



# LOOKING FOR LEADERS

Supporting communities  
to live more sustainably

Graham Duxbury



**Communities Living Sustainably** was a £12 million programme funded by the Big Lottery Fund. Twelve local organisations in England were awarded up to £1million each to help deal with the potential impact of climate change and build the sustainability and resilience of their local community. The programme has run for five years, with these communities sharing what they learned with each other and providing inspiration to others.

This report draws on the work undertaken by Groundwork UK, Energy Saving Trust, New Economics Foundation, Building Research Establishment and the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens to support and learn from projects funded through Communities Living Sustainably.

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The views expressed in this report are those of the partners and not the Big Lottery Fund.



# Communities Living Sustainably

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How do we invest in the sustainability of our communities in an age of austerity? How do we inspire and mobilise people to think as global citizens given such divisive political discourse? Where should we look for environmental leadership as government immerses itself in Brexit negotiations and councils struggle to meet the basic needs of their communities?

The achievements of the 12 projects funded through the Big Lottery Fund's Communities Living Sustainably (CLS) programme demonstrate that remarkable things can happen when local organisations are given the funds, the support and the freedom to drive change in their area. We know that, in a world buffeted by global economic forces and increasingly feeling the impacts of climate change those communities that can generate their own power, grow their own food and develop more circular economies will be more resilient to future shocks. However, we continue to find it difficult to make this innovation mainstream and to escape its reliance on sporadic, short-term funding.

This essay looks at what we can learn from CLS and how we can use that learning to influence the policy and practice of those in a position to promote and sustain local environmental action.

**Graham Duxbury**  
Chief Executive, Groundwork UK  
March 2017

# Introduction:

## Resilience and civil society

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The earthquake that struck Kobe in Japan on 17 January 1995 was the most devastating the country had suffered since 1923. 6,400 people lost their lives and 75,000 buildings were destroyed. In the aftermath of the disaster it became obvious that state-led emergency relief and rebuilding efforts were struggling to cope given the damage that had been done to local infrastructure.

**W**hat happened next was a first for Japanese society as a range of non-government organisations who had previously focused on international campaigns and cooperation began to arrive in the area to stimulate and coordinate volunteer action to support local communities. The episode is widely regarded as the point at which the concept of 'civil society' took root in Japan, and was followed a few years later by the government enacting the Law to Promote Nonprofit Activity, formally recognising this new sector and establishing a stronger legal framework for it to operate.

It would be glib to equate this extreme example of volunteer-led action with the activities of local groups supporting communities in the UK, but there are useful parallels to be drawn about what stimulates and sustains community action. On Boxing Day 2015 the River Irwell in Greater Manchester rose to unprecedented levels following heavy rainfall before finally bursting its banks, bringing flooding to Salford and the surrounding area with thousands of people losing power and possessions and the emergency services evacuating residents by boat. They were helped in this task by the Irwell Valley Sustainable Communities Project, which had established a community emergency plan and a network of volunteers who had been trained to issue flood warnings and had a list of the 100 most vulnerable households in the area. The project

has become embedded in the way local agencies manage emergency relief and improve the long-term resilience of the area. It has taken a leading role in surveying the Irwell flood plain and has successfully lobbied the council to convert 6.5 hectares of land adjacent to the river into a wetland to help protect homes and businesses in future.

Six years ago the Big Lottery Fund initiated an experiment to test different approaches to increasing the sustainability and resilience of local communities in 12 locations in England. The programme – Communities Living Sustainably – set out with a number of questions it was trying to resolve: to what degree could community-led action drive environmental behaviour change; does environmental activity bring additional social and economic benefits for vulnerable groups in society; how might community groups be supported to make such change happen and, crucially, to make it last?

The experiment has been played out through 12 local partnership projects, each granted £1m following a competitive process with the programme as a whole supported by a 'learning partnership' of national organisations with expertise in energy, the built environment, community food growing, local economies and behaviour change.



*Volunteers clean up the Irwell Valley after the boxing day floods (Nature in Salford / Mersey Basin Rivers Trust)*

Over the last five years the 12 projects – spread from Newcastle to Dorset – have supported and delivered activities as diverse as home energy efficiency audits, cookery classes, upcycling ventures and flood relief programmes. Well over 60,000 people have been engaged in those activities, nearly 10% of those being considered particularly vulnerable to climate impacts. More than 6,000 people have received training or progressed into paid or voluntary positions in the green sector while nearly 10,000 have been supported to make greener choices in their homes or workplaces.

Over the same period the context within which these projects have been developed and implemented has altered significantly with changes of government, different funding regimes and an ongoing – and tightening – squeeze on public sector expenditure.

The achievements delivered by the 12 projects – and the learning generated from understanding how they have operated and evolved – are important if we make the assumption that levels of resilience and community self-help are going to become more significant pre-requisites for maintaining and enhancing our quality of life in future. This is not because we need to adopt a post-apocalyptic survivalist mentality, nor because the route to happiness is through some romanticised notion of ‘Good Life’ self-

sufficiency. What is true, however, is that an era of extended political uncertainty will breed economic turmoil, meaning more shocks to the global system are an ever present danger. At the same time we are increasingly witnessing the impacts of a changing climate closer to home with warmer, wetter weather overwhelming our ill-prepared infrastructure and, as is the case the world over, impacting first and worst on those in society who have least.

