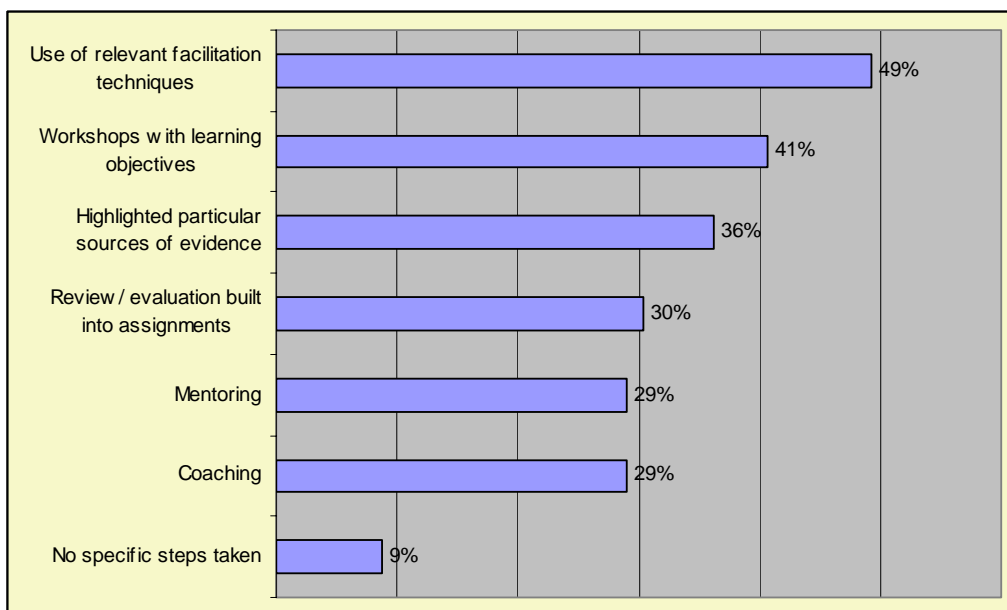
N = 69

When matched with the findings from the partnership survey and the comments made by NRAs in the telephone survey, this response suggests a more positive picture than may be the case. We found, for example, that only a couple of these NRAs stressed the importance of building evaluation into assignments, in order to improve effectiveness and maximise the learning. One articulated very clearly how he was using this to help develop partnership capacity to assume roles when the NRA was no longer involved. The same NRA also described how evaluation was being built into an LSP partner funding alignment project, to help ensure that new strategic decision making processes take root. For others, transfer was largely seen as a by-product of the assignment itself (most notably those relating to the introduction of PMF) acquired either in an osmotic way or through demonstration (with comments like, "*they've seen me display competent facilitation skills*" - which may or may not lead to skills transfer).
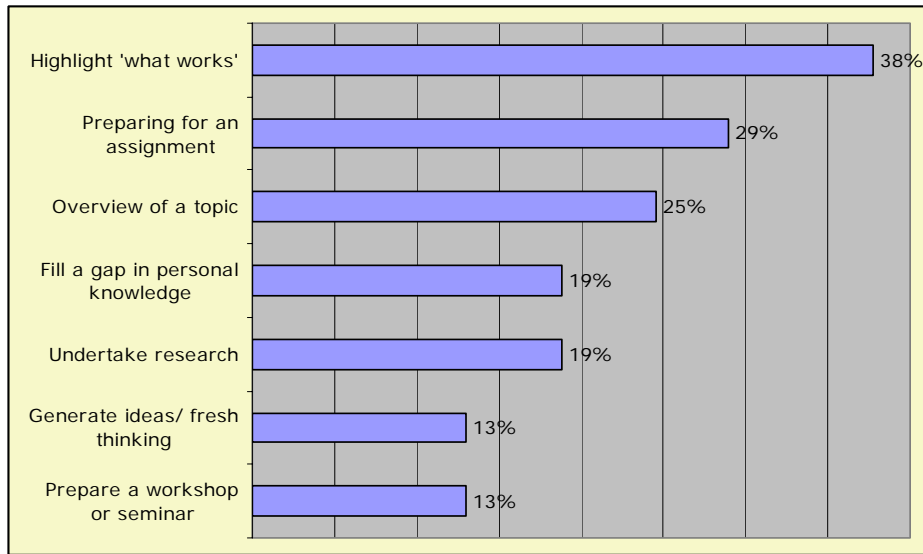
There was some scepticism amongst the telephone interviewees about the extent to which typical NRA assignments *could* lead to significant learning. In part this reflects the immediate concerns of GOs and the NRU to get partnerships moving on a stage with their strategy and development plans agreed to having an impact on service delivery. NRAs had been frequently required to produce quick results which for some meant taking a directive approach. Several NRAs also reported instances of organisational leaders failing to acknowledge that they themselves need to change, eg, in their personal approach to partnership working and diversity. This is itself a skills issue, raising the question of how best to challenge entrenched attitudes.

6.4   Use of evidence by NRAs

We asked NRAs about the sources of evidence / knowledge that they had used during their assignments, and in particular their use of Renewal.net. Nearly three quarters (72%) responded that they had used Renewal.net, and a higher proportion, 86% had recommended its use to participants on their assignments.

