



NATURAL
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The Parks Agency

Wildspaces! Evaluation

SUMMARY

for Natural England

Published October 2006

Natural England - Wildspace! Evaluation

Summary report

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Natural England - Wildspace! Evaluation

Summary report

1 Introduction

Wildspace! was a £7 million grant scheme, supported by the Big Lottery Fund (BIG) (formerly the New Opportunities Fund), as part of its Green Spaces and Sustainable Communities programme and delivered by English Nature (now Natural England).

The programme was run through partnerships with a range of Award Partners who opened their individual schemes for applications in spring 2001. In England there were seven award partners including Barnardo's – Better Play; British Trust for Conservation Volunteers – People's Places; Countryside Agency – Doorstep Greens; English Nature – Wildspace!; Royal Society for Nature Conservation – SEED; Sustrans – Green Routes and Safe Routes; Sport England – green spaces, playing fields and children's play.

Wildspace! aimed to help local communities to create more Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) and to improve existing ones. By mid-summer 2006, 169 grant awards totalling £7 million, including 28 'fast track' awards of £10,000 or less, had been made to 143 grantees, mainly local authorities, wildlife trusts and charitable groups who are involved in the management and development of LNRs in England, particularly in disadvantaged areas that lacked access to natural open space.

The evaluation of the scheme was carried out between July and November 2006 and was conducted through detailed questionnaires, in-depth interviews and site visits.

2 Targets of the scheme

At the scheme's inception the following aims were established:

- to create 200 new LNRs over the life of the scheme
- to fund the employment of 46 Community Liaison Officers (CLOs) to help deliver the scheme
- to fund the 'visitor friendly' enhancement of 2 LNRs per region as examples of best practice
- to fund the development of two LNRs per region as centres of excellence for environmental education

English Nature set targets for the relative funding split between the different elements of the grant scheme as follows:

- 45% to support project work on LNRs
- 50% to support the employment of Community Liaison Officers (CLOs)
- 5% to enable the purchase of land for the purpose of declaring LNRs

3 Delivery of the scheme's targets

The Wildspace! scheme was an **outstanding success**, not only in comfortably meeting or exceeding its targets while consistently advancing its priorities, but also in realising wider social and environmental gains. It also realised these benefits, in our view, comparatively inexpensively and provided great value for money. Gains were made in the designation of LNRs, in

biodiversity, in community engagement and volunteering, in promoting social cohesion, in providing opportunities for environmental education, in training and personal development and for improved health and managed to do all these things in urban and rural areas of relative deprivation, while explicitly targeting hard-to-reach and vulnerable groups.

Our view that the scheme was a great success was amply borne out by everyone who responded to our questionnaire and participated in in-depth interviews. Criticisms of the scheme were very few and minor in character, being focused mainly on the scheme's immutable constraints: the timescale for funding (three years) being too short and insufficient funds to meet all capital needs; or on matters of process, principally some exasperation at the levels of reporting required. This view was expressed most forcefully by a grantee who had received a relatively small, capital-only grant, and it is possible that reporting requirements did not necessarily reflect the size of projects.

The principal mechanism of delivery, and critical to the scheme's success was the widespread employment of Community Liaison Officers to engage with communities, build capacity, arrange events and activities and to maintain support. This was the outstanding feature of the success of Wildspace!

Below are the **main findings** of our research: we refer readers to the full report for an appreciation of the wide scope of the scheme's achievements.

- The aims of the Wildspace! scheme were met and exceeded in respect of the number of new LNRs (140% of target) and the number of CLO posts funded (194% of target).
- By the end of the scheme 335 new LNRs had been designated, bringing the total in England to 1,273 - an increase of 36%.
- Grants were awarded for the employment of 89 CLOs, almost twice as many as first envisaged. The importance of employing CLOs was emphasised by applicants and recognised by the grants award team and panel. The grants for CLOs consequently increased from an anticipated 50% of the available monies to 63%.
- Funding the 'visitor friendly' enhancement of 2 LNRs per region as examples of best practice was achieved.
- Funding the development of two LNRs per region as centres of excellence for environmental education was achieved.