Add to these global forces the fact that the local services, facilities and assets we’ve come to recognise and rely on will, in the foreseeable future, receive much reduced levels of public money – given local authority budget cuts in particular – and it becomes obvious that, as citizens, we are going to have to organise ourselves and commit more of our time to maintain the social infrastructure that keeps us safe and well and underpins the networks and activities that we value.

The following sections draw on the lessons learned from the activities of the local projects funded through CLS and focus in particular on identifying how stakeholders (whether partners, funders, regulators or policymakers) can support greater levels of community-led action on sustainability and resilience. ■■

# Learning and legacy:

## 1. Driving change

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Community-led action can bring about behaviour change and help communities to prepare better for the future

**H**ow to encourage pro-environmental behaviour change has been the subject of debate and research for a number of decades. Learning from a series of national campaigns and local initiatives has led to a number of core principles that are considered received wisdom: creating fear of the future doesn't work; focusing on intractable global issues breeds powerlessness and inaction; behaviours can be nudged through a combination of incentives and rewards; people are willing and to some extent programmed to do the right thing but if the right thing isn't easy to do it won't get done.

CLS tested another core pillar of behaviour change theory, namely that the messenger matters as much as the message. Through the programme, local community organisations, many of which would not see themselves as 'green groups', took a lead in attempting to engage residents of an area in activities designed to reduce waste, conserve natural resources and change consumption patterns across several areas of life from energy use to cooking.

External evaluation of project outcomes and internal programme learning both concluded that local community organisations can achieve considerable success in reaching people – particularly groups considered vulnerable – and engaging them in activities which improve environmental awareness and understanding or promote collective voluntary action or individual behaviour change.

In London the Manor House PACT project developed the Closer Neighbours initiative which supported groups of neighbours to learn together about ways to live more sustainably.

“ *Such 'peer to peer' messaging ensures that conversations are less threatening or moralising and at the same time are rooted in the experiences of people living in the same area.* ”

Members met together and worked through a guide covering topics such as climate change, energy efficiency, waste reduction, sourcing and growing food, and smarter travel, exploring each other's motivations and barriers. Meanwhile in Liverpool the L8 Living Sustainably project adopted the concept of 'Community Living Rooms' - friendly and open spaces for anyone wanting to learn new skills or meet new people living in the area. By emphasising social benefits, the project found it was able to engage more people than might attend a workshop session that was more explicitly 'environmental'.

The reasons for this success resonate with current theories and research around behaviour change. At the heart of many of the local projects were committed and trusted volunteers or community leaders who acted as the front line in terms of recruitment and engagement strategies. Such 'peer to peer' messaging ensures that conversations are less threatening or moralising and at the same time are rooted in the experiences of people living in the same area and therefore dealing with the same issues and risks.



*Greening Wingrove used the 'Community Living Room' concept*

In some instances CLS projects worked through specific organisations or individuals in order to target sections of the community not normally reached by public agencies or through more mainstream communication channels. Sustainable Sunderland's partnership included the International Community Organisation of Sunderland and Sunderland BME Network while One Planet Middlesbrough worked with Middlesbrough and Stockton Mind to reach new audiences. Adapting messaging and engagement techniques at a very granular level like this is part and parcel of ensuring environmentally responsible behaviours are made relevant to different cultural contexts and personal circumstances.

Whilst the combination of open, accessible activities and relevant, targeted messaging delivered through CLS demonstrates that it's possible to reach people and help them begin a process of change in terms of their own understanding, awareness and lifestyle choices, projects have also wrestled with the two issues that continue to be a feature of debate when it comes to behaviour change programmes. The first is that, once awareness and a commitment to action have been engendered, embedding and normalising changed behaviours requires a mutually reinforcing system of support:

community-scale activists able to inspire people to take action; an effective local infrastructure that makes sustainable choices easy; a reinforcing national narrative about the importance of those actions; and national policies which create the right mix of rewards and regulations. So, while communities can drive change, that change needs to sit within a broader, supportive context that communities will find it hard to influence.

The second area of debate is the challenge of squaring behaviour change with social outcomes. What CLS has been particularly successful in achieving is increased social capital and improved community infrastructure which enables people to achieve a better quality of life (eg by having access to better green spaces or by escaping fuel poverty) or, as a community, being better prepared to cope with future uncertainty. In areas where levels of social capital and political agency are low it could be argued that these are more important outcomes than individual lifestyle shifts, particularly when we consider that, in pure environmental terms, many of the areas targeted by such programmes are more likely to be suffering the consequences of other people's unsustainable lifestyles than generating the biggest problems themselves in terms of carbon or waste. ■■

## 2. Changing lives

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Community-led environmental action can deliver powerful personal benefits for people in need.

CLS had a specific focus on reaching groups and individuals who might be considered by some to be marginalised, vulnerable or – in old money – socially excluded. The premise being tested was that stimulating community-led environmental action could be a vehicle for delivering change in people’s broader personal circumstances. It also responded to the clearly proven correlations between social deprivation, health inequalities and environmental poverty. The design and targeting of CLS projects were guided by the recognition that people living in economically disadvantaged areas also have access to fewer environmental assets, such as good green spaces, fresh food or sustainable transport options but are also most likely to be impacted by the injurious impacts of climate change, resource scarcity or unsustainable living, such as increased flood risk, high energy prices or worsening air quality.

