

Evaluation of the Woodlands In And Around Towns Challenge Fund

The Woods In and Around Towns (WIAT) Challenge Fund supported activities to improve woodland access and quality in some of Scotland's most deprived urban areas. This study evaluated the WIAT initiative to assess whether it had achieved its expected social, economic and environmental benefits. It found that the fund provided a significant positive return on investment. WIAT also led to significant positive change in how people feel about the quality of local woodlands and the contribution of those woodlands to their quality of life.



“the social cohesion and local community benefits of WIAT should not be underplayed” Estate Manager.

Background

The Woods In and Around Towns (WIAT) Challenge Fund was run by Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) between 2004 to 2012. The initiative focussed on some of Scotland's most deprived areas and aimed to provide a range of benefits, for example to individual health and wellbeing and community cohesion, by encouraging more people to visit and use their local woodlands. The initiative funded activities to create new woodland, to bring neglected woodland into active management and to work with people to help them use their local woodland.

Objectives

An evaluation of the WIAT Challenge Fund was undertaken in 2012/13 to: 1) Determine whether the expected outcomes of the WIAT programme were achieved by the Challenge Fund; 2) Provide an economic valuation of the outcomes of the WIAT Challenge Fund; 3) Identify the key lessons learned in the WIAT projects.

Methods

Comprised: 1) A quantitative statistical analysis of changes to perception and behaviour outcome indicators over the course of the WIAT Challenge Fund; 2) An economic assessment of the value of recreational visits and the value of additional physical health benefits since the start of the WIAT Challenge Fund; 3) A qualitative study of stakeholder experience and opinion about the WIAT Challenge Fund.

Findings

The analysis of changes in the perceptions and behaviours of people living near to or visiting WIAT woodlands found that overall respondents felt there were significant positive changes to environmental quality and woodland quality during the course of the initiative. They also judged the contribution of woodland to their quality of life to have increased. Overall, when compared to the baseline (2006), the number of visits to WIAT woodlands increased by 20-25% and the average amount of time people spent in woodlands also increased. In the WIAT target social group visits increased by 17% compared to the baseline.

The post intervention the value of recreation and additional health benefits in WIAT Challenge Fund woodlands is £14m per year. When compared with the level of investment in the fund over the evaluation period (about £2.5 m per year), this represents a significant positive return on investments. The increased awareness of the value of woodlands brought about by WIAT had a significant impact on Local Authorities prioritising urban woodland as an important resource especially in achieving national targets for health and wellbeing.

Recommendations

- Targeting sites with greatest potential for delivering social benefits.
- Maintaining community involvement through “pulsed” interventions.
- Improvements to national level promotion e.g. use of exemplar projects.
- Continuing engagement with Local Authorities as key partners.
- The scope for alternative financial management rules which remove barriers to, for example, community groups and small woodland owners.
- Developing a clear strategic commitment to monitoring and evaluation.

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Reports and Publications: Ambrose-Oji, B. et al (2014) *An evaluation of the WIAT Challenge Fund: Changing use patterns, the value of recreation and health benefits, and lessons learned.* <http://scotland.forestry.gov.uk/images/corporate/pdf/wiat-evaluation-2014.pdf>