Community action for the environment

Small enough to care, big enough to make a difference

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COMMUNITY FUND

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Executive summary

The National Lottery Community Fund has been a significant funder of environmental projects for 25 years. This paper explores learning from our most recent funding, with a focus on practical tips on how to spark, mobilise and sustain local community action.

Greener Kirkcaldy

There are well established links between the environment and physical and mental wellbeing - increased physical activity, reduced air pollution, connection with nature, growing and eating fresh food, and making homes warmer and healthier. We also show that taking part in environmental action can create a range of tangible personal benefits - from saving money, reducing waste and gaining new knowledge and skills, to a greater sense of belonging and connection, and of course, reducing CO_2 emissions.

We recognise that communities face challenges and barriers to tackling a huge global problem through local action, but show that 'think global, act local' still has meaning and resonance. People and communities can and do make a difference through their actions and choices.

Key learning from our funding emphasises the need to start small, making environmental action easy and attractive – in particular by linking it to people's individual beliefs and values. Appealing to people's sense of community can be more effective than an explicit appeal to the climate emergency. And working at local or hyperlocal level can create more sustainable networks where people keep up their commitment and action because they feel a shared sense of ownership with, and accountability to, their neighbours.

Role modelling new behaviours and finding engaging ways to show the difference being made is another key part of keeping commitment up. And practical solutions that connect residents to experts and specialists have helped empower communities to make more informed choices – from choosing the right kinds of renewable energy sources to establishing growing schemes and orchards to reduce food miles and waste.

A diverse and inclusive movement helps tackle the widespread assumption that environmental action is disproportionately white and middle class. It's essential to recognise the contribution that many people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities make by actively living green lives. Practical adjustments like paying a living wage and ensuring that outdoor venues are fully accessible to people with disabilities are important ways to make the movement more inclusive.

We also recognise the need to be realistic and pragmatic about what does and doesn't work. Testing and adapting in response to new insights and knowledge is key to maximising communities' contributions. And it's important to recognise and acknowledge the limits of what can be achieved without larger scale infrastructure or systemic investment and change.

We conclude that work at individual and community level can be both empowering and big enough to make a difference. Community action can deliver real impact in terms of CO_2, waste reduction and reuse and redistribution of food, furniture, clothing, toys and material. And in doing so it generates important wider benefits: improving health and wellbeing, increasing community pride and supporting skills, training and jobs.

The Crafty Gardener

Introduction

An unexpected positive of the COVID-19 lockdown has been our new appreciation of nature and the environment. From birdsong to traffic-free streets and plane-free skies – many of us have cherished a glimpse of a less polluted planet. By the end of April 2020, global CO_2 emissions had decreased by around 17% from 2019 levels, with almost half of this reduction as a result of reduced use of transport[1] but there are real, and realistic, fears that with the easing of lockdown, things will quickly revert to 'normal' and this progress will be lost.

The pandemic has changed our world radically. As we publish this paper, we don't know what shape our future will take, but it's clear that there's an appetite for change. An April 2020 YouGov poll on behalf of the RSA's **Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (FFCC)** and **The Food Foundation**, found that just 9% of people want to go back to the way things were before lockdown.[2] Concern for the environment is at record levels with a number of recent polls showing the highest recorded levels of concern about climate change,[3] air pollution, plastic waste and the loss of plant and animal species.[4]

The National Lottery Act identified the environment as one of the four good causes to benefit from the sale of tickets[5] and The National Lottery Community Fund went on to become a major funder of environmental projects ever since. We produced this paper before the pandemic, as a look back at what we've learned from our funding that has supported projects with a direct focus on the environment, as well as many others that embed care for the planet into their primary work on a multitude of other issues.

Primarily, we wanted to identify how grantholders have harnessed the desire to do more to protect the environment, and how they have energised their communities to make and maintain changes that help us live more sustainably. From large-scale programmes with an explicit focus on sustainability and building resilience to climate change, to a multitude of small, grassroots projects, we support a hugely varied range of grantholders. In the five years since April 2015, we've awarded over £350 million through more than 4,800 grants.

The learning outlined here now feels more pertinent than ever, as we ask what community involvement means for environmental issues. We outline how our funding has supported communities to mobilise and act and look specifically at how grantholders have helped engage and motivate people. We also consider what drives changes in behaviour, and how we can we support and sustain these shifts; how this work can do more to include the whole community, given ongoing criticism that the movement is disproportionately white and middle class;[6] and how everybody can build sustainable practice into their work, whatever their main interest or focus.

It's intended for people who are setting up, commissioning or delivering environmental work. Those who are looking to make their existing work more sustainable will also find inspiration and practical suggestions here.

We've drawn from interviews with grantholders and our own staff, as well as evaluations and research from across the UK. We share insights and stories, looking at the conditions that supported and enabled grantholders' work, to see what we can learn from them and how we can harness concern for the environment and translate that into practical and tangible action.

A flavour of our environmental funding across the UK

England

Communities Living Sustainably was a £12 million, five-year programme that worked with 12 communities across England to tackle the social, economic and environmental impact of climate change.[7] It engaged over 60,000 people and saved more than 500,000 tonnes of carbon.

Wales

In Wales, the £8.8 million **Create Your Space** programme supports communities to conserve and enhance the natural environment. One of the funded projects, **Woodland Routes to Wellbeing**, has redeveloped the **laundry gardens at Tredegar House** as a community hub, with growing beds, a fresh food bag scheme and shop, sensory and tranquil gardens for people with visual impairments or mental health problems, and a play area for children.[8]

Scotland

In Scotland, we've supported several projects enabling small, isolated communities to become self-sufficient through renewable energy. A £600,000 grant for wind turbines, solar panels and energy storage helped to bring 24 hour power to Fair Isle for the first time.[9] The energy in the Isle of Canna's **award-winning scheme** is 98% renewable, while the **Foula Community Electricity Scheme** has given the island a reliable power supply through wind energy.

Northern Ireland

Energy Efficient Venues invested £6.9 million to improve community venues in Northern Ireland. 403 projects made long-term improvements to their financial and environmental sustainability. For example, outdoor pursuit centre Share Discovery Village improved its insulation and installed LED lighting and solar panels, saving £8,500 a year on electricity bills.

Across the UK

Our Bright Future is a £33 million programme, led by The Wildlife Trusts. 31 youth-led projects support young people to, "take ownership of what they deserve: a healthy planet, a thriving greener economy, and a bright future." So far, it has worked with more than 115,000 young people. More than 6,200 have gained environmental qualifications and 758 have gone on to work in the sector.

The **Climate Action Fund** commits £100 million over ten years, enabling people and communities to take the lead in tackling the climate emergency. It will make its first awards in summer 2020 and support activity that is known to make the biggest difference to climate change, including sustainable energy and transport, consumption and waste, food and land use. By linking local action to national change, it will ensure that community voices are at the heart of the work.