On a very practical level CLS projects have achieved success in mitigating some of these multiple deprivation issues. Green spaces have been created or improved, fuel poverty has been alleviated and people are better equipped to make healthier dietary choices. Across the programme more than 4,000 vulnerable households received practical advice in terms of reducing their utility bills with average potential savings of up to £1,000 identified for each household and in one project alone (Manor House) 800 people reported they now felt able to grow their own food.

Going further, however, CLS has demonstrated that, designed and delivered in the right way, projects aimed at fostering collective community action can have a transformative impact on the prospects and life chances of people with significant personal challenges.

“ Across the programme more than 4,000 vulnerable households received practical advice in terms of reducing their utility bills with average potential savings of up to £1,000 identified for each household...”

Brian’s story is typical of many captured through the programme. Brian started tending an allotment with support from Real Food Wythenshawe after being diagnosed with bowel cancer and undergoing extensive surgery. He was struggling to recover and continue his working life and had just gone through a bleak period of inactivity, unsure even if he was going to live much longer. He had spent many months lacking the confidence to leave home for any length of time, but found that the allotment offered him much more than a morning of gardening. He says:

“The allotment is such a friendly place and I definitely believe laughter is the best medicine... More than anything is the return of my positive attitude to life. I realise the importance of maintaining the things you love. I have made good friends here and I generally feel healthier eating seasonal, good quality food.” ■■

### 3. Engaging and embedding

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Community environmental activities are relevant and popular but more effective when integrated with a supportive local infrastructure.



*Food growing activities at  
CLS Dorset*

It is increasingly said that the best way of engaging people in action about climate change is to ensure you don't mention the words climate change. Putting aside the efforts of high profile 'deniers' to muddy the debate and sow confusion, it is again received wisdom that complex global issues and the language that goes with them are off-putting, inaccessible or irrelevant when compared to the 'more pressing day-to-day' issues of feeding your family, paying your rent or coping with the challenges of crime in your neighbourhood.

Learning from CLS projects affirms the view that rooting conversations in everyday concerns

and engaging people through offers and incentives that provide an immediate return or obvious personal benefit is the route to success. However, those leading projects also stress that, although they may start conversations in a different place, bringing them back round to wider environmental issues is important, not least to demonstrate the linkages between the social challenges faced by many communities and the unsustainable consumption patterns or policy priorities of wider society.

More than that, however, CLS demonstrates that, far from being a difficult subject to engage people with, community-level action on climate-related

issues has been attractive, popular and, crucially, fun. Often this has been because the activities involved have been social and communal in nature, delivering a range of rewards, whether the satisfaction that comes from volunteering to help others who are less fortunate or the personal benefits derived from meeting new people, learning new skills or saving money.

The first Hull Harvest Festival - 'Feeding the City' - was organised by Green Prosperity as a platform to inspire people to grow and cook fresh local ingredients. It was estimated that over 500 people from a wide range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds came to enjoy and share food, demonstrating a model for building greater cohesion in an area while promoting more sustainable living.

Manor House PACT provided 340 training opportunities to their volunteers, helping them develop skills in areas such as green construction, practical conservation, permaculture and forest gardening. All the courses were provided free in exchange for volunteer time credits, ensuring a reciprocal commitment. As a result 70 people were able to find work, illustrating in a small way the potential to link community action to the growth of the green economy.

None of this should surprise us. Many people have spent many years proving and re-proving that, with the right encouragement and support, communities can mobilise to generate creative solutions to social challenges that are perfect expressions of local sustainable development in action.

Learning from CLS, however, adds a new dimension to this well-established evidence base. Firstly CLS was a rare example of a funded programme which allowed organisations to target a wide range of sustainability or resilience-related outcomes - from supporting 500 of the most vulnerable households in Hull to escape fuel poverty through Green Prosperity's programme of energy efficiency visits to planting wildflowers along the River Welland in Market Harborough to create habitats for bees - and provided the encouragement, challenge and support to think even more widely.

