

**Working with the voluntary and community sector on climate change  
Lessons from NCVO’s vulnerable people and climate change programme**



**1. SUMMARY**

National Council For Voluntary Organisation’s (NCVO) **Vulnerable People and Climate Change** project (Apr 2011 - Mar 2013) worked with 51 non-environmental voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) to explore how climate change could affect their work and beneficiaries. The project targeted 4 cohorts of VCOs supporting people in England who could be particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. These were: older people’s organisations in London; disability and mental health organisations in London; black and minority ethnic (BME) organisations in Greater Manchester and organisations supporting people on low incomes in Hull and Portsmouth.

NCVO’s undertook this work in light of its role in championing and strengthening the voluntary sector in the UK. NCVO recognises that climate change has society-wide implications and all voluntary and community organisations - whatever their mission - need to consider and prepare for the likely impacts this will have on their work and those they support.

This case study provides an overview of NCVO’s approach to working with voluntary and community sector organisations to enable them to become more knowledgeable about climate change impacts, better prepared to adapt to the changing climate and more motivated to reduce their carbon emissions. It may be useful for public agencies (e.g. local authorities, Healthwatch) charged with developing national and local responses to climate change; voluntary and community sector organisations and voluntary sector support organisations.

U3As, volunteering bodies, user-led organisations, big, small, learning disability groups, community garden, mental health agencies, homelessness organisations, stroke/brain injury specialists, older people’s forums, arts organisations, youth groups, faith, asylum/refugee, advocacy bodies, lunch clubs, work programme, Age UKs, advice agencies, student unions

## 2. ACTIVITIES

The programme approach was based on NCVO Foresight methodology, which supports organisations to identify and respond to external trends or forces (drivers) through three simple questions: **What** drivers could affect your organisation? **So what** are the implications for you? **Now what** can you do in response?

Seven climate change drivers were developed for the programme, based on the [UK Climate Projections](#), international impacts and the need to reduce carbon emissions. A range of materials were developed, including: a booklet tailored to each cohort's field and location, to help participants frame their in-house discussions with colleagues (modelled on NCVO's Foresight pocket guides); and a compilation of existing free resources for participants to use with beneficiaries if they wished. Resources were available to make it easier for VCOs to access the programme: participation was free and travel and carer costs were offered. With advice from the associated steering group, a small honorarium was available to enable some small organisations to participate, as many of the targeted groups operate on a shoestring.

**What type and form of information/evidence was produced?** Participants were supported to identify the implications of each climate driver for their organisation and service users. After discussions with colleagues and beneficiaries, they selected the issues which, in their view, would have most significance for their organisation.

These priority issues formed the basis of each organisation's action plans. Mini reports of each cohort's work were also produced to share nationally with other VCOs in the specialist fields.

**Partners:** Between 8 and 18 VCOs were involved in each cohort. The profiles of those participating covered a broad spectrum in terms of size, type of organisation, services and specialisms, reflecting the breadth and diversity of the voluntary sector, as shown in the box. Each organisation could have two places on the programme and 74 individuals took part over the course of the project. Most were senior representatives or the main project worker for the organisation, except the older people's cohort, which was mostly made up of self-organising, peer-led groups of older volunteers.

**How were people involved?** In addition to the people directly participating in the programme workshops, over 1,200 people were involved in project activities emerging from this engagement e.g. 343 staff, volunteers and trustees took part in the in-house conversations and 753 service users and others (e.g. family members and carers) were involved in the projects run by participating VCOs. There were also 'experts' from UK Climate Impacts Programme who presented the climate information.

**Length of time:** All four cohorts were supported through a programme of activities over several months that included: three workshops (each a day-long); an in-house conversation with staff and/or trustees; in-house work with service users; and development of an action plan. The project concluded with a final event for participants and a policy roundtable during Climate Week 2013.

**Funding:** City Bridge Trust was the primary funder with additional support from Defra for low income and BME cohorts and some top up funding from the Environment Agency.

### 3. OUTCOMES

Of those taking part in the project: 31 VCOs (57%) completed the programme. 20 developed an action plan for their organisation. 95% of participants interviewed at the end of the programme reported that they knew more about the implications of climate change for their organisation. 80% felt their organisation was better prepared for the changing climate. 83% felt more motivated to reduce their organisation's carbon footprint. 43% considered that their organisation was more likely to campaign in some way on climate change. An analysis of the actions across all the plans reveals that: 50% are adaptation focused; 25% contribute to carbon reduction; and 25% deliver both adaptation and carbon reduction benefits.

**Who used the outcomes and how?** Learning from the project has contributed to the UK's first National Adaptation Plan. The project also attracted a lot of interest from wider arenas including academia, local authorities, other VCOs and even NCVO's sister organization, ACOSS in Australia.

NCVO currently has an additional grant from the City Bridge Trust to run co-facilitated workshops with Climate UK and the London Climate Change Partnership with London based VCOs to further test what resource and support is needed for them to be able to respond effectively.

The work will continue to strengthen the voice of the voluntary sector in the national adaptation planning and learning will be shared through for example the Environment Agency.

### 4. BARRIERS

There was confusion between the terms 'adaptation' and 'mitigation' - unsurprising given that adaptation was a new idea for most participants. Framing discussions around 'impacts' helped participants to think beyond their organisational carbon footprint. The dropout rate from the first workshop to final workshop was quite high (43%). Reasons for leaving included: moving jobs, unexpected developments within organisations and general lack of capacity. One volunteer-led disability VCO found the activities too tiring.

The project launched in 2011 just as the extent of government cuts were becoming apparent in the voluntary sector – reducing funding and increasing demand for services. Two trial online discussion forums were set up on existing environmental platforms for two of the cohorts to support networking and peer learning between sessions, but neither facility took off. The project demanded considerable commitment from participants in terms of time and effort. A less intense programme might attract more VCOs. The programme worked better on a shorter timescale; the last cohort running over four months had more momentum than the earlier strands which had each lasted between eight and ten months.



### 5. GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- ✓ Encourage links between public sector agencies and VCOs. VCOs' specialist knowledge and community links are likely to lead to better community engagement if VCOs can act as conduits
- ✓ Put the mission of each organisation at the core of the work, to enable participants to appreciate the relevance of climate change in their own context, and to find appropriate ways to respond.
- ✓ Ensure there is a mix of information provision and small group exercises and discussion to enable everyone to participate in the workshops
- ✓ Don't use information that is too complex –often simple headline messages of how the climate will change is sufficient
- ✓ Don't feel you have to be an expert in the details of each organisation's business. Provide information and a structure for discussions and the implications of a changing climate for a particular business will become apparent
- ✓ Don't think that the implications of a changing climate are something for the future – it affects decisions you are making now!

### 6. LINKS

- NCVO website: [www.ncvo.org.uk](http://www.ncvo.org.uk)
- NCVO blog article from 2013 during the project: <https://blogs.ncvo.org.uk/2013/02/28/why-we-need-a-socially-just-response-to-climate-change>

