

Raising Standards for Country Parks

A National Pilot Study Project

BACKGROUND

In 2001 the Countryside Agency (CoAg) commissioned 'GreenSpace' to assess the state of England's Country Parks. This resulted in the 2003 report, "Towards a Country Parks Renaissance".

The research revealed that, as many of us already suspected, there was a trend towards a continuing decline in the condition of Country Parks. The report finished with a number of recommendations - including the need for a set of standards for all Country Parks to aspire to in order to improve the quality of visitor experience.

In June 2004 the Country Parks Network (CPN), run by GreenSpace and funded by CoAg, set up a pilot study to address this need.

METHODOLOGY AND IMPLEMENTATION

Eleven Country Parks were involved in the study. In order to ensure that the conclusions were applicable to a broad cross-section of Parks these eleven were selected from a range of criteria including:

- Park condition and trend in condition;
- getting a regional spread across England;
- representation from fringe-urban and rural-urban fringe sites
- differing management focuses - such as conservation or heritage.

It was decided early on that evaluating Country Parks against the Green Flag Award (GFA) criteria - instead of designing a new set of standards - would be the best course of action. The GFA uses eight main headings which judges score against. Green spaces must meet sufficiently high standards by showing:

- A welcoming place;
- Healthy, safe and secure;
- Well maintained and clean;
- Sustainability;
- Conservation and heritage;
- Community involvement;
- Marketing;
- Management.

The GFA, run by the Civic Trust, is the nationally recognised standard for green space management; by using the GFA scoring process the study would

test its usefulness for Country Park managers as a self-assessment tool to help identify and prioritize improvements.

Having selected a set of standards it was now down to the Parks to test their relevance and ease of use for self-assessment. This began in September 2004 when a first site assessment was undertaken. Parks were paired so managers could provide support, objectivity and fresh ideas into the process. Further support and guidance was provided by CPN through a series of group meetings.

Based on the first assessment action plans were drafted so pilot study Parks could achieve a GFA. With such a small time frame for the study, achieving meaningful improvements was always going to be unlikely as annual work plans were already in place or capital bids were needed. Therefore, it was established that the project was more about the lessons learnt rather than actual improvements.

Central to the GFA is a site-specific management plan and no green space can enter the Award without one. The 2003 CoAg report revealed that 36% of Country Parks had no management plan and my Park, Irchester, was one of those. It was not surprising then to see my Park's score for the second self-assessment, undertaken in May 2005, increase significantly due to the creation of such a plan.

RESULTS

The main findings established that:

- Self-assessment against the GFA criteria does help Country Park managers identify and prioritize improvements by raising awareness about all aspects of site management
- The GFA criteria is relevant to Country Parks

Even with the relatively small timeframe for the study, eight out of the eleven Parks saw an improvement in their scores. Irchester's score rose from 54 to 76. On reflection I didn't think the second assessment was as objective as the first (I had recently spent a month writing the management plan so was probably not in a mind to give it a poor score). The actual score should have probably been around 65 making the site borderline pass/fail for a GFA. This was confirmed last year when we applied for real to the GFA scheme. We scored in the 60-65 bandwidth and so just failed.

THE FUTURE

The success of the pilot study project meant that the Countryside Agency planned to launch in 2005 a challenge fund, in partnership with English Nature, which will support ten new Country Park innovative projects, which can be used to develop and share good practice. Each region will have

approximately £10,000 available for Country Parks and will use the same buddying system and self-assessment as part of its process.

CoAg have also renewed the funding for the CPN for a further two years and further work on the 'Renaissance' recommendations is planned.

Since November 2005 the Country Parks Network has been administered by the Civic Trust. The links between GFA and CPN are clear – sharing best practice examples, direct links to GFA judges and training, etc – and should drive forward improvements in standards for Country Parks.

It is also time to reassess the state of England's Country Parks. The Civic Trust will be undertaking an audit to see how the condition of Country Parks has changed since the first survey. It will be interesting to see if the move up the political agenda for green spaces has also meant improvements for our Country Parks.

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WEBSITES

http://www.countryside.gov.uk/LAR/Recreation/country_parks/index.asp

<http://www.greenflagaward.org.uk/>

<http://www.green-space.org.uk/>

<http://www.countryparks.org.uk/>