



# **Wear Valley Community Research Oakenshaw Community Appraisal**

**February 2002**

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Prepared by



## **1. Introduction**

This community appraisal for Oakenshaw, part of the Willington East ward, is a reflection of the views of residents about the place in which they live. Its purpose is to identify what concerns them, what are thought to be the main opportunities and what they would like to see happen now and in the future. In short, it aims to identify what type of place they would like Oakenshaw to be in which to live and what their expectations are for work, play and learning.

The community appraisal has been prepared with the full involvement of the community and for the use of community itself. It aims to provide a short and a long-term vision about what is important to the community and a shared view of what might be achieved by working together and with others in partnership.

In addition the community appraisal will provide a basis upon which Wear Valley District Council and other investors in public services can better understand the needs of the community and help ensure that services meet those needs in the best way. For example, this might include support for young people, leisure and environmental services as well as regeneration funding for community development, training and local enterprise. As such the appraisal is the first stage in a new approach to community planning and links closely to the Government's strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal.

Local consultation has stressed that, unlike previous consultations, this is not a one-off exercise that starts and finishes with the production of this report. It is in fact the start of a concerted and on-going dialogue with local communities to which the District Council and its partners are fully committed.

### **1.1 Local Consultation Exercises in Oakenshaw**

To complete the appraisal a consultation process was undertaken that, wherever possible, has tried to build on existing community organisations and networks and make use of information from previous consultations and research. Very specific advice was taken from communities about the type of consultation that would be effective within the locality. The methods used have been flexible and responsive to local conditions, building on existing local community events and activities and reflecting the different groups and interests within the ward.

Consultation in Oakenshaw has included the following activities:

- Personal interviews with local residents;
- Two workshop events with secondary school students attending Wolsingham School that sought a perspective of Oakenshaw from its youth;
- Reference to the Community Appraisal completed for Willington;
- Two public meetings at which local people discussed the problems and opportunities of their community and their vision for its future;

- Interviews with key informants, local organisations and service providers;
  - Town Councillors
  - Business principals
  - Community leaders
  - Officers of strategic agencies and service providers including Wear Valley District Council, Durham County Council, 2D, Bishop Auckland College, Groundwork, health agencies, police.
- Steering group meetings for the package area.

Results and opinions from these sources have contributed to the picture of the village and its community described in this appraisal.

## 1.2 The Data

In addition to the consultations the appraisal uses information drawn from various data sets and analyses including:

- The government's *National On-line Manpower Information System (NOMIS)*
- The *Neighbourhood Statistics Service* of the *Office for National Statistics (ONS)*
- Various data sets from the *Wear Valley District Council*
- Various data sets from the *Durham County Council*

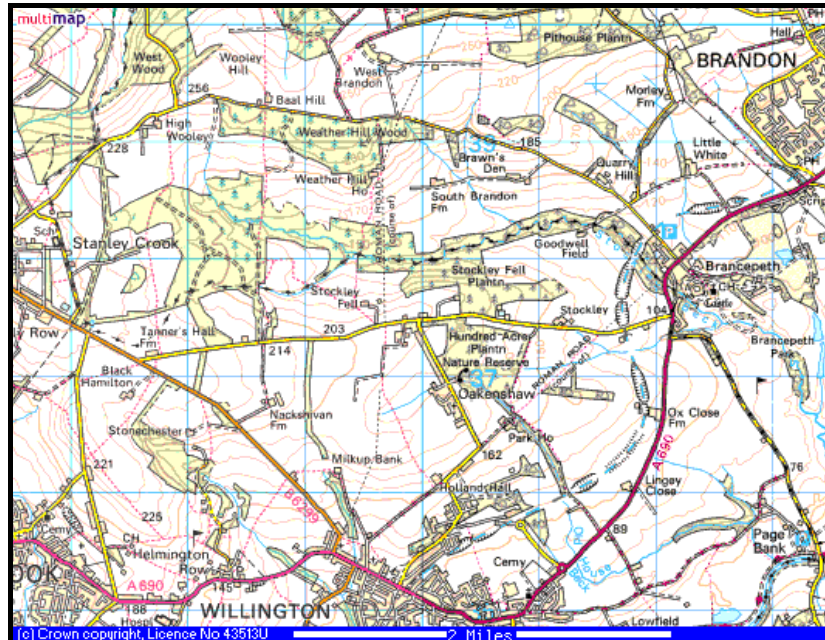
Some of this data can be subject to statistical errors when rounded to a ward level. Where this was obviously the case further consultation was undertaken to clarify the local situation.

