

# ShowCase

## Community Learning and Action for Sustainable Living (CLASL)

**Topic:**

Sustainability

**Organisation:**

World Wildlife Fund UK

**Location:**

Surrey (South East Coast)

**Dates:**

March 2005 to April 2008

**Contact:**

Niamh Carey

**Email:**

[ncarey@wwf.org.uk](mailto:ncarey@wwf.org.uk)

**Telephone:**

01483 426 444

**Overview**

The World Wildlife Fund UK (WWF-UK) Community Learning and Action for Sustainable Living (CLASL) project aimed to develop an innovative methodology to enable local communities to define and work towards new patterns of sustainable living.

Funded by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' Environmental Action Fund and by World Wildlife Fund UK, the three-year project used a mix of conventional research, extensive reflection and learning, as well as development and support work with four existing community groups in Surrey.

Four community groups were supported by a project support worker through a seven-stage development process, where they scoped, planned, implemented and reflected on activities of their choosing. Examples include: conducting an energy audit of the church, installing recycling and compost bins, and 'swap it' events where people could bring and exchange products and goods.

**Results**

Two of the community groups made significant practical environmental improvements at the church and school they were associated with. They also developed their own skills and confidence as group members, allowing sustainable ongoing growth of the initiative.



## GETTING STARTED

In 2005, the UK Government launched the Community Action 2020 – Together We Can programme to support communities to work together to make the world more sustainable for themselves and future generations. Since then, sustainable consumption has continued to be a priority for the UK government and for the World Wildlife Fund UK (WWF-UK). There has been a dramatic increase in research to understand the extent to which personal and social behaviour change can contribute to more sustainable lifestyles.

However, there was a lack of detailed information about how behaviour change theories worked in practice and at a local level when applied to sustainable lifestyles. The Community Learning and Action for Sustainable Living (CLASL) project was set up to address this gap.

Initial discussions began in November 2004 to consider the potential for a community-based approach to sustainable living. Funding for the project was sought through the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra's) Environmental Action Fund (EAF).

Defra's EAF programme was established in 1992. Between 2005 and 2008 the EAF awards focused on supporting community-based behaviour change programmes, aiming to further the Government's sustainable development objectives in England. A successful application was made to EAF and detailed planning for the CLASL project began in April 2005.

It was agreed early on that the objectives would be pursued by working with four local communities in Surrey. Surrey was chosen partly because it is where WWF is based

(allowing the organisation to promote its role as a 'good neighbour'), and partly because of the desire to test ideas and behaviour around sustainable living in a relatively affluent area.

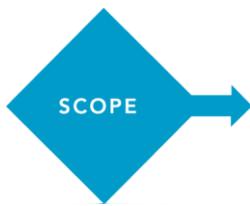
A Project Advisory Group was set up to guide the work and consisted of representatives from:

- WWF-UK
- Surrey Community Action (the rural community council for Surrey, representing and supporting voluntary and community groups throughout Surrey)
- Surrey County Council
- Guildford Borough Council
- Shared Practice (external evaluator)



Project objectives were set in June 2005 to:

- Develop an innovative methodology for defining and working towards sustainable living at a neighbourhood level in England
- Build the knowledge, capability and commitment of participants (residents and those working in local institutions) to increase sustainable living behaviours
- Embed the learning within the project community (the core group, steering group, community groups and national advisory group)
- Influence relevant governance structures to ensure that barriers to sustainable living are tackled and that appropriate long-term support is developed



## Target groups

Three community groups were initially identified in Reigate, Stoughton and Buckland, with the later addition of a fourth group in Cranleigh.



It was decided that the target community groups should have the following characteristics:

- The groups would be as different from each other as possible (e.g. size of group, type of locality, communities of interest and geographical communities, social mix)
- The groups should be existing community groups, with a formal constitution – In practice the groups were not fully constituted: one was an existing EcoTeams church group aiming to achieve eco-congregation status; the second was a group of parents who were associated with an eco-school but did not know each other; the third was in a rural village group linked

to the parish council and everyone knew each other as neighbours, but they had not worked together on sustainability issues before

- The groups should not have sustainability or environmental issues as their core purpose, but should have broad interests across the community – In practice, the EcoTeams group did have environmental interests, but the others did not
- At least one group should be from an affluent area

An analysis of the nature of the areas represented by the original three groups was undertaken using the Community Engagement and Sustainable Development tool developed by WWF-UK and CAG Consultants.

