

The Energy Academy

Manchester Knowledge Capital working with the Make Energy Change Happen Toolkit



What is the Energy Academy?



The aim of Energy Academy project is to recruit a force of 10-15 volunteers who are willing to be trained by the sustainable development charity, Action for Sustainable Living (AfSL), in engaging, enthusing and supporting local residents taking practical action on climate change. The volunteers

will operate in the Greater Manchester borough of Trafford, and in doing so also refer people to the domestic energy efficiency services offered by the Greater Manchester branch of the national Energy Savings Trust Advice Centre (GM ESTAC) network. It is co-ordinated by Manchester Knowledge Capital (M:KC).

The target group for the Energy Academy consists of four groups: a fuel rich community, a fuel poor community, a mixed community and what the project characterizes as a 'community of interests' (e.g. a college). In addition, through engaging with different target groups it creates the possibilities for comparing and contrasting the lessons from these different groups.

The objectives of the Energy Academy are:

1. To increase referrals to the GM ESTAC for domestic energy efficiency / renewables advice.
2. To increase uptake of ESTAC services including home energy checks, grant support.
3. To increase awareness of climate change and the need for personal action.



A group of Energy Academy volunteers, July 2009

How does the Energy Academy work?

The Energy Academy employs part time coordinators to recruit, train and support volunteers to work in communities for the benefit of local people. The volunteers attend workshops, receive guidance and training on climate change campaigning. Volunteers work with others to target a range of events and small-scale public speaking opportunities to engage with the public - for example, through quiz nights, film nights, energy savings events, door-knocking and so on. Additionally, the project is communicated locally to residents using well-established local authority communications routes. At events or people's doors, volunteers assist householders to access the energy advice and financial support available locally and nationally, save energy and reduce their wider environmental impacts.

By July 2010, over 30 community events and meetings have been attended or organised, over 150 Home Energy Checks have been completed, and 20 renovations (e.g. cavity wall or loft insulation) have been carried out.

The critical lesson

Simon Robinson is Programme Associate at M:KC and has led the development of the Energy Academy. In his view “the critical lesson that was gained from working with several partners is that partnership working is itself a skill”. This is a cultural issue that requires a particular way of working between partners and also requires an investment in time - in understanding when is the right time to act and how.

The Experience of Manchester Knowledge Capital with the Energy Change Toolkit

Manchester Knowledge Capital has been involved with the development of the CHANGING BEHAVIOUR toolkit from its initial stages. Simon Robinson has led M:KC’s involvement in developing the toolkit. His experiences of the toolkit are that: “I think the activities are something to learn from. I have identified the activities that I recognized as being particularly relevant to our project - we then took some actions and it has improved the end understanding and delivered the project”.

The toolkit covers many aspects of a project’s life from beginning through to implementation and learning. As an experienced practitioner, particular parts of the toolkit helped me at different times. The activities in the toolkit were vital as a means of orientation to help me reflect, think and learn about the project process. This allowed space for critical reflection on my practices.

Simon Robinson. M:KC

Below some of the activities applied by M:KC are described:

1. Is the time right?

For Manchester Knowledge Capital it was important to think about why the Energy Academy was a project whose time had arrived. The M:KC team, led by Simon Robinson, developed insights systematically about the ways in which internal organizational aims could be aligned with external opportunities.

This required turning the issue of timing to one based on the opportunities and possibilities provided by M:KC’s external environment. Four insights from the MECHANisms tool were particularly important:

1. *Brainstorming* – internal and external organizational discussions were critical to thinking about what sort of project was required and what M:KC’s role would be in that. In particular this involved thinking imaginatively about how top-down (national) priorities could be aligned with bottom up (local) projects.
2. *Partnering with existing projects and campaigns* – This was based on making use of existing projects and campaigns, such as GM ESTAC and AfSL. To build collective capacity that was greater than any of the existing projects, MK:C’s challenge according to Simon Robinson “has been basically trying to stitch together two very different organisations with the practicalities of what that means”.

How can you engage people on climate change in unexpected ways and make use of ‘windows of opportunity’?

We participated in communities’ social events. It was a bizarre sight to see, people singing on stage whilst volunteers cajoled people to fill out home energy check forms.

Simon Robinson, M:KC



3. *Windows of opportunity* – This was based on acting on windows of opportunity in terms of existing projects, sources of funding and existing relationships. This is important, particularly, in difficult financial times where, in Simon Robinson’s experience a “low-cost, high-gearing model is exactly where we should be looking in terms of the ‘writing on the wall’ with public finance”.

4. *Reconsider project aims* – working effectively with different project partners meant constantly keeping what the project’s aims should be at the forefront of project thinking.

Creating a ‘window of opportunity’ to talk about energy and climate change at the local library

2. Define progress and manage external expectations

The progress of the Energy Academy is assessed through a series of criteria that are used to signify its effectiveness, its efficiency and the lessons to be learned from the Energy Academy. These criteria are used to monitor, evaluate and learn to what extent the aims and objectives of the Energy Academy are met.

Qualitative and quantitative measures used by the different project partners were brought together by M:KC. They were measures, according to Simon Robinson, “that were already sitting around and that no one was making use of in this way and using them to understand whether the project was successful or not”. This provides the basis for the whole project group to understand the progress of the project. Progress is monitored and discussed through a mixture of regular steering group meetings, via presentations, email exchanges, written summaries and informal meetings.

I think there has been a desire to have a greater understanding of how the project is working on the ground - in a support and monitoring role. Our job is to bring people together in doing that.

Simon Robinson, M:KC

Effectiveness targets for the project include the following – all of which have been met and often significantly exceeded:

- Personal engagement with 600 Greater Manchester residents
- Predicted carbon savings of 891 tonnes (lifetime)
- Community action teams of advocates set up
- 15 trained advocates
- 5 action groups, projects or events set up
- 5 talks / workshops delivered to community groups
- 18 Community meetings attended
- 24 events attended
- 15 articles and press releases

Efficiency is calculated on the basis of the outcome achieved for the amount of resources committed to the project:

- Outcome: CO₂ saved – which was calculated at 3861.42 tCO₂ saved
- Resources: Total Budget + estimate of staff and volunteer time + marketing materials – which totalled £20,000 + 9,932.93 + £5,115.12

In the course of the project M:KC learned to mediate and manage the different expectations of stakeholders – both within the project group and also with volunteers and the public. As Simon Robinson characterizes it: “M:KC are overseers and coordinators and EST and AfSL are the deliverers of the services...So it sometimes feels like we’re the weld between these two very different organisations - a micro charity and a national body”. Understanding the expectations of the other project partners and finding an alignment or accommodation between them was fundamental to the Energy Academy’s success. This required regular communication between the partners – through steering group meetings, email exchanges, telephone calls, face-to-face meetings and at Energy Academy events. It was also based on personal relationships that have been developed over a period of time prior to the Energy Academy. This communication of expectations of the Energy Academy was a fundamental part of the learning process of how a project that involved three core partners could work for mutual benefit.



The Energy Academy project was jointly implemented by the Action for Sustainable Living, Manchester: Knowledge Capital and the Energy Saving Trust. Requirements and expectations of all three organisations, of external funders and of participants had to be aligned.