Five ways our funding makes a difference

> "Climate change is happening now and to all of us. No country or community is immune […] And, as is always the case, the poor and vulnerable are the first to suffer and the worst hit."[10]

**António Guterres,
United Nations Secretary-General**

Many campaigners and scientists agree that we need more urgency to tackle climate change. The data is stark: UN scientists warn that an increase of more than 1.5° centigrade in global temperatures would have severe consequences,[11] yet they're currently expected to rise by 3-5°.[12] The UK Government **Committee on Climate Change** (CCC) has said that, even if emissions are reduced to zero, "our climate will continue to warm in the short-term, and sea levels will continue to rise for centuries."[13]

The UK has made some progress, reducing emissions by more than 42% since 1990, but this excludes emissions from international aviation, shipping and imports.[14] In 2008, four fifths of the UK's electricity came from fossil fuels; over a decade that has fallen to less than half.[15]

But achieving these aspirations requires more ongoing and meaningful change by all of us - households produce three quarters of the UK's carbon emissions.[16] The CCC acknowledges that, "some of the difficult decisions […] will only be possible if people are engaged in a societal effort to reach net-zero emissions and understand the choices and constraints."[17]

Most of us recognise we have a role to play. The **Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS)** tracks public attitudes to the environment and in March 2019, 86% of those surveyed agreed that "if everyone does their bit, we can reduce the effect of climate change."[18] But this belief isn't always reflected in our everyday behaviour . It's not always easy to balance the need for large-scale international change with personal action.

Our grantholders have tackled this challenge in several ways, breaking down the barriers that can make environmental change feel huge, distant or overwhelming and focusing on the very human elements that engage and sustain us. By understanding our motivators and drivers, whether that's reducing our bills or strengthening our sense of connection to our community, and combining this with practical actions that feel achievable we're seeing ways we can all make a difference: a difference that sticks.

1. Helping people to save money and lower their carbon emissions

Engaging people in activities to reduce their carbon footprint can be a tough ask. It can feel at once abstract, and significantly bigger than anything they can affect through their own behaviour or choices. By focusing on more immediate and tangible consequences of reducing carbon emissions, grantholders have been able to make the issue feel relevant and personal. Using less energy saves money, can reduce fuel poverty and create warmer, more comfortable homes.

"The little tricks that we share with people almost act as a hook to get to know them better and we become aware of their needs," explain staff at Y Dref Werdd. This social enterprise is based in Blaenau Ffestiniog, Gwynedd, which has the highest fuel poverty in Wales.[19] Working with more than 400 families, it's helped them save over £200,000.[20] The project's energy advice has led to 246 applications for the Warm Home Discount, saving residents a total of £34,440. And 70 participants have successfully applied for support from the Nest scheme, which tackles fuel poverty with home improvements like new boilers or central heating.

While installing energy saving measures, projects have also been able to help people review their energy use. Manor House PACT in north London made home visits to discuss simple adaptations. "The Energy Advisor helped me make some changes to my flat and to think about how I can use less energy and water," one participant explained. "I was really surprised when my next quarterly bill was down by almost £50 – these savings will make a real difference to my family." 83% of those visited said they had stuck to their pledges, while 90% said that the visit had changed how they use energy at home.[21] Across 913 homes, PACT's visits helped residents save £147,618 and 411,146kg of carbon.[22]

Starlings Aberystwyth

Green Prosperity, a Communities Living Sustainably project in Hull,[23] offered energy advice, particularly to older and vulnerable people. Home energy monitors had an immediate impact. When people saw their energy readings shoot up when they put the kettle on, they became more careful about over-filling or boiling it so frequently. It's important to use this window of opportunity to support people so that behaviour change becomes absorbed into everyday life. "Monitors are really important for 6-8 months while people learn what to do," explained one adviser. "After that there isn't much change and they become ornamental."[24]

In Salford, the Irwell Valley Sustainable Communities project presented its online carbon measuring tool as a savings calculator. "Our evaluation team felt quite strongly that if we just talked about carbon footprint that wouldn't be as engaging as cash."[25] The tool showed users how they could save money while helping the environment, meaning the project team could also use the results to identify which behaviours to target.

Stronger Families, a project supporting unemployed people with children to get back into work, also focused on everyday changes. Making sure that everyone shut down their computers overnight saved an average of 216,000 watts of electricity per person, with a further 8,640 watts saved if an employee also switched off their computer during team meetings. They also reduced travel emissions by encouraging video calling, holding work from home days and making sure venues were accessible by public transport.[26]

Consulting an expert can uncover new ways to save money and carbon. Through a network of local coordinators and peer mentors, Renew Wales supports community groups to tackle the causes and impact of climate change. Participants are enthusiastic about getting so many new ideas, from, "little things that could have a big impact," like energy efficient bulbs, to bicycle schemes or funding for more sustainable water, which they, "wouldn't have thought about," otherwise.[27] Their larger scale projects include the micro hydro project at Cwm Clydach, which generates an income of up to £25,000 a year to support local community buildings and services. They've made their buildings more energy efficient by installing solar panels, solar water harvesting and rainwater harvesting. Measures like this can make serious savings – which means there's more to spend on the organisation's own priorities.

When Renew Wales helped one organisation install solar panels and LED lighting, its energy bills dropped by, "probably over 50%. It's huge last month – we produced over 50% of what we use […] Our chair said it's almost like having a new grant every year […] It's transformational, as we're able to spend the money we'd be paying out to British Gas on our charitable aims."[28]

2. Reducing food, clothing and furniture waste

Waste is a major contributor to greenhouse gases. It takes land, water and labour to produce the goods and food that go to landfill – where they produce more emissions as they break down. Estimates suggest that we waste around £19 billion of food in the UK – although we've seen a reduction of almost £1.3 billion since 2015.[29] Grantholders have found ways to reduce waste, often as part of their work on other issues such as poverty, social exclusion and loneliness.

For some people, making greener choices can be a luxury they feel they can't afford. Sustainable food is often more expensive, at least in upfront costs. Yet some argue that consumers pay "three times over" for non-organic food - over the counter and again in hidden costs, like the effects of pollution. [30]

Grantholders are working at every stage of the food cycle to reconcile the true cost of food with the realities of food poverty. **Real Food Wythenshawe** mapped the area to identify possible growing sites, then matched them to local community groups interested in running and maintaining them.[31] In Stirling, **Edible Borders** replanted municipal flower beds with food crops. They were cost-efficient, because they used fewer plants[32] and the harvest went to the local Salvation Army kitchens.

Meanwhile gardens are designed to be short-term, using sites earmarked for future development. Irwell Valley made temporary use of a traffic island,[33] while Middlesbrough's **Community Patchwork Orchard** finds and promotes public sites where fruit trees and bushes grow, teaching safe foraging and maintenance and distributing surplus fruit to those who need it most.[34]

We know that, when food poverty increases, people are less likely to pay attention to arguments for local, seasonal food.[35] Grantholders are tackling waste and hunger by redistributing surpluses. Hubbub's **Community Fridge Network** redistributes an average of 584kg of food each month, from locations including community centres, places of worship, cafés and universities. Businesses (95%) and individuals donate food is available for free to those facing hardship. As one community fridge user explains, "Without this wonderful service, me and my children would never eat fresh fruit and veg."[36]

FareShare also redistributes surplus food to charities that turn it into meals. In 2019, it redistributed 20,838 tons of food through regional centres across the UK, to organisations including homeless hostels, children's breakfast clubs, domestic violence refuges and community cafés.[37] We've supported the charity to expand its work by putting new volunteer managers in place and recruiting and training hundreds more volunteers. As a result, FareShare got 25% more food out to charities in just one year.[38]

