

Research Project: Work, Wellbeing and Welfare: Sustainable Communities.

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Background: Communities represent the context in which many sustainability-orientated behaviours, sustainability impacts and stakeholder relationships play out. Systems relating to waste management, transport, food production & consumption, and energy can all be organised at a community level, and the behaviours of individual citizens and consumers are often shaped by the infrastructure, environment and social norms of the community they live within. The importance of creating more sustainable communities was recognised in the government's 2003 plan *Sustainable Communities: Building for our Future*, and the need for communities to develop the necessary skills to pursue sustainability strategies was recognised in the Egan Review '*Skills for Sustainable Communities*' and reflected in the creation of the *Academy of Sustainable Communities* (ASC) in 2005 with a mandate to ensure that there are sufficient people with the right skills to create and maintain sustainable communities.

Aims & objectives:

- To understand how communities can become engaged and motivated to participate in developing sustainability strategies, actions and activities at the community level in relation to food, energy, transport and the home;
- To explore the skills, training, learning and knowledge transfer approaches that are needed to support community engagement and participation in sustainability initiatives;
- To identify the skills, training, learning and knowledge transfer needed to ensure more effective leadership, innovation, and management of change for sustainability issues;
- To understand the role of professional services firms in the resilience of rural communities, particularly through a study of rural community law firms in Wales;

About the research: The core project within the BRASS Sustainable Communities work was "*Motivating, Engaging, Leading and Supporting Skills and Knowledge for Sustainable Communities – Applying Models of Sustainable Localised Economies*" funded by the ESRC and the ASC. In addition to a literature review and a series of expert stakeholder interviews (including community representatives, local government representatives, academics, businesses and policymakers) this project brought together case study analysis of the skills and knowledge behind the success of twelve different sustainable communities initiatives. This was complemented by an in-depth study of initiatives within the community of Stroud and all of the project findings were pulled together to create an interactive '*virtual sustainable community resource*'. This virtual resource, made publicly available on the project website, has been designed as an innovative way of engaging with a much wider audience in the dissemination of research findings and it links to the project case study communities to provide examples of skills and knowledge development for sustainable communities. This work also had an international comparative dimension with a study of Chinese community based sustainable food enterprises to compare with those studied in the UK. Another aspect of the sustainable communities work concerned community resilience in rural areas through a study of the role of law firms within rural economies in Wales. Law firms play an important role in rural communities in relation to land management, livestock ownership, planning issues etc, but this role has received little research attention. This project, funded by the Law Society of England and Wales involved interviews of law firms, and GIS based analysis of data on the provision of legal services in rural areas to build up a picture of current provision, trends in access to legal services and the implications for the resilience of rural economies.

Results and outputs: In 2008 BRASS published *Sustainable Communities: New Spaces for Planning, Participation and Engagement* a book which represented a synthesis of research work conducted by BRASS researchers over several years. It combines key debates and empirical cases from an international perspective exploring the ways in which more sustainable and resilient communities can be built. The core sustainability leadership skills and learning project produced an alternative approach to the conventional approaches geared to transmitting a ‘fixed’ skill set. The alternative proposed places a much greater emphasis on ‘learners’ as individuals and ‘learning’ as achieved through experience. The role and influence of people in place are implicit within these ‘learner-centred’ models. This reflects an understanding of the need to approach learning strategies in a way that relates to people’s everyday lives.

The work on legal service provision in rural areas showed that recruitment into training within such firms is inadequate to provide for the longer term, and already the lateral hire of qualified staff is a matter of some difficulty. This is leading to a population of rural solicitors that is ageing over time without new blood to replenish firms for the future. This slow decline is not due to lack of available demand for legal services, but due to a bundle of reasons ranging from regulatory disincentives to lack of management capacity to grow the businesses. Without doubt rural legal services are a vital part of the communities studied and this form of practice offers considerable rewards, not all of them financial, to both the solicitors and the communities within which they practice. The pattern of regression seems capable of being arrested, but only if action is taken soon.

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Impacts achieved/potential for impact:

The findings from the core sustainable communities project were distilled into a non-technical ‘*Guidance for Communities*’ and fed into policy-making through briefings for Defra and the *Dept for Communities and Local Government*. Dr Julie Newton was also been appointed to the government’s expert technical working group on wellbeing measurement coordinated by ONS. The Law Society placed the report on the provision of rural legal services on their website and also widely distributed it amongst practitioners and policy decision makers (including, all solicitors’ practices in rural Wales and all Assembly Members in the Welsh Government).