



SuScit

Citizen Science for Sustainability

Providing local communities with a greater say in environmental and sustainability research

The Citizens Science for Sustainability (SuScit) Project was a unique attempt to provide local communities with a voice in the future of urban sustainability research. Funded under the EPSRC's Sustainable Urban Environment's Programme, the SuScit Project developed an innovative programme of action research and networking activities designed to promote engagement and dialogue between the EPSRC research community, professional stakeholders and sustainability practitioners, and most importantly local citizens: particularly socially and economically excluded citizens, such as older people, single parents, young people, and those from black, Asian and ethnic minority communities.

Addressing Environmental Inequalities

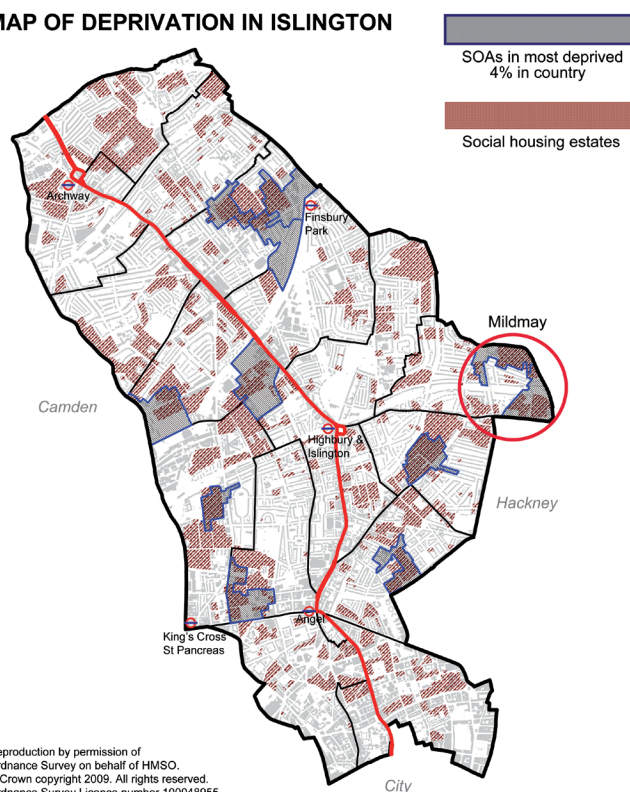
We know that it is often disadvantaged members of our society living in poorer neighbourhoods who are exposed to the greatest environmental risks (such as pollution from traffic and industry, vulnerability to flooding), have the worst access to environmental goods and services (such as good quality housing, energy efficiency measures, green space, etc) and who experience the poorest health and quality of life. These communities are also the least likely to be engaged in dialogues about how science and technology can help to address these problems.

Working in Mildmay, Islington

The action research for the SuScit project took place in the Mildmay area of Islington in North London between January and July 2008. Islington is a vibrant, diverse and densely populated area, but also the sixth most deprived borough in the country facing significant social, economic and environmental challenges. Mildmay is one of the most deprived wards in Islington. Over two thirds of Mildmay's 11,000 residents live in rented accommodation. Many are economically inactive.

The built environment of the ward is dominated by estates of mixed quality social housing. Throughout the research we worked closely with the Mildmay Community Partnership and Islington Council. By establishing strong working relationships with key local stakeholders and locating the initial phases of the fieldwork in the Mayville Community Centre, in Mildmay, the project aimed to promote both ongoing local ownership of the process and maximise the benefits to the local community.

MAP OF DEPRIVATION IN ISLINGTON



Five Phases of Action Research

The SuScit project sought to design a 'bottom-up', public engagement and foresight process which empowered lay citizens in dialogue with scientists, policy makers and professional stakeholders, in order to articulate the environmental and sustainability research needs of marginalised and excluded urban communities. In addressing this challenge we sought to design a participatory process that:

- Recognised the inherently contested nature of sustainability, through providing an open and reflexive framing of the problem, and valuing local knowledge and expertise.
- Supported lay participants through the use of appropriate facilitation and engagement tools, and by recognising the differing roles and responsibilities of the various participant groups involved.
- Worked with and through the local community in order to build trust, promote engagement and maximise the value of the project's outcomes to all those who participated.

In practice this meant that local residents initially took the lead in exploring what the environment and sustainability meant to them, whilst researchers and practitioners were encouraged to listen and learn from what they heard. Later in the process responsibility shifted to the researchers and practitioners to discuss and respond to what they had learnt from the local community, by developing a research agenda for urban sustainability which reflected the issues raised.

A ten point agenda for urban sustainability research

Ten key themes were identified through the SuScit dialogue and deliberation process:

- Crime and Safety
- Eco-Social Housing
- Affordable Green Energy Services
- Urban Food Production and Consumption
- Sustainable Urban Transport
- Greenspace, Parks and Places to go
- Rubbish and Recycling
- Community Cohesion and Empowerment
- Shopping and Local Services
- Health and Well-being

For each of these themes a series of indicative research questions were also developed.

