

Report from Sustainable Development Fund Panel

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Summary: In 2006-07, 28 projects were awarded grants totalling £76,091. This paper provides a summary of the SDF operation in 2006-07 and proposes possible changes for 2007-08. The cost of the scheme in 2006-07 can be met from grant aid from Natural England and will not require a draw on reserves.

Purpose of report: To review the operation of the scheme to date and consider any amendments for 2007-8.

Background

1. The total fund for the current financial year is £80,000, of which up to 10% can be used to cover administration and management costs. The Board has also agreed to the use of up to £20,000 from reserves to support SDF projects if required.
2. There have been 105 expressions of interest, of which 56 have translated into applications seeking grant aid of £275,641.
3. Grant offers have been made to 33 projects and accepted by 31. Of these, 3 will be funded from other Project Grants, leaving a total of 28 SDF projects with a total allocation of £76,091.
4. Table 1 summarises the type of projects and organisations supported.

Table 1

Type of Organisation	No. of projects	% of total grant	Type of Project (primary category)	No. of projects	% of total grant
Local Authority	1	13	Nature Conservation	7	43
National Trust	1	7	Historic Environment	3	4
Registered Charity (excluding National Trust)	14	43	Access	6	21
Community Organisation (including Parish Council)	10	31	Awareness & Enjoyment	11	32
Business	2	6	Built Heritage	1	1

Table 2 compares types of organisation awarded SDF grants in the Chilterns AONB to England-wide figures.

5. The Countryside Agency commissioned consultants to undertake a national review of the SDF. Table 2 provides a comparison with the Chilterns.

Table 2

	Voluntary group/charity		Public body/Local Authority		Private /business	Individual
	National*	Chilterns	National*	Chilterns	National*	Chilterns
Proportion of all projects (by number)	45%	75%	29%	18%	25%	7%

* from Land Use Consultants evaluation of SDF in England 2005-6

Issues 2006- 07

6. Applications were slower to come in than anticipated, despite high levels of interest (as indicated by expressions of interest).The Panel's target of allocating 60% of the fund by July and the rest of the fund by November was not met. Funding was still being allocated in January 2007.
7. Compared to 2005-6 there has been a shift in type of applicant awarded a grant, from the larger organisations to smaller community groups. In 2006-7 there were no grants awarded to County or District Councils, and just one to the National Trust.
8. 19 of the 28 projects have volunteers directly involved in project delivery. 5 involve awareness raising with young people/children, and 2 involve raising public awareness of farming issues. 3 involve practical conservation of BAP priority habitat.
9. The Chilterns scheme to date has been particularly strong on projects focussing on :
- Protecting /enhancing biodiversity or landscape features
 - Community engagement
 - Improving access
 - Improving understanding of the AONBs special qualities
 - Providing opportunities for voluntary participation

Projects have also been supported which:

- Conserve the historic environment
- Build capacity in the community (e.g. Chilterns hedge-laying group)
- Encourage healthier lifestyles (e.g. Henley Food Festival)
- General education (e.g. Trees for All)
- Offer new opportunities for voluntary participation
- Cultural heritage (e.g. Bradenham Woods archaeological surveys)
- Promote local products
- Contribute to farm diversification

- Promote renewable energy (e.g. Matthews Brickyard brick drying scheme)

There have been few if any projects concerned with:

- Minimising pollution
- Water quality
- Waste/ recycling
- Conservation of other natural resources
- Sustainable transport
- Disadvantaged/minority groups
- Encouraging sustainable tourism
- Collaboration between businesses

This is broadly consistent with the national profile of types of projects supported.

10. The vast majority of projects have involved direct works on the ground – e.g. environmental improvements, access improvements or interpretation/ awareness raising. Only one - from the YHA - has involved a feasibility study. Several applications for feasibility studies were turned down, on the grounds that they did not demonstrate sufficient benefit to the AONB.

Evaluation of the AONB SDF scheme for England (2005-6)

11. As far as can be judged after only one year of operation, the consultants considered the scheme to be broadly meeting its objectives, and commented that

'the SDF has been a positive experience for the large majority of applicants and the beneficiaries of their projects.'

12. Most of the report's recommendations relate to the administration of the fund.

13. One recommendation related to promotion of the fund to excluded communities and suggested that AONBs should identify

'key communities, both inside and outside the AONB, that can be regarded as having been excluded from, or experience barriers to, AONB purposes,'

and use a proportion of the fund (5% is suggested) to work with these communities to develop SDF applications.

Operation of the fund 2007-8

14. The SDF Grants Advisory Panel proposes the following adjustments to the scheme for the coming year:

i) More active encouragement of projects dealing with:

- Renewable energy generation – particularly wood fuel
- Marketing or processing of local products such as venison, thatching spars, wood products etc
- Sustainable tourism
- Support/development of new partnerships e.g. collaboration between local groups

ii) More active encouragement of applications from:

- Businesses
- Groups/communities not traditionally involved in the conservation of the AONB

iii) That the guidelines be amended to make clear that there is a presumption in favour of projects that deliver on the ground as compared to feasibility studies.

Promotion 2007-8

15. The proposal is for promotion of the fund in 2007-8 to be more focussed than in previous years on particular types of groups/ areas of work.

The Panel proposes the following as part of this:

- Themed case studies on the website and available to e-mail to targeted recipients –e.g. via business networks.
- Greater targeting of promotion through relevant networks.
- Greater use of parish / district council newsletters to promote the fund.
- Continued effort to secure press coverage of projects and the scheme in general.

The Panel is also considering:

- a promotional event, targeted at 'excluded communities', amongst others.
- a promotional leaflet available on the website and in hard copy.

It is recognised that there is a need to strike a balance between the time and energy going into promotion and the relatively limited size of the fund. Nonetheless, there would seem to be scope to get information on the fund out to new audiences, to mutual benefit.

Recommendations

- 1. Board members approve the proposed amendments to the operation of the scheme.**
- 2. Board members provide feedback on the proposals for promotion of the scheme in 2007- 08.**