

Report on Community Sustainability Course for Abbeyleix 2011



The Community Sustainability Course was an eight-week course giving an overview and introduction to sustainability in Ireland.

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The Community Sustainability Course was an eight-week course giving an overview and introduction to sustainability in Ireland. During the eight weeks* the group explored the issues of food and energy security, “future-proofing” and building the resilience of a community like Abbeyleix and visioning the pathway to a sustainable future.

PCDA brought in the facilitators Peadar Lynch, Senan Gardiner (Presentation Ireland Ecology and Sustainable Living Officer) and Theresa Carter (Transition Towns Ireland) to deliver the course. The following speakers were also brought in to increase the breadth of expertise: Colm Byrne (GLAS), Davie Philip (Cloughjordan) and Susie Cahn (Carraig Dulra).

General Results:

Over the eight weeks the following themes were explored. Each week there was an icebreaker generally recapping learnings from the previous week and then a viewing of the 20 minute DVD.

After the DVD, discussion of the issues raised would be facilitated and there would then be a coffee break. After the break the facilitators would use one or more activities focussed on the week’s topic to enable participants to explore it in a more participatory manner and be given the opportunity for deeper learning. Lastly there would be a bridging activity – a kind of homework to keep people thinking about the topics throughout the week and bring the learning outside the workshop. Below is a list of the topics, the main activities and the bridging activities.

8 ~Week Themes

1. **The Challenges Ahead** – Climate, Energy and Sustainability
 - a. Activity: “Newspaper from the future”
 - b. Bridging: Calculate your Carbon Footprint
2. **The Power Of Community** – Social Capital, Resilience and the Local Economy
 - a. Activities: “Needs and Wants” “Mapping the resilience of the community”
 - b. Writing statements of obstacles to achieving sustainability in our communities
 - c. Bridging: Plot the resilience in your area
3. **Rethinking Energy** – Conservation, Transport, Efficiency and Appropriate Technology
 - a. Activity: Energy World Café – looking at local energy supplies
 - b. Bridging: Ask two people what they think about climate change
4. **Transport/Consumerism-** Supply Chains and waste. Reducing our consumption.
 - a. Activity: Eco-Dragon’s Den – sell a “reuse” idea for a “waste” item.
 - b. Bridging: Look at the supply chain of one household item
5. **Global Citizenship** - Opportunities for Change
 - a. Activity: Stepping up – a roleplay exploring the ability of different people to engage in active citizenship.
 - b. Bridging: Explore activities you could carry out in a neighbourhood of twenty families that engage in sustainability
6. **Deconstructing Dinner** - Food Miles, Trade and Food Systems
 - a. Activity: Participative Presentation on securing local food
 - b. Bridging: Examine our dinner plate – where does one meal rely on?
7. **Energy Descent Pathways/Transition Initiatives** - Post Carbon Cities, Transition Towns and Eco Villages
 - a. Activity: Developing the Energy Descent Plan
 - b. Bridging: Find out stakeholders for the energy descent plan
8. **Where Do We Go From Here?** – Communication and Livelihoods
 - a. Activity: Fishbowl activity – what can we do from here?

Obstacles

One particular activity at the start asked the obstacles that people saw in their pathway to a sustainable future. The idea was to gather this information and re-present it to this group and others after the course to ask how they feel about the statements at that later date. The comments gathered in this group were both specific and broad:

Rechargeable batteries for toys and camera need to be improved – they don't compare favourably to non-rechargeable ones

Why do I bother when there's enough for my time/my life

Incentives for people and their pockets is required

It is handier to buy vegetables/fruit that are prepacked than to have to pick them and put them in bags

No new dress? No dance? We must go for a drive on Sunday

What bothers me is the cost of batteries and the amount of [them needed] for children's toys

How do we manage our lifestyle without the present level of air transport?

Evaluation results:

From the evaluation of the facilitation the majority felt the food module worked the best, with people also enjoying the energy, community and final workshops. The reason most connected to the food module was the personal connection everyone can make to the food on their plate – where it came from, how much energy was used to get it there, etc.

When asked for how the course could be improved, suggestions included showing what can and can't be recycled, a follow-on, more demonstrations/real life examples, more participant input into the planning of the course and a half hour increase in the time allotted (and occasionally the time did run on an extra ten/fifteen minutes).

When asked how the course changed the participants' view of, or specific interest in, sustainability and energy descent planning the following answers were written:

- *Food miles*
- *Yes, seen consequences and how easily they can be avoided*
- *Awareness of waste and food miles*
- *All areas opened up a whole new outlook*
- *Composting*
- *I am more confident now of my being able to play my part in a more sustainable community*
- *I learned so much*
- *It has made me more aware of all the things extra I should be doing*

Groups that were recommended for the sustainability course included youth groups, community groups, schools, active retirement, the ICA, transition years, residents' associations, sports clubs, young parents, people made recently redundant, grandparents and teachers.

In the evaluation participants were asked to voluntarily leave a quotation to convey the worth of the course for future potential participants and funding.

Conclusion

The comments and replies to the open questions show a positive response to the course and show it is “eye-opening” and helps people “rethink”. Topics that people noted that they had learned more about included the areas of “waste”, “food miles” and “community”.

Values and attitudes toward sustainability were shown to be “positive on so many levels” and linked the issues firmly to “our future”, “our children” and “the ordinary family”

Empowerment toward behaviour change is noted in quotes like “we can change everything” and “what I can do”. However there was a need identified here in having more practical demonstrations – e.g. composting, setting up a water butte and a need identified in that “follow-on” is needed.

Outcomes

From the start the group engaged very strongly with the topics presented to them and took care to examine them in relation to the Abbeyleix area.

The emphasis on facilitated group discussions and group work helped to create a relaxed environment and many of the participants commented on the positive energy of the group. This also created opportunities for people to network and get to know other people from the community.

For each module the participants would explore the content as it related to Abbeyleix. Facilitation and training techniques used included short icebreaker, introductory talk, group discussion, Powerdown programs, small group work, brain storming, World Café, Newspaper of the future and finally a link to the following week’s content. In this way the group took a detailed look at Abbeyleix in relation to sustainable development and resilience, energy, climate change, food production, community, transport, housing, energy descent and global issues.

A number of submissions were made as a result of the course. Submissions were made to the County Laois Development Plan and to the Abbeyleix Sustainable Communities Project through ABC. The submissions considered how best to develop and strengthen the local economy through developing local food and energy businesses.

In addition, as a result of the course there are plans for a food event during Abbeyfest which will take place during the June bank holiday weekend 2011. There are also plans for a larger food festival in September.

Other outcomes of the course include local knowledge and understanding of:

- Sustainable development
- What it means to be a Resilience community
- Importance of a local food economy
- Energy issues. Peak oil. Energy vulnerability.
- Threats from climate change
- Issues relating to climate justice
- Community development issues
- Engagement with local authority
- Effective brainstorming of local issues
- Personal empowerment

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Follow Up Actions

The group was very motivated in finishing the course. The actions that were followed up were;

- Submissions to County Laois Development Plan
- Submission to the Abbeyleix Sustainable Communities Project
- Planning has begun on a local food and sustainability event to take place in conjunction with the Abbeyfest in June
- Thought is being put into developing a harvest food event for the autumn time – possibly “Applefest” to coincide with the apple harvest?
- Contact was made to a number of land owners about hosting a community garden. The GIY group has demonstrated a strong demand for a facility of this type – some promising leads are being pursued including an old walled garden in the town centre as well as a suitable site for an allotment garden near the Church of Ireland.
- Working with Tidy Towns to increase the emphasis on “sustainability and resilience” in their activities.