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Evaluation of Local Places for Nature Programme: year one (2020 to 2021) (summary)

The evaluation of the first year of the Local Places for Nature Programme.

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Introduction

The Local Places for Nature (LPfN) programme was designed with the aim of trialling local scale interventions that support nature. The primary focus of LPfN is to engage communities and encourage participation in the efforts to create places for nature, in turn contributing to the preservation and sustainability of biodiversity alongside the social and wellbeing benefits of interacting with nature. Importantly, the scale of intervention aims to be relatively small and local, but visible, in an attempt to establish and develop accessible 'nature on their doorstep'.

The LPfN programme seeks to encourage and fund community groups to engage in small scale growing in spaces within their communities. The approach represents a relatively new way of funding and working and was intended to be a demonstrator, piloting different approaches. The programme's logic is that if people can engage with nature where they live, work and access services, they are more likely to value it. If people value nature, they are more likely to support action, initiatives and spending to support efforts at reversing decline and enhancing nature. Moreover, there is a belief that more indirect benefits will be achieved from engagement with nature such as improved physical and mental wellbeing.

The programme also works towards the modest measures outlined by the First Minister by targeting urban and peri-urban areas and public spaces that lack

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access to nature. It aims to target deprived and disadvantaged communities in particular.

A £5 million capital fund to establish the LPfN programme was subsequently announced in the draft budget on the 12 December 2019. The programme also utilised additional funding in the year, and the budget was raised to £6.9m.

The programme operates through three scheme managers. The Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) administer grants (£2.7m in total) to 25 Local Nature Partnerships (LNPs) to deliver local plans to restore and enhance nature. The National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) offer (£2.3m in total) capital grants from £10-50k for more bespoke and tailored interventions. Keep Wales Tidy (KWT) offer (£1.8m in total) pre-paid starter and development packs of capital assets to communities that enable community groups to establish Butterfly Gardens; Fruit Gardens; and Wildlife Gardens. More ambitious Development Packages were also arranged and delivered by KWT.

The three schemes are designed to reach different groups and accomplish slightly different outcomes. Together, they have the potential to affect change on a variety of scales, for communities and individuals, as well as to encourage sustainability and prolonged engagement.

This evaluation sought to assess the progress made towards this programme benefiting nature 'on your doorstep' from the perspectives of scheme managers and participants by the end of the operation period in March 2021. More specifically, it sought to explore the following research questions:

- Has the programme helped create 'nature on your doorstep' in urban and peri-urban areas? And if so, in what ways?
- What impact has the programme had upon individuals and groups involved?
- How sustainable is the engagement of the groups with local nature?

A range of methods were used including:

- reviewing monitoring data
- semi structured interviews with 13 LNP coordinators
- five NLHF Capital Grants project recipients

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- an online survey with 146 KWT 'pre-paid' package applicants
- a focus group with KWT package applicants
- semi structured interviews with five management and delivery personnel
- semi structured interviews with 12 stakeholders identified in partnership with the programme management staff

The delivery of the demonstrator programme coincided with the coronavirus pandemic and associated lockdown, social distancing and wider public health measures imposed by the UK and Welsh Governments. Consequently, due to delays in the delivery of the programme and the early stage at which this evaluation took place, it is not yet possible for the full impacts of the programme to be seen. It was also felt by most respondents that many of the community impacts of the spaces will not be visible or measurable until at least the Spring of 2021.

Findings

The data strongly suggests that all three schemes, though delayed by the impact of the pandemic, have or will create new spaces of 'nature on your doorstep'. LNP and Capital Grants projects will likely lead to the creation of new spaces that are embedded within wider sustainability plans to ensure that these spaces are accessible and maintained into the future.

However, the engagement of, and consequently the impact upon, communities has been limited due to the pandemic. Coordinators and project managers were nonetheless optimistic in their expectations of the impact that the new spaces would have in enabling access and engagement with nature for communities.

