

# Background document

## **Building trust with communities – a toolkit for staff**

*“We cannot secure the environmental outcomes we want on our own. Local authorities, landowners, businesses, voluntary organisations, the public and Government have a significant role to play in helping us achieve our objectives.”*  
*Environment Agency Corporate Plan 2003-2006*

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## Introduction

The Environment Agency works with local communities every day of the week. We know we cannot solve the country's environmental problems alone. Local communities have a great deal of knowledge and enthusiasm and we need to work together to improve the work we do.

Every time you pick up the phone or speak to someone from the community face to face you are the Environment Agency. Your words and actions have a direct effect on how people see our organisation. The public needs to believe it can trust the information we give and the services we provide. We all have a part to play in this.

'Building Trust with Communities' is a new programme that aims to improve how we work with the public, community groups and other organisations. We will give practical help and support to everyone; from the most experienced to those who are thinking about working with local people for the first time.

We have put together this short, practical booklet which is a step by step toolkit to the skills and techniques you should be using when working with local communities. This will be supported through training workshops and more detailed information is also available on the Building Trust with Communities Easinet site. The booklet is just one part of a range of work to improve our relationship with local communities.

We hope you find it a useful tool in supporting your work. We would welcome any feedback you may have to help us help you in the future.

*Helen McCallum*  
*Director of Corporate Affairs*

## **A new approach**

As a public sector organisation, we are accountable to both the Government and to the public for improving and protecting the environment of England and Wales.

The word 'Community' can be described as the people living in one area or a group of people who have the same cultural, religious or other characteristics.

Communities will be interested mainly in local issues, but they may have concerns at a national level. They are usually concerned about a specific issue.

'Community' now forms an important part of Government policy and the 'community approach' is the driving force behind many of the practical initiatives designed to modernise government and public services in the UK.

Working with local communities is not a new area for us. We do it every day (for example developing local Flood Risk Management strategies or permitting sensitive sites). We have some excellent experience, but we need to build on these strengths.

Recent research<sup>1</sup> shows that the key to developing greater trust is:

- more information and openness
- acting as champion for the environment independent of outside interests
- strong and visible leadership.

This powerful focus on 'community' means we need to look even more carefully at the way in which we work.

The public are much more aware of their rights and the effect our decisions have on their lives. The expectation on us to deliver improved services has risen greatly. Changes in legislation also mean that we have to involve people more in the decisions we make.

## **So, what are we doing to improve?**

To get better, we are starting to change. We have set up new teams with a focus on external relations. The need to build consistency and transparency has been accepted and supported by the Chief Executive and other directors. This area of work is of interest to all parts of the Environment Agency. So we need to act and we need to act now.

<sup>1</sup> Trust in public institutions (Audit Commission/MORI Social Research Institute)

## **Working with local communities – one step at a time**

Working with local communities is not difficult and mostly its common sense. This section gives some basic guidance for those new to working with communities and provides a useful checklist for those more experienced.

### **It's not just what we do... it's the way that we do it...**

How we work with local communities is just as important as what we do. Use the following checklist for all work you are involved in:

- Fair for all

Encourage people from all parts of the community to take part.

- Be clear

Make sure people know what the Environment Agency can and cannot do and what can or cannot be changed as a result of being involved.

- Ready information

Give as much information as possible and explain if information is missing.

- Show respect

Show that people's views really do count and will be included wherever possible.

- Feed back

Let communities know about final decisions as soon as possible.

- Take action

If people think their views will not be taken seriously or that things cannot be changed they will not take part.

- Learn lessons

Working together should mean that we can learn from each other.

- Stand alone

We need to remain independent and not be too close to a particular interest group.

- Targeted approach

Different groups have different needs which need to be considered when communicating and working with them.

- Common outcomes

Decisions made should be consistent and show that we work to the same professional standards.

- Work wisely

Always make best use of resources, especially time.

- Balancing act

The amount of time you can spend should depend on the importance of the issue.

- The bigger picture

The Environment Agency's main aim is to improve the environment. Be clear from the start how any work with communities can help this.

