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Community learning and action for sustainable living (CLASL)

A guide to supporting communities in sustainable living

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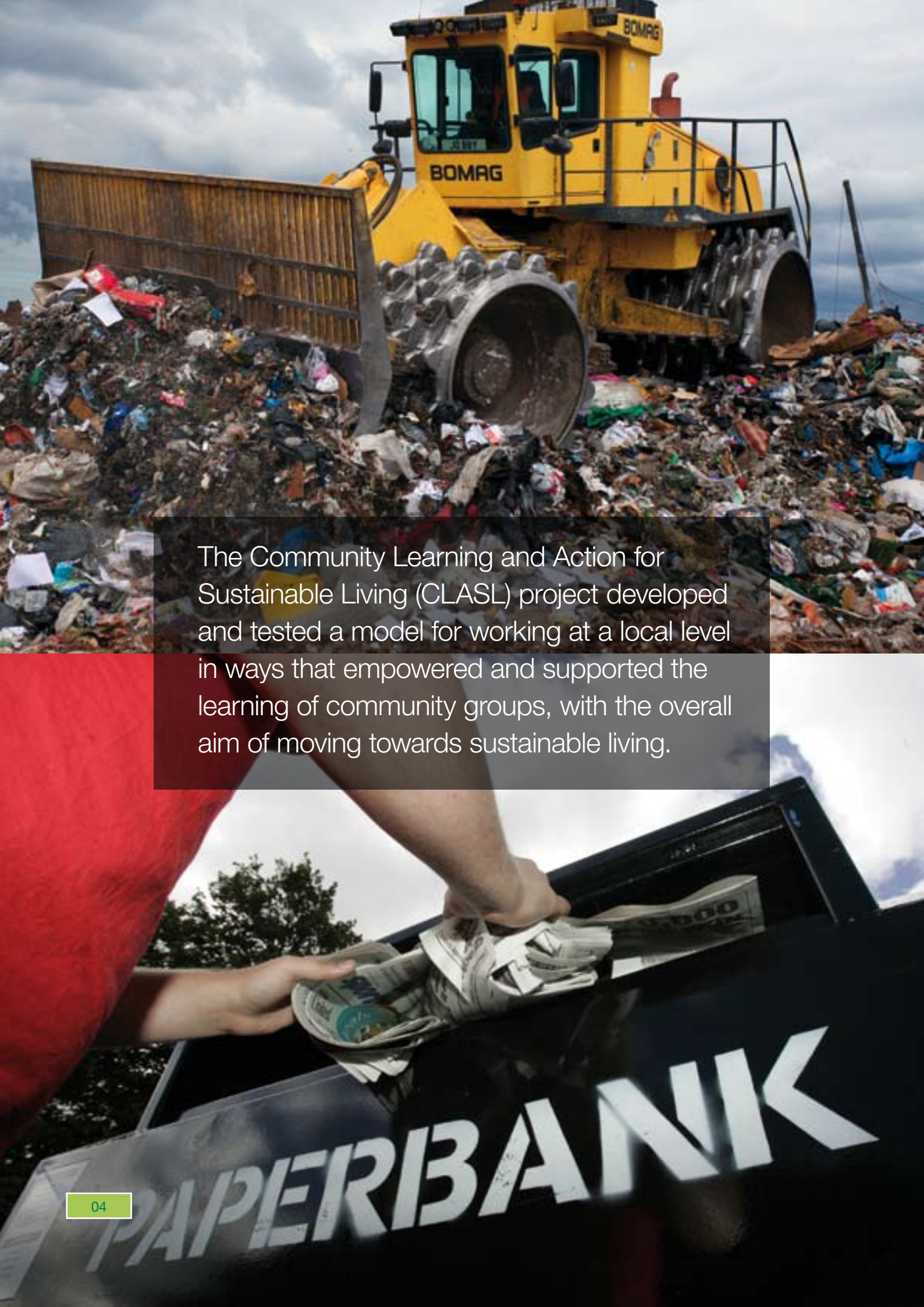


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The Community Learning and Action for Sustainable Living (CLASL) project developed and tested a model for working at a local level in ways that empowered and supported the learning of community groups, with the overall aim of moving towards sustainable living.

1. Introduction

Community Learning and Action for Sustainable Living (CLASL) was a three year experimental WWF project designed to explore ways of working closely with local communities in order to define and work towards new patterns of sustainable living.

The project was based on ideas from the theories and principles of behaviour change for sustainability, community development, action research and action learning. It developed and tested a model for working at a local level in ways that empowered and supported the learning of community groups, with the overall aim to move towards sustainable living.

The project ran from 2004 to 2008, and worked in-depth with two community groups in Surrey, and in less depth with two other groups. The two in-depth groups achieved a great deal. They made significant practical environmental improvements at the church and school they were associated with, spreading messages about sustainable living to many other local groups and hundreds of individuals, and developed their own skills and confidence.

The CLASL project team at WWF-UK learned a great deal too; about the practicalities of working for sustainable living at a local level, and about the processes of support that can enable local progress.

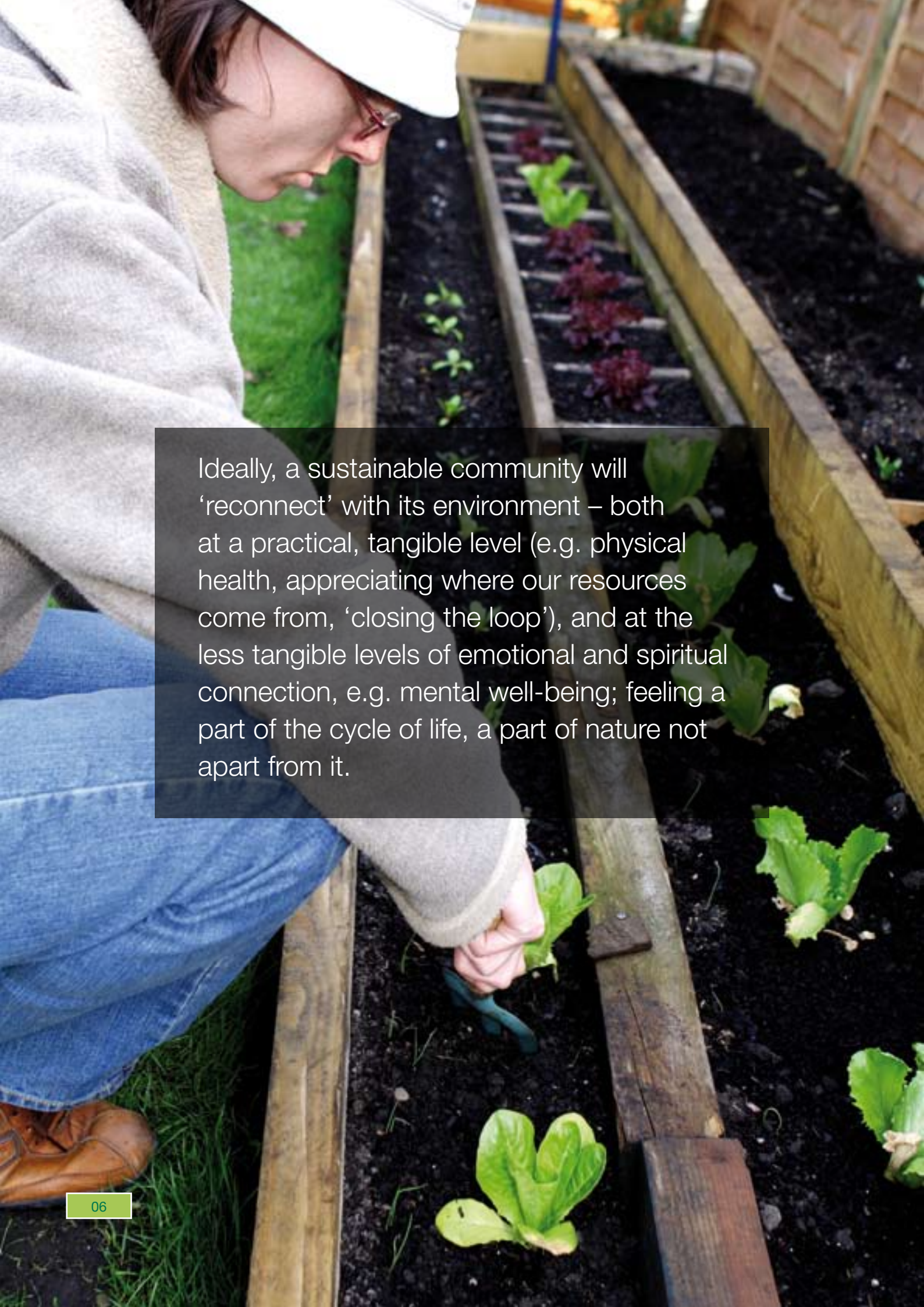
This short guide draws on the lessons from that experimental work¹. It summarises the model of working effectively with community groups towards sustainable living that emerged from the CLASL project. We hope it will be of value to community workers and others in local authorities, voluntary and community organisations who are interested in working towards local sustainability.

