

# **Evaluation of Reading Climate Action Groups (CAGs)**

## **1. Aims**

This evaluation aims to shed light on COIN's existing community mobilisation structure in terms of how it currently operates, the relative merits and drawbacks of this structure, and possible recommendations for improvements based on individual experience and the experience of other regional climate action mobilisation initiatives.

Climate Action Groups use a flexible and self-directed learning approach to bring together people who endeavour to '*share thoughts, ideas, feelings and concerns on climate change and to then take decisive action within their local communities*'. The most recent of these initiatives was held in Reading in September 2008, in partnership with the Greater Reading Environmental Network (GREN). The Reading CAGs functioned through an initial open space 'matchmaker meeting', involving division into groups based on shared areas of interest decided and dictated by the meeting's attendees, followed by monthly group meetings for a period of six months. The desired result of this process was community-wide reductions in carbon emissions and mobilisation against climate change.

This report uses the thoughts, experiences and ideas of both facilitators of the CAGs, including representatives from COIN and GREN, as well as a number of people who attended the matchmaker meeting and were active within their action groups. Their suggestions for areas of improvement or particular success are placed in a context of existing community environmental initiatives which exhibit similar successful structures.

## **2. Methodology**

A number of qualitative approaches were implemented to amalgamate the information used in this evaluation.

At the end of the matchmaker meeting a brief questionnaire was completed by twenty of the meeting's thirty eight attendees, which outlined how the attendee found out about the event, their previous involvement in climate change activities, their perceptions of the matchmaker meeting, and areas of particular strength and weakness of the meeting. The questionnaire responses were codified and tabulated on an Excel spreadsheet.

At the end point of the CAGs' six month meeting period another questionnaire was sent out to all the active members of groups by email. Only three responses out of a possible twenty five were received. This questionnaire focussed predominantly on the participant's experiences within their specific CAG, what their group achieved, and any problems encountered throughout the process. Again the responses were codified and tabulated on an Excel spreadsheet.

A number of participants who stood out as particularly active in each of the four CAGs were contacted by telephone and took part in a semi-structured interview based around their group theme of choice, group strengths and weaknesses, and possible areas for improvement. The interviews were transcribed, but the extremely broad and qualitative nature of responses was ill-suited to codification. Two facilitators of the CAGs from GREN and COIN were also interviewed in much the same manner, but with more of a focus on their respective organisation's aims from initiating the CAGs.

Information on five other regional climate change action initiatives was gathered by a combination of semi-structured interviews with coordinators, websites, and organisation publications. The organisations included:

- Winchester Action on Climate Change
- Climate Friendly Bradford on Avon
- Manchester is My Planet
- Cambridge Carbon Footprint
- Climate Durham
- Global Action Plan Eco-Teams

In order to capture the diversity and depth of responses, the evaluation is both conducted and written with a qualitative rather than quantitative approach.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

The findings of the evaluation are grouped thus:

- CAG participants
  - Demography
  - What they aimed to get out of joining a CAG
  - Previous involvement in climate change action
  - Subsequent involvement in climate change action
- Matchmaker meeting
  - Experiences
  - Suggestions
- Formed action groups
  - Experiences
  - Suggestions
- Actions taken
  - What was done
  - Suggestions

#### CAG participants

Males represented the majority in the CAGs by a very small margin (13 males, 12 females). The questionnaires and interviews did not explicitly refer to age or socio-economic group. However three

responses made reference to the majority of white middle class individuals in attendance at the matchmaker meeting, and a further three interviewees felt the groups would have benefitted from a greater diversity of participants. The predominant interest from the white middle classes seems to be symptomatic of climate change action throughout the country: *'the attendees were representative of the kinds of people who join low carbon communities'*.

All of the participants contacted found out about the event either from an advert (3), through the Quaker Meeting House in Reading (4), or through contact with a representative from either COIN or GREN (3).

Reasons for wanting to join a Climate Action Group were both broad and diverse. Wanting to do something practical, effective and tangible on the local scale or getting involved locally was cited five times as a reason for participating, whilst wanting to bring a particular area of interest or expertise to an action group was alluded to four times. Two interviewees wanted to learn more about climate change issues, a further three wanted to meet people from their local community, and another three wanted to make a difference. Individual rationales included wanting to improve their own home's energy efficiency, wanting to persuade others to take action against climate change, and wanting to make their ideas more practical.