During the COVID-19 lockdown, FareShare increased its partnerships with food businesses by almost 25%, tripling the amount of food it distributed each week. And in just one week in June 2020 it provided enough food to charities and community groups that they could deliver over 3.2 million meals to people across the UK.[39]

Middlesbrough Environment City stresses that by using pay as you feel food stalls, you're acting on sustainability as well as saving money. Working with surplus food, the charity aims, "to change the idea that you're only benefiting from this because you're poor and you're eating stuff that's wasted. […] It's an environmental issue that you're helping to solve."[40]

In Scotland, **Furniture Plus** works against poverty and social exclusion by reusing, repairing and recycling furniture and other household goods. While the core aim is to provide furniture to those in need, this also means reducing the amount going to landfill. In one year they diverted 238 tonnes, supported 1,700 local families and 12 volunteers gained new skills and work experience.[41]

Though reuse is good for the environment, it can still have a bad image. Where buying second hand is associated with poverty, people often prefer new goods - even if they're lower quality.[42] **Forest Recycling Project** tackles this by hosting workshops where craftspeople and graduates from London College of Fashion share ideas for zero-waste living. Each public workshop pays for a second event, held for the charity's volunteers. "A superhot designer comes in to teach them about repairing clothes – and they know that everyone else pays real money for this."[43] It adds glamour and credibility whilst teaching sustainable, money-saving techniques.

By turning them into shared activities, projects have found that reuse and upcycling can be a way to attract interest. **Sustainable Sunderland** used upcycling workshops to engage the community, along with activities for families and community clean-ups. "It was important for me to see the effects of the activities of the organisation," explained one participant, who was pleased to see completed projects as well as ideas for upcycling and growing vegetables shared on the group's Facebook page.[44]

Acorn Farm Project

3. Nurturing knowledge and skills

Knowing which environmental actions will be most effective in your area can be a challenge, but many grantholders have found new ways to get practical recommendations and advice. Some focus on learning what does and doesn't work as they go, while others have focused on increasing access to formal training in conservation and environmental skills that can be an important way of helping people into work.

Offering practical knowledge can create a snowball effect that starts with attracting people, then equipping them to stay involved over the longer term. Telford Access to Nature developed and supported 16 friends' groups, bringing them together as the Telford Green Spaces Partnership. As well as caring for local nature reserves and parks, they identified four more sites with potential and worked with the local authority to create new management plans. Not only did this boost people's skills and confidence, but the Partnership went on to advise the council on green infrastructure planning right across the borough.[45]

The £30 million Access to Nature programme gave 971,548 people that had rarely connected with nature before, opportunities to experience it first-hand. Around two-thirds (640,000) went on to take part in a range of learning activities that included conservation techniques like maintaining footpaths, using tools safely, and identifying and removing invasive species. Almost 42,000 completed more formal training, like the two and a half thousand who received the John Muir Award - a non-competitive, accessible environmental award for people of all backgrounds. Projects also worked closely with local schools, providing Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for staff, and outdoor learning for pupils.[46] Projects were successful in changing their practice too: taking lessons learned and applying them to other initiatives, creating new strategic goals or investing their resources differently.[47]

Training also enables local people to influence and contribute to a more sustainable local infrastructure. After significant flooding in Salford in 2015, the Irwell Valley Sustainable Communities project created a list of the 100 most vulnerable local households, a community emergency plan and a group of volunteers who were trained to issue flood warnings. They've subsequently played a vital role in surveying the local flood plain and lobbied the council to convert 6.5 hectares of land next to the river into a wetland to help protect homes and businesses.[48]

Across the Communities Living Sustainably Programme, more than 6,000 people received training or went on to paid or voluntary roles in the environment sector, and almost 10,000 got help to make more environmentally friendly choices at home or work. For example, Manor House PACT volunteers got free training in exchange for volunteer time credits. This created new skills in green construction, practical conservation, permaculture and forest gardening and 70 volunteers went on to find paid work using their new skills.[49]

Tapping into the convictions of young people has been important too. Led by The Wildlife Trusts, **Our Bright Future** is a £33 million investment that supports children and young people to be environmental leaders. More than 80,000 11-24-year olds have taken part across 31 projects. Activities include habitat management and work on conservation and biodiversity, alongside communication, team working and decision-making skills. Three formal leadership programmes are designed to arm youngsters with skills for campaigning, planning and decision making: **Bright Green Future**; **My World My Home** and the **Environmental Leadership Programme**. Through them young people have presented policy asks to Parliament;[50] created local youth fora[51]; taken up trustee roles in conservation charities;[52] shared views with decision-makers in Stormont, who are developing Northern Ireland's first-ever environment strategy, and spoken at a range of events including the Wales Energy Forum and Friends of the Earth Cymru's National Gathering.[53]

The programme's interim evaluation noted that, despite challenges with collecting impact data, there are examples of self-reported increases in knowledge and skills, plus related benefits like improvements in participants' motivation to learn. By December 2018, 3,932 children and young people had gained qualifications, including NVQs, John Muir and Duke of Edinburgh awards. Its larger legacy will be what these young people go on to achieve. "I can't predict the future, but I really want our community to get better," explained one participant. "But it's about turning up on the day and doing it. It's about keeping your word. So one day when we grow up and we come back, we'll feel like we made this place a better place."[54]

Step-by-step approaches can be an effective way to move people from taking part in one-off sessions to longer-term involvement, which might include volunteering, training or advocacy. Forest Recycling Project's Waltham Forest Foundations scheme worked with unemployed people and those who were socially isolated or had mental ill health and supported them to move from taking part in workshops to sharing their skills, leading sessions and mentoring other volunteers. At all stages, the project promoted ways to reuse materials and reduce waste, while supporting people to make connections and increase their confidence.[55] A follow-up project takes this further: volunteers can now go on to work with external partners, helping to build networks across the environmental sector.[56]

> **"**It's got to be about building people up. […] If you don't support the people, and give them the skills and confidence and self-esteem to actually attend, there's no sustainability and no legacy to any of the work.**"**
>
> **Cheryl Dixon, Vice Chair**
> **North Ormesby Big Local**

Allowing people to move at their own pace, when and if they want to is important. While Access to Nature supported 42,000 people to take part in training and development, we should also celebrate the 971,548 people who visited and enjoyed outdoor spaces – sometimes for the first time.

4. A sense of connection: building belonging and community pride

Local, visible transformation can change how people see their own communities, and how they feel about where they live. In Liverpool, regeneration of the **Granby Four Streets** area started by planting flowers. The neglected neighbourhood was becoming derelict[57] until residents took control, planting up the streets, "with flowers in huge tubs and ivy climbing up the empty buildings".

This spontaneous gesture grew into longer term change. Residents set up a Community Land Trust to renovate the area. Grants from The National Lottery Community Fund supported skills workshops, newsletters, translators and communications support to get the word out. The Trust's art collaboration even won the Turner Prize. But they still see that early planting as a turning point, helping to create, "one of the cleanest, greenest and even award-winning quarters in the city."[58] Change started with people taking pride in where they lived and showing that they valued it.

