

INFLUENCING PEOPLE THROUGH PEER GROUPS

CASE STUDY 1

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SUMMARY

What people know and think affects how they act. Information and knowledge about an activity is important, but not sufficient to activate most kinds of pro-environmental behaviour change.¹

A person's values, perceptions, motivations, habits, skills, social environment, and local context all influence their behaviour. Over four case studies, we explore approaches adopted by projects funded by the Big Lottery Fund's Communities Living Sustainably (CLS) programme to support pro-environmental behaviour. These case studies highlight practical lessons for success and reflect on what to consider if adopting the approach.

This first case study looks at the different ways of bringing together groups of people (who face similar circumstances, have similar intentions, and who live in the same area) to encourage them to take pro-environmental action. Peer groups have been used effectively as a way of influencing an individual's attitude towards an activity, and their intention to change the way they act.

This works through a combination of providing information emphasising the benefits of performing the new action (*what will be the result of taking this action*), building confidence to act (*demonstrating that people like me can make this change*), and normalising this activity (*people I associate with expect me to act this way*).

Peer group approaches have been used to influence a range of behaviours including energy and water saving, generating renewable energy, reduction of household waste, and reduced car-usage.

For community groups, organisations, and local authorities designing projects to influence pro-environmental behaviour in communities, four key design lessons have emerged from the CLS projects' use of peer groups:

- Investment in a baseline study to understand people's awareness and motivations related to pro-environmental behaviour will help target project activities and inform their design.
- Social motivations such as getting to know neighbours and being an active member of the community can be important reasons for people to engage in activities.
- Longer-term behaviour change is likely to be mobilised by working intensively in small groups where habits can be challenged and peer pressure used to motivate people.
- Using financial savings as the only motivator to take action is likely to affect only short-term changes, with no wider impacts into other pro-environmental behaviours.

DIFFERENT APPROACHES

The peer group approaches can be grouped into three themes:

- Projects encouraging small groups of near neighbours to help each other to live more sustainably (*working together*). This approach demands a high level of time commitment both from the people involved, and from the project team supporting them. The social setting and ‘opportunity to get to know your neighbours’ can appeal to a broader range of people than those primarily motivated by environmental issues.
- Projects which aim to drive behaviour change by comparing neighbours actions (*comparison*). This approach uses the power of social pressure and an emphasis on the financial savings the household could be making, to provoke a change in behaviour at a household level. This type of project requires a significant time commitment from the project team to collect and present data.
- Events which showcase people who have already made changes and are considered as trusted sources (*demonstration*). These events can reach large numbers of people, and demand a lower level of time commitment from the participants.

Table 1 summarises examples of the various ways the CLS projects have used peer-to-peer approaches, which are explored in more detail in the next section.

Table 1: Summary of Projects

Approach	Aimed to	Projects
Working together	Bring people together living in the same area to provide mutual support to help them make changes to a range of behaviours.	<p>Manor House PACT, London – Closer Neighbours</p> <p>Supported a network of community groups where neighbours learned together about ways to live more sustainably. Members of the Closer Neighbours group met five times in a venue of their choosing. Groups received the option of a facilitated first session to get started, and then worked through a guide covering a different topic each week which included awareness of climate change, energy efficiency, waste reduction, sourcing and growing food, and smarter travel.</p> <p>Using the broader framing of sustainability, participants’ motivations to adopt energy saving behaviours extended beyond saving money. Important motivators included combating climate change, and becoming an active member of the local community.</p>

Table 1 cont.

Approach	Aimed to	Projects
Working together	Provide information in a structured way about environmental sustainability and positive actions that can be taken.	<p>L8 Living Sustainably, Liverpool – Community Living Rooms</p> <p>Brought together neighbours who spent time with each other and shared a meal. Events were held where people gathered in shared accommodation, churches, and community centres. Sessions were facilitated by project team members. Those who attended received information about how to keep warm (energy efficiency tips and help with switching) and eat well (people received the soup recipe, a pack of seeds, and guidance on growing). Related craft workshops were run making hot-water-bottle covers and draught excluders.</p> <p>CLS Dorset – Transition Streets</p> <p>Brought together small groups of neighbours to learn in a group about energy, food, water, and transport. The group supported each other to take a wide range of behaviour change actions.</p>
Comparison	Encourage people to save energy by comparing their energy usage data with their neighbours.	<p>WEA Greening Wingrove, Newcastle – Four Streets</p> <p>Conducted a door-to-door survey of energy use and provided a tailored home energy report for each household showing how their consumption and expenditure on energy compared to their neighbours. Tailored advice was provided on how to lower energy usage.</p>
Demonstration	Showcase local people who have made technical changes to their homes.	<p>CLS in Dorset – Open Eco Homes</p> <p>Involved local people as Open Eco Homes hosts opening their home to visitors to explain practical steps they took to adapt their home to become more energy efficient.</p> <p>Sustain Eden, Cumbria – Green Build Festival</p> <p>A series of events demonstrating technology available to improve energy efficiency, renewable energy installations, and the use of natural and sustainable building materials and techniques.</p>

MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN

Working together

Transition Streets in Dorset is an example of an approach that brings small groups of people together who live in the same neighbourhood to learn about environmental sustainability, and identify actions they will take to reduce their environmental impact.

Using an approach and materials developed by Transition Totness, the Dorset project explored a wide range of topics including energy and water saving, food, and packaging and transport.

Each month Participants pledged to make changes and then discussed their progress at the next session. Each group ran their own meetings and stress was placed on neighbours recruiting the members of the group themselves. This approach aimed to influence behaviour by:

- Influencing attitudes by providing information about the benefits of taking action (cost saving and environmental benefits).
- Increasing an individual's sense of agency that they could successfully take the action needed.
- Using peer pressure to move people into taking the action.

"The programme has worked because it combines community support and motivation with practical knowledge and advice. [...] I've lagged my pipes, installed plastic window glazing, installed a reflector behind two radiators, insulated my loft cover, cut my time in the shower..."

Group participant

Due to the community-based group approach Transition Streets was successful at engaging people who would not normally engage with environmental issues.

Motivations to join the Dorset groups ranged from practical issues such as saving money and reducing energy bills, to getting to know neighbours, being more involved, and changing lifestyles.

"It's a good way of getting people who don't normally get involved in green activities and influencing them.

"A lot of the neighbours would run away from anything described as green, but because it was sold as a community group and a chance to get together and have a chat with your neighbour, it engages people you normally wouldn't engage with."

Group participant

What changed?

Three transition street groups were set up in Dorset involving a total of 30 people. Two of the groups continue to meet even though they have completed the programme.

Members reported an increase in their awareness of climate change and sustainability issues, and many were able to make low-cost home adjustments, including: the installation of energy-efficient lights bulb and draft proofing to save energy, and water-saving measures such as cistern bags and installing water meters.

A range of behaviour changes were supported including saving energy by using a battery recharger, monitoring gas and electricity use, turning off the lights in unused rooms, reducing food waste, increasing recycling, reducing shower time, and cycling to work.

An evaluation of the Fordington Transition Streets group indicated that the group of six people made a collective saving of £658.66 on energy bills over a six-month period. Additional pledged action is expected to save £1,626.

Lessons for success

The project team offered the following lessons for success:

- **Proximity matters.** Draw group members together from the same street. Transition Streets experimented with changing their name to Transition Together and drawing their group members from a wider area. However, a crucial aspect to the programme is community building, which they found did not work as well when the peer group was drawn from different streets.
- **A personal approach.** Using leaflets to recruit members did not work. The personal approach was far more effective – knocking on doors and explaining what the project was about. To strengthen a sense of group identity, groups also came up with their own group names: Green Saints and Waste Less; Spend Better.
- **Relax control.** The Transition Streets model only works when people are on a level playing field, so once a group has been recruited, the organising group must be prepared to relinquish control. *It's about everyone participating and learning together, not those who don't know anything being lectured.*

Comparison

Greening Wingrove in Newcastle used a neighbourhood comparison approach to changing energy-use behaviour. The project team selected four streets (a total of 305 houses) which had different demographics and housing types.

Community organisers dropped leaflets into each house and conducted a door-to-door survey of energy use, including taking a gas and electricity meter reading. This was followed up 4–6 weeks later by a second house call to get a further meter reading which was provided by 51 households.

In addition, householders were offered a thermal image of their house to show where energy was being lost. A personalised home energy report was created for each household showing how their consumption compared to their neighbours in similar houses, and indicating if they were a relatively high, medium, or low energy user.

This work commenced in March 2015 and energy monitoring is currently in its first phase of delivery. Providing residents with information about how their energy use compares to neighbours in similar houses is likely to provoke some of the residents to question why this is the case.

