

Evaluation of Sheffield and Camden 2007 Climate Action Groups

June 2008

1. Aims

This evaluation seeks to assess experiences of the Climate Action Groups (CAGs) initiated by COIN in Camden and Sheffield in 2007. It will focus on the following areas:

1. **Individual experiences:** who got involved in the CAGs and how did their participation change their engagement with climate change?
2. **Group experiences:** how effective is the current model in establishing action groups?
3. **Suggestions for changes:** how can the CAG model be improved?

COIN states that 'Climate Action Groups are for people who want to come together to share thoughts, ideas, feelings, concerns and to act on climate change.' COIN holds a Matchmaker meeting 'in which we use facilitating techniques to form groups around particular topics or issues that people want to work on'. The participants determine the group's agenda and format.

2. Methods and Data

We followed up participants of the CAGs with an email questionnaire and then by telephone interviews. The initial email questionnaire captured only two responses so participants who had given their telephone numbers were contacted directly and twenty-five interviews were carried out. Telephone interviews were recorded and then transcribed (as .doc files). Responses were coded and summarised on a spreadsheet (.xls). Responses were highly variable so the tabulated results represent them in only a limited way. This evaluation will aim at reflecting the diversity and individuality of responses as well as the common themes, following a qualitative rather than quantitative approach.

3. Findings and Discussion

The findings of the evaluation are grouped as follows:

- Profiles of participants in CAGs
 - Demography
 - Aims in joining CAGs
 - Previous involvement in climate change activity
 - Subsequent involvement in climate change activity
- The initial Matchmaker meeting
 - Experiences
 - Suggestions
- The action groups
 - Experiences
 - Suggestions

Numbers are given in the form 6/25 to indicate 6 responses out of 25; or (6) to indicate 6 responses in this theme. Question numbers are given thus [8].

3.1 Profiles of participants in CAGs

A small majority of participants interviewed were male, 15/25 [13]. Participants were bunched slightly in the 30-49 age group, 11/25, but all age groups from 18-69 were represented [12]. The majority of participants were employed, 18/25 [10], and the largest group worked in the environmental sector, 8/25, with local government and the arts also employing more than one participant [11].

Participants expressed a range of personal aims in getting involved in CAGs with the most common being to network and get together with other people (8), to take action (7), to gather or share information (7) and to take action at a local level (4) [2]. When asked whether their aims had been met responses varied according to their region [3]. 10/11 Sheffield participants and 4/14 Camden participants answered 'yes'; 5/14 Camden participants and 1/11 Sheffield participants were uncertain; some participants pointed out that this is an ongoing process (3). These responses are an extremely imprecise indicator of the effectiveness of the CAGs but do give some suggestion of participants' satisfaction levels.

A small majority had been involved in climate change activity before, 15/25 [8]. 7/25 reported no previous involvement, while others reported that previous activity had been only private, online or at work. This agrees with the impression that CAG facilitators had of the initial meetings, where it was felt that 40-50% of participants were 'new faces'. Most heard about the initial meeting through a personal contact, 9/25, or a group they belonged to, 5/25; 6/25 had seen an advert or poster.

Responses to the question 'Did your involvement in climate change activities change after getting involved in CAGs?' [9] differ markedly between the participants in Camden and Sheffield. 14 participants were interviewed from Camden where 9 reported no change, and 5 some change. 11 participants were interviewed from Sheffield where 8 reported some change and 3 no change. Most of those who reported that their activity had changed referred to participation in a specific CAG. That more groups lasted beyond the initial stages in Sheffield explains the distinction between the two sets of results.

Only three participants reported moving from no activity at all to participation in a group. Others reported changes in the type of their activity, especially through participation in a local CAG (5). The groups may offer opportunities to these individuals, in the words of one of the coordinators, 'to explore/experiment beyond current/"safe" activities'. 2 participants felt that the process had significantly raised their awareness of climate change. In that the CAGs sought to offer opportunities for new types of involvement in climate change activity, particularly among people who had not been active in established groups, the results are rather disappointing. This is particularly the case as attendance at the initial meeting was good and apparently fairly diverse.

Two questions arise from these results:

- How can CAGs more effectively recruit and inspire participants?
- How can the success rate of the groups be maximised?