Renewal.net has been most used by NRAs (Figure 12) to highlight 'what works' during assignments (38% respondents), and nearly 30% NRAs have referred to the site when preparing for assignments. A quarter of respondents have used it to gain topic overviews, and nearly a fifth identified use of the site for research or to fill a gap in personal knowledge.
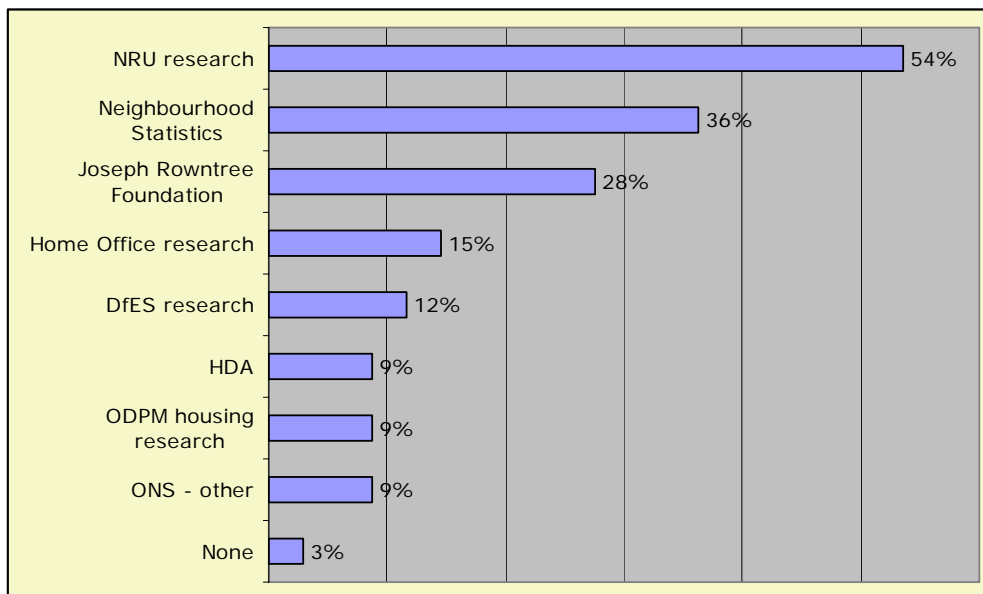
Figure 12   Purpose in using Renewal.net

Highlight 'what works' 38%
Preparing for an assignment 29%
Overview of a topic 25%
Fill a gap in personal knowledge 19%
Undertake research 19%
Generate ideas/ fresh thinking 13%
Prepare a workshop or seminar 13%

N = 69

Other sources of evidence or knowledge recommended by NRAs (Figure 13) include NRU research and/ or guidance (mentioned by over half the respondents), Neighbourhood Statistics (recommended by over one-third) and Joseph Rowntree Foundation (recommended by over one-quarter). NRAs interviewed by telephone commented that their own experience provides valuable evidence that they pass on during assignments, and several recommend contacts whom they encourage clients to follow up themselves. It appears that many NRAs are promoting evidence-based approaches, drawing on demonstrable good practice and good quality research - though it was clear from the telephone interviews that NRAs could do this more systematically.

**Figure 13   Other recommended sources of evidence**

NRU research 54%
Neighbourhood Statistics 36%
Joseph Rowntree Foundation 28%
Home Office research 15%
DfES research 12%
HDA 9%
ODPM housing research 9%
ONS - other 9%
None 3%

N = 69

6.5   NRA personal development needs

We asked a series of questions which relate to NRAs' own personal development, covering what they feel are their main needs and what they are doing to develop their personal effectiveness as NRAs, eg, through networking and professional updating.

'Keeping up with policy and practice' in their own main area of interest and in related topics of neighbourhood renewal were by far the most important development needs amongst NRAs, each mentioned by over 55% respondents, followed by 'understanding what works', cited by 40%. Developing their own skills and techniques for facilitation, (30%) and analysis (25%) were also mentioned. One in ten NRAs felt they have no particular development needs. Several respondents commented that many of their "cross-cutting" development needs might well be met by other NRAs with specific skills, but there is no ready structure at present whereby they can all share knowledge and experience.

Figure 14   NRA personal development needs
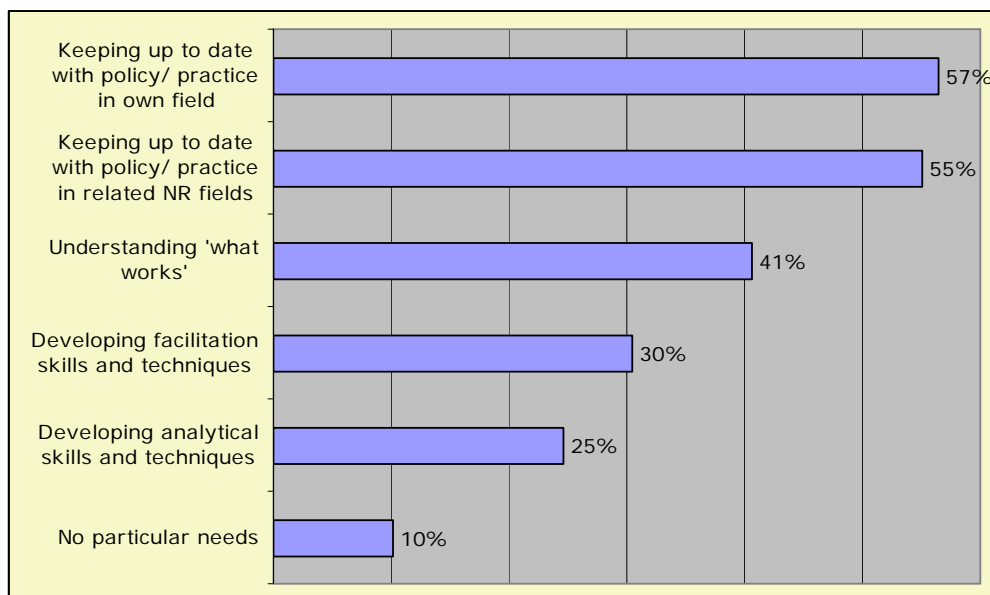
N = 69

Seven out of ten NRAs cited 'keeping up to date' as being one of their practices in developing their personal effectiveness as an NRA. Participation in NRA briefings (see the next sub-section) was mentioned by nearly two-thirds (64%), followed by participation in relevant networks by 56%. From our telephone interviews we are aware that most NRAs see much of their learning as being 'on the job'.

