

Executive Summary

The Parks for People programme aims to regenerate public parks of national, regional or local heritage value for the enjoyment and recreation of local people. The programme began as a joint initiative between the Big Lottery Fund (BIG) and the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). Between 2006 and 2009 £80m of funding from BIG for public parks in England was added to HLF support for parks projects UK-wide.

Monitoring and evaluation are important elements of the programme. The Heritage Lottery Fund and BIG commissioned Hall Aitken, assisted by Community First Partnership (CFP), to provide support to projects to enable them to fulfil the monitoring and evaluation requirements of the programme.

This is our third and final report, and will show the progress made by 70¹ projects in the programme and the impact so far. Since many projects have not yet completed work this report presents the interim findings and potential future impact.

The Parks for People programme offers grants of between £250,000 and £5 million for projects which involve existing urban or rural green spaces designed for informal recreation and enjoyment, which local communities value as part of their heritage. The parks must be freely accessible to members of the public, and actively involve local people in their running and activities.

The programme requires all projects to work towards the following five outcomes:

- Outcome 1 – Increasing the range of audiences.
- Outcome 2 – Conserving and improving the heritage value.
- Outcome 3 – Increasing the range of volunteers involved.
- Outcome 4 – Improving skills and knowledge through training.
- Outcome 5 – Improving management and maintenance.

Parks for People in context

Much has been written about the value of green space and that it forms an intrinsic part of the fabric of urban society without which our towns and cities would be much worse places to live.

Good quality green space can result in a wide range of benefits, including:

- Economic value.
- Physical and Mental Health Value.
- Benefits for Children and Young People.
- Social Cohesion.
- Sustainability and biodiversity.

Investment in the quality of green space in the

“Parks and green spaces are the backbone of sustainable and high-quality urban environments. A growing body of robust research shows that high-quality green spaces bring considerable benefits to local economies, to people’s physical and mental health, and to the environment.”
(CABE 2010)

¹ There were 72 projects originally. Mesnes Park in Wigan is two separate grants but is only required to submit one set of monitoring data, and Bentley Park is currently on hold.

last decade has resulted in a Parks renaissance. More people are getting involved in Friends groups, satisfaction with greenspace has increased and expectations have been raised. However, recent cuts in Local Authority budgets will constrain management budgets and the challenge for Parks Managers will be to safeguard the service and quality expected by local people with less money.

The concept of Big Society presents an opportunity for Local Authorities to develop greater ownership of services and assets by the Civic Sector. Examples of community trusts taking on the ownership of parks exist, however there is a need to develop organisational and community capacity before transfer of assets can take place. The Parks for People programme can help to build this capacity, with its focus on involving local people in heritage projects and increasing volunteer capacity.

The need for effective evaluation

Recent changes in government policy and public sector cuts mean that demonstrating the impact and value of improvements to parks has never been so important. Although the benefits of greenspace are widely understood, historically there is little evidence of the value that high quality green space can make to wider agendas such as public health, quality of life, sustainability, education, community safety and social inclusion. Parks managers have lacked the business case for future investment or evidence of benefits to defend themselves against cuts.

Our work has shown that evaluating the impact of park projects is a relatively new concept and often managers lack the knowledge and skills to implement effective evaluation methods which will provide a case for future investment, both at a local and national level.

Hall Aitken and CFP were commissioned in 2007 to *'focus on providing support and advice to grantholders on their project monitoring and self-evaluation work; collating and analysing grantholders' data and evidence; and carrying out further research to get an overall picture of the social, economic and environmental impacts of the programme'*.

The support provided and data collected during our 3 year contract represents a significant step change in building the capacity of the greenspace sector in monitoring and evaluation. The unprecedented amount of data collected will help HLF and BIG at a national level and Local Authorities at a local level to demonstrate the impact of investment in parks.

Overview

Our contract involved working with 70 projects in receipt of £155m of Parks for People funding across two separate HLF Strategic Plans (SP). Projects in England from SP2 are joint funded by HLF and BIG. Projects in SP3 and all those in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales are just funded by HLF. As at December 2010 19% (£29m) of the funding had been claimed.