3.2 The initial Matchmaker meeting

3.2.1 Experiences

Participants were predominantly impressed by the initial meeting (21) [6]. In particular they said that it had been well facilitated (7) and some specified that they found the

people running the meetings enthusiastic, impressive or likeable. The large numbers of people at the first meetings (around 50 at both) were mentioned as important in enthusing participants (4). The presentation was described as 'energising' and 'motivating'. The structure of the meetings was praised:

- '[There was a] nice balance of structured introduction and programme and it was still informal enough to get people involved'
- 'It was practically based and [got] people to talk to each other'
- 'It's not the sort of way that campaigns tend to be organised... It was all very specific and what was motivating was that people were thinking about what kind of thing they would like to do'
- One participant who was new to campaigning liked the way the groups responded to what people wanted to do rather than being fixed at the beginning and found this process 'democratic'.
- 'A 6 month deadline... was absolutely crucial in getting busy people to commit to something... you can't commit to something open-ended.'
- 'It looked very promising, walking in there seeing about 60 people sat in a circle.'

These comments endorse the idea that CAGs offers something different from other groups involved in climate change by offering people flexibility and self-determination. Thus the CAGs present an alternative to environmental campaigns that ask their audience to do particular things, and instead invite them to think for themselves about what they can do. This approach has been recommended in a recent report by the WWF: 'Prompting such reflection may facilitate integration of these external regulations [on behaviour] into a person's sense of self. Individuals may then be more motivated in the behaviour choices they make, and engage in these changes more persistently.'¹

There were some criticisms of the initial meeting, particularly that it was rushed or chaotic (4) [6]. Related criticisms were that the meeting had too broad a brief (1), was over-ambitious (1) and required an over-arching structure (1). The experiences of those who were new to climate change networks were mixed. Two participants reported feeling like newcomers (2) and one implied that there was a need to 'impress' more experienced activists. The other participant reported coming to the initial meeting with friends who were new to climate change activity and said, 'I think we all felt that we were at the bottom of the class, that we needed to know more and maybe it wasn't for us'. This participant later dropped out of the action groups. Although there were many people who were new to campaigning at the meetings these individuals still perceived there to be a majority of people who already knew one another. One of the co-ordinators observed that although people at the meeting were supposed to move around from group to group to find out where their interests lay, instead people stayed with the first group they joined and a feeling of embarrassment appeared to stop them from circulating. This agrees with a comment made by another participant, 'I ended up with these two people in a corner...', and may be related to the dynamics experienced by those new to climate change activity.

Summary of experiences:

Feedback on the initial meeting is largely positive, especially in regard to the presentation, facilitation, participants, structure of organising groups and attendance. The main criticisms are that the meeting was rushed, needed a wider range of participants and did not fully integrate new participants. Criticisms will be further

¹ Tom Crompton, *Weathercocks and Signposts: The Environment Movement at a Crossroads* (WWF, April 2008) p. 33.

addressed below.

3.2.2 Suggestions

Participants were keen to see a wider range of people attracted to the meeting (4). Various ways of attracting new participants were suggested including greater use of advertising and making wider contact with groups that are not specifically involved in environmental activity (e.g. women's groups, trade unions and religious congregations). One participant identified the problem that it would be difficult to move from motivating people to act on climate change to action plans for groups in a single meeting. One of the co-ordinators suggested that a warm-up period should precede the matchmaking meeting in the form of a series of workshops and events, including within large employers (leaflets and advertisements alone cannot inspire sufficient commitment). This process would increase interest in the matchmaking meeting and clarify its agenda when it takes place.

At the other end of the process, one participant explained how the meeting should clarify follow up actions: 'It might have been better if the action points were flagged earlier on in the meeting... We needed time for the people in the groups to discuss how they would collaborate.' Another voiced a similar concern: 'The initial brainstorming session was quite good but I think perhaps the more concrete things could have happened after a second session... to force a gameplan. A lot of time was spent coming up with an idea and there was little time at the end to organise how we're going to do this and move ahead. That was a bit rushed.'

These criticisms might be addressed by situating the meeting more clearly as one event within a process rather than as a unique event.