This showed that none of the areas covered by the community groups was deprived in any sense (although neither were the areas uniformly wealthy). In practice, all of the group members were adults. It was expected that people in the groups would have different levels of interest and knowledge and be at different stages of personal commitment. This was the case in practice.

A mix of structured and more open data collection processes was used, including quantitative and qualitative methodologies, such as interviews, conversations, meetings and workshops, observation and questionnaires.

## Literature review and behavioural theory

The first stage of the project included a research exercise, conducted by Shared Practice in 2005 and published in 2006.

This research informed early programme development, providing a review of current thinking on behaviour change and methods for community engagement. The review also examined the wealth of material on what works in terms of community involvement and social learning.

Five linked themes emerged from the review:

- There is public awareness of environmental sustainability
- The problem for people is not a lack of information
- Behaviour change is linked to people's underlying values and attitudes
- The concept of 'environmental citizenship' is key to future work in this area
- 'Social learning' is an important factor for encouraging behaviour and value change

The action research mantra that 'there is nothing as practical as a good theory' worked well for the project, which used the initial research phase to identify relevant theories around behaviour change for sustainability, action research and action learning.

Three theoretical principles of social learning were particularly useful for developing the programme:

1. **Action learning** – Learning by doing and reflecting on experiences as a group. Action learning is an approach that recognises that some issues have no 'right' solutions and addresses this through personal and collective inquiry and insight (supported by research)
2. **Action research** – Generating knowledge about an issue at the same time as trying to change it. This involves bringing theory and practice together, by using a participatory process with the community group and focusing on working through a particular problem or change process, whilst referring to relevant theories for support
3. **Monitoring and evaluation** – Reviewing and reflecting are essential to social learning processes. Evaluation is often seen as mainly about measuring change, but it is as much about capturing lessons and translating them so they are meaningful. Participatory evaluation, involving all those taking part in the project,

also contributes to the broader learning processes

In addition to this theoretical focus on social action and research, members of the CLASL core team and the Project Advisory Group (including Surrey Community Action) drew on different theoretical frameworks to help everyone involved understand what was happening in the practical work with groups.

For example, WWF's education staff identified an idea from Educational Theory, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, which was used in two ways:

1. To understand that people may be 'nearly ready' to demonstrate new understanding but need 'scaffolding' to help them bridge the gap
2. To structure the benchmarking so that it started with questions about what people already do and know, to help them feel confident about moving forward towards new behaviours

### Community consultation

At the heart of CLASL was a commitment to understanding the people it was working with, based on the premises that:

- The best way to work with groups was to start from where they were already, and support their values and positive impulses within a broad picture of what was sustainable
- It was important to focus on the existing motivations of group members and to understand what they wanted to do to move towards sustainable living (based on the opportunities that were available locally)

Based on these premises, the project aimed to create a collective understanding of what sustainability meant for the groups, and to use ongoing dialogue between community group members and project staff to create a specific and practical definition of 'sustainable living'.

## Benchmarking exercise and ecological footprint quizzes

Research was conducted with each community to establish:

- Initial attitudes
- Sense of environmental responsibility
- Sense of agency
- Values
- Behaviour
- Knowledge

The aim of the benchmark research was to enable quantitative and qualitative change to be measured individually and collectively. However, the benchmarking exercise also provided valuable insights about the communities' attitudes to sustainable living and current behaviours. These were different for each group and later allowed facilitators to pursue different development options that responded to each group's needs and wishes.

For instance, the benchmarking exercise for the Reigate group revealed that members were already aware of the environmental impacts of their lives and of environmental issues more widely. However, group members wanted to take their existing EcoTeams work and link it more closely with their church.

By contrast, the Stoughton group held different initial objectives, which included influencing and encouraging others to be more sustainable through 'gentle persuasion'.