For a detailed description of the themes and related research questions see the SuScit project report: *Towards a Community-led Agenda for Urban Sustainability Research: Insights from the Citizens Science for Sustainability (SuScit) Project.*

Phase 1: Engaging Local Communities and Recruiting Participants

Three different groups participated in the SuScit dialogue process:

- The **Researchers' Panel** comprised senior academics with expertise across a broad spectrum of urban sustainability issues.
- The **Sustainability Practitioners' Panel** comprised professionals from local, regional and national stakeholder organisations.
- Three **Residents' Panels** reflected ethnic and cultural diversity of the local area: A **Young Peoples' Panel** (16-21 years); a **Women and Lone Parents' Panel**; and an **Older Peoples' Panel** (65+).

Phase 2: Exploring Narratives and Perceptions of Urban Sustainability

- Exploratory Meetings and Focus Groups
- Community Film Projects

Community film projects allowed residents to articulate their own perspectives. Residents developed their own stories of living in their local community and what the environment and sustainability meant to them.

Phase 3: Sharing Local Knowledge

- 1st Shared Workshop

All participants together deliberated upon the issues raised by the community's films.

Phase 4: Visioning Sustainable Communities

- 2nd Shared Workshop

Residents, practitioners and researchers together undertook simple visioning exercises to explore the community's aspirations for a sustainable urban future.

Phase 5: Developing a Community Led Research Agenda for Urban Sustainability

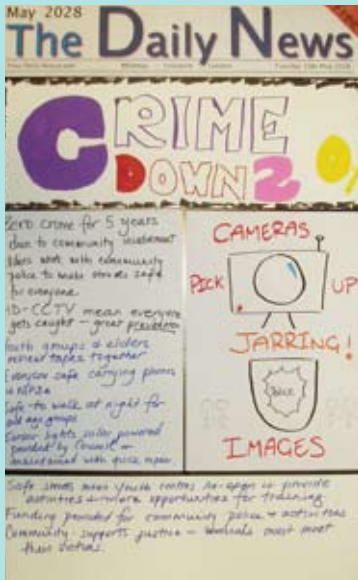
- Researchers' & Practitioners' Workshop
- 3rd Shared workshop

Researchers and Practitioners sought to develop a research agenda which responded to the concerns and priorities of citizens in Mildmay and similar communities.

Examples of Indicative Research Issues

The SuScit process articulated a distinctive ten point agenda for urban sustainability research - reflecting the interests of marginalised communities. Examples of some of the research priorities which emerged from the process include:

Crime and safety



"I've got gates on the back door and on the windows because people get over the wall and on the front door. I feel quite safe in there but sometimes you look out and you look as though you're in prison because you're behind the bars" (Member of Older People's Panel)

Indicative research issues

What can we learn from better integrating the measurement and mapping of crime, and fear of crime, with other aspects of environmental amenity, health and wellbeing?

Through what mechanisms does crime, and fear of crime, impact on quality of life for urban communities, and what are the implications for policies intended to promote sustainability?

How can the different experiences of crime, and fear of crime, of different social group best be integrated into urban planning and design research and practice?

What approaches to urban planning and design to reduce crime, and the fear for crime, are compatible or in conflict with the promotion of wider sustainability and quality of life objectives?

Urban food production and consumption



"...quality of life is about being able to obtain and consume good quality foods and the environment and the community all have an effect on whether that's available and whether it's not" (Member of Lone Parents Panel).

Indicative research issues

What role could alternative systems of urban food production and consumption (allotments, community gardens, food co-ops, lunch clubs, community kitchens, etc) play in promoting environmental, social and economic sustainability?

Nutrient cycling, energy and water use in alternative systems of urban food production and consumption.

What are the most appropriate metrics and indicators of assessing the sustainability costs and benefits of urban food production and consumption?

How can urban planning and design best facilitate opportunities for urban food production and consumption?

Urban food production and consumption, social capital and wellbeing.

Community cohesion & empowerment



Trust, neighbourliness, mutual respect, unity, compassion...

Distrust, anti-social behaviour, racism, isolation, loneliness...

Indicative research issues

How can we better understand the relationship between the built environment and social cohesion, and how can planning and urban design better foster social cohesion and sustainable community development.

How can technology be better used to foster community consultation and empowerment in marginalised urban communities.

How can initiatives to promote environmental citizenship be better designed to meet the needs and circumstances of marginalised urban communities?

Developing appropriate tools to facilitate the engagement of young people in urban planning and design.

Mainstreaming action and participatory research into urban sustainability.



Key findings

- It is possible to articulate a distinctive community-led agenda for urban sustainability research, which responds to the needs and concerns of socially and economically excluded citizens.
- Community participants in the SuScit process generally attached a high priority to the social dimension of sustainability.
- Some of the key themes identified within this report (particularly: crime and safety; urban food production & consumption; and, community cohesion) are not well covered within the EPSRC's current portfolio of sustainable urban environments (SUE) research.
- Even for those themes (energy, housing, recycling, greenspace, health and wellbeing) which are a more established part of the broader sustainable urban environments research agenda, the SuScit process of dialogue and deliberation brought into focus the particular needs and concerns of socially and economically excluded citizens.
- Science and engineering have a vital contribution to make in developing the interdisciplinary, solution oriented, research necessary to address these problems.
- There is a need for innovative modes of funding to support research on urban sustainability with marginalised communities.

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Further Information

For further details of the SuScit project and to download copies of the project reports see www.SuScit.org.uk

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