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Are we ready to shift direction?

*Community Engagement and
Sustainable Development*

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Are we ready to shift direction?

by Andrew Ross

Around the country this summer, local authorities are using all sorts of methods to encourage local communities to live in ways that will reduce their impact on the planet. Durham County ran its recent Action Packed Futures 2006 festival with a host of interactive activities to inspire people to take new actions such as using renewable energy and recycling more. Residents in Bristol are rolling up their sleeves to take part in preparing local sustainability plans. Lewes District Council on the south coast is working with local people to help them take actions to reduce climate change.

These activities are prompted by growing evidence that the direction we are heading in is increasingly unsustainable. WWF-UK has calculated, for example, that if everyone in the world was to live like the average UK citizen then we would need three planets instead of just the one we've got. As a Chinese proverb makes clear, 'unless we change direction, we are likely to end up where we are going'.

Community workers and council officers report that, at a local level, there is an appetite for change and a willingness to participate in programmes that are designed to curb our unsustainable behaviours. A recent publication on how to promote more sustainable consumption also highlighted this shift in mood. The report, called *I will if you will*, was published by the Sustainable Development Commission (an independent watchdog) and set out an important leadership role for government. But it also suggested that "community initiatives and local feedback will reassure people that they are part of a collective movement that's making a real difference." Everyone, it seems, has a role to play.

To this end, the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) is supporting the Federation for Community Development Learning to help community development workers improve their skills and knowledge so that they can support communities to take a range of actions to improve local sustainability. These might include setting up recycling schemes, buying local produce and getting involved in local planning consultations.

There is currently no shortage of attempts by local authorities to involve residents in sustainability activities. But how do councils, or communities themselves, know whether this involvement is leading to actions and behaviours which make a difference?

A new evaluation tool, developed by WWF-UK, in partnership with CAG Consultants, may help to provide the answer. The CESD (Community Engagement and Sustainable Development) tool has been piloted by five councils – including Durham County, Bristol City and Lewes District – and a sustainability charity. WWF-UK is now seeking another 50 participants to take part in a research project, using the tool to measure the impact community engagement has on changing and maintaining sustainable behaviour.

Niamh Carey, Project Director at WWF-UK, says the idea for the tool came about when WWF-UK realised the dearth of evidence available to justify why involving communities is beneficial for sustainability projects.

"There is masses of advice on how to involve people, but there is seemingly nothing that helps local councils and others to assess the impact of this involvement and how to make it more effective."

Niamh has a background in community development work and knows that workers with these skills can make a huge difference. But she is anxious that, without the sort of evidence that WWF-UK hopes the tool will generate, community involvement programmes could be

vulnerable to the shifting fashions of funders. “What we want to demonstrate”, she says, “ is that involving communities isn’t a luxury or a fad – it is a crucial part of creating lasting behaviour change.”

The tool allows practitioners to evaluate any sustainability project they are planning to do which involves communities. Participants are asked a series of questions at the beginning about their current awareness and behaviour. They are then followed up with another round of questions once a project is complete. Comparing the before and after responses will allow councils to track what programmes or projects have been most effective in capturing the imagination of participants, and what has worked best to influence behaviour change.

Emma Cranidge, from CAG Consultants, has led on the development of the tool. She believes that “it has challenged the pilot authorities to ask themselves ‘why are we doing this’, which is leading them to think about how else they can achieve the results they want.” Because the tool is based on accepted project management theory and practice, it will also help councils and other large organisations working with communities to decide how best to spend their participation budget to get the changes in behaviour they are looking for.

For example, take the problems around disposal of waste. Local authorities are responsible for increasing the amount of waste that is recycled to reduce landfill. Ultimately, though, it is residents themselves who will need to change their behaviour. Education and awareness-raising is expensive. So understanding what are the most effective ways of getting people to change their behaviour to reduce their waste would be practically beneficial, and also help councils financially too.

Maggie Bosanquet, Sustainability Manager at Durham County Council (one of the councils involved in piloting the tool), believes that it will help to quantify work that hasn’t been measured before. “The reality is that we now live in a performance management environment. If the tool can help us to measure what we are doing and demonstrate benefits, then that has to be a good thing.”

WWF-UK has been encouraged by the experiences of the pilot authorities so far, and now wants to sign up another 50 councils and other large organisations who use community engagement to promote sustainability. Organisations should already have a project they would like to assess using the tool. Participants will not need to commit any additional financial resources to their project and WWF-UK will provide support throughout the duration of the research, including an online helpdesk. The research will run for 12 months from October 2006.

Niamh Carey says that it is an exciting time to be involved in this work, particularly as ministers consider devolving more power to local communities. “We definitely have the ear of government. They are interested in the ‘how’ of behaviour change and we hope our work will contribute to that.”