## Barriers

- Perceived lack of time and cost
- Lack of understanding and know-how

## Competition

- Not enough time to do more – All groups felt that it was very difficult to live a sustainable life with the pressures of modern living
- Other competing initiatives – For all of the groups, but particularly for the Buckland village group, there was stiff competition

from existing community initiatives, such as magazine groups, fêtes, activities for young people, walking groups and history groups

## Assumptions

The research phase also identified four main assumptions, which were used to underpin the development of detailed objectives for the project:

1. In order to make progress towards sustainable lifestyles, both individual and collective changes to attitudes and behaviour are required
2. Mutual reinforcement and social learning relate to sustainable behaviours, and criticism of unsustainable behaviours is strongest where close social relationships have been built
3. Helping local communities to work collectively will encourage 'good or sustainable' behaviours and reduce 'bad or unsustainable' behaviours
4. What a 'sustainable lifestyle' is can be determined through dialogue between communities and external technical specialists

These assumptions were discussed at the April 2005 CLASL Project Advisory Group meeting before being refined and agreed as the core set of assumptions that underpinned the programme.

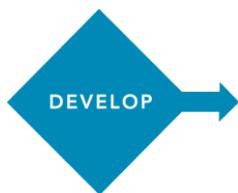
## Behavioural goals

Based on the benchmarking exercise and initial project planning discussions, the desired outcome of the project was to improve the ecological footprint of the three communities, the core project team and the Project Advisory Group.

The project also aimed to get people in the pilot communities to:

- Understand more about what living unsustainably means, for them and the planet

- Have changed their behaviour to live more 'sustainably'
- Understand more about how their personal behaviour links to wider policy, regulatory and legislative frameworks
- Have engaged with other bodies (especially local government) to change attitudes and behaviours
- Become 'ambassadors' for sustainable living locally and wider



The local development process comprised seven stages:

### **1. Set-up: Identify and engage community groups**

This initial stage enabled the support worker to develop trust and understanding with the group and form a sound basis on which to work. The work had to proceed at a pace the groups were comfortable with. Spending sufficient time at the beginning was an essential investment in a long-term process.

### **2. Levelling and motivation**

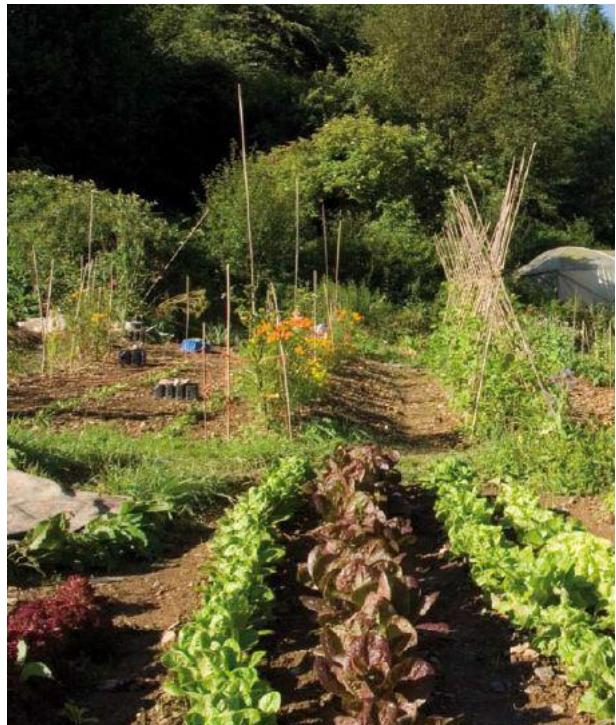
Levelling – The group's assumptions, expectations and skills were examined. People were encouraged to get to know each other and develop a common understanding of what they may or may not achieve, preventing disappointment at a later stage.

Motivation – Group members' individual motivations and what might motivate others to join the group were identified. This stage was about gaining understanding, not about 'selling messages' from outside.

### **3. Understanding: Took knowledge from previous stages and developed this into deep understanding**

Activities at this stage may have included:

- Identifying key sustainability issues the group wants to work on
- Considering using specific tools to broaden the group's understanding
- Considering additional skills and knowledge needed to achieve outcomes
- Considering external expertise to supplement the group's own knowledge
- Using WWF-UK's Ecological Footprint calculator to identify key areas for action



### **4. Planning: Used gathered information to identify what the group wanted to tackle, created a working plan and agreed specific activities (manageably spaced)**

The detailed planning stage may have been the right moment for the support worker to begin to take more of a back seat, leaving this work to group members while continuing to provide advice where needed. It was important for community groups to achieve some 'quick

wins'. Early achievements boosted confidence and wider aspirations. Complex and difficult activities could be undertaken successfully, but groups often needed some other smaller scale, shorter-term projects that could be completed successfully. This kept up interest and morale over time.

