

4

Environment and the Big Society

Context

The devolution and decentralisation of power from central government to the local public sector and communities; features strongly in current government thinking. The Big Society offers to enable communities to take responsibility for their lives; with emphasis on local services by and for local people. However, environmental concerns rarely respect local boundaries. New policy developments leaning heavily on the localism agenda face a challenge addressing environmental issues that may require regional, national and potentially international collaboration. However, at the heart of environmental sustainability lies the actions and behaviour of people and communities.

Environmental organisations perform a dual role of both influencer and deliverer and take a two-pronged approach in addressing this:

- engaging communities in activities to improve environmental sustainability and
- embedding sustainability principles within the development of local policies and strategies.

Case study

Friends of Green Wood Community Forum

Based in Nottinghamshire, Greenwood Community Forest has always encouraged community participation through its establishment of Friends groups to improve, care for and promote the community woodland sites being created.

Created in 2000, the Friends of Greenwood Community Forum offers a place for these individual groups to share their experience and knowledge, whilst providing mutual support, boosting confidence and increasing recognition of the work of individual volunteers.

The forum is led by the Friends groups, with support by the Greenwood team. Their other activities include quarterly meetings, an annual awards celebration, production of The Greenwood Community Woodland Handbook and the attainment of Green Flag status for individual sites.

“Over ten years, one thing that has stood out for me is the camaraderie, depth of knowledge, range of skills and bucketfuls of advice we are happy to share with each other. I think that is the main reason we are all still involved and long may it continue.” *Colin Barson, Chair of the Friends of Greenwood Community Forum*

For more information visit www.greenwoodforest.org.uk



East Midlands Dimension

The environmental VCS have consistently been at the forefront of delivering projects and activities that promote good practice in the use of natural and environmental resources and engaging communities in activities that have a positive impact on the environment.

In the East Midlands there are many groups working in an environmental context, coming together within the informal network of East Midlands Environment Link (EMEL). Collectively they coordinate their activities and increase impact through sharing skills and resources, resulting in an holistic approach to addressing environmental issues.

Total membership of EMEL members exceeds 450,000 in the East Midlands. The network collectively supports a large network of volunteers and owns and manages thousands of hectares of environmentally significant land in the interest of people and wildlife.

EMEL have consistently worked with the public sector to ensure that VCS perspectives on the environment are represented within local and regional policy. It is important that policies that link national and local principles and objectives on the environment preserve and foster and build on this legacy.

Challenges and opportunities

Environmental VCS groups have a long and successful history of establishing local volunteer structures for local initiatives. Knowledge of the local area, a commitment to its protection and a pride in the natural environment all contribute to this success and support its continuity. As member-based groups, environmental VCS organisations are heavily reliant on volunteer effort and contribution. However, the challenge to all such organisations is to keep volunteers committed and engaged, otherwise momentum is lost.

Involving local people in environmental activities fosters a willingness to care more about their local area and assume a greater responsibility for their part in that community. This can bring positive outcomes when people contribute their time and resources to achieve locally identified needs and objectives. Continuity of this work can be enhanced by more progressive policies that encourage:

- Volunteer recruitment and giving,
- Group development coupled with legal and professional support.

These issues resonate with the Big Society idea.

Environmental VCS organisations have developed productive relationships with a range of current and former public sector structures, finding ways to reflect environmental principles in policy-making for the benefit of all society. This has been particularly successful in embedding the economic argument of following sound environmental principles in local decision making processes and sustainable development practices in regional and local transport plans.

However public sector at the local level must be persuaded of the importance of continuing this relationship and preserving its legacy. There is a real danger that otherwise, funding pressures will mean that local authorities take not simply a local but a “parochial” attitude which would work against the essentially national impact of environmental concerns.

Whilst focused action relating to community engagement with environmental issues can be coordinated at a local scale, dealing with the wider impacts frequently requires a scale greater than local. An example is work being undertaken to support biodiversity and water quality within river basins. Rivers do not adhere to political or neighbourhood boundaries and acting to improve rivers has to be taken on

a scale between local and national. Similar considerations have to be considered for issues such as air quality, transport planning, forestry and animal migration patterns.

Impact of National Policy

The coalition government has launched the **National Citizen Service** pilots aimed at school leavers aged 16 to take place from summer 2011. This could provide an opportunity for young people to engage in social action projects and take part in environmental stewardship roles in their communities.

The **Localism Bill**, which is still to be publicised, will devolve power away from the centre empowering people and organisations to challenge the way local services are being delivered and to offer a better more cost effective alternative. Communities and organisations will be able to bid to takeover the running of community amenities such as parks, museums, road networks and pathways. Professional and legal advice will be essential in helping communities to exercise their rights and obligations in a sustainable way.

In spring 2011 DEFRA are due to publish the **Natural Environment White Paper**. Effective dialogue with environmental VCS organisations and networks will help to frame the role that the environmental VCS can play in supporting both community engagement in the environment and in influencing and shaping good practice at local, regional and national level.

The development of **Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs)** across the country is one of the few new structures to reflect a wider geographical coverage. The focus on economy and enterprise will have direct implications for the development of transport planning and land use. To ensure wider sustainability within actions arising from the LEPs, engagement with environmental VCS organisations and embedding principles of sustainable development at the outset will deliver tangible economic benefit as well as contribute to national carbon reduction, resource efficiency and other sustainability targets.

It is important that issues of uncertainty as a result of new government policy and initiatives are urgently resolved. So many environmental issues, such as biodiversity loss and climate change, are time-critical. Delay in dealing with them will have a damaging impact at both a local and national level.

It is vital that the coalition government is able to support and enforce the national and regional strategies and associated action plans in order to conserve and protect the environment. There is a risk that regional and national issues may be neglected as government pursues the localism agenda as the cornerstone for building the Big Society. Of prime importance is the recognition that environmental issues such as sustainable development and biodiversity are essential to the health and prosperity of society at the local and national level. This recognition must be established throughout public sector policy; linking neighbourhoods, regions and sometimes the international community in positive action for positive outcomes.