

Local support for community action on climate change: lessons from the Communities Cutting Carbon project

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Abstract

Action by local communities on climate change has been recognised by researchers and policymakers as having great potential to support a transition towards a low-carbon UK economy. Support for such action from community development workers can assist projects and groups to develop, act, and achieve positive results.

This paper explores the work of the Communities Cutting Carbon project to provide support to community groups acting on climate change in the Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland sub-region. The project is a Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP), which involves collaboration between the RCC (Leicestershire & Rutland) and De Montfort University, and is actively supported by all the local authorities in the sub-region.

The current picture in the UK with regard to community action on climate change is introduced, along with a summary of the support available and strategies used by the Communities Cutting Carbon project. Initial outcomes from the project's first year are reported, alongside some early evaluation of its impact to date.

The findings indicate the high demand for the support offered and point towards effective strategies that can be used to support the burgeoning "Communities and Climate" sector to grow and have a positive impact in future years.

Introduction

The need to act on climate change in the UK by reducing carbon emissions and adapting to future changes in the climate is now well-established. The UK Government has called for action by all sectors of UK society to support a transition to a low-carbon UK, including individuals, businesses and local communities (DECC 2009).

In recent years there has been a significant increase in the number of grassroots community groups that are acting locally on climate change (O'Hara 2009). These range from dedicated green groups, such as Transition Town initiatives (Transition Network 2011) and members of the Low Carbon Communities Network (LCCN 2011), to other community groups and organisations for whom environmental issues are not a core concern (e.g. parish councils, residents' associations).

This paper introduces the work undertaken by the Communities Cutting Carbon Knowledge

Transfer Partnership (KTP) project to support this action in an English sub-region (Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland), and reports and reflects upon the strategies used and results to date.

Background

Community climate action

Community climate action refers to activities which are carried out to act on climate change (reducing emissions and/or adaptation) in a local area, that are carried out by members of a geographical community and/or a community of interest.

Whilst there are many community-focussed programmes managed by local authorities, utility companies or other organisations (CSE 2009), this paper focuses on activities and groups which are genuinely community-led (ibid). O'Hara (2009) has estimated that there are currently several thousand community-led climate change initiatives in the UK.

Table 1: Types of Community Climate Group (after Church 2010)

| Type | Description | Examples | Number in UK |
|------------------------------------|---|--|--------------|
| Local Green Group (LGG) | Dedicated group focused on green/climate/environmental issues | Ashton Hayes Goes Carbon Neutral, Transition Town Totnes, Transition Town groups | Hundreds |
| Local Community Organisation (LCO) | Community associations which carry out some climate change related projects | Churches, parish councils, residents associations, sports clubs | Thousands |

Based upon a framework put forward by the Low Carbon Communities Network (Church 2010), groups carrying out community-led action can be characterised as either “Local Green Groups” (LGGs) or Local Community Organisations (LCOs) (Table 1). The activities carried out by such initiatives can vary greatly, including awareness raising events, practical projects to cut local emissions, lobbying, campaigns, and discussion groups (Hopkins 2008; LCCN 2010).

Benefits of community action

A review of best practice amongst community climate change initiatives identified the key benefits as including increased public engagement with climate change, improved community cohesion and a focus on positive local solutions (CSE 2009).

Such initiatives also provide opportunities for supporting a shift towards new social norms and practices that support sustainable living (Heiskanen et al. 2009; Middlemiss and Parrish 2010). One way that this can be achieved is by the opportunities that such initiatives provide for experiments in sustainable living which could potentially be scaled up to wider society (Seyfang and Smith 2007; Haxeltine and Seyfang 2009;). Shifts in values and attitudes can be supported by the opportunities for discussion and action provided by such initiatives (Involve and DEA 2010; Rose 2010).

A further benefit relates to effective communication of messages regarding climate change, as peer to peer communication within communities has been recognised by sustainability practitioners as being more trusted than messages from politicians, the media or local authorities (Marshall 2007; Church 2010).