Eight out of the ten of the active CAG members interviewed had been involved in climate change activities prior to joining a climate action group. Of these eight participants, the involvement of five was directly related to their career, with job areas including environmental journalism, renewable energy solutions, participation in GREN, work with the Reading Borough Council and environmental social justice organisations. Of the remaining three participants with prior involvement, one was an active member of the Green Party, and another was a member of both Green Peace and Friends of the Earth.

All but one of the ten interviewees said they would continue their involvement with climate change activities, but only one claimed this would be through their climate action group. Of the two participants who had not been involved in climate change activities before, only one said they would continue to be involved in the future. All of those active through their career choices said their continued involvement would largely be through their day to day job, with action through other external and voluntary groups, peripheral to their work.

## **Matchmaker meeting**

### ***Experiences***

Thoughts and reactions to the matchmaker meeting were on the whole positive. Of the twenty individuals questioned immediately after the event, 89% agreed or strongly agreed that the meeting was inspiring and motivating, 79% felt more confident that they could work together to reduce Reading's carbon footprint and 83% intended to commit to a Climate Action Group for six months.

The interviews introduced a number of more in-depth observations and experiences relating to the matchmaker meeting. The 'open' and 'free' style of the meeting was looked upon with particular

praise. The open space approach adopted allowed *'the freedom to move around to different groups and individuals so that you could join one group then another until you found something you were interested in'*. As a consequence participants did not feel pressured to stick to one group if, after more detailed discussion, it did not fit entirely with their objectives. Furthermore it allowed attendees to meet and talk with more people, something which was deemed an enabling factor by two of the interviewees and seven of those attendees initially surveyed. Talking, networking and sharing ideas and information with likeminded people was considered a particularly enjoyable and motivating aspect of the meeting: *'I enjoyed meeting people and there were diverse and interesting groups of people there'*.

The introduction, presentation and facilitation of the meeting were also deemed as positive, useful and inspiring. The representatives from COIN and GREN present provided good technical background, coalesced ideas and *'got people thinking and brainstorming'*. The matchmaker meeting process was generally regarded as *'very well facilitated'*.

Another strength noted by those people already involved in climate change activities, be that through GREN or otherwise, was the presence of people new to climate change initiatives rather than just the 'usual suspects'. Half of those surveyed after the meeting had not been involved in climate change related projects before, and one of the GREN facilitators described the interest of new participants as *'highly rewarding'*. One such participant who was interviewed remarked that the meeting was welcoming, and claimed that even though she was new to climate change activities felt able to freely contribute because knowledgeable individuals *'didn't hog the agenda'*.

The opportunity for groups to decide and dictate their own area of action was similarly considered positive and an empowering factor. The process was described as *'equitable'* and *'democratic'*, both of which contributed to participants' wanting to throw in ideas and expertise, and feeling motivated to take group action. The opportunity to create their own objectives was looked upon as key to the strength of action groups because the members were united by an area of particular interest.

Three of those interviewed six months after the matchmaker meeting spoke quite passionately about the group element of the meeting needing more structure and better facilitation. A member of the International Solidarity action group felt that a facilitator needed to have provided more support in the matchmaker meeting so a better action plan could be compiled encompassing specific action and more realistic goals within the six- month timeframe. A member of the home energy action group felt that options of possible climate change actions and steps of how to implement them should have been provided so that a tangible carbon reduction impact was observed which met with COIN's aims. A Car Free action group participant felt that advice should have been given in the meeting on the main environmental issues effecting Reading, so that the actions could be placed in a more local context. Overall it was felt that the meeting was *'a bit of a free for all'* and captured the objectives and ideas of *'the person in the group who could speak the loudest'* rather than the areas that would have the biggest impact on tackling climate change.

Members of the International Solidarity CAG commonly expressed complaints relating to the efficiency of the matchmaker meeting in the light of a divergence of opinion in the group on how to interpret and define 'international solidarity' as a climate reduction target. As a consequence more

time was spent *'quibbling about semantics'* than *'clarifying specifically what we wanted to do'*. The matchmaker meeting came to a conclusion without the CAG having firmly established an action plan, and thus the *'objective uncertainties'* were carried through to the subsequent meetings, further inhibiting the productivity of the group.