## **Six-step checklist**

Everyone's experience of working with communities will be slightly different, but the following six steps will provide a useful checklist to follow.

### **Step 1**

Understanding the community – how it works

### **Step 2**

Why work with the community?

### **Step 3**

Understanding the community – its people

### **Step 4**

Agreeing the best way of working

### **Step 5**

Starting work and checking progress

### **Step 6**

Reviewing work – lessons learned and sharing experiences

## **Working with local communities – our experience**

We work with local communities all the time in many different areas, such as:

- consulting over licensing applications
- working with local organisations to design flood defences
- working in partnership with local authorities in Local Strategic Partnerships
- consulting residents about new recreational facilities
- working with local specialist organisations and residents on longer term planning for water quality and river management.

Here we have put together a selection of case studies which show some of the areas staff throughout the Environment Agency have been involved in.

### **Wild and wonderful**

*“The most pleasant and one of the most rewarding pieces of work I have been involved in was the Millennium Project at View Island in Reading. The island was an area of derelict land which was converted by the Environment Agency and other partners into an outdoor classroom and park. The island had been closed to the public for 20 years but is now visited frequently. Staff really enjoyed the work involved in changing the island, in public interaction and in leaving a lasting environmental resource. The borough council receive more letters of praise about this one park than all 120 of their other parks put together and it is held up as a model of best practice in managing parks for wildlife.”*

*Enforcement Team Officer, Wallingford, Thames Region*

### **Coming clean in Burnley**

*“Working with our partners Burnley Borough Council, the Sustainable Action Partnership, Tidy Britain Group, Lancashire Constabulary and Jinnah (an independent forum for discussion of issues related to the Pakistani community) an initiative was set up to tackle the varied problems of vandalism, litter and flytipping.*

*Working with local groups, play leaders and others, the project has provided community skips and video surveillance and all schools in the area have produced posters for public display and received kits to help keep their own grounds clean and tidy.”*

*Environment Team Officer, North West Region*



### **Humber plan is crystal clear**

*"The purpose of the Humber Estuary Shoreline Management Plan was to develop a long term plan of protection for the entire Humber estuary.*

*This plan involved a great deal of new research work and took six years to complete. A steering group, including six external people representing different areas of expertise, managed the project throughout. We received a positive reaction to our open, involving and informing approach and developed good working relationships with a wide range of externally interested groups. This was particularly important as enormous numbers of people were affected by the plan."*  
*Principal Project Manager, North East Region*

### **Clear communication in Attlebridge**

*"Attlebridge Landfill Site has encountered many problems in the past including odours, flies and contaminated groundwater moving towards drinking water boreholes. The Environment Agency has been working extremely hard to resolve these issues. Clear communication (through visits and newsletters) explaining the background and the steps that the Agency were taking to resolve the problems worked really well. This work has been commended by various interested parties and has resulted in the site currently being far less contentious."*

*Senior Environment Officer, Anglian Region*

You can read about the many other staff experiences by visiting 'Case Studies' on the 'Building Trust with Communities' Easinet site. If you have similar experiences that you are happy to share with others, please let us know.

## **Step 1**

### **Understanding the community – how it works**

To work with a community you need to understand how it is structured and how it works. You can then plan how you will work with them to meet your needs and theirs.

Ask yourself the following questions:

#### **a. What are the main organisations? What do you need to know about them?**

- Local Strategic Partnerships in England or Community Strategy Partnerships in Wales

- > Who are the members?
- > What are the priorities?
- > How important is it in local strategic planning?

- Local authorities

- > Are they used to working in partnership with others?
- > Do they have links with the Environment Agency already?
- > If so, what and how important are our priority issues in local politics?
- > Are local councillors interested in environmental protection?

- Local economy

- > Who are the large employers?
- > Are there powerful private sector networks or other groups?
- > Are the Chambers of Commerce or small business associations active in environmental issues?

- Health authority

- > How is it structured?
- > Is it being restructured?
- > How much are local interests already involved in Primary Care Trusts, hospital trusts and health authorities?