**Figure 15   Actions to develop personal effectiveness**
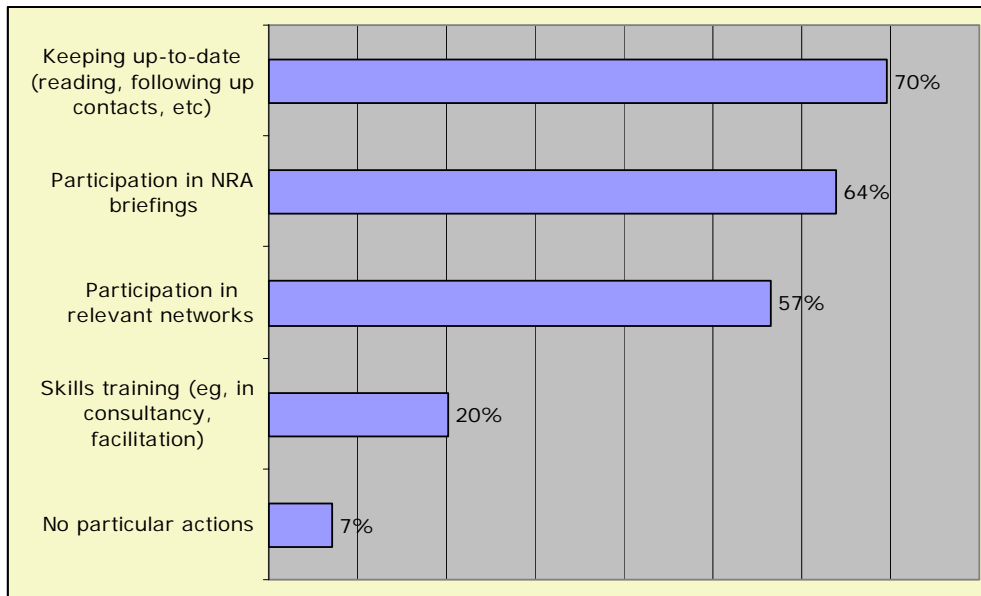
N = 69

6.6   NRU support for NRAs

To help ensure that NRAs are well-informed and up-to-date - and as part of their commitment to quality assurance of the NRA service, the NRU have undertaken a number of activities, over and above the three-day NRA induction course:

- maintaining an 'e-community' on the ODPM internet server
- providing a closed discussion area on Renewal.net dedicated for use by NRAs
- organising networking events for NRAs (for NRAs as a whole and for NRAs grouped by neighbourhood renewal theme or by interest, eg, in performance management or community cohesion)
- inviting NRAs to policy and programme development events with GOs (and sometimes partnerships)
- disseminating key information (eg, copies of the LSP newsletter produced by the NRU LSP policy team)

The **NRA e-community** provides a searchable database of all NRAs (with a breakdown of NRA themes, specialisms, regions and contact details and a brief personal summary), a document library (programme guidance, NRA service documentation, etc) and a 'what's new' section. It can be accessed by relevant NRU and GO staff and by all NRAs. The NRU has, in practice, made limited use of the e-community as vehicle for communications and networking.

Over three-quarters of the NRAs had not used the NRA e-community (Figure 16); those who had thought it under-developed. Lack of the habit of using the e-community meant that some NRAs had lost their password, others found it hard to access or that their password did not work. Earlier users of the e-community found the site undeveloped and had not been tempted to revisit it. Alerts to new content would most likely prompt them to use it more, as would more, better and up-to-date information, eg, reports and materials from NRA assignments and details of forthcoming assignments.

Figure 16   Ways of increasing use of the NRA e-community
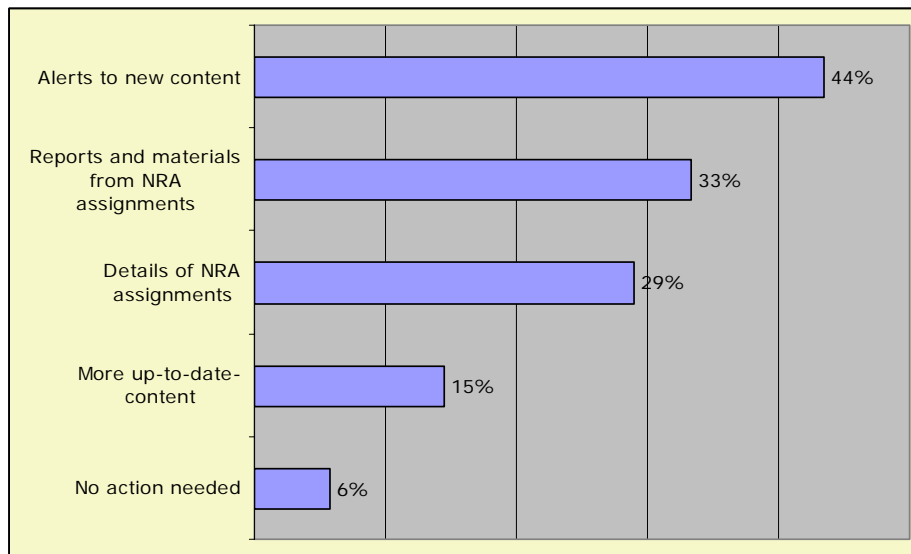
N = 69