Wildspace! was targeted at areas of urban and rural deprivation, particularly those that lacked access to natural open space. It was proposed that 70% (£3.8m) should be awarded to projects that were in local authority areas of high deprivation. The Wildspace! scheme comfortably exceeded its 70% targets (awards to deprived areas), awarding grants totalling £5.7m to 124 projects (150% of priority). There was a consequent under-provision for the 30% targets (awards outside deprived areas), £1.3m being awarded to 45 projects (79% of proposal).

4 The achievements of the projects in advancing priorities

Performance in advancing the agreed priorities for the scheme was reported by grantees as follows.

Did your project:	Yes	No
Enable the establishment of Friends Group(s)?	77%	23%
Enable new community groups/individuals to experience or get involved in the management of LNRs?	96%	4%

Did your project:	Yes	No
Enable long-term community ownership or adoption of LNRs?	75%	25%
Benefit people with mobility or learning difficulties?	77%	23%
Provide for young people disadvantaged by lack of access to natural open space?	78%	22%
Promote environmental education to the public?	97%	3%
Offer training, learning and personal development opportunities?	87%	13%
Show innovation in interpretation and community involvement?	86%	14%
Make LNRs safe, accessible and enjoyable to visit?	94%	6%
Realise gains in biodiversity?	87%	13%
Improve the long-term future and/or sustainability of LNRs?	89%	11%
Contribute to local and national policies and strategies?	88%	12%

The figures indicate a very high success rate in furthering all of the scheme's priorities, especially when it is considered that not all projects targeted all priorities. When this factor is taken into account we believe that all the projects that responded to our survey achieved complete success in delivering their initial targets. Many of the respondents who answered "no" to the survey questions added that the particular benefit in question was outside of their projects' aims.

4.1 Local authorities declaring their first LNRs

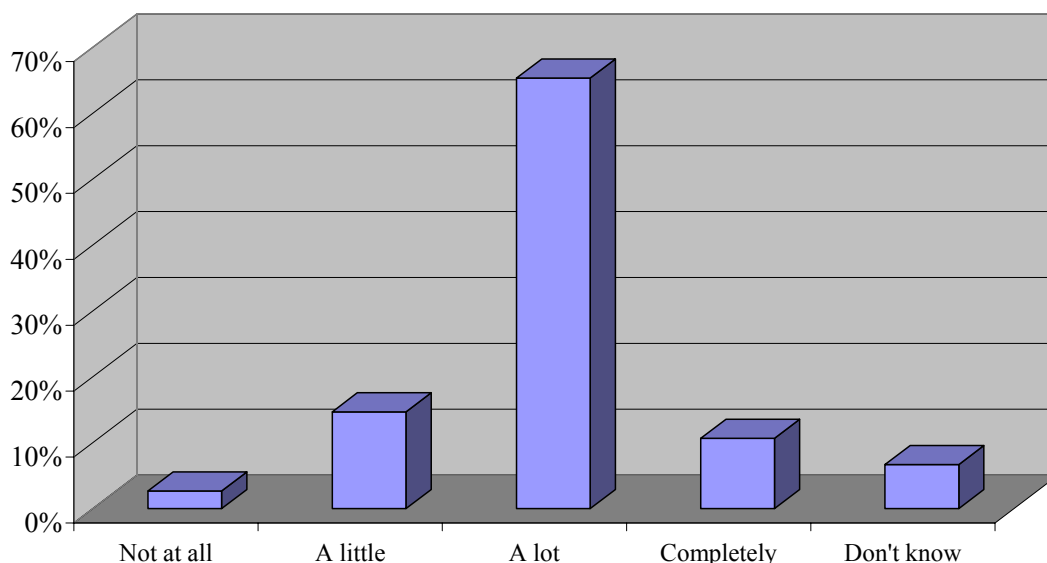
Our survey showed that some local authorities made spectacular gains in their numbers of new LNRs. Gains recorded included: from 0 to 10 (Calderdale Borough Council); from 1 to 11 (Taunton Deane Borough Council); from 2 to 12 (East Riding Council); from 1 to 10 (North Lincolnshire Council) and from 1 to 9 (Epping Forest District Council and Mansfield District Council). This shows that, for those local authorities who took advantage of Wildspace! grants, significant progress could be made in declaring and enhancing LNRs. Our research suggested that around 20 local authorities declared their first LNRs as a result of the Wildspace! scheme.