The guide starts by summarising how the CLASL project used a strong theoretical base for designing and developing the methodology.

It then goes on to provide a summary of the methodology and the seven main steps of the CLASL process towards community-based sustainable living.

The guide concludes by summarising some of the overall issues that have emerged from the practical testing of the model, and implications for future practice.

¹ A full evaluation report of the CLASL project is available



Ideally, a sustainable community will 'reconnect' with its environment – both at a practical, tangible level (e.g. physical health, appreciating where our resources come from, 'closing the loop'), and at the less tangible levels of emotional and spiritual connection, e.g. mental well-being; feeling a part of the cycle of life, a part of nature not apart from it.

2. Getting started

“Nothing is as practical as a good theory”².

For the CLASL project team, the above slogan from Kurt Lewin, who developed the idea of action research, was an important starting point. The team was aware that there had been a lot of theoretical development in this field, and that it could provide useful and very practical foundations for developing a new approach.

The background research for the project looked at the theory on behaviour change for sustainability and relevant community work methods³. The research did not dwell on the basic principles of sustainable development. However, it became important to restate these principles regularly in working with the groups, partly to remind everyone of the connections between the environmental actions that the groups were most interested in working on, and the related social, economic and governance issues that form part of the whole picture of sustainable development.

WHAT IS SUSTAINABILITY?

Different communities will come to different understandings and expressions of what it means to be sustainable. However, WWF-UK believes that for a community to be sustainable it must address the four pillars of sustainable development:

1. Environment
2. Society
3. Economy
4. Governance.

A sustainable community must also address local to global links, equity and inclusion, present and future needs – all set within the context or boundary of environmental limits.

Ideally, a sustainable community will ‘reconnect’ with its environment – both at a practical, tangible level (e.g. physical health, appreciating where our resources come from, ‘closing the loop’), and at the less tangible levels of emotional and spiritual connection (e.g. mental well-being; feeling a part of the cycle of life, a part of nature not apart from it).

² Kurt Lewin, quoted in Greenwood, Davydd J. and Levin, Morton (1998) *Introduction to Action Research. Social Research for Social Change*. Sage, London. (page 19).

³ Warbuton, Diane et al (2005) CLASL Literature Review, <http://www.wwflearning.org.uk/localmatters/resources/>

ASSUMPTIONS THAT UNDERPINNED THE WORK OF THE CLASL PROJECT

The background research, within the context of the WWF-UK principles of sustainable development, formed the basis for four main assumptions that underpinned the work of the CLASL project:

1. Individual and collective attitude and behaviour changes are necessary to make progress towards sustainable living;
2. Mutual reinforcement and social learning related to sustainable behaviours, and criticism of unsustainable behaviours, is strongest through close social relationships;
3. Helping local communities to work collectively at a local level will encourage 'good/sustainable' behaviours, and reduce 'bad/unsustainable' behaviours;
4. What a sustainable lifestyle is can be determined through dialogue between communities and external technical specialists.

These four assumptions were used to underpin the model of community intervention outlined in this short guide. The theory was invaluable in helping to clarify these ideas and provided a sound basis for design and delivery. These four assumptions were then used to create some clear aims and objectives for the CLASL project, which helped clarify planning and action overall:

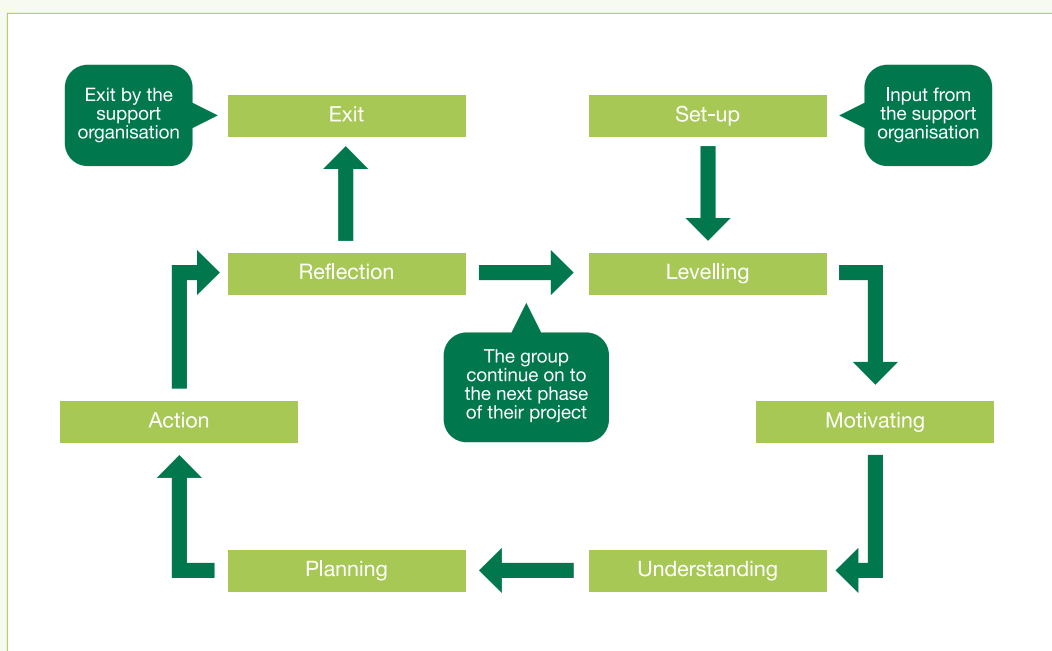
- **Aim of the project.** The aim (overall purpose) of the project was essentially to develop and design a method that would create effective community action for sustainable living.
- **Objectives.** The objectives (how we expected to achieve the purpose) were complex, and partly related to the delivery of the project itself. They were reviewed during the evaluation. Based on that reflection, we would summarise effective objectives for working with communities towards sustainable living as follows:
 - To build the knowledge, capacity, capability, commitment, ownership and responsibility among participants to increase sustainable living;
 - To embed the learning within the project community (the groups and the project team);
 - To consider the role of local and national governance structures to tackle any barriers to sustainable living.