Only one respondent had attempted to post an item on the NRA ***discussion forum on Renewal.net***, and three in 10 NRAs stated that they were not aware of the forum. However, more than half responding (23) said they would be encouraged to access it if they knew other NRAs were using it, and seven thought that the forum needed 'more active discussion threads'.

Four out of five NRAs surveyed had attended **NRA-related events** run by the NRU or Government Offices; nearly half of these had attended five or more events. Nearly nine out of ten NRAs had found these events use or very useful (20% saying 'very useful'). One commented on how the events helped counter the feeling of the *"loneliness of the long distance NRA"*.

We invited NRAs to suggest ways of improving the value of these events. Nearly a quarter requested 'clearer objectives' and/ or 'more advance notice'. There were also suggestions for more networking time and for more work in small groups during the events. Several NRAs made comments like, *"it's better to concentrate on specific themes"*, or that *"the general ones are not so useful"*. There was a request that specialist events be open to the non-specialist NRAs in the interests of the 'joining up' agenda. Overall, NRAs have valued the events as offering the opportunity to update themselves on current NRU thinking, be alerted to relevant publications, notably evaluations, and for networking with civil servants and fellow NRAs.

The survey invited NRAs to respond to suggestions for possible actions by the NRU or GOs which would support them on assignments (Figure 17). Those NRAs looking for greater support from the NRU tended to be those who had done fewer (if any) assignments. The most frequent request - from nearly half - was advance information on forthcoming NRA assignments, followed by feedback on assignments (45%) - where current practice is patchy. There was also interest in thematic and regional networking, and in 'problem-solving workshops involving partnerships' (ie, opportunities to work with practitioners to share practice and seek better responses to critical issues). There were a few requests for regular and consistent information (briefing on policy developments, guidance notes, new content on Renewal.net or the e-community, etc)

across the whole neighbourhood renewal agenda, both nationally and regionally, and a suggestion for an annual conference, facilitated by NRAs for NRAs, NRU, relevant staff from GOs and OGDs.

**Figure 17   NRA requests for support from NRU/GOs**
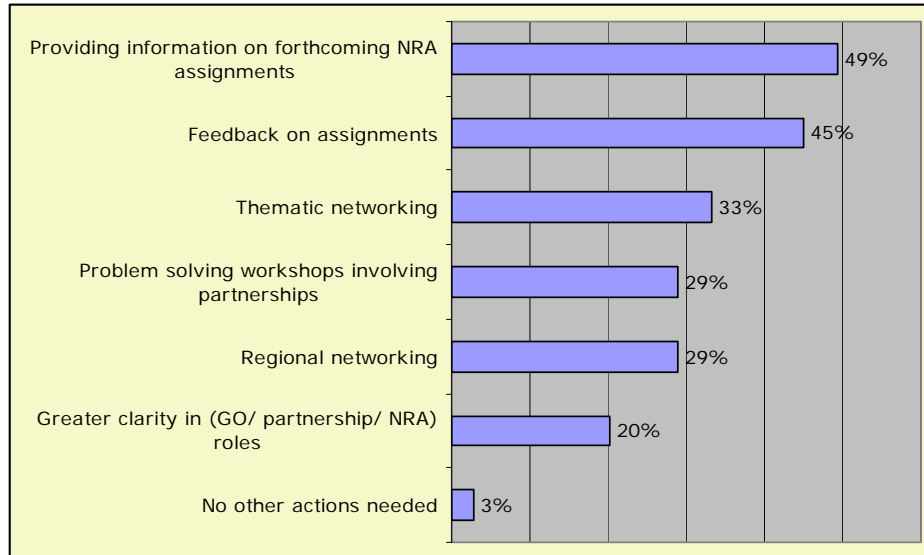
N =69

6.7   Improving the NRA service

When asked questions about whether or not the commissioning or management of NRA assignments could be improved, nearly four out of five (79%) identified scope to improve the former and nearly three out of five (58%), the latter. On commissioning (Figure 18), most prominent were requests for better briefs (32%), opportunities to put your name forward for specific assignments (32%), followed by better links to related NRA assignments, more use of a scoping stage (25%), and improved introductions to project stakeholders (25%). Other suggestions included better publicity, greater notice of assignments and the prompt sending of commissioning letters.

