

PRACTICAL ACTION TO BUILD COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

Community initiatives to reduce carbon emissions and encourage more sustainable living have gained increasing national support. They also improve community resilience, allowing neighbourhoods to better adapt to change. This action research project investigates different ways of engaging residents to create a more resilient and environmentally-sustainable community in a low-income neighbourhood in York.

Key points

- Making links between sustainability issues and the underlying interests of community groups, and connecting to their existing social networks, was important to engage a cross-section of people.
- Attempts to build new community groups solely around energy saving and sustainability proved difficult, with declining participation at themed events.
- Identifying 'hooks' relevant to local people's interests was important for encouraging shared action among residents and proved pivotal to success.
- The most successful ideas to engage people were a community sustainability event with the local secondary school that was linked to a global environmental conference, the Rio Earth Summit; activities to improve residents' connections with their natural environment; and developing neighbourhood maps of local problems which helped spawn ideas to improve the area.
- Sustained engagement was vital to build trust. This was linked to a phased reduction of outside help to try to embed change in the community and encourage a legacy of achievements.
- The initiative achieved notable success in building new social links as well as reinforcing some existing networks. These improvements appear to help significantly increase community resilience.
- Local and national organisations can support community resilience and inclusion by providing the wider policies and infrastructure that promote it.

The research

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BACKGROUND

The Good Life Initiative was conceived as a practical intervention in the low-income community of New Earswick, a suburb of York consisting mainly of social housing managed by the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust (JRHT). The initiative aimed to stimulate community resilience by encouraging residents to achieve a healthier, more sustainable, knowledgeable and sociable life. It was developed in collaboration with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), JRHT and York in Transition.

Although affluent households tend to have high expenditure and consequently high carbon emissions, low-income households are potentially more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. The project took a broad approach to sustainability and tried to promote the best use of community resources holistically, rather than focusing purely on environmental behaviour.

Specific project objectives were to:

- achieve a measurable reduction in household carbon emissions;
- raise public awareness of low-carbon lifestyles;
- foster community cohesion through joint actions;
- support connections between community action and JRHT work on sustainability;
- enhance local skills for self-sufficiency and build local resilience.

Community resilience is about how people living in a particular place deal with economic, social and environmental problems. Going beyond merely coping, resilient communities can actually become stronger and more adaptable over time as they adjust to the problems they face. This could be by acquiring new skills, strengthening social connections and developing new physical resources. This way of thinking about communities and resilience – their inherent strengths, flexibility and resources – implies that a resilient community might also be a more sociable, inspiring and sustainable place to live.

Practical actions and achievements

The project focused on three themes linked to our objectives:

Theme	Focus	Activities	Objective
Home	Energy Food Shopping	Looking at energy and cost-saving measures households could take, including changing their behaviour to save energy and reduce consumption and food waste.	To reduce household energy consumption and fuel bills; reduce expenditure on food.
Living environment	Transport Waste Green spaces	Identifying sustainable travel methods. Sharing new ways to reduce, re-use and recycle materials. Improving the village's green spaces to benefit residents.	Reduce travel costs while improving the community carbon footprint; reduce waste; enhance the value and use of green spaces.
Wellbeing	Health Community Skills and knowledge	Develop activities to build community identity and social cohesion. Increase knowledge-sharing and skills around sustainability.	Improve overall wellbeing of residents; increase the leadership, common vision and skills base of the community to boost resilience.

Good Life organisers arranged activities related to these topics, including nature walks and fruit picking, energy use surgeries with residents, planting new woodland and wildflowers, organising and running an environment summit with the local secondary school and developing shared visions for the future through community maps to identify ways the neighbourhood could be improved.