One of the important lessons from the CLASL project was that community action for sustainable living cannot be developed in a vacuum. The work at a local level needs to be related to wider legislative and regulatory frameworks, at local and national (and international) levels.

Local people said that their individual and group efforts could only ever make a limited contribution to major global issues such as tackling climate change. Actions by local and national governments that cut across the principles groups are trying to apply locally undermines their efforts. The wider context does not stop local people trying to work towards sustainable living, but it can affect morale, ambition and confidence.

3. The CLASL framework

The detailed design of the process for working with community groups was based on two frameworks: Bloom's taxonomy⁴ and Kolb's cycle of action learning⁵. The final design of the CLASL methodology is represented in the diagram below. Each step of the process is outlined in more detail in section 4.



THE CLASL APPROACH TO COMMUNITY WORK

The theory, the CLASL project also identified some broad methods of community development and community engagement that could be used with local groups. From the beginning the project team understood that this work was not classic community development; this was somewhere between community development and community engagement, and linked to very specific actions towards sustainable living. The issues are outlined in the box on page 10.

⁴ Bloom, Benjamin in <http://coe.sdsu.edu/eet/articles/BloomsLD/>

⁵ Kolb, D., 1984. *Experiential learning: experience as the sources of learning and development*. Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement is about supporting communities to become involved in local decision-making and other activities. This includes providing information, collecting opinions on a survey, or may involve some more in-depth participation, such as in participatory appraisal approaches.

Community development is a process of support for a community to achieve its own goals. A community development approach means that a worker does not bring their own agenda to the table, but works with groups to identify the needs of the community and methods to address issues which they identify.

In the CLASL project, WWF-UK used community engagement techniques to work with communities and to explain its sustainability 'agenda' to participants. However, the project also used some community development techniques. These include supporting the groups to identify the issues they wanted to take action on, supporting them in their decisions, and providing advice on how to tackle these issues, even if this meant the group did not precisely follow the CLASL process and WWF-UK's policy priorities.

One objective was to build capacity and skills within a group to enable them to take ideas forward once the main project was complete. To do this it was important that the groups followed their own initiative and reflected on and learnt from what happened.

The CLASL project differed from traditional community development, and emerging practice on community-based work on sustainability, in two ways:

- 1. Different from community-based sustainability.** The CLASL project team took the view that the best way of working with groups was to start where they were, and support their values and positive impulses within a broad picture of what was sustainable. It was not designed to sell them an idea and persuade them to sign up and start work.
- 2. Different from traditional community development.** The CLASL project was not led by an analysis of local needs, followed by creating a vision, planning, gaining resources and taking action⁶. It was focused on the motivations of the individuals in the groups, and what they wanted to do, depending on what immediate opportunities were available locally, to move towards sustainable living.

THE CLASL APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE LIVING

The CLASL project was always intended to explore the idea of sustainable living, having recognised that there was no clear picture or vision that currently existed. The project team expected that what a sustainable lifestyle is could be determined through dialogue between communities and the CLASL project.

In practice, the dialogue between the CLASL project and the communities was much more practical and specific. Mostly ideas came from the group and the CLASL team provided feedback on whether the activities would contribute to sustainable living. Some areas produced debate. These were:

⁶ As the traditional needs-led approach to community learning development. See, for example, *LEAP. A manual for Learning Evaluation And Planning in Community Learning and Development*. The Scottish Government, Edinburgh, 2007.


- **Bigger than environmental action.** The groups really wanted to work on environmental issues (e.g. energy saving, water saving, recycling), and there was some debate about how those contributed to sustainable living. It was sometimes possible for the CLASL project to identify some social and economic benefits from projects that started as environmental. For example, book swaps had social implications in helping improve literacy, and economic implications by providing free resources for people on limited incomes). However, it was accepted by the project team that the groups were most interested in the environmental dimensions of sustainability.
- **Empowerment rather than behaviour change.** The CLASL team was surprised to discover that the biggest contribution of the project to sustainable living, beyond practical improvements to the church and school the groups had links to, was within the governance element of sustainable development. The most significant change was probably to the confidence and capacity of the people within the community groups, and the likely sustainability of the groups themselves into the long term.

For the CLASL project, the idea of sustainable living became at least as much about the capacity of the community groups as about measurable changes to energy and water use, etc.

COMMUNITY PROCESSES IN PRACTICE

Lessons learned from the CLASL project reveal that the implementation of the methodology in similar work with community groups on sustainability projects needs to be flexible:

- **Existing knowledge and commitment.** The people in the groups were already relatively well informed about environmental issues, and relatively active in reducing their negative environmental impacts within their own lives. There was no significant lack of awareness or understanding of what needed to be done, nor any lack of commitment or sense of responsibility for taking action.
- **People processes are not linear.** The diagram of the methodology (page 9) can only be a guide to the main steps involved. Often, some of the steps that seem separate are happening at the same time. At other times, groups may leap several stages in a planned process. Flexibility, responsiveness and sensitivity are essential to effective working with groups.
- **Personal support is key.** Groups already had access to the technical expertise they needed (e.g. from the CLASL team on climate change, energy audits by local organisations and from local authority support workers on recycling). The groups' main demand was for the regular personal support of the CLASL project worker, which was more important to them than any other resource offered.
- **Review and reflection are not community priorities.** Community groups prefer to concentrate on action rather than reflection and learning. Unlike groups of professionals (e.g. teachers, local authority officers), community groups are giving up their free time and they want to feel they are achieving something. Although learning is important, they tend to see it as a by-product of getting on with things. The best approach was found to be little and often: regular reviews of what worked well or less well in specific activities, and what they would do differently next time – rather than formal monitoring and evaluation throughout (as was planned). See 4.6 review and reflection for more information.

A close-up photograph of a young green plant with lobed leaves growing in a brown paper pot filled with dark soil. The plant is the central focus, with its stem and leaves clearly visible against the blurred background. The leaves are bright green and have a distinct lobed shape. The pot is made of a fibrous material, likely paper or cardboard, and is filled with dark, rich soil. The overall scene is well-lit, highlighting the texture of the leaves and the soil.

It can easily take six months from initial contact by a project worker for groups to become fully engaged and thinking about action plans. Spending sufficient time at the beginning is an essential investment in a long term process.

4. The CLASL model

This section provides a basic guide to each step of the CLASL process, the lessons learnt, and what has emerged as the best way to approach each step in the future.

4.1 Set-up

This first stage is about identifying and engaging community groups. The initial stages are very important in enabling the support worker to develop trust and understanding with the group to form a sound basis on which to work. They cannot be rushed. The work must proceed at the pace with which the groups are comfortable.

The main issues to consider during set up are likely to be as follows:

TIMESCALES

It can easily take six months from initial contact by a project worker for groups to become fully engaged and thinking about action plans. Even after two years in-depth work, groups are often only just getting to the stage where they could continue without support; some may still be anxious that they need continuing support. Spending sufficient time at the beginning is an essential investment in a long-term process.