Figure 18   Improving commissioning of NRA assignments
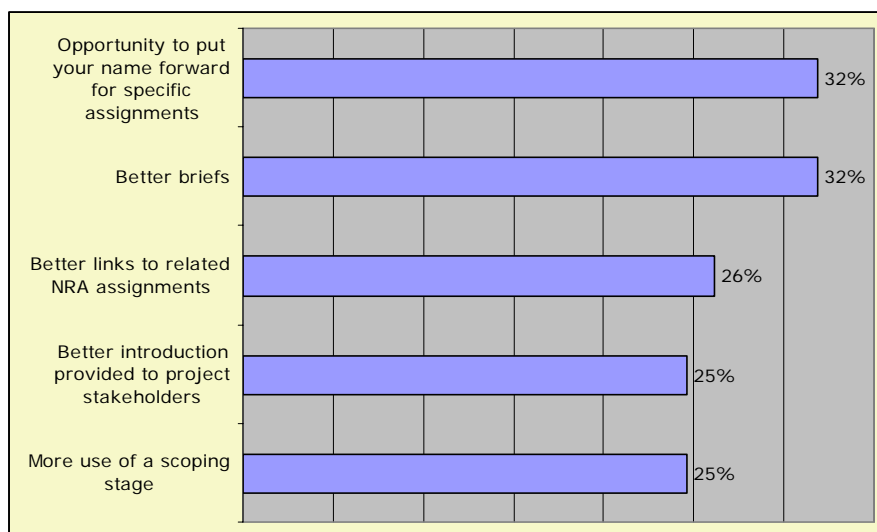
N = 69

When given a selection of prompts, every participant had at least one comment or suggestion to make. Nearly half requested information about forthcoming assignments, closely followed by a request for feedback on their work as a matter of course, including requests for follow-up details such as whether their recommendations are being implemented. One fifth thought that arrangements for closing assignments could be improved. There were also requests for more prompt settling of invoices.

Figure 19   Improving management of NRA assignments
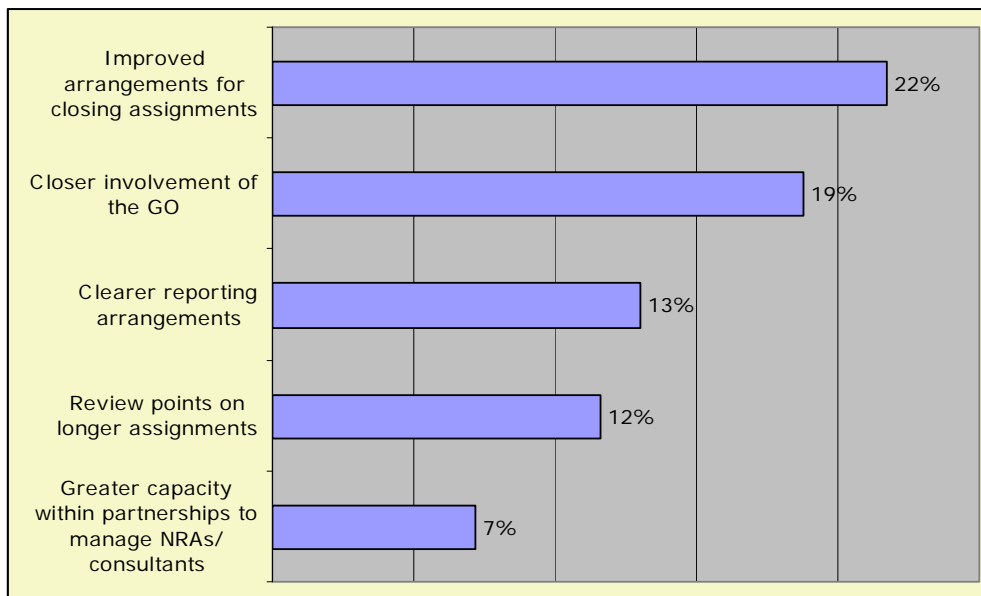
N = 69

Nearly one in five NRAs would welcome 'closer involvement of the GO', including where necessary staff outside the Neighbourhood Renewal team (eg, thematic leads); others would welcome closer involvement with team leaders in the NRU. Some participants had more general concerns regarding their interaction with GOs, requesting 'clearer reporting arrangements', 'greater clarity in GO/ partners/ NRA roles', GOs to help ensure that NRA recommendations are implemented, and the opportunity to review points with the GO during the course of longer assignments. There have been cases where certain NRAs have felt they were being asked to carry out tasks that they saw as the function of the GO, especially with partnerships in difficulty. Five NRAs advocated greater capacity *within* partnerships to manage assignments.

Several NRAs interviewed were critical of the way in which their assignments were specified, poor briefings about partnerships with *"problems"* or *"sensitivities"* ("*it has on occasion been like walking into the lion's den"*), and the lack of flexibility over the number of days to be worked. Some said that what they found on assignment rarely corresponded to what they had been told in advance, notably by the GO. This could result in additional work, carried out at the NRA's expense. Echoing feedback from the partnership survey, they argued for a scoping phase for assignments, in which NRAs would be able to test assumptions and understandings and work up a brief with the partnership as well as the GO, helping to promote greater ownership of the assignment within the partnership. A few added that the commissioning process is too slow and that there are inconsistencies in the process between regions.

NRAs were invited to make suggestions for steps to improve recruitment or induction of NRAs, but seem largely satisfied with the arrangements they experienced. A few NRAs commented that they would welcome an annual review of their work, which would provide an opportunity to update the NRU/ GO records of NRA skills, specialisms and experience so that there was a better awareness of the range and scope of NRAs, especially within the partnerships.

Several NRAs suspected that partnerships are unaware of the full range of NRA support available and, if aware, are uncertain how to access it. One NRA suggested that the NRU produce a leaflet for partnerships explaining what the NRA service offers and how to access it.

