Green Conversations, Wednesday 26th July 2023

Outline of day

This Green Conversations event was held at Rugeley Community Centre on Wednesday 26th July, 1-4pm. It was hosted by Support Staffordshire through the Transforming the Trent Valley scheme, and supported by VAST and Staffordshire Wildlife Trust staff.

The aims of this event were:

- To provide a space for community and voluntary groups who are interested in 'green' issues (this term was deliberately used loosely to encourage a range of groups to attend) to network, create new contacts and share ideas and resources.
- To introduce the idea of a Staffordshire Green Network for community groups, to provide the initial plans for the structure of the network and to gain feedback on these plans

The format of the event mostly focussed around three guided conversations, led by staff from Support Staffordshire, Staffordshire Wildlife Trust and VAST:

Table 1 (Support Staffordshire): Funding and Development – successes and challenges

Table 2 (VAST): Staffordshire Green Network – your ideas

Table 3 (Staffordshire Wildlife Trust): Networking and resources – what is needed?

After an initial introduction to the event and attendees in the room, as well as a welcome and introduction to the retrofit work of Rugeley Community Centre by the manager Chris Fielding, there were three rounds of 20 minute conversations to allow attendees to rotate between the tables. Participants were not required to rotate round tables in a particular order, they could choose which tables they engaged with, and for how long. There were 10 minutes break between each round of conversations to allow for informal conversation or refreshment breaks.

There was also a resource table available for attendees to pick up and share resources or leaflets from their own groups.

Key themes from event and attendees

Table 1: Funding and Development

Key themes:

1. Difficult to have a full overview of an area, such as other groups doing similar work, public spaces available for environmental projects, community engagement with activities
2. Funding challenges: it takes a long time to get to a point where you are eligible to apply for funding (eg sorting bank account, constitution, required policies and procedures, then the ongoing admin time for managing funds), public bodies usually not eligible for charitable funding, sustainability work is given limited resources in existing budgets.
3. Development challenges: setting up bank accounts for small voluntary organisations, managing time (admin vs 'doing')

Table 2: Green Network – your ideas

Key themes:

1. There is a need for a knowledge hub/directory accessible to community groups: including information about other groups doing similar work or projects, contact information so groups can reach out to each other for support and collaboration, useful resources, case studies to learn from.
2. Communication. Linked to the knowledge hub, there is a need for better communication about different sustainability initiatives in Staffordshire. This could take the form of newsletters, email, social media, articles in press or magazines, and utilisation of existing communications channels.
3. Working across different sectors. There were several mentions of wanting to know what bigger environmental organisations were doing, what the council were doing (both County and District councils), what Keele University were working on, and how community groups could connect with all of these other sectors. Linked to this is the desire for specific training/Q+A sessions, for example with retrofit installers, or speakers on different topics.

Table 3: Networking and Resources

Key themes:

1. Groups were able to share some general challenges they face, and ask each other for advice. Some thoughts shared were around the channels of promotion for community/volunteer events, how to manage volunteers, and highlighting some of the successful projects in Staffordshire (eg repair cafes, cycling groups and a growing food network).

Attendees

31 attendees from 22 different organisations attended the event. Attendees came from voluntary groups, constituted community groups, registered charities, public sector bodies, parish, town and district councils and local businesses. Appendix 3 outlines the organisations in attendance.

15 of the 31 attendees were paid staff, the remainder attended as volunteers representing different groups. 8 attendees had previously attended the previous Community Conversations event, held in January 2023 in Uttoxeter.

Next steps

Future Green Conversations are being planned by VAST and Support Staffordshire/TTTV to continue gaining insight into what community groups might want from a Green Network. These will be held in different areas of Staffordshire – so far planned in Stoke on Trent and between Lichfield/Tamworth in autumn 2023.

These future events could be used to delve deeper into some of the key themes to focus the work of the Green Network. For example, to learn more about the methods of communication that could be

used to share information and resources, or what training and advice is most needed to support different groups in their sustainability journey.

An online survey can also be utilised to gain these deeper insights into how best a Green Network can benefit the VCSE sector, and advance sustainability actions in Staffordshire.

Consideration should be given to the name of future event. As mentioned by one attendee, naming events 'eco' or 'green' attracts people who are already working on the sustainability or environmental issues. To increase the range of groups and individuals taking action for climate or wanting to begin taking action for the climate, the events need to be advertised in a way to attract these new groups.

