

Research & Knowledge Exchange

Playing Games with Sustainable Communities?

Despite tough economic challenges, many people still aspire to create more sustainable communities. A *Sustainable Communities Challenge* board game may not be everyone's idea of a knowledge exchange tool, but one developed by a team in the Resilient Communities group has proved popular and effective in introducing the components of sustainable communities, systems thinking, trade-offs, negotiation and prioritisation to both school children and adults.

The challenges for policy and practice

Many of our current ways of planning for change are ill-suited to the transformation of communities to become more sustainable. Current methods focus on identifying clear and achievable goals, direct and efficient paths to achieve them including the recruitment and application of known skills and resources.

However, there is no clear and unambiguous goal that will guarantee a more sustainable community. Instead there are multiple possibilities and uncertainties. There are multiple voices clamouring to be heard and few opportunities or often time available to work through all the possibilities.

As a result, those with skills in negotiating and involvement in decision making (eg community councils) or with knowledge about place-making (eg planning professionals) dominate in discussions over a community's future. Others in communities tend to be marginalised.

The place of useful learning

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Research Leader



Dr Robert Rogerson, Senior Lecturer, University of Strathclyde, who leads on this work, said:

“Knowledge exchange activities provide unparalleled opportunities to test and explore research findings. Creating a social learning environment benefits our research while creating relationships with those who will ultimately be influenced by it.”

Research conducted

The ‘Challenge’ was developed as a means to communicate research findings of an ESRC Joint Venture Targeted Initiative on Skills and Learning for Sustainable Communities. Involving 11 research projects from across the UK, the Initiative highlighted the critical importance of social learning in which built environment professionals learned from each other and from the communities in which they worked to better understand what might be

achieved and how. New forms of leadership and learning were recommended to support the creation of more sustainable communities.

Using the research

Principles of uncertainty and dialogue informed the design of the *Sustainable Communities Challenge*. The value of components of sustainable communities such as homes, services, economy and environment is presented in terms of their consequences for energy and waste. Teams work initially to achieve the most sustainable outcome for each component and later for the whole community.

Developed first with school children in mind, as part of the ESRC Social Science Festival, the *Challenge* has also been used with adult policy and practitioner communities at Sustainable Homes and Communities event organised for Knowledge Exchange Week in 2012 and as part of an AHRC project on 'play'.

The symbols used within the challenge have an immediacy for children and adults alike and participants bring their own knowledge and experience of sustainability to bear on a range of choices. The use of symbols and their valuation in terms of energy and waste enable consideration of concepts and priorities over specific place-based agenda and reveal the consequences of trade-offs more clearly.

Impact and sustainability

The Challenge has been described by adult participants as '*great for getting people thinking about how to create a sustainable community*', while school children highlighted the complexity and compromise required.

The board game format has proved effective in both very short time frames (visitors to the University Research Day were able to work through short challenges in 10 minutes) and in more in depth sessions (pupils visiting the A+DS workshop at the Lighthouse, had one hour

sessions, while participants in the Primary School collaboration had 2-3 sessions).

Leadership and learning within the Challenge have been mediated by the researchers, who have taken this forward through case study research (ongoing) into

- who is engaged in creating visions of sustainable community?
- how does a vision evolve?
- how does the process of envisioning a



sustainable community influence the final outcome?

Principal Research Funding:

ESRC/Homes & Communities Agency Venture Targeted Initiative into 'Skills and Learning for Sustainable Communities' (£839,445).

Knowledge Exchange Funding:

ESRC Festival of Social Science (£1800) and University Research Development Fund (£1000)

Working with your organisation

Opportunities exist to work with the research team to develop the Sustainable Communities Challenge into a commercial product, an educational tool and/or in an online platform.

If you would like to know more about or discuss involvement in the future possibilities, please contact:

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