We asked the NRAs for their views on what more could be done to *capture and share knowledge from NRA assignments* (Figure 20). Over half thought that the e-community could be used to post reports and materials from assignments. They would welcome better coordination of related assignments, especially the opportunity for NRAs working on related assignments to review and share their experience. Over two-fifths thought that any improvement in feedback arrangements (see above) should include sharing knowledge and experience with GOs and partnerships, with almost as many requesting to have sight of GO monitoring and evaluation reports on their assignments.

Figure 20   Steps to capture and share knowledge
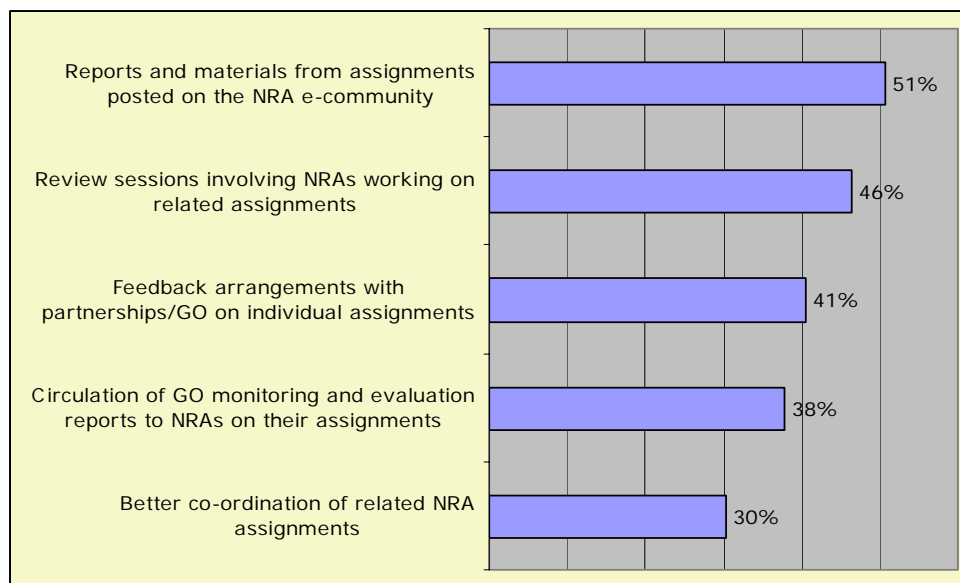
N = 69

7 Future Needs for NRA Services

7.1 Partnership views on future needs

We asked partnerships and NRAs for their views on the likely future demand for NRA services.

For the *partnerships*, which we interviewed for the interim evaluation, most potential demand for NRA services appeared to relate to themed areas, especially for NDC (who constituted the largest category of partnerships interviewed). Specific topics mentioned include:

- action plan development (for a neighbourhood management pathfinder)
- diversity issues
- partnership board development
- human resource issues
- appraisal, monitoring and evaluation
- introduction of Service Level Agreements

There was some interest in the continuing provision of NRA support for performance management reviews, on the grounds that there would always be a case for having an independent facilitator[15]. There were also comments about using NRAs more in support of strategies and strategic actions, less as crisis responses.

7.2 NRA views on future needs

Figure 21 sets out the main areas of need identified by NRAs.

Figure 21   Greatest needs for NRA support
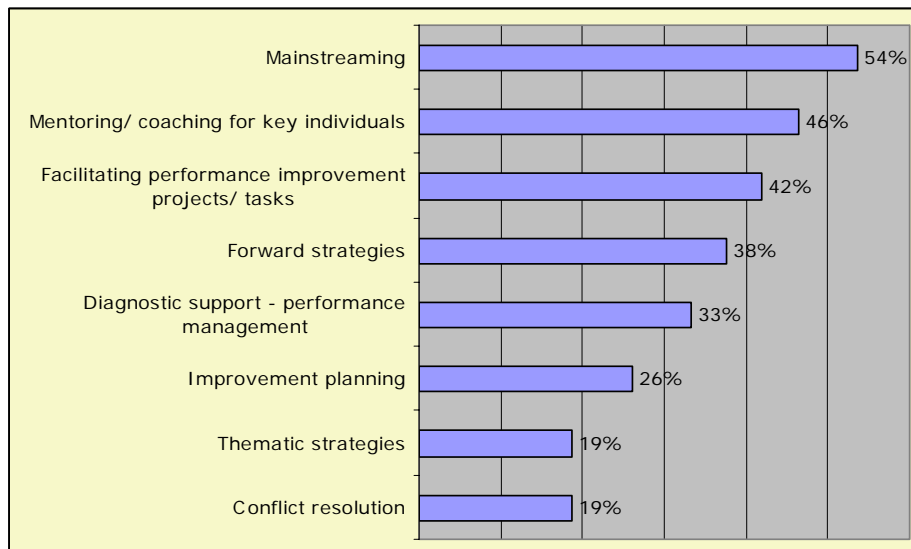
N = 69

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[15] This was strongly recommended by the NRU in programme guidance for 2004, with the suggestion that NDCs might like to use a different NRA to bring a fresh perspective. Use of thematic advisers was also suggested to help take forward issues arising through improvement planning.