Projects are expected to develop a full set of baseline and target data during the development stage (once they have received their stage 1/first round pass and are working to develop their stage 2/second round application). 11 projects in our study are still in the development stage and are working to collect this data.

59 projects are currently in the delivery stage; they have received their stage 2/round 2 pass and are either on site or working towards this. They should have a full set of baseline and target data and be some way towards implementing their plans. Limited progress will have been made in some cases where projects have only just started to deliver, with many not yet on site.

Despite some projects starting the delivery of revenue activities before or while the capital works are ongoing, many have not. Therefore the 11 projects which have completed the capital works will be able to demonstrate progress towards achieving the outcomes, but in some cases the revenue elements have not yet started. Projects have up to 5 years to implement their revenue plans, and no projects within our study have fully completed all their proposals.

Despite the relatively early stage of the 70 projects in our study, the majority have baseline data and targets in place. This means we can build an effective 'before' picture and show the potential impact of the programme. Projects which are further progressed are starting to return 'actual' data, and through this we can start to make interim conclusions about the impact of the programme.

Outcome 1 – increasing the range of audiences

In order to effectively increase the range of audiences in parks, projects are expected to understand their baseline visitor counts, develop a visitor profile and compare this to the local area. From this information they can identify under-represented groups and develop an Audience Development/Activity plan that increases visitor numbers and/or diversifies their audience base.

From the baseline data collected from 70 projects we can see that:

- There are 36m annual person visits.
- On average, parks have 630,000 annual person visits.
- Overall, slightly more women (53%) than men (46%) visit parks.
- 11% of visitors are BME.
- 6% are disabled.
- Adults represent the largest age group visiting (in 62% of parks) and young people the smallest age group (in 66% of parks).
- The most popular reason for visiting a park is for a walk, closely followed by play and fresh air.
- On average 67% of visitors are satisfied with the park.

Overall, visitor numbers are expected to increase significantly to a total of 41m annual person visits. This is an additional 5.4m annual visits, a 15% increase amongst all projects in our study. Projects are using a variety of methods to increase their overall number of visitors including regular communication and public relations strategies, events and activities programmes, new and improved facilities and

Case study: Devonport Park in Plymouth aimed to increase visitor numbers by 15%. By last year, the park has enjoyed an increase in visitor numbers of over 30% over the past two years. This has been achieved through delivery of a strong media programme, regular events and organised walks through the park.

visits by schools and other organised groups.

Outcome 1 asks projects to increase the *range* of audiences, not just visitor numbers. We would expect that projects would identify particular target groups and plan activities and events to attract these groups. However, the survey and data results show that only a small number of parks are attempting to attract a different 'kind' of visitor:

- The majority of projects are not attempting to significantly change the gender split.
- Overall projects aim to increase BME visitors from 11% to 14%, with a third of projects aiming to increase their BME visitors by at least 1 percentage point. Targets are designed to reflect local demographics.
- On average projects aim to increase their disabled visitors from 6% to 8%.
- Only 8 projects want to change their visitor age profile.

Impact to date

So far annual person visits have increased by 890,000, or 16% of the 5.4m target. Overall good progress has been made, with 7 parks already achieving or exceeding their target.

No major changes have been made to visitor profiles, however there has been a significant increase in BME visits from 6% to 11% among a small number of parks.

There is also evidence of an increase in perceptions of safety, increase in community ownership and pride, improvements to the profile of the area and overall contribution to more sustainable communities.

Outcome 2 – conserving and enhancing our diverse heritage

Outcome 2 focuses on the capital works, which will conserve and enhance the heritage value of the park. This includes the physical conservation work to the landscape, features and facilities, as well as working to increase applicants' and visitors' appreciation and understanding of the heritage value of the park.

Overall the programme will see over 100 buildings and 230 features restored. The majority of parks are restoring historic features, improving landscaping and infrastructure and making a visible transformation to the appearance of the park. A relatively small number are removing buildings from at risk registers.