LNP coordinators and Capital Grants schemes define rural and peri-urban areas of deprivation more loosely and give consideration to the groups that will access and benefit from the sites, not simply its geographical location. This more nuanced interpretation of urban and peri-urban areas should be maintained, to enable the schemes to capitalise on a key strength of their design, namely their flexibility and responsiveness to local circumstances and contexts.

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The KWT packages meanwhile have had a positive impact on individuals and groups who have engaged with the work and spaces. The packages sought to engage groups with nature projects, particularly new groups. The first year of the programme has provided proof of this concept, with a range of groups, including newly formed groups, engaging with the packages. More generally, the scheme appears to play a valuable role in initiating engagement with nature and encouraging the groups to develop their activities with either a development package or by approaching the NLHF Capital Grants scheme.

Respondents also confirmed the logic of the programme by reporting improved physical and mental well-being as a result of the activities. These individuals noted a desire to continue their engagement with nature projects and to support other local and national nature programmes.

The project officers for the KWT packages were also widely thought to be valuable assets for the scheme, with their site visits involving the sharing of good practice and information with volunteers and groups. This element may be key in developing the skills and knowledge of often first-time nature volunteers. Project officers are also likely sources of insight into the groups and individuals engaging with the programme as well as the communities being targeted. They consequently represent key sources of knowledge and experience.

Nevertheless, the spaces created are not exclusively in urban and peri-urban areas. The automatic approval of over 200 KWT packages for Town and Community councils, many in rural locations, has restricted the ability to focus exclusively on urban or peri-urban areas. Moreover, the data available did not allow any judgement in relation to the quality of the nature spaces, and whether the packages or indeed the extent to which any scheme was improving nature spaces.

The LNPs and NLHF schemes have both incorporated their sustainability plans into their designs and planning. Moreover, the Local Authorities and the Town and Community councils (particularly for Capital Grants holders) offer a resource to support continued engagement with the spaces. There was evidence also of KWT package holders expressing an interest in developing their spaces in a more bespoke manner and doing so by seeking to access the Capital Grants scheme.

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The NLHF Capital Grants programme was deemed to be particularly effective in supporting wider masterplans for the regeneration of particular areas in very specific and bespoke ways. In theory, the grants were also able to act as a means of developing spaces that had benefited from the KWT pre-paid packages, though to date, only enquiries have been made. This potential represents a means of supporting the sustainability of groups' engagement with nature.

However, though in contact with scheme management teams and LNP coordinators, it is unclear what impact the pandemic has had upon volunteer groups and their capacity to engage post-pandemic. Assessing this capacity and supporting engagement should be a key consideration for the programme management in the forthcoming year.

There is considerable evidence that the demonstrator fund has encouraged a constructive learning process. Effective internal evaluation cycles have been evidenced throughout the programme. Coupled with the considerable practical experience of delivering within a particularly challenging context, the management and delivery teams appear well placed and informed to improve and refine the programme during the 2021-22 year.

The schemes have been significantly affected by the pandemic, which has delayed procurement and limited the availability of deliveries, equipment, and materials as well as the backlog of work delaying contractors from engaging with some sites. In the KWT scheme's case, project officers have supported delivery, whilst the other schemes have had to delay follow-on work.

Most impactful however is the significant restriction to volunteering and individual or community engagement across all schemes and sites. It is thought that the 18-44 year-old and the 75+ age category of participants may have faced significant barriers to participation due to shielding and vulnerability or childcare and caring responsibilities.

Given the core aims of the programme, the impact that has been evidenced within the report must be understood within this context, and that in all likelihood, a wider and bigger scale of impact may have been possible had lockdowns not restricted engagement with the spaces to the extent that they have. All schemes

are nonetheless thought to have benefitted from an increasing demand to access more spaces of nature. The aftermath of the lockdown may prove a unique opportunity to engage people with nature, biodiversity, environmental and conservation volunteering.

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government.

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