Initial attempts to build new groups linked to the project themes proved unsuccessful as the messages did not readily connect to existing community groups' interests. Activities directly related to environmental behaviour, even when developed with residents, proved unsuccessful. However, far more people got involved when a greater focus was placed on the project's partners such as the local secondary school and parish council, and links were forged with other organisations' sustainable development processes. These included City of York Council's travel planning and JRHT's home energy saving improvements. Participation improved by more than 70% (from 249 people to 431) and, critically, the number of people coming to more than one event increased significantly.

The link with the local secondary school meant the project engaged the pupils and teachers directly, and they also spread it into the wider community. The relationship between local action and global change was emphasised in school assemblies, lesson plans, and school-wide activities. This culminated in a pupil-led community event linked to the Rio+20 Earth Summit.

Activities that resonated with current local interests – and that could be promoted by existing community champions – were a successful 'hook' for getting a wider cross-section of residents involved. Improving the quality of green spaces and encouraging greater use of natural resources (for example, communal fruit picking) proved particularly successful. Making use of these local interests was central to the project's evolution and delivery, and was pivotal in its successes.

Once people were 'hooked' they were more likely to attend related events on other sustainable development themes (for example, sustainable transport roadshows) which they may not have previously considered. Building connections between existing interests and wider sustainability themes proved important for broadening participation.

Evaluating what works

The five aims of the Good Life Initiative had varying degrees of success. It is not possible to demonstrate any measurable change in household emissions due to the low take-up of household energy surveys. However, pledges for personal energy saving commitments did prove popular and indicated some willingness to change behaviour.

The project was more successful in raising awareness of low-carbon lifestyles. Around 360 people attended events around these themes and our evaluation shows people's knowledge of energy saving and recycling habits improved. The feedback from activities at the secondary school indicated increased knowledge on sustainability issues, including low-carbon lifestyles, among the pupils and staff. This was a highlight in terms of influencing future behaviour.

The project improved connections between the JRHT and the community. Community mapping – the process of recording local problems and devising solutions – was a useful tool for communicating preferences on sustainable development in this largely social housing neighbourhood. Tree planting by residents and JRHT staff improved the environmental sustainability of the village. This was well supported and generated significant goodwill that could be built on to develop other initiatives.

One of the project's biggest successes was improving social connections in the community, and the links between residents and other groups working on improving local sustainability. There was a small but meaningful rise in the number of people getting involved with others in the community around sustainability themes.

These new representatives gained better practical and organisational skills that reflect the project's ethos of 'making the most of what you've got'. These improved connections and knowledge indicate better community resilience and community cohesion. The project also encouraged residents to

form a new group concentrating on food production. This will build on some of the project's wider sustainability themes, ensuring a longer-term impact in the community.

Conclusion

Building community resilience can be complicated. Local leadership needs to be supported and enhanced to encourage and enable people to take collective charge of developing community resources, including green spaces. And the inevitable conflicts of direction have to be addressed creatively. Relationships are critical in maintaining resilience in the face of adversities, and the most successful communities are those that take a 'joined up' view of developing a diverse range of neighbourhood resources.

By involving a wider range of people with new skills and better connections, the project may have spurred New Earswick on to becoming a more resilient community – a community more able to respond and adapt to future challenges. It also highlights how new ideas need to be made locally relevant, and considerable care and time is needed to embed them.

The Good Life Initiative shows that, with the right kind of practical support, communities can take on more responsibilities, have a greater say in local decisions and encourage environmentally-sustainable and resilient development.

About the project

This research has been carried out by a team from the Stockholm Environment Institute (Environment Department), University of York, as a collaborative project with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust. It involved residents of New Earswick in north York – a garden village founded by philanthropist and entrepreneur Joseph Rowntree that has a mix of full ownership, shared ownership and rented homes. The authors are Steve Cinderby, Gary Haq, Howard Cambridge and Kate Lock.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

This summary is part of JRF's research and development programme. The views are those of the authors and not necessarily those of JRF.

The main report, **Practical action to build community resilience: The Good Life initiative in New Earswick** is available as a free download at www.jrf.org.uk

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