



Evaluation of the Sustainable Development Fund in English National Parks 2002-2009

Response of the English National Park Authorities Association

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ENPAA is a registered not for profit company limited by guarantee, number 6521048, registered in England at First Floor, 2-4 Great Eastern Street London EC2A 3NW
Telephone 020 7655 4812

www.enpaa.org.uk

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) is a grant scheme that supports new ways of living and working within National Parks in a sustainable manner. The funding is provided by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and is managed by the National Park Authorities and the Broads Authority¹. Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The Sustainable Development Fund encompasses projects that can demonstrate social, economic and environmental development.

The English National Park Authorities Association (ENPAA) exists to support policy makers by providing a collective voice for the 10 National Parks Authorities in England². In September 2009, the English National Park Authorities and the Broads Authority commissioned Land Use Consultants to undertake an independent evaluation of the first seven years of operation of the Sustainable Development Fund. The purpose of the evaluation was to assess the impact of the Sustainable Development Fund and help inform its future direction. The findings of the evaluation study were published on March 3rd 2010. The full evaluation report and a summary of its findings and recommendations can be found on the ENPAA website³.

This document outlines the response from the English National Park Authorities to the conclusions and recommendations of the independent evaluation and should be read in conjunction with the evaluation report. The response has been prepared by the Sustainable Development Fund Officers and ENPAA staff.

Key strengths identified and the responses of English National Park Authorities and the Broads Authority

The evaluation study identified ten key strengths of the SDF as delivered in the seven years 2002-2009. Below we set out the report findings in bold text and our response in plain text.

The evaluation study found that the Sustainable Development Fund:

Delivers National Park purposes and especially their duty to foster social and economic wellbeing. A key strength of the SDF is its emphasis on a ‘bottom-up’ delivery, meeting needs identified by communities and businesses. This approach should be balanced with the ‘top-down’ priorities within the National Park Management Plan.

The English National Park Authorities welcome the recognition that the SDF is an ideal mechanism to deliver the duty on National Park Authorities to ‘seek to foster social and economic well being’ whilst delivering National Park purposes. We would however stress that SDF is not the only means by which National Park Authorities achieve this. We firmly believe that the ‘bottom-up’ delivery approach of SDF is a vital component to the success and appeal of the scheme. This approach addresses local needs and fosters a sense of ownership of projects, thus helping to make them truly sustainable. The English National Park Authorities have some hesitancy about the recommendation to place a greater emphasis on ‘top-down’ priorities. We would suggest that given the inclusive ways in which

¹ The Broads Authority is a Special Statutory Authority with parity to the other English National Park Authorities.

² Dartmoor, Exmoor, Northumberland, the Peak District, the Lake District, the New Forest, the South Downs, The Yorkshire Dales, North York Moors and the Broads.

³ http://www.enpaa.org.uk/enpaa/whatsnew/s_d_f_evaluation_report.htm

National Park Management Plans are developed that the word 'strategic' rather than 'top down' is more appropriate in this context. We believe SDF should strive to incorporate a balanced approach, but it must be managed in such a way so as not to compromise the successful 'bottom-up' engagement. The approach taken by all the English National Park Authorities seeks to link all SDF projects with the respective National Park Management Plan, which in turn links many other strategies together. In this sense the SDF seeks 'bottom-up' community ideas and helps them to fit with broader strategic aims, whilst not being overly restrictive. The evaluation findings indicate that the linkages made between the strategic aims and 'bottom-up' ideas need to be made more transparent.

Is highly accessible. The SDF was designed to minimise the administrative burden and this objective has been achieved.

The English National Park Authorities strongly agree with this finding. We believe that the 'light-touch' approach, as required in the original Defra prospectus, is a strength that works well for both the applicants and the accountable bodies. It is important as we move forward with the SDF that the future direction should maintain this 'light-touch' approach. We believe that this successful methodology could be adopted by other grant programmes.

Delivers more than a grant. The input from the SDF Officers is invaluable, sharing knowledge of other funding sources and experience of similar projects that have taken place.

The English National Park Authorities strongly agree with this finding. The SDF often represents an investment in a good idea or a positive aspiration rather than a simple grant allocation. Investment entails working together with the project proposer in mutual support, often using a range of knowledge and expertise available to National Park Authorities and their partners and therefore we feel that this is a great asset of the SDF.