The difficulties experienced by those new to climate change networks are also worth special attention. One participant emphasised the need to greet and welcome new faces, although she did feel that this was done at the meeting she attended. Perhaps more positive and personal interest could be shown towards newcomers at these types of meetings.

Summary of suggestions:

Prepare for the event with a warm-up period, attracting a wide range of participants. Ensure that 'new faces' are welcomed. Allow time in the meeting for follow-up steps to be firmly established (or to arrange another meeting in which this will take place).

3.3 The action groups

3.3.1 Experiences

Most participants felt that the CAGs had achieved something [4]: many pointed to outcomes from specific groups (12), some felt that the process had brought people together (7), others felt that it had raised awareness (6). However, some could not name a positive outcome (6).

The initial meetings in Camden and Sheffield succeeded in establishing groups addressing a wide range of climate change related ideas:

- Green energy in public buildings (Camden; persuaded two schools to change energy supplier)
- Tappers (Camden; launched a campaign against the use of bottled waters and got a public fountain installed)
- Guerrilla Gardening (Camden; cultivate an unused plot of land)
- Sheffield Renewables Campaign (Sheffield): Set up a growing group working towards establishing renewable energy projects around the city.

- Reading group (Sheffield): Runs a monthly book group focussed on climate change.
- Green House (Sheffield): Investigated green technologies for the home available locally, launched a blog and are working towards a fuller website)

Several participants involved in these projects were enthusiastic when discussing them:

- 'The whole thing was fantastic... As a team we were enormously chuffed. I think within the limits of what one event can do, we were pleased.'
- 'We wanted to find things out and that's what we've been doing and that's what we continue to do. We've got this blog now that we put together and we continue to add to and I know a hell of a lot more now that I did before.'
- 'SCR is now a constituted group with committee and bank account. We received a start up grant (£250) from Sheffield city council, raised £350 to invest in a local community renewable energy scheme, initiated two sustainable schools projects (Tapton School and Silverdale school) and have completed an options review to develop a community owned hydro power scheme on one of Sheffield's weirs. We held a public meeting, which was attended by 60 people and we have nearly 100 supporters. Overall, I am very pleased with the progress made in the first 6 months. Looking forwards the schools work is moving forwards rapidly. We have an (overly?)ambitious plan of having a hydro plant up and running by the end of 2009 (requires approx. £200k capital investment). We are also starting to build up a programme of outreach work (festivals, talks, workshops etc).'

The major difficulty with the CAGs system that this evaluation encountered was the high attrition rate among the groups, indicated in the following problem areas [5]:

- failure of groups to materialise (6)
- participants were not contacted by their groups (3)
- loss of momentum (3)

There was a marked contrast between the CAGs in Sheffield and Camden in this area: all but one of the above responses were made by Camden participants (the exception was an individual who lost contact with the Sheffield group due to not having access to email).

Many participants mentioned that they lacked time or that people in general lacked time (8). There is concern that there are too many groups in existence, as one participant put it, 'people feel obliged to join more and more groups and literally burn themselves out... they achieve very little because they're spreading their time around too thinly'. Another said, 'the first meeting showed that there was a lot of interest but there's a lot of mixed messages, different information and different visions among environmentalists. We're all jumping over each other and in each other's way. Some people didn't stay because they felt what they were doing was insignificant.'

Participants in both networks received email contact and some stated that they valued this even if they are not currently active (4). The Sheffield co-ordinator circulated a monthly newsletter by email with information about what was going on in the different groups. It was found, however, that email has limits as a method of communication. Two participants said they find it difficult or impossible to use. One of the co-ordinators reported that it sometimes feels like 'talking into the ether', a perception that agrees with the experience of conducting this evaluation in which only two people replied to an email whereas everyone who was contacted directly by phone was willing to talk about their experience.