INTRODUCTIONS THROUGH INTERMEDIARIES WHO KNOW THE GROUPS

Initial introductions through people well known to at least some members of the group provide a short-cut to progress. They can give the project early legitimacy if intermediaries are already trusted by those individuals.

Working initially through intermediaries may also help to address the problem of external groups 'parachuting' in to a community and being seen as outsiders. Intermediaries can also give the project team background information on the groups. This allows the project team to ensure that project communications and presentations are relevant to the groups.

CLARIFYING THE AGREEMENT WITH THE GROUPS

The support organisation needs to be completely clear and honest about the nature of the work they want to do, what they want to achieve from it, the support they can offer the group, and the expectations they have of the group.

These issues may include:

- **Small grants offered:** CLASL offered £1,000 per year in expenses for each group; in practice this was not a major incentive, £500 would have been ample in most cases to cover printing, room hire etc.
- **Other support offered:** CLASL offered the personal support from a WWF-UK employee who provided direct support and advice to the group, attending all meetings of the group, answering questions by phone, email etc.
- **Responsibilities of the group:** In CLASL, the group had to be willing to act as a case study.

LETTER OF AGREEMENT

It can be useful to draw up a letter of agreement between the organisation providing support, and the community group. The group may need this to get clearance from their own structures of governance, or it may just be useful to clarify the relationship and manage expectations of the support organisation. A sample letter of agreement is given below:

SAMPLE LETTER OF AGREEMENT WITH GROUPS

Address

Date

Dear X

Agreement between the X group and Y support organisation

Following our initial meetings and discussions, the following is a letter of agreement describing the purpose of our work together and how we will carry out any actions arising.

- Enter a brief description of the project.
- Outline what opportunities the project will offer to groups (bullet points).
- Outline what the organisation (Y) will provide (bullet points).
- Outline what is expected of group X.

This letter forms the basis of the working arrangement between X and Y. Any changes to this agreement will be agreed by X and Y.

Signed

on behalf of
Y organisation

on behalf of
X group

GETTING STARTED

The first group meetings will want to consider a whole set of basic questions (see box below).

MANAGING THE GROUP

The following are a list of questions to help get the groups started. They may also be useful to set some ground rules for meetings.

- Who are the members of the group? Do we need to recruit more people and if so, how?
- How frequently shall we have meetings? At what time? Where? Who will organise the meetings? Who will take minutes? Who should attend the meetings?
- Communication – How will we communicate? Who will be the key contact with the supporting organisation? With whom do we need to communicate externally? How regularly does this need to happen?
- Records – How will we record the group's progress? What type of record will we use? Who will be responsible?
- Resources – What kind of resources do we have or want? Who is responsible for them? Do we need someone to manage the group's finances? Who will be responsible for this?
- What should/will the support organisation be responsible for?

GETTING ESTABLISHED

The initial members of the group will not necessarily be those who stay involved. While it is possible to establish shared responsibilities for the group early on, it is important to remain flexible as members may join and leave as time goes by, for all sorts of personal and professional reasons.

In order to establish a sustainable group, the group may need to ensure it has the following:

- a bank account (which can take a long time for a small voluntary group to set up).
- access to a meeting room for regular meetings, which can be in group members' homes to save resources and keep meetings informal.
- a simple constitution, if the group is likely to want to start raising funds from elsewhere (local Councils for Voluntary Services or Rural Community Councils can provide model constitutions for groups to use).
- allocation of roles e.g. secretary to take notes and set up meetings, someone to run the meetings, people to take responsibility for different actions.

LEADERSHIP AND LEVELS OF INVOLVEMENT

Leadership is always a contentious issue, and has to be carefully managed. There can be dangers if the group relies too much on a single individual member as that person can become burnt out through too much responsibility and simply doing too much. The group is then vulnerable to collapse if that person leaves. It may be helpful to avoid identifying group 'leaders' or 'chairs' for those reasons. The recommended CLASL approach to leadership and levels of involvement is:

- to take the view that leadership is a task that can effectively be shared among the group, if they each take responsibility for certain activities and share overall responsibility for the group itself;
- that there need to be layers of involvement, so that those that want to come to meetings and help manage activities do that, but there is also room for those that just want to help with running activities, and for those that just want to join in with activities.

EMPOWERING THROUGH SUPPORT

All groups are different and may demand different levels of input to get started and established. There is no single model for groups, or how they operate, and each will have a different style. However, there is a clear style of support that works with community groups:

- **Support and facilitation rather than direction.** When an external organisation approaches community groups to engage them in a project, the local groups can assume that they are going to be told what to do, at least initially. But if the group is to survive in the long term, the group has to very quickly recognise that it is there for its members, not for any external organisation. This can be difficult for some groups who may not want to take on that sort of personal responsibility.

This way of working requires very sensitive support, that inspires and motivates but does not take away from the group members the sense that the group is **their's**, and it is doing what **they** want to do – that they **own** the group and its achievements.

Providing support in this way is a highly skilled, professional, demanding and resource intensive task, and it is essential to enable group members to achieve what they set out to do. It needs constant:

- **vigilance:** to spot anything that might be going wrong before it becomes a problem;
- **sensitivity:** especially to the fact that this is being done in people's spare time and they don't want processes that are too formal or pressured or bureaucratic – it has to be enjoyable;
- **responsiveness:** providing help and resources when needed.

The approach could be described, in summary, as being:

- support ... not direction
- resources ... not leadership
- learning ... not recruitment
- guidance ... not rigid processes and bureaucracy
- personal ... not objective
- enthusiastic/involved ... not neutral or distanced
- light touch ... not heavy-handed
- collaborative and responsive ... not instructional.

- **Using the right methods and tools.** There is a wide range of engagement methods and tools that can be used to work on local sustainability issues (see the Annex for some of these).

However, for many small, new, community groups, only very informal methods will work – even flip charts can seem too much like a ‘classroom’ or like being at work. Groups very often want their meetings to be as informal and relaxed as possible. They do not want to be pushed into using what they may see as formal methods or tools.

4.2 Levelling and motivation

In the initial CLASL methodology chart levelling and motivation were originally separate, but they work better as a single step creating an overall discussion about expectations, assumptions and motivations. They also need to look into prior knowledge and skills. The main questions within each are outlined below.

- **Levelling** is about examining the group’s assumptions, expectations and skills – both those within the group and those needed. The aim is to encourage people to get to know each other and develop a common understanding of what they may or may not achieve in the project. This prevents disappointment at a later stage.
- **Motivation** is about identifying the group members’ own individual motivations. It is also what might motivate others to join the group. It is not about ‘selling messages’ from outside.

The main issues to consider during the levelling and motivation stage of the process are likely to be as follows:


RECOGNISING EXISTING SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

A number of activities might be used at this stage to enable people to identify the knowledge that they have and what they might need to know. Initial questions to set discussions within the context of the group may include:

- What does the group as a whole see as their role?
- Is the group what you expected? What’s different/similar?
- What did you assume might happen when you joined the group?
- How do you feel now you’ve joined?
- How hopeful are you that the work of the group/project can make a difference?

Once these basic questions are discussed, it can be a positive experience for the group to share information about the skills and knowledge they already have. They can bring this experience to the group and the projects it works on.

