

Unit 327, 30 Great Guildford Str,
London, SE1 0HS

tel: 020 7922 0267
fax: 020 7928 8153

info@ecsc.org.uk
www.ecsc.org.uk



ENERGY CENTRE FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

www.thetenantline.org.uk
End of Project Report

The Energy Centre for
Sustainable Communities

(Formerly Energy Conservation
& Solar Centre)

Andrew White
Project Manager

andrew.white@ecsc.org.uk



Contents Page

	Page Number
Background	3
Aims of Project	4
Innovation	4
Benefits for local authority tenants	5
Recommendations on benefits for local authority tenants	6
Completed Tasks	7/8
Recommendations	8
Overall Assessment	9
Financial Expenditure	10

Background

ecsc has 25 years of experience of working with community groups to promote sustainability and a low carbon society. Our work with tenant groups has centred on energy efficiency and creating and supporting opportunities for people in social housing to make a difference around climate change.

For three years we ran the Energy Resources for Tenants training programme which delivered the following:

- 360 tenant groups from across England trained to deliver basic energy efficiency advice to local tenants
- 360 local energy projects which included contacts with local energy suppliers to promote energy efficiency measures
- Tenants from across the country taking action on climate change and energy efficiency
- Promotion of grants for energy efficiency measures, taken up across the country
- Tenant empowerment to take a lead on climate change action in their local communities
- Tenants driving policy on energy efficiency at a local authority level.

Through our work on Energy Resources for Tenants it became clear that tenants wanted to take a driving seat in energy action and use the opportunity to promote greater tenant participation.

ecsc has taken a lead in ensuring that tenants utilise technology, which will enhance their chance to participate effectively in decision making and action on climate change. We ensured that all our training packages supported use of emerging technologies such as interactive websites, particularly those promoting energy efficiency. However, it became clear that there was no dedicated website for tenants which promoted tenant participation and energy efficiency. We conducted research with tenant groups from across the country into what sort of website would achieve the dual success of supporting tenant participation and energy efficiency. From this work and research came our application to the Innovation into Action programme led by the Chartered Institute of Housing on behalf the then Department of Environment, Transport & the Regions.

Aims of Project

The basic aims of the project where:

- To support tenant participation through a dedicated website for tenants which would highlight participation options
- Use the 'hook' of energy efficiency, climate change action and tackling fuel poverty to engage more tenants in local participation efforts
- Disseminate information about grants for energy efficiency measures which would help tenants cut bills and contribute towards climate change action
- Harness enthusiasm for new technology amongst tenants and reach out to 'new' people
- Support the Energy Resources for Tenants programme, enhancing the training programme through innovative technology and clear, easy to use advice tips for energy action
- Support tenants who have difficulty accessing traditional participation options and provide regularly updated information about energy efficiency and tenant participation locally

Innovation

We considered the project innovative because tenants did not have a dedicated website which dealt with issues of the environment, tackling fuel poverty and greater opportunities for tenant participation. Specifically, our project:

- Explored ways to overcome the 'digital divide'
- Promote activity amongst tenants around environmental action
- Tenants leading the website development to ensure it met their needs
- Mail groups for tenants to communicate with each other across the country
- Involve all age groups and people from different ethnic minorities
- Language provision for those who have English as a second language
- Website accessed by tenants from across the country, supporting a national tenant training programme (Energy Resources for Tenants).

Benefits for local authority tenants

In our initial application **ecsc** said we would achieve the following benefits for local authority tenants:

1. Developed a well trained body of 360 tenants from across England able to advise others on:
 - Tenant participation, energy efficiency and community involvement supported through the website with regular updates and examples of initiatives that can easily be replicated
 - Using the internet and IT related disciplines, in line with central government objectives of lifelong learning and access to IT helping overcome the digital divide
2. Promote swift communication between tenants from across England to ensure dissemination of information and best practise through a mail group
3. Improve energy efficiency of householders in contact with the project, thereby reducing fuel debt, alleviating fuel poverty and reducing harmful greenhouse gas emissions in social housing

Our project delivered the following against these points

- 1.1 All participants in the Energy Resources for Tenants training programme were able to utilise www.thetenantline.org.uk and the energy efficiency tips section of the site has been adopted as best practise in training tenants around energy efficiency measures
 - 1.2 It was decided by DETR and CIH that the project would only work with one local authority area, rather than 360 groups across the UK. North Cornwall District Council tenants chose to participate and lead on the project
 - 1.3 The website was regularly updated by tenants themselves who had complete editorial control over what was posted
 - 1.4 Tenants led the project, and those who formed the management group had previously no involvement with ICT and had no knowledge of Internet use. By the end of the project, council tenants themselves were designing new web pages to go up on the site!
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- 2.1 As explained earlier, it was decided to focus on one local authority area and therefore a mail group was deemed unnecessary. However, tenants did take up email addresses and participated in discussions through the website around tenant participation issues

- 2.2 Tenants participating in the Energy Resources for tenants also utilised the website, so an additional benefit was that tenant groups from across the country used the site to promote participation in their own local area
- 3.1 The website was immensely popular with tenant groups who utilised the energy efficiency tips section to promote environmental action in their own local community. For example, Oxford Council tenants persuaded councillors to adopt energy efficiency measures in part by showing them the website
- 3.2 It is not possible to measure exact amounts of carbon emissions cut back through our work, simply because it is impossible to tell how many people utilised the site and then implemented measures in their own home.