Sticking to clear aims and objectives – Having clear and simple objectives allowed the group to stay focused and achieve what they really want to do.

Events – Ran their own events or participated in events run by other groups.

Spreading the message – Tried to get more people supporting the ideas and the changes that are needed for sustainability.



## 5. Action

At this stage the support worker took a backseat role as the group took the lead on running activities. Handing over the process to groups was really important, avoiding over-reliance on the support worker and lessening the possibility that the group would cease to function once the supporting organisation withdrew. Most activities were specific projects to reduce individual, group and wider negative environmental impacts, such as:

- Setting up compost bins
- Putting hippos into toilets to save water
- Running fun, educational events for children with environmental messages
- Lobbying for specific changes in the local community

- Organising 'swap it' events – Bringing and taking rather than 'bring and buy'
- Surveying local residents to find out what they thought were priorities
- Clearing litter from the village green

## 6. Reflection

In reflecting on actions taken, the CLASL project worker explored with the groups how their actions met environmental, social, economic and governance objectives and considered how improvements could be made to activities, or where success could be continued, and to work on these issues as part of subsequent activities. The reviews were based around five simple questions:

- What happened?
- What went well?
- What did not go so well?
- What would we do differently next time?
- What have we learned from this event or activity?

## 7. Exit

The aim of the CLASL project, in addition to creating individual and group change, was to leave the groups with the confidence, skills and tools to tackle sustainability issues in the future.

An initial exit strategy was developed at the end of the first year of the project, both to help plan how to take forward the findings of the project and to help the groups think about how they continue once the CLASL project has ended. The CLASL worker ensured that the groups were clear about the timeframe of support from the start of the project and began to hand over responsibilities to the group throughout, so that they could take over tasks with support and then feel confident about continuing alone. Discussion of the transition phase helped the groups feel more confident that they could continue the work.



The groups were recruited through Surrey County Council and Surrey Community Action.

In Stoughton a group was brought together through connections to a local primary school (a mix of staff and parents). A member of the CLASL project team met the primary school's head teacher and other staff members in November 2005. Following this a group was formed of parents and staff who were interested in the work, and the group formally met for the first time in May 2006.

In Reigate, a member of the CLASL project team met an individual from an existing EcoTeams group linked with a local church, in January 2006. A formal letter of agreement to participate in the CLASL project was signed in September 2006.

Both of these groups completed the ecological footprint assessment in November to December 2007.

In Buckland, a group was formed which was made up of people involved with the parish council. A member of the CLASL project team met the Parish Clerk in August 2005. In the coming months there was significant involvement of the CLASL worker at a number of meetings, but no activities resulted locally in the village. The group had not become cohesive, partly because different people attended meetings at different times, no new relationships were developed and no shared interests emerged for them to work together on.

As the Buckland village group was struggling to start any sort of activities, CLASL was able to offer help to an alternative group and subsequently made contact with a group in Cranleigh. This group was following a variation of the Global Action Plan model and CLASL

was invited in September 2006 to help the group with monitoring and evaluation.



The benchmarking and ecological footprint measure with Reigate and Stoughton did not work as hoped. Although the initial benchmarking provided useful data on the state of existing knowledge and activities among the group members for the core project team and Project Advisory Group, the data was far less useful to the groups themselves. The follow-up benchmarking showed no real change from the initial measurement, with possibly less sustainable living since the project started.

In addition, those local group members who completed WWF-UK's online Ecological Footprint tool found that their scores suggested that although they were below the UK average of needing three planets to support their consumption levels, they were not always very much below that average. Some were disappointed by these scores and some were angry and took issue with the framing of the questions and what 'counted' as sustainable behaviour. As a result, the benchmarking did not provide the sort of information that allowed for any comparison between groups (as a result of different activities, with some groups wanting to focus on broader community engagement rather than individual behaviour) or over time. Nor did it provide any positive feedback to help support morale.