The most prominent were:

- mainstreaming (mentioned by over half participants), and in particular ensuring that local authorities and public agencies sustain their neighbourhood renewal commitment once 'programme' money runs out
- mentoring and coaching for key individuals, especially in leadership and management, - including change management - skills
- facilitating performance improvement in projects and tasks as partnerships move on to focus more on delivery in the themed areas. NRAs expect a need to support partnerships through their early commissioning phases and encouragement to develop *"a commissioning culture"*. Several NRAs commented that they thought it would be necessary to keep reminding partnerships to *"link evidence to implementation"*, *"think strategically"*, *"keep the focus on working in deprived neighbourhoods"* as projects develop
- designing forward strategies, and in particular in relation to the sustainability of organisational structures. A few forecast problems with asset management issues, and expect to be called on for advice on legal status and on legal and other responsibilities arising out of the development of forward strategies. If their status changes, new bodies are expected to need support as they manage new relationships, especially with local authorities
- meeting continuing demand for diagnostic support, eg, on performance management

Other needs identified included conflict resolution, thematic strategies, strengthening LSP/CEN relationships, and making more use of NRAs by GOs for internal staff development. We also note that there has been growing awareness of needs for analytical support for partnerships, as highlighted by The Places Project and the LSP experience in 2004 of Floor Target Action Planning[16]. Finally, there were concerns echoing those of the partnerships, seeking a few more proactive assignments to balance the preponderance of 'problem fixing' ones.

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[16] We note that the preliminary report on the SELD (Supporting Evidence for Local Delivery) project has identified the scope for using appropriate NRAs to support development of analytical skills amongst neighbourhood renewal practitioners. It was proposed that this be explored where a pilot region has sufficient NRAs with relevant skills and experience.

8   NRAs: Conclusions and Recommendations

8.1   Benefits and results for partnerships

The various NRA-related components of the evaluation point to positive conclusions regarding the benefits and impact of the NRA service. We note in particular that:

- In more than four out of five cases, partnerships interviewed had introduced or made changes to strategies and/or projects which can be wholly or largely attributed to NRAs.
- In three out of five cases, the partnerships had introduced or made changes to ways of working, systems or processes. These related, eg, to improved decision making and risk assessment processes, structural reorganisation, greater delegation to frontline staff, and better use of evidence in planning and project development
- Half of the partnerships interviewed pointed directly to actual or planned improvements to services, and some to specific neighbourhood renewal outcomes, eg, in better housing and in the level and quality of community participation. For most other respondents, it was too early for them to comment on improvements and outcomes.
- Over two thirds reckoned that they had achieved more, better or faster results than had they not had the services of the NRA. In some cases, NRA input is reckoned to have been responsible for turning round dysfunctional partnerships, helping to ensure that outputs and outcomes have been delivered which otherwise would not have been achieved at all.

Improved processes, ways of working, and more robust strategies with community support are expected to track through to improvements in partnership performance. The limited evidence of impact on neighbourhood renewal outcomes reflects the stage of development of partnerships (as echoed in NRU evaluations of NDC, Neighbourhood Management pathfinders and LSPs). We note also that NRU records show that assignments have sought to promote equality and diversity, at least indirectly, and the NRU recruited 18% of NRAs from BME groups (just short of target).

Two thirds of the partnerships had gained skills and knowledge - especially the latter, eg, on policies and 'what works' - along with improved disciplines (eg, in project appraisal, options appraisal and prioritisation, and use and presentation of evidence) and guidance in introducing new systems, eg, performance management. We note, however, that not all assignments have offered the degree of capacity building expected in the original concept, though many partnerships have benefited in other very practical ways. However, feedback from partnerships (and from NRAs) suggests that there is scope to ensure greater learning transfer.

Other benefits to partnerships include:

- independent/ impartial facilitation and brokerage (in many cases helping to reduce or dispel tensions and conflicts)

- a source of challenge to partnership plans and practices - and often reassurance as well
- greater understanding of the bigger picture
- fresh ideas and evidence of what works elsewhere
- access to specialist expertise not found within the partnership
- an external stimulus to change, backed by Government

NRU records show that GOs/partnerships were satisfied or very satisfied for four out of five assignments; very few assignments have been rated as poor. NRAs have been appreciated by the partnerships for their personal attributes, knowledge, relevant skills, independence, and effort in 'going beyond the call'. The indications are that demand for NRAs will continue to increase, not least as word of mouth spreads as to what NRAs can offer - along with direct promotion by GOs and the NRU to partnerships with greatest needs. This will pose issues for the NRU in rationing demand, given the limited budget.

8.2   Benefits to NRU and GOs

The NRA service has helped to strengthen the 'policy delivery chain', by providing complementary skills and resource to the roles of the NRU and GOs in implementing the National Strategy - not least in helping to manage some of the critical risks in programme delivery. In particular, NRAs:

- have shown that they are able to do things that GOs or the NRU cannot, or do not have the time or expertise to do (particularly through impartial facilitation)
- provide in-depth, practical knowledge and experience on which GOs and the NRU can draw for a variety of purposes
- offer a means to stimulate partnership changes
- feedback from close to the ground

They have also been making a growing contribution to improving the understanding of policy and programme staff about what is happening and what works on the ground, and contributing in other ways to internal staff development.

There is scope to draw on NRAs in pursuing NRU objectives, in performance support, in capturing 'what works' and in pursuing more innovative assignments, including service improvement projects involving front line staff - a relatively underdeveloped area to date. NRAs constitute a large 'field force' and rich source of experience. They have been used increasingly to support the roll-out of new initiatives - most effectively where NRAs have been involved in planning and training events geared to anticipating the practical implications for partnerships and how best to provide support. Several NRAs have argued that there is more scope to use thematic NRAs in *"supporting the joining up agenda"*, working on assignments involving other departments at regional and national levels.

