

Integrating the Regional Stepwise service with a Community Involvement and Awareness Programme - Case Study of Brechin

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In 2003, Angus Council carried out an ambitious ecological footprinting project as part of its Local Agenda 21 Strategy for Angus. The main aim of the Strategy is to promote sustainable development as a means of improving the quality of life locally, while at the same time making a contribution to tackling global problems, and ensuring that the quality of life of future generations is also safeguarded.

The LA21 Strategy is closely linked to the Angus Community Plan which includes sustainable development as one of its three key principles. The process of preparing the Community Plan involved a partnership approach between the Council and key agencies supplemented by extensive consultation.

From the outset the ecological footprint was considered more as an educational and awareness raising device than one which drove policy. The ecological footprint was seen primarily as a means of empowering the community - as one means of communicating the concepts underpinning sustainable development.

Angus Council therefore decided to carry out a survey of households in the Brechin area to determine the size of the average household's ecological footprint. This involved inviting people to complete a questionnaire regarding their lifestyles, e.g. questions on travel, energy use, water, and shopping, waste and the local environment. The responses were analysed and reported back to the community.

This was the first **community based** footprint project in Scotland. An ecological footprint is normally calculated as a desktop exercise looking at resource flows in and out of an area and the results are then fed back to the community. However, this exercise **involved** the community in gathering the information to formulate the footprint.

Questionnaires, developed in collaboration with Best Foot Forward, were given out through schools in the Brechin area but were also available to the public through the libraries, housing office, and the local community centre. People were encouraged to take part through money-off vouchers for items that would help reduce their footprint, e.g. low energy "A" rated white goods and window blinds – donated by local stores.

Other local businesses donated items for a prize draw, e.g. an organic hamper, a bicycle, wild bird food and organic dog food. Everyone who participated in the project and returned a completed questionnaire received a free low energy light bulb. Children participating through the schools all received a free goodie bag (made out of unbleached cotton), containing items which reinforce the message, e.g. recycled pens, pencils, rubbers, rulers, mouse mats (donated by the Scottish Executive), and wildflower seeds (donated by Scottish Natural Heritage) as well as leaflets containing information about the environment.

Pre-publicity included a leaflet explaining the project, and the concept of ecological footprinting, being placed in the lid of every household's bin. Some publicity was also given through the local press, which included a photograph of schoolchildren participating in one of the schools and another with the businesses who sponsored the prizes.

A paper questionnaire was produced (on 100% recycled paper) because schoolchildren needed to take it home for help to complete it. However, people were also encouraged to complete a specially prepared online questionnaire at Best Foot Forward's website. Most of the schools had the children complete their questionnaires "on-line" and the website also included a facility for teachers to request an eco footprint for their class.

The questionnaire also contained an insert page giving "Footprint Tips" on how to reduce the size of a household's footprint. The "Footprint Tips" page was loose and could be retained by the recipient for future reference. The schools also received a "Footprint Challenge" leaflet giving numerous ideas for projects and offering prizes for the best ones.

Future plans include rolling out to the other burghs in the Angus area. The project was part funded by the Fresh Futures/New Opportunities Fund and was match funded by the Council through "in-kind" contributions of officer time and cash for printing costs, purchasing the cotton goodie bags, and recycled pens, etc.

The eco footprint concept is seen by the Council as being a very useful tool to communicate sustainable development issues to the community. It is a very simple concept and is easily understood by everyone. This project benefited those taking part by making them better informed about environmental issues as well as providing people with the means to reduce their impacts on the environment, e.g. free low energy light bulbs, money off vouchers for low energy goods and window blinds. Not only has the project appealed to young people in school but many of the questionnaires returned through the libraries etc. have been completed by older people, some quite elderly – including one lady at the age of 88!

The methods used for this project are easily replicable and other local authorities in Scotland have shown a great deal of interest. Indeed, a seminar was held in Arbroath in March 2003 on the topic of eco footprinting, which was very well attended by representatives of almost all the local authorities in Scotland through the Sustainable Scotland Network. The interest in eco footprinting has grown enormously in recent years as both a means of communicating sustainability as well as a method of measuring our progress. This project provides a practical use to the concept, which may prove to be the catalyst for further "on the ground" projects in future.