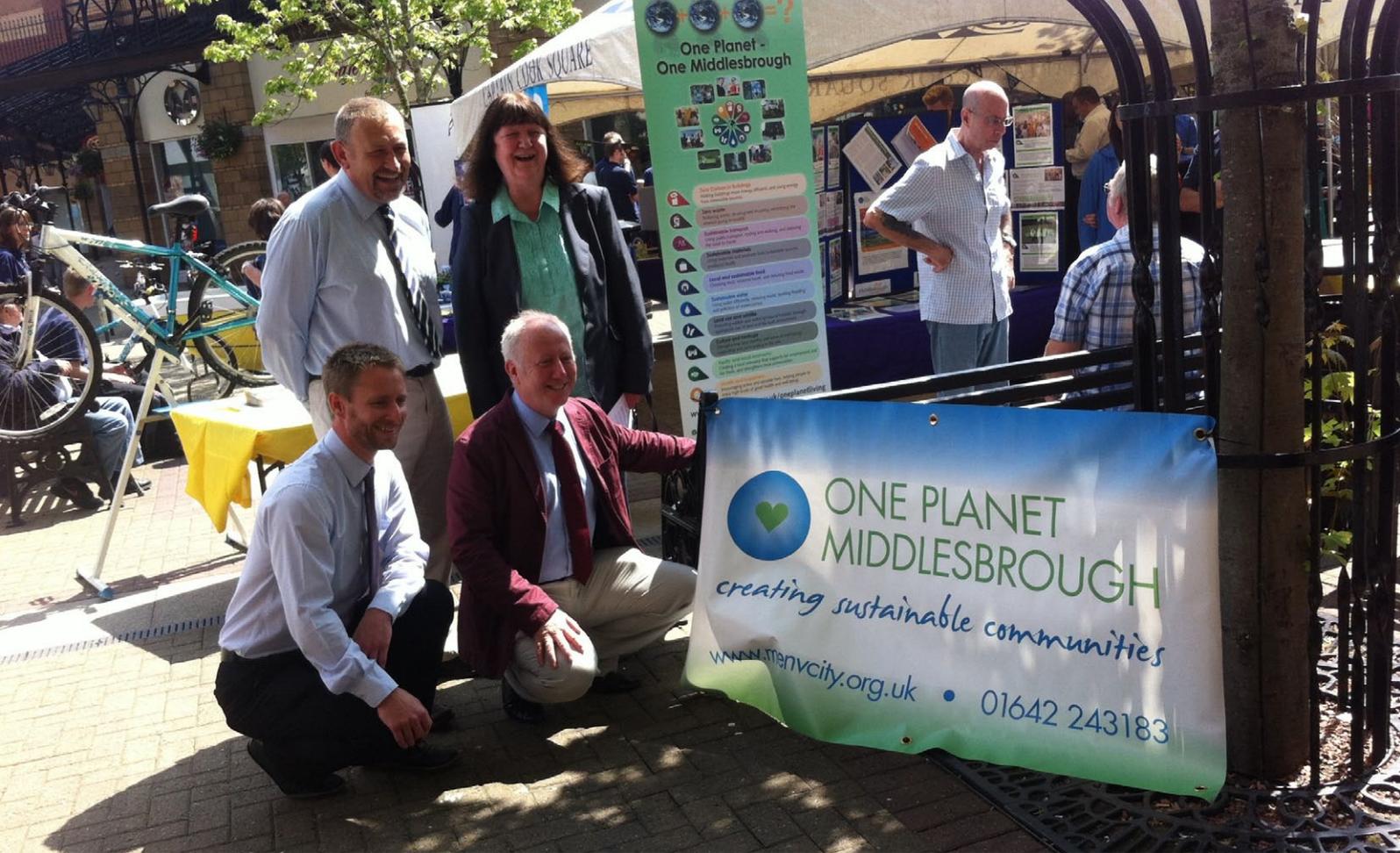
This, added to the flexibility of the grant management process provided by the Big Lottery Fund, allowed projects to reflect the fact that our lives aren't lived in compartments where decisions about energy are made in one part of our brain and decisions about food or transport in another. This holistic approach meant communities could be engaged from lots of different angles and given lots of opportunities to connect their learning and action in one sphere with their behaviours in another.

One Planet Middlesbrough's 'Carbon Fast' was a 40-day programme of activities running through Lent and designed to help people understand how a range of day to day behaviours contributed to climate change. The challenges were themed around Celebrating the World, Expressing Concern, Loving Others, Seeking Justice, Living Simply and Living Contentedly. By linking together 40 different actions in this way they were able to incorporate all ten facets of One Planet Living: carbon, waste, travel, materials, food, water, land use and wildlife, culture and community, equity and economy, health and happiness.

In a more direct way a number of people supported by the Green Prosperity project in Hull with energy monitors and advice also began to engage in the food growing activities at the community farm. One resident, Sarah, articulated the link between her growing her own food and the wider issue of waste.

'.. because I can go out and pick something, it's not in packaging which is brilliant because we have way too much packaging. My blue bins are full every fortnight ...if you get it out of the garden, and you wash the mud off it fine, you don't need that extra packaging'.

Secondly, each of the projects operated at a different scale and engaged differently with a wider infrastructure of statutory services and stakeholder relationships. The context within which projects were operating made a difference in terms of the longevity of their impacts. One of the challenges of community-led environmental action is that it often arises as a result of campaigns around specific issues and is



*One Planet Middlesbrough has had strong support from the local authority and other organisations*

generally sustained (if at all) by a succession of short-term funding opportunities, which are likely to pull activity in one direction or another. In some areas CLS projects emerged from and were embedded within a local narrative and framework that already had visibility and support from the local authority and other statutory bodies.

The One Planet Middlesbrough project is part of an ongoing campaign to support and inspire communities in the town to live healthier and more sustainable lifestyles, in doing so tackling many of the challenges the people of the town face. The lead organisation for the project, Middlesbrough Environment City, works closely with the local council and other partners, building on Middlesbrough's designation as an 'environment city' in 1992. In 2011, that green aspiration was widened into an ambition to be a leader in sustainability, embracing economic, social and environmental progress,

and Middlesbrough became the UK's second One Planet Council. The project has benefited from strong support from the local authority and maintaining One Planet Town status is now one of the elected Mayor's promises.

Working within such a supportive framework – while not being afraid to suggest ways in which it might be improved or expanded – makes it easier to deliver greater impact but also to provide ongoing opportunities for those members of a community who have been inspired or equipped to begin their journey as environmental activists.

A number of the volunteers engaged by Greening Wingrove, who had never previously been active in this sphere, now self-organise their own litter-picking groups and are getting involved in a new Friends of Nuns Moor Park group that may soon have control over the park as the council hands over responsibility. ■■

## 4. People, places and power

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Communities can spearhead change without government support ... but policy still matters.