## 1.3 Next Steps

As well as presenting a clear profile of the area as it is today based on research and input from local people, the appraisal also includes a **Community Vision** and **Key Themes for Action**. The next stage will be for the community to begin the process of defining programmes and projects for delivery through various funding programmes and, perhaps more importantly, the re-focusing of the way core services are delivered in the area.

## 2. The Ward

This section presents a description of Oakenshaw, its location, services, facilities and general situation.



Oakenshaw and its location

### 2.1 Main Settlements

Oakenshaw is a former pit village occupying rising ground some 5 miles west of Durham City and 1 mile north of Willington. For administrative purposes it falls within the Willington East ward. It is surrounded by low-grade agricultural land and a short outlying terrace lies approximately half a mile away towards Willington.

### 2.2 Road Networks

At the top of the village is the unclassified Brancepeth to Tow Law road. Running southwards from this, and along the eastern edge of the settlement, is an unclassified road leading to Willington.

### 2.3 Local Facilities and Key Public Services

The former working men's club is situated between the old village and the newer housing. It lies in the corner of the playing field immediately adjacent to a sub station that is particularly intrusive. It recently closed and was put up for sale and interest has been expressed in the idea of converting it into a pub with some accommodation for 'village use', possibly a shop and meeting rooms. Its future is therefore an important factor in the development of any improvement proposals for the village.

The only other public facility in the village is an underused allotment garden that runs along the western edge of the playing field. This looks unsightly around the perimeter and without a renewed commitment to use and maintenance is likely to encounter pressure for an alternative use.

## 2.4 Physical and Environmental Assessment

### *A Brief History*

With the winding down of mining in West Durham in the late 60's, Oakenshaw found itself out on a limb as economic development policy focussed on new towns, new industries and the major transport corridors. Derelict colliery buildings dominated the landscape around the village, the housing was poor by the standards of the time and employment and public services moved away from the village. Although coal extraction re-started briefly between 1991 and 1993, small scale industrial and social developments of the last 30 years have not tackled the area's major structural issues of poor roads, insufficient inward investment, lack of skills and entrepreneurship, and out migration. Oakenshaw has remained a relatively isolated community with an uneasy relationship with nearby Willington, the local base for public and commercial services and the local transport hub. The historical legacy continues to affect the views of Oakenshaw residents, many of whom want to preserve the distinctiveness of their village while reducing its isolation. But this opinion is increasingly balanced by the view that physical separation from Willington is broadly beneficial.



### *Built Environment*

The four remaining miners' terraces have recently been improved and are in private ownership, but the majority of the settlement now comprises modern semi-detached and detached houses with large garden plots built on the cleared sites over the last ten years. These new buildings owe little to the vernacular architecture of a Durham mining village, and being out of character with the older terraces, tend to create an impression of an unplanned jumble of styles. The physical character of the village has

therefore been changing over the last few decades; the mid 1990's land reclamation and woodland planting scheme on the site of the former the opencast mine have continued this process.

The main roads and pavements are relatively well maintained but the areas between the 'two halves' of the village and around the edge of the newer buildings where the roads and pavements have an unfinished



appearance. Some of the unadopted lanes that serve as parking areas and give access to the rear of the houses are of poor appearance and maintenance quality.