### **Suggestions**

It is clear that a balance needs to be achieved between permitting self-determination of the groups so as to empower and interest the participants, and choosing feasible actions which have an obvious carbon -cutting impact. One possible way to achieve this is to allocate a certain number of groups to be more structured and to facilitate them under a framework laid down by COIN. A suite of possible actions with potential for tangible and quantifiable emissions reductions, could be provided for the group, along with a timeline of suggested activity. This kind of approach would appeal to those new to the carbon reduction movement, as well as those who work more effectively with a precise and prearranged plan. Some of the groups could remain exclusively self-initiated, and the meeting itself could continue to implement an open space approach so that clear elements of freedom and openness remain.

An alternative approach would be for the groups to discuss and decide their own area of interest, while the facilitators took a more active role in the construction of an action plan. At this stage the idea could be placed in the context of realistic targets and actions that could be implemented over a six month period, with the facilitator delegating certain tasks to individual group members. In this way the interest and passion of group members would be ignited from the beginning through a collective consensus on the group's initiatives, while the implementation of the idea would be clearly set out with achievable goals.

Equally, the meeting's opening presentation could be more explicit in possible areas to take action, potentially relating them to the local area. With this information in mind, groups might be more inclined to either adopt one of the suggested actions, or attempt to tackle a specific issue affecting their locality. For example, the emissions from businesses in Reading are significantly higher than the national average. Yet none of the groups coalesced on reducing business emissions, but may have been inclined to do so had the meeting's introduction more clearly provided this information.

A further suggestion which arose from the International Solidarity action group was to provide some ground rules stating that group members could not interrupt each other, criticise each other or quibble over an individual's use of semantics. The International Solidarity group would have functioned far more effectively had a single interpretation of their aim been established early on as a result of a few basic guidelines and firmer advice from a facilitator.

## **Formed action groups**

### **Experiences**

The matchmaker meeting saw the formation of four different action groups based around the following areas

- Lobby action
- Car Free
- International Solidarity
- Home Energy

There were a number of common experiences which arose from the interviews relating to group dynamics, productivity and social functioning.

A consensus which arose from the majority (6) of the interviews was that their success in terms of creating an idea, forming an action strategy and putting the idea into practical action, was based on certain members of the group having a particular area of expertise related to the direction of action: *'it was good to have a mixture of expertise, we had someone with technical skills, someone with communications skills, someone who could make websites'*. The high proportion of participants who were employed in the environmental sector makes this observation not altogether surprising, but was crucial for the establishment of contacts, access to resources and sound technical background. The inclusion of a renewable energy consultant in the home energy group, and a member of Reading Borough Council in the Car Free group were considered particularly fundamental to the implementation of action in these CAGs:

*'BG works for a renewable energy company and has lots of contacts... because of this we had a good group of experts at our events who gave accurate and interesting information'*

*'It was very useful to have TN in our group who was on the local council so could arrange meetings and contacts'*

Astute, sharp and adept group participants were also deemed central to group success because it inspired a desire to get involved and take action: *'we were all pretty bright and capable...we were all the kinds of people who wanted to do something'*. Keen organisational skills were similarly seen as a catalyst in the orchestration of meetings and sticking to action plans both objective and time wise.

A good group dynamic from a social perspective was another area felt as responsible for ongoing interest and productive activity: *'We had a very good group of people in our group. I definitely enjoyed it. We had six people to start with and all got on very well'*. The encouragement, maintained interest, and support of co-group members gave people the confidence to contribute, and the aspiration to maintain participation and enthusiasm. The home energy group functioned particularly well by following this ethos, with the allocation of a team co-ordinator seen as an effective way of goading people on *'We did well with XX - he chaired meetings, contacted people by phone and always gave everyone a pat on the back'*. Similarly the support of facilitators throughout as a means of social cohesion was central to retaining vigour and concentration on the tasks in hand: *'The COIN Project Manager has been very good at spurring us on and keeping us focussed... without her keeping momentum up we wouldn't have really done anything I don't think'*. A poor group dynamic and tension between participants was considered the prime reason for waning momentum and interest in the International Solidarity group: *'There were various divergences of opinion. Several of us were already involved in international solidarity issues and had clear ideas on what we wanted to do. Other people did not share our views however... momentum definitely tailed off'*.