4.2 Projects that allow biodiversity gains to be realised

In our survey 87% of grantees confirmed that biodiversity gains had been realised through their projects and 13% said that they had not been realised. In interviews it became clear that systematic recording of biodiversity was not yet universally in place and many projects could not yet measure these gains against Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) targets. This is not surprising when it is considered that for many local authorities Wildspace! enabled designation of their first LNRs; that community involvement on this scale was very new, attracting many new volunteers; and that habitat improvements take some time to bear fruit. However it was also clear that recording was, for many projects, the target of training initiatives with Friends of Groups and other volunteers and was a major future priority.

4.3 Involvement of Friends of Groups in LNRs

How involved have Friends Groups and/or volunteers become in the longer term management and sustainability of the LNRs?



The establishment of new Friends of Groups and the refreshing of existing ones was a major focus of the scheme. New groups were set up in 77% of the projects and the level of involvement of all Friends of Groups is shown above.

4.4 Contribution to LNRs by Friends of Groups

The range of contributions to the management, enhancement and sustainability of LNRs was wide, with a very high level of physical and practical work. As well as physical activity, Friends made notable contributions in raising money, in promotion and publicity and in organising and running events, activities and open days. They were also involved in behind-the-scenes work in steering management and helping to draft management plans.

Contribution to LNRs by Friends of Groups	Number of mentions	Frequency of mentions
Physical management and maintenance	45	76%
Fund-raising and grant applications	18	31%
Work parties	15	26%
Attend steering meetings	11	19%
Organise events, activities and open days	11	19%
Contribute to management plans	9	16%
Promotion, newsletters, interpretation and lobbying	8	14%
Wardening, training, surveying and organising contractors	7	12%
Recruit new members	5	9%
Litter picking	5	9%
Take ownership	1	2%

Ability of voluntary groups to:	Projects with CLO	Projects without CLO
Fundraise	59%	39%
Undertake management and maintenance	73%	43%
Engage with wider community	66%	46%

4.5 The importance of CLOs

The lower part of the table above introduces the difference between the effectiveness of Friends of Groups in fundraising, carrying out management tasks and involving the community in projects with and without CLOs. The importance of CLOs to the success of projects was rated as very important or critical in 98% of responses.

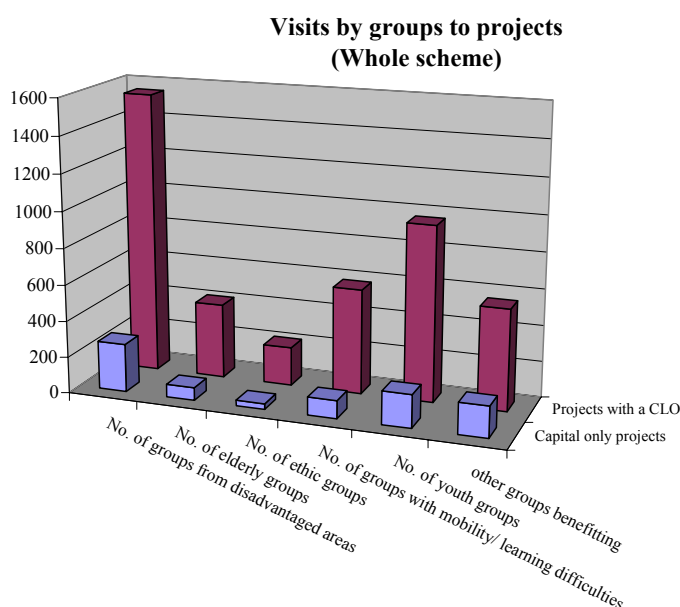
	Not important	Fairly important	Very important	Critical
In your opinion how important to the success of your project was the employment of a CLO?	2%	0	17%	81%

CLOs were highly regarded in facilitating a range of LNR improvements and initiatives.