Participants reported a wide range of experiences within the groups, some of an individual nature. Here are a selection:

- There was a dispute regarding email contact in one network (some people did not want their names on the network list).
- 3 people in London mentioned that they did not get involved in the Camden network because they do not live in the area.
- 'As a group we've felt supported. We've known who we could go to, to ask things about the process.'
- The group's project was 'over-ambitious'.
- 'I got involved in guerrilla gardening and I'm not really into planning gardens – it was too radical.'
- 'I've been inspired to get active on climate change since that meeting in many ways and am now standing as a candidate for the NZ Green party in this years' election! I thought the way the group was carried out was excellent and the empowering.' (This comment is from an email and this participant was not included in the survey of telephone interviews)

Summary of experiences:

Several successful and ongoing action groups were established in Sheffield and Camden, providing new and local ways of getting involved. However, many groups did not materialise. Continued contact was valued by participants, although email needs to be supplemented by personal contact, either at regular meetings or through other support networks. The section below will look at how groups can be supported.

3.3.2 Suggestions

The range of the active groups' identities suggests that the focus chosen by a particular group is not necessarily the essential factor in its success, although it does appear that successful groups need a clear focus (3). Two key factors emerged in discussion of what would improve the success rate of action groups:

A. Follow-up actions

Participants would value regular days for everyone to get together, both in the form of established meetings for groups in dedicated spaces and as a series of re-launches for the wider network inviting new participants (7).

Participants also suggested more follow-up contacts by phone and email would be valued, including emailed information about activities but also about climate change developments, reminding people of the issue's urgency. The monthly email newsletter used in Sheffield appears to be a useful procedure to repeat. One of the co-ordinators also suggested that a mentoring system conducted by telephone would be an especially effective way of inspiring action.

There is a danger of exhausting enthusiasm through regular meetings and in practice it may be difficult to attract large numbers to such gatherings. The time scales that were suggested for these 'regular' meetings ranged from every two weeks to once or twice a year! Clearly the time scale of gatherings should be responsive to the participants' wishes but some structured system of follow-ups is desirable.

B. Active group members

Many participants felt that the success of a group was dependent upon the enthusiasm of members, sometimes upon experienced individuals within the group (7). For this reason some suggested that key members should be assigned to groups, or dedicated support workers and mentors (5). One participant said of the CAGs model, 'It does what it's supposed to do which is to get people to meet and talk and spark off ideas but I think there's a gap in support for people who want to do low

level stuff but don't know very much how to go about it, to be a mentor, facilitator for them, and say you've thought about doing that, have you thought about doing this?' Some participants suggested that the level of commitment required would be difficult for volunteers and that funding is vital (4).

One of the major values of the CAGs as a system is that it is organic and fully determined by the wishes of participants. A system of assigning key members or mentors could be considered but it would need to be careful not to interfere with this self-determination. Mentoring might be more successful in achieving this than 'assigning' members or leaders.

Another common suggestion was that CAGs should develop links around the country and include discussion of experiences from elsewhere (5). One participant suggested an email newsletter about CAGs around the country: 'this is all about ideas sharing... it would be good if there was a little bit of link up of information and resources.' A common reason for attending the first meeting was that participants wanted to network so it would be worth developing this aspect of the groups at both a local and a national level. This could be related to another participant's suggestions that the CAGs should have some sense of 'over-arching structure'. The problem that there are numerous environmental organisations in existence and the common experience of time pressure has already been noted. However, the CAGs offer a new opportunity for supported grassroots activity.

The need to attract new activists from a range of backgrounds has been noted and of particular interest in relation to this are two participants interviewed in Sheffield, both female, aged 18-29 and of non-British origin. Neither had been active in climate change activism before the matchmaking meeting but they had both shown interest in the subject through their choice of university studies. Both women joined and continue to take part in the book group and the Renewables group.

Offering both forums for discussion and forums for action may be an important opportunity within the CAGs, particularly in encouraging individuals new to activism. The Sheffield co-ordinator noted with regret that a friendly general discussion group failed to materialise and that it had contained a particularly high proportion of newcomers to climate action. One participant specified a desire for a similar forum: 'What I'd like is once a month to have a very low key meeting where people just turn up, more like a pub thing... I think COIN wanted to start up these projects and they'd solve every problem. But I think it's more organic than that, things go more slowly.' The participant also suggested that such an informal meeting could be arranged to take place after the lectures advertised by the CAGs and by COIN and mentioned in the emails circulated. It is a possibility that such meetings could provide spaces for people to become familiar with activist networks, from which point to escalate their activity. Such forums could also address one of the key needs within today's environmental movement identified within the recent WWF report, to 'achieve greater clarity on the values that motivate the environmental movement'.²

Other suggestions included the following:

- Groups need to be large enough to maintain momentum (3).
- Information about job opportunities relating to climate change could be circulated.
- CAGs should build closer links with the local council.
- Focus more.
- Use clear, simple language.