Projects have used a variety of methods to increase visitors' appreciation and understanding of heritage. These include interpretation boards and improved signage, information materials, guided tours and nature

Case study: *Barnes Park in Sunderland included restoration work to railings, bandstand, gates, gateway and pillars and benches. There will also be improvements to the lake and the cannon.*

To increase awareness and appreciation of the Park's Heritage, there will be a time capsule project, the Friends group are working on a DVD that shows the history of the park, and the Park's team and Friends Group are working on the local history. They also have a website which is well used by local schools, had articles in the local press, and run local exhibitions.

trails, history projects, education packs, events and marketing. Projects are involving Friends groups in these activities and employing on-site staff to deliver talks and tours.

Impact to date

So far, 35 buildings and 78 heritage features have been repaired or restored.

100% of projects which have completed the capital works and 94% of projects in delivery have noticed an increase in visitors' appreciation or understanding of heritage

Projects have also resulted in stimulating other heritage projects, contributions to local tourism and changes to way Local Authorities think about heritage.

Outcome 3 – increasing the range of volunteers

The purpose of outcome 3 is to increase both numbers and types of volunteers involved in the project. The aim of the Parks for People programme is to not only increase opportunities for volunteering in parks, but also to attract groups which do not traditionally volunteer (for example young people or BME groups).

The baseline data collected shows that across the programme:

- 2,375 people were involved in volunteering in the parks before the projects started.
- There is an average of 34 volunteers per park, however this ranges from none in 10 parks to over 200 in War Memorial Park and Brockwell Park.
- This work represented a total of 50,000 volunteer hours spent in parks in a year – an average of 719 hours per park.
- More women than men volunteer (54% and 46% respectively).
- Only 9% are from BME communities (compared to 11% of visitors).
- In the majority of parks the largest age group volunteering is over 50s. Only in 3 parks is the largest age group under 40.

Case study: *Chances Park in Carlisle set targets to increase volunteer numbers from a low baseline of 6 to 42. The aim was to involve volunteers in maintenance, horticulture, marketing and one off events. They have now established a 'Friends of Chances Park' group and over £1,000 worth of volunteer hours were recorded from April to May 2010.*

The project has also formed links with voluntary sector organisations, which has given local people a new sense of ownership of the park.

The majority of projects are involving volunteers from the start of the project. Engaging volunteers from an early stage provides a variety of different opportunities for people to get involved.

Across the programme it is expected that the total number of volunteers will increase dramatically, from 2,375 to 6,442, a 171% increase of 4,067 volunteers overall. As

the number of volunteers increases, so will the number of volunteer hours. It is expected that the time invested by volunteers will double from 50,000 hours per year to just under 100,000 hours. This represents £667,000 of volunteer activity using a daily rate of £50.

Projects are involving volunteers in a variety of ways; in the events and activities programmes, on project steering groups, through carrying out elements of the physical works and ongoing maintenance and by getting involved in the monitoring and evaluation of the project by carrying out surveys and visitor counts.

Impact to date

So far an additional 971 volunteers have been involved in projects, 24% of the 4,067 target. 10 projects have already met or exceeded their targets.

There has been an increase of 16,000 volunteer hours, which represents £107,000 of activity.

Volunteers have benefited from employment opportunities, increased confidence, health benefits, community cohesion and improved skills.

Outcome 4 – improving skills and knowledge through training

To achieve outcome 4, projects should establish a training plan for staff and volunteers. They should also consider establishing opportunities for work placements and use of the park by third parties as a training venue.

Across the programme, it is anticipated that approximately 930 staff and 1,700 volunteers will receive training. 370 work placements will be established and 570 qualifications obtained. In addition to this, 2,500 third parties will also benefit from using the parks as a training venue.

Projects have implemented a wide range of training opportunities in:

- Capital works and maintenance;
- Horticulture;
- Management; and
- Planning and running activities.