How successful CLOs have been in facilitating these improvements?	
Physical access (paths, entrances etc.)	75.6%
Intellectual access - interpretation, leaflets, events, guided tours etc	80.2%
Educational opportunities for local schools	75.0%
Educational opportunities for the public	76.9%
Improved friends/volunteer groups	78.7%
Inter-departmental working within local authorities	66.0%
Partnership working with other organisations	73.9%

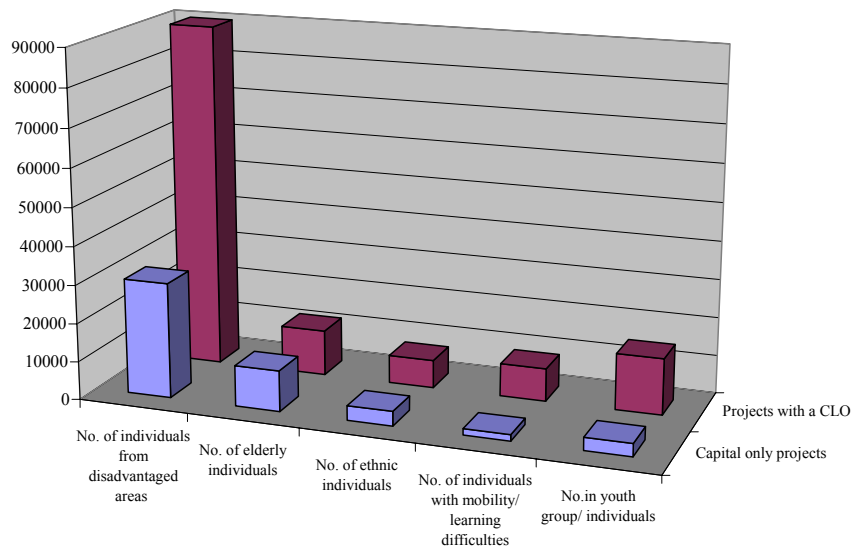
We asked grantees who had employed CLOs whether their roles would continue after the grant period expired: 62% said they would and 38% said they would not. Most who said they would had been able to make the posts part of their permanent staff establishment, either by identifying resources internally or through securing external sources of funding. The fact that so many posts were retained suggests that the improvements to LNRs and the social and environmental benefits of them were recognised within the host organisations.

CLOs also made a radical difference to the numbers and range of groups and individuals visiting LNRs.



The effect was evident across all groups, especially those from disadvantaged areas, but was particularly marked in the cases of traditionally hard-to-reach groups: the elderly, ethnic minorities, people with mobility and/or learning difficulties and young people.

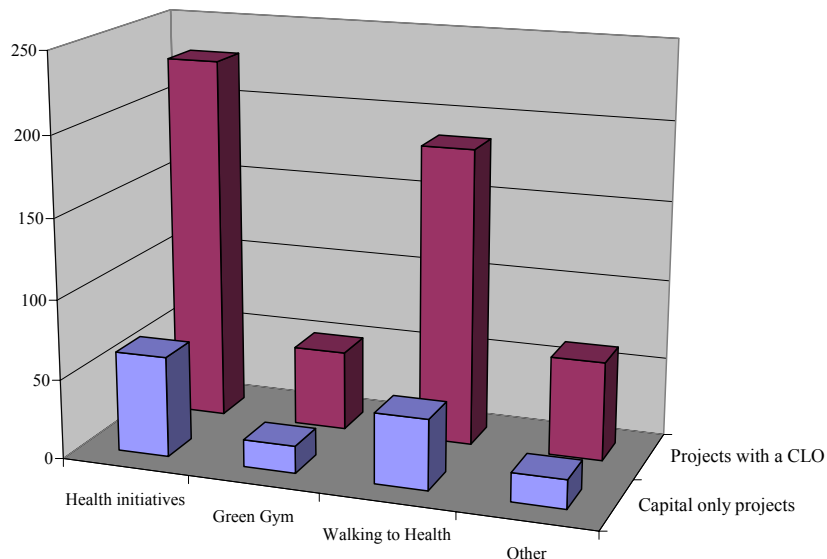
**Visits by individuals to projects
(Whole scheme)**



The benefits of CLOs were also demonstrated in attracting hard-to-reach individuals but a comparison with the previous chart shows clearly that disproportionately more disadvantaged members of communities are encouraged to visit if they come in groups. This is particularly true of people with mobility and/or learning difficulties and young people.

