

Environment Jobs Scotland: An Overview of Community Skills for Sustainable Communities

Executive Summary

Report prepared by
Forward Scotland

Funded by
Scottish Executive
BP
Jobcentre Plus





Background

Sustainable development is a process relying heavily on a community's ability to understand its long-term needs; to be able to play an active role in planning and to communicate effectively with partners to achieve its goals. This has been recognised by the UK government and the Scottish Executive in their recent sustainable development strategies. This recognition has many implications for communities in terms of skills and capacity and this too has also been the subject of a great deal of attention in pinpointing what defines a sustainable community and what skills are needed to become a sustainable community.

The skills required by communities to carry out sustainable development activities can be both generic and specific in nature. It is recognised that these skills are difficult to comprehend and it seems clear that there are different sets of processes involved where different skills and training structures should come into play.

Current Issues in Community Skills and Training

There are a range of training opportunities available to develop generic and specific skills for the practical delivery of sustainable development projects. There are also a wide range of options for private funding for capacity building activities in communities. However, while community groups are generally able to access generic skills training cheaply and locally, training in specific skills is often expensive and less accessible. This can be a source of frustration for community groups who may spend a great deal of time and effort not just trying to access this type of training but in applying for grant funding to pay for it.

Since 2004, Individual Learning Accounts - small amounts of money for people on low incomes to buy training which will improve their individual skills capacity - have been available. However, Individual Learning Accounts were primarily introduced to help raise individual skill profiles, not as a means of building community capacity.

Community learning and development plans are in the initial stages of implementation in Scotland. Each local authority will be responsible for developing and delivering the plans which will be determined by local needs. There does seem to be an emphasis on e-learning as a valuable delivery method as it maximises the training that is available. The cost of e-learning is unlikely to be met entirely from statutory budgets however, which means that grant funding will be required. Local authorities which are able to source additional funding will be able to maximise opportunities through e-learning, while those who don't will have to rely on local provision.



Conclusions

In response to these issues, the following ideas are suggested:

Community training might be targeted using 'Community Learning Accounts'. Under such a system, all groups or interests within a local community would take part in developing a sustainable development action plan for their community. On the basis of this, each group would then undergo a training needs analysis and would receive a specific number of credits according to their training needs. Groups would then be able to trade these credits for training. Groups could also supplement their credit allocation by purchasing extra credits, if they had income to do so. Such a system would help ensure an even distribution of training amongst different, perhaps competing interests in the community. It would also help to target training against specific community outcomes that had been determined in the sustainable development action plan.

Financing these credits could be achieved through a mixture of public and private funds. Many grant funders are realising the value of having elements of community capacity building within their funding criteria, as long as an applicant can show how the capacity building activity will lead to the achievement of a specific project outcome. Since the community learning account system is directly linked to a local sustainability plan, there is clarity in most cases between the outcome to be funded and the action to be achieved. Local funders might even consider allocating part of their fund towards a community learning account for general allocation, if such a system were in operation.

A second issue that could help to maximise community skills is in setting a standard for community training, so that communities can be sure that the training accessed holds validity - that it "does what it says on the tin".

Organisations such as Communities Scotland have begun to develop frameworks for community capacity building and standards for community involvement. This is important given the move towards online learning techniques, where the trainee is able to access training courses at a national level. There needs to be a framework for community training that ensures the training is relevant, valid and effective.

Finally, it is worth exploring the idea of an online portal for community training and development. Like other community websites, the Community Webnet, which Forward Scotland manages in partnership with other Scottish bodies, provides information on events and training. However, the Community Webnet goes further than other websites in that it is interactive, providing communities with a means of sharing views, ideas and experiences. There is therefore potential to develop the Community Webnet further so that it becomes a national gateway for communities to access valuable training and development.



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Summary Report Produced January 2006

Printed onto Heritage Laser Colours 180g.
A paper containing 100% genuine recycled fibre waste which conforms
to the UK Government's guidelines for sustainable development.