In CLASL, levelling and motivation steps were combined with the formal benchmarking. The research identified levels of knowledge and experience within the group, as well as areas that individuals were particularly interested in working on. It may sometimes be assumed that, because group members know each other socially, that they will know each others’ interests, skills and experience, but this is often not the case.



When a community-based project has a clear objective – as the CLASL project did (to consider sustainable living) – there has to be a clear framework within which people’s aspirations are articulated and used to structure future plans for action. Setting discussion of motivations within the context of sustainable living helps to keep discussions of aspirations within realistic and relevant boundaries, and avoid later disappointment.

Identifying skills and knowledge may also be useful for external agencies to monitor the success of the project, but it is advisable for that to be a secondary objective for the exercise. Any benchmarking for external purposes needs to be done very informally and sensitively. Group members will not want to be 'measured' in any way. However, it can be useful to structure this sort of work carefully, to enable people to begin to share their hopes as well as their past experience with the group. This empowers them to start to work towards goals that they really care about. It may therefore be best to start with some basic questions, such as:

- What have you done before? A brief skills audit of the group can reveal hidden talents, and may help people to transfer skills that they might use at work or home into the group and projects.
- What else do you need to know?
- What additional skills might be needed to manage the project and the group?

More formal benchmarking may also be useful, if people want to test the extent to which they have developed their knowledge and understanding as a result of being involved. It may be useful to find out:

- How much knowledge do you have of the issues of sustainability? (With scores of one to 10 for environment, social, economic and governance separately.)
- How much are you already doing personally that contributes to each of the four legs of sustainability? (Again separate scores for each leg.)
- How much do you talk about sustainability issues to other people? (A lot, to not at all.)
- How much do you know about the global implications of sustainability – the bigger picture? (A lot, to none.)
- How responsible do you feel personally about the need to take action, or find out about, sustainability issues?
- How much do you think sustainability matters? (A lot, to not at all).

The ideal situation is to measure people's knowledge and action at the start, and then review how people have progressed as a result of their involvement in the project. But this sort of benchmarking is never straightforward.

People are quite likely to become more self-critical as time goes by. As they do more and their knowledge increases, they may judge themselves more harshly. It is therefore very important to use these kind of benchmarking tools with great care, and to recognise the difficulties at the start.

ARTICULATING MOTIVATIONS

Many group members will not have been asked about their hopes, aspirations and motivations before. When a community-based project has a clear objective – as the CLASL project did (to consider sustainable living) – there has to be a clear framework within which people's aspirations are articulated and used to structure future plans for action. Setting discussion of motivations within the context of sustainable living helps to keep discussions of aspirations within realistic and relevant boundaries, and avoid later disappointment.

For CLASL, it helped to encourage people to articulate their motivations by asking:

- What do you think sustainable living is?
- What does sustainable living mean to you personally, in terms of values, attitudes and behaviours?

By coming to understand their own interpretation of sustainable living, group members can then ask themselves:

- What is your motivation for getting involved?
- What do you want to achieve personally?
- What do you want the group to achieve?

Group members can then go on to consider how to reach out to motivate others. They can consider:

- What sorts of 'hooks' encourage people to get involved in something? What sort of incentives work? What doesn't work?
- Should we share ideas/link up with other groups?
- How do we identify community needs? Who do we target?
- Where can we get more information?

FLEXIBILITY

Not all groups want to go through the somewhat lengthy process outlined above, especially at the beginning. They may want to get straight on with things, planning and delivering some action. It is important to be flexible in allowing a group to develop its own ideas, using this process as a guide. The questions outlined here can easily be split up and used at various times in different group meetings. That way it does not take up all the time at early meetings.

However, it can be very valuable to go through this process fairly early on in the life of the group. The process can start to build mutual understanding and relationships.

LINKING MOTIVATION, CAPACITY AND OPPORTUNITY

It is also important to consider the external context as well as the skills, knowledge and motivation within the group. Those assets and resources can be used in relation to specific opportunities. These may be⁷:

- events that heighten the perception of the need for change;
- new resources (that become available);
- recognition of mutual interest (with other groups and organisations);
- positive attitudes to build on;
- willingness of external bodies to consider change.

Quite often, groups will pick up a sense of some of these issues, rather than having detailed evidence to work on. It is always useful to consider the external system and context that the group is working in to see how what it is doing can be more effective and/or influential.

⁷ Based on *LEAP. A Manual for Learning Evaluation and Planning in Community Learning and Development*. Scottish Government, Edinburgh, 2007 (p18)

4.3 Understanding

This step is about taking **knowledge** (identified in the levelling and motivation stages of the process) and developing this into a deeper **understanding**. Activities at this stage may include work to:

- identify and/or review the main issues of sustainability that the group want to work on, if they have not already done so;
- consider the use of specific tools to discuss and broaden the group's understanding of issues (e.g. using photos, news cuttings etc), or games (e.g. the New Economics Foundation's Democs tool);
- consider asking the group members to record the process in journals (although this can be quite time consuming and people might not keep it up);
- consider again the skills in the group and what additional skills and knowledge may be needed to achieve what they want to do;
- consider bringing in external expertise to supplement the group's own knowledge, and to provide external stimulus to help keep interest high;
- use WWF-UK's Ecological Footprint calculator⁹ to identify key areas for action.

The main issues to consider during the understanding step of the process are likely to be as follows:

CROSS-CUTTING AND CONTINUOUS WORK

The 'understanding' phase cuts across the entire project; it doesn't happen in isolation. It is important for the project to remain aware of this stage throughout the work with the group. Providing opportunities for developing understanding of issues will support the group to apply their knowledge.

As with the levelling and motivation stages, not all groups will want to spend time explicitly 'understanding' what they are doing. There is more in the section on review and reflection on this issue. However, it is worth noting that groups tend to want to learn to improve what they are doing, so they do it better next time, rather than learning for its own sake.

4.4 Planning

Planning is a key stage of the process. This stage uses the information gathered in previous ones to identify what the group wants to tackle and create a working plan of action.

Questions to put to the group at this stage are likely to include:

- What opportunities are there to do something? (e.g. new resources available, an event taking place that the group can join, willingness of another group or organisation to listen or change).
- Has another group used tools and techniques that you can adapt to your way of working?
- Where does the group want to get to and how will the action help achieve that?
- Who needs to be involved – are there experts who could help with an issue? (e.g. from the local authority or from other organisations).
- Start to think about how success can be measured. Does the plan reflect what the group wants to achieve? What does the group now think about sustainability? How will the group monitor what happens and how will they know it has been successful. Are there any simple indicators that could be used?

⁹ WWF-UK Ecological Footprint calculator. Available from <http://footprint.wwf.org.uk>

Techniques such as brainstorming ideas, then clustering them into topic areas, can help the group identify their main concerns and where they want to take action. The group can then agree specific activities that they would like to carry out in each area. These can then be entered into a timeline and actions plotted onto it so that the activities can be separated into manageable chunks. This way the group doesn't try to do too much at once.

Using the timeline, each activity can be taken one at a time and a more detailed plan drawn up. Detailed plans are likely to include assigning actions to specific people, with deadlines, so that individuals can report back on their progress at each meeting.

The detailed planning stage may be the right moment for the support worker to begin to take more of a back seat leaving this work to group members, while continuing to provide advice and resources where needed.