It has often been said that 'the big society' was exactly the right idea promoted at exactly the wrong time. The view that we in our communities should be better equipped and more empowered to decide how local assets are managed and services are run would have support from people across the political, social and demographic spectrum. However, introducing the terminology whilst simultaneously turning off the tap of public spending was bound to lead to the conclusion that it was a figleaf for austerity measures. Add to the mix a political rhetoric around service transformation and marketisation and it can also be dismissed by some as an ideological attack on the very notion of public service.

However, there are many that would agree that building the capacity of individuals and whole communities to be more self-reliant is an important social project. For some this is a defensive response to sustaining vital services in the face of funding cuts while to others it's a positive opportunity to re-design the way our local areas function so that services are more responsive and local economies more inclusive. Either way, it's a long-term process and one that's fraught with issues, not least the question of equity. Can communities with less stable, less affluent, less networked and less skilled residents benefit from the same opportunities as others? Can impassioned and energetic 'community leaders' bridge the accountability gap to ensure local conversations and initiatives are truly inclusive?

CLS has shown that, with the right support, community organisations can rise to the challenge of designing and delivering interventions and impacts across a wide range of issues. What's more, this process can lead

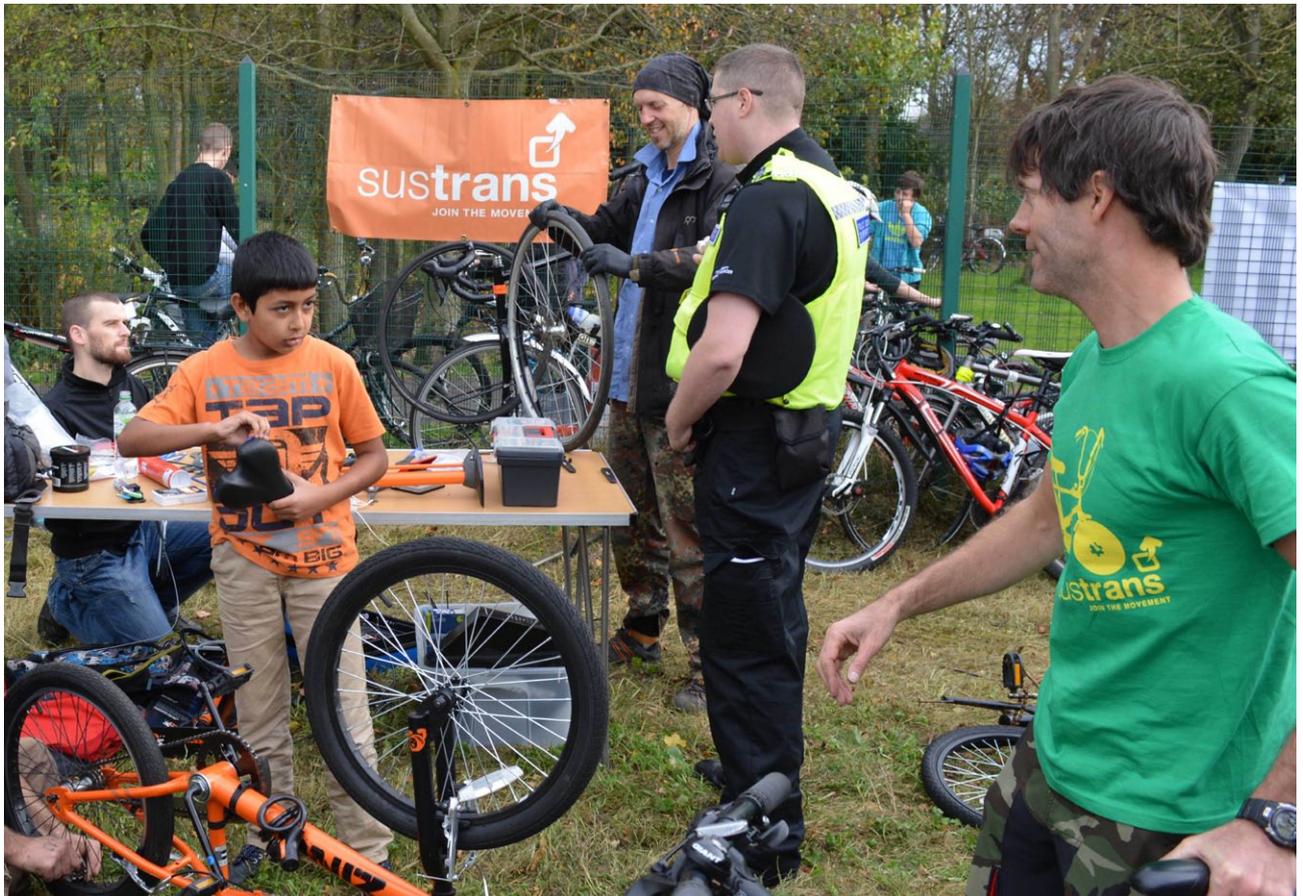
to the development of new service models and new approaches to maintaining and improving quality of life in some of the most challenged communities.

Greening Wingrove has operated through a community interest company, giving it the freedom to take over the management of a former bowling green and associated pavilion. Working with partners Sustrans, the CIC developed the site as a 'bike garden' with a commercial model built around community-led cycling events and private hire.

The Sustainable Sheppey project has focused on establishing new community structures and ventures in order to sustain some of the activities funded through the CLS programme. An allotments group, Community Energy Trust and the Sheppey Environment Forum are all now constituted and engaging directly with the local authority and other stakeholders to influence local decision-making and commissioning strategies.

