

Regional Sustainability Advisers 2012-13

Collaborative project report for the South-East Region: College engagement with local communities for enhanced sustainable development



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Organisation	Hadlow College	
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1. Aims of the project	<p>High level aims: To critically review the challenges and opportunities of networking for joint sustainable development between FE Colleges and local community groups.</p> <p>It was hoped to see an increasing level of awareness of and commitment to engagement with local communities.</p> <p>The project was seen as an opportunity to learn from existing best practice and facilitate new schemes by example.</p>	
2. Situation: Identify the situation or issue that faced you	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How did you arrive at the idea for this project? Hadlow College has been running a successful collaborative project with the village – the HadLOW Carbon Community. The project is now just over five years since inception and it was considered an opportune time to revisit and reflect upon developments. Additionally it was decided to see if the HadLOW experience could be replicated more widely.• What was it that you felt this project could help, support, change or improve? There is an urgent need to empower local communities towards a greater level of sustainable development (SD) and this is also true of FE Colleges. This project was thought to be capable of encouraging better links between Colleges and communities in the south-east, to quicken the pace of localised SD.• Were there particular regional factors that you considered? The initial focus area was that defined by the SE RSA post but ultimately it was hoped that the concept would roll out more widely.• What were the opportunities that presented themselves? The key opportunity seen was to showcase the successes of the Hadlow College-HadLOW Carbon Community partnership for wider adoption• What motivated you? The UK urgently needs more self-sustaining communities for better long term access to food, water and energy. But more than that is required: local communities need to regenerate their economies and educate everyone who wants to learn new and relevant skills. Thus collaborative links with nearby Colleges are seen as a vital part of SD for local	

	<p>communities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why did you see a need or opportunity for action? The current situation risks impending shocks due to shortages of food, water and energy and this will negatively impact both local communities and Colleges. Urgent action is therefore seen as vital, to help stakeholders join together and improve their resilience.
3. Task: Define the outcomes you needed to achieve	<p>The overall goals were intended as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the Hadlow College-HadLOW Carbon community relationship; • The dissemination of key findings as a resource for other Colleges, so that they might replicate such collaboration; • As these Colleges developed similar links, a wider move towards better localised SD. <p>Expected change:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A SWOT-type understanding of the Hadlow College -HadLOW Carbon community relationship and how we might develop this most effectively in the next five years; • Behaviour change on the part of staff in other Kent Colleges and initiatives to link more closely with local community groups. <p>Outputs generated:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project report which analyses the Hadlow College-HadLOW Carbon community relationship for optimal future development. This is currently being written as a final year BSc honours research dissertation; • A further series of meetings planned with colleagues in other Colleges across the south-east to reflect on the effectiveness of new external links to community groups: such meetings would not always be face-to-face (F2F), with e-mediated conference software being used (such as 'Blue Button' – which was demonstrated to participants at the recent 2nd event). <p>Benefits and learning outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A rejuvenated relationship between Hadlow College and the HadLOW Carbon community. This will benefit local residents in terms of better security of food supply and access to College short courses, whilst College students will benefit from enriched teaching and opportunities for enhanced skill development; • Similar potential benefits for other Colleges and local communities across the south-east. <p>These changes, outputs and benefits can clearly and specifically be linked back to the high-level aim in section 1.</p>

4. Actions that you took in order to achieve your plan, and your approach

The project was organised in three parts:

1. A series of interviews with a total of five members of the HadLOW Carbon community;
2. A semi structured interview with a contact at MidKent College;
3. A 'Survey Monkey' survey sent electronically to Kent Colleges.

The timeline was as follows:

- June 2012 – preliminary discussion with critical friend at LSIS meeting and agreement of project theme and aim;
- July 2012 – contact with a few local Colleges for preliminary feedback;
- July 2012 – discussions with HadLOW community members for F2F semi structured interviews;
- September - November 2012 – approaches to local organisations – KAFEC and AOSEC – for help with publicity and feedback about project aim;
- November 2012 – F2F semi-structured interviews with five HadLOW community members;
- December 2012 – HadLOW member assists with development of Survey Monkey questions;
- January 2013 – Survey Monkey details sent to south-east Colleges *via* KAFEC and AOSEC mailing lists;
- January 2013 – visit to MidKent College for F2F semi structured interview;
- February and into March 2013 – monitoring responses to Survey Monkey;
- March – writing report to analyse HadLOW interviews, MidKent interview and Survey monkey responses.

