

Sustainable Northern Ireland

Swap Shop Project

Final Report January 2006 – January 2007

Context

During 2006 Sustainable NI has carried out three closely related projects promoting waste reduction and the reuse of materials, diverting them from landfill to find a future productive use either at home or abroad. All the projects also promoted a general 'waste reduction' message as a way to introduce the concept of sustainable lifestyles.

The Swap Shop project worked with a variety of charities, voluntary and community organisations, businesses and social economy projects to raise their awareness of waste issues and to promote the reuse of materials which might otherwise be sent to landfill. A philanthropic ethos and entrepreneurial spirit underline much of the work in this sector. Since the Swap Shop project was funded by Better Belfast it concentrated primarily on organisations based in the greater Belfast area. Groups were selected as potential partners for a number of reasons:

- Their beliefs promote a pro-environment and sustainability based philosophy and are willing to incorporate these principles into their business practice.
- They have many years experience in community development, fundraising and project management.
- They have premises central to and used by every community, with their clientele drawn from a wide range of people regardless of age or social background.
- These organisations are widely respected because of their long term perspective and their charitable works. They can easily act as a focus for promoting environmental practice and an opinion-former for attracting other potential stakeholders.

By targeting this audience who are already familiar with sustainable development or environmental agendas we may promote a waste reduction message to a receptive and influential group. By demonstrating that goods that are no longer wanted can be given a second life and be of use to others, while diverting them from the waste stream, this activity can produce materials and stimulate partnerships which will continue to deliver the 'message' after this short term project has been completed.

The Swap Shop programme fitted in well with its sister project, Faith Waste. This project, also funded by Better Belfast, worked with a variety of faith communities to raise their awareness of waste issues and how environmental matters tie in with other aspects of sustainable development, specifically the social agenda appropriate to faiths. The two projects dovetailed well in that faith organisations often work in partnership with the 'charity shops' who were eager to receive more material for their outlets. A third project, Choose to Reuse, funded by Community Waste Innovation Fund (CWIF); was also complementary to Swap Shop. This project involved the promotion of reuse through posters, leaflets and conferences.

Aims

- To survey the existing voluntary and community organisations and businesses which are involved in promoting the reuse of materials which might otherwise be sent to landfill.
- To develop a network of these organisations to encourage communication and co-operative working to improve their effectiveness.
- To determine mechanisms to encourage more people in Belfast to reduce the amount of material going to landfill through using these organisations to 'reuse' goods.
- To identify areas where co-operative working will be productive and to identify barriers to co-operative working and means to overcome these.
- To assist the organisations to promote their activities through the Faith Waste groups and the reuse poster/information leaflet and conferences organised under the Choose to Reuse project.
- To determine existing barriers to 'reuse' and mechanisms to overcome these.
- To share ideas on how best to get messages about waste incorporated into the social and economic agendas promoted by the organisations.

Objectives

- Hold a workshop of interested parties to network, exchange experiences and explore issues.
- Identify areas/materials where a co-operative approach is agreed to be useful.
- Develop coalitions of groups to take ideas forward and service them as necessary.
- Identify mechanisms to promote the concepts of reuse and encourage their adoption.

Level of involvement

The Swap Shop Project contacted over 40 charity shops, and recycling organisations, various waste industry companies and faith groups. Of these, 21 groups have already taken part in the project, with 11 of them taking a more participatory role and working enthusiastically to further their own expressed goals to reduce waste through developing an ongoing forum.

Project Outputs

One of the advantages of this new and innovative project was the lack of specific constraints on how to implement or achieve the desired objectives.

The rationale for the project

- We wished to recruit organisations that represented a range of business models and social origins in order to represent the entire sector and attract other groups. We did not confine our contacts to charity shops only, but also included social economy projects and websites.
- Growth of the membership of the programme was based on identifying key people who would open gateways to their group and other organisations.
- The waste outcomes were achieved using community development principles. Each group was assessed to see how our project could deliver what they as an organisation wanted to achieve. Thus their involvement may have resulted in a growth of retail opportunities, developed their market profile or encouraged cross-sectoral understanding and improved working practices.
- The method of our involvement was tailored to their beliefs or ways of working. Hence some of the training, influence and trust-building was achieved by SNI staff addressing some group's specific challenges from the perspective of their value system.