- Voluntary and community sectors

- > Is there a Local Compact (see below)?
- > How much activity/interest is there in environmental issues?

#### **b. What other local groups and organisations are there?**

- Informal groups and networks (eg. pensioners groups)
- direct action groups & campaigns
- ethnic & minority groups
- religious & faith groups
- groups for people with special needs.

N.B. It takes time to get a full picture of the structure. We do not recommend that you identify all local groups and organisations. This would be an enormous task and the information would quickly become out-of-date.

### **c. Who are the key people?**

You will probably find the main people you should make contact with in these organisations:

- The local Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) and/or Rural Community Council (RCC) should be able to give an overview of voluntary activity in the local area and advise on the main local issues and the major organisations.
- The local Council may have a Voluntary Sector Liaison Officer who you should contact. It is also worth talking to the economic development department to find out about small business networks etc. and the planning department for details of environmental and amenity groups.
- Chamber of Commerce can give the views of the private sector and may be able to put you in touch with major local employers.
- Any individuals or organisations we have had contact with in the past. Build on past links and set up new ones.
- Check the web for local groups of national pressure/campaign groups.

### **d. Is there a local Compact?**

A Compact is a formal agreement between the Government and the voluntary and community sectors to improve working relationships. You should find out if there is one in your area by contacting the Voluntary Sector Liaison Officer at the council (if there is one).

If not, the CVS or the RCC will know if there is a local Compact. If there is one, you should make sure that your relationships with the voluntary and community sectors fall within the Compact's guidelines.

### **e. Consult community groups**

You can also ask existing community groups, who are in touch with current local opinion, to help you identify key organisations.

As well as understanding the community, you need to understand who the community is interacting with and how. What networks are in place, how do they obtain and share information and who do they trust?

**Tips**

- No two communities are the same. They can sometimes surprise you with their priorities.
- Communities and their priorities are also always changing.
- Each community may have a diverse and well-established infrastructure of groups and organisations.
- Communities are never isolated. They all have links with other parts of government and other communities.
- Previous work with the community will affect how it responds now.
- Local factors can make communities sensitive to particular risks/issues.

## **Step 2**

### **Why work with the community?**

You now understand the structure of the community and how it works. You now need to be sure why you want to start working with the community.

Possible reasons may include:

- required to consult
- public demand to be involved
- early involvement could improve proposals
- identify and communicate possible issues now to reduce disagreement later and help save time and money in the long term
- discuss and solve current or future problems
- let people know our concerns and plans before the final decision
- work out how people could be involved in the future and start to make contact
- allow more people to feel they own and accept what is going on
- collect and share accurate information
- gather ideas that we may have overlooked
- promote ourselves and what we do
- encourage people to want to work for us.

This is a two way process. You should also think about why communities would want to work with us.

### **‘What’s in it for them?’**

Reasons may include:

- have a say and feel included in decisions that affect them
- put across minority interests
- chance to offer advice, expertise and information to benefit others
- help us see the possible effects decisions may have and influence them
- see how we think and act.

Once you have agreed why you want to start working with local communities, it is simply a question of:

- looking at the information you have about the local community
- considering whether the issues are, or are likely to become, contentious
- thinking about how you might work with communities.

### **How could I work with others?**

We will look at the many ways in which we can work with our partners in Step 4. But the following options may help you to start thinking:

- **Supporting**

Helping others do what they want with advice and support.

- **Acting together**

Different interests can decide together what is best. They may also work in partnership to carry it out.

- **Deciding together**

Encourage others to give extra ideas and options and join together in deciding the best way forward.

- **Consultation**

Offer a number of options and listen to the feedback you get.

- **Information**

This is the very least people will expect if they are affected by what is planned.

### **What have I learned and what are the next steps?**

By the end of Step 2 you will have a good idea of the main issues of concern in the local community and who the main players are. You will also know why you would want to work with the community, and what's in it for the community itself. You will also have started to think about the best way of working with the local community.

The next step is to look at the people and groups you will be working with in more detail.