1. The HadLOW interviews

These had been intended for some time and the development of the LSIS collaborative project stimulated action. Howard Lee is a regular attendee at the monthly HadLOW community meetings (first Monday evening of each month) and broached the idea at the meeting in July 2012, the last before the summer break. There was a positive response from members. Howard also discussed these interviews with year 2 BSc International Agriculture students, who were about to break for the summer – as a possible honours project in their final year. In October 2012 one student in the above group asked to become involved in the interviews for her honours project and was briefed by Howard. She met members of the HadLOW community at the November meeting and a week later, she interviewed five members in their homes. The honours project was then drafted and is ongoing, due for completion by late April. The emphasis for a final year honours project is the use of critical analysis for any issues considered – and this fits well with the aim in section 1.

The questions asked for each HadLOW interviewee were:

1. Why was the HadLOW group started?
2. How did you get involved?
3. Any relationship/hierarchy issues within the group?
4. How is the leader chosen?
5. What skills do members have?
6. Who organises activities?
7. Funding issues?
8. What have been the obstacles
9. What have been the successes?

All five interviews were conducted on the afternoon of 14.11.12.

2. The MidKent College interview.

This was undertaken by Howard Lee on 23.01.13 with the Estates Manager. The questions asked were the same as those used in the Survey Monkey questions, as shown below. This interview was in effect a 'trial run' of the questions, before they were disseminated to other Colleges. As such the information gathered was intended to help in analysing the prospects of Colleges engaging with local community groups for greater joint SD and therefore fits within the aim in section 1.

College questionnaire (Survey Monkey) – sent to Kent Colleges

1. Please specify your name, College name and email address - though you may omit this information if you wish.

2. Does your College have any links to any local community group with an interest in environmental issues, climate change, local food production or related issues. Some examples are: Low Carbon Groups, Transition Town Groups or Community Allotment Groups.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

3. Please describe the main theme(s) of the environmental groups your College is associated with. You may list theme(s) against each group if you are describing more than one group.

4. Please estimate the number of local community groups (other than environmental groups) that your College has interacted with in anyway. Please write in a number.

5. Other than environmental groups, what other types of community groups has your College interacted with? Please describe the main theme(s) for each of these groups.

6. If your College has no links with environmental groups, please indicate the main reason for this. Please tick one box only.

- ☐ Lack of time available to engage with local community
- ☐ Lack of funds
- ☐ Other interests take priority in engaging with local community
- ☐ No expertise within staff to add value to local group
- ☐ Not aware of any local environmental groups to engage with
- ☐ Geographical limitations to engage with the local community
- ☐ Local environmental groups are not relevant to the College curriculum
- ☐ Other (please specify)

7. Are there any specific issues relevant to this project that are not covered here and that you think should be addressed? Please specify

	<p>8. Would you be happy to be contacted again for a possible face-to-face meeting at your College?</p> <p><input checked="" type="radio"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="radio"/> No thanks</p> <p>9. THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS SURVEY! Would you like to be kept informed about this project, information resources and possible workshops?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes please</p> <p><input type="radio"/> No thanks</p> <p>3. The Kent College survey</p> <p>The above questions were sent electronically <i>via</i> Survey Monkey courtesy of the KAFEC and AOSEC College mailing lists, to Estates Managers at Kent Colleges (six in total). It was felt that the issues raised at MidKent needed to be explored in other Kent Colleges before further surveys were organised across a wider area. The results were planned to contribute towards a more effective critical assessment of College-community collaboration, leading to better SD and were thus within the key aim shown in section 1. Results from this survey are being used to develop a larger survey across the south-east later this year.</p>
<p>5. Results that you obtained</p>	<p>Data shown in this section are the results of semi structured interviews and one survey – none of which allowed the accumulation of quantitative data. Thus data summarised below are therefore qualitative.</p> <p>1. The HadLOW interviews</p> <p>These results are currently being analysed and written into an honours dissertation of 12,000 words with a deadline of late April. Information gathered will be analysed in detail in that dissertation (using techniques such as Thematic Analysis). At this point and for this form, a summary of the key responses across the five interviewees is given.</p> <p>Qs 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 9: the activities of HadLOW</p> <p>All respondents were key members of the Steering Group and thus familiar with the <i>modus operandi</i> and recent projects. These primarily covered (i) local food production and awareness raising issues, (ii) art as a medium for the expression of SD and (iii) the challenges of sustainable transport provision. (i) The HadLOW community supports a community allotment, jointly with Hadlow College, has published</p>

several editions of a local food directory and organised local food awareness exhibitions. These have educated both local people and contributed to the learning environment of College students. (ii) Several of the five interviewed HadLOW members are talented artists and one hugely successful art exhibition was staged on the College campus three years ago, with the theme 'Finite: an exhibition for tomorrow.' (iii) Sustainable transport is an ongoing issue but there have been modest outcomes so far (extra bike racks in Hadlow village). Projects to improve cycle tracks in the locality are ongoing. The College is also about to launch a 'Boris bike' type scheme across its Hadlow campuses for staff. Most HadLOW members were acknowledged to be primarily middle class, well educated, aged >50 years and primarily female.