Case study: *Gheluvelt Park, Worcester. Staff and volunteers have benefited from a range of training opportunities, resulting in 48 staff members trained and 2 volunteers. The project has also benefited from the Future Jobs Fund and has been able to establish 5 work placements within the park; all of which have also benefited from this training. So far 5 qualifications have been achieved, and the park has also been used as a training venue by 16 third parties.*

Impact to date

So far 175 staff and 133 volunteers have been trained. 49 work placements have been established, 71 qualifications obtained and 86 third parties have benefited from using the park as a training venue.

Benefits from the training include employment, skills, confidence, improved maintenance of parks, better communication with visitors in terms of raising the profile of the area and ability to share learning elsewhere.

Outcome 5 – improving management and maintenance

To achieve this outcome projects should develop a management and maintenance plan and achieve the Green Flag award within a year of completing the capital works. We would expect that projects would establish a baseline Green Flag score and build into their management and maintenance plan ways to achieve the Green Flag award.

Surprisingly only 22 of the 70 projects (30%) have set a baseline Green Flag score. This means that projects that don't will not have an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses that should inform their plan to achieve the award.

It is positive to note that 13 projects have a target to exceed the Green Flag pass mark of 66.

Some projects have also set other targets for Outcome 5, including:

- Customer satisfaction; satisfaction rates are due to increase from 67% to 82%.
- Perceptions of safety.
- Performance targets for staff.
- Achievement of Green Heritage award.

Projects are using a variety of ways to improve maintenance and management, including the appointment of additional dedicated staff and apprentices, improved design specification to reduce future maintenance costs, greater emphasis on responsive maintenance and enhanced supervision.

Case study; Hale Park, Halton. With better equipment and more staff the park has had Green Flag status for 2 years. A rise in standards and people's expectations now means the park is held in higher regards, local people are now proud of the park. The responsive team have actually witnessed an increase in reports of minor vandalism, graffiti etc. The team believe that this is caused by higher expectations of the local community now the improvement work is complete.

Impact to date

So far, 11 parks hold Green Flag status. 2 projects have improved their baseline Green Flag score and 3 have met or exceeded their target.

Satisfaction has also increased substantially from 61% to 80% amongst 29 projects which have carried out formal satisfaction surveys.

Conclusions

Despite a historical lack of evidence and experience of monitoring and evaluation in the greenspace sector, we have managed to collect a comprehensive suite of evaluation data and information from all projects in our study. Through the support provided we have been able to drastically improve the ways parks measure their

success and the dataset collected goes a considerable way to demonstrating the potential and actual impact of the programme to date.

Overall the programme has made a difference to the ways in which Local Authorities think about audience development, heritage management, engaging volunteers and skills development, as well as building capacity to develop their approach to monitoring and evaluation.

So far good progress has been made with increasing visitor numbers. Projects are using a range of methods to engage visitors, from events and activities programmes to improvements in marketing and communication. Being able to fund dedicated staff to implement these plans has been crucial.

Excellent progress has been made with capital improvements. Projects are also looking at ways to improve visitors' understanding and appreciation of heritage, through the activities and events, tours and other heritage related projects. They aren't just relying on the capital improvements to achieve these targets.

Projects are also successfully engaging volunteers in the delivery of many activities which helps ensure that the programme meets the needs of park users. There is also evidence that the programme is having a wider impact on park users, individuals working in and volunteering in parks and the wider community.

Almost a quarter of staff to be trained has been achieved, with many gaining qualifications, enhanced skills and knowledge. And management and maintenance is also improving as a result of the programme as additional revenue funding has enabled projects to employ more staff and sustain a higher standard of maintenance.

The key area of weakness in the programme so far is the lack of focus on targeting audience development or volunteer plans to specific groups. Only a small number of projects have identified hard to reach groups and are actively trying to engage these groups in the project.

Projects also need to review their current status in terms of Green Flag, as without having an idea of where they are now, implementing plans to achieve the award will be extremely difficult.

Although it is relatively early days in the development of the 70 projects in our study, the evidence collected so far suggests that overall the programme is on track to achieve its outcomes. However, projects need to consider audience and volunteer profiles in more detail and look to target their approaches to engage more hard to reach groups.