² *Weathercocks and Signposts*, p. 35.

- Clarify COIN's role.
- Evaluation should be carried out sooner.

Summary of suggestions:

To support groups in the early stages follow-up actions are required, especially regular established meetings on different scales. Continued contact through email and phone is also important. Successful groups depend on enthusiastic members, but a system of mentoring and support could be considered. Options of forums for discussion and for action might be valuable in engaging people less familiar with environmental activism.

4. Vignettes

Two vignettes are offered below to illustrate individual experiences of the CAGs process.

EF is a 30-39 year-old male who works in local government and had not been involved in climate change related activities before the CAGs. He heard about the Camden meeting through a neighbour and went hoping to 'try to do something rather than talk about it'. He found the meeting 'really good, very inclusive' and 'useful and informative'. He joined an action group seeking to persuade public buildings to change to green energy suppliers. The group has succeeded in persuading three schools to change supplier, but EF said that this was 'not the scale we were hoping for because we haven't put enough time into it'.

EF would like a regular day once or twice a year where everyone gets together. He thought that this would be motivating and added, 'if you knew there was a meeting you'd do something now so you didn't turn up embarrassed'. He would also like to hear 'examples from elsewhere, what has been done'.

EF was emphatic that his involvement in climate change activity had changed as a result of the process, particularly in relation to awareness. He said, 'I've been able to take some steps at home to reduce my carbon footprint. But I haven't been as assiduous in following through the stuff that would make a difference to the wider world.'

OB is a male, aged 60-69 years-old, recently retired and now a full time campaigner. He is active in the World Development Movement and had previously campaigned on climate change. He was encouraged to attend the Sheffield meeting by a contact. Although he had intended to 'go along and show moral support' he was 'enormously impressed' by the meeting. In particular he noted that the CAGs are 'not the sort of way that campaigns tend to be organised' and thought that the structure was very 'motivating': 'What was good about this was that it took a specific campaign and it got people organising not in terms of taking particular jobs within a campaign, but actually splitting off and doing something around a particular kind of activity.' He also thought the presentation was 'very energising' and that the six month time scale was an enabling factor.

The CAGs process enabled OB to develop an idea he had been considering: 'I just felt that we weren't getting out on the streets so my proposal was that we pull together a bunch of people to do interesting things on the street.' He joined a group named Chocolate Aeroplanes who held an event constructing a climate ark, which was covered by the local press and through a display at the public library. He was extremely enthusiastic about the group's experience: 'It was enormously successful... The whole thing was fantastic'. The group may plan another event in the future but recognise that they 'can't do more than two a year on that level'. This

experience illustrates the possibility that the CAGs model offers to explore beyond current activities (as suggested by one of the co-ordinators), responding to changes or gaps within the wider movement.

OB is now interested in considering new approaches to climate change, especially discussion of economic growth and how to present this movement to people who are not 'converted'. He would like to know what COIN's plans are within Sheffield now and is interested in hearing more about 'an exciting idea of setting up campaigning training or campaigns developing agency in Sheffield'.

5. Conclusion

The evaluation shows mixed experiences of the Climate Action Groups, including significant differences between the two projects reviewed. The experiences do suggest that the CAGs model offers a valued opportunity for local networking and developing groups responsive to the particular concerns of participants. The matchmaking meeting itself was largely felt to be a very positive experience. However, two significant areas of concern present themselves: the limited evidence that participants are significantly escalating their activity within climate change as a result of the CAGs (especially those who had no previous experience in the area) and the large number of groups that did not establish themselves. These two problems are intimately related and participants offered a large number of useful suggestions for ways COIN could improve CAGs, particularly through situating the matchmaking meeting within a larger process of publicity and escalating activity, establishing follow-ups and regular meetings, and ensuring that groups are supported by experienced members or mentors.

