

Practical action to build community resilience: The Good Life Initiative

1. SUMMARY

The Good Life Initiative was a practical intervention in a low-income suburb of York to stimulate community resilience by encouraging the neighbourhood’s residents to achieve a healthier, more sustainable, knowledgeable and sociable life.



The project was developed by the Stockholm Environment Institute at the University of York in collaboration with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust (JRHT) and York in Transition who wanted to support the development of sustainable living in New Earswick, a community primarily consisting of social housing managed by JRHT. Activities lasted approximately 18 months and were funded as part of the JRF’s research programme on Climate Change and Social Justice. The project aimed to stimulate pro-environmental behaviour with residents and 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.

This case study is relevant to organisations trying to stimulate pro-environmental behaviour change and improve community resilience including social landlords, third-sector groups or local communities themselves.

2. ACTIVITIES

The project was led by SEI and co-developed with residents. Activities focussed on three themes linked to our objectives. Concepts of community resilience relate to the abilities of people living in a particular location to cope with economic, social and environmental problems. Going beyond merely coping, communities could actually become stronger and more adaptable over time as they adjust to the problems facing them: by building new skills; strengthening social connections; and developing new physical resources.

1. In the home we looked at energy and cost saving measures that households could take, including behaviour changes to save energy, reduce consumption and food waste.
2. In relation to the wider environment we identified sustainable travel choices and built capacity in terms of new skills on how to reduce, reuse and recycle materials. We also focused on facilitating improvements to the quality and use of the village’s green spaces to benefit residents.
3. Linked to the resident’s wellbeing we co-developed activities that would build community identity and social cohesion including increasing the knowledge sharing and skills base on sustainability themes.



We undertook practical activities related to these topics including: nature walks and fruit picking; energy use surgeries with residents; planting new woodland and wildflowers, providing material for lessons and organising and running an environment summit with the local secondary school; and developing a shared vision for the future with residents using community maps to identify opportunities for improvements to the neighbourhood.

3. OUTCOMES

We had mixed success in relation to our aims. We could not demonstrate any measurable change in household emissions; however, pledges for personal energy saving commitments did prove popular and indicated some willingness to engage with direct behaviour changes.

We had more success in raising awareness levels on low-carbon lifestyles. Significant numbers of people attended events around these themes (approximately 360 participants) and our evaluation indicates improvements in knowledge of energy saving and recycling habits. The feedback from activities at the local secondary school indicated increased knowledge on sustainability issues including low carbon lifestyles

amongst the pupils and staff. Pupils also felt empowered and learnt new skills through the project. The school followed this work by getting involved with the eco schools initiative. This was a real highlight in terms of legacy of influencing behaviour into the future.



The project improved connections between the JRHT and community. Community mapping provided a useful tool for communicating preferences on sustainable development. Tree planting allowed for a shared action between the residents and JRHT staff, improving the environmental sustainability of the village, whilst also generating goodwill that could be built on to develop other initiatives.

Probably the most successful outcomes related to improvements in the social connections within the community between residents and other groups working on improving local sustainability. Our evaluation indicates a small but meaningful improvement in the number of people active in the community around sustainability themes. These new representatives have enhanced skills (practical and organisational) linked to the project's ethos of 'making the most of what you've got'. This way of thinking about communities and resilience – their inherent strengths, flexibility and resources – implies that a resilient community might also have the capability of being a more sociable, inspiring and sustainable place to live.

4. BARRIERS

Initial attempts to build new groups linked to our project themes proved unsuccessful as the messages did not readily connect to existing community groups' interests. Activities directly related to pro-environmental behaviour, even when co-developed with residents, proved unsuccessful in encouraging a cross-section of people to engage. To address these shortcomings we re-focussed on working with strategic partners (including the local secondary school and parish council) and making links to other organisations' sustainable development processes (e.g. City of York travel planning) and issues of interest that came from the community (including local nature). This led to a significant increase in the number of people engaging with the project (from 249 people to 431) and critically the continued involvement of people coming to multiple events increased significantly.

5. GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- ✓ Make links between sustainability issues and the underlying interests of existing community groups and their social networks to ensure engagement with a cross section of people
- ✓ Ensure engagement is sufficient in terms of quality and duration to embed behaviour change messages and transfer relevant knowledge and skills to ensure a legacy of outcomes
- ✓ Connect with local organisations that can attract other people to your activities – for example our link to the local secondary school ensured high levels of participation from across the community
- ✓ Don't try and build new groups around project themes too early – allow people to get hooked on some key ideas they are already interested in first before diversifying or broadening into new areas
- ✓ Don't get disheartened if your initial plan doesn't work – react and evolve your project activities until you identify what works in a particular community
- ✓ Don't rely on just the 'usual suspects' of active community members to deliver change – try and broaden the base of local participation to help build community resilience.

6. LINKS

For details including a video by school pupils shared at the Rio Earth Summit see

<http://www.york.ac.uk/sei/researchhighlights/building--community-resilience/>

For a copy of the JRF project report and findings see <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/practical-action-build-community-resilience>

7. CONTACTS

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