While visible change can be very motivating, improvements might not be enough. Residents are sometimes wary, worried that damage or vandalism might undermine clean-ups, or fearful of drawing attention that makes them feel vulnerable. By finding practical solutions for these fears, projects can improve safety while proving that they take local concerns seriously. Cheryl, a Middlesbrough Environment City volunteer, introduced

planters but, "the plants didn't last five minutes." She went on to build a successful community park in the same area. The difference was that when the park was developed, a CCTV system was included, "to create a sense of safety in our older generation. There was no good building things […] if people were too frightened to come outside."[59]

Middlesbrough residents also turned the paved alleys between rows of terraced houses into community gardens, planting flowers and fruit trees. Installing alley gates was an essential first step, not just to prevent break-ins and fly tipping, but to build confidence. 81-year-old Mavis, a member of the **Alley Pals** group, explains that her street was one of the first to be fitted with gates. "The minute that was done, I thought, it will be safe now, you can do more with that." The space is now lavishly planted. "It's very precious, we live on a main road, an arterial road with a bus route, and we don't have space at the front of the house. So to have an outside space – it's a valuable community space, and it's very well used."[60]

Involving communities in neighbourhood design also has the potential to strengthen local pride.[61] The **Connswater Community Greenway** invited local people to choose names for its new bridges and walkways, often honouring locals like Sam Thompson, an east Belfast shipyard worker and playwright whose work included the play Over the Bridge and addressed themes like friendship, life in the shipyards and the trade union movement. In its first year, 220,000 people crossed the new Sam Thompson Bridge, which has led to greater use of the local park, including increased membership of running and cycling groups.[62]

It's also the case that when people have worked on something, they feel a closer connection to it. Through Access to Nature, people volunteered in their local green spaces and made them more accessible by creating new entrances, paths, trails, bridges and fences. This work opened up many sites to new users, and nearly 640,000 people used this improved access to visit sites for the first time, while over 800,000 benefitted from other improvements like better design and greater biodiversity. The work created a sense of ownership and affection, as people who had worked on the improvements wanted to share them with others. The project found that, "children and young people are returning to sites with their families to show them around." [63]

> **"The stuff you plant, you get kind of protective of all the things you've made happen."**
>
> **Participant, Student Community Action at Rupert's Wood, Newcastle** [64]

Changes in mindset are harder to measure than visitor numbers, but projects across Access to Nature reported this growing sense of care. Some participants made formal commitments, such as starting or joining friends' groups to maintain natural places. Others were "discouraging and reporting" damaging behaviour, such as fly tipping, littering and vandalism. [65]

People also built new connections. **Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust** worked with one youth group who initially had a negative view of the local Country Park. A year later, the young people, "now look down on anyone that causes disruption and damages trees," and were ready to work with others to prevent this, sharing information with other local groups. [66]

Other projects build on local pride and loyalties. **Brymbo Heritage**, a Create Your Space project near Wrexham in north east Wales, set out to turn a former steelworks – an important symbol of the community's recent industrial past – into a new visitor attraction. By taking a green approach, and framing the steelworks as a community asset, the project has helped to bring different local groups together.

Some are passionate about their industrial heritage, particularly those who have, "living memories of the 20th century steelworks," [67] while others want somewhere safe and green for their children to play. The area has an older village and a newer housing estate, which had tended to keep apart rather than mixing as a single community. The project has helped to bring them together. [68]

> **"In the 18th century Wales became the world's first industrial nation. Now it's leading the way in tackling issues around sustainable development […] it's all being delivered by the people with the greatest stake in its success – our people. From former workers sharing their memories and passing on their skills, to residents young and old bringing fresh energy and approaches […] working together to care for and celebrate our special place."** [69]
>
> **Brymbo Heritage**

5. Supporting individual and community wellbeing

There's a wealth of evidence to show that nature is good for us. And a World Health Organization review found that increasing and improving urban green space can deliver health, social and environmental benefits, particularly among groups with lower socioeconomic status. The most effective projects combine improving space with social engagement – and this is central to our approach to funding.[70]

We know that many of the factors that contribute to creating a thriving community are important for the environment and our physical and mental health too. The huge changes needed for climate action are also an opportunity to improve quality of life across the UK. Outdoor activity and exercise, reducing air pollution, eating more fruit and vegetables and connecting with nature can all contribute to greener, happier and healthier lives.[71]

This can also address the climate emergency's negative effects on wellbeing. Psychotherapists have seen a sharp rise in people suffering from eco anxiety.[72] [73] Greta Thunberg, the Swedish teenager who started the school strike for climate movement, was diagnosed with depression, which she links to her fears for the planet.[74] Psychologists suggest that taking action can reduce feelings of hopelessness and loss of control.[75] And as Thunberg explains, "the one thing we need more than hope is action. Once we start to act, hope is everywhere."[76]

Many of our grantholders have seen important benefits to people's wellbeing through their involvement in improving their local environment. Communities Living Sustainably tracked participants' wellbeing over the course of the programme, alongside seven other recognised indicators of sustainability, which included biodiversity, community and the local economy. Wellbeing had the lowest starting score, but by the end of the programme had increased by over 30%.[77] Evaluators put this down to the programme's emphasis on physical activity and growing and eating fresh food, along with making homes warmer and healthier, and, "the well-established links between environmental activities and mental health."

> **"**Improved wellbeing can perhaps be seen as the greatest legacy of Communities Living Sustainably**"**[78]

Halfway through the Our Bright Future programme, 85,788 young people have been involved in environmental action and campaigning. And for over 10% of them, this is sustained action, lasting more than three months.[79] Evaluators have gathered a range of anecdotal evidence about the positive impact this is having on 11-24 year-olds' confidence, mental health and wellbeing.[80] Feedback from staff, young people themselves and family members is backed up by survey results with a sample of participants. Results show that at the start, just 41% agreed or strongly agreed that they felt confident in themselves. Through taking part in activities delivered through the programme, this has almost doubled to 80%.[81] There are other positives for children and young people too - like feeling more relaxed, connected to others and having faith that they can make a difference to the environment. One Year 10 student expresses this wellbeing benefit beautifully. "I love feeling the wind in my face, it clears away all the bad things in my head and fills it with nice things."[82]

It's not easy to aggregate this mix of data and anecdotal evidence from across so many activities, but it's clear that there are recurring and interconnected wellbeing benefits from working in and around nature and green space, as well as working with others to improve and green your local area. These can include anything from losing weight and increasing the amount of physical exercise you do, to feeling less stressed or anxious.