## 2.5 Open Spaces and Play Facilities

There is one large public open space at the top of the village. It lies behind the terraced housing and incorporates a slightly sloping 'football pitch' and a recently equipped children's playground. The area is informal and at its edges runs into the carriageway behind the housing; cars are informally parked at this edge.

### *Wildlife Area and Hundred Acre Wood*

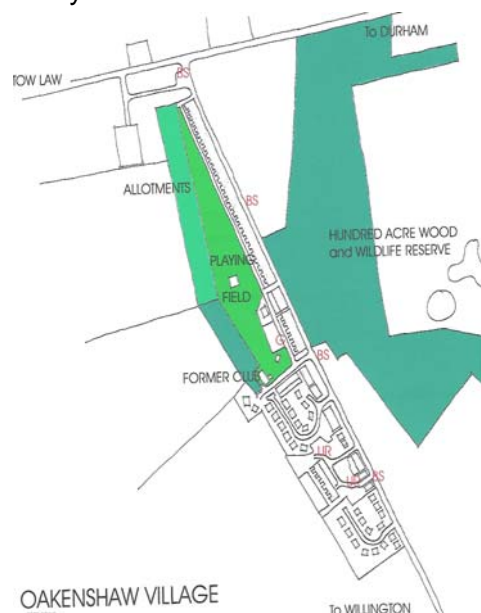
After the closure of the opencast mine the site's owners created a mixed commercial and amenity woodland with ponds, wetlands and footpaths. This is now a valuable community asset and an educational resource for Durham. Along with the exceptional views out over the Durham plain to North Yorkshire, the new 'Hundred Acre Wood' has radically improved the environmental quality of the village and its attraction to incomers. Interestingly, the new planting harks back to the village's probable origins; 'shaw' being an old English word for wood.



## 2.7 Local Organisations

There are two key external agencies involved in the village other than the local authority. They are Groundwork NE and the management body responsible for the wildlife reserve mentioned above. Groundwork has not undertaken any work to date but has expressed an interest in work around the playing field.

Both County and District Councillors represent the village, but there is no evidence of any consideration of the need for other forms of representation, for example by a Parish Council or by a more explicitly legitimate and resourced Community Association. A very loose group of residents do meet but are not formally constituted as a representative body.



## 3. Understanding Needs and Priorities

This section reports on the current circumstances within Oakenshaw. It is based upon national and local data, and the results of meetings and events with the people of the area.

The key findings in paragraph 3.1 are drawn from the data sets available at a ward level, as previously noted. Due to the possibility of statistical errors when rounding down to a ward level they have been used to draw only key messages. Oakenshaw is a small part of a larger ward and so information available at a ward level requires particular attention and has not been relied on to tell the complete story.

A full set of data tables is contained at Annex 1.

### **3.1 Socio-Economic Profile**

#### *Population*

The population of the whole ward declined up to 1991, although Oakenshaw's is likely to show a significant growth over the decade up to 2000 and currently stands at around 800. Whilst there are significant numbers of longstanding residents in the village the population growth is almost entirely due to the arrival of people with no previous ties to Oakenshaw or to Wear Valley. This is because Oakenshaw has become an attractive, convenient and affordable place to live in easy reach of Durham and Tyneside by car.

#### *Employment*

Ward level statistics for employment give a particularly deceptive impression of Oakenshaw. For example, there are approximately 800 jobs in the ward, but none of these are likely to be in the village. The whole ward has a high number of economically inactive adults and high unemployment, but neither this nor the ward's poor educational and health figures are likely to be true of the village.

#### *Education and Learning*

Pre-school children in the village attend facilities in Willington or in other local communities. Infants and juniors mainly attend school in Willington and there is some evidence that numbers are increasing. Secondary students attend schools in Wolsingham or Willington using the good school bus service. Wolsingham School does receive a high approval rating locally, although it may be a minority choice for this area. Older pupils interviewed at the community college (including one who travels from Oakenshaw) seemed highly motivated but many revealed that their intention was to learn, qualify and leave as they felt that as jobs can only be found outside the area, they must be willing to leave to get them.

