



The Urban Lab of Europe!

CASE STUDY

REPORT

Democratic Transitions for All

PROJECT

Green Minds - Green Minds - a planning and management system for sustainable land use and nature based solutions

📍 Plymouth, United Kingdom

TOPIC

Sustainable use of land and nature based solutions

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Green Minds, Plymouth, UK

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1. What has the project been about?

The project's context

More than 30% of the total surface area in Plymouth is greenspaces. However, half of these currently fail to meet quality standards due to a lack of an effective policy framework for their management and the budget cuts for funding and investments for green spaces. On the one hand, managing green spaces in England is not a statutory function for local authorities and on the other, budget cuts have led to staff reductions and a lack of expertise in the responsible city departments. Additionally, the city's green and blue infrastructure is owned and managed by multiple organisations that work in silos, adding an extra layer of complexity to managing greenspaces. The decline of the existing green spaces is more evident in low-income neighbourhoods, resulting in less use by the local residents.

The project's goals and vision

Green Minds is an innovative project that developed and tested new ways of thinking about and supporting nature in the city through the active involvement of its citizens in land management. The project sought to enhance the quality of life for all by adopting holistic approaches to transforming the city's relationship with its natural capital. The project's vision can be summarised in the following three goals:

- Deliver urban rewilding initiatives
- Create green mindsets
- Embrace complexity and take a systems-wide approach

These goals were monitored throughout the project's life cycle to measure the effectiveness of the tools and methods selected, the overall impact, and to learn lessons & optimise the approach.

The links to Just Transitions

The Green Minds project aligned with the guidelines of the [UK's Environment Act](#) and contributed to the local Biodiversity Net Gain goals. Biodiversity net gain (BNG) is an approach to development and/or land management that aims to leave the natural environment in a measurably better state than it was beforehand^[1]. More specifically, through the partnership with the Devon Wildlife Trust (DWT), Green Minds developed a wildlife strategy for the city's green spaces as a strand of the Council's Climate Emergency Action Plan.

Green Minds also worked to embed a connection with nature in local and national strategies and policies in an effort to ensure access to nature and improve quality of life for all residents. To monitor and measure the improvement of the quality of life, Green Minds adopted the 'nature connectedness' concept developed by the University of Derby to inform and evaluate the policy support for both individual and societal-scale shifts in the human-nature relationship. Additionally, Green minds integrated three key questions relevant to 'nature connectedness' into the official City Survey and Schools Health and Wellbeing Survey, which are conducted bi-annually and reach more than 4,000 residents and all school levels (primary, secondary, and special education).

^[1] <https://www.local.gov.uk/pas/topics/environment/biodiversity-net-gain-local-authorities#:~:text=Resources,What%20is%20biodiversity%20net%20gain%3F,the%20term%20'biological%20diversity'>.

2. What solutions for Democratic Transitions have been found?

Connecting everyone with nature - the Nature Connectedness Pathways Framework

Not everyone feels connected with nature. Green Minds sought to increase the number of individuals and the range of different social groups that interact and ultimately benefit from their contact with nature. For this purpose, the project adopted the Nature Connectedness Pathways Framework^[1]. The five principles of this framework are (1) Contact, (2) Beauty, (3) Meaning, (4) Emotion, (5) Compassion. Green Minds developed pilot activities tailored to each principle. For example, (1) Contact: Delivering outreach activities to non-users of greenspaces, supporting nature connection, (2) Beauty: Facilitating student art projects to raise awareness of nature, (3) Meaning: Creation of citizen nature dictionary, (4) Emotion: Green Social Prescribing programmes that encourage reflection and response to nature, (5) Compassion: Support nature-based enterprise to steward local natural spaces and provide facilities that help engage a wider audience. This pilot approach to applying the Nature Connectedness Pathways framework has also been under evaluation for impact assessment. The evaluation method used is the 'Nature Connection index'^[2].

^[1] The [framework](#) has been developed by the University of Derby and has been implemented by the project partners National Trust and Devon Wildlife Trust.