Supporting community action

Prior research on community climate change groups has noted the need for a supportive environment to enable the groups to fulfil their potential to bring about positive changes

(O’Hara 2009, CSE 2009). The support available comes from a wide range of organisations, including national networks for green groups, local authorities, and local voluntary sector support organisations.

On a national level, LGGs can become members of the Transition Network or Low Carbon Communities Network, and receive issue-specific support through programmes such as “Making Local Food Work” (for local food) or “Green Communities” (for energy). These organisations typically offer annual networking events, newsletters, training, some project management support, and a variety of published materials.

On a local and regional level, the strength of the support available from local authorities or other funded projects varies widely (LCCN 2010). A small number of projects provide dedicated support to LGGs in local authority areas in a similar way to Communities Cutting Carbon. These projects include: “Green Assist” in Dorset (Sustainable Dorset 2011) which supports LGGs and LCOs; “Community Action Groups” in Oxfordshire (CAG Oxfordshire 2011) which supports LGGs and focuses on waste issues; Everybody’s Talking in Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire (MEA 2011), which offers advice, a newsletter and networking events for LGGs.

For LCOs, in addition to accessing support from the organisations above, dedicated support to develop and implement action plans has been available in recent years through the Every Action Counts programme and its recent successor Just Act (Just Act 2011).

From the perspective of the groups themselves, two recent surveys on support needs have taken place. A survey of groups in Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire supported by Everybody’s Talking found that the services offered were rated highly, and that the local support service was “valuable, appreciated and useful” (CCAN 2009). The most popular services offered were a database of local experts, local case studies, an email bulletin and networking support (ibid). A survey by the Low Carbon Communities

Network found that networking events, training, case studies and mentoring were the most popular support services (LCCN 2010). For the UK as a whole, O'Hara (2009) found that where it exists, local support for climate action is greatly valued by the groups that receive it.

A key challenge to the creation of local support projects is securing funding, resulting in the scattered provision across the UK (LCCN 2010). One aspect of this picture is that funders are reluctant to resource local networking activities, even though these are highly valued by community groups (ibid).

Project context

Local Context

The Communities Cutting Carbon project follows on from and builds upon a number of strands of activity in the Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland sub-region over recent years. These strands include:

- Financial and project planning support provided to three climate change initiatives in Leicestershire under the "Climate Friendly Communities" programme from 2008 to 2009 (LCC 2011)
- Work by the RCC to support several new environmental groups to become established, and to hold public events, after carrying out community-led plans
- New LGGs becoming established in the area over recent years (e.g. Transition Harborough, Transition Leicester)

With the award of £90,000 of Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership (RIEP) funding to the local authorities in the sub-region, a decision was taken to use these funds to provide support to community action on climate change across the whole area.

Partnering with the Institute of Energy and Sustainable Development (IESD) at De Montfort University through a KTP provided extra funding and expertise, leading to the creation of a two-year project commencing in March 2010.

Support offered

Communities Cutting Carbon aims to support community-led action on climate change through three strands of activity:

1. Dedicated support for 10 core groups

This involves working with one community in each of the local authority areas covered by the project and one community of interest. The support available includes establishing new groups and assisting groups to plan and carrying out activities.

2. Local grant fund

This existed from June 2010 until March 2011, with grants of £200 to £5000 available for community projects that act on climate change.

3. Local support hub for sub-region

This involves offering assistance to all groups in the sub-region through:

- a monthly e-newsletter
- bi-annual networking events
- occasional training events
- online information and resources
- a point of contact for enquiries

Principles of action

As a KTP project, Communities Cutting Carbon has built upon academic knowledge and the experience of the industrial partner, the RCC, to design its plan for delivery. The strategy employed can be summarised through the eight principles described below, which are based upon the expertise available from the KTP project partners, and a review of the existing support packages and the support needs discussed above.

1. Community Development

This recognises the need to develop and support thriving volunteer groups so that activities can be carried out within communities.

