

Background

From 2005 to 2008, as part of a pilot project funded by the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (defra), Action for Sustainable Living (AfSL) promoted action in 3 localities in Manchester to improve sustainability across a wide range of areas including green energy and energy saving measures, green household products, recycling and waste management, organic and fairtrade food, green holidays, and reusable nappies. AfSL aimed to help develop sustainable local communities, which were stronger socially and economically, promoting thriving community groups and “greener” local businesses that are sensitive to the needs of their community.

Individuals were supported to change their lifestyles, focusing on areas for change relevant to them, by drawing on a simple menu of possible actions, aimed at producing changes that would have an immediate impact. Actions to be taken by the individual and by AfSL were agreed in pledge form.

Existing and new community groups were supported to take action on sustainability issues in their locality. AfSL helped with:

- Identifying relevant issues and interested individuals and stakeholders to participate in addressing them
- Facilitating initial project group meetings
- Doing necessary administration as needed (Eg room hire, meeting notes, publicity, funding bids, etc)
- Advising on how to organise key support processes such as project planning and evaluation.

During 2007 AfSL conducted a formal evaluation of its work, looking at:

- Impact on individuals, by means of a telephone survey of people who had pledged to take action
- Support provided to groups, by means of focus groups and interviews
- Support provided to volunteers, by means of interviews

AfSL's achievements

AfSL's main achievements during this period were:

- Over 2,400 people made pledges to reduce their environmental impact
- 95% of those people went on to take action to reduce their environmental impact
- 30% of those people are doing much more to reduce their environmental impact as a result of AfSL's support
- Initiating over 40 substantial projects on sustainable living
- Providing valued support for action groups, through both paid workers and volunteers (principally “Local Project Managers” or LPMs). 3 key benefits resulted from different types of support:
 - Generating social capital, by connecting both individuals and groups
 - Enabling action to take place that would not have happened otherwise, by nurturing and sustaining groups
 - Enabling action to be more effective and efficient, by helping groups to organise their activities
- Developing a diverse range of volunteering opportunities and supporting over 300 volunteers
- Enabling volunteers to benefit from their time with AfSL through:
 - Developing practical and technical skills
 - Increasing their confidence
 - Gaining valuable work experience
 - Engaging with other people, sharing ideas and being inspired
 - Doing something complementary to their paid work
- Producing wider benefits through volunteering:
 - Civil renewal
 - Social inclusion
 - Breaking down barriers

Conclusions

AfSL did help towards developing sustainable local communities, and enabled volunteers and other local people to make a substantial contribution to service operation and development. To a large extent, AfSL also succeeded in developing service models that will work in a diverse range of localities, and in “handing over” to local people. Despite these benefits, however, AfSL struggled to generate funding to support the maintenance and expansion of its services.

- It is feasible to support action on sustainability both through paid locality workers and through volunteer locality workers supported by a paid coordinator.
- Both mini and in-depth consultations can help people to take action on sustainability, as can both in-home and at-event consultations. It would appear likely that at-event consultations offer better value for money.
- Enabling people to meet others who are also trying to reduce their environmental impact may help them to make more substantial changes.
- Some actions are harder to put into practice than others. It may be that this is related to the time, effort and money required for each action.
- Women may have been more receptive to AfSL’s approach than men.
- Approaches need to be tailored to local communities, taking account of factors such as culture and levels of deprivation.
- It is important to work with existing groups wherever possible, rather than cut across other work that is already happening.

Recommendations for the further development of AfSL

AfSL should consider:

- Providing different levels of support, or adopting different approaches, depending on the difficulty of the action that is being attempted. One option might be to focus only on relatively easy actions, with minimal support.
- Developing information, policies and training for volunteers, action group members and staff with regard to:
 - Project planning and management
 - Creating roles within a group to share workload and make the most of diverse talents
 - Engaging diverse communities
 - AfSL’s values and what the organisation can offer
 - Agreeing a clear ‘contract’ between AfSL, its volunteers, and the individuals and groups it supports
- Providing information to help local groups decide on what mix of meeting venues and means of communication is best for them.
- Providing enhanced induction, ongoing training, supervision and other support for volunteers.
- Taking steps to recruit a more diverse range of volunteers
- Providing greater recognition for volunteers’ achievements
- Giving greater priority to evaluation, by:
 - Engaging with staff, volunteers and action groups at an early stage in order to establish a culture of evaluation
 - Developing expertise in data collection and analysis
 - Providing sufficient time and financial resources
- Conducting further evaluation to investigate issues raised by this evaluation

Your comments

We would welcome comments on this evaluation. You can comment on our website at www.afsl.org.uk/evaluation0708 or by contacting us at the address and phone number below.

Further Information

The full report of this evaluation can be downloaded at www.afsl.org.uk/evaluation0708 or by contacting us at the address and phone number below.