An aggregate measure of energy used for a household does not provide information on which behaviours contributed the most to the energy used, which is necessary to identify an effective strategy to reduce energy use in the home. To address this, the project team is planning pop-up activities for each street to engage residents on how to reduce their energy use.

Providing effective guidance on appropriate measures will require each household to identify their main energy-using household equipment, and how they use it. A follow-up survey is planned to assess the effectiveness of the approach.

Lessons for success

The group offered the following implementation lessons:

- **Local organisers.** It took a number of conversations to engage people to take part in the survey. Community organisers provided a personal way to start an informed conversation and get buy-in to complete the survey.
- **Engagement.** Students and well-informed social housing tenants were most willing to engage in the project. The areas selected included householders with limited English-speaking skills who were unable to engage. Recognising this barrier, Greening Wingrove has worked with National Energy Action to pilot materials within ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) courses on how they can save energy, change suppliers, and keep their homes warm.
- **Achieving scale.** The project team was inspired by a US example to test this approach.² The US project achieved scale by providing an online platform, using mobile technology, and importantly partnering with large energy

suppliers to provide energy use comparison information to customers. The project team is aiming to mirror the US example by exploring working with Northern Powergrid on an online smart meter game using mobile technology. It is yet to be seen if the project team will be able to take this a stage further and partner with an energy supply company to provide customers with energy use comparison information.

Demonstration

When a change in behaviour needs to be supported by investment in technology to adapt the home, a number of CLS projects used open home events to demonstrate the technology and encourage local people to invest in similar measures.

Demonstration events extend the reach of the project team and quicken the process of finding people in the community who are already intending to make some changes to their homes.

There appears to be a number of reasons explaining the success of demonstration events in drawing large crowds.³ First, the event provides an opportunity to learn about the practicalities of installation and use by talking to trusted peers who have already implemented changes.

“The best thing about the Green Build Festival is that you get the information from the horse’s mouth. You’re talking to the householder who has done the research [...] and they’ve lived with it.”

Participant

Secondly, demonstration events are successful at increasing participants’ sense of control, and their confidence about their ability to make changes. By showcasing what people in similar circumstances have been able to achieve, demonstration projects encourage participants to think ‘If they can do it, so can I’.

Demonstration projects are often large scale, but involve little continued interaction with the participants. Although this approach can reach a lot of people in a short period of time, there is no peer pressure element or pledge made to reinforce the intention to take action. The onus is then on the project team to develop follow-up mechanisms to find out if the event prompted more people to commit to action.

This approach appears to be less suitable in influencing behaviour in less affluent communities. Sustain Eden, for instance, note that ‘by its very nature, the Green Build Festival attracts people who have an interest in installing extensive adaptations to their homes. Therefore these tend to be people with some money to invest and not people

who would be classed as vulnerable or in fuel poverty.'

What changed?

Nine months after both Eco Homes events in Dorset, surveys were sent to visitors to assess whether the event had resulted in any behaviour changes. Although the response rate for surveys was low, findings indicated that a number of people made changes.

Overall CLS Dorset found that 60% of respondents said they had been 'influenced' and 10% had been 'influenced a lot' by Open Eco Homes.

A survey administered at the Green Build Festival in Cumbria showed similar levels of success: 77% of those who attended said that the event had taken them closer to action. Intended action ranged from investigating ground-source heat pumps, air-source heat pumps, and solar PV; and implementing renewable energy sources in new builds.

A follow-up survey confirmed that 55% of respondents had taken action to save energy through either behaviour change or by installing new measures.

Lessons for success

The group offered the following implementation lessons:

- **Use community links.** It can be difficult to get people to open their homes to visitors. Work with a local organisation with strong links with the community in order to recruit people able to demonstrate measures.
- **Offer a variety of home types.** People like to see something in a house that is similar to theirs. Try to use a range of homes which are typical of the area. In areas where there are fewer examples to properties implementing these types of measures, CLS projects have developed their own eco show homes.

REFLECTIONS

The findings of the CLS projects and research into pro-environmental behaviour change highlight two key areas for consideration when thinking about using these approaches to influence pro-environmental behaviour:

Know whom you are trying to engage: Investing in a baseline survey at the start of the project, which includes questions about people's attitude to climate change and concern about the environment, and the range of actions they have already undertaken, will help to inform the design of interventions.

There are two dimensions to people's engagement in environmental issues which most behaviour change projects are trying to influence: current concern about environmental issues, and consideration of the future consequences of their actions.