Some of the queries and challenges faced by groups (support in setting up a bank account, developing policies and finding funding) can be addressed through Support Staffordshire, VAST and SCVYS's existing offer to organisations. See links for websites and information.

While there are in existence numerous directories of community groups in Staffordshire, it is clear that these are either not know about widely, or not fit for the purpose of finding other like-minded community groups. This piece of work could form part of the future Green Network, to research existing directories and whether they can be improved to benefit Staffordshire green groups.
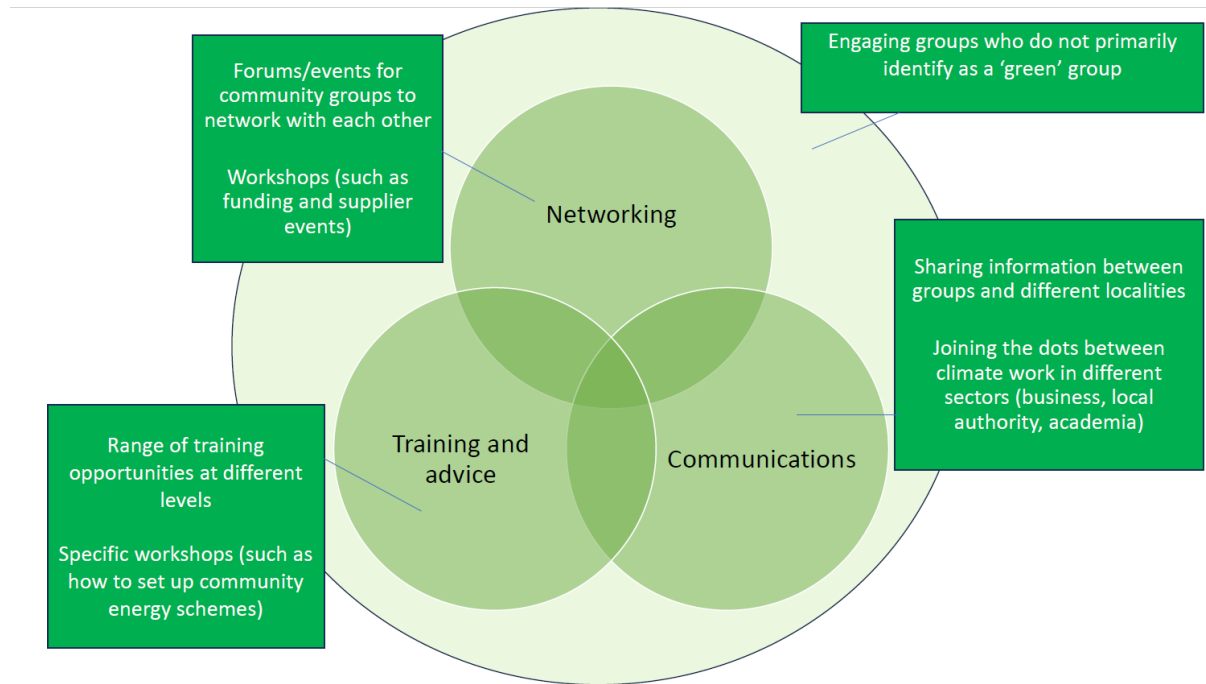
Appendix 1 – raw notes taken during conversations

Table 1: Funding and Development

Development Challenges	• Getting other local companies on board • Getting access to bank accounts • Understanding what is available • Knowing who is in the area • Managing time – balance • Knowing about public available spaces • Implementing a programme into an area with the approval of the community (eg creating a wildlife area)
Development success stories	• Joined up approach with other groups • Groups self run without funding (eg Burton Conservation Volunteers)
Funding challenges	• Aviva – request for crowd funding • Questions – 'if you're unsuccessful, what will you do?' • Time consuming to get everything in place (polices, bank account, constitution – both in the beginning and ongoing) • No funding for public organisations eg fire service • Some don't cover VAT
Success stories/successful funds	• Severn Trent Community Fund • National Grid Community Grant Programme • Woodland Trust Free Trees • Supermarkets • Local garden centres • Amazon funding • National Lottery • Tarmac • Parish councils • County Councillor Community fund

