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I'm in: what the pilot projects say about the CESD tool

by Andrew Ross

The Community Engagement and Sustainable Development (CESD) tool has been piloted by five local authorities and a community-based organisation. Here we report briefly from a selection of these pilots about how they have found working with the tool so far.

BRISTOL CITY COUNCIL

The council is using the CESD tool to assess resident involvement in developing a sustainable neighbourhood plan for the regeneration of the Brislington area in the city.

The neighbourhood plan will include proposals for future development and a map, and will hopefully be used as a 'material consideration' in the planning process (that is, it will have influence even though it won't be a statutory plan). The process of developing the sustainability plan includes local people, agencies and businesses.

The tool will help the council to assess behaviour change as a consequence of implementing the finished plan.

Council officers Mark Leach and Steve Marriott are leading on this work. Mark says that "using the tool has already helped us in our forward thinking to understand what impacts the project will have."

"It is helping us to answer questions like why are we doing this project, and what do we hope to achieve by it? We can then better frame our benchmarks for evaluation."

Mark believes that the tool can also help authorities to assess what the impact of their decisions might be on sustainability, provided that the right data is collected. This will ultimately help to get sustainability funded if there is evidence that projects deliver the benefits they say they will.

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

Durham is using the tool to evaluate two projects. The first is its annual Action Packed Futures Festival which focuses on sustainability issues through creating a kind of 'sustainability village', complete with village green. Having run the festival for a number of years the council wanted to find out whether people who attended changed their behaviour or not as a consequence. Officers handed out questionnaires to visitors at the most recent festival in June 2006, and will follow these up later in the year to find out what behaviour changes, if any, they made as a result of attending the festival.

The second application is working with a new initiative called North East Region Sustainable Communities. This will involve communities in designing a toolkit for creating projects to help improve sustainability in a community. The council will use the CESD tool to help evaluate the impact of the toolkit on behaviour change in the area.

Maggie Bosanquet, Sustainability Manager at Durham County Council, believes that the tool will be able to help her team assess whether they are meeting their objective of 'subliminal sustainability', that is, inculcating an understanding of how people can change their behaviour without banging them over the head with it.

The tool is also an extremely useful way of quantifying 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. This is just the sort of information we need to demonstrate that our spending leads to change, and to stave off any threat of budget cuts.”

LEWES DISTRICT COUNCIL

Lewes District Council understands the potential impacts of climate change in its area and wants to raise awareness of its residents too so that they can take action. The council is using the tool to assess an awareness raising campaign about climate change that aims to influence people’s behaviour.

Using the tool has involved an initial survey of 1000 households in one area of the district to establish current levels of understanding. The council received 300 returns and it will go back to these households with a follow-up survey once it has finished its climate change communication campaign in the local area (which includes consultation and information sessions) to see if this awareness raising has an effect on changing household behaviours.

While it is difficult to totally isolate what influences individual behaviour, Trevor Watson, the lead officer at the council, hopes that it will be possible to identify whether the authority’s campaign has been influential. He says that “engagement is a key method for us so it is important to monitor whether or not it makes a difference. This is why we wanted to be part of testing the tool.”

KIRKLEES METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

Kirklees is using the tool to work collaboratively with other parts of the council. It wants to influence the decisions people make about their transport, and to get more people walking. The Environmental Information Coordinator, Heidi Smith, has integrated the testing of the tool with attempts by the Highways section to improve the transport infrastructure in Littleton and Mill Bridge.

She has used the tool to establish a baseline understanding of why people in these areas do or don’t walk to local facilities. This will then influence the infrastructure that the council develops to encourage people to walk – for example pedestrian signs, walking maps and so on. The tool will then assess levels of walking to discover whether the new infrastructure influences behaviour.

Heidi believes that “the principle of the tool is good and the tool is useful – casual observations and assumptions are just not sufficient in persuading sceptics that sustainability projects can work. Measuring the impacts of a project is valuable and is a step that is often missing”.

She believes that the tool can help officers responsible for sustainability to improve their project management of consultation. But it is also important for these officers to persuade larger council services to use it too. “We have to avoid using the findings of the tool to only preach to the converted – one way of doing this is to get other parts of the council involved from the start so they can see the benefits too. The tool can be a good way of communicating with colleagues.”