Stretches aspirations. SDF input often pushes projects, providing practical examples of sustainable development in action.

The English National Park Authorities agree with this finding. It should be noted that stretching aspirations is most often achieved through the expertise of, and advice from SDF Officers, SDF grant panel members and others within the National Park Authority network. Applicants are encouraged to embrace the wider aspects of sustainability and of promoting partnership working between projects and organisations. In addition, we feel that there are educational messages that arise from stretching aspirations, which result in a better understanding of sustainable development and the role and responsibilities of National Parks.

Reaches where other schemes do not. Applicants are free to identify the needs and objectives they wish to address. The SDF is prepared to support innovative ideas and take risks on projects with no proven track record, funding initiatives that would otherwise fall between the gaps of other funds. The SDF often provides the first offer of funding from which other support can be generated.

The English National Park Authorities strongly agree with this finding. This is an important element that we feel needs to be maintained, in order to enable sustainable development and drive necessary behavioural change in the future. There have been many examples of how SDF is often the first funder – taking a bit of a step into the unknown and subsequently unlocking other funds. NPAs are not afraid to take a measured risk with the SDF and learn from experience.

Draws down high levels of other funding. For every £1.00 of Sustainable Development Fund investment, on average £4.30 of funding from other sources is levered in, reflecting favourably compared to other grant schemes operating in rural areas.

The English National Park Authorities believe that the excellent match-funding ratio reflects the high level of potential which exists in National Parks as future economic drivers in our rural areas. However, we believe that the separation of cash match funding from in-kind match funding in the evaluation was unnecessary. The in-kind contribution is a vital element to the success of any given project, as identified by Defra in the original SDF prospectus. We therefore believe that the cash match-funding ratio of 1:4.3 should be disregarded in favour of the 1:4.6 total match-funding ratio, which is more accurate.

Creates jobs. Over 16% of the projects created jobs, and over half of those projects received less than £1,000 per job created.

The English National Park Authorities welcome the fact that the SDF has contributed to rural economic development in a highly cost-effective way. Whilst not a primary objective of the scheme it is clear that the SDF has had an impact on employment through its grant support by helping to safeguard and sustain existing jobs, by allowing access to training opportunities, by encouraging rural business development and creating new jobs. We consider this to be an area which would benefit more consistent data gathering in future.

Involves partnership working. Some Authorities have developed strong linkages with strategic partners.

The English National Park Authorities agree with this finding, and would highlight further examples of effective partnership. For example the North York Moors National Park Authority and the neighbouring Howardian Hills AONB Management Board share a panel to administer SDF grants, and there are other examples of Authorities liaising with nearby AONBs regarding administering SDF funds. Northumberland National Park Authority has also set up a partnership with the Community Foundation to share funding for socio-environmental projects, and the Lake District National Park Authority started to report the outputs of its SDF to the Lake District National Park Partnership, a body of 20 key organisations that have a role in the National Park.

Is cross-cutting within Authorities. The Sustainable Development Fund successfully draws out the skills available to the Authorities.

The English National Park Authorities agree with this finding. The SDF is a challenging grant programme that generates enthusiasm across staff working within the National Park Authorities and from a broad range of partners. This has not only resulted in an effective approach by the Authorities in promoting, developing and assessing projects but has also contributed to the successful and on-going management and delivery of activities and projects.

Encourages a new perception of the National Park designation. The role of the Authorities has evolved away from a regulating, statutory planning body, towards an enabling organisation.

The English National Park Authorities agree that SDF has been a useful vehicle in helping Authorities to apply a more positive, pro-active and engaging approach to delivery of national park purposes. As such, it is however, only one of the ways in which Authorities have evolved their ways of working over time. SDF has been an exemplar of how a National Park Authority can contribute directly to those living, working and visiting a protected area often leading to the development of new approaches more widely adopted within National Park

Authorities. The pursuit of sustainable development has for some time been at the heart of what NPAs do and has been central to the objectives of both Local Development Framework and Management Plans.

Challenges identified and the responses of English National Park Authorities and the Broads Authority

The evaluation study identified six challenges and opportunities for the future delivery of the SDF. Below we set out the report findings in bold text and our response in plain text.

