

March 2005

Evaluation of the Community Forest Programme

Executive Summary



Prepared for the
Countryside Agency
by
Land Use Consultants
with SQW Ltd



EVALUATION OF THE COMMUNITY FOREST PROGRAMME: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION AND OVERALL EVALUATION

1. This evaluation of the Community Forest Programme (CFP) was undertaken by Land Use Consultants and SQW Ltd. on behalf of the Countryside Agency, which has lead responsibility for managing the Programme up to March 2005.
2. The evaluation found that the CFP is contributing positively to a range of outputs and wider outcomes, including national and regional targets, in the following key areas:
 - Increasing woodland cover and improving the environment.
 - Providing for access, recreation, art and culture.
 - Regenerating local economies.
 - Encouraging community development and lifelong learning.
3. The evaluation also found that the CFP has contributed to a strategic, long term vision in the Forest areas, influenced policy at all levels, and provided a model of successful partnership working.
4. In consideration of these factors, as well as the inputs to the CFP, the evaluation concluded that the Programme represents good value for money.

BACKGROUND AND APPROACH TO THE EVALUATION

5. The CFP was launched in July 1989. It comprises 12 Community Forests (CFs) which are the product of a partnership between the Countryside Agency, the Forestry Commission, 58 local authorities and a host of other national and local organisations.
6. Following 15 years of national support for the CFP, and with a change in core funding arrangements from 2005, it is an appropriate time to review and evaluate the programme and to inform its future development, including the potential role of community forestry in the countryside around towns in the future.
7. The evaluation addressed four main aspects of the CFP:
 - Origins, objectives and inputs.
 - Direct outputs and wider outcomes.
 - Cost effectiveness and value for money.
 - The way ahead.

8. It assessed the performance of the CFP against:
 - Overarching objectives of the CFP, which were defined at the outset of the Programme.
 - Priority Targets, which were introduced in 1995.
 - Contribution to wider themes (targets of Government departments and Regional Development Agencies, aims and indicators set by the Countryside Agency, and objectives for forestry set out in the England Forestry Strategy).
 - Wider outcomes and contribution to policy agendas (which go beyond the CFP's objectives).
9. To address these issues, LUC and SQW undertook a literature review and extensive data gathering and consultation exercises. The Directors of the Community Forests were consulted individually and collectively. Structured interviews were also undertaken with representatives of a wide range of national, regional and local organisations.

ORIGINS AND OBJECTIVES

10. The CFP was conceived as a 30-year experimental programme to develop and test the use of multipurpose forestry as a mechanism to regenerate 5,230 square kilometres (about 15 times the area of the Isle Wight) of countryside and greenspace around England's towns and cities. The CFP was seeking to respond to a number of key issues at the rural-urban fringe, including the need to integrate forestry with recreational interests, and to address problems of poor land management and despoiled land.
11. The principles of Community Forests and community forestry more widely have gained increasing acceptance over the 15 years of the CFP's operation, largely brought about by the key role that the Programme has played.
12. Since its inception, the CFP has worked to a consistent set of objectives. Until this evaluation, an assessment of progress against objectives had not been undertaken. However, the Programme is monitored against a range of Priority Targets on which each CF must report annually.

INPUTS

13. National partner funding meets around half the costs of each of the CF teams, and also contributes towards project implementation. The CFP relies heavily on a range of other sources of funding, including: other public sector funding; private sector funding; European funding; Lottery money; Landfill tax revenue; and other grant funding.
14. The amount of grant funding has varied significantly during the life of the CFP; total grant funding over the period 1994 to 2002 exceeded £128m. Lottery Funding, Landfill tax and European funding have been the most significant sources of grant funding over the life of the CFP.

15. Overall the CFP has been successful in leveraging in high levels of private and voluntary sector support. In summary, over the period 1990-2003, the total amount levered in totalled £42.9m.
16. On average across the years for which data is available, 24 pence of private and voluntary sector funds were levered in for every pound of partner spend. For the years 2000-2003, on average £3 of additional grant funding was levered in for every pound of partner spend. These ratios generally compare favourably to other Programmes, such as returns from the Single Regeneration Budget.
17. In recent years, both grant funding and private and voluntary sector funding appear to have declined. The reasons for this are not entirely clear, although it is considered likely to relate to the way in which such income has been distributed between a number of years.
18. The CFP has also drawn heavily on a range of important non-monetary inputs, including: the original Community Forest Unit, now superseded by the Countryside Agency's 'Countryside Around Towns' programme; high quality, dedicated CF teams; and a strong partnership approach with a range of other organisations.

