

Climate Challenge Fund Review 2019

Literature Review Findings

Introduction

The Scottish Government's Climate Challenge Fund (CCF) has been operational for over 10 years. During that time, several assessments of the CCF have been published, including two official evaluations of the fund and several research papers that use CCF projects as case studies. These documents have been reviewed, alongside literature on other similar community-based sustainability initiatives, to identify evidence that could help inform the future design and management of the CCF. This report provides a summary of the findings of that review.

The value of the CCF

In both research and practice, there is widespread recognition of community-level action as an important element in addressing climate change.¹ It has been suggested that individuals can find global-scale concerns, such as climate change, “distant, abstract, and even disempowering”. Therefore, framing the problem – and its solutions – at a more local, community level can be an effective way of helping people to connect with climate change.² Not only can messages that come from community peers have a bigger influence than other forms of messaging,³ but environmental issues have been found to become more meaningful to people when they connect with their own lives and personal relationships.⁴ Importantly, the community scale has also been identified as a scale at which people may feel “empowered to act”⁵, and projects can be designed to meet the specific needs of the community in question, increasing the likelihood of local acceptance and engagement.

Community initiatives are often facilitated by a group of unpaid volunteers, but a lack of access to financial resources is often a barrier to groups undertaking substantial climate change projects (and therefore having a greater impact) as funding is required for materials, professional services and/or dedicated staff time.⁶ In such cases, many community groups seek out public funding, such as that provided through the CCF, to enable activities to happen.⁷ The two official evaluations of the CCF provide substantial evidence to demonstrate that the resources provided through the CCF enables community-led climate change projects to be delivered that would otherwise not be possible.⁸

Whilst the CCF is widely acclaimed as providing vital resources to communities to take action on climate change, there is also evidence of its limitations and opportunities to improve the way in which community-level action on climate change is supported by government funding. There appear to be particular opportunities for the CCF in three key (interconnected) areas: encouraging cross-sector cooperation; appropriately measuring success; and facilitating long-lasting outcomes.

Cross-sector action and cooperation

The CCF currently provides funding to individual community groups to deliver carbon reduction projects for their local community. After a decade of funding, over 1,100 projects across all 32 local authorities have been supported, demonstrating wide geographic spread. As well as supporting these groups to undertake their own projects, there is evidence that it would be beneficial for the CCF to also facilitate greater partnership working *between* community groups and other organisations. For example, the early findings from an ongoing longitudinal study of the CCF suggest that: “CCF projects which include people who can facilitate relationships between different key organisations within a community are more effective in achieving change... CCF funding could more strongly encourage partnership working through funding multiple organisations within communities, and by funding activities that create opportunities for groups to work together...”⁹

It has been suggested that working with other community-led initiatives should be part of this collaboration and cooperation but, importantly, this should also include engaging with other types of public and private sector organisations, to enable stakeholders to work together towards broader shared aims and have a bigger impact. It has been identified that third sector cross-community networking organisations (such as the Scottish Community Alliance) are effective in creating and maintaining strong links between some (but not all) community-led climate change initiatives. However, links between community groups and other sectors are much more limited, with local authority-level climate change action often not well connected with community-level action.¹⁰

There is evidence of partnership working being very effective in practice. For example, in the context of community gardening (which the CCF currently supports), it has been observed that the construction of a “multi-scalar” partnership (bringing together actors from community gardens and food groups, the city council, national government, national health service and broader public and private-sector food and health care interests) offered a supportive forum that highlighted the importance of connections to wider scales for fostering sustainability. The partnership enabled greater ‘visibility’ of community activity, enabling it to inform wider strategies and outcomes.¹¹

There is a role for ‘intermediary organisations’ in enabling this kind of joined-up action. Intermediaries are organisations that are one-step removed from the communities themselves, and can act as a coordinator and mediator between multiple grassroots projects and other actors and organisations.¹² They can also play a role in providing guidance and support to new initiatives, and potentially remove bureaucratic pressures on smaller, volunteer-led projects that are often associated with grant funding, allowing them to remain focused on delivery on the ground.¹³

Measuring success

Community groups should be able to evaluate their work.¹⁴ A study trialling monitoring and evaluation tools amongst a sample of low-carbon community groups in the UK found that evaluation that is constructive for a group, relatively light touch, and potentially even fun, “can encourage groups to feel part of a broader goal and narrative”.¹⁵ However, capturing the outcomes of community initiatives is notoriously difficult.