Recommendations on benefits for local authority tenants

1. All tenants from across the country would benefit from a shared resource dedicated to them available via the Internet. What would make this particularly helpful would be local elements to the site, which could be uploaded by a central resource but sourced from local groups
2. Energy Efficiency and environmental matters are incredibly important to tenants, and these issues should focus heavily on such a website
3. A feedback system to monitor actual implementation of energy efficiency measures, perhaps through a feedback form on the website would be helpful
4. As councils put more of their services online, **ecsc** believes that a national system of making pc's available to all council tenants with relevant training would ultimately save considerable amounts of money through cutting back on administration
5. Pc's availability would mean that more tenants could participate in the management of their homes, through local referendums held online
6. More tenants would benefit from energy efficiency measures and grants if they had online access, and the style of www.thetenantline.org.uk should be adopted to ensure clarity and ease of use.

Completed Tasks

Ecsc supported the development of www.thetenantline.org.uk and the following achievements were met in Year 1:

1. www.thetenantline.org.uk was developed on time and to budget with a high profile launch held at the Royal Cornwall Show, hosted by the Mayor of North Cornwall District Council, and the Rt. Hon Paul Tyler MP (local Member of Parliament).



Brian Whittington (then project manager) along with the Mayor, Chairman of Council, Ashraf Ahmed from CIH, tenants Tom and Sue (tenant managers of the project) and John Thorp, Director of **ecsc** at the launch of the website at the Royal Cornwall Show, September 2001

2. We did not establish mirror sites as it was agreed with CIH that this was unnecessary as the number of people in North Cornwall who had English as a second language would not require full mirror sites. However we did have the energy tips translated into different community languages so that other groups from across the country would benefit
3. The website editorial was managed exclusively by tenants from North Cornwall District Council and the project was overseen by a tenant management group made up of tenants from different villages from across the 400 square miles of North Cornwall District Council
4. The Mail group was not required and was agreed with DETR and CIH that this would not be implemented
5. Tenants were visited and best practise was published, along with relevant tenant materials such as the Tenants Compact, and all housing department papers were published on the site so that tenants could download them

Year 2

1. We continued to publish best practise and any other documents required by the tenants to be uploaded
2. We continued to highlight the website and the tenants organised a school competition to design posters which would be placed around North Cornwall. This also generated favourable publicity in local newspapers
3. Instead of the mail group we had sections of the site developed for tenants to place questions which could then be answered by relevant officers or other tenants. Unfortunately this did not receive the level of traffic which we had envisaged
4. **ecsc** continued to support the site development and attended regular management meetings with tenants every quarter

Year 3

1. We had envisaged that Public Energy Suppliers would support the ongoing development and management of the site. However, as the site was so successful, the local authority decided to support its continuation and tenants voted that the site would merge with North Cornwall District Council website. At the time of writing this section of the council website is the most visited and utilised. (Source, NCDC tenants)
2. **ecsc** continued to administer the project and support its development
3. **ecsc** visited local groups, and attended quarterly management groups. The site was regularly updated to ensure its local relevance

Recommendations

1. Whilst the website project did not lead to a massive boost in the numbers of tenants participating, it is noted and welcomed that tenants lead a three year project which resulted in people with no knowledge of ICT being able to personally oversee website development. For this reason we support the continuation of tenants leading local websites
2. Environmental action is a successful hook for people using the website, which demonstrated the need to relevant, useful and easily accessible local information for tenants to use
3. Energy efficiency is of considerable importance to tenants and access to clear information is essential. The Energy Tips

section should be copied and made available to all tenant groups in the country.

4. Language development is not of concern in North Cornwall and as such would not be required in any new project involving the internet would not require such an element
5. The Internet is a viable tool for communication with tenants as long as they have access to it and sufficient training to ensure that they can use it effectively.
6. As more council services is made available online, it is essential to consider a national scheme to promote home PC use by council tenants
7. The website, and the Energy Resources for Tenants training programme led to the set up of the Community Action for Energy Programme (see www.est.org.uk/café) This project supports community action. However, there is now no national tenant training programme around energy efficiency and overcoming fuel poverty. CIH should consider working with agencies such as **ecsc** in setting up such a project, which could be supported through materials made available through this project

Overall assessment of the Project

www.thetenantline.org.uk was a successful project for the following reasons:

1. The website supported and developed participation in a technical and sophisticated project which ran for three years
2. The website became so popular the local authority decided to allocate resources to merge it into their own site, and it quickly became a regularly visited section
3. Whilst quantity of tenant involvement did not dramatically increase, quality and level of involvement clearly flourished
4. Where tenants had access to the internet, the site was well used, however it remains an issue in terms of levels of access, particularly in rural areas
5. Energy efficiency and environmental action did prove to be a 'hook' for engaging tenants, who led the programme successfully for three years and continue to be involved in development of the council website
6. The project received considerable interest in tenant affairs in the wider community, with schools and community groups participating in the project, all generating favourable press coverage, including BBC Radio Cornwall and local papers over a sustained period of time.