Different activities have different implications for the group. They will require the group to ask itself different questions. The main types of activities for groups working on issues of sustainable living are likely to be as follows:

EVENTS

Groups may want to run their own events, or participate in events run by other groups and organisations (e.g. fairs, open days). The group may want to publicise their work, recruit more members, spread the message and give information on sustainable living, or they may simply want to take part in and support relevant activities by other groups and organisations.

A checklist for planning events is given in the box below.

Example checklist for setting up events

- What is the aim of the event?
- What do we want to achieve?
- What is our budget for the event?
- How much do we think it will cost? Do we need to raise more money?
- What is the title for the event?
- Where will the event be held?
- How many people can we expect / can we cater for?
- What will be the date / time of the event?
- Will we have refreshments?
- Will we charge for entry and / or refreshments?
- Who is our audience?
- How will we let people know about the event?
- Will this be an ongoing event?
- Do we need support from anyone else / another organisation for the event to happen?
- How will we know that the event has been a success?
- How will we record what happens for publicity and for learning purposes?

SPREADING THE MESSAGE

Spreading the message of sustainable living is often a key part of the work of groups working in this area. The aim is usually to try to get more people supporting the ideas and the change that is needed for sustainability. It can be surprising how much local people are committed to reaching out to others to pass on what they have learned and encourage and support them to live more sustainably. There does seem to be a real passion for sharing knowledge and information on these issues.

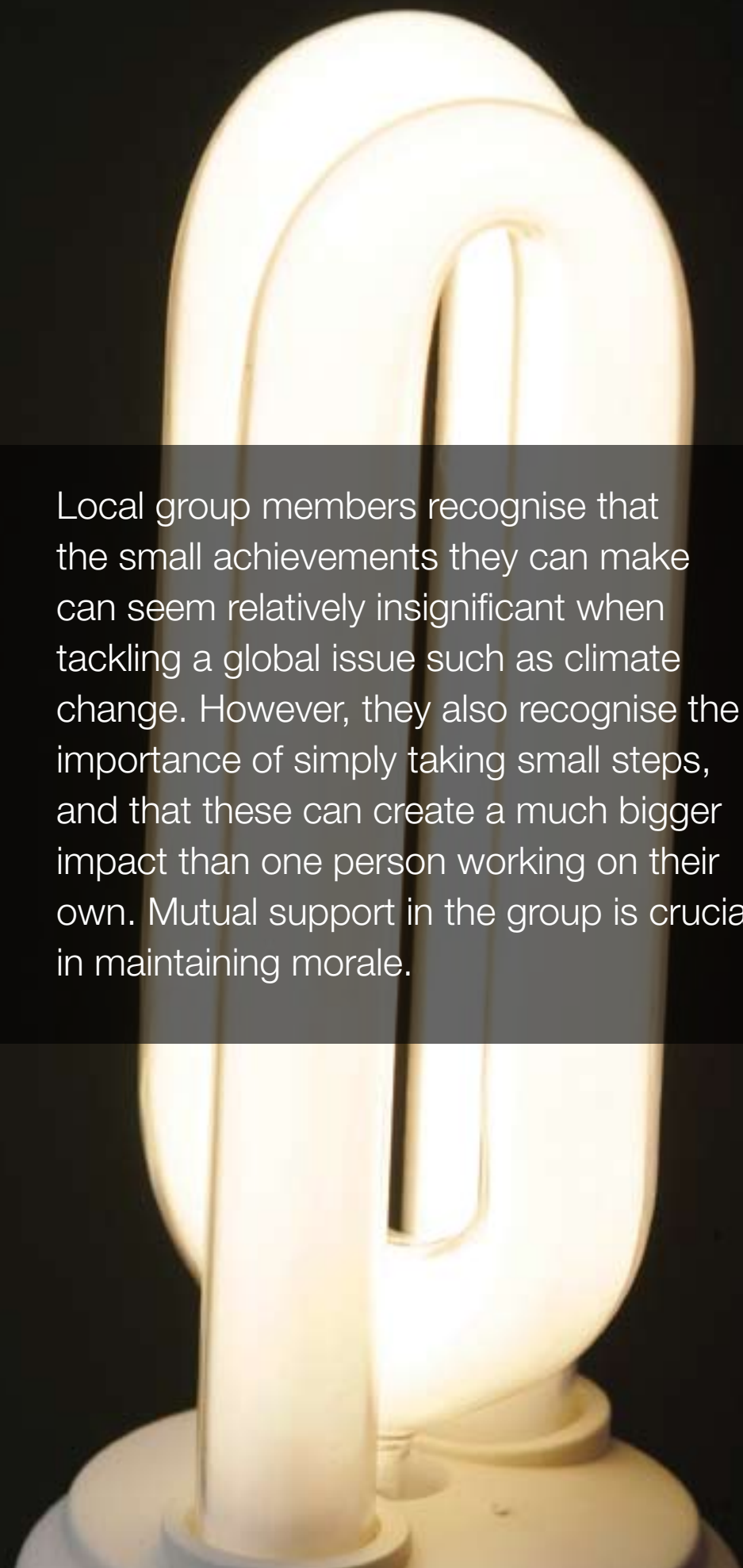
The CLASL methodology has developed a quite specific approach to spreading the sustainability message. This has implications for planning how the groups plan and work on it. The CLASL approach is very different from other work with communities which identified 'champions'. CLASL referred people in the group who took on this work as 'ambassadors' rather than 'champions'. Their role is not to 'sell' messages, but to stimulate interest and then support, encourage and resource others (e.g. by providing information and their own experience) who are interested in taking action themselves.

The difference between 'champions' and CLASL 'ambassadors' can be summarised as follows:

Champions	CLASL ambassadors
Salesperson/teacher: selling a message and telling people what to do	Focuses on mutual learning, not telling
Trained to deliver/present a message	Employs a 'You can do it'/'We can change things' message: a collective movement
Uses cascade methods to spread the message	Works from a position of personal strength (own group) and moral authority, as well as confidence from having done it
Isolated individuals locally, even if national support is provided	Supported individuals, working collectively within the local group
Agrees message to be disseminated	Starts where people are, and focuses on what they can do – their interests and skills

This different approach has significant implications for how the group actually goes about spreading the message. For example, although they may still give talks to schools and community organisations, group members can structure them so that at least part of the event is designed to enable the audience to participate in thinking about what they are interested in and may want to do.

Using this approach means that group members need to be trained in facilitating group discussions. They also need to have knowledge of the subject (e.g. climate change, or waste management).

A glowing lightbulb with a filament, symbolizing an idea or inspiration. The lightbulb is the central focus, with a warm, yellow glow emanating from it. The filament is visible, and the bulb is mounted on a white base. The background is dark, making the lightbulb stand out.

Local group members recognise that the small achievements they can make can seem relatively insignificant when tackling a global issue such as climate change. However, they also recognise the importance of simply taking small steps, and that these can create a much bigger impact than one person working on their own. Mutual support in the group is crucial in maintaining morale.

AIM FOR A MIX OF ACTIVITIES

It is important for community groups to achieve some success early on – some ‘quick wins’. Early achievements boost confidence and wider aspirations. Some groups set themselves very difficult tasks (e.g. traffic campaigns) which take many years to complete.

Complex and difficult activities can be undertaken and achieved successfully, but groups often need some other smaller scale, shorter term projects that can be completed successfully. This keeps up interest and morale over time. It is therefore vital for the planning stage to include a mix of small scale and shorter term objectives and activities. That’s in addition to the major long-term changes aimed for.