All but one of the interviewees thought the six -month timeframe was a further enabling factor. A foreseeable time framework put targets into a realistic context and meant results were visible relatively immediately: *'It got people to focus on things and ideas that could be achieved over a six month period'*. Four of the interviewees responded positively to the idea that operating over a six month period meant there was less pressure associated with a long term commitment, and therefore involvement in a group could be relatively relaxed, casual and fun:

*'It was good because it meant people weren't worried about committing to something forever.'*

*'Six months is about right for keeping momentum going but means there's no pressure to carry on if there's no interest.'*

Self-determination was likewise seen as a cause of a free and relaxed approach by three of the participants, something praised by the interviewees as it made involvement enjoyable and separate from their working lives. Furthermore it inspired a sense of project ownership and control, which further ignited a desire to see projects through.

*'The informal casual attitude kept us enthusiastic.'*

*'It was good to have the freedom to go along at your own pace, and have control over your own decisions.'*

Yet contrastingly a greater majority of interviewees saw the informal, self-initiated side of the CAGs as a hampering element, because it made people quasi-committed, and as such, their attendance at meetings was irregular and unreliable. Five of the participants interviewed cited group members not attending meetings, and difficulties in communicating, co-ordinating and arranging to meet other group members as a significant weakness in the functioning of their group: *'We ran into difficulties almost immediately because people consistently didn't turn up for meetings, and when I kept turning up this was very frustrating'*. All but two of those interviewed alluded to momentum waning over the six month period, with four people attributing this to being very busy or having other priorities: *'Everyone is busy and has their own lives and agendas; it's hard to find the time and commitment'*.

A further difficulty experienced by the International Solidarity and Lobby Action groups was that their projects did not produce tangible or immediate results, and consequently there was a loss of interest by a number of members because they failed to see what they had contributed or done: *'It was demoralising for some people trying to tackle something where you couldn't see direct results'*. For many this was a reason for disbanding their group after the six month period because little action was visible, and thus members questioned the point of belonging to a group: *'The actions that we planned were only a small part of a much bigger process and some people found this really demoralising and struggled to see what they had done or where to go from here. They lost their energy and enthusiasm and a number of people dropped out'*.

For other members, however, problems were experienced in connection to having to do too much and taking on too many responsibilities. Those participants who took on more of a co-ordination and organisational role commonly remarked that they found it hard to sustain such an involvement in conjunction with their personal lives and careers, with the former possibly compromising the latter:

*'I felt it was more of a commitment, and much more work than I first bargained for, which is raising questions about what I can do in the future.'*

*'It was slightly frustrating but I had to have lots of involvement to make sure the group carried on- I had to do a lot of work. I've left the group now because I just didn't have the time for so much work.'*

### **Suggestions**

Maintained commitment to the cause and regular attendance at meetings are areas that really need to be enforced in order to uphold the momentum and morale of group members, as well as to ensure that effective actions are taken. One suggested way to tackle this, proposed by both a facilitator and an interviewee, is to impose a "pledging" system at the matchmaker meeting whereby participants guarantee attendance at a certain percentage of meetings and agree to take on responsibilities between meetings. A similar "pledging" approach is implemented by Manchester is My Planet, whereby Greater Manchester residents make an online promise to take a certain range of carbon reduction steps in their homes and travel habits, and receive reading material, publications and invitations to events as both reminders and incentives to uphold their pledge. There would need to be a certain degree of sensitivity to maintaining the celebrated self-initiated and casual element of the CAGs, but this could be achieved by endorsing the pledge itself as self-initiated.

Another approach would be to have monthly meetings on a regular pre-determined date, so that group members could plan far in advance and include CAG meetings in their regular routine. Additionally a fixed venue could be booked for these meetings for all the CAGs so that arranging a meeting place is eliminated as an excuse for failed meetings; and if a large proportion of a particular group do not turn up, then another CAG could easily be joined, much in the same 'open space' approach of the matchmaker meeting. Climate Friendly Bradford on Avon employ a comparable degree of regularity to their meeting times and locations, and circulate reminders via email and the local newspaper. This approach has successfully seen consistent long term attendance of members.