The breadth and flexibility of CLS has also meant that communities have had the freedom to shape local programmes to address needs and issues they consider important. In some cases these priorities have aligned completely with those of local agencies or national government. The focus on mitigating flood risk is an obvious example, where community concerns have dovetailed with big picture decision-making and direction of travel. However, in some areas CLS projects have been responding to issues raised by communities which generate little statutory support.

It could be said that in the last three years CLS has been delivering results against the backdrop of a policy environment which has been at



*Greening Wingrove CIC worked with Sustrans to set up a 'bike garden'*

best indifferent and at worst hostile: climate change has become an issue to be addressed through the lens of our industrial strategy; parks and green spaces aren't seen as a matter for national policymakers; infrastructure planning is dominated by roads and airport expansions and rural land owners are incentivised to manage uplands in a way that stores up trouble for urban communities lower down river catchments.

For the most part this disconnect between national policy and local practice hasn't hampered the ability of CLS projects to engage communities and deliver outcomes. However, in some cases policy changes have fundamentally undermined the business models being developed by projects to ensure the long-term sustainability of those activities. In particular the CLS programme has run alongside the rollercoaster journey around community energy. The programme was initiated at a time when

the sector was being courted and rewarded with ministerial groups and departmental strategies, but during its implementation period the market mechanisms created to underpin long-term activity – Green Deal, feed-in tariffs etc - have been systematically downgraded or dismantled. Some CLS projects set up their structures before changes were introduced, allowing them to create a viable platform for delivering powerful community and environmental benefits. Others had the rug unceremoniously pulled from under them.

Just as the business community seeks certainty and continuity to reassure investors and settle the markets, so community organisations need a stable policy environment so that they don't find themselves in the position of having inspired and engaged local people only to find out that rewards that were previously on offer have been removed. ■■

## 5. Making it last

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There is no quick route to financial sustainability for previously grant-funded activities

It is a characteristic of many current grant programmes that funding is awarded on the basis of a plan setting out how activities will be sustained beyond the life of the grant. This was a clear criterion for funding through CLS and groups have had up to five years and the benefit of external advice and support to build these plans for financial sustainability. Many will still find it a challenge and a range of activities which have been delivering valuable benefits and outcomes in communities desperately in need of support will cease as programmes close, staff resources are lost and partnerships dissolve.

This should not be considered failure. Despite the difficulties highlighted above in terms of commercial models for community energy, across the programme there has been considerable success in establishing new ventures and vehicles and building the capacity of community organisations to continue delivering change and engage in the ongoing management of services or assets. This is being achieved in a number of ways: investing to build a network of more committed volunteers to sustain activity; equipping local organisations to be more successful in attracting public commissions; creating enterprises or assets able to generate traded or other revenue income.

CLS in Dorset was one of the projects aiming to engage the community in the management of local energy generation through Dorset Community Energy. A community share offer raised more than £350k in less than three weeks, and generated appetite within the local community that previous schemes had failed to unlock, recruiting 153 members. The project went on to install solar PV on Bridport Arts Centre, 12 schools and 3 village halls, generating an annual revenue of £60,000 to repay

members (at 5.5%). Overall, the sites will benefit from £600,000 of free solar electricity over the next 20 years.

The Sustainable Sheppey project has had significant success in delivering positive outcomes for local people through training and work placements linked to growing and cooking skills and has developed a social enterprise model that offers work to ex-offenders at the community café and allotments.

In a number of areas this success is not just measured in terms of community activities being sustained so that individual projects can continue operating but through the impact CLS activity has had in bringing about a more systemic change in the way local areas function. A prime example is the work that has been done to build or reconfigure local food economies. In Dorset and Market Harborough CLS groups have been at the forefront of developing relationships between local food growers, distributors and retailers which have the potential to place sustainable consumption and the circular economy at the heart of local markets and regional food tourism initiatives.

Thanks to CLS in Dorset, Food Future Bridport has been developed as a partnership to celebrate and support local and sustainable food. It promotes new, food-related enterprise in the area and raises awareness about food issues and sustainable eating habits.

Sustainable Harborough has been collaborating with the local tourism board to map and promote local food producers and has set up edibLE16, an online venture to market produce. The project has ambitious plans to close the circular economy loop including a community-owned venture



*CLS in Dorset's work has promoted food-related enterprise in the area*

converting food waste collected from businesses to oil to sell to other local companies.

In other parts of the country, by contrast, CLS activity on local food exemplifies the challenge of scaling up and sustaining activity. Community-led food growing initiatives have been one of the most effective activities used by CLS projects to engage a diverse range of people in conversations and action on sustainability but are most likely to suffer when grant funding is removed.

This is not a new phenomenon. Many open access, volunteer-led community activities exist precisely because there is no commercial marketplace for the 'environmental goods and outcomes' being delivered or, increasingly, because the targeting of public services on those in most need means that many others who may be vulnerable or 'at risk' are missing out on the social interaction and peer support that is so crucial to our wellbeing. CLS projects – like many others in the community sector – were hopeful

that the reintegration of public health duties within local authorities and the commissioning autonomy handed to CCGs would lead to new conversations and unlock more stable resources as part of the drive to realign health resources towards keeping people well rather than treating preventable illness. This shift, although perceptible in some places, is inevitably slow in coming and hampered by the current debates about the twin 'funding crises' in the NHS and adult social care budgets.