From rubbish dump to a place to heal

Middlesbrough Environment City with Investing in People and Culture created Albert Park Community Garden on the site of a former rubbish dump. It's now a thriving allotment where asylum seekers, refugees and people of more than ten nationalities grow plants, alongside local university students, people with learning disabilities and other residents. It's a place to make friends and improve your English language skills while growing and nurturing crops. For Ibrahim, "it's like one big family [and] a way of improving your mental wellbeing. Most of us have had terrible journeys to the UK. The community garden is a good place, you have no fear, your mind is at ease."[83]

Ibrahim, Albert Park Community Garden

Even the simplest environmental actions can offer a range of benefits. Grow Wild's programme to grow and learn about plants and fungi that are native to the UK means people give back to their community by volunteering. They get personal benefits too: 65% of people who received a seed kit said this helped them build connections with others in their neighbourhood and 73% got outdoors more often. That's not to downplay the benefits of reaching 30% of the UK's most deprived places and covering the equivalent of a thousand football pitches with wildflowers - making our local places look and feel more attractive and cared for.[84]

Practical support also plays a vital role in offering kindness and care. Not only did Y Dref Werdd support a client to reduce her electricity payments and apply for a new heating system so she could afford to heat her home; they also helped her cope with being bereaved and isolated in a place she didn't know well. "I hadn't been here that long when my husband died […] I didn't know anybody, and I felt very isolated and alone […] you helped me feel a part of a really warm community. That was really significant in helping me feel that I was at home and that I had a positive future ahead of me."[85]

In capturing the difference sustainability projects are making, it's becoming clear that we should look broadly and see all the ways in which participation benefits people and their communities. As we'll see, finding ways to demonstrate the difference in environmental terms is urgent - to keep people motivated to act – but acting on something that has meaning to us also has a powerful impact. It helps address urgent social challenges like loneliness, anxiety or simply helping each other feel more connected to our community and our neighbours.

Seven things we've learned about community action for the environment

We've seen how the climate emergency means everyone is taking steps to lead greener, more sustainable lives. And yet we know that behaviour change is one of the hardest things to implement and sustain.

Shettleston Community Growing Project

Concrete, tangible ideas can help people act, but messages of fear don't necessarily help people to change their behaviour.[86] Where dire warnings may have a paralysing effect, showing what each of us can do has helped encourage people to act.

We're learning that simple steps from motivating the willing, to finding fun and engaging ways to measure progress can help sustain people's energy and interest. Deeper and more profound work to diversify and make the movement more inclusive are also an essential part of ensuring that we support, empower and include all of our communities in this movement for change.

1. Behaviour change comes one step at a time

Inertia is a, "key obstacle to changing behaviour,"[87] so helping those who are already willing but haven't yet acted may help encourage more widespread change. The Scottish Government's Climate Challenge Fund found that it had the most success by helping people to act on ideas they'd already considered but hadn't got around to doing yet. Projects were much less likely to convert sceptics who saw no merit in being greener.[88] Environmental campaigner Anne-Marie Bonneau argues, "We don't need a handful of people doing zero waste perfectly, we need millions of people doing it imperfectly."[89]

What helps people to change?

The UK Government's Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) emphasises that behaviour change should be made easy, attractive, timely and social – the EAST model.[90]

Making it easy might mean breaking an action down into clearer, more concrete steps. 'Eat five a day' is a more precise and useful message than 'eat healthily'.

The social element is where community groups can make a powerful difference. Those around us play a key role in influencing our behaviour, so our social networks may help enable collective action, by providing mutual support, and spreading behaviour change through the power of positive example.[91]

When people find out that their neighbours are using less energy, their own usage drops.[92] However, there's also risk of a boomerang effect - if people see their own consumption is below average their usage may increase.[93] Adding a message of approval or disapproval, like smiley or sad face emojis, can prevent this effect[94] because affirmation and encouragement are powerful levers. When we're told we've done well, we want to keep going.

Projects have learned that aligning their work to what matters to people is an important motivator. "People's values (guiding principles in their lives), and their sense of identity (how they define themselves) are crucial to how they engage with climate change, and are broadly consistent between different contexts and situations. This consistency is important in establishing low-carbon lifestyles (rather than a cluster of more disparate behaviour changes). The reasons and motivations behind changes in behaviour really matter."[95]

This process of making your work personal and positive is really important to tap into people's different motivators – from being 'early adopters', to making it meaningful for people and their loved ones. Going Carbon Neutral Stirling aimed to reach half the city's population who were new to environmental work, through a sales and marketing approach. It set daily and monthly targets for cold-calling local organisations and as a result 261 community groups, schools, businesses, and council departments agreed to take part in the project's Carbon Cutter Plans. [96]

With ongoing support, each group developed its own plan, choosing from a list of actions designed to reduce their carbon footprint. Working in groups encouraged larger scale participation and meant that people could support each other. 85% of participants surveyed made changes to their behaviour or lifestyle, with 96% saying they had stuck with these actions after a year. The impact of these sustained changes included an estimated reduction of 682,323 miles in car journeys, and 676,943kg of waste diverted from landfill. The project learned that appealing for help, and emphasising how people and communities can contribute, was much more effective than just suggesting that they could save money.[97]

As well as its work on 'fast fashion', Forest Recycling Project provides vouchers that entitle housing association residents to up 50 litres of free, reclaimed paint to decorate their new home. Clients were initially sceptical about the idea of using waste paint, but were convinced when they understood that waste didn't mean inferior quality or having less choice. "They'll say, 'I don't want waste paint'," explains CEO Pernille Moeller, but if, "your daughter really wants a pink room – I will go to serious trouble to find that pink your daughter wants!

"We actively talk about paint and waste, not about CO_2. We say, 'This would have gone to landfill, it would eventually go into our waterways and our soil.' That's way more tangible than, 'There was a lot of plastic in the production'. You can almost see it: cans of paint in landfill, and eventually that metal casing is going to erode. It's an easy story to tell." [98]

This personalised and thoughtful approach, which links taking care of the environment with taking care of your home and family, alongside their wider strategy of reduce, re-use and recycle, means they've been able to reuse 459,097 litres of paint, saving 1,406,065 Kg of CO_2 emissions.[99] And though the work with housing associations is expensive for the charity, it's a valuable chance for engagement, often leading to residents getting involved as volunteers.

Finding these connections is vital for behaviour 'spill over' - the idea that one green action will lead to another, unlocking a pattern of more sustainable living. It's a key goal, but one of the hardest to achieve. The Scottish Government's Climate Challenge Fund found that, even where projects set out to encourage it, this, "very rarely worked when the promoted behaviours were, in their [participants'] eyes, unconnected."[100]

By framing the work as part of something bigger, projects can help to develop those connections. "Making the link between growing food in your garden and stuff that you potentially throw out at the end of the day is quite interesting," explained a member of the Edinburgh Garden Share Scheme. "If I'm growing stuff here, I definitely don't want to be throwing it out."[101]

Engaging people's values and their sense of identity may be the best chance of creating spill over because people want to live up to the reputation they've established for themselves. [102] Sharing knowledge and making the conversation part of everyday life is important because of the key role that peer pressure has in driving behaviour, making going green more visible and mainstream.[103]

Linking small actions to the bigger picture can also help people to make greener choices: if someone saves money on heating bills but spends it on a bigger television, the emissions could cancel out the original savings.[104]

Focusing on values is a way to emphasise the other benefits of carbon reduction, such as improved air quality and green space, better health and wellbeing and more connected communities. Campaigning has tended to emphasise the negative: what you should give up, what we're trying to prevent. Don't miss the positives, the chance to show how greener choices can improve everyday life.