Similarly the health benefits of LNRs were more fully exploited in projects with CLOs than those without, as shown below, with health walks being the most popular benefit:

**Benefits to health
(Whole scheme)**



CLOs also reported a wide range of inter-departmental working within local authorities and working with many partners from the public, charitable and private sectors to the benefit of the LNRs and the communities that use them.

4.6 Projects that promoted environmental education to the public

In our survey we asked grantees if projects had promoted environmental education to the public: 68 of 77 respondents answered and 97% said yes and only 3% said no.

Environmental education has been integral to Wildspace! projects in the sense of offering and enabling individuals and groups to become involved in nature conservation activities. Data from grantees show that the most highly rated social benefit (60% frequency in responses) arising from the scheme was *greater awareness and understanding; opportunities for education, learning, training and developing skills, increased interest* (see below). The range of environmental education projects has been huge: some projects were solely targeted to engaging with local schools and have proved very successful in co-ordinating with the needs of teachers and the National Curriculum for different age groups: one project alone received 13,000 visits from schoolchildren from 25 different schools. In addition to schools projects nearly all projects ran educational programmes for the general public along with educational events and activities. Various aspects of lifelong learning and other educational opportunities were successfully facilitated by CLOs. Grantees scored these aspects as follows:

How successful CLOs have been in facilitating these improvements	
intellectual access (interpretation, leaflets, events, guided tours etc)	80.2%
educational opportunities for local schools	75.0%
educational opportunities for the public	76.9%

In our survey we asked grantees if projects had offered training, learning and personal development opportunities: 87% said they had and these opportunities ranged from practical training in the use of tools, machinery and equipment; management plans and training; IT training; species identification and recording; first aid and health and safety issues.

4.7 Projects that provided for young people disadvantaged by lack of access to natural open space

A particular social benefit of the Wildspace! scheme arose from prioritising projects that provided for young people disadvantaged by lack of access to natural open space, 78% of respondents reporting that their projects met this need. For many projects publicity, school holiday activities and making sites better known encouraged youngsters to enjoy sites in an informal way but there was also outreach work to engage urban children to make use of green spaces. More formal engagement was achieved through working with youth groups: Youth Clubs; Scouts, Guides, Cubs and Brownies; Youth Carers and Youth Offender initiatives. Some LNRs went further by appointing Junior Wardens and one had a Junior Management Committee which took part in third party negotiations on behalf of the Friends of Group.

4.8 Projects which benefit those with mobility or learning difficulties

There is a high level of general awareness to meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act: some projects carried out access audits for all their LNRs and many have introduced measures designed to make access easier for wheelchair users: paths, surfaces, bridges, gates and decking have all been upgraded. It has been a marked feature of the scheme that there has been a great deal of involvement with special needs groups. Interviews have confirmed that there is considerable demand from groups working with people with mobility and learning difficulties and the success of Wildspace! in engaging with them and offering opportunities to become actively involved cannot be overstated. In our survey we asked grantees if their grant had facilitated projects which benefited people with mobility or learning difficulties: 77% said they had, whether or not these benefits were particular targets.

5 The greatest social benefits arising from LNR designation and Wildspace! grants

We asked grantees to tell us *in their own words* what they considered to be the greatest social benefits of LNRs arising from designation and the projects. A wide range of responses was received and the identification of keywords was used to highlight the most and least commonly recognised benefits as shown below.