There is a clear message emanating from CLS that local community-led environmental action can provide an effective nursery for developing the skills needed for communities to engage in future service delivery and a crucible for forging innovation in service design and integration. However, in order for some communities to unlock the resources required to sustain local programmes, more will have to build their capacity and test and refine their approach using grant funds. Turning the tap off at one end will inevitably reduce the flow at the other. ■■

# Conclusion:

## In search of leadership

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To continue or replicate the success of Communities Living Sustainably, we need to address the leadership gap.

**B**etween them the CLS projects have delivered wide-ranging change in local communities facing significant environmental, social and economic challenges.

Project activity has reached well in excess of 50,000 people and saved more than 500,000 tonnes of carbon. Projects have engaged in a range of local evidence gathering and self-assessment processes which, at a combined programme level, have seen significantly increased scores on a dashboard of sustainability and resilience indicators, with particular progress in well-being, governance and resource efficiency.

By all objective measures the programme has been a success and the learning derived from it has already been used by the Big Lottery Fund to inform its future grant giving. It has also been disseminated by local projects and national learning partners to a wide range of policymakers, funders, stakeholders and, most importantly, other community groups looking for ideas, inspiration and insight.

However, the future of local project activity in the 12 areas is far from assured and the challenge of replicating it elsewhere without the benefit of similar funds being secured is not inconsiderable. There is also a leadership gap.

In the days of Local Agenda 21 local authorities were seen as natural convenors and funders of community activity on climate change and local environmental quality. Many of today's community leaders and environmental activists were schooled in campaigns led by councils linking neighbourhood action and individual behaviour change with global millennium development goals. Ongoing austerity means that local authority budgets are being corralled to protect statutory functions and that these skills and experiences have been lost. It used to be said by community organisations that one of the challenges in embedding delivery was knowing the right person at the council to speak to. Now the barrier is that there simply is no-one left in the council to speak to.

Similarly in previous incarnations national government acted as a standard bearer for environmental campaigns and programmes, providing a framing narrative and sometimes regulation and funding to stimulate and sustain local action. Current political rhetoric has seen climate change become highly politicised and the domestic ramifications of the EU referendum and the US presidential election are unlikely to convince Westminster to take a more positive or enabling stance.

*“ It used to be said by community organisations that one of the challenges in embedding delivery was knowing the right person at the council to speak to. Now the barrier is that there simply is no-one left in the council to speak to. ”*

“As communities – and the country as a whole – consider how they regroup after divisive political campaigns and avoid the tensions now surfacing, we could do worse than focusing on genuinely shared issues that play out in our shared spaces.

What CLS teaches us is that it's possible for community organisations to lead without government support and that the local vision they create can be joined up, holistic and relevant to a wide range of stakeholders. Delivered and supported in the right way, community-led environmental action is popular and can be both a life changer and a cost saver. It is a good way for communities to cut their teeth in terms of the management of local services and assets and some highlight its potential to provide an instrument of democratic renewal.

In its 2014 Pride of Place report the Fabian Society calls for “a revolution in the culture of environmentalism, which puts a much greater focus on rebuilding democratic capacity rather than focusing on securing legislative change.” As communities – and the country as a whole – consider how they regroup after divisive political campaigns and avoid the tensions now surfacing, we could do worse than focusing on genuinely shared issues that play out in our shared spaces.

Similarly, CLS projects have demonstrated that grant-funded community action on the environment can help stimulate new economic activity through community businesses and social enterprises. Again this is not a new development and there have been many such examples from previous programmes, some of which have continued to thrive as social businesses while others have found it difficult to survive without subsidy.

It is fair to say that, while there is a vibrant tapestry of local sustainability initiatives trading successfully in local communities, few have managed to achieve a scale or a business

model that genuinely changes the way our mainstream economies work in key sectors such as food production, energy generation or waste management. The task of building resilient, circular local economies remains as vital as ever in terms of tackling resource depletion but should now be given greater emphasis on the basis that a more self-contained economy is more likely to be able to withstand the eddies of shifting global trade winds. In developing the criteria for the programme the Big Lottery Fund encouraged private sector involvement in local partnerships. Whilst in some cases this became a slightly artificial construct, in others it was obvious that business interests around strong, cohesive communities and environmental messaging enhanced local project activity.

Here the question of leadership is perhaps slightly easier to answer. Despite its status as political football, devolution provides an opportunity to re-set the conversation about local economies and local growth. Given the prospect of pooled budgets, it also allows us to reconnect economic, social and environmental considerations through a more integrated strategy at a more manageable spatial scale.

The Welsh Government's Wellbeing of Future Generations Act is an example of how policy leadership can be translated into local delivery priorities with Public Service Boards established in each local authority area requiring public bodies to collaborate in delivering their activities in line with sustainable development principles. In England, meanwhile, mayoral candidates in city regions see advantage in making bold promises in terms of environmental action. Liverpool City Region candidate Steve Rotheram has built

“ *Ultimately what made Communities Living Sustainably work was the investment in a credible, embedded local infrastructure or anchor organisation,*

protection of the city's historic green spaces into his campaign manifesto while the new London Mayor Sadiq Khan has prioritised implementation of an ambitious air quality plan.

Arguably it is this new breed of city leader that will have the biggest potential in future to create a positive policy framework and establish the infrastructure and funding environment needed to enable communities to drive change in their local areas.