The core team reviewed the possible reasons for the lack of positive improvement in the ecological footprint of the groups at the stage of the second benchmarking exercise, in light of the overall experience of working with the groups throughout the project. The team concluded that the following were likely to be factors in the difficulties found in benchmarking:

- Imposed framework
- Groups had no neighbourhood focus
- Group members were already knowledgeable and active
- Too mechanistic
- People became more critical of themselves
- Group members changed
- Answers depended on circumstances at the time

Despite these problems, the implementation of the project identified some key successes, including a number of benefits and outcomes for the participating groups:

### Social benefits, learning and building confidence

The personal benefits to group members tended to be primarily social, especially meeting new local people, but also learning (including learning from each other). Several group members commented particularly on the learning they felt they had achieved, which built on their existing knowledge. This also helped their confidence, which in turn made them feel more able to talk to others about living more sustainably.

### Mutual support from working in groups

The two main CLASL groups felt strongly that there were real benefits in working as a group, rather than just as individuals. This was partly due to strength in numbers but also to the mutual support provided and the sense of working together.

### Empowerment rather than behaviour change

The CLASL team was surprised to discover that the biggest contribution of the project to sustainable living, beyond practical improvements to the church and school the groups had links to, was within the governance element of sustainable development. The most significant change made was probably to the confidence and capacity of the people within the community groups and the likely sustainability of the groups themselves into the long term. For the CLASL project, the idea of sustainable living became at least as much about the capacity of the groups as about measurable changes to energy and water use.



A full evaluation was commissioned in April 2005 and completed by Shared Practice in March 2008.

The aim of the evaluation was to demonstrate the value of the type of approach piloted via the CLASL programme, as well as any issues encountered. It therefore assessed whether the process to develop the methodology and the piloting of the methodology with the Surrey community groups was effective in meeting the objectives of the programme overall.

### Evaluation research methodologies

- Observation of meetings with each of the two main community groups, including informal interviews with a range of participants
- Questionnaires with the community groups for benchmarking, undertaken in June 2006, February 2007 and November 2007 (using a simplified version of the original benchmarking tool)

- Interviews were used to provide richer data on some of the key issues and were carried out with core members of the Reigate group, the SWAP group and the Cranleigh group from November 2007 to February 2008
- Group workshops and regular reviews were undertaken by the Project Advisory Group and a full review of progress to date was held in December 2006 prior to the production of the interim evaluation report. Each local group also conducted regular informal reviews of their work, facilitated by the CLASL worker

## Findings

In summary, the model for the CLASL local development process worked well. It proved to be robust and applicable to various situations – existing and new groups, in different areas, with different interests.

There was significant informal review, reflection and learning throughout the project (although the more formal approach to local benchmarking did not work satisfactorily). The process took longer to establish, with the pace of initial development slower than expected.

On the other hand, development of group members into 'ambassadors' worked better and more quickly than expected, with the two main groups reaching out and spreading messages about sustainable living amongst their communities.

## Achievements

- The groups achieved tangible improvements in their individual and group behaviours and have influenced others
- Confidence and skills were developed among group members, especially in speaking to other groups. Individuals within the Reigate and Stoughton groups developed significant skills, particularly in public speaking and engagement

- Increased aspirations among group members, particularly wanting to do more to promote sustainable living
- Groups clearly articulated links between the small steps they could make personally and the major contribution these might make if everyone just did a little
- Group members particularly valued the personal support they were given by CLASL support workers

Headline achievements from the two established communities include:

**Reigate** – This group was church-based and aimed to achieve 'Eco-Congregation' Status.

- Conducted an energy audit of the church
- Developed an action plan for the church premises
- Installed and carried out weekly emptying of recycling bins
- Installed compost bins and water butts
- Switched to recycled paper and environmentally friendly cleaning products
- Installed hippo bags in toilet cisterns and systemisers in urinals
- Installed energy saving light bulbs
- Assisted with teaching at local schools on environmental issues, often through taking part in an assembly so they were talking to the whole school, staff and parents
- Spoke to other churches
- Spoke to the scouts, three local schools, the Sustainable Redhill environmental group and a local secondary school
- Worked with Churches Together to encourage others to apply for the Eco-Congregation Award

