

Project type: **Running an energy advice centre**

Name of example: **Energy Alton**

The organisation

Greening Alton and Holybourne is a community organisation working on local campaigns and other projects to promote sustainable living in and around the Hampshire market town of Alton and nearby village of Holybourne.

In 2011, Greening Alton and Holybourne established Energy Alton, a community partnership including some 40 local organisations. Managed by a team of seven core group members, Energy Alton aims to spread awareness of the benefits of greater energy efficiency and to give practical help to people who want to improve the energy performance of their homes.

The project

In December 2011, Energy Alton was awarded a total of £80,000 by DECC's Local Energy Assessment Fund (LEAF) to deliver a number of energy-saving projects. One of these projects was an Energy Advice Centre, which opened on Alton High Street in February 2012 to provide free and impartial advice to the public on household energy saving.

Additionally, the Centre was essential for the promotion and administration of several Energy Alton energy schemes, acting as a portal for members of the public to learn about and access:

- Home energy surveys
- Home thermal image survey
- Loft insulation and cavity wall insulation
- DIY loft insulation
- Draft-busting workshop

Through support from local installers, the Centre was also able to put on several 'Meet the Expert' sessions, where members of the public could ask questions about topics such as solar PV, biomass and energy efficient lighting. As well as this, the Centre was used as a venue to deliver a CSE PlanLoCaL training session for local councillors on renewable energy and planning.

The Centre was run by a full-time manager, supported by a team of 20 volunteers. The manager organised the volunteer rota, maintained the contact database, researched enquiries and administered other Energy Alton schemes. Volunteers, many of whom had been involved with past Greening Alton and Holybourne projects, received a half day training session before helping in the Centre. Energy Alton also put together an advice manual to assist volunteers with helping members of the public.

The local networks established through Energy Alton's earlier work in the town were key to the success of the advice centre project. Through partnership with a diverse range of local businesses and organisations,

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Energy Alton was able to publicise the Energy Advice Centre (and other schemes) across their community and gain a range of free support, including:

- visits to local Women's Institute and sports clubs meetings
- flyers sent home with school pupils (approx 2,800 pupils)
- flyers included in prescription bags from local pharmacies
- free meeting space at Swan Hotel
- attendance of the local MP at the opening of Energy Advice Centre
- sample energy efficiency products donated by a number of local suppliers
- reduced business rates from Council

Although one of Energy Alton's principal aims was to reduce carbon emissions in the community, publicly the Energy Advice Centre focussed more on the cost savings achieved through energy efficiency, since this was identified as a much greater interest for the majority of local people.

The Centre's High Street location also helped raise the group's profile and contributed to high levels of footfall from passers-by who otherwise might not have engaged with the project. The group was offered alternative premises free of charge by the Council but decided that the central location of the Centre was worth paying for.

Achievements

The LEAF grant used to fund the Advice Centre had to be spent by the end of March 2012 and the Advice Centre subsequently remained in operation on Alton High Street until July that year. During this period energy advice was delivered to over 600 people and referrals were made for 150 Home Energy Surveys, 500 DIY loft insulation projects and 80 free loft or cavity wall insulation jobs. Life time carbon saving coming out of these projects have been estimated by Energy Alton to be in excess of 16,000 tonnes of CO₂.

Following the success of these projects, Energy Alton continued operating the Energy Advice Centre for two days a week out of Alton Library. Unlike the High Street centre, which employed one full-time member of staff, the new service is run and managed entirely by volunteers.

Lessons learned

On the basis of its experience with this project, the group learned several lessons of importance to others seeking to set up a similar scheme:

- The effective running of the Advice Centre was greatly helped through having a full-time, trained and paid manager.
- Small changes can make a big difference. Simply rearranging the window display in the Energy Advice Centre made a huge difference to the number of people coming into the premises.
- The time scales of the LEAF grant were very short and since receiving the grant the group had only one month to open the Energy Advice Centre. This meant some aspects of the project were rushed. In particular, the price paid to lease the High Street premises was very high, since there was not time to shop around or negotiate with landlords.

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Links

Energy Alton | www.energyalton.co.uk

Greening Alton and Holybourne | www.greeningalton.org.uk

Resources

People



The group consists of a 7-person core management team (volunteers), one paid full-time Energy Advice Centre manager (6 months) and 20 Energy Advice Centre volunteers. At any one time it normally took two or three people to run the Centre.

Technical skills



The core management team had a range of backgrounds, including public sector management and finance. One member had experience working for the Department of Energy and Climate Change, and another is currently doing a sustainability Masters at the Centre for Alternative Technology.

The project did not need significant technical input. The group did, however, need to outsource skills for some aspects of the project, including leaflet and poster design, and website design and maintenance. 'Meet the Expert' sessions were also carried out by local energy industry but free of charge.

Finances



£80,000 LEAF funding secured, of which around £36,000 was used to fund the Energy Advice Centre. Most of this money was spent on leasing the premises (6 months), manager salary (6 months), website design and leaflet design and printing. To manage these funds, the group decided to register as a Community Interest Company.

Project partners



Energy Alton was a partnership of around 40 local businesses and organisations. Whilst this partnership was not contractual, it helped deliver significant support from a wide range of local organisations. Funded by the District Council, Insulate Hampshire carried out free loft and cavity wall insulations for the Energy Alton schemes. The group received a small amount of money for making referrals to Insulate Hampshire.

Green Deal potential

Energy Alton is expecting to provide advice about the Green Deal and is seeking funding to enable the opening hours of the Energy Advice Centre to be extended in the future.