### **Step 3**

#### **Understanding the community – its people**

The information you gathered in Step 1 will provide the raw material for finding out more about the people and groups you will be working with.

You should start by dividing the people you are likely to work with into groups. In the past the Environment Agency has used these three groups:

- professionals – paid employees from the public, private and voluntary sectors
- local groups – non-professional organisations, including wildlife or sporting groups, residents' associations and youth, women's or religious groups
- local people – a wide variety of individuals who are interested in environmental issues.

You may want to divide people by their knowledge of the environment. Ask yourself do these people have:

- specialist knowledge
- local knowledge
- procedural knowledge.

#### **Tip**

Be careful you do not just work with those people who are easy to work with such as professional people and local groups. You could end up excluding other people who should also be involved.

You've now found out the main groups you want to work with. The following questions will help you find the right people:

- Who will the plans affect (positively and negatively)? Think about employees, customers, contractors, suppliers, partners, trades unions.
- Who might be for or against any changes?
- Who holds the senior posts?
- Who runs organisations with relevant interests?
- Who has been involved in similar issues in the past? Think about regulators, government agencies, politicians, non-government organisations and other national interest groups.

#### **Tip**

Make a list of obvious people and then ask them 'who else should be involved?' and 'how do I contact them?' Do this every time you make a new contact.

## **Getting started**

As a starting point you should consider involving the following people:

- the general public
- sections of the public (for example those at risk from flooding)
- those who must be consulted by law (for example Local Authorities, English Nature)
- Environment Agency staff
- Regional Advisory Committees and Area Environment Groups
- other government organisations
- representatives of special interest groups, such as trades unions
- individuals with particular technical expertise
- the Environment Agency's customers
- mixed groups of experts and lay people.

Then ask yourself:

- What will motivate each group to take part?
- What might stop them from taking part?

You may find that you end up with too many people and too little time to speak with them. What happens next?

## **Tips**

You have a number of choices available. You can:

- make more time and people available to speak with everyone
- involve larger numbers of people at less cost (for example using the Internet or post)
- involve different interested people at different stages
- invite everyone on a 'first come, first served basis
- find out if some people could represent the interests of others.

## **Fair chance for all**

Important

You need to make sure that everyone who wants to has the chance to take part.

You may need to think about:

- Language barriers

We subscribe to a translation service 'Language Line' that allows our customers to talk to us in their preferred language.

- Meeting places

Choose venues that are accessible and appropriate for all.

- The time meetings take place

Consider the needs of parents with small children or those that work.

- Communications



Consider good communications practice to cover a diverse range of needs:

- > clarity – always use plain english to present your messages
- > design – clear and interesting materials
- > images – can be used to enhance your messages.

**And finally...**

**...don't forget your colleagues**

You need to think about which people within the Environment Agency might need to know about your initiative and include them on your list. They may be able to help and offer advice or support.

## **Step 4**

### **Agreeing the best way of working**

There are four main stages when deciding the best way of working with local communities.

#### **a. Decide our position**

- Are we going to act alone and simply give information?
- Do we need to work with others?
- Is it really our responsibility to do something?

#### **b. Decide our role**

- Are we going to lead the consultation?
- Are we going to work in partnership?
- Are we reacting to someone else's consultation?

#### **c. Review information gathered**

- Will the audience understand it?
- What are the gaps and likely questions?

#### **d. Decide the best approach**

- Will traditional methods such as campaigns, surveys and consultation be best?
- Would other methods such as workshops, focus groups and interactive methods be more effective?

Each of these stages is described in more detail.

#### **a. Our position**

Act alone

There will be times (for example pollution incidents) when we need to act quickly and use our technical and scientific expertise to deal with a problem. You need to make sure that we explain quickly to the local community why we acted the way we did and the effects of our actions. This should explain our role and give a contact point for more information.

Work with others

This is the main focus of this booklet and the three main ways in which we work with others are described in more detail in Step 5.

It is not our responsibility

There will be circumstances where we are not responsible for dealing with an issue or a problem, but we have become involved. Again you have three choices, you can:

- Support external effort

It might help your objectives to get something done. You could find an external organisation who may be tackling the issue and be able to offer support through funding, expertise or use of premises.

