

Science for Environment Policy

Learning from experience: an evaluation of a UK Green Infrastructure project

The development of Green Infrastructure (GI) in a UK case study has been researched in a recent study. Some issues caused by an imbalance in stakeholder power and conflicting roles played by major stakeholders were identified with the project. Stakeholder participation is central to the concept of GI and the research reiterates the importance for those implementing GI to ensure that participation is effective and balanced.

There has been growing interest in GI as a means to support more [sustainable](#) and multifunctional landscapes. One of the major advantages of GI is that it can fulfil a wide range of functions for humans and nature, such as habitat protection and community recreation. Successful planning and implementation of GI must incorporate the viewpoints of a range of stakeholders, as highlighted in the recent EU Communication on Green Infrastructure¹. However, stakeholder participation can bring challenges in coordinating and integrating different interests. The experiences of past projects thus have potential for valuable learning.

The study investigated these issues by considering a GI project that was proposed in 2006 for the Ely Country Park in the UK by the local authority. At the time, the project did not reach its full potential as a key multifunctional area of green space as part of a local and regional GI network with multiple stakeholders acting together to achieve planning and management objectives. The 78ha² park is on the edge of the city of Ely, linking the urban area to the countryside and contains an important protected area, designated under UK law as a 'Site of Specific Scientific Interest' (SSSI). Much of the area is wetland, which helps alleviate flooding, and the GI plan proposed a marshy landscape with permanent wetland areas.

In order to understand the issues and barriers to fully implementing the plans, the researchers retrospectively evaluated the appropriateness of GI before implementation. Their evaluation method involved discussion groups with stakeholders, such as government environment agencies and environmental NGOs. One of the stakeholders in the target study was Natural England, a national authority in charge of monitoring and legally protecting the area, which has positioned itself as the main stakeholder in driving the development of GI in the UK.

The study revealed that Natural England supported local conservationists in their campaign to limit development of the proposed GI plans by the local authority. Conservationists were concerned that the increased access to recreational opportunities in the park would increase numbers of people in the vicinity of the SSSI and reduce its capacity to protect biodiversity.

When the local authority proposed changes to the plan that would limit its impacts to one area of the park, this was not considered enough to achieve adequate protection. The study suggested that the implementation difficulties arose for two reasons. Firstly, there was an imbalance in stakeholder power, in that some stakeholders had more influence over decisions than others. Secondly, a major stakeholder (Natural England) was acting in apparently conflicting roles: as a regulator in charge of applying SSSI legislation, as well as a stakeholder to promote best use of the site.

The findings suggest that issues can arise when implementing GI, in the process of achieving multiple aims with numerous stakeholders of unequal power and sometimes with conflicting roles. This supports the importance of balancing stakeholders' interests to achieve a joint vision before the planning process begins and ensuring that biodiversity protection can be upheld as part of the plan.

Although the issues identified by this research are specific to this case study, it is important to note its finding that GI development needs to function at all scales and requires a joined-up approach to policymaking. The use of evaluation instruments throughout the development process may help to reveal potential difficulties and support those seeking to develop GI plans and achieve better collaboration. By learning from past experiences, those involved in GI projects can develop full and balanced stakeholder participation. Issues around participation are common to all projects that involve public interest and, as such, GI may be able to provide a model for initiatives in a range of areas.



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1. See http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/ecosystems/index_en.htm