For initiating new groups, the standard approach employed by the RCC was used, which involves:

- Identifying and contacting local stakeholders with an interest in the project
- Organising a well-advertised public launch meeting
- Arranging a follow-up meeting to agree group aims and volunteer roles, and to sign a simple constitution
- Supporting the group to plan initial activities

Ongoing support is valuable, as issues of group process (e.g. conflict within members, poor

communication) have been identified as being vital for the success of Local Green Groups by prior research (O'Hara 2009) and support workers that have assisted LGGs that have run into difficulties (Herbert 2011). Ongoing support can involve sharing information and ideas, providing assistance with running effective meetings, identifying training needs and assisting with carrying out activities.

2. Learn from case studies

This principle acknowledges the value of groups being aware of the many successful community-led projects which have already been carried out across the UK, so that such projects can be replicated or used to provide ideas for action. These projects may be small scale or large scale (e.g. one-off events or ideas for social enterprises) and address various issues (e.g. local food, energy, waste).

This information is shared through the project website, presentations at events, correspondence with groups and at group meetings.

3. Effective communication

The issue of climate change presents unique challenges with regard to communication, due to the influence of individual and societal values, attitudes and worldviews on motivations to act (Marshall 2007; Defra 2008; Hulme 2009). In recent years, researchers and sustainability practitioners have put forward a number of ideas on how to communicate about climate change more effectively, based upon insights from fields such as social marketing, eco-psychology and addictions therapy (e.g. Futerra 2005; Marshall 2007; Hopkins 2008).

Some of the insights include the need to connect any proposed actions with an individual's core values (Marshall 2007, Rose 2010) and the positive impact of framing a call for action in terms of the benefits of what could be gained rather than risks of what could be lost (Hopkins 2008; Spence and Pidgeon 2010).

Communities Cutting Carbon aims to use such ideas through its own activities, and support volunteer groups to put such ideas into practice in their own communications with local media and prospective members.

4. Networking and partnership

As discussed above, members of LGGs greatly value opportunities to network with and learn from their peers, so providing opportunities for this is a core aim of the project.

Partnership working is also seen as important, as volunteer groups are unlikely to have sufficient resources to have a large impact in their local area if working alone (Hopkins 2008). The project therefore aims to encourage and support groups to establish supportive relationships with local authorities, businesses, community groups and other potential partners.

5. Access to funding

Lack of funding can be a barrier to action for many community green groups (LCCN 2010), so providing appropriate financial support can have a positive impact. The support needed can vary in size according to needs and the stage of development of a group: a few hundred pounds can help a group form and meet ongoing costs (e.g. volunteer expenses, venue hire, insurance); a few thousand pounds can fund small local projects; thousands of pounds can fund bigger projects, which might require paid staff or help from consultants.

The £50,000 grant fund made available by Communities Cutting Carbon from 2010 to 2011 sought to meet the need of local groups for small to medium amounts of funding.

6. Access to expertise

Access to local experts is valued by community green groups (CCAN 2009). Expertise might relate to areas of project work (e.g. renewable energy or local food), understanding of climate change or sustainability, or group working skills (e.g. communication, managing meetings).

For Communities Cutting Carbon, this expertise is made available through a combination of the knowledge of the project team, and through signposting to other organisations and local experts.

7. Diverse approaches

This principle acknowledges the diversity of communities that are supported and the need to tailor support to fit with the needs of those communities.

Key differences between communities include their physical characteristics (e.g. location, urban/rural, land use) and demographic make-up (ethnicity, age, socio-economic status). The Five Capitals model put forward by Forum for the Future is a useful model for understanding the opportunities and challenges that arise from the existing resources of a given community (FFTF 2011). It emphasises that communities will differ in terms of wealth (financial capital), infrastructure (manufactured capital), community organisations and networks (social capital, capacity and skills of residents (human

capital), and that all these factors relate to natural resources (natural capital) (ibid). The lack of social and human capital in many communities has commonly been noted as a constraint on the development of LGGs in some areas (O’Hara 2009, Hopkins 2010).