OUTPUTS AND OUTCOMES

19. The following paragraphs draw out the main achievements of the CFP in relation to four main topics, which cover the objectives of the Programme and the main areas of operation and achievement of the CFs. The evaluation report provides further information on the significance of these achievements in relation to the PSA targets of Government departments and Regional Development Agencies, the aims and indicators set by the Countryside Agency, and objectives for forestry set out in the England Forestry Strategy.

Increasing woodland cover and improving the environment

20. Overall, the CFP is performing well in terms of increasing woodland cover and improving the environment. The data from annual monitoring reports indicates that the CFP has successively met targets for woodland creation, and non-woodland habitat creation and creation/restoration of hedgerows.
21. The CFP's core environmental objectives - regenerating the environment of the Green Belt, improving the landscape of the area, and protecting sites of nature conservation importance – are generally being met. Protecting areas of high quality landscapes and archaeological sites is not a priority for the CFP, because this falls within the remit of a range of other organisations. Interestingly, however, the CFP is involved in protecting and promoting industrial landscapes, which are less well served through traditional structures.
22. The CFP is also contributing to a range of wider environmental outcomes, including climate change mitigation, wise use of resources, renewable energy through development of energy crops and use of wood for energy, and also

reducing the need to travel through development of greenways and networks.

Providing for access, recreation, culture and the arts

23. The CFP is performing particularly well in terms of providing opportunities for informal recreation and opening up rights of way. It has performed less well in terms of the area of woodland opened up to public access, although where this has occurred the quality has been high. The CFs have helped to provide links between urban parks, Country Parks and the wider countryside. The CFP's contribution to formal sports provision has been limited, although the forest areas provide attractive and popular settings for sports such as golf.
24. The CFP's growing contribution to the public health agenda is an important wider outcome. Through forging links with Primary Care Trusts and Mental Health Care Trusts, a number of CFs are helping to address physical and mental health issues.

Regenerating local economies

25. By disseminating information, such as on availability of grants, and in building confidence amongst farmers to diversify their enterprises, the CFs are helping to sustain the agricultural economy.
26. It was not the intention of the CFP to generate a significant supply of timber. However, CFs are undertaking a wide range of successful small-scale wood product related projects and contribute to the wood fuel market locally.
27. The CFP has also not performed particularly well in relation to attracting private sector support to implement CFs. This is an area where CFs will need to place greater emphasis in future. Linked to this is the need to align themselves more closely to the RDA agenda, in order to obtain regional level funding streams, which will require a demonstration that CFs are providing regional level outputs.
28. There was general consensus amongst consultees, however, that the CFP is helping to create the conditions, or 'green infrastructure', in which others, such as RDAs, can promote their regions to investors. In so doing, and in improving the environment near housing and local industry, there is some evidence of a positive impact of CFs on the value of properties and businesses.

Encouraging community involvement and life long learning

29. Encouraging community involvement and lifelong learning is a key area of activity for the CFP. It has exceeded targets in relation to numbers of community events held, and is performing well in relation to the objectives of relevance to this topic, particularly in terms of providing educational opportunities. The CFP is also drawing in a wide range of volunteers who are integral to project implementation. However, there remains some scope

to raise the public's awareness of the role of community forestry, for example through more effective publicity.

30. On the other hand, there is evidence that CFP is playing an important role in raising the profile and relevance of countryside and greenspace among new audiences, notably the RDAs. This ties in with the current agenda on the provision of 'green infrastructure', particularly in the Government's Growth Areas.

Process outcomes

31. The achievements of the CFP extend beyond their physical outputs on the ground, to include a range of 'process outcomes'. The lessons learned through the operation of the CFP, which have been monitored and disseminated by the Countryside Agency and Forestry Commission, have exerted a strong influence on the development of national forestry and woodland policy.
32. The experience of the CFP is also central to the emerging policy for the rural-urban fringe. These lessons have influenced the policies and approach of the Countryside Agency itself, and the Agency's and Groundwork's recently published vision for the countryside in and around towns, which incorporates many of the principles of community forestry.
33. The direction of spatial planning, both forward planning and development control, has been strongly influenced by the success of the CFP. In particular, the achievements of CFs are strongly influencing policy and approaches to green infrastructure in the Government's Growth Areas.
34. Further features of the CFP's operation which have added to its success include:
 - The pursuit of a long term, strategic vision for each CF through the development of 30 year plans, which has led to improvements at the strategic landscape scale.
 - Governance and partnership working, which has led to the creation of strong links between different organisations at the local level, which may well provide benefits for other initiatives.
 - Independence, flexibility and dynamism, which have meant that the CFs are well placed to respond to the circumstances, characteristics and needs of the local environment and local communities, and to tap into new funding opportunities as they become available.

