

Research notes

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Doorstep Greens

Introduction

The Countryside Agency commissioned The Parks Agency to evaluate three aspects of the Doorstep Greens initiative during 2005. The research was intended to assess the unmet and continuing demand for grants for community green space; to evaluate Doorstep Greens as a potential model for any such future grant schemes; and to identify good practice and make recommendations for consideration by decision-makers and funding agencies. The full report can be downloaded from the 'evaluation' link at www.countryside.gov.uk/doorstepgreens.

Doorstep Greens was launched in 2001 as part of the £125m **Green Spaces and Sustainable Communities Programme**, funded by the New Opportunities Fund (now the Big Lottery Fund). Grants were administered in England by seven award partners: Barnardo's – Better Play (£9m); British Trust for Conservation Volunteers – People's Places (£6m); Countryside Agency – Doorstep Greens (£13m); English Nature – Wildspace! (£4m); Royal Society for Nature Conservation – SEED (£14m for sustainable development and transport over 3 years); Sustrans – Green Routes and Safe Routes (£7m); Sport England – green spaces, playing fields and children's play (£31m).

Doorstep Greens was set up to help 200 communities improve their quality of life by creating or enhancing green spaces near where they live. The aim was to help people who experience disadvantage and to improve places where regeneration of the local environment was crucial.

The three research topics studied were:

1. The demand for grant-funded community green spaces
2. What makes Doorstep Greens unique?
3. The Community Element

1. The demand for grant-funded community green space

There was not enough money to fund every community that wanted to create a Doorstep Green. The aim of this topic, therefore, was to find out more about the continuing demand for grant-funded locally managed green spaces. Groups contacted through the GreenSpace Community Groups Network, the Country Parks Network and the Greenspace Learning Network were invited to complete survey questionnaires. Two hundred organisations took part, representing a diverse range of interests in community green space.

The research showed that:

- All groups said that there is a **continuing demand for grants** for improving green spaces.
- The highest support was for funding for **maintenance** at 60%, **wildlife** at 54% and **land reclamation, clearance and cleaning up** at 45%. The least important priorities were water play at 2%, signs at 9% and wheel sports areas at 9.5%.
- **66% of respondents knew of an actual site that needed a grant and named it.** This gave a total of 104 named sites needing immediate attention.
- **89% also believed that there is a need for support and guidance** to be made available to groups in addition to financial assistance.

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- 63% thought that **community development was the highest priority for support and guidance**. The second priority was help with **fund raising** at 58% and third was **grant advice** (57%).
- 65% prioritised items requiring predominantly **revenue support**.

The recommendations arising from this research are:

- New grant schemes should be established to meet the high demand for both capital and revenue grants to fund the creation, development and maintenance of community green spaces across the country.
- As well as money to ensure the good management and future maintenance of individual green spaces, funding should be made available for providing access to expert advice on project design, project implementation and legal and technical matters.

2. What makes Doorstep Greens unique

This research was designed to compare the Doorstep Greens initiative to other contemporary 'peer' grant schemes that operate in different ways and take different approaches to the regeneration of community green spaces. The Agency wanted to know if and why the Doorstep Greens approach worked well compared to these other schemes, how effective partnership working had been and what good practice lessons could be learnt from the comparisons.

The grant schemes examined were Pocket Parks, Millennium Greens, Living Spaces, Local Heritage Initiative, Doorstep Greens, Better Play, People's Places, and Wildspace! Research was carried out through desk reviews of the aims, costs, methodologies and successes of the 'peer' schemes, structured interviews with key players, questionnaires of managers and surveys of grant recipients.

The research showed that Doorstep Greens was unique amongst its peers for the following reasons:

- Lessons learnt from previous similar schemes helped in anticipating challenges and meeting them at the planning stage.
- Adequate funding for adviser support was put in place. The performance of Doorstep Greens Advisers was reported as outstanding.
- Community involvement and the sustainability of projects were encouraged by insisting on the community buying the land, having a long lease or a management agreement with landowners.
- The combination of a national team to lead, regional teams to implement, and a national grants panel to oversee the initiative brought the combined benefits of clear leadership, local knowledge and consistency in approach.
- Active targeting of local authorities, who were often the landowners, encouraged long-term partnerships and supplied resources for future maintenance. The initiative therefore engaged with local democracy and was able to take advantage of community networks and support already established by the local councils.
- Three-years' maintenance funding and the requirement for a management plan were built into the grants to provide the foundations of sustainability.
- The promotion of wide-ranging partnerships levered in additional funding and gave Greens a wider stakeholder base. The measured approach, demanded by tackling land tenure issues and producing Project Preparation Plans, encouraged the forming of partnerships.
- Funding for Project Preparation Plans allowed for professional input into design, costing and advice at the outset and meant that there was a document to be used for consultation, negotiation, specification and as a record.

The recommendations arising from this research are:

- Greater flexibility should be built into future schemes to meet the needs of all communities, in particular future schemes should be designed as one-stop shops for all the elements of green space improvement, including the higher level of funding required for buildings, play and sport provision.
- Access should be funded to a range of specialists, including legal, financial, land management, ecological and community development. This provision should be formalised through service level agreements with specialist advisory bodies.
- Grant schemes should run for longer periods so that gains in efficiency and experience can be exploited.