Bishop Auckland College is the major provider of vocational training in the area. It clearly has a real commitment to outreach and to running programmes locally if possible.



### *Crime*

The meetings and the school focus groups suggested a fear of general harassment, drunkenness and anti social behaviour rather than the fear of theft and burglary. Local secondary school students confirmed that nearby Crook and Willington were renowned for their levels of anti social behaviour.

Current community policing policy does not meet the approval of local residents, many of who feel that it is inconsistent and unreliable and that local policing is evaluated against its performance in areas less relevant to Oakenshaw. The general feeling at the community meetings was that more community based policing is required.

The Local Authority offers a range of crime prevention and awareness initiatives but a lack of communication with communities such as to Oakenshaw prevents them being taken up. There is currently no forum in which these issues can be discussed and resolved.

### *Health*

The local Primary Care Group are sensitive to the need to work within communities such as Oakenshaw. A top down assessment of local needs may initially be required, particularly since a sizeable proportion of the population is aging and there is an influx of younger families. The nearest health centre, for example, is in Willington and waiting times for appointments are a major problem. Consequently, there is a real need for a viable and representative body to act as the community's intermediary in any future discussions.

### *Transport*

Transport was mentioned at various points throughout the appraisal process although indications are that most people believe the service is good however. However, suggestions were made regarding better timetabling on the top road into Durham that might encourage increased work and leisure usage.

## **3.2 Community Meetings (November & December 2001)**

### *General Issues*

The local consultation revealed concern about the lack of communication between the residents and organisations working in Oakenshaw. Contributors expressed a feeling of being isolated from the mainstream at many levels. There was a widespread feeling that Oakenshaw receives few of the available resources in Wear Valley and that the current consultations would merely reinforce this situation.

Although contributors felt that there was little unemployment in the village, a number of people were concerned about the loss of a sense of community. Although there had clearly been considerable inward movement recently, there seemed a reluctance to accept that the village might be becoming a dormitory settlement where traditional notions of community were no longer valid, and where service demands would be well met from beyond the locality.

### *Environment*

The under used and poorly maintained playing field was the major environmental issue. Although a proposal to turn it into a Millennium Green had failed, it was felt that a real opportunity exists to create a meaningful focus in the village if the pub is built with a significant landscaped area around it. A project like this could also help to link the two distinct parts of the village together.



There was concern at the state of the unadopted back lanes leading into the newer part of the village, but the issue was confused by uncertainty about ownership and legal responsibilities.

Generally the public spaces were considered to be under-maintained rather than eyesores. Some areas around the playing field edge were highlighted for specific landscaping or regular treatment. The substation is a particular eyesore. The area between the older and new village needs attention.



### *Economic Development*

Most workers commute beyond the immediate area for work and low levels of unemployment were assumed for the village. Contributors linked local unemployment to public transport shortcomings, and mentioned the lack of services leaving the village at a time that would allow people to work in Bishop Auckland or to connect to services to Durham or further afield. The services using the top road were felt to be the ones that could be most usefully re-scheduled.

There were comments about the difficulty of motivating young people to learn if there were no local jobs, and an acceptance that young people will continue to leave, further undermining the viability of the community both in Oakenshaw and in the other smaller settlements of the Wear Valley.

### *Community Facilities*

The playing field, which incorporates the children's play area, on the northwest side of the village is a much used facility in need of considerable enhancement. The



green area has a slope that restricts its use for organised football or other games. Other contributors suggested a need for professional advice about options for changes and improvements.

The future of the former Working Men's Club hangs in the balance. There is

support in the village for the proposal to convert the building into a village pub with community facilities included, but no assessment of community requirements and

associated resource implications has so far been undertaken. All other leisure and recreation facilities are located further afield.