Activities

- Speaking with key personnel of the participating organisations,
- Training personnel in sustainable development practices regarding waste resources (assisted by advisors from Belfast City Council),
- Encouraging networking and identifying areas/materials where a co-operative approach is beneficial,
- Encouraging partnership working with councils, government departments, business and other organisations (including faith groups) to provide 'whole sector' solutions,
- Developing sustainable and improved working practices,
- Advancing their own agenda and ethos (e.g. refurbishing materials, selling goods, training disadvantaged or marginalized adults),
- Developing mechanisms to promote reuse.

Creating Partnership workshop

On 19th April 2006 the 'Reduce, Reuse and Recycle: Creating Partnerships' Workshop occurred was attended by approximately 24 guests at the Belfast Activity Centre, Barnetts Stable Yard, Belfast.

Four guest speakers addressed the workshop:

'The Business of Waste Exchange', *Trevor Knipe, Invest NI*

'The Need for a Co-ordinated Message', *David Wilson, Irish Polymers*

'Reuse and Recycle with Oxfam Ireland', *Peter Tomlinson, Oxfam Ireland*

'Arc 21: A Partnership Story', Ricki Burnett, Arc 21

Workshop session elicited the following points:

- The format was highly successful,
- Any follow up must be specific, such as the plans for a charity shop forum,
- There is widespread support for the formation of partnerships,
- It is important to keep the message on reuse and recycling 'Simple',
- Alternatives to charging the sector for waste disposal need to be considered,
- It is important to look at current practices and seek to improve these,
- The charity shops sector wished to work collectively so that they can negotiate with councils/ government, arrange inter-charity arrangements, promote the benefits of donating materials etc,
- Charity shops should have a comprehensive list of where individual items can go to or be accepted either by other charitable organisations or recycling companies,
- Sustainable NI can facilitate and co-ordinate partnerships.

These issues were advanced through the development of a charity shops forum and other SNI work through the Faith Waste and Choose to Reuse projects. The workshop was successful both in terms of numbers attending, feedback and a sense of community and commonality among those attending.

Charity Shop Forum

Our involvement with charity shops, recycling organisations, waste industry companies, councils, and government agencies has continued through facilitating the Forum recommended at the Workshop. Many of these groups were interested in working together to divert 'waste' materials to a productive use. The workshop and other contacts with these groups led SNI to facilitate the setting up of a collaborative Forum or Association of Charity Shops. Many of these shops are involved in both the Faith Waste and Swap Shop projects.

There have been a number of meetings which have put this forum on a secure footing. To date they have:

- Elected interim office bearers,
- Set the aim / purpose of the Forum and the framework within which it should work
 - Holding Hands,
 - Working in co-operation with Council, other charities and local government,
 - Lobbying,
 - Stabilising costs for the charity sector.
- Decided the relationship it should have with the UK Charity Shop Association.
- Considering the possibility of partnership working and seeking future funding.
- Addressing other areas of common interest such as charity shops having 'Reuse Huts' at council recycling sites and other schemes.

Day Trips

Groups were also given the opportunity to attend field visits to Bryson House Recycling Centre (Mallusk), Palmerston Road Recycling Centre (Belfast) and Quinn's Glass Factory in Fermanagh as part of their involvement with Faith Waste. Five people representing four groups specific to Swap Shop took advantage of this opportunity. Interestingly, all who took part went on to fully commit their organisation to the project.

Outcomes

One of the hallmarks of our method of working has been the positive relationships forged between the participating communities and individuals and the SNI project workers. Regular review visits, good communication and aligning our work to the needs and desires of the groups have delivered a comprehensive set of outcomes welcomed by all the participating groups.