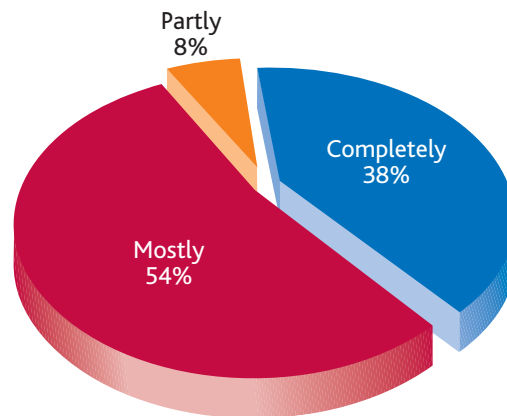
- Future schemes should provide for revenue funding as well as capital, covering future maintenance and staff posts (even if posts were split between two or more sites).
- Sufficient lead-in time (six months) should be allowed to funders for designing and meeting operational requirements, especially the recruitment and training of staff.
- Land tenure requirement should be made easier to achieve while retaining ownership as the preferred option. Leases could be shorter or dispensed with in favour of 'rights over land' which could offer a simpler way of protecting public use.
- While funding is currently available to cover the cost of producing a management plan it should be made a condition of grant that in all cases plan is produced to accepted standards, such as Green Flag Award guidance, employing professionals if needed.
- Communities experiencing difficulties should be targeted with the appropriate help of 'trouble-shooters' who could be commissioned on a call-off basis.
- Maintenance endowment funds should be introduced and permitted to receive grant aid and commercial sponsorship.
- Self evaluations and monitoring should be introduced and the aggregated results made available to policy makers and decision makers.
- Grant schemes should seek to fit in with existing local strategies, policies and established priorities.

3. The community element

A central aim of Doorstep Greens is for them to be a catalyst to community involvement. The research questions under this topic were to determine how important the involvement in projects of local people was; whether Project Preparation Plans delivered on the ground what they promised and whether the community element had been truly catalytic in projects which involved a large range of partners.

The research was conducted as a series of 24 case studies, three in each region, which were examined through desk reviews of the files; interviews with Doorstep Greens advisers and partners; workshops with the grant aided community groups and visual appraisals of the projects.

Have local people got what they wanted from their Doorstep Green through the design and creation stages?



The research showed:

Role of the community - only 8% regarded themselves as being in partnership solely with the Countryside Agency. The others had additional partners involved in their projects (usually local authorities): 38% regarded themselves as equal partners and 54% as lead partners. This showed the truly catalytic nature of the roles of communities in Doorstep Greens. In all cases groups regarded themselves at the very least to be equal partners: interestingly not one group felt themselves to be 'subordinate partners', 'consultees' or 'merely used to attract funding'.

Influence over the project - groups felt that the community had 70% of the influence over the way their projects developed. This confirms the confidence of communities as lead partners. Doorstep Greens advisers were appreciated for their advice and guidance: they had 14% of the influence, above local authorities (who were often the landowners) at 11%. Other partners' influence over the way projects developed was generally of little significance in the projects we visited, notwithstanding a wide range

of support from other grant giving bodies. This suggests that the Countryside Agency is regarded as a safe pair of hands with other people's money, and can be trusted to deliver projects.

Getting what the community wanted at design stage - 92% thought that the community mostly or completely got what it wanted through the design and development stages of their projects. This is consistent with communities feeling genuinely in charge, but flexible enough to concede a level of change that was reasonably consistent with their original aspirations.

Getting what the community wanted at implementation stage - results exactly mirrored those for the previous question, indicating that communities remained pretty much in control despite the inevitable changes that come with implementing any land project.

Did the Project Preparation Plan deliver on the ground what it promised to? In three cases work had not started so this question could not be answered. In seven projects implementation went exactly as planned. The remainder were pretty much on target with some minor modifications, items to be completed and some failed softworks to be done again.

Was the community element truly catalytic, especially in projects involving a large range of partners? In 19 of the 24 cases we found that the community element was truly catalytic; in three cases the projects was not sufficiently advanced to tell; in one it was regarded as opportunistic in relation to Doorstep Greens funding and in one it was not possible to answer.

Overall observations on the Community Element:

- The sites are a great improvement on what was there before: often run down and barren local authority open spaces, some of which were described as "dogs' toilets".
- Community involvement is genuine and communities almost always got exactly what they wanted.
- Projects have provided a learning curve for communities and local authority officers. Communities have learned more about the difficulties and frustrations inherent in the management of public open space and local authority officers have learned or are learning to listen properly to community groups.

4. Conclusions

The evidence presented in the two volumes of the full report shows that:

- There is a continuing and strong demand for grants for improving green spaces.
- New schemes are needed for capital and revenue grants to fund the creation, development and maintenance of community green spaces across the country.
- Funding should be made available for providing access to expert advice on project design, project implementation and legal and technical matters in community-led schemes.
- The engagement of local people in Doorstep Greens has been very meaningful. Projects have nearly all been led by the community which retained a dominant role in their planning, development and implementation. Project Preparation Plans nearly always delivered exactly what they promised.
- In complex projects with a large range of partners the role of the community has been catalytic and remained dominant through implementation and on to completion.

Suggested further reading:

Full version of the evaluation report and appendices

PDF copies available at

<http://www.countryside.gov.uk/LAR/Recreation/DG/evaluation.asp>

Doorstep Greens case studies

(Hard copies available from the Doorstep Greens national project team in Birmingham, PDF copies available at

http://www.countryside.gov.uk/LAR/Recreation/DG/casestudies/case_studies_02.asp)

Telephone 0121 233 9399, email doorstepgreens@countryside.gov.uk

Dr Stewart Harding FRSA
Director
The Parks Agency