- Refer the problem

Find an appropriate organisation and refer the problem to them.

- No action

If no action can be taken it is still important to explain why.

## **b. Our role**

### **Lead**

In this situation you have most control over how you work with local communities. As we briefly mentioned in Step 2 there are different ways in which you can work:

- Information/education

Maximum control, although may need a lot of resource. This can include giving regular information about an initiative to major campaigns aimed at changing attitudes and behaviour.

- Consultation

This is most common approach to working with communities.

- Involvement

Listening to views is sometimes not enough and there is a need to involve others in the planning and decision making.

- Partnership

You may need to set up a new partnership to deal with a particular problem or launch a community initiative in partnership with others.

- Supporting others

Although you may have been involved in an initiative, it may be that others have to take the necessary action and not you.

### **Work in partnership**

Here you will be just one among the partners and you will need to share all decisions about aims, objectives and roles. An example of this sort of partnership is our involvement with Local Strategic Partnerships.

When working in partnership there are four main issues to consider:

- Project is specific

Partnerships work best when the project is specific and can be achieved quickly.

- Formalise the partnership

If the project is long term you may need to do this to give a structure for making decisions and agreeing ways of working.

- Issues

Do not try and tackle a wide range of issues particularly if the members of the partnership do not know each other well.

- Agree a purpose, values etc

Simply setting up a partnership structure is not enough.

Asked to get involved

We often start working with local communities when we are asked to get involved in an initiative which has already begun. You may be invited to a public meeting arranged by someone else and over which you have no control.

The following gives useful advice on how to deal with the situation:

- Stay independent

You need to stress that you are neutral and independent, especially from the operator of the site, but also from the local authority.

- Listen

Listening is as important as anything you might say. Expect anger, fear and frustration from the audience. Showing that you are willing to listen to people's concerns and take them seriously is important.

- Bring in other experts

Health issues will be the main concern for many public meetings. Whenever possible, try and get specialists along to answer any questions directly.

- Create the right atmosphere

Even if you are not running the meeting, you can make sure some basic rules are followed, such as being clear about the purpose of the meeting and explaining the Environment Agency's role.

- Direct and personal contact point

Research suggests that a personal link is vital. The public react much more favourably if they can talk directly to a human being. Choosing the right person to lead any interaction with the public is crucial.

- Create a bigger can

It has often been said that the best way to deal with a 'can of worms' is to create a bigger can. In practice, this means putting the current problem or issue in a wider and more positive context.

**c. Review information gathered**

This is the point to review the information gathered on working with local communities, fill in any gaps and look at any barriers to working effectively.

Use the following as a checklist:

- Why work with the community?

Remind yourself of the reasons for working with the local community. This will be a quick and easy reference and a useful guide to measure progress.

- Resources needed?

You can now start thinking about budgets, staff and timescales.

- Check details on people/groups involved Make sure you are happy with the number and the type of organisations involved. Have you included all interested parties?

- Complete detailed planning

This should be dealt with the same way as for other projects and programmes:

- > set a project plan
- > think about literature, venues, invites etc.
- > publicity and marketing (do you have a communications strategy?)
- > prepared to reply to responses and feedback?
- > analyse the results (if a consultation)
- > plan evaluation.

#### **d. Decide the best approach**

Once you know who you will be working with and why, you can decide the best approach to take. There is a wide range of ways of working with local communities depending on the level of involvement. Listed here is just a selection of possible methods. When selecting a method make sure it fits your purpose and that you communicate your purpose (for example, information giving to your audience).

Information Giving (involve Corporate Affairs)

- leaflets
- brochures
- newsletters
- advertising
- exhibits/displays
- newspapers
- video

Information Gathering

- staffed displays
- surgeries
- internet
- public meetings
- surveys, questionnaires and interviews

For the following approaches you may want to consider further training. Information on what is currently available can be found on the Building Trust with Communities Easinet site.