Secondary school children had a particularly jaundiced view about the quality of leisure facilities available locally. Students at the Wolsingham School felt that most were either of the wrong type, too expensive or else difficult to get at. Crook and Willington are, in any case, not considered attractive options for a 'night out' and Durham was felt to be too far away. Other contributors had few complaints about commercial leisure activities but were more critical about local authority facilities in the area. Swimming pools and other public indoor and outdoor facilities are considered too expensive or too remote.

### *Transport*

Local bus services are considered adequate for 'off peak' use during the working day and for shopping and other visits to Willington and to Durham. There are also regular school services. Trips out of the area for work are more difficult however, as are some trips for appointments with doctors, dentists and at hospitals.



A bus stop - hidden away!

Buses run through the village from the south, turning on a large tarmac area at its top. There are several other bus stops on the road down to Willington but these have minimal provisions for passengers.

There is thought to be a reasonable level of car ownership, probably concentrated in the working population, and there are some problems with cars being driven fast through the village. The rumble strips on the main road are considered to be ineffective in preventing this.

### *Community Safety*

Residents are critical of local community policing policies, which are considered to be inconsistent and inadequate, and resented the fact that the village had been promised a regular 'beat' officer who had yet to arrive. Contributors at meetings appeared to agree that there was a fear of crime, despite the view that the safety of the village is one of the positive aspects about living there.



Neighbourhood Watch

#### 4. SWOT Analysis and Summary

This section brings together the data and ideas from above and uses a SWOT analysis to present the basis for a medium and short-term action plan for the village.

<p><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attractive surrounding landscape</li> <li>• Strong private housing market</li> <li>• Low unemployment and social exclusion</li> </ul>	<p><b>Weaknesses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Isolated position</li> <li>• Poorly performing service providers</li> <li>• Lack of community resources</li> <li>• Absence of local forum or community association</li> </ul>
<p><b>Opportunities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Possibility of mixed commercial and community-based development of the old club</li> <li>• Improvement of the communal spaces</li> </ul>	<p><b>Threats</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of local engagement with the regeneration process</li> <li>• Lack of local capacity to manage projects and funds</li> </ul>

##### *General*

Those residents that involved themselves in the appraisal process were passionate about the issues. However the overall impression from this profiling process is one of indifference. The vast majority of the residents were not interested in the public meetings and offered nothing via other means. That said, the village is in transition and requires assistance in dealing with its emerging status as a dormitory community. This transition tends to reduce demands on public services in the short term, taking the eye of the local authority 'off the ball'. However, it can be divisive and damaging, leading to problems in the medium and longer term.

Its attractive setting, with views over the Durham Plain, and its good road links to Durham and beyond has made Oakenshaw desirable to a new population of owner occupiers with more disposable income. It has little in common with most parts of Willington and the rest of the ward, and does not therefore present the same set of economic and social challenges. Its absence of high unemployment, social housing and industrial dereliction, combined with its more diverse population mix and environmental assets, have helped to produce a climate in which market forces have provided much of the investment needed for regeneration.

The 'Willington Community Appraisal 2000' focused on the levels of multiple deprivation created by poor housing stock, low employment opportunity, low activity levels and an ageing population. It proposed a range of actions concentrating on skills development, town centre improvements, housing estate revitalisation and tackling offending behaviour among young people. Little of this resonates with the issues identified by the residents in Oakenshaw despite the proximity of the two communities. With no apparent employment within the village following the demise of the Working Men's Club, new residents commute to remote work, generally in white collar occupations. Barriers to employment are therefore those of the region as whole.

It is clear nevertheless that Oakenshaw does share some of the wider challenges of Wear Valley District and other small rural communities nearby. In particular, the related problems of physical and social isolation are heightened by inadequate bus services, outdated local facilities, poor communications and lack of information.

Other local public services in areas such as health, leisure, policing and training are delivered at lower standards and frequencies than in the nearby urban areas.

#### *Environment*

Much of the environmental deficit from the former mining industry has been dealt with by the development of owner occupation and the village's land reclamation and woodland planting schemes. There are still important shortcomings in the village's environmental quality however, particularly in the state of public facilities and common areas. It seems clear that community involvement, high-quality professional support and investment will be needed to achieve positive impacts on this problem.