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Groups also recognise the benefits of working on a range of activities and topics (e.g. not all composting), so that there are opportunities for everyone to get involved and take a lead on something. Using personal motivations as a source of inspiration for activities can help sustain the delivery of a plan.

STICKING TO CLEAR AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

It is likely that aims and objectives for the group will have emerged from previous stages. At the detailed planning stage it is essential to be really clear about what the group is actually aiming to do.

Having clear and simple objectives will allow the group to stay focused, and to achieve what they really want to do rather than be distracted by all the other possibilities for action.

However, it may be useful to have a mix of aims and objectives that can be relatively easily and quickly achieved, and some that are much more challenging and encourage group members to start to think about moving beyond their comfort zone. Sustainable living is likely to involve some major challenges to current lifestyles, and groups will want to consider how far they are willing to try to go.

4.5 Action

This is the fun part where the group actually takes action. If it's not already happening, it is likely that the support worker will take a backseat role at this stage, as the group takes the lead on running activities. Handing over the process to groups is really important. It avoids over-reliance on the support worker and lessens the possibility that the group will cease to function once the supporting organisation is no longer available to provide in-depth help.

Activities around sustainable living include participating in and running events, and spreading the message, as outlined above. However, the majority of activities are often specific projects to reduce individual, group and wider negative environmental impacts. These create positive environmental impacts.

POSITIVE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

Activities that groups can do around sustainable living are endless, and groups can invent new ways of working that have positive impacts.

Examples from CLASL groups include:

- energy audit of the church;
- presentations at church events and within services to the main congregation;
- short courses on sustainability issues linked to church educational activities (e.g. Bible study);
- establishing and running recycling schemes for a range of materials;
- setting up compost bins;
- putting hippos into all toilets to save water (a hippo is a device which fits into the toilet's cisterns to save three litres of water every time it flushes);
- changing light bulbs to energy saving bulbs;
- introducing environmentally friendly cleaning materials in the church as well as in group members' homes;
- persuading the institution (church or school) to switch to recycled paper;
- running fun and educational events for children with environmental messages, including give-aways made from recycled materials;
- publishing a column in the parish/school magazine with hints and tips for reducing environmental damage and waste (e.g. energy saving);
- setting up a notice board with regularly updated information on environmental actions that people can easily take;
- answering individual questions from people at school/church/or public events to help people change what they do and why (e.g. climate change);
- working for awards and prizes, to gain publicity for what the group is doing, as well as boosting the morale of members (if they are successful) (e.g. Eco-Congregation Award);
- joining national organisations and taking part in their campaigns and activities;
- lobbying for specific changes e.g. for the council to take a wider range of materials for recycling, shops to have recycling bins on their premises or nearby;
- getting free equipment (e.g. hippos and water butts) and giving them away at events, including through raffles;
- organising book swaps to recycle used books and providing resources to support literacy, especially among those who cannot afford to buy books;
- organising other 'swap it' events: bringing and taking rather than 'bring and buy';

- surveying local residents to find out what they thought were priorities for the group;
- growing food within school grounds, as a learning opportunity and to improve nutrition by providing fruit and vegetables;
- organising practical environmental improvements such as clearing litter from village greens, clearing ponds, etc.

WIDER BENEFITS FROM ACTION

Group members see this work as a good way to spread the sustainable living message and change the attitudes of the wider community. They see the group's activities and wonder why they are taking action and why they think it is important to do so. That basic questioning allows the group to spread the message further.

Successful actions and achievements have various other benefits for the group and for the wider community. Group members are likely to grow in confidence, to develop their skills and learn new ones. They also grow in ambition and aspiration. Once they have succeeded in some areas, almost all group members want to move on and do more and different activities. These increase the positive impact they can have on the environment, in the wider community and as a contribution to sustainability more generally.

Some group members may just want to do more of the same, others may want to move on to bigger and more ambitious projects. As with all stages of the process, flexibility is crucial to enable people to find the best ways to work together to meet as many of their hopes and ambitions as possible.

NETWORKING AND COLLABORATING WITH OTHERS

Many community groups do not have the resources to achieve all their aims and objectives alone. Some groups become very skilled at finding ways of working with other groups and organisations and gaining access to their resources, staff and events. This is expected and a part of working effectively at local level. It allows groups to achieve far more than they could alone.

Many groups work with a relatively small core number of active members (say five to 10 people), with a wider circle of others who are involved to different degrees. It is always difficult to recruit members to the core group. Those members often feel they do not have the time to do all they want to do.

However, it can be possible to gain access to the additional resources (including people) needed for a particular activity by working with other groups and organisations – especially local authorities, parish councils, councils for voluntary action and rural community councils. These last two are umbrella bodies for voluntary and community action in towns and rural areas respectively.

Networking and collaborating have other potential benefits. These include ensuring that the group is aware of wider opportunities and new resources early, so they can use them to achieve their own priorities.

4.6 Review and reflection

Review and reflection can be done informally, or through more formal monitoring and evaluation. However, for many small community groups, the focus will generally be on informal reflection to review and learn from each of their actions and develop this into the next action.

These five basic questions can be used to structure informal reviews and reflection:

1. What happened?
2. What went well?
3. What didn't go so well?
4. What would we do differently next time?
5. What have we learned from this event/activity?

Evaluation can be a lot more complicated, but these five questions will allow the groups to come to some early conclusions about what they have achieved and what they need to change in future.

Community groups often prefer to concentrate on action rather than reflection and learning. They are giving up their free time and want to feel they are achieving something. Although they do see learning as important, they tend to see it as a by-product of getting on with things. However, reflection and learning are essential elements in the process, and groups do generally see the value of some review and reflection when their activities improve in quality over time.

The main issues to consider during review and reflection elements of the process are likely to be around what to measure, and how to measure.

WHAT TO MEASURE

Projects that provide support for community-based action on sustainability are often funded through local, regional and national programmes. These have their own objectives, which may require the measurement of certain activities, achievements and wider benefits.

However, there are real dangers in measuring impacts that are either not relevant to the groups, or are impossible to achieve. The important points in deciding what to measure are:

- **Measure what matters.** There can be a tendency in some monitoring and evaluation schemes to measure what can easily be counted (e.g. numbers of people involved, numbers of trees planted), rather than longer term and less tangible outcomes (e.g. greater confidence and skills among group members, increased aspirations, wider awareness and interest, readiness for change, groups continuing into the long term). It will always be important to balance measuring **quantity** and measuring **quality** of impact.
- **Avoid focusing on topical political concerns.** The concerns of community groups tend to be fairly long term. They are around local environmental quality and quality of life. Funding can be tied to wider political concerns (e.g. reducing carbon emissions), which can have little relevance to local community action and potential local achievements.

- **Use measures that will help to communicate achievements.** The results of joint review and reflection in the group can help to identify real achievements, which can then be used to promote the success of the group more widely (to recruit more members, gain more resources etc). For sustainable living, these measures may include:
 - empowerment and understanding among group members, rather than personal behaviour change;
 - spreading awareness of sustainability in the wider community, rather than specific physical reductions in emissions;
 - sustainability of the group, in term of its long-term survival and ability to function well and achieve what it wants to do, rather than numbers of people involved.
- **Use measures that have wider resonance.** If it helps communicate the achievements of the groups in terms understood by wider communities. It can be useful to use national measures that are relevant to the work of the groups.