**Stoughton** – This group was school-focused and activities included:

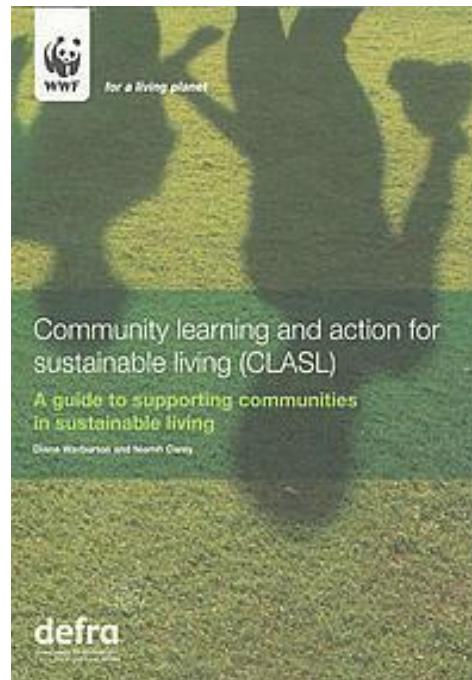
- Organising 'swap it' events, where people could bring and exchange goods and products

- Hosting a major book swap, to recycle books and support literacy by providing free books
- Partnership working with another local junior school
- Hosting a dedicated water event, including: a water butt raffle (100 adults entered and 30 won full water butt kits); a total of 60 water butts were given away during the day; 100 hippos were given away (to put into cisterns to save water); information was handed out, as were recycled pencil cases for children; and a children's competition to raise awareness of water conservation
- Recruitment of one group member to a part-time position at the original school to continue to develop activities the group had been providing on a voluntary basis



Upon completion of the project the groups still wanted further support from WWF-UK. Subsequently it was agreed that WWF-UK would continue to provide a lower level of support for some time after the project had finished, so the groups could still ask for help if they needed it and to help embed the sustainable behaviours being developed.

To share learning and results, presentations have been made about the CLASL project at Defra's cross-organisational learning sessions as part of the EAF funding stream. WWF-UK has also developed a guide to support communities in sustainable living, based on the CLASL framework, which is available on its website.



WWF-UK has used the learning from this project to further inform its work to change behaviours amongst organisations. One such project has been WWF-UK's work in 2008, alongside 18 partner organisations, with Girl Guides UK to offer young people a range of stimulating activities to help 'change the world'. WWF-UK's One Planet Challenge helped participants (aged 7 to 25) to explore the environmental impacts of their food and shopping choices and to take action – individually, as part of their Girl Guide Unit, with their family or friends, or out in the wider community.

### Lessons learned

#### **Short termism**

The CLASL approach was successful in developing community groups that will continue to work together on sustainability. However, it takes a long time to get to that stage and problems (especially climate change) are seen to be urgent. Short termism can be a major disincentive for these ways of working.

### **Contribution to cultural change**

Resources needed to make a community-based approach work are extensive and the impact on behaviour change to reduce negative environmental impacts is not extensive.

Influence on others is likely to spread the message further, but not necessarily to encourage deeper change. Bottom-up actions of this sort are likely to need to work in close conjunction with wider policy change to achieve the necessary major shift in culture.

In summary, this approach to bringing about enough change to reduce unsustainable consumption patterns in the UK will only work as part of a larger solution that also includes wider policy and legislative change, leading to a wider shift in culture.

### **Appropriate measurement**

Methods of measurement are needed that support community groups' activities while demonstrating the value of the community approach. Since this project has been completed, the WWF-UK and CAG Consultants have developed the Change! Tool, which is designed to measure the impact community engagement has on changing and maintaining sustainable behaviour (see [www.community-engagement.org.uk](http://www.community-engagement.org.uk)).

### **Support and resources**

There is a limit to what people can do individually, as groups and through influencing others. Effective work to support community-based action towards sustainable living is highly skilled and resource intensive. It is vital that new support structures, appropriate for the stages the CLASL groups have now reached and for new groups just starting, are developed that will widen and deepen the influence of the message of sustainable living that local groups are promoting.