

Involving local groups in strategy: Conference 05

This workshop looked at the current ways (summarised at the end) we involve local groups and explored ways to improve them.

8 local group members, 4 staff and 5 Board members attended the workshop.

Discussion round the Advisory groups / Regional partnerships.

* we have inadequate info on what groups are working on - in terms of what local partnerships they're involved in, what committees, etc do they sit on - local planning committees, agenda 21 groups, etc. Some of these have a lot of power locally, and so informing groups of key policy shifts, or new developments is critical to maximise their impact on these committees.

Therefore - we could survey groups to find out this info. We have some basic info on Community and need to get staff to know about this, and to add info they find out when talking to groups.

* lines of communication and are too long, too infrequent and too complicated - this leads to a lack of clarity on the decision making process. The constitutional structure is not always clear either, so the status of the decision is not clear.

Therefore - We need more direct communications about decisions and plans. We could make better use of our online stuff - e.g. moderating the discussion lists better - and generating quality discussions.

* There was a sense that there was little preparation, forewarning or discussion prior to the change in the direction of the waste campaign. This has led to depressed staff, and low morale in the network.

* communicating about decisions taken is not always clear either.

Therefore - we could convene a group 2-3 times a year with key stakeholders - campaigners, budget holders and decision makers. This means that those involved are clear on the how and why of decisions taken, and are aware of resource constraints, etc, so can explain to others about why a decision was taken - even if the decision didn't go their way. This would also avoid the fact that some key people are left out of such decision making, and can feel resentful. This would also ensure greater transparency.

* the AG needs autonomy - group members should be elected.

[The problem with this is that groups are already stretched and this new responsibility could over burden them.]

* need more research on the changing world and how this should or does influence our forward planning.

Discussion around motions and the Strategic Plan

- ❖ Motions were felt to be a good 'pressure release valve' when other opportunities have failed. Bringing a motion does ensure that Friends of the

Earth does address the problem. Motions always deal with worthwhile issues but we don't talk about prioritising work – if we vote to work on extra issues, something will have to be dropped. Deciding what not to do is always more difficult than deciding what to take on.

- ❖ Regarding the Strategic Plan: we need to be clear at each stage of the process how much decision making authority is being given to local groups. Local groups should be more involved in deciding the direction that local groups should move in rather than the BIG PICTURE. We could focus on what capabilities we want local groups to develop. Concern was expressed that seeking consensus around issues might prevent radical ways forward being developed.
- ❖ An accessible summary of the plan should be produced [Ed – there is one]. The strategy should have regular check points that are reported back to local groups. Local groups should understand what and why our priority campaigns are and the implications of adding extra campaigns.
- ❖ Local group members who attend conference feel far more engaged in Friends of the Earth. They are the groups who should be involved in the Strategic Plan. Network developers' assistance could be sought to test views of people who don't come to conference.

Summary of Current methods of involvement of local groups

Workshops/meetings at conferences and regional meetings, local group training days, campaigner evenings, activist networks. All these were traditionally ways to transfer skills & knowledge to campaigners, to keep them informed and updated on current events. Increasingly they are being used for more collaborative 2-way communication, with feedback channels incorporated, and more opportunities for asking questions of staff.

One-off requests for local group views – e.g. through CYW, paper and email surveys / questionnaires, phone consultations. These are a key way for us to get feedback and suggestions from groups. A key bit of work here were the baseline data surveys, 'How are you?' and 'How can we help you?', first issued last year.

Advisory groups – participative fora intended to enable local activists to contribute to strategy, policy and tactics on our campaigning activities. These groups aim to provide us with local campaigner input on the direction and steer of our campaigns. Currently we have groups in the following activities: Youth & Education, Planning, Reduce Resource Use, Corporate Accountability, virtual fora for GM and supermarkets, and currently setting one up for Climate and Energy.

Regional Partnerships (RPs) – these are new participative fora being set up in each region of England and in Wales and Northern Ireland to enable local campaigners, among others, to find a closer way of working with Friends of the Earth.

In particular RPs will have a specific role in contributing to strategy, policy and tactics in each area and to revisions to our national strategy. RP's are intended to help form closer working between Friends of the Earth and people in each region / nation and will compliment other ways of engaging the local groups' network.

RPs in Wales and Northern Ireland are due to be set up following recent years of successfully engaging local groups in strategic ideas and planning. In England RPs exist already in the North West, North East, Yorkshire & the Humber, East Midlands and will come on stream in the remaining regions by the end of 2005.

Motions to annual local groups' conference – these are intended to enable local groups to raise constitutional/organisational or campaign related issues where they feel a change to the current approach is required. A formal approach to proposing, seconding and then debating the motions at conference is used. Due to our organisational status (i.e. two Ltd companies) adopted motions are advisory (rather than binding) to the Boards of Directors.

Motions have been in existence for a long time.

Participation in the Strategic Plan 2003-8

- Local groups were involved in developing the highest level of strategy.
- In May 2002 regional meetings were used for Local Groups to look at external and internal trends relevant to developing a new plan.
- In November 2002 regional meetings were held to identify campaign options for the plan;
- In February 2003 campaign networks were mailed for 'temperature takes' relating parts of the plan so far to relevant campaign networks;
- In March 2003 local groups were invited to help prioritise by considering a number of scenarios.
- Involving local groups in the development of the Strategic Plan was a new development in 2002. A conscious attempt was made to involve broader stakeholders than had been involved in the past.

Note: We will develop a new plan to start June 08.

Rough outline proposed timescales:

Spring 2007 information gathering – PEST, SWOT

Identify changes to key assumptions and strategic and resourcing aims.

Estimate resources available.

Sept 2007 make choices about activities/campaigns to run

Jan 2008 make choices about objectives and policy for activities/campaigns

Spring 2008 plan tactics and agree resources

Initial suggestions are that local groups/activists could be involved:

- in the Spring in the information gathering and how it might change current aims
- at conference 2007 in which campaigns to deliver the aims
- in advisory groups about objectives and policy
- in advisory groups about tactics