The official evaluation of the CCF conducted in 2015 found that the current practice of calculating carbon savings was perceived as a challenging, complex and confusing process by many groups. Recording progress against targets was found to be a significant concern for groups and required substantial efforts to undertake. Whilst setting carbon targets led some projects to add elements to increase potential carbon savings, this restricted activities for other projects where it was felt that measurement of changes was difficult. Consequently, there was some concern that this was acting as a barrier to progressive activity within community groups as too much focus was being placed on this element.¹⁶ Feedback provided separately from Development Trusts Association Scotland has stated that they have observed that some CCF groups feel that there is “an over concentration on carbon counting”.¹⁷

Using ‘objective’ indicators or numbers (such as tonnes of carbon saved) to demonstrate ‘value for money’ is not always an effective way of assessing the value provided by community initiatives. Research on community groups beyond the CCF found that many groups had little interest in evaluating their projects through conventional quantitative approaches or cost-benefit analysis. This is typically because the primary outcomes of community climate change projects are often in the form of less tangible, qualitative outcomes, such as engaging people with the issue of climate change and encouraging and empowering them to take action.^{18,19} Moreover, learning processes are typically an important element of community sustainability initiatives, with groups developing their understanding of the problems and their solutions as the project unfolds. Adherence to evaluating projects according to narrowly predefined criteria can make it difficult to present more nuanced learnings that emerge from within projects. Instead, there could be value in more flexible evaluation approaches, which recognise that it may not always be appropriate to try to determine concrete outcomes of a new community-led initiative before the project has started.²⁰

A guide to monitoring and evaluation for low-carbon community groups was published in 2016.²¹ This provides a range of tools and frameworks that could be applied within the context of the CCF. In addition, one strand of an ongoing three-year research project with five CCF groups is assessing methods of evaluation. Findings from this work are expected in early 2020.

Taking a long-term view

Much of the literature identifies how critical it is to take a long-term view of community-level action on climate change. For example, it has been suggested that the “acid test” for the effectiveness of the types of projects funded by CCF “lies in the durability of attitudinal and behavioural changes in the community”²² However, there is evidence that the current CCF practice of offering one or two year grants does not maximise the potential for these long-term changes as the projects that are most likely to be proposed and accepted for CCF funding are those that can deliver outputs within a couple of years. It follows that most CCF projects are therefore ‘activity-driven’, i.e. centred on delivering specific carbon-saving activities, rather than engendering sustainable lifestyles more holistically.²³

The tendency of government policy initiatives to focus on “simple and painless private-sphere behaviour changes” has been critiqued in the literature. It is argued that, in terms of a wider sustainability strategy, the only reason for targeting these types of small-scale changes is to act as precursors to larger-scale behaviour change (a ‘spillover’ effect), or to initiate more active involvement in the political process (the ‘foot in the door’ effect). However, these secondary effects are unpredictable and unreliable. Rather than encouraging the uptake of other aspects of a sustainable lifestyle, individuals who adopt one pro-environmental behaviour may see it as a way of off-setting other environmentally detrimental behaviours, leading to a negative spillover (or rebound) effect.²⁴ This is confirmed by the findings of the 2011 evaluation of the CCF, which reported very limited evidence of a positive spillover effect within CCF projects, noting that, “Even where projects were deliberately trying to catalyse spillover, this... very rarely worked when the promoted behaviours were, in their eyes, unconnected.”

It is not feasible to expect community groups to be able to deliver the transformational changes required to address climate change in a one, two, or three year CCF grant period. Ensuring a sustainable legacy – beyond the lifetime of a CCF grant – is therefore essential. However, many community groups do not have any material or financial resources of their own and there is evidence that groups are unable to keep operating when funding is not continued.²⁵ The evidence suggests that groups would value more support with the process of building this sustainable legacy so that the positive influence of the project can be maintained after the funding period comes to an end.

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