

PEMBROKESHIRE COAST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT FUND COMMITTEE
20th January 2016

REPORT OF SDF ADMINISTRATOR

SUBJECT:

AONB REVIEW OF SDF – MEMBERS DISCUSSION

It was previously reported (Report of SDF Administrator 9th September 2015) that in 2014 the five Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in Wales commissioned 'Resources for Change' to carry out an independent review of the Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) from 2009 to 2013, which they delivered with funding from Welsh Government. The review was intended to provide robust evidence about what SDF has achieved, to assess the SDF model and help to inform thinking about future implementation.

A copy of the review's executive summary is attached as an appendix to this report and the full review (54 pages) is available electronically upon request.

Recommendation

For interest Members are requested to note the report conclusions and recommendations as there will be an opportunity to discuss these at the meeting. Also to consider and discuss any potentially noteworthy points or conclusions which may help inform future administration of the fund locally.

AONB REVIEW OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT FUND – ACHIEVEMENTS & RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

In 2014, the five Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in Wales commissioned Resources for Change to carry out an independent review of the Sustainable Development Fund (SDF), which they deliver with funding from Welsh Government.

The purpose of SDF is, through partnership, to develop and test ways of achieving sustainable development in AONBs in which the local characteristics of culture, wildlife, diversity, land use and community are conserved and enhanced.

The review was intended to provide robust evidence about what SDF has achieved, to assess the SDF model and help to inform thinking about future implementation. It was conducted through analysis of quantitative monitoring data, interviews with SDF officers in AONBs, Chairs of the SDF assessment panels, Natural Resources Wales and Welsh Government, a sample of projects, as well as online surveys of assessment panel members and funded projects, and more in-depth case studies of five funded projects.

ACHIEVEMENTS

What the monitoring data tells us

In the five years 2009 – 2013, SDF has funded a total of 385 projects across the five AONBs. Of these, the projects report that on average, around half would not have happened without funding from SDF.

There has been a total expenditure of £1,736,843 over this period. Funding increased after 2009 to a fairly consistent level of just under £350,000, which increased in 2011 to over £400,000 when additional funding was available from Welsh Government; this fell back again in subsequent years. There is considerable variation between AONBs in terms of average spend per project, ranging from £3,691 in Llŷn to £6,543 in Anglesey.

The Fund has consistently levered in over £1 million of external funding from the public, private and voluntary sectors each year, and in some years this has been significantly higher. 2009 and 2012 provided the highest levels from external sources. The average leverage for the five year period is 4.25, i.e. every £1 invested by SDF is matched by £4.25.

What the qualitative information tells us

SDF is delivering sustainable development. AONB officers are strengthening project proposals in relation to sustainable development, ensuring that applicants fully understand what sustainable

development is and how the proposed project can be developed to better deliver sustainable development outcomes. It has been a valuable mechanism to raise awareness and understanding of sustainable development amongst the communities in AONBs. SDF has offered some unique characteristics that are key within the AONB context, i.e. enhancing the natural and cultural environment, and the very nature of sustainable development itself. Also, it has brought sustainable development into practice in relation to culture, economy, community and the environment, thus providing practical demonstrations and helping to delivery Welsh Government's priorities for sustainable development.

SDF is not only delivering on sustainable development, but on several other significant agendas too, including economic development, health and well-being, community development and cohesion.

Responses from the funded projects make it clear that the SDF funding has been crucial in enabling projects to happen that they believe otherwise would not have happened. Also, it is noticeable the extent to which SDF has helped community groups to increase their capacity for fund-raising.

SDF is striking for its achievements in terms of community capacity-building, which are very well appreciated by the projects that have been funded. This is a function of the time, effort, advice and support provided by AONB officers.

SDF has made a difference to the AONBs themselves, in terms of providing a positive mechanism for AONBs to build relationships in their communities, and also showing the worth of the AONB to these communities, and in so doing, has raised the profile of the AONB.

In terms of the delivery model, SDF does a good job of getting small amounts of money out into the AONBs. The current system works, in that applicants find it relatively easy to use. Each AONB has worked towards the same intended outcomes, and has organically developed SDF to work within its own particular circumstances. It has been important that each AONB has been able to do things to fit locally.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Resource SDF so that it can achieve the fullest impact

With more resourcing, SDF would have more capacity. This would have several benefits: to improve dissemination of learning; to ensure that current good practice in terms of capacity-building activities can continue and be extended so that the 'harder to reach' groups can be supported; to promote the Fund more widely and to be pro-active in seeking project applications which have potential to meet SDF's goals including more innovation.

2. ‘Sell the message’ of SDF’s benefits across multiple WG agendas

In order to ensure that this contribution is recognised, more staff resource will be needed so that there is someone (or more than one person if the role is shared) who can be pro-active in compiling the evidence and then taking this evidence to decision- and policy-makers in key public sector bodies and WG.

Also, the AONBs should engage the Welsh Government Protected Landscapes team to act as champions for SDF within Welsh Government.