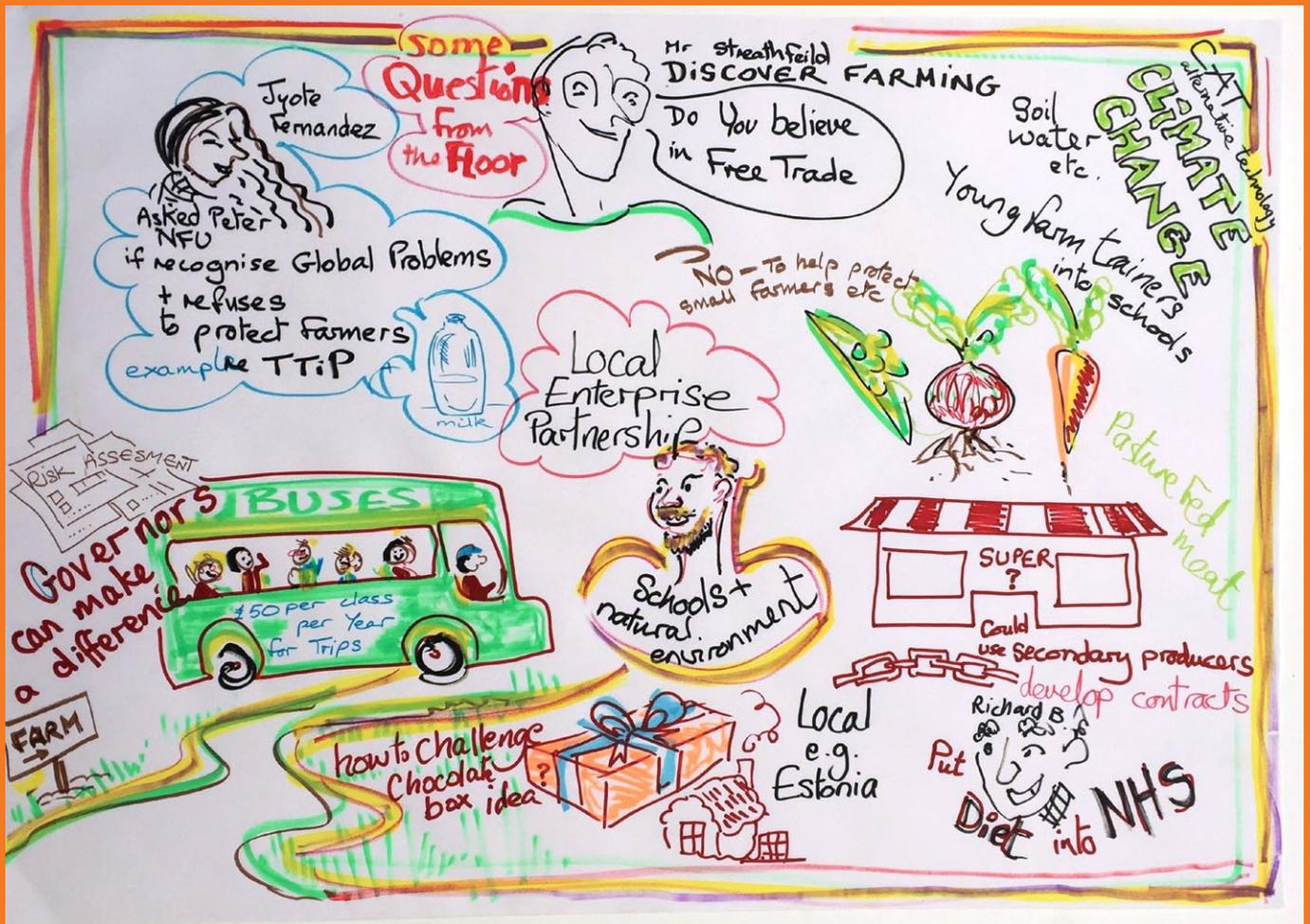
If the lessons from CLS, and a range of previous programmes, are going to get traction then realising this potential will need concerted action in three areas in particular:

- 1. Central government needs to extend the scope of its devolution thinking beyond jobs and infrastructure and into a broader suite of powers and budgets designed to ensure local economies are more environmentally sustainable, local communities are supported to access new economic opportunities and businesses play a bigger role in supporting the wellbeing of communities.**
- 2. Local government and city region leaders should make good on the promise of 'double devolution' by ensuring that integrated planning and pooled budgets are used to equip and empower community organisations to lead the delivery of services and activities.**

- 3. Community organisations need to develop structures and vehicles that enable diverse local initiatives and enterprises to operate together to maximise cross-fertilisation and operational efficiencies and to achieve the scale and quality necessary to ensure they are financially sustainable and able to drive more systemic change.**

Ultimately what made CLS work was the investment in a credible, embedded local infrastructure or anchor organisation, one that was able to operate strategically with public agencies while simultaneously unlocking the power and the passion in local communities to build a different future for the places that matter to them.

As the reins of public expenditure tighten and community and voluntary sector organisations reposition and repurpose themselves for a new policy and funding reality, we need to guard against seeing this infrastructure function as an impediment to reaching the 'real grass roots'. Instead we need to harness its potential as the glue to bring diverse community interests together and a framework for ensuring those community interests achieve the scale they need to play a leading role in devolved decision-making. ■



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## Credits

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