Table 2: Green Network

Proposed structure of a VCSE Staffordshire Green Network:

Forums/events for community groups to network with each other

Workshops (such as funding and supplier events)

Engaging groups who do not primarily identify as a 'green' group

Sharing information between groups and different localities

Joining the dots between climate work in different sectors (business, local authority, academia)

Range of training opportunities at different levels

Specific workshops (such as how to set up community energy schemes)

Networking

Training and advice

Communications

- Difficult to find key contacts/people with past experience in specific areas – so many buzzwords – hard to google.
- Having a "single point of entry' combining contact and resource lists
- A register of projects which have already taken place, with contact details
- Engagement with industries and businesses
- Comms – nice to have some kind of web presence – facebook page – direct engagement encouraging feedback
- Eco church – network of contacts – have a map – do certification
- Would need a website – could use an existing one eg Staffordshire Connects
- Eco directory – using pre existing directories eg SOT directory – important to keep up to date
- Helping to sort through and make sense of the vast amount of resources out there – providing info about funding
- Guest speakers, resources, contact details – knowing who to turn to
- Case studies and contacts
- Case studies, centralised information
- Social media
- Community walls in cafes
- Advertising in places like local libraries – through councils
- Environmental directory – differentiating regional and local activities
- Concern re keeping databases up to date
- Being able to find speakers, information about them
- Adding this into existing directories

- Infrastructure orgs as a connecting resource – overarching single organisation
- Staffordshire connects
- Utilising existing newsletters – regular newsletter – magazine
- Public engagement
- Building channels of communication
- Walking programmes – co-work with pre existing groups
- SCFC (Stoke City Football Club) – working in primary schools- would want to know the eco groups "in the know" to bring them into schools and impassion the young people
- Putting on outdoor events as a group – getting community engagement
- Where to get funding and how
- Bigger environmental agencies would need to be included
- Would love to find out how tree planting organisations water them – sharing knowledge, building partnerships
- Focuses for the group – would need to think about water (tree planting groups?) – building partnerships
- Q+A sessions with providers (eg solar panel installers – particuarly interested in waste management)
- Video footage – demonstrations – getting speeches from smaller, local groups
- Influencing small, behavioural changes – giving the baby steps "when eating an elephant, eat one bite at a time"
- Speakers – letting people know – topic of paras pairing (?) – something people don't know about
- Including social prescribers
- Community voice very important
- De stressing and mindfulness
- Convincing groups that environmental work fits into their charitable aims – SDGs – breaking it down and making it accessible
- Would like to get more community involvement – important for them to have their say
- Network sessions needs leadership and clear direction to tackle issues
- Concerns – getting the community involved – don't want things to just be seen as a council project
- Represent a village with a piece of land owned by parish council – had idea to do some rewilding – had no idea where to turn for advice (land behind the village hall)
- Environmental education project – teaching to schools. Also provide environmental team building days
- Events for schools/families – things like Christmas cards, art events, music/poetry
- Getting involve with Globe Eco Centre Climate Expo
- Lots of Green Hubs around Staffordshire
- Greenwashing training
- Put it where people go
- Getting Keele involved – knowing what they're working on
- Contact sharing event
- Getting councils involved – local and regional
- Attention on knowledge and getting people to engage – working with young people
- Giving a bigger voice to smaller groups

- Group of people in Derbyshire who have rewilded a field ([Whistlewood Common](#)) – useful contact
- Already in a network – [National Forest Community Woods Network](#) – usually meet once a quarter – have a speaker or activity – sharing information and expertise – last meeting was about volunteering. Opportunity to go and learn things – useful first to be able to chat, work together to address problems, celebrating achievements
- Stafford environmental panel – networking group specifically in the Stafford Borough https://www.staffordbc.gov.uk/climate-change-and-green-recovery-community-panel

Table 3 – networking and resources

- Newsletter – meeting moves around
- Parish newsletter and local press (not just social media, not at all)
- Self fulfilling volunteer groups by charging for work (BCV?)
- Fix day every month and location
- Create local nature walk inc accessible routes for families
- Bike recycling and community project
- Sitting in on other groups to learn and observe
- Volunteers – set a specific time period (eg next 6 weeks) and specific job (eg for this event)
- Tension in groups – dark/light green – resolved by talking about common ground
- Veg and food – right to grow – farming network – whatsapp group – kindling farm
- Link with local prison – provided free garden furniture
- Repair café – good network – Stafford/Burntwood/Lichfield – tip recycling centre for electrical items – also Staffs library
- List of toolkits – project examples
- List of other projects getting funding from councillors

