DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

A Briefing on Resources and Good Practice

This briefing is intended to help those starting or developing a group in their local community to take effective action on climate change. It could be used by local residents, community representatives or other local stakeholders.

The briefing provides links to resources and good practice on a series of key topics that groups may find helpful.

The topics are:

- Understanding place and community
- Developing an initial strategy
- Mapping stakeholders, networking and developing partnerships
- Developing a plan of action and early projects
- Communicating about climate change
- Seeking involvement and commitments to act
- Developing and maintaining an effective group
- Access to funding
- Evaluation

Understanding place and community

Guidance on 'What Works?' often stresses the importance of understanding the situation and potential of your place and community. It suggests projects are likely to be more successful when meeting or addressing local needs, concerns and aspirations. See, for example, ['Our Place Our Planet'](#) (section 4, points 1 and 3), and ['Local support for community action on climate change'](#) (point 7 in 'principles of action').

More specifically, based on their community engagement experience, the Centre for the Sustainable Energy (CSE) advocates an approach to local discussions which starts by exploring what people value about their locality and their lives within it, and then asks, given that, 'How can we best make our contributions to a low carbon future round here?'

According to CSE, "given the opportunity and the support, people start exploring options and seeking to understand impacts, costs and benefits. They discuss their own perspectives of local landscapes and built heritage. They talk about the trade-offs such as between, put very crudely, exploiting a renewable energy resource and preserving a view. And they start talking about how they can make sure more of the benefits of change accrue locally and inclusively." See ['Towards meaningful public consent ..'](#).

Developing an initial strategy

An initial strategy for 'making contributions to a low carbon future round here', could vary significantly on a spectrum from:

- Focusing on practicable and participatory activities that primarily aim to develop community involvement and shared endeavour (for example community cooking, food growing, sharing, repairing or bike schemes), and have carbon reductions as an 'added benefit'; to
- Focusing on carbon reduction and prioritising actions which make the most impactful reductions, and have increasing community cohesion and resilience as the 'added benefit'.

A strategy consistent with the first end of the spectrum is achieving positive outcomes in Participatory City Foundation's 'Every One Every Day' programme in Barking and Dagenham. This approach is helping build community cohesion and resilience. Guidance consistent with a sharper focus on carbon reductions is available in a Best Practice Review from CSE. An initial strategy might, for example, mix elements from the two ends of the spectrum.

Mapping stakeholders, networking and developing partnerships

Good practice guidance often highlights the value of:

- identifying who else is active in a community, or has responsibility for relevant issues ('mapping stakeholders');
- making contact, sharing information and opening up conversations about ideas and initiatives; and
- discussing the potential for working together and forming partnerships.

The Transition Network highlights that networking, collaboration and partnership building can help:

- avoid duplication;
- develop new opportunities, ideas and solutions;
- scale-up activities to have more impact; and
- develop 'joined-up' strategic approaches and initiatives.

Our Place Our Planet explains how "putting time into partnerships pays off" (p24). It points to the value of linking the concerns and aspirations of local people with the strategies and resources of local authorities, local businesses and other stakeholders, but also highlights that 'professionals' should recognise the need to step back and enable local residents to take control. It adds that good communication and a common understanding from everybody about their remit and responsibility are crucial.

Developing a plan of action and early projects

The Best Practice Review from CSE suggests developing an action plan, which can set out aims and initial strategy, the activities and projects that will contribute to delivery of the aims and strategy, and the allocation of responsibilities and timescales. CSE point out that an action plan can help ensure that a group all understand and sign up to the same agenda, avoiding potential for misunderstanding and disagreement later.

CSE also highlight the advantages of undertaking a project that provides a 'physical focal point' in the community, for example, insulating a well-known community building or installing renewables on

community buildings, such as the church or local school. They point out that this can provide a visual stimulant, topic for discussion and a clear example of what the community group is capable of achieving.