COST EFFECTIVENESS AND VALUE FOR MONEY

35. The following overall conclusions were drawn in terms of the inputs to the CFP and value for money of the outputs of the Programme.
36. Direct job creation is not a primary purpose of the CFP, where much of the expenditure is related to social and environmental activities, with a heavy

reliance on partnerships with the voluntary sector and volunteer labour. The monitoring reports show that direct employment rose from 11.5 jobs in 1990/1 to 72 jobs in 1999/2000, across all the forests. When this is considered alongside indirect employment generated, the impact of the CFP is significant.

- 37. With regards to woodland planting, there is no consistent pattern of activity across the Programme and great variation in the scale of planting schemes. This made any comparison of costs unfeasible.
- 38. Similarly, in terms of land reclamation it was difficult to make direct comparisons with any recognised benchmark, as costs will vary depending on the site and the type of remediation required. However, the relative costs of CFP activity in this field appear to compare favourably with mainstream land reclamation schemes.
- 39. The evaluation highlights the very significant impact of the CFP on a wide range of Government PSA and regional targets, including those related to environmental, social and economic issues. Whilst not always measurable in precise terms, the scale and scope of these impacts, together with the extent of financial leverage achieved by the CFP, is testimony to its value.

THE WAY AHEAD

- 40. To inform the way ahead for the CFP, and taking account of reduced core funding, the evaluation summarised the current strengths and weaknesses of the CFP.

Strengths	Weaknesses and threats
<p>Multi-functionality The CFP's multiple outputs and outcomes extend the range of potential participants and beneficiaries.</p> <p>Independence CF Teams are aligned with, but independent from, local authorities. According to consultees this helps the CFs to engage with partners and the general public and enables them to be more risk-taking than other organisations.</p> <p>Longevity The credibility of the CFP has increased over time and partners recognise value of long terms, strategic land management.</p> <p>Influence There is evidence of the CFP's influence over other agencies, extending beyond the forest boundaries.</p> <p>Entrepreneurial CFs are generally good at identifying and obtaining new sources of funds. With a</p>	<p>Lack of cohesiveness Whilst flexibility and dynamism is a key strength of the CFP, it has also resulted in a relatively diffuse programme with a lack of cohesion and common ground between the individual CFs and the CFP has not responded consistently to key and complementary national policies, such as those related to sustainable development.</p> <p>Poorly monitored The quality and consistency of performance monitoring has also been inadequate.</p> <p>Unclear accountability As noted above, at the national level, the monitoring has been inadequate and poorly reported. At the local level, the lines of accountability are unclear – particularly where charitable trusts take on a wider role in the delivery of CF activities.</p> <p>Inadequately marketed The marketing and promotion of the CFP and individual CFs has been inadequate, resulting in a lack of recognition in some</p>

<p>strong track record of financial leverage, they are perceived as a safe place in which to invest funding.</p> <p>Integrated The role of CFP in integrating environmental, social and economic concerns is widely acknowledged. CFs are 'close to the ground' in this respect and deliver action, rather than talk.</p> <p>Inclusive The CFPs' inclusive approach to local involvement engages a wide cross section of the local community and helps create strong public and political support.</p>	<p>quarters (notably the general public and the private sector) of the contribution of the Programme.</p> <p>Duplication Other organisations, such as Groundwork, are also addressing the rural urban fringe agenda.</p>
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Lessons and recommendations

Policy-makers and funders

41. Lessons and recommendations for policy makers include:
- CFs provide a successful model of area based environmental regeneration involving a diverse range of public, private and voluntary sector partners.
 - CFs provide an integrated framework for positive planning and management and the provision of green infrastructure at the rural urban fringe. There is potential, through the new planning system, to add weight to the role of community forestry through recognition in regional and local planning policy and definition of Action Area Plans.
 - The long term approach and vision of the CFP helps to build confidence in rural urban fringe areas.
 - The CFP has shown a remarkable ability to evolve and dovetail with changing policy priorities, whilst remaining faithful to the core vision of multipurpose community forestry.
 - Core funding has been essential to the success of the CFP. Without it, CFs would have been less able to attract funding from external sources, both initially and in the long term.