2. Harness our desire to connect and feel we belong

Neighbourliness has a strong appeal for many people. **Transition Streets**, set up by Communities Living Sustainably Dorset, shared advice on transport, energy, food and water. But it presented itself primarily as a community group, "a chance to get together and have a chat with your neighbour."[105]

The tight local focus made a real difference and they learned that groups drawn from a single street worked much better than those from a wider area. "A lot of the neighbours would run away from anything described as green," one participant admitted, but they got involved because the sense of community appealed to them. The combination of peer support and practical knowledge created momentum and enthusiasm and people were inspired to make small, practical changes. "I've lagged my pipes, installed a reflector behind two radiators, insulated my loft cover, cut my time in the shower."[106] Over six months, one small group of neighbours saved £658.66, with pledged action expected to save an additional £1,626 over time.

Throughout, there was a sense of learning together and supporting each other as equals. Communities Living Sustainably Dorset gave its groups autonomy; they ran their own meetings and recruited their own members. This made them more self-sustaining, with some groups continuing to work together after the project ended.

A small grant to pilot the **Fife Communities Climate Action Network** tested ways to build capacity and trial a model of regional support that, if successful, could be adopted by similar networks across Scotland. Through five networking meetings, they brought together 30 community groups to learn from each other and network with potential partners. These simple opportunities to connect with others in their area helped 55% of groups to start to tackle challenges they faced in their work. The benefits ranged from gaining reassurance that, "just knowing that there are others in Fife doing similar work, sharing challenges and information, is a boost to morale [...] we're not plugging away at this alone" and also, "because of the contacts made, we have now established a development trust and given us a first project to focus on."[107] 19 organisations joined the network, which went on to be part of **Fife Environment Partnership**, which helped govern Fife Council and other public sector bodies' work on climate change.

Grantholders also say that though leaflets and advertising campaigns can raise awareness, nothing beats speaking to people face-to-face. Door-knocking, personal appeals and word of mouth can get through to people who don't respond to written information. Conversation offers the chance to ask questions, to hear what a project is actually doing, and what it could do for you personally.

Make these conversations part of other work you do. Visiting homes to offer free energy advice, or redistributing surplus food, are chances to raise environmental awareness, give people information about where to get further help, or share ways they can get involved in the project.[108]

Talking can also prepare the way for other approaches. **Woodland Routes to Wellbeing** tried to reach people on one local estate through a volunteer recruitment day. That didn't work, but they learned that people were much more interested in, "results they are seeing take place," like the project team at work in the woods, and the chance to talk to them about what they were doing.[109] One resident approached the team about fly tipping, leading to a leaflet drop recruiting other people to help clear up the woods and surrounding area. They formed a litter group, which has been, "instrumental in maintaining the area," and recruited five litter champions.[110]

Downpatrick Men's Shed

3. Use the power of good example and keep demonstrating what's possible

Projects have shown that working at community level is small enough to feel personal, but big enough to have a real impact. Individual changes add up so much faster when there's a group making them. But this isn't just about increasing numbers, it can also be about chipping away at stereotypes and cynicism and helping people develop confidence and self-belief.

"Some people have the mentality; if it's just me that does it, it's not going to make a massive difference, so why do it?" explained a participant in Sustainable Sunderland. "Being different can be a social barrier […] People are judgemental, you get called for doing [for example] a litter pick […] A good community stick together, so if someone does stuff, others follow."[111]

Grantholders have found that emphasising the moral and social reasons to act, while showing practical ways to do it, is most likely to lead to action.[112] Participants said that one of Manor House PACT's biggest achievements was the way it improved their sense of belonging, of community. "You start on small things, but it snowballs," one explained, "we are all supporters of PACT, we are all doing things together." While ways to save money were attractive, "working together for a shared goal has been the biggest driver of behaviour change." As one resident put it, "I have learnt I can make a difference… that **we** can make a difference."[113]

Social Farms and Gardens' Growing Resilience project in Northern Ireland nurtured, "the development of trusting and reciprocal relationships," which helped people gain confidence to take their first steps. "The support from the other groups made it easier to test it out, a gentle audience. Even after we did it we were chatting about how we could it differently." By the end this new found assertiveness had become motivation in itself, "We don't need to follow trends/the crowd etc. When we have a good idea, we should do it."[114]

Sustainable Sunderland found that, while businesses wanted to engage with environmental issues, "they aren't always top, or anywhere near the top, of their priority list. This was a huge issue for smaller organisations whose tiny margins prevented them from getting involved." VCS organisations had to focus on, "keeping a building open, paying staff and raising money for project work. Environmental sustainability and green issues slip down the order of importance."[115] The challenge is to find ways of embedding those issues into everyday life.

The Climate Action Top Up Pilot

To support our grantholders in Wales to be more sustainable we've piloted green top-up grants. Working with partners **Renew Wales** and **Severn Wye Energy Agency**, projects develop action plans, and The National Lottery Community Fund provide an extra £10,000 upfront to support the expenses of becoming greener.[116] These grants have paid for a wide range of things, from electric charging points, solar panels and thermostats, to local feasibility studies, orchards and allotments.

As a result, twelve of the building projects supported by **Sustainable Communities Wales**, have estimated their annual savings at 236,049 kilowatt hours - a 56 tonne reduction in CO_2, and cost savings of £13,487. Others, like **Growing Space** have involved 40 people with mental health or learning disabilities in carbon reduction activities.

We learned that grantholders don't need any real encouragement to take part, but access to impartial advice is really important so that projects, "were able to have confidence that we were addressing the most important areas and that the quotes we were getting were reasonable and from reputable companies." Charities valued the grants because, without the extra money, few felt able to pay for or prioritise activities like these. Overall, we've learned that offering larger amounts and a longer window to spend it in would help similar initiatives have even more impact.[117]

Cooper's Wood and Field Community Group

It's easier to act when your choices are clear, simple and fit your situation. Showing people how to do something is more effective than just telling them – particularly if this happens in their own home or business. By visiting people, projects can make changes on the spot, identify potential problems and highlight the tips that will be most useful in each case.

Repeat visits support and reinforce change. It takes time to form a new habit, and people are more likely to stick to their pledges if they think someone will check how they're doing. A second visit is an opportunity to check possible barriers and give people a chance to try further changes – or to try again with what hasn't worked the first time. Manor House PACT found that follow-up visits were, "incredibly effective in seeing and addressing problems," calculating that the 363 homes visited twice in one year saved an average of £179 each. [118]

Some projects have tried to simplify people's choices by categorising their options as "easier" (turning off lights), or "harder" (using the car less or replacing inefficient boilers). These distinctions didn't stand up in practice because different people find different things easy or hard. And it became clear that, by making assumptions about what people might like to do, projects were influencing the outcomes. The turning point came when they replaced these rankings with the potential carbon savings for each action. When people could see the effect their decisions would have, they stopped choosing options that saved less carbon. Given the right information, people targeted the biggest impact.[119]

Existing groups have built-in strengths and connections, so it's important to make the most of them. Building environmentally friendly behaviour into what the community already values, rather than trying to impose something from outside can reach a larger number of people and beyond the usual suspects of the green movement.

At its simplest, this can be a way of getting the word out, for example by asking a local GP consortia or community group to promote a project, or by asking groups or businesses to sign up to shared action. Another option is to develop longer term partnerships, in which one side offers green expertise while the other brings a new client base, with knowledge of their service users' needs and priorities. Where partner groups are already trusted, they give weight and credibility to the environmental advice.

