

Can we nudge communities towards climate action? Insights from Foundation Scotland



Giles Ruck, CEO Foundation Scotland

Foundation Scotland embarked on its climate journey three years ago. It is now committed to applying a climate lens to the organisation and all its work. As a leading light in the community foundation field in the UK and across Europe, their learning along the way is extremely helpful to others following on this path. Giles Ruck, CEO Foundation Scotland, is always willing to share his insights and below he reflects on how their grantees responded to the foundation's 'nudging' to build climate action into their thinking and activities and how Foundation Scotland intends to build on that

'Our journey started by learning about climate change science, to provide staff and trustees with a common understanding. From here, we first acted internally, including stewarding our investments for a post-carbon future, by moving our endowment to an impact investment model; and in decarbonising our operations, by measuring our footprint, taking reduction actions, and offset the balance.

Nudging communities was our next objective, a big external opportunity. Each year we reach over 4,000 grassroots community projects and enterprises in Scotland, receiving this number of grant applications and fund at least 3,000. The addition of a question focussed on climate action would underpin this 'nudge'.

Our team therefore introduced the following question into the grant application process: "What measures have you taken to maximize the positive environmental impacts and minimize any negative environmental elements from your project?"

There was no judgement, no scoring of answers. We aimed to strike a balance between introducing new grant requirements and sparking innovative ideas among our applicants. It was simply our starting point to understand the current actions taken by project and community leaders, set against the climate emergency, while also recognising that two-thirds of the projects we fund are driven by volunteers, without paid staff, and that many communities are grappling with a cost-of-living crisis.

Insights from the ground: rural versus urban perspectives and a spotlight on housing

The vast majority of applicants took the time to respond. We learned that generally a distinction emerged between rural and urban projects. Rural initiatives often had *specific* plans to reduce environmental impact and promote sustainability. For

example, an energy report commissioned for a community-owned building, or a community allotment improvement through polytunnels to target increased amounts of fresh produce for residents, with associated measures of carbon reduction.

In contrast, city and urban projects often noted more *general* actions, such as having transitioned from permanent office spaces to home working and online services, as part of carbon reduction; and, noting ubiquitous recycling policies. All still valid, but demonstrating a lack of specificity. It's possible that more rural communities in Scotland can see more immediately the effects of climate change, and hence this difference. For example, significant flooding in mainly rural North-East Scotland from recent Storm Babet caused widespread family displacement, alongside two deaths. But perhaps also, the nature of many rural projects might be easier to measure.

From a thematic viewpoint, housing projects provided the most detailed information regarding sustainability and efforts to reduce negative emissions. Not surprising, considering the critical role housing plays in environmental impact and energy consumption. What is particularly positive is the level of detail from applicants in explaining how their capital projects would prioritise sustainability for *future generations*.

Looking ahead: Amplifying the climate action nudge

What next? A key task will be to encourage thematic projects, such as youth projects, arts, and sports initiatives for example, to consider how they can adopt environmentally friendly practices and integrate climate action into even the smallest of projects. While sustainability might not be as obvious as it is in, say, housing projects, there are still opportunities for positive environmental impact.

We will continue to build communications and resource signposting for projects, but more than this we're considering how to grow our role and team to include a colleague focused on climate action, to amplify this initial nudge. Or perhaps to do this in collaboration with other funders in Scotland.

It's a good start, to ask the right questions of projects, but as a community foundation committed to integrating a climate focus across our work, we need to underpin this with practical advice and support, beyond just signposting. Recognising, leveraging, and resourcing local knowledge and expertise is crucial. The collective wisdom and commitment of communities serve as a beacon of hope in the global endeavour to combat climate change.'

Giles Ruck

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<https://www.foundationscotland.org.uk/>

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