

## Scottish Communities CAN's Community Engagement Support

Scottish Communities CAN's aim for this project was to address two key challenges our members face in community engagement work:

- how to engage with a greater cross-section of their community and,
- how to deepen their engagement to ensure that interest in their activities leads to lasting behaviour change.

### Projects

Nine projects were offered up to three days of mentoring support over 3-6 months. Projects had a variety of activities and purposes and came from different parts of Scotland, both rural and urban. Their behaviour change related aims focused on local food growing, home energy efficiency and sustainable travel. Projects were at varying stages and had differing levels of experience.

### Support provided

Community groups and consultants were invited to put in a proposal to provide paid support, and were matched with projects according to their experience and skills.

They offered the projects:

- Someone independent to talk through challenges, problems and solutions
- Expert knowledge of particular climate change projects and areas
- Experience and skills such as running community organisations and projects, or doing community engagement
- Action plans with specific recommendations
- Templates and resources that could be adapted for participants' projects
- Tools such as for work planning or analysis
- Expert advice

The people who received the mentoring found that taking a period of focused time to reflect and review the project aims, and its successes, limitations and effectiveness was helpful. Some appreciated the experience providing

- Individual benefit akin to Continuing Professional Development
- Reassurance and confidence
- Making a new contact and sharing their networks
- Knowledge-sharing
- Changing the way you think and approach things
- Better informed on how to direct a project

### Impact

Participants used the advice, experience, skills and specific recommendations from the mentors, and applied them to their projects. They felt they had ownership of the recommendations because they had originated from staff, and the mentor had helped to provide clarity and facilitate an action plan for their ideas. Some were supported with specific challenges.

Here's how some of the projects adapted:

*I restructured two of my staff members and used them differently. That's going really well. I started targetting within the community, rather than hosting more general public events.*

*We've start selling our successes and using them to our advantage to attract more people. We're organising our events and advertising ourselves differently that is much more attractive to people in the community.*

*The students haven't returned yet, but we are certainly more prepared than we've been previously for their return. We're meeting weekly now as a team, and that's definitely been worthwhile.*

*The mentor's report became the structure of a new volunteer's work. I wouldn't have had the time to be able to provide the volunteer with that kind of plan.*

*We will implement the four key areas of actions. Some of them we had been starting to do anyway, but we're doing things more consciously now.*

*We've been actioning who we target and how. The school resources that we were given were really useful as we had been struggling with the sessions in the schools and the mentor gave us resources that we could engage the children with.*

*I have written applications for grant funding more competently because I now understand what I can do to actually engage communities. This means we can improve how we gain community buy-in right from the start of a project.*

*We've already gained new volunteers from improving how we sell ourselves. Our Committee members are motivated again, and we're meeting more regularly. New energy has been put into the project.*

### **Tips for improving community engagement**

- **Consider getting a mentor:** You will gain from getting someone outwith your project, external to your organisation who has the right skills, knowledge and experience to improve what you are doing on issues such as community engagement. You will gain from their advice, support and recommendations.
- **Linking people together:** See what collaborative working you could do with other organisations or projects in your community. Could you share resources? Make some efficiencies? Improve your community engagement by working collaboratively? Remember you are not in isolation and connecting to other groups and communities could help each other's objectives as well as improve your community engagement.
- **Setting your goals:** Set your goals and needs right from the start of the project. Be clear on them so that you can really see the tangible achievements you've made.
- **Have confidence:** Have confidence that just because one thing may not be working out fabulously, that you aren't getting it all wrong. Community engagement is not an event, but a process. You have to keep going with it, because it doesn't just happen overnight and building relationships in your community takes time. Trying to create lasting behaviour change in particular is really difficult and it is also a process.
- **Remember it's about people:** Face-to-face interaction is really worthwhile. Social media, flyers and posters can help community engagement but you often get a better response with more personal, face-to-face interaction. You need to take what you're doing to people, think where you are promoting your work and make it easier for them to come to your events.

### **Tips for working with a mentor**

- **Clarity and purpose:** be clear and structured about what you want to gain from the mentor, and how you are going to structure your time.

- **Get dates in the diary fast:** make sure you get your mentoring schedule into each diaries, because it's harder than you think to schedule time together – even more so when you need a team or board members to be part of your mentoring work.
- **Don't be shy:** Ask for the help you need. Ask as many questions as you can. The mentors can't wave a magic wand, but they certainly have the skills, experience, knowledge and networks to help you as much as they can. If what you need is beyond the scope of the mentoring, all they can say is no! Ask first!
- **Tailor the mentoring to your needs:** the mentoring is designed to be tailored to what your project needs to improve community engagement. The mentor does not only have to work on one project, or with one person. But if it's really one project, or one aspect of your organisation that is holding you back, make sure you raise that with the mentor at the beginning.
- **Make a list of your perceived challenges:** Be clear about your specific challenges, and list them before you see the mentor. You may need to focus on additional tasks, but at least you will feel you have not wasted the opportunity to tackle your specific problems.
- **Ownership:** Take ownership of the mentoring and drive it forward. Know who in your project is co-ordinating it.

### Case Study: Broadford and Strath Community Company

The Community Company had 3 days' worth of mentoring with a mentor that they felt was a perfect match. They discussed the challenges and problems they faced during face-to-face sessions, and found that the mentor understood their challenges well because she had tackled them directly herself in a similar island-based community setting. Further support was provided by telephone and email.

The mentor worked primarily with the Project Officer, but also met with the full board and directors of the community company. They focused on improving engagement amongst the volunteers within the Company, as well as how attract more people from the wider community. The mentor provided a written report that included the key points from their discussion and recommendations.

The Project Officer is gradually implementing the mentor's suggestions and putting the plan into effect. For example, better advertising, selling their success, better targeting of populations, as well as making their events more attractive through, for example, bolting them on to well-attended community events such as the Community Gala Day.

The project has been rejuvenated since the mentor's work with them. Internally, the organisation is working better, meetings are more regular and with more enthusiasm. There are also new volunteers to both projects and the Company.

The Company has benefited from having an external assessment of what they were doing and through sharing the mentor's direct experience, advice and knowledge.

### Case Study: Oasis at Wallacewell

Oasis is a relatively new community group started in Spring 2014, with the community garden and energy project a new addition in Spring 2015. As it was a short-term one year funded project, the Project Manager was keen 'not to reinvent the wheel' and to hit the ground running, utilising the experience and best practices from others. The mentor was a suitable match because they had expertise on community energy projects – a specific

request by the Project Manager. As a result, the participant felt the mentor was well placed to quickly understand the issues and challenges she faced.

The mentor contacted the Project Manager in order to outline the structure to the mentoring before they met. Two face-to-face mentoring sessions were provided. The first session provided background to the mentor and an opportunity to share concerns about the project. The second session was a review of the written report the mentor supplied to the participant following the first session.

The written report included suggested tools such as an action plan and the development and use of energy diaries, as well as a range of resources and sources of information. The participant found it very useful to have everything written down and structured in a report. She has been able to give the report to a volunteer to help implement the plan for the project.

Oasis are currently implementing the mentoring work. The Project Manager felt it was very useful to have someone to bounce ideas off when a worker is not part of a bigger team.

The participant felt she would have gained more if she'd had a clearer understanding of the mentoring process, and options, further in advance and suggested that more face-to-face time with the mentor may have been useful. The sessions only lasted two hours each. Overall, having someone external 'to go to for advice on whether to count something in or count something out' was extremely useful.