Greatest social benefits arising from LNR designation Information from 65 grantees	No	Frequency
Greater awareness and understanding; opportunities for education, learning, training and developing skills, increased interest	39	60%
Improved community cohesion; sense of ownership; pride	24	37%
Community involvement, engagement and volunteering	21	32%
Participating in events, activities and practical work parties	15	23%
Establishment and strengthening of Friends and other community groups	15	23%
More use of LNRs by local community	15	23%
Opportunities to improve health; exercise, recreation, green gym, well-being, enjoyment	12	18%
Improved access, accessibility and interpretation	12	18%
Greater social inclusion	12	18%
Better publicity and promotion; raised profile of LNRs	10	15%
Better communication and increased tolerance; making new friends	8	12%
Involvement of young people	7	11%
Improvements to local area and quality of life	6	9%
Increased individual self-esteem and confidence; sense of achievement	6	9%
Opportunity to develop partnerships	5	8%
Involving people with special needs	3	5%
Providing a safe public environment	3	5%

It was clear that the greatest social benefits arose from the efforts made to reach out to local communities in making people realise what was available on their doorsteps. This was achieved through various outreach and promotional efforts of which running events and activities and fitting in with the needs of education and health professionals seemed to be particularly successful. Attracting more people led in turn to other welcome benefits: greater social inclusion and community cohesion; involvement of hard-to-reach groups and increased sense of pride and personal well-being.

6 The greatest environmental benefits arising from LNR designation and Wildspace! grants

We asked grantees what were, in their view, the greatest environmental benefits of LNRs arising from designation and grant support. They identified the benefits below.

Greatest environmental benefits arising from LNR designation Information from 60 grantees	No	Frequency
Introduction of active management, improved management and maintenance	35	58%
Statutory protection from development of wildlife sites	21	35%
Biodiversity gains and habitat creation	20	33%
Increased local authority commitment and support for the wildlife agenda	9	15%
Increased funding opportunities	6	10%
Capital improvements to LNRs	4	7%
Staff freed up to improve other sites	3	5%
Increased area of wildlife rich green space	3	5%
Encouraged more walking and cycling, reducing car use	1	2%

The comments above demonstrate convincingly that, in the view of grantees and in their own words, the benefits to biodiversity, land management and local environmental enhancement were fully realised. Protection of sites from development also ranked highly.

7 Recommendations for any future scheme

These recommendations are offered in the spirit of making positive amendments should any future, similar, scheme be considered. By far the most common comment was that, because the scheme was so successful, it should have been continued or seamlessly replaced to enable the momentum to continue and the gains to be consolidated. In short, most people felt that it did not run for long enough.

- Reduce reporting requirements – too many requests for information can send out an unintended message of distrust and can be regarded as onerous by applicants.
- Consider carefully capping capital grants – this was called ‘moderating’ by the Panel and was done in the interests of securing as many supportable projects as possible. However, to some applicants it created difficulties in generating momentum and meant that considerable time was wasted in implementation as other sources of funding were sought.
- Extend the life of revenue support in projects which target hard-to-reach communities. Engaging people with little initial awareness or interest was frequently reported as very time consuming and some CLOs felt that funding expired just as projects were about to really take off.
- Adding a taper to the period of revenue grants might make it more likely that cash-strapped local authorities and other bodies would find the necessary additional funding for posts to continue. This might also buy time for exploring other sources of external funding.
- Consider producing a ‘welcome pack’ and/or offering induction to people employed through the scheme – some felt they were thrown in at the deep end with little initial support and guidance. This pack could usefully contain guidance on how to engage schools and involve local communities, especially in deprived areas. There is probably enough experience generated by the Wildspace! scheme to produce a series of guidance notes on all the topics researched in this report: access and interpretation improvements; enhancing and recording biodiversity; organising activities and events; involving young people; engaging with people with physical and learning difficulties; innovation in interpretation; offering training and educational opportunities; and working across local authority departments and with external partners.
- Consider establishing a support network (website or email forum) at the outset – this was done eventually but many CLOs felt isolated to begin with.
- Consider holding conferences annually and perhaps one at the end of the scheme to allow people to feed back their experiences: the conference was widely appreciated and helped engender a sense of being part of a family.
- Consider designing any future schemes as a one-stop shop so that the whole range of improvements to local environments desired by communities may be included. This would include funding of posts and capital grants for infrastructure repair and improvement and habitat enhancement, but could also extend to community facilities such as play areas, cafes, visitor centres and meeting rooms, secure storage areas, toilets and anything else that would help put LNRs at the centre of community activity.