The LEAP model, for example, identifies six areas of impact on local communities:

1. Confident, skilled and active community members.
2. Active and influential roles in local and wider decision-making.
3. Developed local services, where appropriate, in response to priority needs.
4. Effective planning, management and evaluation arrangements.
5. Ensure they are inclusive and value social and cultural diversity.
6. Productive networks and relationships with other agencies and organisations.

Using indicators from other national programmes can help groups frame their achievements in ways that make sense in the wider community. They provide opportunities for demonstrating achievement more widely. WWF and CAG Consultants have produced useful ideas for measuring change in their Community Engagement and Sustainable Development project⁹.

HOW TO MEASURE

How review and reflection are carried out is as important as what is measured. Issues are likely to include:

- **Recognising impact of measurement on the measured.** Some methods of measurement for sustainable living (e.g. ecological footprint) may not be appropriate for local actions by small informal community groups. Where an inappropriate tool is used, the results may focus on the small scale of changes created by group activities, which can be very de-motivating for the individuals involved.
- **Evaluation can be intimidating.** Community groups generally operate during people's leisure time, and they can strongly resent being subject to inflexible and intrusive evaluation that reminds them of performance measurement at work, or exams at school. These processes can seem intimidating and heavy-handed. It may be best in many cases to avoid the term 'evaluation' at all. Instead focus work on review and reflection and the benefits that can have for the group and their activities.

⁹ *Community Engagement and Sustainable Development*, CAG Consultants and WWF-UK. Available from www.cagconsultants.co.uk/community-engagement.htm

4.7 Exit

The aim of any project that works with community groups is create change that contributes to sustainability. But the aim is also to leave the groups with the confidence, skills and tools to tackle sustainability issues in the future. The way the support organisation designs and implements its exit strategy is likely to have a major impact on the long-term sustainability of the group.

The most important element of the exit stage is to be clear about when the support will end. Local groups need to be clear right from the start of the project about the timeframe of the support that will be available. The exit strategy will then continue to be developed in detail as the project proceeds and the availability of resources are confirmed. The key steps are:

- Inform groups at the start about the timescale for support, and when it is likely to end, and talk to them about it at regular intervals;
- Discuss with groups how the transition phase can be managed so that they are confident enough to take the work forward without in-depth support from an external organisation;
- Build a gradual handover of responsibilities from the support worker to the group so it goes as smoothly as possible.



5. Issues and conclusions

This document describes the CLASL methodology, with the benefit of hindsight following a three-year period of piloting and trials. It therefore incorporates main lessons from the experimental period.

Other groups and organisations will not necessarily follow this model step by step, but the project team hope that their experience will provide some useful guidance for others considering similar community-based work towards local sustainable living. Some of the issues raised are very practical. They are workable ways the project team have employed to take the initiative forward.

There are also some wider issues and lessons that have emerged from the three-year CLASL project that may be relevant to other projects in the field:

- **Long term-ism.** The CLASL approach was successful in developing community groups that will hopefully continue to work together on sustainability issues in the long-term. However, it takes a long time to get to that stage, and problems (especially climate change) are seen to be urgent. Short term-ism can be a major disincentive for these ways of working. Importantly, the next small step in these long-term approaches could provide the tipping point that will create major change.

It is therefore vital that the sense of urgency (e.g. on climate change) does not stop actions that are necessary now but that have long-term impacts that may not be apparent or measurable immediately.

- **Contribution to cultural change.** The amount of resources (skills, time, people, money) needed to make a community-based approach work are extensive, and the impact on behaviour change to reduce negative environmental impacts is not extensive or fundamental. Influencing others is likely to spread the message further but it won't necessarily encourage deeper change. Bottom-up actions of this sort need to work in close conjunction with wider policy and legislative change to achieve a major shift in culture.

This approach to bringing about enough change to reduce the three-planet consumption patterns in the UK will only work as part of a wider solution. This includes policy and legislative change, leading to a bigger shift in culture.

- **Appropriate measurement.** There are real problems with measuring the changes that can be achieved through community-based initiatives of this sort, whether through formal measurements such as Ecological Footprint or less formal processes such as the CLASL benchmarking. The CLASL project found that there were problems with inappropriate criteria for sustainability in terms of practical group actions. Also current measurement models are not sensitive enough to capture relatively small changes. As a result, impact measurement in the project has sometimes undermined group members' confidence by making them feel their impacts are too small to be of value.

New methods of measurement are needed that support community groups' activities, demonstrating the value of the community approach. That is now possible because spreading awareness and empowerment are recognised as being valuable achievements of the work.

A WWF-UK project on measuring community engagement and sustainable development, due for completion in 2009, is designed to contribute to the development of these new methods.

- **Support and resources.** There is a limit to what people can do individually, as groups and through influencing others. It may not be revolutionary but it does create a readiness for change. Effective work to support community-based action towards sustainable living is highly skilled and resource intensive. Regular personal support from professional experienced workers is crucial.

It is vital that new support structures are developed, appropriate for the stages the CLASL groups have now reached, as well as new groups just starting. This will widen and deepen the influence of the message of sustainable living that local groups are promoting.

- **Community action for sustainable living cannot be developed in a vacuum.** Local people said that their individual and group efforts could only ever make a limited contribution to major global issues such as tackling climate change. Actions by local and national governments that cut across the principles groups are trying to apply locally undermines their efforts. The wider context does not stop local people trying to work towards sustainable living, but it can affect morale, ambition and confidence.

Work at a local level needs to be related to wider legislative and regulatory frameworks, at local and national (and international) levels.

Final conclusions

The CLASL project has achieved its objectives.

The methodology has been developed and tested and shown to be robust, as long as sufficient skills and resources are invested to support it.

Local groups have achieved a great deal in a short space of time. This has included some very practical measures to improve the sustainability of their own lives and the institutions they work closely with (a school and a church). They have successfully spread the message about sustainable living to hundreds of local people.

The project has also identified some important lessons relevant to future work on behaviour change for sustainable living. These are based on the practical experience of working with real groups of local people with no previous experience of environmental action.

There is now real evidence for a new approach to supporting local action for sustainable living based on the CLASL experience.

WWF-UK is keen to work with others to continue to develop these methods and approaches into the future.

Annex: Resources and contacts

There are many organisations that provide information on community engagement, community development and sustainable development issues.

Here are some we have found useful:

Action for Sustainable Living

www.afsl.org.uk

Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE)

www.acre.org.uk/

Community Development Exchange

www.cdx.org.uk/every-action-counts-0

Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens

www.farmgarden.org.uk/

Federation for Community Development Learning

www.fcdl.org.uk/projects/defra/index.htm

Global Action Plan

www.GlobalActionPlan.org.uk

Involve – the participation organisation

www.involve.org.uk/home

London Sustainability Exchange

www.lsx.org.uk

National Association for Voluntary and Community Action

www.navca.org.uk/

New Economics Foundation - Democs

www.neweconomics.org/gen/democsuses.aspx

Soil Association

<http://www.soilassociation.org/>

WWF Local Matters

www.wwflearning.org.uk/localmatters

Community learning and action for sustainable living (CLASL)

A guide to supporting communities in sustainable living

Diane Warburton and Niamh Carey, June 2008

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- **conserving the world's biological diversity**
- **ensuring that the use of renewable resources is sustainable**
- **reducing pollution and wasteful consumption**



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