Whilst a wealth of individuals with particular knowledge or skills areas evidently has benefits in terms of the formation of ideas and the establishment of useful contacts, it would seem on occasions that having too many members in one group with strong, potentially divergent opinions, is counterproductive. A possible solution to this may be for the facilitators to take a more active involvement in the matchmaker meeting so that groups contain a better balance between those with experience in climate change activities and those new to the movement. Indeed three interviewees were disappointed that their group did not involve enough newcomers, whilst one of the facilitators noted that the Lobby Action group was at a distinct disadvantage by being devoid of members familiar with campaigning. The Cambridge Carbon Footprint Conversation groups implement such a balance by each group being led by two volunteers experienced in climate change activities and trained by Cambridge Carbon Footprint, with the remainder of the group being new to the initiative. The result is an effective combination of knowledge and experience, with fresh ideas, and individuals without a pre-existing agenda.

Some form of training for one or two members of each group is similarly an approach that could be encompassed in the CAGs. Allocating a group member as team co-ordinator proved very efficient in the Home Energy and Car Free groups, because it kept organisational uncertainties down, and group morale and enthusiasm up. If this individual was to receive some training from COIN focussing on the achievability and tangibility of actions and leadership skills, then problems connected to over-ambitious or low-impact actions, and delegation of responsibilities will also be quashed. Winchester Action on Climate Change (WinACC) has a very effective co-ordinating strategy whereby a WinACC volunteer is appointed to chair a group of volunteers.

The International Solidarity group was hindered to a certain degree by some participants' wanting to pursue their own political agendas, something which was found intimidating by some of the others in the group, and a subsequent reason for a number of people leaving the CAG. Both Climate Friendly Bradford on Avon and Manchester is My Planet endorse a mainstream and accessible image in order to attract people from a range of backgrounds- environmental or otherwise. Climate Friendly Bradford on Avon have tried to be *'grounded in science and fact, and have very welcoming and inclusive meetings. This way a range of people get involved because we don't have a far out hippy image'*. Providing some options for action which move away from strong political ideas or campaigning measures which have connotations of being 'anti-government', may have the effect of both increasing group efficiency because strong opinions are tempered, as well as attracting more new faces to climate change activities.

## Actions taken

### **What was done?**

A variety of actions were taken by each of the four CAGs in the endeavour to reduce Reading's carbon footprint. These are perhaps best elaborated on through the words of group participants.

### **Lobby Action**

- *'The Reading Borough Council was producing a Climate Action Plan so we posed a question to them at their final meeting. This was quite a positive experience and it really showed the council that people are interested.'*
- *'It didn't really change anything dramatically but it sent a message to the council and they seemed to listen which was good.'*
- *'The group went to a cabinet meeting to ask some question- this was a good step because it is very difficult to engage with local climate change strategy. However, it was a very sterile process and the answers were pre-prepared so it was only a very small part of the process.'*
- *'To really have an effect we needed to apply sustained pressure.'*
- *'Even though we didn't achieve that much on the surface, for me the CAG was great because it linked me in to GREN, so I'm now linked to their lobby action campaign which is what I wanted'*

The lobby action group met four times and has now disbanded but two of its original members are now working for GREN lobby action.

### **Car Free**

- *'We had a number of meetings and initially our proposal was to have a car free day every month in Reading. But before we could do anything we needed to talk to more people and the relevant bodies.'*
- *'We spoke to Reading Borough Council, the manager of Reading Buses and the director of the Oracle Shopping Centre. After that we talked about what was feasible and we're in the process of putting together a proposal.'*
- *'The car free group is now focussing on businesses in Reading, and trying to get three large Reading businesses to carry out a car free day a month over summer.'*

The car free group met 9 times, and all the original members are still involved in the group.

### **International Solidarity**

- *'The group wanted to explore links with Reading's twin town in Nicaragua, and we formed a connection with the Twin Town Association.'*
- *'We wrote a number of letters to Nicaraguan authorities- but this achieved very little on the face of it because there were major language barrier issues when it came to writing to people in Nicaragua.'*
- *'I am trying to carry on- I have a friend who is happy to translate the letters into Spanish for us. We will possibly achieve something eventually.'*

The international solidarity group met at least 5 times, the group has now disbanded but a number of its members are attempting to pursue links with Nicaragua through alternative channels.

### **Home Energy**

- *'We ran four events on home energy for home owners. One of them was particularly successful and lots of people attended. Two others were run in partnership with True Food Co-op and these were pretty successful, and True Food Co-op were keen to run more events with us in the future.'*
- *'We based each event around the area each member lived. This enabled me to get on with what I wanted to do, but I provided others with materials and contacts if they wanted them. More than 30 people attended my event and 15-20 households signed up to change their home energy.'*
- *'We had speakers at the events who gave accurate and useful information, making them very focussed and compact events. The people who attended also wanted to attend further meetings, which was very positive.'*
- *'We advertised by door knocking which was not too successful. People seemed to have an initial interest when we spoke to them at their doors, but they didn't actually come to any events.'*

The home energy group met 8 times, two group members have dropped out, but four members are still running the group and others have since joined.