Qs 3, 4, 8: the dynamics of HadLOW

The group is just over five years old and most of the five respondents expressed disappointment at the relatively low membership, which has declined even further in recent years (and in a village of just over 3,000 residents). This was seen as a major obstacle to the future of the group and thought to be due to (i) a rather remote and serious reputation of the group – *i.e.* not social enough and fun to be part of, (ii) a tendency to preach to others if public events were called – many people found this patronising and annoying; (iii) relatively remote from many people's immediate lives in the village – the word 'apathy' was frequently used in interviews, but 'disconnected' could perhaps be interpreted as more accurate.

Hadlow College is aware of the current situation and in June a meeting is being arranged between Hadlow College staff and HadLOW members to re-examine how the collaboration can be further developed to reinvigorate the HadLOW group and improve its future.

2. The MidKent College interview

The key points from this interview were that:

- MidKent College held numerous links to local community groups but that only a few could be considered to have an environmental or sustainable development (SD) focus. The main such contact was with an allotment group;
- A major impediment to further links and joint SD initiatives was seen as pressure of College work and consequent lack of human resources and time.

	<p>The lack of time for collaborative projects was repeatedly stated during the interview and seemed an important point to pursue with other Colleges. So, the above list of Qs was distributed to Kent Colleges <i>via</i> Survey Monkey.</p> <p>3. The Kent College survey</p> <p>Participation was good but the results were a disappointment. MidKent College had already been covered and all the remaining five Colleges responded. Colleges completed the survey on-line. <i>All</i> respondents stated that they had almost no contact with external community groups and that this was due to lack of time. In fact the response clearly indicated that such links had never been and were currently not under consideration. The impression gained was that such questions were out-of-touch with the current pressures Colleges faced, to perform to ever increasing national standards. Of course this attitude by Colleges can be argued to be misplaced – for example, the recent high OFSTED grading of Walsall College in the Midlands was largely due to their commitment to SD on campus, though information about their external links is less clear.</p>
<p>6. What made the project a success? What were the key ingredients?</p>	<p>This project has clarified some important points:</p> <p>1. The HadLOW interviews</p> <p>Many environmental community groups across the world have relatively short life spans, as discussed by Gary Moffatt (see http://www.connexions.org/CxLibrary/Docs/CX5003-WhyDoCommunitiesFail.htm). This is true for the many groups set up in Britain over the past five years, including Transition Town initiatives. The HadLOW group's survival over five years is therefore exceptional but cannot be seen as a large success, since numbers and the morale of remaining members are low. These issues need to be analysed further and this is currently happening: (i) in the honours project, which is being prepared and (ii) in discussions between Hadlow College and the HadLOW group. What is clear is that Hadlow College's partnership with the HadLOW group is very unusual in Britain (it was discussed in a book chapter written a few years ago and which is appended here – see Lee H.C., Taylor, J. (2010). <i>The HadLOW Carbon Community: behavioural evolution in the face of climate change</i>. In <i>Low Carbon Communities: Imaginative Approaches to Combating Climate Change</i> (eds M. Peters, S. Fudge & T. Jackson). Edward Elgar Publishing. pp. 237-251). Why is the Hadlow College-HadLOW relationship so rare? What can we learn from this? How can we encourage greater College-community links for SD? The above points are worth considering here:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarity of purpose • Planning/scoping/project management

- Flexibility and adaptability
- Clarity of communication
- Engagement and capacity building and involving the right people

Do we have a clear enough purpose? The HadLOW group held a ‘think tank’ meeting of its remaining members in September 2012 – only six of us were there, so discussions were not necessarily representative. Those present agreed that food was and should remain a key purpose of the group. The College and HadLOW jointly continue to consider how we can best develop better local food awareness and security. For example, we are considering a further recruitment drive for more villagers to take part in the community allotment. The College is also planning a separate community allotment for staff and students as part of an EU funded College network initiative, and it is hoped that HadLOW will also have some involvement.

Generally our project management has been good – one of the HadLOW members has a project management background in the pharmaceutical industry and her skills have been enormously helpful. The College’s sustainability co-ordinator also has excellent experience of project management in the banking sector. So, there is much potential to push ahead with new initiatives.

