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# Turning ad hoc university-local government cooperation

# into a sustainable long-term relationship

11 January 2024 | [Wim J.C. Melis](#),  
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**Wim Melis describes how a request for independent advice has grown into a constructive, mutually beneficial collaboration between the University of Greenwich and two local councils.**

## Establishing and enhancing relationships

Early 2023, the University of Greenwich was contacted by a local authority in the southeast of England, namely Medway Council, to provide independent advice to residents on achieving zero carbon and healthier living by retrofitting domestic properties. The university had prior links with this council, but this was often limited to specific tasks and topics. However, on this occasion we endeavoured to go much further, resulting in a much closer and sustainable working relationship.

Often, such ad hoc requests are hampered, as universities and their

partners get bogged down trying to find the means to finance their activities and discussing the when, where and how. On this occasion, we managed to identify a small budget to cover the basics, as well as a common goal. We also agreed that as a university we would offer the same to Kent County Council, which brings all boroughs and district councils in Kent together. We were fortunate enough that our contacts at Medway council helped to put those links. From this basis, we were able to deliver a series of events. While the organisation of these events often relied on goodwill and involved some last-minute dashes, we delivered a set of well-received events and developed a platform to do more.

## Turning a challenge into an opportunity

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often push us to the best of outcomes. From the outset, we agreed that the aim was not just to deliver a series of events, but equally to learn from the audience. This longer-term thinking helped us to focus and establish a collaboration that was worth investing in for everyone involved. Gathering comprehensive feedback from each event, we not only delivered, but also managed to plan.

Dealing with a very complex subject in only a few hours can be challenging and limits the amount of detail you can cover. Therefore, we also created recordings, compiled frequently asked questions and provided additional resources to the attendees. These additional resources are currently being turned into an information hub that will be open to all. While overall the feedback was positive, we learned that our audience was only a specific subset of residents, and that has raised the question of how to reach other parts of our target audience.

## **Different views – a common goal**

As with most projects, anyone attending meetings or events brings their own perspective. However, if this is channelled towards a common goal it makes for a substantial difference in how the conversations move forward. These different perspectives are extremely valuable in ensuring you have a better overall outcome that respects different perspectives. In our case, the perspectives of the university and the two councils may differ in certain areas, e.g. the use of brand names, but it is important that all parties have an open mind and engage in an open dialogue.

Thus far, we have touched on sensitive and challenging topics, but through a

positive framework, these have been tackled with ease. The group also brings together people from very different backgrounds, such as those with more technical skills and others with a background in social sciences. Considering that we often say: “all the technologies already exist, it is all about how to integrate them”, it is crucial to understand the importance of coming together to deliver. Hence, this variety of perspectives, backgrounds and expertise has been most beneficial.

## **What are our next steps?**

It is now time for the next steps in our journey. We are currently focusing on how we can reach a wider audience, with a more targeted message, while keeping workloads manageable. Ideally, everybody wants an opinion on their specific questions, but that model is not viable for scaling up within the available timeframe. Hence, we are exploring various models to see how we can achieve this target. While this is a challenge, numerous ideas are floating about, and we are prioritising these based on an intention/action model. This will then help us establish our short- and long-term goals, which will then determine the next steps. At some point, we may need to define our partnership more formally. Yet so far this has not limited anyone’s ability to share information and create new

opportunities.

We are lucky to have gotten going with such an enthusiastic group, and this network has meanwhile extended into an even larger group. This is helpful, but we must remain mindful that we should not duplicate efforts nor exclude people because they were not the first to get involved. Keeping that open mind is very important to keep our work truly collaborative.

Last but not least, I would like to acknowledge and thank the enthusiastic individuals from the local councils (Medway and Kent) with whom we have had the pleasure to work so far. I look forward to continuing our journey.

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