#### *Community Organisation*

The presence of community-owned facilities and the existence of robust community organisations tend to be mutually inter-dependent. Oakenshaw is short of both and has no credible representative body. Without this, it is hard to see where a local drive for change would come from. No formally constituted community association, residents association, community council or village club exists and the redundant premises of the last community-based club are for sale and likely to become a commercial development. Since the informal meeting of some residents is not seen as representative or relevant to most local people, there is a need for a forum to be developed for consideration of local issues. A wider, better-supported community forum might also lend weight to arguments made on its behalf by the elected members.

#### *Community Facilities*

To help counteract the sense of the loss of community, the village needs a physical centre and a social heart in the form of a community resource building. There is still an opportunity to promote a study of the future of the Working Men's Club in a wider context. This could encompass the landscaping and environmental enhancements that might be done around the site, the play area, the allotments and the 'unfinished' area between the older and newer parts of the village. The future of the former Club, which is now in a dilapidated state, is clearly a key issue in the village. An offer has been made for the building and is under discussion, but the area between club and the new village also needs to be tidied up and developed into a linking area. A decision about redevelopment has to be made soon.

A mixed-use community resource centre would have a number of overlapping and positive impacts including improving local leisure opportunities, providing informal pathways into training, creating local social and physical capital, disseminating local information and supporting the growth of community-based organisations and activities. It would also provide a focus for the work of external agencies, statutory service providers and local authorities and a place for them to 'do business' with local people. They, in turn, should accept the responsibility to make up-front development assistance available to the local community to help it achieve these objectives.

#### *Community Capacity*

The study attempted to gauge the community's potential for self help. A small and committed group presently meet to discuss the village's future but it only attracts a very small percentage of the population. This is consistent with a community in transition and increasingly made up of recent arrivals. The Working Men's Club had an important role in the life of the village during the mining era and its future is likely

to be a key factor in the development of the village. But the use and viability of any community facility in the village depends upon knowledge and communication. The contributors at the meetings claimed that local communications were poor and that circulation of leaflets and free local newspapers was unreliable.

## 5. A Community Vision

The lack of broad community involvement in this appraisal process means that it is difficult to offer a vision for Oakenshaw that has 'ownership' or legitimacy. If the village wishes to retain a sense of community, a moot point, then it has to develop the mechanisms required to create a vision of its future, to undertake activity and to influence its service providers. The following points indicate areas for future thought within the village and between it and its service providers.

- Reduce both the perception of, and actual, isolation from service provision within practicable limits.
- Ensure that agencies are listening to local people and are talking to each other in preparing solutions.
- There appears to be no desire to control or run activity but there is a real desire to be able to influence the service provision and influence its quality.
- The local authority and its partners have a clear responsibility to ensure that the quality of their services is not conditioned by viewing Oakenshaw only as a dormitory for affluent commuters. They should provide evidence that this not the case.
- There is a desire for a cleaner, increasingly attractive village, exhibiting high-quality design and high levels of maintenance. The play area and the site of the Working Men's Club significant opportunities in this respect.

## 6. Indicative Thematic Actions

This profile points to action on two levels. There are a number of specific early wins that could improve the quality of life in the village and could reinforce the sense that the Local Authority and its partners are committed to change. There is also a need however, for a longer-term strategic framework to link investment and activity of external partners to local needs and projects.

The 'quick hits' could include actions identified by the residents of Oakenshaw and noted below:

- Minor environmental works throughout the village.
- A study of the future use of the playing field.
- A full consultation and feasibility study into the options for the former Working Men's Club.
- Investigation into the land ownership issues of all derelict and poorly maintained land including the back lanes and adjacent garaging areas; full discussion of options within the village.
- Investigation of additional traffic calming on the main road.
- Review of bus stops and shelters within the village.
- The development of an appropriately resourced and legitimate Community Association.