On an individual level, people within communities will differ according to their attitudes towards pro-environmental behaviour (Defra 2008) or for engaging with climate change (Marshall 2007). Such differences are likely to be reflected through prevalent attitudes to environmental issues within particular communities (CACI 2011), although little research in the public domain has documented these issues to date.

To respond to this diversity, a key strategy employed is to motivate participants to act through communication and projects that address complementary agendas, such as health, wellbeing and community cohesion (Alexander et al. 2007; Hopkins 2008). Initiatives that carry out practical projects based on other motivations can have the outcome of participants aligning their values more closely with support for action on climate change as a result of their involvement (Rose 2010).

8. Action research

Action research involves simultaneously taking action and seeking to learn from that action, so that both action and knowledge can be improved over time (Coghlan and Brannick 2005). As a research strategy, it involves a

cyclical process of diagnosis of the situation, planning, action and evaluation (ibid).

For Communities Cutting Carbon, this approach involves regular documenting of events and outcomes (e.g. meetings attended, action carried out by groups), regular meetings to discuss progress and written reflection upon issues that arise (e.g. judgements on barriers to action). Annual surveys of project stakeholders will be used to get feedback and inform the future work of the project.

Project outcomes to date

10 core groups

The project has so far supported five existing groups, enabled four new groups to become established and will seek to establish a new group in one further community. The groups supported are characterised in Table 2.

Some points worth noting are the diversity of communities, in terms of the type of area (urban/rural, city/town/village) and population (from 800 to 39,000), and that the project is mostly working with larger communities.

Each group has between 1 and 11 core members (defined as those that regularly attend meetings) and a wider total membership of up to 30 (those that have participated in some of the group’s activities as group members). These numbers may appear low, but are not untypical for voluntary groups.

Table 2: Characterisation of 10 Core Groups

| Group | Type | Geographical area | Population | Number of members: core (total) | Focus |
|----------------------------------|------|--|------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Greener Highfields | LGG | Urban neighbourhood in inner city | c. 30,000 | 6 (10) | Green space and local food |
| Pride in Enderby | LGG | Large village | 5,650 | 11 (15) | Community cohesion, local pride, green space |
| Ashby 2020 | LGG | Market town | 12,800 | 6 (20) | Sustainability |
| Dunton Goes Green | LGG | Small village | 800 | 10 (15) | Going carbon neutral |
| Earl Shilton for Sustainability | LCO | Market town | 9,000 | 2 (5) | Supporting local businesses |
| Interfaith Youth Hub | LCO | Community of interest | N/A | 2 (30) | Faith and environment |
| Transition Rutland | LGG | Rural county, including two market towns | 39,200 | 7 (15) | Sustainable land use, community resilience |
| Oadby Community Stakeholders | LCO | Urban neighbourhood in outer city | 22,700 | N/A | N/A |
| Shelthorpe Community Association | LCO | Market town neighbourhood | 6,300 | 1 (4) | Community garden project |
| Vale Villages in Transition | LGG | Small villages around small market town | c. 10,000 | 5 (10) | Awareness raising on sustainability |

The focus of each group listed in Table 2 is based upon its constitution, where one exists, or the main stated aims of core members if not. Only one group has an explicit focus on climate change, and most combine sustainability issues with other concerns (e.g. faith, provision of green space), or in one case, have other concerns as their main focus.

To date, eight of the ten core groups have been awarded grant funding for local projects, which include a project to promote cycling in a market town, improving a village orchard, a plastic-bag free day, and a green fair.

Grant funding

Grant funding was made available through the "Climate Friendly Communities Grant" from June 2010. Of a £50,000 fund, enquiries for funding totalling approximately £80,000 were received, and the full £50,000 was awarded by March 2011. A summary of the types of project funded, types of community funded and types of applicant supported is given in Tables 3 to 5.

Of the 26 applications received, 22 projects were awarded funding. The average grant awarded was £2,272, with just four grants for less than £500 and nine grants around the mid-range of £2,000 to £3,000. More than half the funds were allocated to improvements to community buildings and to local food projects, with a variety of other one-off projects receiving support.