Local authorities and local partners

42. Many of the lessons for policy-makers and funders also apply to local authorities and local partners. Other lessons for them include:
- Community forestry is an effective tool for engaging local communities.
 - The CFs' capacity and reputation as independent intermediaries can assist in achieving a range of objectives.

- Partners can make use of the CF ‘product’, in order to deliver their own agendas (e.g. health, biomass).

Community Forest Programme

43. The evaluation’s findings for the CFP are generally positive. The consultation revealed considerable support from national and local organisations for the succession of the CFP.
44. Functionally, where they exist CFs are seen to provide an important ‘stepping stone’ between the urban park and the wider countryside around towns and cities. There is clear potential for CF activity to be applied more widely.
45. However, the evaluation highlights the need for the CFP to evolve further, to adapt to changing circumstances and make the most of the opportunities available. The key areas for improvement are set out below.

Vision, aims and objectives

46. The overall Vision of the CFP is sufficiently all encompassing and focused on the key issues. Consideration should also be given to the need for strategic aims, possibly based on the four main topics used in the evaluation (see paragraph 2 of this summary).
47. The list of 17 CFP objectives should be reduced to a shorter list of objectives that focus on the key delivery areas of the CFP. A balance needs to be struck between having a wide remit, whilst not losing focus on the things that CFs do well and where they have most influence. Consideration should also be given to the distinctive features of the CFP, to ensure that it is not seen to duplicate the objectives of other organisations (e.g. Groundwork). The objectives should be accompanied by measurable indicators.

National coordination

48. The national future of the CFP needs to be embedded in the wider future of community forestry. To ensure that CFs are a major structural component of this, the development of the CFP should be supported by national guidelines. These could be structured around the revised strategic aims and objectives.

Monitoring

49. There is a need for more robust monitoring against a set of agreed indicators. Such indicators should relate closely to national and regional targets and cover the main areas of CF activity: Increasing woodland cover and improving the environment; providing for access, recreation, art and culture; regenerating local economies; encouraging community development and lifelong learning. The most appropriate way for data to be managed would be through the production of a published Annual Report.

Integration with national, regional and local policy objectives and targets

50. Better integration with national, regional and local policy objectives and targets is the key to sustaining and realising the potential of the CFP. Such integration would help to secure funding from a wider range of sources. The incorporation of CFP objectives in statutory plans and strategies will also help to ensure greater accountability.

51. Integration with the regional agendas will be particularly important, as increasing emphasis is placed on regional governance and diversity. The CFs should seek recognition within Regional Economic Strategies as one of a range of delivery mechanisms for attracting investment.
 52. The new planning system at the local level is also a key area of opportunity; for example, as noted above, by incorporating community forestry in Core Policies and Area Action Plans within Local Development Frameworks. This would help to secure incorporation of CF objectives into development proposals and planning obligations.
- Marketing and promotion*
53. The CFP should communicate more effectively the value of its approach and increase recognition of its role in relation to stakeholder interests. This in turn would raise the profile of the CFs and open opportunities for funding from a wider range of sources.
 54. In future the CFP should focus further efforts on promoting the role of CFs in economic regeneration, stressing the important role that CFs are playing and can continue to play in delivering a high quality environment, which is essential in creating a successful base for attracting investment. In particular the CFs will need to demonstrate that they are delivering regional outputs. CFs should also work to promote their role amongst the business community more generally.
- Further research*
55. As noted above, better integration with national, regional and local policy objectives and targets is the key to sustaining and realising the potential of the CFP. To this end, the Countryside Agency and Forestry Commission should seek to demonstrate, based on this evaluation, how community forestry can deliver in relation to the targets of Government departments and the RDAs. This could then be communicated to Government departments and the RDAs in a series of advice notes, including case studies.
 56. Further research should also be undertaken to quantify the effects that the CFs are having on inward investment, for example through surveying companies locating in the CF area to find out whether they are aware of the CF and whether the CF specifically, or the quality of the environment generally, were factors contributing to their location decisions.

**Land Use Consultants and SQW Ltd.
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