On **value for money**, the NRA service has been a relatively inexpensive programme to develop and administer. This has largely avoided duplication of functions at regional level, and there have been clear benefits in undertaking the core functions of NRA recruitment, induction and networking centrally. (We note the flexibility in the most recent round of recruitment where GOs played a larger role, seeking to fill regionally-specific gaps in NRA availability.) There have been procurement savings through ease of deploying NRAs to particular assignments, and also as a consequence of negotiating very

competitive daily rates. (We estimate that NRAs working as freelancers or employed by consultancies typically charge other clients 10-15% more.)

8.3   Recommendations and suggestions for improvement

Participants in our surveys identified many ways of improving the effectiveness of the NRA service. In some cases, these suggestions relate to ways of overcoming issues or problems encountered (eg, in commissioning and managing assignments; in seeking to avoid the use of NRAs as an easy option by NRU, GOs or partnerships; or in promoting the transfer of learning through NRA assignments) - and in others, to opportunities to maximise the potential contribution of the NRA service. There is also a specific need to make use of NRAs who have yet to undertake an assignment.

actions by NRU

- give greater publicity to possible uses of NRAs, with illustrations of what they have achieved, highlighting in particular assignments relating to performance improvement, in accord with NRU priorities
    - produce a short leaflet on NRAs, drawing attention to NRA roles (and what NRAs are not), successes and possible uses of the NRA service, and make this available to target partnerships, GO and NRU staff, OGDs and on-line
    - source case studies on Renewal.net which illustrate successful outcomes of NRA interventions, and commission further 'how to' content which relates to change management and facilitation tasks undertaken by NRAs (and relevant to other 'change agents' amongst partnership staff)
- ensure more consistent briefing across all areas/ partnerships relating to available support from NRAs
- promote more active use of the NRA e-community, eg, by:
    - posting details of forthcoming assignments and reports and other material from completed assignments
    - maintaining details of past and current assignments, possibly with contacts provided for informal references
    - posting materials and reports from assignments
    - providing links to useful tools and techniques, data sources and developments
    - alerting NRAs to critical new content on the site
- improve the management information system for NRA assignments, to make it easier to produce useful progress reports and interrogate the database (the system to include use of amended NRU monitoring forms and follow-up evaluations of individual assignments[17])
- promote greater use of NRAs in a cross-government context, working with NRU policy leads and OGDs and their agencies, giving more priority to thematic networking geared to critical professional updating, identifying future uses of NRAs and sharing and developing knowledge and skills

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[17] New monitoring and evaluation procedures have been introduced by the NRU following an (internal) interim report on the Skills and Knowledge Programme Evaluation.

actions by GOs and NRU
- ensure greater consistency across GOs in managing assignments (building, for example, on the preparatory work for the introduction of NRA Assignment Managers in setting out roles and responsibilities)
- create opportunities with NRAs to review, share and develop successful intervention methods (eg, in performance turnarounds - what has worked and what has not)
- encourage greater use of NRAs on mainstreaming and service improvement, including projects involving frontline staff and residents
- improve mechanisms to capture learning, including through:
    - ♦ creating opportunities to share experience and outcomes from similar assignments (eg, in support of PMF and improvement planning)
    - ♦ using NRAs to mine valuable sources of intelligence (eg, PMF reports)

actions by GOs
- help ensure a better match between NRA, partnership and assignment by making more detail available about the NRA, and offering a list of all relevant NRAs, not just those in the particular region
- provide further opportunities for partnerships, GOs and NRAs to get to know each other, and how each can help the other - in particular where this is planned as a by-product of learning events focusing on practical challenges (eg, on developing the CEN role as an LSP partner and promoter of community engagement in neighbourhood renewal)
- ensure prompt responses as required during the commissioning process and beyond

actions by GOs and partnerships
- build and share knowledge 'within the system' on effective use of NRAs (eg, through review workshop sessions involving NRU, GOs and NRAs; good practice incorporated into updated guidance on use of NRAs)
- try to identify potential NRA assignments at an earlier stage, to encourage more of a focus on strategic interventions and less on firefighting
- ensure that NRAs are working to sound briefs, using where appropriate a scoping stage to clarify the further work required. (While this has always been envisaged by the NRU as an option, it has not always been recognised by GOs.)
- build learning objectives into each brief, so that there is a focus from the outset on how the partnership will build skills and capacity
- plan an early meeting to ensure that all relevant parties are clear about, and have a say in, the expected outcomes of the assignment
- strengthen arrangements for closing assignments (including a preference for a closure meeting involving the partnership, NRA and GO, to clarify benefits, lessons from the assignment, further action needed, etc)
- provide feedback to NRAs (including circulation of assignment monitoring reports)

actions by partnerships

- ensure that stakeholders are fully signed up to the use of the NRA
- ensure effective co-ordination where several NRAs are involved with the same partnership
- keep in view the core purposes of NRAs - including ensuring that the partnership gains as much learning as possible through NRA assignments

actions by NRAs

- request feedback from assignments - and offer suggestions to GOs and NRU on how NRA interventions can be strengthened
- strengthen ways of maximising the learning that partnerships can gain from NRA assignments, including through use of Renewal.net and other sources of 'what works'
- take full advantage of NRU, GO and regional networking opportunities to learn from each other, get to know people from neighbourhood renewal partnerships and help develop the body of NRA practice
- make active use of the NRA e-community, eg, in
  - ♦ posting materials and reports from assignments
  - ♦ suggesting links to useful tools and techniques, data sources and developments
- reflect on personal practices and development needs: what new or enhanced skills, techniques and knowledge could help ensure better outcomes from future assignments?