3. Hold a one-off officer and Panel Chair workshop to review how SDF delivers on the Programme for Government.

SDF would benefit from taking focussed time out from day to day delivery to assess and record the ways in which it contributes to Welsh Government’s stated commitments, in order to create a resource which will support on-going work to ‘sell the message’ of SDF’s benefits across multiple Welsh Government agendas.

4. Return to SDF’s roots of funding innovation

Unlike many other funds, SDF has the opportunity to support innovative – and therefore inherently more risky – projects. The AONBs should consider how to make this a core part of the Fund. The concept of rewarded risk may be helpful, by which the scale of the potential positive impact, i.e. the reward, is considered as well as the likelihood of its success.

It would be helpful if Panel Chairs have clear guidance about risk, so that they can support Panel members on this subject. The current care that Panels take to ensure that public money is well spent should continue. In addition to this, there should be explicit guidance about SDF’s interpretation of success and failure; in the context of SDF, it is acceptable that an innovative project fails, i.e. that it does not bring about the anticipated change, *so long as* the learning is captured and shared (certainly locally, and ideally across SDF).

5. Ensure that SDF’s USP and raison d’etre of sustainable development is explicit and prioritised

Moving forwards, ensure that sustainable development is explicitly at the core of everything the Fund does, e.g. during the application process (form, criteria and assessment, and decision), delivery, monitoring, learning and dissemination about achievements.

6. Consider re-positioning SDF as an integrated cross-AONB programme, funding in single or multiple AONBs

We suggest that the AONBs pilot a small number of bigger, innovative projects that can take place in two or more AONBs, with particular potential for relevant learning about sustainable development. This is likely to require AONBs to be pro-active; this could be

through identifying suitable themes and either putting out a call for suitable applications or directly seeking suitable applicants.

AONBs might also want to consider taking the partnership approach to funding a step further, working also with the National Parks' SDF.

7. Strengthen the Fund's position as a programme working to a single set of outcomes, delivered with local flexibility

SDF should continue to fund projects across the five AONBs that aim to satisfy a unified set of outcomes but through delivery which is suited to the particular circumstances in each AONB.

We recommend that officers review the 'paperwork' and 'processes' that underpin the Fund, e.g. application form, Panel decision-making guidance, in order to agree a set of core principles and materials.

8. Instigate new forms of monitoring in order to capture the full picture of SDF supported outcomes, linked to a re-assessment of the criteria used to assess project applications.

It is vital that SDF has a credible evidence base which it can use to demonstrate its achievements across the range of policy agendas, and that this base links with the criteria used to assess project applications. The data should be both quantitative and qualitative, using the two formats to show the full story of achievements.

The AONBs should come together to discuss and agree a set of appropriate indicators/topics to measure and ways of doing so, and then take this discussion to Welsh Government, in order to come to agreement about what measures would work for both parties, as it is important that the monitoring works for WG as well as the AONBs.

The work to design new monitoring approaches and its on-going implementation will require additional resourcing, over and above the existing funding for project delivery.

As noted in our evaluation of Environment Wales in 2014, if resources could be found, there would be benefit to public and third sector organisations doing similar work if there were a collaborative project to come up with a standard set of monitoring and evaluation indicators.

9. Be consistent in monitoring across the Scheme

Quantitative data needs to be gathered in a consistent manner across all the AONBs.

Recommendation 8 above will lead to creation of a revised set of monitoring requirements, so to ensure consistency of information-gathering, there will need to be training to all SDF officers and Chairs.

10. Improve monitoring on SDF's contribution to project outcomes

SDF is often one of two or more funders to a project, and it would be beneficial to gather monitoring information which explicitly describes SDF's contribution, e.g. as a 'catalyst' funder, a 'completer' funder, providing capacity-building etc.

11. Instigate standardised training for all Panel members about sustainable development and the purpose of SDF

Build on existing good practice in providing training for Panel members to create a package of standardised training which is then delivered on a regular basis to all Panel members, so that there is a clear and consistent understanding across the AONBs about the intended outcomes for SDF and how sustainable development is interpreted in the context of SDF. It may be helpful to include SDF officers in this training, as part of the drive to build consistency across the programme nationally.

12. Resource an intern to design and test a mechanism for peer learning and dissemination of best practice

We suggest that designing and testing a mechanism for peer learning and disseminating best practice in funding sustainable development projects could be designed to work well as an internship, with clear aims and outputs. This would require additional resourcing, in order to cover the costs of the intern, and of their management.

13. Extend networking to other similar initiatives

The learning that emerges from SDF could usefully be disseminated to other initiatives, such as SDF in National Parks, Environment Wales, Tidy Towns, Wales Environment Link, and SDF could usefully learn from them. We recommend seeking resource to enable a pilot networking event. We suggest identifying one or two themes that are relevant across the participating initiatives, e.g. how best to monitor soft outcomes, to form a focus for the event, as well as timetabling the event to allow for plenty of informal networking discussions.