

COMMUNITY NETWORKING PROJECT

Summary of the Community Networking Project and resulting resources developed

For: GreenSpace North West Community Involvement Working Group

Full text can be found at <http://www.green-space.org.uk/community/research.htm>

Funded by the HLF, the Community Networking Project was run by GreenSpace from November 2001 to January 2004.

Objectives:

- To compile a National Register of community based organisations across the UK with an interest in parks and green space
- To research the resources and abilities of these existing community based groups
- To increase the efficiency and ability of such groups to function effectively.

THE COMMUNITY REGISTER

In November 2003 there were 3500 groups on the register with 1700 agreeing to share their contact details on the website (<http://www.green-space.org.uk/community/index.htm>).

Aims of the register were to contribute to communication and networking, to reduce isolation between groups and help them to share experiences and solutions to problems.

The register is now part of the Community Network, with dedicated staff and an area of the GreenSpace website. Membership of the network is free and benefits include a newsletter, access to the on line list of community groups and also various support services.

GreenSpace now provide a facility for groups to register or update their details on line as keeping the details current was identified as a concern.

Publications available for purchase include:

- Saving open space How to run a successful community campaign
- How to make a difference Setting up and maintaining a parks and green space community group
- Claiming your share A guide to external funding for parks and green space community groups

Free resources include:

- How to tackle graffiti
- How to make a funding application
- How to start a community project
- How to start a community group
- How to build a community based website

RESEARCH PROJECT

GreenSpace compiled a database of community group contact details and circulated a questionnaire. Local Authorities were the source of the majority of contacts.

The number of community groups in the UK was estimated at 4000 and data from 1000 groups was analysed giving about a 25% representation.

SUMMARY OF THE DATA

The project categorised the groups as follows:

- Friends Groups
- Environmental Conservation Groups
- Tenant and Resident Associations (TARA)
- Heritage Conservation
- Single Issue
- Parks Trust
- Park Watch
- Other

The primary categories were Friends of (41.3%), Environmental Conservation (33.2%) and TARA (8.7%). The data was analysed by all responses and considering these 3 categories separately.

The vast majority of groups formed since 1990 and the friends groups were younger than the other categories. The late 1990s saw a rise in group formation attributed to the development of Best Value within local government and the requirement for community consultation associated with HLF bids. More recently there has been a decline in the formation of groups and the low number of groups older than 13 years can be seen as indicative of a lifecycle pattern. The report recommends that more research be done on the life cycle of groups.

Constitutions help a group to be formally recognised by local authorities and funding agencies, and are seen as indicative of a level of organisation. 75% of groups had a constitution and there was no correlation between the age of the group and the presence of a constitution. The average age of groups with a constitution was only one year older than those without one.

The average membership of groups was 134 with an average of 36% of the membership being actively involved in activities. Less than 10% of groups felt their membership is declining and 56% reported an increase. The data indicated that older groups were more likely to have declining membership and younger groups a growing membership although this was not very defined.

The report extrapolated that 4000 groups across the country with an average 134 members would give 500 000 individuals involved in groups. Taking an average for active members and the number of hours contributed per year, GreenSpace estimate that 38400000 working hours are contributed per year with a total value of £1.7 million.

Only 22% of groups are registered charities and these have an older average age than the general population of groups.

The largest numbers of community groups by region were found in the South East (18.1%), London (16.9 %) and the North West (13.0%). This is not taking into account population size. The North West has the second highest number of Friends and TARAs after London, however is joint fifth for Environmental Conservation groups.

The most common areas of work were promoting / encouraging the use of the site and improvement tasks. TARAs were more likely to use the site as a resource for the promotion of their activities rather than viewing the site as the reason for their activities.

51% of groups ranked environmental conservation as their first priority although the interpretation of this term is thought to have included general maintenance as well as nature conservation. Less than 6% of groups indicated capital projects were their main priority.

Young people followed by old people were the two main sectors identified as benefiting from groups' work and relatively few (20%) felt they were benefiting ethnic minorities. GreenSpace therefore identify involving ethnic minorities as an area of potential expansion.

The average size of site was large (49.14 Ha) with TARAs generally working on much smaller sites (avg 6.2 Ha). This is probably due to TARAs being more focused on residential areas.

Fifty six percent of groups consider that their site is of historic interest with this being strongly associated with the type of site. 87% of churchyards and cemeteries were rated as of historic interest with only 2% of allotments and 0% of sports grounds.

29.7% of groups categorised their frequency of work parties 'other' rather than as a time period indicating a flexibility of work patterns. The second most popular frequency was monthly (28.8%).

The vast majority of groups (91.2%) were on local authority land with only 0.9% possessing legal ownership rights. Although the majority of contacts were located through local authorities, this statistic still indicates the fundamental relationship between the authorities and community groups.

57% of groups felt that they were generally kept well informed by their local authorities. GreenSpace interpret this as a positive situation with room for improvement. Advice and staff time were the most common types of support provided by local authorities, training and office space being the least frequent. This could be due to advice and staff time being easier to meet out of existing budgets. There was a clear correlation between how well informed groups feel that they are and the quality of their relationship with the local authority.

28% of groups do not have formal meetings with local authorities. Quarterly and monthly formal meetings are the most popular for the groups that do. 65% of the groups that never have formal meetings still rated their relationship with their authority as excellent or good. Formal meetings with the land owner can indicate a break down in the relationship and many local authorities have informal relationships with their community groups.

Less than 5% of the total groups felt they had a very poor relationship with their local authority nearly 70% rating it as good or excellent.