The Transition Network highlights that practical projects can provide different ways for people to get involved, as well as acting as important demonstrations that change is possible and happening. Ultimately, some projects could lead to the creation of new enterprises in a community, with associated employment and training opportunities. See the Transition Network's guide to Small Practical Project Ideas for new groups, and the more ambitious, 'Developing Practical Projects'.

One example of a practical project – designed to enable groups of local residents to work together on ways of achieving lower energy lifestyles – is Transition Streets.

Our Place Our Planet provides links to tools and resources on specific types of project:

- a Community Energy Efficiency Toolkit has been developed to help communities take effective action – this contains resources on home energy advice visits, training and education and demonstration homes;
- a guide to getting involved in community renewable energy;
- a guide to strengthening the local food economy, and a Guide to measure and evaluate the health and wellbeing outcomes from community food growing projects; and
- an information directory (see download under "BRE") for community groups interested in carrying out resilience work in their area – it provides a number of climate adaptation case studies and links to a number of tools to support practical implementation.

The Centre for Sustainable Energy has also published a series of guides, exercise tools and videos to help with specific types of project, including a participative approach to generating community buy-in to renewable energy projects.

Community Energy England's 'energy hub' also provides a wealth of guidance and case studies to help in choosing and developing energy projects.

Communicating about climate change

A recent review of best practice in communicating climate change makes the following recommendations:

- Resonate with the audience: connect with what matters to the audience and show how climate change will affect them directly.
- Tailor messaging: design information to reach a specific audience, based on the values or characteristics of that audience.
- Be engaging and build balanced optimism - two-way dialogue is crucial - learn together, avoid preachy, 'didactic' communication, and don't persuade forcefully.
- Increase awareness and understanding – provide scientific clarity and accuracy.
- Catalyse change – nurture agency and empowerment.

This guidance is consistent with, and builds on, the advice about the importance of understanding place and community. Following the guidance does nonetheless present challenges, particularly in thinking about how to resonate with, and tailor messages for, specific audiences.

Communication specialists, Climate Outreach, have published research that helps.   This distinguishes between peoples' values that are 'self-enhancing' (such as wealth building and social recognition) and 'self-transcendent' (such as empathy and cooperation). The research shows that values influence how we interpret climate change information to either accept or reject the need for greater engagement and action. The research points out that very few individuals hold only one set of values entirely at the expense of the other, and that under certain conditions individuals leading 'self-enhancing' lifestyles have been shown to identify with and be receptive to messages framed using 'self-transcendent' values. *Critical, therefore, is the extent to which particular values are activated and primed by communications.* Climate outreach researchers suggest that focusing on concerns, for example, about public health, community well-being, intergenerational duty or security can activate self-transcending values in those often motivated significantly by personal gain.

This view has been underpinned by more recent research looking at how to communicate climate change with those who hold centre-right perspectives. This research makes a series of recommendations, including using messaging around human relationships, responsibility and duty to future generations (eg 'we are all in this together', 'everyone is doing their bit', and 'it's important to do the right thing').

It is also important to highlight the best practice recommendation about nurturing agency and empowerment. This is particularly important when messaging could lead to fear about what the future might hold. As Zero Carbon Britain argues (section 7.2), fear can be motivating, but only when there are clear ways of responding effectively. Others argue that the best way of nurturing agency and empowerment is to enable people to develop a vision of a desirable low carbon future for their community (see Sell the Sizzle).

Seeking involvement and commitments to act

As part of thinking through an initial strategy, plan of action and approach to communication, it is important to address ways of building wider involvement and commitments to act.

In its guidance, the Transition Network highlights that this involves "learning to develop relationships beyond just our friends and natural allies", and provides a range of resources to enable wider community involvement.

One popular approach is to seek commitments or pledges to act. Based on a detailed analysis of 'commitment-making strategies', researchers find that when people are asked to make pledges, such as to save energy or re-cycle, they are more likely to follow through with their planned actions.