"It would take us forever to [build that trust]," explains Mark Fishpool of Middlesbrough Environment City, which has developed a network of partners across the town. "And why would you, when there's somebody there already?" Working with community interest groups, MEC helps them to develop their resources, "so they then have the capacity to get on and recruit from their community and deliver on our behalf." Co-designing the work makes sure that it meets the needs of both organisations.[120]

4. Make it tangible: measure and show the difference you are making

Another key insight is the importance of making changes visible and demonstrating their clear connection to, or impact on, community life. **The Centre for Sustainable Energy** found that encouraging people to increase their loft insulation might make the biggest carbon savings – but installing a solar panel on a local school would do much more to raise awareness.[121]

Quick wins, visible change and recognition of what you've achieved are good motivators because they make things concrete, telling a positive story of change. Feeling that you've made a difference is also empowering. And showing what you've done can double its value by motivating others and drawing more attention and support. Sharing successes can mean everything from showing and celebrating progress as you go, to finding ways of recording less visible or tangible progress like carbon reduction.

Construction of the Connswater Community Greenway ran from 2013 to 2017, but planners made sure that people could benefit from the work as quickly as possible. As each section of the park was completed, it was opened to the public, "so that local people could use the facility and quickly see what the project was aiming to achieve."[122] Within the first four months of construction, the Greenway opened a major new bridge and a woodland trail. They launched with large public events – a naming ceremony and a festival – designed to promote the Greenway, tie it in to sources of local pride, and demonstrate how the community could use it.[123]

Sharing achievement is harder when your results are less tangible. Work on climate can be particularly challenging: how do you celebrate changes you can't see or touch, such as lower emissions? Our grantholders have found ways to visualise or measure the difference they've made, helping people to understand what they've achieved.

Visualise it

"One of the main challenges, specifically if you consider the use of energy in the home, is these difficult concepts, like – 'What does six tonnes of carbon dioxide look like?' We use this as the average figure for people in Blaenau. And what it is – if you could see it - is the equivalent to a hot air balloon stuck to each dwelling."

Y Dref Werdd[124]

Finding ways to quantify carbon savings can give a sense of control and agency. The Centre for Sustainable Energy found that 'measurable outputs' are an effective way to drive change, with community groups emphasising, "the importance of monitoring and publicising the impact of the actions."[125] As well as sharing successes, this can be a way to spread awareness of the issue, and of what can be done to tackle it.

It's important to find the right level of measurement. The Scottish Government's Climate Challenge Fund found that calculating carbon savings could be, "a challenging, complex and confusing process."[126] Though targets can be motivating, some groups found recording progress was stressful. With so many different tools and calculators available, the choice can be baffling. Some measurement systems require many inputs and calculations; others are simpler, but less accurate.

While carbon savings matter, community groups often have other priorities, such as raising awareness or empowering people. Nobody wants to spend more time on recording than on actually doing the work. Projects and funders need to be realistic about what measurement systems may be available and appropriate. A community group's motivational milestones might not need the robust measurement levels of a scientific research project.

Dorset Community Energy installed solar panels on 12 schools and four community buildings.[127] Participating schools will save an estimated £600,000 over a period of 20 years, as well as saving 3,000 tonnes of CO_2. They've used the panels as an educational resource and placed smart displays in the entrance foyer of each school, so that pupils, staff and visitors can learn about the energy they are generating.[128]

We know that incentives can have a short-term impact but may not contribute to long-term change.[129] The government's feed-in tariff system, which paid householders for the energy they produced from solar panels, led to a boom in installations; but this stopped when the tariffs ended.[130] Studies also suggest that financial rewards only encourage people to behave differently while the incentive lasts, and only for the action that will save them money.[131]

You can reduce this risk by presenting financial savings as part of a larger discussion that builds carbon literacy and makes the link between reduced costs and protecting the environment. Recognise too that you'll need to tailor messaging for different audiences. Bright Green Business matches environmental students with grantholders for 10-week placements. They found that boards and committees responded strongly to the financial benefits of making environmentally friendly changes, but when speaking to the wider community, it was better to talk about how change would benefit them or their area.[132]

When you can measure what you're doing, it becomes easier to set targets. The **Building Better Opportunities (BBO)** programme - a large investment with the European Social Fund (ESF) into tackling the root causes of poverty and driving local jobs and growth - asks all grantholders to create a sustainable development policy and record their progress. It's a way of showing that environmental action isn't just for green projects, but for everyone. The bar for evidence was deliberately set quite low, as it's designed to be a minimum requirement that everybody can meet, with encouragement to go further if they can. Projects must report every quarter, but there's flexibility over the level of recording and action. We ask BBO grantholders to consider which areas they can focus on, with simple baselines as a starting point for continuous improvement.[133] This guarantees that all 132 projects take part.

Setting targets can also help keep up the momentum, give a clear sense of what you're aiming for and make it fun. Healthy competition can reinforce change. Within your organisation, try tracking how much waste goes to landfill in seven days, then see if you can do better next week. Create a table to compare the performance of different green initiatives, to see where you've done most good, and where you could do better. Or get in touch with other organisations in your area and suggest a competition: can you top the local green league?[134]

You can make a game of one-off events, too. For greening projects - which find ways to add plants to an urban neighbourhood, such as window boxes and vertical planting – get the community involved, see who can finish their planter first. It's an effortless way to make the process faster, and to get people invested in the results.

The change our grantholders have created is something to celebrate. Sharing it is a way to reward their hard work. Whether that's through telling people about a new green space, or challenging them to recycle more, it can be a way to inspire more people to join the cause.

Climate Action Fund launch

5. Create a network of advocates and enthusiasts

Creating supporters and 'cheerleaders' has helped grantholders to share information and shift mindsets, getting people invested in the ongoing success of their work. Inspiring individuals can really help to push change - informally or as part of an existing role.

For example, champions from among staff and volunteers can be an easy way to instil green values across a wider organisation, Building Futures, a Building Better Opportunities project in Buckinghamshire, commissioned an independent audit commended their progress in developing new environmental policies and procedures. It suggested that their best next step would be to get their staff on board, including appointing green champions to help people change their behaviour.[135]

Others have found that bringing in someone from outside can offer specialist expertise or fresh eyes. In Scotland, Bright Green Business students tailored their approach to the needs and interests of the host organisation: a key part of the programme's success. They could then offer specific solutions, from how to save water and energy, to tips on engaging local residents via social media. Not only did the students bring enthusiasm, they helped charities access free resources they weren't aware of, like energy audits, to help reduce their costs. What's more, they ran a wide range of staff training and workshops, helping to make changes stick once the placement ended. Every organisation reported positive environmental impact as a result of the placement, and all noted an increase in staff awareness of environmental issues too. Five organisations said they'd reduced their energy use and saved money.[136]

Alley Pals

Personality makes a big difference when you're trying to energise and motivate others. Whether you're appointing someone from within the community, or an outside consultant, it's important to match the person to the role. The Bright Green Business model takes great care over the choice of candidates for its student placements. Working with the host organisation, it identifies the needs, aims and limits of the placement, providing a shortlist of applicants for the host to interview and make the final selection. This helps to find the best fit.[137]

Still, it takes time to form habits and, sometimes, to overcome resistance. Furniture Plus hosted a Bright Green Business student who set out to improve recycling rates. To encourage people to take their waste to one of the new recycling points he removed the kitchen rubbish baskets, only to find that staff kept creating their own makeshift bins. He persevered and, "after constant reminders and engaging with staff this stopped and recycling rates increased." Within weeks, the new system became habit, and people began to feel pride in taking positive action.

