

Community Energy Savers – Middleport Environment Centre

About the project

The 'Middleport Community Energy Savers Project' is a domestic energy efficiency project which was delivered by a partnership consisting of Middleport Environment Centre, Marches Energy Agency, Beat the Cold, and Keele University, along with a number of community organisations and residents. The project focused on two differing communities, seeking to address rising levels of fuel poverty and reduce levels of GHG emissions from the residential sector.

The aim of the project was to train and support residents to deliver energy efficiency and affordable warmth advice in their own communities and to seek to establish a legacy of self-supporting energy groups in two culturally different communities:

Shrewsbury: a market town with a relatively middle class 'green' culture.

Silverdale: an ex-mining 'village' on the edge of the Stoke/Newcastle conurbation.

Volunteer development and training sessions took place with a focus on increasing knowledge of energy efficiency and confidence in community engagement. This included participant-led development of a programme of community-based activities.

The training sessions included:

- Top tips for a warm home
- Fuel poverty and health: how to spot signs and offer help
- How to look online for information on fuel switching
- Fuel bills, Warm Homes Discount and Priority Services Register
- Different heating systems and controls. How to compare energy companies
- Pre-payment meters
- Renewable Energy
- Event skills

Energy efficiency activities across both communities included:

- Stalls at community fairs
- Clinics at GP practices
- Thermal imaging of homes
- Community education/support sessions
- Home advice visits
- Engagement with local football clubs

Participants in Silverdale reported a score of 74% for the level of increased knowledge and confidence resulting from the project, while participants in Shrewsbury reported a score of 57%. The latter result likely reflects the levels of pre-existing capability within the group, all of whom were educated to degree level and above and also with professional experience in renewable technology, architecture and broader sustainability.

Successes

Following project completion participants were asked for their feedback on what was successful about the project. The feedback comments included: helping people change energy suppliers; showing people how to set heating and

hot water timers/programmers; home visits and GP surgery visits (baby clinic and Warfarin Clinic) successfully engaged those potentially eligible for the Warm Homes Discount; using thermal imaging technology on individual's homes to teach individuals where heat was being lost and retained.

The project engaged 577 members of the public which is 77 more than had been projected. It also exceeded expectations on the number of events, delivering 18 in total. The majority of additional events occurred in Silverdale, a key driver for this being an ongoing focus on promotion of the project and the desire to recruit a more stable core group of volunteers.

Challenges

It is evident that participants need a reason to engage and stay engaged in a project such as this whether to gather inputs to their existing voluntary projects, to gain in confidence and skills, or to improve their conversational English. For this reason one of the biggest challenges was the recruitment and retention of volunteers.

Involvement

The project was predicated on an assumption that sufficient volunteers would be recruited by March 2014. Although the project did in fact have 30 volunteer participants over the course of the year many more would have needed to be recruited to gain the critical mass necessary to develop sufficient committed core volunteers. An assumption of ongoing volunteer commitment was implicit in the rigid structuring of the project with a four session preparation phase followed by an activity phase.

In Silverdale the 'patients participation group', associated with the local GP practice, were an early interested party. They treated the project more as an opportunity to develop an 'affordable warmth' forum sending different representatives to each training meeting and not wishing to engage with the project as we had envisaged. The local parish council and local residents associations also sent representatives to gather information for their stakeholders but did not become officially part of the group. With time a very small group emerged who were individuals who had benefitted personally from the work

of the project and appeared to operate out of gratitude and respect for the project staff. Elements of social contact and friendship kept them involved.

In Shrewsbury, though slow to start, the volunteer group developed more over time, with individuals approaching the Middleport centre to find out more about the project. Of the eight people who attended, the five who stayed the course were all previously known personally by the project staff member.



Learnings

An overall observation from the project was that vibrant and successful community-based groups demand considerable time, energy and knowledge to run, without which they will become unstable and dwindle away.

Funding

Funding for the project was provided by the Cabinet Office as part of a national programme to support a range of pilot community energy generation and energy efficiency projects.

Legacy

In Shrewsbury the establishment of a new 'energy demand reduction group' was not needed, but rather the bolstering and development of an existing one.

In Silverdale the project has identified the demand for winter briefings for existing groups and organisations.

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