To be most effective, the researchers find that commitments or pledges need to be:

- actively made (eg through a written statement of signature)
- public (or with the potential to be published)
- require some effort (ie to take active steps to be carried out)
- voluntary or internally motivated
- salient to the issue
- positively framed and promoted
- embraced by significant social groups

The researchers highlight the importance of the fourth bullet point: "when people view their behaviours as voluntary and not coerced, they conclude that they come to the decision by themselves, reflecting their true motivation." This valuable insight links with the guidance above

about communication and messaging: in particular, communications that are able to activate and prime 'self-transcendent' values are more likely to lead to voluntary and internally motivated behaviours and commitments to address climate change.

Developing and maintaining an effective group

The Transition Network highlights that great projects are more likely to happen where groups have learnt how to work well together. It suggests that setting up good clear group structures at the start will help ensure that a group is effective and sustainable. And as a group develops, it should tend to the need to keep it healthy and productive, particularly when new people get involved and new projects are developed.

To help create and sustain healthy and effective groups, the Transition Network promotes a range of resources based around the following themes:

- trusting, caring and compassionate relationships;
- taking decisions effectively;
- running nourishing and successful meetings and events;
- avoiding burnout; and
- navigating conflict.

In their best practice review of community action, CSE also point to conclusions on how to sustain a healthy and active group. These include:

- Ensuring succession: community-led initiatives are often heavily reliant on volunteer time, requiring high levels of enthusiasm and energy amongst volunteers. There is a risk that over time this will diminish. To ensure long term sustainability, it is important to ensure that additional volunteers are recruited over time and there is someone to 'handover the reigns' to, particularly for key roles.
- Building on people's strengths: identifying the different skills and interests of group members and building on these, enabling them to do what they are good at and enjoy can also help to maintain interest, motivation and passion, whilst also maximising resources of the group.
- Building on and publicising successes: it is important to build on any successes and milestones achieved, no matter how modest, to demonstrate to volunteers and the wider public the impact of the group's efforts, which will also help to maintain and enhance motivation and interest.

Access to Funding

Funding is, unsurprisingly, a key enabler of local action. Funding needs can vary according to the stage of development of a group and the types of projects planned. So, for example:

- a few hundred pounds could help a group form and meet ongoing costs (eg volunteer expenses, venue hire, promotional material);
- a few thousand pounds could fund some local projects; and
- thousands of pounds can fund bigger projects, which might also require help from paid professionals.

Basic ideas for fundraising include local collections, fundraising events and member appeals.

A good overview of wider funding approaches is available on the 'My Community' website. This distinguishes between 'non-repayable' sources (such as grants, donations and crowdfunding) and 'repayable' sources (including specialist loans and community shares).

Potential local sources of grants include:

- Transition Stroud – which has a 'Facilitation Fund' to provide modest pump priming for initiatives which local people with enthusiasm and commitment want to turn into reality.
- Town and Parish Councils – often have grant programmes to support community activities – see for example Stroud Town Council grant programmes.
- Stroud District Council – provides a range of information about community funding and grants.

For national grant programmes, the Centre for Sustainable Energy provides a list of links to trust and foundation grant programmes and guidance on making applications to the National Lottery's Awards for All programme. Community Energy England also provides a page for current grant opportunities for low carbon projects.).

Ultimately, a successful group may be able to use some of these funding sources to develop projects that generate income, thereby enabling a wider range of activities to be supported.

Evaluation

Although evaluation may seem like an unnecessary additional task for a group that is short of time and resources, it could help improve learning, effectiveness and impact of the group and its activities.

Different types of evaluation are possible:

- Project evaluation – this could, for example, help identify what worked well and less well, help create a basis for future planning, demonstrate good use of resources, and provide evidence to funders – see for example this practical guide from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Carbon savings – a 'carbon footprinting' tool could be used to establish a baseline and monitor progress and impact of a group's initiatives – see for example the footprinting guide and calculator available from the Carbon Trust.
- Group 'health-check' – the Transition Network has developed a group 'health check' tool to enable group reflection, learning and improvement.

These resources should help a group decide what type of evaluation it wishes to pursue, taking into account time and resources.