Communication can always be improved – for instance the College’s sustainability group – which meets every six weeks – normally invites at least one HadLOW representative but recently this was overlooked and has had to be rectified.

Engagement is a continuing challenge, both for College staff/students and the wider village community. As the RSA for the south-east the theme of the 1st event was ‘behaviour change,’ and this continues to be seen as a pivotal issue: without engagement and behaviour change, real development of SD is problematic.

Community capacity building - developing skills and experience, increasing opportunities and enhancing confidence for greater involvement in decision making – can be argued to have failed so far and must be addressed as part of the future development of the Hadlow College-HadLOW collaboration.

2. The MidKent College interview

The purpose of this interview was to explore external links between MidKent College and the wider community. There was a specific need to understand how links to environmental groups could be improved for better joint SD. However it quickly became clear that the interviewee, a hardworking and committed Estates Manager, had many other issues on his very crowded ‘ToDo’ list: links to such community groups was not even a low level issue. On reflection it became clear that, whilst communication, engagement etc. had

	<p>been effective with this person, he was clearly not the right contact at MidKent College for community links and projects. However when the VP had been approached, this had been the person referred to for contacts. Thus, a re-think is required: how to find the person(s) who are more appropriate in this and any other College.</p> <p>3. The Kent College survey</p> <p>The response from MidKent College was mirrored by the e-survey. The key points are the same as for the mid Kent College interview and so will not be covered here again. However further discussion seems appropriate here. Specifically, if the e-survey had asked for College views on SD and its importance etc. then it is likely that there would have been support in principle. Instead the survey specifically requested evidence of practical outreach activities in the locality – i.e. on-the-ground projects. Clearly these are lacking for Kent Colleges.</p> <p>Questions to ask are:</p> <p>Why is this so? Is it pressure of work for staff? Lack of a clear steer for such links? Perhaps lack of interest by College SMTs? Funding barriers? OFSTED induced priorities away from external links?</p> <p>These and many other questions need to be explored in a follow up survey which is distributed much more widely and this is currently being planned. Lack of College links to external community groups is seen as a major impediment to greater SD at local level: community groups alone are vulnerable to failure as discussed in section 4 and thus need the mutual support dynamics of a nearby College.</p>
7. What were some of the challenges and obstacles you faced in planning and implementing your project? How did you anticipate or respond to these challenges?	<p>Time constraints were very real and had been anticipated, but it is concluded that real progress was made with this project: an honours student helped with the HadLOW interviews, which was hugely supportive. Kent College staff were very helpful in responding to requests for an interview or to complete the e-survey. The progress made with this project is seen as part of an ongoing research programme, which is planned to continue after the tenure of the LSIS post. So, the response to the challenges of the project was to draw in student help and plan the interview and e-survey within the time available; as a clearly defined first stage of a longer research programme.</p>

<p>8. What would you say were the most important things you learned from this project, which you will take forward as an individual or as an organisation in your sustainability journey?</p>	<p>The key points raised by this project are that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are very limited practical, on-the-ground links between Kent Colleges and external community groups with a sustainability focus, and this seems to be primarily due to lack of available staff time; • The Hadlow College-HadLOW Carbon community collaboration is struggling, especially as HadLOW membership declines and with most villagers appearing to be disconnected from the key issues and not interested in engagement. <p>What has been learnt from this is that behaviour change is at the heart of SD and especially for College-community links. Looking forward there is clearly a need to understand:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the Kent experience typical of the south-east (and nationally)? Is the trend in Kent more widespread – i.e. are most Colleges not linked to local community groups as a part of joint SD programmes? If so, why not? How can perceived barriers be overcome? (such barriers might be ‘between the ears’ or range up to financial or policy issues); • If any Colleges are involved with local groups (such as Hadlow College-HadLOW) what are the key successes? If there are still barriers, how can they best be addressed? How can the most successful points of each partnership be celebrated and replicated elsewhere? • How can a programme be generated which helps Colleges kick-start external links to community groups? It is suspected that behaviour change barriers are profound – this might range from a conservative and uninterested attitude, to a general sympathy but lack of confidence and experience. When the Hadlow College-HadLOW partnership started it needed considerable courage to approach the village and offer this possibility. It has taken several years to develop mutual respect and trust and has at times been quite difficult – see Lee & Taylor (2010); • The final point that has been learnt is that this project is just the beginning and that this theme needs to be further developed over the next few years if any real and positive change is to be seen. This will involve further surveys, F2F interviews but many other initiatives, ranging from HadLOW projects to Hadlow College and other College short course provision via F2F teaching and blended e-conferencing.
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