Funds have been fairly evenly spread between urban and rural communities. This was due in part to the grant funding panel seeking to award funds to projects from all the local authority areas in the sub-region.

In terms of the successful applicants, the majority were LCOs rather than LGGs. In three cases, a recently established LGG worked in partnership with a local constituted organisation (e.g. parish council) to undertake a project.

Support Hub

To date the support hub strand of work has focused on producing a monthly e-newsletter (since August 2010) and organising the first bi-annual networking event.

The first networking event featured workshops on establishing groups and three sessions on ideas for projects. It was attended by more than 60 participants and received positive feedback. More than 180 individuals now receive the monthly newsletter, which is reaching all active Local Green Groups, members of Local Community Organisations with an interest in green issues and other local stakeholders with an interest in community climate action.

Work is also underway to produce a Green Directory listing local projects, groups and support organisations, and to produce case studies of local successful projects. This work addresses two of the main support needs for community groups identified by CCAN (2009).

Table 3: Grant funded projects by type of project

| Project Type | Building improvement | Project: local food | Project: energy saving | Event(s) | Project: community infrastructure | Project: lifestyle change | Project: transport |
|--------------|----------------------|---------------------|------------------------|----------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|
| Quantity | 7 | 6 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Total value | £16,885 | £11,441 | £7,003 | £5,677 | £5,000 | £1,583 | £2,410 |

Table 4: Grant funded projects by type of community

| Community | Village | Town | City | Urban Neighbourhood | Wider urban / rural area |
|-------------|---------|--------|--------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| Quantity | 6 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 3 |
| Total value | £18,301 | £9,557 | £8,932 | £5,970 | £7,239 |

Table 5: Grant funded projects by type of applicant

| Applicant | Community Group | Parish / Town Council | Community / Faith Centre | Residents Group | Not-for-profit organisation | Community Co-operative | Business Forum |
|-------------|-----------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| Quantity | 6 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| Total value | £11,610 | £12,397 | £11,585 | £3,470 | £4,906 | £3,267 | £2,764 |

Discussion

At this stage no formal evaluation of the project has been carried out, but some early indications of the impact of the three strands of work can be put forward.

In terms of the work with the ten core groups, the initiation of four new Local Green Groups shows that community development strategies can be successfully employed to increase community action on climate change.

The ten core groups each differ in terms of their main focus, and in most cases climate change is not the main motivation. This finding supports the position introduced above of seeking to catalyse action on climate change by drawing upon broader values and motivations.

The rapid allocation of £50,000 of grant funding indicates the appetite for this funding amongst local community groups and the capacity to deliver projects if this funding is made available. The high take-up by Local Community Organisations in particular indicates that the wider voluntary sector has an interest in undertaking community projects that act on climate change.

At this early stage it is difficult to evaluate the impact of the support hub activities, but the positive evaluation of the first networking event and positive reviews of the newsletter indicates that this service is appreciated and of use, as has been the case elsewhere in the UK.

Taken as a whole, the various strands of activity have been mutually supporting. Managing a grant fund has enabled contact to be made with the majority of local stakeholders that the support hub would seek to engage. The grant fund has also provided a focus of activity for the ten core groups. Offering grant funding as an incentive has also made it easier to secure the participation of volunteers from these communities in the project.

In terms of how the project is delivered and resourced, the regular contact with local authority partners through the project steering group has been beneficial. The connections made have led to LGGs being invited to participate in local authority events, and have enabled LGGs to quickly access information (e.g. local recycling provision) from local authority contacts.

As each strand of the project appears to be valued by members of community groups, a key question that arises is how this work could

be funded and delivered beyond the lifetime of the KTP. This question relates not only to Communities Cutting Carbon, but also to similar projects that exist in a small number of local authority areas elsewhere in the UK. Due to the short lifespan of grant-funded work, funding from either local or national government would appear to be the most effective strategy for putting this support work on a sustainable footing. The evidence from Communities Cutting Carbon suggests that this could be money well spent.

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