

FACT SHEET

Keeping going as a Champion

The skills linked to being a Community Champion are likely to improve and develop over time as you use them. If you're ready to offer help then there are probably groups who'd be keen to work with you, always assuming they know what you do. But doing this on your own can be tiring and you may feel rather isolated – no-one else locally may be doing quite what you do. This briefing offers some advice on how to maintain your energy and enthusiasm levels and build your skills.

Planning your work

Just as one of the key roles of a Champion is to help groups develop an action plan, so it makes sense for any Champion to have their own personal action plan. You may want to consider:

- How much time do I want to put into environmental work?
- Do I have spare time apart from the time I am putting in to my current work?
- Are there other people I could work with (or how could I find them?)?
- Are there skills I would like to have to enable me to work better?

These questions (and others) will help you set your own priorities and also help you work out what you can do as a Champion. From this you can set some goals for the year ahead, such as:

- I think I can find the time and energy to help three groups do action plans....
- I'd like to be better at facilitating group discussions...
- I want to know more about local action on food growing...

This may mean that you need to look for groups to work with, to maybe go on a training course or to get actively involved with a local food project.

Getting involved locally

It's hard to be a community champion if you've no community to work with! Even if you don't know anyone who may want advice, other groups may. Most towns have some form of environmental network or newsletter: five minutes on the internet should help you find your local network.

Networks vary in energy and effectiveness. Some may welcome new people, but others may be a group of long-established organisations who won't know much about Every Action Counts or Community Champions. You may want to prepare a short note on what you're doing and either introduces yourself at a meeting and/or write something for a local newsletter. If you can offer support and advice then it's likely that people will be interested.

If there's no active network there may be an organisation – such as a conservation body, a Friends of the Earth group or a 'Transition Town' network – that you could join and use this as a way to find who else is active in your area. Networking is also increasing on-line. Subscribing to a local e-newsletter will help you keep up-to-date on local events and activities. There may also be websites, Facebook groups etc. Your local council environmental officer may well know.

Socialising is also a good way to make contacts. There are 'Green Drinks sessions in over 40 places around the UK – informal evenings at a pub where green activists – professionals and volunteers - from an area can meet and talk. You can find your nearest one on www.greendrinks.org or you could think about starting one if there's not one near you.

Building your skills

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The more you focus on your own skills, the better you will be able to help others. The question is simple: 'What would you like to do that you can't do now (or don't feel confident about)' – whether it's speaking in public or advising on fundraising. There may be several but choose one at a time and work out how to improve. Training is available through the Environmental Trainers Network nationally but there may also be local training programmes. Your local Council for Voluntary Service or Community Council may well know or ask around local green groups.

Training is always most useful when there's the opportunity to put the skills you've learnt into action. Try and plan your work so that a chance to facilitate or speak in public comes up soon after you've been on a similar training course.

Evaluating and learning

It's easy to forget what you have done and what you have learnt. For that reason doing some evaluation of your own work may be helpful. Normally evaluation is done by an independent person but there are ways that you can do this for your own work.

Firstly get used to evaluating work that you have done with a group. You can design a simple feedback form (based on the one for the Champions course) or design a form on a sheet of paper that gives everyone a chance to score different aspects. These would include issues such as 'How much I learnt', 'How easy it was to participate' and 'How much I enjoyed this work'. There are also other easier exercises: getting people to put their hands up high if they really enjoyed something, hands half-way up if it was OK, and leaving them down if they were not positive can give you instant feedback at any time in a process.

Even a simple discussion between all the participants at the end of a session can be very helpful. This is especially important if you've been working with a group for several sessions: allow a decent time (perhaps half an hour) for an open-ended discussion towards the end of the last session.

But evaluate yourself as well. If you are doing surveys, don't look at the results until you've done your own response: How well do you think it went; How far did an exercise work; How easy do you think people found it to participate etc. Be as honest with yourself as possible: writing things down in this context can be very helpful.

Then compare your own perceptions with those of the group you've worked with. If there are things that you worried about that they thought went well, then that's a good sign! If on the other hand they were disappointed with activities that you thought worked well, then you may want to review what you did and do it differently in future.

Don't be put off by occasional criticism! The main reason for doing any evaluation is to learn, not just about what happened, but about how to do it better in future. Evaluating your work takes you back to your personal action plan. Consider what you've been doing that you've evaluated, and then think about how that fits in with your plan, and whether it gives you ideas on how to change and develop that plan.

Keeping going...

Most people working voluntarily get support and satisfaction from working with a group and seeing what the group does and how it develops over time. Most Community Champions do seem to work mostly with one group but the skills that you have as a Champion will certainly be valuable to other groups. Working with one group will give you support; working with new groups will give you new challenges and ideas.

The key in all this is to do what you can do well and not to do more than you feel confident with (while at the same time building your skills and confidence). If you can do that then you really are likely to be helping people make sure that 'every action' really does count.