#### Consultation

- workshops
- focus groups
- internet
- by post

#### Dialogue

Open dialogue (everything can be discussed) and bounded dialogue (discussion is limited by requirements such as legislation).

- Community Advisory committees (small groups of people representing particular interests)
- Liaison groups (groups representing specific areas of interest)
- Citizens' juries (people representing the views of the community)
- Facilitated meetings (meeting managed by a third party who is unconnected to the issue)

#### **Tip**

Try and choose the method that will best help you achieve the aims and objectives you have set. For help and information either look on the Building Trust with Communities Easinet site or contact the External Relations Teams at Head Office, Region or Area.

## Step 5

### Starting work and checking progress

Work to be done at this stage will depend on which of the three roles you have decided to take (see Step 4).

<b>Lead</b>	<b>Partnership</b>	<b>Asked to get involved</b>
Launch initiative	Set up/join partnership	Join existing initiative
Find out more about people involved	Find out if there are any partners missing and invite them	See if there are any people missing and suggest they are invited
Plan in more detail	Plan together	Plan how the Environment Agency can be involved
Start work	Start work together	Get involved
Feed back to public/community	Feed back together to public/community	Feed back together to public/community

The Environment Agency will want to check the progress of all initiatives. What practical things were done and what were the results. There is some guidance on reviewing the success of the work in Step 6.

You must remember, however, that it will not be just you who will be checking progress. If you are involved in a partnership or join an existing initiative you will be checking progress together with others.

#### Tip

It is also important to keep feeding back and giving out information even if there is little to say, as well as listening to the views of others.

## **Step 6**

### **Reviewing work – lessons learned and sharing experiences**

When you review any work with local communities you should look at:

- the results
- how the work was carried out.

Evaluating work does not have to be difficult or take a long time, but it must be done. It will help you find out if you have met your original aims as well as giving useful lessons for the future. This will help both you and your colleagues to learn from your experience.

At the very least it will give you a record of what was done, who did it and what the results were.

Any evaluation should include the following:

- Objectives

What was the purpose/issue to be addressed? Was it achieved?

- Involvement

At what level was the Environment Agency involved? Was this appropriate? Which staff were involved and why? What did they contribute?

- Methods used

How did you communicate with local communities? Was it successful? Could you have done more/less, something different?

- Responses

Number and type of responses.

- Timescales

Note the key dates and start/finish times.

- Costs

What were the time, staff and production costs? How have they been recorded?

- Publicity

What literature was produced/events organised? Did you involve Corporate Affairs?

- Results

What was achieved? What has changed as a result? Lessons for the future? What information is available? How has this been shared?



- Follow up communications

Are you maintaining and continuing to build your relationship with the community?

- Using the results

Make sure lessons are shared and understood.

Please feedback your evaluation to the Head Office Community Relations Team. This will help us to share experiences and create a network of staff who are prepared to share their knowledge and expertise with others.

## **To find out more information**

This is intended to be a short, practical booklet which is a step-by-step toolkit for those working with local communities. It is just one part of a range of work to improve our community relations.

The information within this booklet has been taken from 'Building Trust with Communities', a background report produced as part of the 'Building Trust in Local Communities' (BTiLC) project. The report contains detailed support information and provides the policy background and context as well as practical advice based on Environment Agency research and experience.

The Building Trust with Communities Easinet site contains the full background report and this toolkit with links to other useful information. Or please speak to your Regional or Area External Relations Teams.

### **Have your say?**

We hope you find this booklet a useful and practical tool when working with local communities.

We'd like to know what you think about it and how we might improve to help you work better with local communities in the future.

### **Please send your views to:**

Ruth Rush  
Community Relations Manager  
External Relations  
Corporate Affairs

We'd also like to hear from you if you would like to get involved in developing the Building Trust with Communities programme.

## **Six-step checklist**

Step 1

Understanding the community – how it works

Step 2

Why work with the community?

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Agreeing the best way of working

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Reviewing work – lessons learned and sharing experiences

*Community is the governing idea of modern social democracy.*  
*Tony Blair, Strategy Unit Report,*  
*November 2002*