50% of community groups have contact with other similar groups. 69% of groups were in contact with another special interest group, the most popular being BTCV, then a category 'Other National Group' encompassing a variety of different support bodies with Groundwork third. 4% of groups specified that they would like contact with other groups in their area as well as groups facing similar issues. When answering questions on networking groups identified that they would like opportunities to share ideas and locate information. Networking can help resolve some issues daunting for single groups such as insurance and equipment.

41% of groups had an annual income of less than £500 and 20% had an income of over £5000. The reasons for the disparity in income and the low number of mid range incomes are not clear and warrants further investigation. It is possible that income figures may include grants for capital works to the site and may not accurately represent an average annual income.

The greatest source of income was membership, followed by local authority grants and fundraising events. Membership is stable income and indicates that most groups are sustainable independent of external funds. However approximately 50% of groups have income that lasts for less than 12 months and when combined with the predominant low income levels this highlights the need for funds which can enable long term stability such as training, capacity building and employed staff such as fundraisers.

Local Authorities were the highest recipient of funding applications (55.8% of groups). The majority of these grants are most likely to be small subsistence awards to aid the start up of the group. More significant awards are likely to come from lottery board or from national agencies. Only 30% made applications to the lottery board and 20.1% to national agencies indicating scope for development in this area.

Groups with charitable status had higher incomes although it is difficult to say if the charitable status is the driving factor in this trend. Also groups with a constitution tended to have higher

income than those who did not. Both charitable status and a constitution increase the range of funds that can be applied for and also may be an indicator of higher levels of organisation.

11% of groups stated that they require capital funding to develop and enhance the site they work with. 15% of groups stated that they wanted resources such as more local authority staff time, provision of information about the site, office space, photocopying facilities and training. Training, office facilities and storage were the least frequent types of Local Authority support, in some way explaining these requests.

34% of groups need to secure revenue funding to cover the costs of group activities to ensure new and existing activities can be undertaken effectively. The main costs were insurance, premises hire, administration and training.

Groups are clearly capable of applying for grants, with the right information and encouragement although there is scope for improvement in this area. 205 examples of successful funding applications were analysed. 80.9% for capital grants and 19.1% for revenue grants.

Outcomes, aims and time scales are less easy to define for revenue funding than capital projects and therefore most funding bodies cater for capital projects. There is therefore a need for long-term revenue grants to build the sustainability of the groups.

The most popular revenue grants were for salaried positions, training, administration and marketing.

The most common successful capital grants were for green space improvements (33.9%), soft infrastructure (10.9%) and ecological conservation (10.3%). Play/recreation equipment, hard infrastructure, equipment purchase and land purchase were also significant.

Capital projects are a good way to improve the site and advertise the work of the group. They do however need to be supported by capacity within the group that requires revenue funding. They should also be seen in the context of the potential life span of the group.

10% of groups requested information and advice on the following broad areas:

- Nature conservation
- Ideas for capital projects and events
- How to start a group including long term development and capacity building.
- Legal advice
- Scientific, ecological and archaeological surveys
- Tools and equipment, particularly advice on maintenance and operation
- Group transition to charity or trust status
- Professional advice on subjects such as sustainability, horticulture, planning etc...
- Social surveys
- Information packs on topics such as ecology, wildlife and heritage.

2% of groups requested legal advice, probably representing a snapshot of groups currently dealing with legal situations. Additional funding sources to cover these costs would be useful in the long term and guidance on standard legal topics may be beneficial.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Research priorities and further research

1. The research indicates that most groups were less than 13 years old. Investigation of the number disbanding each year and the reasons for this would identify potential problems that other groups could avoid. The trends of group formation and disbandment are also not known. The research indicates that groups may have a limited life span, the length of the span and factors behind any trends are not known.

2. A repeat research project in five - ten years would assess the trends in age variation of groups.
3. Ethnic minorities are a sector that only 20% of groups feel their work benefits. To act as a voice for the green space in the wider community the groups should be representative. It would be useful to explore the reasons for this lack of involvement and make a more detailed assessment of how well community groups currently represent their wider communities. This could include social or ethnic breakdown of the group membership.
4. Further research on the groups' finances and the relationship to their background.
5. What are the barriers and difficulties groups have when making funding applications and what are the solutions they develop? The questionnaire only asked about successful funding applications. An analysis of unsuccessful applications would be very useful.
6. A disproportionately low number of groups came from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. This could be related to low return of lists by local authorities in these areas however this needs further investigation.

Recommendations for Community Groups

1. There is low involvement in capital projects, political lobbying, site security and direct management. Though groups should not widen their remit beyond their capabilities or interests, support organisations would benefit from raising awareness of these areas.
2. Community groups should aspire to be representative of the wider population. The low provision for ethnic groups highlights the potential for community groups to expand into this sector. One route to broaden appeal is through events and festivals.
3. Increasing and expanding networking opportunities for groups will reduce feelings of isolation and potentially increase their longevity. The establishment of the Community Network has been a main objective of this research.
4. Increasing group financial stability would allow long term planning and project development.
5. There is a need to increase the general capacity of community groups (ie the ability, efficiency and effectiveness of the group).

Recommendations for local and national government and other support organisations

1. Improve capacity-building schemes open to groups ie advice, marketing resources, training and more volunteers.
2. Increase the number of revenue funding schemes. More money for capital projects must be complemented by revenue funding otherwise investment risks being unsustainable in the long term.
3. Further development of community group regional forums, dependant upon demand from the groups. The first regional form event was held in Manchester, April 2003, with over 350 individuals attending. The organisers were the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities and GreenSpace. While it is crucial to develop these events in a bottom up approach, for practical reasons the lead needs to come from local authorities and other support organisations working with community groups.

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