For people who are already engaged with both of these areas, then framing materials and events with an environmental message is likely to result in more positive attitudes towards changing behaviour, such as energy saving, than economically framed benefits.

In contrast, people who report lower levels of consideration of the future environmental consequences of their action are more likely to respond to short-term economic benefits, for example financial savings on energy use.⁴

Demonstration events are most likely to accelerate the uptake of measures by people whose values are already aligned to sustainable living, are considering action, and are simply seeking further information from a trusted source before taking action.

Demonstration events may also be useful interventions to target people who have recently moved into an area.⁵ People's habits (frequent actions which by-pass a conscious intention to act) can have a strong influence on behaviour.

Research has found that major changes in life such as moving home can disrupt habits and open a window of opportunity to influence patterns of behaviour for a relatively short period of time.⁶

Longer-term behaviour change: Research has found that interventions that include goal setting and the use of prompts, and highlight conflicts between beliefs, values, and action have the largest effect on behaviour.⁷

This implies that although time consuming, the small group-based peer-to-peer approaches described are likely to be the most effective in supporting longer-term behaviour change, because they offer a structured guide to explore a range of pro-environmental behaviours, help to identify clear actions, and include peer pressure to move people into action.

Interventions that only relate benefits to financial savings of a particular behaviour have been found to effect only short-term changes in that behaviour with no wider impact (spill-over effect) into other pro-environmental behaviours.⁸

This is an important consideration for projects such as CLS which are aiming to promote communities to live more sustainably (i.e., support change across a range of behaviours).

A marketing approach that promotes pro-environmental behaviour by appealing to self-interest alone is unlikely to support the scale and scope of change required.

For more information

Further information about the approaches described in this case study can be found at:

Cumbria Green Build Festival: <http://www.cafs.org.uk/projects/cumbriagreenbuildfestival/>

Dorset Open Eco Homes: <http://www.clsdorset.org.uk/Open-Ecohomes.aspx>;
<https://youtu.be/XKKgi6KR39g>

Greening Wingrove Four Streets: <http://greeningwingrove.org.uk/four-streets-community-energy-use-survey-we-need-your-help/>

Greening Wingrove ESOL Energy in the Home materials:
<http://greeningwingrove.org.uk/saving-energy/save-energy/>

Dorset Transition Streets: http://www.clsdorset.org.uk/Greener_Choices-Transition_Together.aspx

Transition Streets Approach and Materials: <http://www.transitionstreets.org.uk/#!prettyPhoto>

ENDNOTES

¹ For example, Fliegenschnee and Shelakovsky in a 1998 meta-analysis of pro-environmental behaviours study found that 80% of factors influencing behaviour did not come directly from knowledge and awareness [in Darnton, A. (2008). *GSR Behaviour Change Knowledge Review Reference Report: An overview of behaviour change models and their uses*. Government Social Research, London.]

² Laskey, A. (n.d.) How behavioral science can lower your energy bill. Retrieved from http://www.ted.com/talks/alex_laskey_how_behavioral_science_can_lower_your_energy_bill

³ Dorset CLS has attracted large crowds to its events (in 2013, 19 demonstration houses attracted 800 visits; in 2014, 18 houses received 300 visits; and in 2015, 20 houses received 400 visits). The Sustainable Build Festival in Cumbria attracted 262 visits.

⁴ Xu, X., Arplan, L. & Chen, C. (2015). The moderating role of individual differences in responses to benefit and temporal framing messages promoting residential energy saving. *Journal of Environmental Psychology, 44*, 95–108.

⁵ The CLS project evaluations did not test whether the participants had recently moved into the project area.

⁶ A study of 800 households conducted by Verplanken and Roy (2016) found that the window of opportunity to change a habit and influence more pro-environmental behaviour was up to three months after relocation. Verplanken, B. & Roy, D. (2016). Empowering interventions to promote sustainable lifestyles: Testing the habit discontinuity hypothesis in a field experiment. *Journal of Environmental Psychology, 45*, 127–134.

⁷ Osbaldiston, R. & Schott, J.P. (2012). Environmental sustainability and behavioural science: meta-analysis of pro-environmental behaviour experiments. *Environment and Behaviour, 44*, 257–299.

⁸ Steinhorst, J., Klöckner, C. & Matties, E. (2015). Saving electricity – for the money or the environment? Risks of improving pro-environmental spill over when using monetary framing. *Journal of Environmental Psychology, 43*, 125–135.