The evaluation study found that the Sustainable Development Fund has scope to:

Continue to define and support innovative projects as a priority.

The English National Park Authorities believe that there is scope for further research by Defra into the role that innovation plays in the wider sustainable development agenda, and any prioritisation of innovative initiatives should be based on the outcome of this analysis. We understand that for the purposes of the SDF, innovation is best defined at the local level and in an appropriate manner. We cautiously welcome the suggestion that innovative projects should receive a higher intervention rate. We unanimously agree that each independent Grants Advisory Panel should continue to be empowered to decide on the intervention rate based on the merits of each project.

Make more of the test-bedding role and better share project information. This could be achieved through use of the wider National Parks website to demonstrate groundbreaking projects and novel approaches showing best practice.

The English National Park Authorities feel that there is further scope to work together to share information about SDF projects that have been supported, and will aim to bring forward means of doing this over the next few months. In addition to developing our website, we will explore national newsletters and further linkages with other relevant organisations, such as the Sustainable Development Commission and regional SD champion bodies making more of the test-bedding role of the National Parks.

Undertake more proactive engagement with communities outside of National Park boundaries. Although there is evidence of involvement of communities from urban areas, a shared funding pot specifically for this task could help to overcome barriers to people from further afield accessing the protected areas.

The English National Park Authorities believe that we must aim to achieve sustainable development directly in and around the National Parks. We appreciate that it is a requirement of Defra to engage with those from further a field and with our partners we will continue to look for ways to do this. There are already examples of National Park Authorities supporting SDF initiatives outside of the National Park boundaries, particularly with social inclusion and educational projects (there are many examples of working with schools). In addition many Authorities are engaged with this type of work in other ways (e.g. the MOSAIC project) and we also recognise that there are other funding streams that resource outreach work. We are not convinced of the value of a shared funding pot for this work and feel it may over complicate a straightforward programme and stifle local opportunity/flexibility. We will concentrate on increasing our engagement with communities by replicating existing best practice and finding new methods of engagement.

Develop common criteria for awarding high rates of grant aid to ensure value for money.

Whilst the English National Park Authorities can see both pros and cons of this approach we believe the freedom of the individual Grants Advisory Panels to make project-funding decisions should not be compromised. We would welcome broad guidance from Defra which may allow for higher levels of consistency and comparability across the National Parks in the allocation of higher levels of grant, but would stress that each SDF needs to reflect and respond to local needs and is structured accordingly.

Further support and raise awareness of successful projects after completion. The Authorities could consider how they can best celebrate the achievements (e.g. an annual award for the best project, an awards dinner, website recognition, etc.).

Whilst the English National Park Authorities believe that more post-project work could be undertaken, we are conscious of the time and resources available for co-ordinating such activities, especially the methods suggested. We will discuss possible means of doing this alongside considering how to better use the test bedding role and bring forward proposals in the next few months.

Continue to strengthen local partnership working.

Whilst the SDF has clearly demonstrated partnership working at the local level, the English National Park Authorities feel that there is scope for further partnership working at a higher, more strategic level. We feel that the Regional Development Agencies should consider contributing matched funds for the SDF. We would like to see a consistent approach from Regional Development Agencies to support the SDF. We would also welcome the opportunity for other partners, like Natural England, the Forestry Commission and the Environment Agency, to be more involved in the SDF, in order to capitalise on opportunities for mutual benefit.

Next Steps

The Sustainable Development Fund Officers Workgroup will meet in June 2010 in Exmoor National Park. Prior to that meeting SDF Officers and ENPAA staff will continue to develop proposals for improving operation of the SDF and talk to those who can help us deliver those proposals and make the SDF an even more successful funding stream in the future. At the June meeting we will:

- Discuss the findings of the evaluation study
- Draft a vision for the future direction of the SDF from past experiences and future potential needs
- Formulate an action plan for collectively improving delivery of the Sustainable Development Fund for the next 3 years

We would welcome the involvement of:

- The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
- The Welsh National Park Authorities and WANPA
- The Scottish National Park Authorities
- Other key stakeholders in the future of the Sustainable Development Fund particularly the National Association of AONBs and Natural England.