Overall seven of the interviewees, one of the questionnaire candidates and the COIN Project Manager felt that being involved in the CAG fulfilled their aims to a certain degree. Certainly wanting to meet people, network and get involved in the local community were satisfied through the climate action groups. Three participants were also confident that they had made a difference in the local area, however a greater majority felt that they did very little that had an impact, and really felt that

they contributed very little. Putting ideas into practical action was perhaps the area where four of the interviewees were least satisfied, and is testament to the perceived minimal influence some of the CAGs had. However, the fact that all but one of the CAG members approached intend to pursue climate change activities in the future is testimony to a positive, enjoyable and worthwhile experience.

### **Suggestions**

The minimal carbon cutting impact and lack of widespread mobilisation that resulted from the CAGs was expressed as a particular disappointment for both facilitators and participants and is therefore something that needs to be addressed. Similar action groups that operate as part of Cambridge Carbon Footprint use carbon cutting goals as the principle impetus for action. It sets a goal for all its Conversation Group members to cut their personal emissions by half throughout the meeting process. Tangible, high impact results are therefore the aim from the onset. To draw inspiration from this, at the CAG matchmaker meetings facilitators could provide a set carbon reduction target that each group has to aim for.

Two of the interviewees suggested that the facilitators need to do more to monitor the progress of the groups in terms of ensuring they are on track to make an impact: *'I think there need to be some quality checks at a number of points throughout the six months so that COIN can check we're on target to do something and produce tangible results within the timeframe'*. The Global Action Plan Eco-teams similarly uses a group approach and social ties to drive carbon reduction projects forward. Their approach, however, strongly implements measuring, monitoring and feedback structures so that behavioural changes are continually reinforced, and Eco-team members feel supported. CAGs could incorporate a similar slant by each group having to report to a facilitator on a monthly basis with updates on: the measures taken, future plans, and the associated emissions reductions. With this additional monitoring and encouragement, individuals might be more inclined to see projects through and not prematurely drop out.

A concern commonly expressed in a number of organisations, including the CAGs, is that the focus is on small steps and grass roots action, whereas recent publications (including the WWF's 'Weathercocks and Signposts') have highlighted that it is unlikely for small behavioural changes to encourage people to make more significant changes. Furthermore, adopting a small steps strategy is not considered tantamount to a pro-environmental focus. Given the size of CAGs and the limited timeframe they operate in, the emphasis has been on small scale actions, as elaborated on by this participant: *'I think we've found that you can only do small and tokenistic things that don't really make a difference. To make a difference is really hard to achieve- especially for a group of busy volunteers with no money. We have no power to influence policy'*. This observation is shared by the coordinator of WinACC, who has recently put plans into motion to make projects run by the organisation fall under the 'large steps' category: *'We need to become sceptical of promoting small steps because small steps don't necessarily lead to large steps. We need to have a more ambitious approach and we're changing our Low Carbon Champions training accordingly. We've engaged with a local strategic partnership to aim for a 20% reduction over a three year period which is very ambitious so the emphasis is on large steps... We've identified 15 priority areas for action and each of these priority areas will have a set carbon reduction target'*.

So that large steps become precedents for the CAGs it would be worth likewise pinpointing a number of priority areas which shape the actions of the groups. Climate Friendly Bradford on Avon, Climate Durham and WinACC all offer pre-existing action groups based on some or all of the following priority areas: transport, waste, home energy, renewable energy, business environments and school environments. The Climate Durham schools groups have been particularly successful in this regard, implementing a network approach over eight secondary schools in the city so that carbon cutting emissions ideas and actions are shared across a broad framework, and therefore have a more widespread and thus significant impact. Climate Durham is encouraging schools to have an energy audit so that the impact can be measured in quantifiable terms. The allocation of ten or so priority areas raised at the matchmaker meeting would lay the groundwork for a large step approach based on significant emissions reductions, whilst simultaneously reinforcing in people the idea that they are making a difference- an area unfulfilled by the existing CAGs.

