

Milton Keynes National Action Project

Sustainable Communities

Overview

This project set out to explore ways of involving young people in creating and maintaining sustainable communities across Milton Keynes, a rapidly growing new community with a number of new schools that would make good partners for the project. Milton Keynes Council was also keen to experiment with a project that would focus on young people and their role in creating and developing sustainable communities. The result has put sustainable communities on the agenda for all groups involved. It has raised awareness and led to the creation of formal and informal partnerships, as well as increasing local skills and developing a range of tools to promote sustainable communities even further.

Community planning, sustainable communities and urban regeneration aren't usually at the top of young peoples' list of concerns. Yet these same young people have much to offer projects in these areas, not least because they are the citizens of tomorrow. To get them interested HCA Academy undertook a wide-ranging programme of activities designed to show the importance and relevance of the sustainable communities agenda in and around Milton Keynes.

At the heart of this project was a programme of knowledge sharing. Its aim was to spread the word about sustainable communities across Milton Keynes using a toolkit of resources as well as specially created materials relating to the geography and citizenship curriculum in schools. Over two years the project involved 26 secondary and primary schools in identifying, celebrating and disseminating best practice.

Sustainable communities are now an established and respected issue for both Milton Keynes council and the various schools involved with this project. These schools can now go on to inspire other schools. Specific benefits include exciting new learning experiences, working partnerships that benefit all involved, improved skills and capacity across Milton Keynes and the broadening of the sustainable community agenda to include residents associations and the wider community.

Summary

- The project targeted young people specifically because they are traditionally hard to engage in community planning and regeneration activities.
- HCA Academy worked with 26 primary and secondary schools over two years
- Activities centred on developing materials for use within the geography and citizenship curriculum and on disseminating two tool kits. There was an emphasis on schools reaching out into the community.
- For the schools, the project has provided an opportunity to offer new, exciting learning opportunities and build new partnerships.
- More generally, the project has resulted in an enhanced and more informed debate across the city about the development of sustainable communities.

Background

Young people are often difficult to engage with in the context of community planning and urban regeneration. To address this HCA Academy set out to explore how they could engage this audience in the sustainable communities agenda and equip them with the necessary skills to become involved with key projects.

The Project

HCA Academy set up a programme of activities to identify, celebrate and disseminate community engagement best practice. The aim was to deepen the local understanding of sustainable communities, translate and transfer the learning nationally, and spread the message across schools in Milton Keynes.

This programme was delivered by putting together a learning-day toolkit based on the shuffle day activity of Oakgrove School. HCA Academy also set about developing ways for the Sustainable Schools Agenda to be tackled through the Primary School Geography Curriculum Key Stage Two, integrating the principles of sustainable communities into sustainable schools.,.

In Year One a programme of activities was set up in five different schools. This involved:

- Using the development of a sensory garden on a new Special School site to develop links with the neighbouring secondary school, a care home and a garden nursery.
- Exploring how the primary geography curriculum could be used to access the sustainable communities' agenda.
- Working with a school eco committee to investigate the emerging community and improve school access.
- Investigating how a social enterprise approach could enable young people to identify ways of forming links between different groups.
- Supporting the development of a range of activities for an off-timetable day on the theme of sustainable communities.

In Year Two this involved:

- Identifying, celebrating and disseminating the learning from Year One working with a further 11 schools.
- Deepening the local understanding of sustainable communities.
- Translating and transferring the learning across Milton Keynes and eventually the whole UK.

The project centred on four key resources:

Compelling Learning Day toolkit. Five schools were involved in piloting the draft materials and feeding back on their content. Four schools came into Oakgrove School to experience the day in action and to take that experience away to use in launching their own equivalent event.

Active Citizenship Toolkit. A mix of schools, together with youth workers, 'community mobilisers' and representatives of other groups - including additional CSV personnel -

attended a training day to launch the toolkit in Milton Keynes and critique the approach. A follow up was conducted by CSV and the toolkit is now being promoted nationally.

Geography curriculum for primary schools. Course material for Key Stage Three will incorporate sustainability elements and the Egan Wheel into curriculum. This material is being developed by Oakgrove Humanities Department in partnership with GEMK and City Discovery Centre. Training will be offered to Milton Keynes teachers to assist the roll out.

Sustainable primary schools. This initiative encourages primary schools in Milton Keynes to be more proactive in the sustainable schools agenda. It aims to embrace more widely the concept of sustainable communities through a process of outreach and engagement with the local community.

Oxley Park was already proactive in its interaction with the community and has been pursuing initiatives such as energy efficiency, recycling and sustainable travel to school (for example, the 'walking bus concept') as a way of engaging with parents and the community. Oxley Park has also established more formal links with the Oxley Park Residents Association and is developing a community garden for residents to come in and use for moments of reflection.

The Impact

The project put sustainable communities firmly on the radar of Milton Keynes Council, its partner organisations and the various schools that participated in the project. It created a legacy of understanding and reflection, as well as a number of informal partnerships set up to promote the sustainable communities agenda across Milton Keynes.

The convergence of the sustainable schools agenda with the sustainable communities agenda has begun, and the schools involved can now go on to act as beacons for others. At the same time the geography and citizenship curriculum developments should bear fruit in the longer term and has helped embed sustainable communities into the earliest stages of teaching.

More specifically, the programme benefited participants - especially the schools – in terms of:

being able to make the concept of sustainable communities more interesting and exciting.

being able to provide new learning experiences.

the creation new working partnerships - with partners willing to help each other.

being part of the NAP process, which inspires confidence and self-belief in participants.

Partners have benefited indirectly by:

improving skills through joint approaches and new styles of learning experience.

facilitating practitioners across partner schools through detailed discussions that extend the concept of sustainable schools to embrace sustainable communities and to build more effective networks.

bringing together a range of teachers (and teaching disciplines) from different schools within Milton Keynes to discuss common problems when trying to tackle the sustainable communities agenda.

The wider benefits include:

building the profile of Milton Keynes NAP as an example of good practice in sustainable communities from the grass roots upwards.

the formation of smaller partnerships with an interest in promoting the sustainable communities agenda.

an enhanced and more informed debate on developing sustainable communities in Milton Keynes.

There is enormous potential for promoting the tools developed during this project across other areas. The project has been effective in addressing and delivering its practical objectives. Initial questionnaire returns provided constructive feedback and demonstrated overall a high level of satisfaction. At the same time the citizenship toolkit has been successfully piloted and the initial feedback has been positive.

Introducing sustainable communities into the sustainable schools agenda has taken off slowly but there are encouraging signs. Oxley Park School has been engaging with the local Oxley Park Residents Association and has encouraged children to get more involved with sustainability initiatives. Feedback from pupils to date has been very encouraging.

Lessons Learned

Engage with the beneficiaries. Try to meet with representative from the key schools right at the start. Involving them in developing the project's objectives was crucial to its ultimate success.

Plan ahead. The need to plan for succession is critical within projects like the Milton Keynes NAP. This involves not only identifying resources and capacity to run a project of this size and complexity, but also to ensure momentum is sustained and that the legacy lives on after the project has been completed.

It's a journey, not an event. The 'Geography Curriculum for Primary Schools' project is expected to run for several years. The programme is more complex than simply encouraging teachers to use particular lesson plans - Continuous Professional Development (CPD) will also have a role to play. Sustainable communities embrace issues ranging from urban design and place making to sustainable transport and biodiversity. Factoring all this into the curriculum means it makes sense to think of a project like this as an ongoing journey rather than a one-off event.

Reference

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External links

<http://www.gemk.org.uk/>

Project Images