In parallel with this relatively short list of local actions, service providers need to explore new ways of delivering their services and improving access to residents in the ward. Agencies have to collaborate in building the capacity of residents to affect their circumstances and to contribute to partnership strategies that allow all sides to discuss local needs and to raise expectations progressively.

There are two further areas for action. First is the area of political representation; the link between the residents and those accountable for service delivery has to be strengthened. Programmes such as 'Best Value' are still unknown in the village but are bound to have impacts over time on local development and the provision of services. Secondly, it is fundamental to generate a much more positive vision of the village and its community. Although local people accept that many services will not be provided in the village, each provider needs to prepare delivery solutions based on evidence and consult on them fully with residents.

## **7. Marketing and Publicity**

This appraisal has provided an opportunity to start developing a dialogue between the community of Oakenshaw and the organisations providing its services. This momentum for improved communication needs to be continued by expanding the range of information and response mechanisms open to local people. The methods employed must be appropriate and, if possible evaluated to ensure that they promote the increased involvement of residents in the development of the village.

## **8. Forward Strategy**

The preparation of this appraisal has been an intensive process. The methodology has ensured that the approach is evidence-based, whilst at the same time building upon local needs and aspirations. The community events have ensured that local people have been given the opportunity to contribute their opinions and shape recommendations, particularly in terms of the Community Vision and Indicative Thematic Actions. But the appraisal is only the start of the process. Maintaining momentum will be crucial particularly in bridging the gap between words and positive actions. The maturing of local community partnerships is a key step in the process of change. These analyses and proposals will need to be reviewed and modified over time, and further discussions will need to take place locally to determine priorities and programmes for implementation.

Opportunities to secure external funding to help take forward many of the programmes identified within the appraisal are indicated below. Plans need to be drawn up to develop project proposals for funding specifically under the transitional Objective 2, Priority 4 programme.

### **Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF)**

The government has allocated funding to Wear Valley under the Neighbourhood Renewal programme, which aims to support partners to "bend" and adjust main service programmes to meet local need and priorities. The government has allocated a total of £3,839,000 to Wear Valley District over three years. In addition, funding is available through the Community Chest and Community Empowerment Fund to support small scale and capacity building programmes.

### **EU Objective 2, Priority 4 Programme**

£435 000 is available over the next three years to support community economic development activities in the We-Ar One Package area. Priorities include:



- Establishing Capacity in Target Communities
- Promoting Community Based Enterprise
- Investing in Sustainable Communities
- Improving Employability
- Improving Employability: Links to Community Capacity, Businesses and Sustainability.

All measures offer a significant opportunity for Oakenshaw to take forward projects that meet the vision set down within this appraisal document.

The Package Delivery Plan (PDP) includes methods for project selection, funding and approval processes. The plan indicates:

- The partnership structures and working arrangements
- How projects will be selected and locally appraised
- The priority objectives of the package
- Financial and performance objectives
- Key milestones

Representatives from Oakenshaw should play an active part in implementing the PDP for the We-Ar One area.

### **Sports Action Zone**

The whole of Wear Valley District is incorporated within a SAZ, the delivery of which will be informed by the findings of ward level community appraisals. The programme has a five year support budget from Sport England of £299,195 and will be focussing larger sums of sport-related investment from other sources.

The programme has five key themes;-

- Sport and Health
- Sport and Education
- Sport and Regeneration
- Sport and Social Inclusion
- Sport and Community Safety

and will make linkages with the programmes and thematic activity across the Priority 4 wards.

### **A New Contract with Service Providers**

Although access to new sources of external funding will be important, many of the needs and aspirations of local people can be met through better co-ordination and delivery of effective local services, which meet the needs of local people. This will require the development of a new and open relationship between core service providers and the local community. The growing role and capacity of the Local Strategic Partnership will provide a forum for local people to contribute to the re-focusing of local services and increasingly to exercise control over their design and delivery.