A complaint that emerged twice from the interviews was that the group's targets were 'uninspiring', something perhaps related to the lack of hands-on practical action associated with a number of the groups. Pre-determined priority areas could potentially mitigate this complaint by ensuring that all actions suggested encompassed achievable, yet influential, practical activities. Climate Friendly Bradford on Avon focuses largely on community events as a way of channelling information and generating interest and mobilisation. A successful example of this was an exhibition they put on at the town's art festival involving an ice sculpture of a polar bear that symbolically melted over the three day event. As visitors came to admire the polar bear, there were Climate Friendly Bradford on Avon representatives on hand and information and advice leaflets available too. The success of the event lay in hands on activity, face to face contact and direct engagement with interested individuals, and therefore an unequivocal sense of being practical and inspiring others.

## 4. Conclusions and recommendations

### Conclusions

The use of Climate Action Groups as a way of mobilising communities to take action against climate change is generally seen by those participating and facilitating as a successful strategy. The majority of participants strongly believed that the CAGs really worked and provide a supportive outlet for shared ideas to coalesce into something effective and productive:

*'Climate action groups really work- definitely in principle and I think in practice.'  
'It works! It's good for people who want to use their interests to be effective  
in the community.'*

*'The CAG provided the backbone and structure and enabled us to progress the  
idea. We wouldn't have done anything without it.'*

*'I think CAGs work- it's a supportive system and it really pushes people together  
who have a shared interest.'*

The facilitation by COIN is also highly valued, especially in terms of maintaining momentum and infusing the team with positivity at times of apathy. Manifestly, without the CAGs as a spark, meeting point, and foundation, individuals with an interest in climate change activities would be less likely to pursue some sort of action. What is more, a very great proportion of participants intend to fully remain a part of the climate change movement, representing a sound degree of community mobilisation.

The conduct of the matchmaker meeting and general involvement are looked upon predominantly positively, yet more specific experiences are mixed, with numerous suggestions for improvement offered above. In summary:

- Whilst the free and self-initiated approach of the CAGs is looked upon favourably by a few, a greater majority would value more guidance and structure, with support, monitoring and evaluation throughout.
- Specifically the groups would benefit from a facilitator explicitly situating their actions in terms of carbon reductions, and the size and significance of their steps so that participants feel like they are having an impact.
- The groups require more internal structure, perhaps initiated by a training programme, which would alleviate issues of over-burdened group members, and administration and organisational uncertainties.
- The majority of active participants had a pre-existing involvement in climate change activities, and whilst this provided a wealth of invaluable expertise and knowledge, it also meant some member's commitments were split, and there was some very strong, obstinate, and often political points of view. The involvement of new participants would ignite a greater degree of mobilisation and provide fresh perspectives.
- Counter-intuitively perhaps, the success of groups in terms of forging useful contacts, accessing resources and remaining technically accurate is grounded in the knowledge and experience of group members.

Possible ways to approach these areas will be addressed in the following section by drawing inspiration on some of the other mobilisation structures alluded to.

## Recommendations

Two principle areas present themselves as possible solutions to the above observed fields of difficulty. Namely implementing more of a partnership approach, and redesigning the image of the CAGs.

### ***Partnership approach***

Feeding into existing carbon cutting structures in Reading was cited four times by the interviewees as a way of improving the CAG approach in terms of group efficiency, the impact of actions and split loyalties. Partnerships with similar action groups, ingrained networks and local authorities were all considered possible ways to enhance the effectiveness of groups:

*'Really it was difficult for the group to even exist because someone was already doing what we were trying to do.'*

*'There is a very good network of eco-churches in Reading which we could have formed contact with and built on what was already there instead of starting something new.'*

*'There needs to be more of a partnership approach with local councils etc, to help the leadership along- so far this has been absent.'*

*'I think we really need to work in partnership with the Borough Council- that's the key to getting things done.'*

Indeed the success of the home energy and car free groups is to a certain extent grounded in the mutually beneficial relationships they forged with Reading Borough Council. The partnership gave the projects more of a community-wide reputation, whilst also providing invaluable knowledge resources. In terms of channelling into deeply entrenched existing community networks, such as churches, the pre-existing social cohesion evident between group members with a shared history and culture will undoubtedly improve group dynamic, long term involvement, and a sense of continual support. The Global Action Plan Eco-Teams connected to church communities were found to be particularly effective in this regard, emphasising the importance of strong social ties in group action.

