

Evaluation of the Neroche Landscape Partnership Scheme

The Neroche Landscape Partnership Scheme (NLPS) ran from 2006 to 2011 in south west England funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. It consisted of landscape and heritage based activities that sought to maximise the value of the northern part of the Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty for wildlife conservation, access and recreation, learning and skills development. The scheme was led by the Forestry Commission (FC) with eleven partnership organisations involved. The FC commissioned an evaluation to maximise learning from the programme to help underpin the scheme's legacy and provide useful data and insights for future (landscape) partnership schemes.



"... the fact that the Forestry Commission as a government organisation has had the courage to lead a scheme like this is fantastic. This is what the role of a public sector should be, it's providing leadership, it's being a catalyst but it is involving lots of others and it's going across a much broader remit."
(NLPS Board Member)

Background

Landscape Partnership Schemes (LPSs) require a holistic approach to landscape heritage and encompass diverse objectives and different strands of work and activities. They are challenging to design, manage and deliver. The key elements of the NLPS consisted of strong partnership working and community engagement, landscape change including forest clearance and cattle grazing, and development of a wide range of activities and projects focused on art, education, local history and recreation. Neroche has distinguished itself from other LPSs through its strong community-based involvement and decision-making. It is an excellent example of the 'Big Society' which is a key focus of the current government.

Objectives

This research aimed to:

- Develop a narrative that outlines the development and story of the NLPS
- Examine the value of the landscape partnership approach by considering:
 - project impacts from beneficiaries' perspectives
 - partnership working in terms of partners' experiences and engagement, and the governance structure and processes of the scheme
- Identify the successes and challenges of the NLPS.

Methods

This ex-post evaluation researched people's opinions, perceptions and experiences. The following data was collected and analysed:

- questionnaires mailed to 195 participants (79 responded) and 7 apprentices (6 responded)
- 44 interviews with members of the landscape partnership board, the local stakeholders group, the project team and beneficiaries of the scheme
- 2 focused group discussions, one with some of the members of the local stakeholders group and another with Neroche-based forestry apprentices.

Findings

- Expert and local knowledge were combined to produce the NLPS work programme.
- Sensitivity to local context was key to the NLPS' success.
- The local stakeholders group were surprised and pleased to be given a strong role in decision making within the scheme.
- Identifying synergies between partners early on paid dividends later on.
- The diverse range of NLPS activities (education, art, landscape change) enabled new audiences to be reached and provided some existing users with new experiences.
- Beneficiaries talked about gaining new knowledge about the area, learning new skills and increasing confidence to participate in and enjoy the local landscape.
- Forest clearance to create more open habitats caused concerns and vocal opposition amongst some residents. Much time was devoted to discussing and alleviating concerns.
- Even with dedicated and wide-spread efforts spent on communication, reaching diverse audiences took several years and substantial resources.
- Capabilities and priorities within some partner organisations changed during the scheme and are likely to affect the type of 'follow-on' projects, and the composition and approach of future partnerships.

Recommendations

Partnership working:

- Discussion of different expectations and capacity early on are critical along with clarifying priorities to enable project partners to deliver outputs on time.
- Allow staff and partners the freedom and flexibility to be creative in project design and delivery, which can help engender a high level of mutual trust and respect.
- Establish small working groups to help maintain discussion and input from partners and stakeholders within large partnership consortia.

Landscape projects - Big Society:

- Opposition and controversial issues require a sensitive but swift and united response from project leaders/team.
- The early establishment and continued support of a local stakeholders group can result in a highly effective working relationship and a strong sense of acting 'in the community interest'.
- Professional support and training to build knowledge, skills and confidence is needed for communities to play active parts in planning and delivering services and projects. Existing public bodies and third sector organisations have a key role to facilitate this process.

Partners

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Reports and Publications

Carter C., O'Brien L. and Morris J. (2011) *Enabling Positive Change: Evaluation of the Neroche Landscape Partnership Scheme*. Farnham: Forest Research. 108pp.

Neroche LPS Website: <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/INFD-8H8DFS>