

Science for Environment Policy

Social marketing to improve community-level green behaviour

A community-level initiative in the UK has successfully used social marketing techniques to encourage participants to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. On average, participants reduced their emissions footprint by 2 tonnes every year. Based on the initiative, the authors of this study propose a framework to guide future community engagement.

There is increasing emphasis on the role of community-level movements to reduce [greenhouse gas](#) (GHG) emissions. In this study, researchers examine an initiative which used 'social marketing' to encourage a shift towards pro-environmental behaviours in the [city](#) of York, UK. This practice applies marketing principles to change behaviour for the benefit of society.

The York Green Neighbourhood Challenge¹ was conducted from May 2009 to September 2010. It first quantified GHG emissions across the city from housing, transport, food, shopping/consumables and services. The analysis showed that the average York resident had an emissions footprint of 17 tonnes, measured in terms of the climate impact equivalent to tonnes of CO₂ per year (CO₂ eq/yr).

Since housing and transport made up over half the typical resident's footprint, the initiative targeted those neighbourhoods with high housing and transport impacts. To identify neighbourhoods with the most potential to reduce their footprints, the initiative selected those that had access to transport links and the means to improve the energy efficiency of their houses. This narrowed the selection down to two neighbourhoods.

In total, 89 participants completed an initial questionnaire to provide a description of their existing behaviours. The participants formed six 'teams' and over the six-month period they were encouraged to meet on a monthly basis. As well as this they had three milestone events to share experiences and reinforce a common purpose. There was also access to experts to advise on subjects including domestic energy saving, locally-sourced food and composting.

At the end of six months, 49 participants remained, and these individuals completed a second questionnaire on changes they had made to their behaviour.

Those who completed the challenge achieved an average carbon footprint reduction of 2 tonnes of CO₂ eq/yr, meaning a total reduction for the initiative of 98 tonnes of CO₂ eq/yr. The largest reductions were in relation to shopping and housing behaviours, however, there was no significant reduction in travel footprint and not all teams achieved a reduction.

The long-term success of the project depends on the continuation of behaviours and this would require a follow-up study. However, using insights from this piece of research, researchers propose a model of community engagement which is summarised below:

Targeting and recruiting: Target specific groups, especially those with pro-environmental attitudes that have not yet been translated into action. Recruit from existing community groups, such as local churches or youth groups.

Go beyond carbon: The focus on CO₂ reduction will only appeal to a minority; therefore CO₂ reduction should be placed in the wider context of improving general wellbeing and reducing inequalities.

Specifying goals: Have a clear target and establish a baseline from which to measure its achievement.

Initial engagement: Provide information on the social and environmental value of actions and encourage participants to pledge to undertake specific actions. Produce a programme of activities and use mentors and local champions.



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1. See: www.greenneighbourhood.co.uk
For the York Neighbourhood Challenge report, see: www.sei-international.org/mediamanager/documents/Publications/Rethinking-development/SEI-Green-NeighbourhoodChallenge-Project_report.pdf