In Reading there exists a variety of climate change action groups- with some major ones pointed out as in association with GREN. A number of the CAG members had prior involvement with some of these groups and therefore struggled to retain dedicated commitment to both. A partnership approach with these existing organisations might have created a greater bank of knowledge and experience, as well as the potential of these larger groups to prevent overburdening of individuals. Climate Friendly Bradford on Avon's Transport group merged with a town initiative called Priority for People when they noted that they had common aims and implementation strategies. Climate Friendly Bradford on Avon coordinators saw little sense in having two small groups working in competition for the same target. A subsequent partnership approach has proved lucrative for both organising bodies, and centralised ideas and expertise.

All the regional climate change organisations contacted felt that a strong and supportive relationship with local authorities was essential for community wide mobilisation. Without the support of councils, coordinators said it was almost impossible to access the whole community, and maintain the degree of integrity necessary for attracting the mainstream:

*'The only way to get cross-community success is to work closely with local councils.'*

Manchester is My Planet has a highly effective partnership structure with over 100 partner organisations, a number of which are Local Authorities in Greater Manchester. Not only does this work as an endorsement instrument for the organisation, but Local Authorities help at a number of Manchester is My Planet events and utilise marketing material in a mutually beneficial relationship based on shared expertise, resources and reputation.

The signing up to National Indicators based on Government Climate Act Targets by Local Authorities, provides an exploitable conduit for CAGs to develop partnerships with Local Councils based on reciprocity. By working alongside CAGs in a variety of carbon cutting initiatives, the council will be seen as meeting their national indicator targets, thus putting them in better stead for additional

funding. Meanwhile, the CAGs will benefit from the community-wide status, professional experience, and resources that the council provides.

### ***CAG image***

The number of new faces that become *actively* involved in the CAGs is an area that clearly could be improved. The general consensus of a number of participants is that those without a pre-existing knowledge and experience of climate change issues were at a disadvantage both in terms of their ability to carry out actions, and their confidence within the group. Climate Friendly Bradford on Avon has already been noted as implementing a strong degree of inclusiveness and scientific and technical background as a means of attracting a wide range of people. Manchester is My Planet similarly has a hugely successful branding strategy grounded in appearing optimistic, wide-ranging, fun and empowering '*All the messages employed were positive, inclusive empowering. The events targeted to gain new pledges were festivals, sporting events or other leisure activities. The use of celebrities from sport and television was central to this fun and cool image. Political endorsement was sought from both national and local figures to provide gravitas to the campaign.*'

Endorsement by Tony Blair and local celebrities including Manchester United players proved hugely successful in attracting a broad range and depth of members to the campaign. Manchester is My Planet has a comprehensive array of climate change communication principles that desist from using fear and detractors as a way of mobilising the Greater Manchester community, and focus instead on using emotions and visuals to create a trusted voice on climate change which uses attitudinal persuasion measures to make climate change a 'home' rather than 'away' issue. They use marketing collateral in keeping with their fun and upbeat image including a dedicated website, pledge cards, banners and resource packs to support the campaign and provide "pledgers" with additional information and encouragement.

Evidently Manchester is My Planet operates on a scale far larger than that of the CAGs, but there are successful elements of the campaign that are transferable to the smaller scale. Presenting the CAGs as inclusive and welcoming to people entirely new to the climate change movement could be achieved through promotion focussing on the simple benefits involvement brings to everyday life, including meeting new people and getting involved with the local community, as well as the obvious emissions reductions. A friendly and welcoming group dynamic will therefore be encouraged from the onset. This aside, however, an approach grounded clearly in tangible, quantifiable carbon cuts is seen by many as a favourable structured approach, preferable to far-reaching political ideals. It could potentially be to the advantage of CAGs, therefore, for groups to shed their political, campaigning or activist image, which is seen as alienating to newcomers, in favour of a scientifically based attitude and fixed carbon reduction goals.

Endorsement by locally known and respected individuals and organisations had mammoth benefits for Manchester is My Planet and could be replicated for CAGs by partnership with existing locally renowned networks, dominant businesses and local authorities. Partnership will attach stature to both the matchmaker meeting, thus attracting initial participants, as well as promoting interest, support and respect throughout the action process.

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**Report produced by Olivia Pierce, External Researcher, April 2009**