'Constant reminders' could so easily feel like nagging, so it's important to find champions who can energise people, rather than putting their backs up.[138] From other projects, we've heard that it's important to watch out for personality clashes. If one of your community's early adopters is on bad terms with the neighbours, that could discourage others from taking part. Be aware of local dynamics, and make sure that they don't undermine your messaging.

The consultants of Renew Wales are based in third sector organisations and draw on a network of peer advisors to carry out their advice. This model both helps to build a local network of knowledge, and has the weight of already trusted voices, people and organisations already established in the community.

The National Lottery Community Fund's own Green Champions network was revitalised by increased numbers, explicit buy-in from management and regular meetings for mutual support and to share tips.[139]

Menter Iaith Fflint a Wrecsam

6. Take active steps to be diverse and inclusive

When Bristol became the UK's first European Green Capital, explains Jasmine Ketibuah-Foley of **Green & Black Ambassadors**,[140] she, "could find almost no black or brown role models to look up to."[141] Bristol was, "trying to be very sustainable, but it wasn't actually engaging with other communities in those conversations."[142] The Green & Black Ambassadors project set out to change that, aiming to pay, train and support a new generation of environmental leaders from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds.

Diversifying the movement means involving more people – but it also means recognising and supporting more of the work that is already happening. Research by the Green & Black Ambassadors found that the, "perception that BAME Bristolians did not participate in 'green' activities was not true. In fact, many people had lived very 'green' lives for a long time," but the mainstream environmental movement hadn't paid attention. The Ambassadors argue that the city needs to do more to understand its diverse communities, and to recognise their contributions.[143]

Women Connect First works to empower women from Black and minority ethnic communities in Cardiff and South East Wales. They focused on education as a route to change and ran a month of interactive workshops about the environment and an event for women to share their experiences with climate change and how it has affected their lives and home countries. They went on to turn this into action, creating a community garden so women could learn gardening skills, and grow food for their Wales World Café. They explicitly encourage local consumption as a way to contribute to tackling climate change.

Other people say that it can be hard to make environmentally friendly choices on a low income. And research shows that the richest 10% of households produce three times as much CO_2 as those from the poorest 10%. For transport, the difference is between seven to eight times, and ten times for aviation.[144] Bright Green Business made sure that their students had someone to support them within their host company, as well as environmental mentorship from outside. The project paid students a living wage, while host companies offered accommodation. This is important, because when the work is unpaid, it may become dominated by affluent voices - those who can afford to take part. And people are less likely to join a movement that doesn't seem to include people like them, or to recognise their concerns.

Actively breaking down other practical barriers is important too. Venues should be open to everyone and accessible for people with disabilities and by public transport. This is particularly important for practical sessions or when using outdoor venues. In Ynysybwl, **Vision for our Valley** holds activities in the forest, but makes sure that facilities and transport are available so they can be reached easily.[145] Trained staff are there to support people with anxiety or mental health issues, and publicity and marketing materials are bilingual and encourage Welsh speakers to use and promote both the language and the project.[146]

Environmentally themed classes in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) can bring double benefits as they are a way to share practical knowledge, as well as improving language skills and reaching different members of the community. Sustainable Sunderland's ESOL participants learned to measure their own carbon footprints[147] and in Middlesbrough, classes taught both practical skills and the English language terms for them. Subjects included gardening, energy efficiency and cycling. "That proved really effective, because it was meeting the real need of improving language skills, but also, 'I can manage my heating system', or 'I can ride a bike'."[148]

Think inclusively

Think about the changes you're promoting, and whether they work for everyone. Plastic straws have become a symbol of disposable culture, but they can be a vital disability aid. Disability rights activist Penny Pepper points out, "I need straws that bend, ones that can handle all drinks, including medication, and all temperatures […] that won't cause me to choke or be difficult for me to keep in my mouth."[149]

The Toy Project

7. Be honest about what is and isn't effective

Communities Living Sustainably Dorset's **Eco-Schools** project was part of an international programme to raise environmental awareness, improve the school environment and create financial savings. Keep Britain Tidy managed the CLS project across the UK and empowered pupils to take a lead in their school, while involving parents and the wider community.

Young people developed action plans to improve their school's performance on energy, waste and recycling.[150] In Dorchester, St Mary's Catholic First School reduced electricity consumption by 15%. Across 12 participating schools, recycling almost tripled, while 'switch off' days reduced energy usage by up to 50%.[151]

Children also worked to influence the behaviour of adults, at home and in the classroom. St Mary's Eco-team monitored lights left on in empty classrooms, leaving a 'splat' where they found wasted energy. "Nobody wants a red 'splat' on their whiteboard!" [152]

Other grantholders tell us that working with children brings a lot of goodwill, particularly from family audiences. Woodland Routes to Wellbeing worked with the local primary school to raise awareness. The children made a model of the woodland, which attracted a lot of interest when they displayed it in a local supermarket, with more people volunteering as a result.[153]

Longstone School

However, others found that there are limits to children's power to influence and overall Communities Living Sustainably projects found that working directly with parents was likely to have the biggest impact on their behaviour.[154]

Grantholders have also found that it helps to be independent of government. Local councils have a huge role to play in improving sustainability, but sometimes prompt mixed feelings. Residents may be wary about checks on benefits or legal status, making them less likely to respond to officials. Manor House PACT found that householders were more likely to invite staff inside once they knew they weren't from the council.[155]

Recognising that there are limits to what individuals can influence is important to sustaining involvement too. "At some point, unpopular decisions have to be made," explains Mark Fishpool of Middlesbrough Environment City. "Without real changes at policy level, individuals simply can't change, because the system doesn't allow them. I cycle 5,000 miles a year. [But] I still have a car – when the kids were little, we had no choice."[156]

Sustaining your work matters too and while strong projects and inspiring individuals can help others to change their behaviour, there is a risk that interest will wane once the initial project has ended, or if the champion moves on. When Forest Recycling Project starts a greening project, bringing planting to an urban area, they also work to build ownership among the community. Asking volunteers to help with planting and watering encourages community pride, while preparing people for ongoing maintenance. If you establish groups, people will be able to help each other. "It's about finding that model where someone takes ownership, to the degree where [they] can then carry it."[157]

Activities are most likely to continue where there is a sense of continuity: a new host organisation, committed group members who will carry the work forward, or something physical, such as equipment provided by the project.[158]

Conclusion

There is a powerful appetite for environmental change. As our grantholders' work shows, community action can deliver both real impact and important co-benefits: improving health and wellbeing, strengthening community pride and supporting training and jobs.

We've seen how effective work at community scale can be, empowering at individual level but big enough to make a difference. It offers personal solutions to something that can seem intimidatingly large and abstract. Yet we've also seen that the work needs external support. Communities can lead and inspire behaviour change, but they still need the right infrastructure in place.

Nevertheless, our grantholders have shown the power of a positive story: both what we can achieve together and how it can make life better. Instead of fearful messaging, they've found that local, visible change encourages more people to take part, building ownership and driving wider behaviour change.

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