Open questions for participants' comments (interactive questions on walls)

Communications	- How best to share info? Stories, websites, newsletters - Newsletter – 2 votes - Email – 4 votes - Social media – 2 votes - What info do you want to know? Scale – county, local, neighbourhood - Share info with other local groups
Training and advice	What? - List of experts you can contact for advice - Tips on funding bids - Access to training – is it available to public authority? - Carbon literacy (1 vote) Themes? - Climate strategies for councils - How to effectively engage with community - Volunteer ambassadors to cover a town/community

	• Sustainability – quick wins • Retrofit suppliers • Solar PV • Southern Staffordshire community energy
Networking	• Where – range of locations/hosts • Face to face or online • Quarterly

Things my group can offer	
Peer support and learning	Lichfield Re:cycle
Support on repair cafes	Lichfield Repair and Share café (Pam Beale)
Lending/using equipment eg gazebos, tables, display boards	Transition Lichfield (Pam Beale)
Come along to our events to share ideas	Sinch
Talks and demos on food	Rethink Food
Space in our community fire stations in some areas across Staffs/SoT (subject to T+Cs)	Staffordshire Fire
Interested to see if we can work together	Staffordshire Fire

Things my group wants/needs	
Somewhere to set up a Library of Things (and money!)	Transition Lichfield
Access to Land Contact with people who grow food/want to grow food Space for community kitchens Outlets for locally wasted food	Rethink Food
Contacts to come and do talks at our green drinks events Share ideas on funding	Sinch
Advice on sustainability and environment	Staffordshire Fire

What was the best/most useful thing about this event for you?	Was there anything we could improve about the event?	What did you gain from attending this event?	Were there any other ideas, questions or thoughts related to the conversations you had during the event but didn't get the chance to share, or only thought about afterwards?	How do you think we should move forwards with a Community Green Network from here?	How did you hear about this event?
Network and Resource table, Finding out what people are doing, the various different projects.	Perhaps move about so those more North of the city can more easily engage.	Contacts. Inspired by the different projects and org represented there.	no	A facebook community where poeple could go for advice or to share knowledge etc?	Email invitation
Network and Resource table	No	New contacts, useful conversations and the chance to share helpful info with others.	One thing we've learnt is that holding eco events aimed at the public tend to only attract people who are already interested. Perhaps the eco message needs to be at more general events, community events, etc to reach more people. We have found that a lot of people need to see some kind of incentive for them to recycle/care more, especially if they don't have much money.	Keep doing the networking/sharing meetings in person and collating the most popular ideas. The most popular ideas are likely to get the most interest and be sustainable.	From a friend/contact
Green Networks table	Name stickers for attendees	That there is a lot going on and lots of expertise to connect into	No	Regular event so that people know when they are coming up and to prepare thoughts for the session. Canvass opinion on where best to centralise 'network' info	Email invitation
Network and Resource table, Green Networks table	Consideration to be made to establishing common interests / purpose for attending from the visitors to the event so they have a controlled opportunity to share best practice, areas they need support with etc.,	Hopefully a wider network when seeking advice prior to commencing projects. Sharing details of what my organisation is doing to support the climate change agenda.	Seek information regarding Eco Friendly vendors - crafts etc.,	More face to face events in different district authorities.	Social Media

Appendix 3 – groups in attendance

- Transition Lichfield
- VAST
- Together Active
- Cannock Chase District Council
- Support Staffordshire
- Sustainability in Colwich & the Haywoods (SinCH)
- Keele University
- Rugeley Community Church
- Eco Rugeley and Community garden
- Rethink food (also Jam today and Diana's Breads)
- Stone Town Council
- The Friends of Scalpcliffe Woods
- Staffordshire Wildlife Trust
- Burton Conservation Volunteers & East Staffordshire Fairtrade Group
- Trent Rivers Trust
- Stoke City FC Community Trust
- Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service
- Upper Moreton Rural Activities
- Stafford Litter Heroes
- Brizlincote Parish Council
- Rising Brook GroundForce
- Lichfield Re:Cycle