All of the objectives have been accomplished and the aims of the project have been addressed. The main outputs are:

- Partnerships have been made to raise awareness of the inter-relationships of the environmental, social and economic aspects of reuse, and also to aid practical work. This has involved establishing linkages between:
 1. The charity shops and other groups involved in social projects to promote reuse (e.g. websites)
 2. All such groups and other organisations (councils, central government, waste management groups such as Arc 21, business and faith communities) which can impact upon them.
- A newly formed forum arising out of this project – a NI Association of Charity Shops.
- Partnerships have been established through networking within the retail sub-sector, between different sub-sectors, and with outside organisations.
- This project has allowed capacity building within their organisation, developing and building up individuals, sub-groups and associated organisations.
- Groups have worked together to increase the range of services they can provide.
- Education and promotion of waste minimisation and good approaches by groups within the sector have the potential to greatly increase the amount of material being reused and decreasing the amount of waste going to landfill.

Lessons and Recommendations

What has been accomplished?

- The groups are in various stages of development regarding waste. The timescale of the project was too short for some of them to significantly change their existing operating methods. They are now able to look at furthering their involvement to promote more sustainable practice and better internal waste management. What they commenced with Swap Shop (and in some cases Faith Waste as well) they can develop through association with BCC, SNI and other agencies, as well as progressing within their own work-plans.
- Swap Shop has highlighted that waste management issues can improve intersectoral working and practice.
- Partnership working is at a crucial and initial stage and should be encouraged through the above mentioned Charity Forum.
- The benefits of the projects were only possible by having two officers in post to drive the programme. Busy leaders / practitioners from these organisations have their own priorities and will only have the time to commence a new venture with the aid of an external driver. Most groups are now past this vulnerable stage. They value SNI acting as facilitator and secretariat for the Charity Forum.

What can the future hold?

- Deepening and broadening the work that has been done with the groups with regard to waste management.
- Continuing to explore and develop the concept of partnership working and how it can deliver better outcomes.
- Encouraging the NI Association of Charity Shops to develop 'teeth and legs' as a group. This should include promoting further involvement of councils and other agencies with the Forum, the Forum applying for funding for future sustainable development projects, and gaining the personal drivers these groups need to advance on issues in a focused and dedicated way.
- Carrying on the work of the Swap Shop project to empower the groups and individuals involved to make their practices sustainable and habitual.
- Developing the opportunity to introduce other sustainable development practices to these groups.
- Sourcing funding for groups from non-environmental sources.

Lessons from the work

- Success was only achieved by rigorous and reflective practice applying a community development model. This involved selling the message on the grounds of 'what can we do for you' as well as the financial and ethical grounds.
- Charity groups can be used as focal points for waste management practice in society.
- While we tried to be as inclusive as possible, our success rate was approximately one in two contacts emphasising interest and one in four to become fully involved.

- Time, patience, empathy, people skills and evening and weekend working were as important in the building of trust and successful recruitment of individuals / groups as knowledge of waste and environmental issues.
- Concentration on key people to lead to decision-makers within a group is more productive than going through hierarchical and headquarters group structures.
- Undertake review visits to all groups.
- Encourage all organisations participating in the project to take part in the Charities Forum.
- Keep groups aware of project news and good practice by regular reports when meeting together or through newsletters.
- Provide logistical support and advice to participating groups and facilitate any necessary contacts for them.
- Apparent competition between charities, retail outlets and rival organisations can be overcome by promoting the advantages of common approaches and of a united sector-wide lobby to the key decision-makers and stakeholders.

Conclusion

The work of the project is gathering momentum as the groups take ownership of the processes and concepts put in place through the Swap Shop project and specifically the Charity Forum. The success of the programme has been down to the relationships built up by the project officers, the client groups, and the other agencies that assisted in the delivery of the goals of this project. These relationships contributed to the enjoyable nature of the work and should go some way to ensuring future success as the participants develop their own internal organisational waste management practices and manage their business processes to take more material out of the waste stream and reuse it to the benefit of themselves and others.