Recommendations for future CAGs

- Solicit involvement from a higher ratio of people not already involved in climate change.
- Ensure that newcomers are encouraged to stay involved.
- Locate matchmaker meeting within a wider series of escalating and structured activity including providing more information prior to the matchmaker meeting, organising three post matchmaker meetings for all CAG groups to attend and a final evaluation event.
- Provide a greater degree of ongoing support and advice from the COIN secretariat and look at the possibility of setting up a mentoring system.
- Implement a comprehensive system of monitoring and evaluation to identify weaknesses and make positive adjustments throughout the CAG process.
- In order to lend a greater degree of consistency across all CAGs, a generic aim such as reducing carbon emissions should be agreed from the outset and all CAGs will be asked to work towards this aim.

Appendix One: Questions to CAG Participants Used for Evaluation

1. How did you get involved in the Climate Action Group?

1. Null
2. Saw an advert/ poster

3. Via personal contact
4. Involved in setting up CAG
5. Group contacted
6. Can't remember
7. Green Fair

2. What were your initial aims from the groups?

1. Null
2. Networking
3. Wanting to make a difference
4. To take action, help, support actions
5. To get involved on a local level
6. To get together with people
7. To find out more, share information, keep informed
8. To deliver a message
9. To work on an idea (awareness raising)
10. General interest
11. To see if I could contribute

3. Were your aims met?

1. Null
2. Yes
3. No
4. Don't know, uncertain answer
5. It's ongoing
6. The group(s) did not materialise
7. Couldn't be involved (time, location)
8. Achievements of particular group

4. What do you feel the project achieved (if anything)?

1. Null
2. Good initial meeting/s
3. Nothing
4. Good outcomes from group/s
5. Has brought people together, created networks
6. Don't know
7. Groups falling apart, loss of momentum
8. Raised awareness
9. Learning
10. Ongoing
11. Shows concern in the area

5. What problems did you experience within the project?

1. Null
2. Lack of consistent/ strong leadership
3. Lack of time
4. Over-ambitious
5. Not contacted by groups
6. Groups failed to materialise
7. Loss of momentum
8. Wrong area

9. Other
10. Felt new at the beginning
11. None
12. Establishing project
13. Lack of support
14. Personal role difficult

6. What was your impression of the process?

1. Null
2. Good first meeting
3. Lack of follow-up
4. Enthusiastic/ likeable people
5. Lots of people at first meeting
6. First meeting a bit rushed
7. Well facilitated
8. Good email contact
9. Felt supported
10. Too broad a brief
11. Lost contact
12. Continued growth
13. Felt new
14. Praise for campaign structure
15. Six month timeline good
16. Liked moving round groups
17. Chaotic
18. People didn't mix

7. What changes would you like to see made to improve possible future Climate Action Groups?

1. Null
2. I don't know
3. Regular days for everyone to get together (inviting new participants)
4. Discuss experiences from elsewhere
5. Take things slowly, more organic
6. More time at meeting to work out next steps
7. More follow-ups
8. Assign key members to groups, dedicated support workers, mentors
9. More links with other groups around country
10. Approach a range of people (and welcome them)
11. Focus more
12. None
13. An overarching structure
14. Contact with local council
15. A warm-up period
16. More information sharing
17. A relaunch

8. Had you been involved in CC activities before?

1. Null
2. Yes
3. No
4. Only privately
5. Only online

6. Only at work

9. Did your involvement in CC activities change after the process?

1. Null
2. Yes
3. No
4. Plan to change shortly
5. Some change

10. Are you employed/self-employed?

1. Null
2. Yes
3. No
4. Student

11. If yes, what work do you do?

1. Null
2. Environment related
3. Local government
4. Arts, design, writing
5. NGO
6. Care
7. Law
8. Catering
9. Science

12. Age

1. Null
2. 18-24
3. 25-29
4. 30-39
5. 40-49
6. 50-59
7. 60-69
8. 70+

13. Gender

1. Null
2. Female
3. Male

14. Do you have any other comments about the process?

1. Null
2. No
3. It's great, etc.
4. I like to be updated
5. I don't have time
6. COIN did a good job
7. I don't live in the area

8. Not clear about COIN's role

9. Other