^[2] <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/nature-connection-index-nci-dataset>

Communicating to inspire action - See, Think, Do, Care

Green Minds developed a number of effective communication campaigns in collaboration with key partners who shared the same vision for more biodiverse greenspaces in the city. They launched the 'See, Think, Do, Care' campaign and promoted a different topic per pilot case. The most popular seemed to be the case for re-introducing beavers to key greenspaces of Plymouth. According to the project team: "The charismatic beaver proved to be an effective gateway to promote a range of volunteer opportunities and engage a more diverse audience". The 'beaver re-introduction' social media campaign accelerated the outreach to the broader audience. The project team observed a 970% increase in the project's average engagement.

Overall, the project achieved a wide and diverse online engagement with over 1.5 million online views and 94,160 engagements with #GreenMindsPlymouth.

Empowering citizens to take action for their public spaces - co-production and stewardship

Green Minds empowered local residents to participate in the co-production and stewardship of green spaces. The project coordinated more than 165 volunteer activities, engaging 1,555 volunteers in nature recovery and 9 new co-stewardship structures were trialled to support community land management. The Green Minds vision that serves as the foundation for such pilot actions is to foster more bottom-up nature-oriented initiatives. The ambition is to shift green space design and management from a top-down decision-making approach to an approach that enables partnership working with local communities.

'Green Mindsets' - Fostering strong connections between residents and their green spaces

Acknowledging the societal value of the natural infrastructure, which received heightened prominence during the pandemic, Green Minds worked towards strengthening the bonds between citizens and nature by actively involving them in nature-based activities in their neighbourhoods. The ultimate goal was to create 'Green Mindsets' shifting citizens' way of thinking and lifestyle choices to become more pro-environment and embracing the concept of community ownership (co-stewardship schemes) of natural assets, such as green spaces. The pursuit of this goal is justified by participants' testimonies. According to a recent survey, 89% of people participating in Green Minds activities strongly agreed "I felt closer to nature" and 93% of participants stated, "spending time in nature was good for my physical and mental health".

Some further quotes from participants^[1]:

"This was so good for our children as many don't have gardens or spend time outside".
Nursery teacher, Keyham

"I walked here most days during the pandemic, the vast views, the peace, the bird life and lovely planting gave me space to just escape the troubles."
Stonehouse resident waling down to Devi's Point

[1] Green Minds Interim Report- 7.2.1

Green Minds apprenticeship programme - Cultivating the next generation of habitat managers

Green Minds worked with the Devon Wildlife Trust to develop tailored apprenticeship programmes for parks staff, trainees, key volunteers, and community groups. The programme sought to introduce the concept of nature-based solutions in the design and management of the city's green spaces, training the participants to adopt this approach in their everyday tasks, and embedding this methodology in all future apprenticeships. The idea was to move away from the city being the only responsible stakeholder for land management and embrace the idea of co-stewardship schemes between more actors from different sectors.

In parallel with piloting the Green Minds apprenticeship programme, the University of Plymouth developed an evaluation method to assess its impact on the participants, focusing on their behavioural change in relation to nature in green and blue urban spaces.

Aiming for Inclusiveness with the 'Green social prescribing activity' and the Generation Restoration programme

The 'green social prescribing activity' was one of the most popular pilot actions. This approach aimed to improve physical and mental health through a multi-disciplinary program combining sport, art, and nature (e.g., gentle activities in parks, mindfulness walks, tai chi classes). The activity took place at the Community Hub, located at Central Park, a 94-hectare park with hundreds of daily visitors. The project managed to engage 502 participants in connecting with nature activities amid the covid restrictions. The social groups that benefitted explicitly from this activity were mainly vulnerable social groups; children from low-income families, adults, and young people with disabilities, - primarily - older people who have been recently bereaved, and veterans.

Another small-scale programme that managed to attract a quite diverse group of citizens (different ethnicities, age, income groups) was 'Generation Restoration'. Its activities were about planting flaxseeds, then harvesting and weaving the plant's leaves to create artwork. The key elements were probably the connection with the land and the opportunity to share different experiences from different cultures in creating art.

According to the latest available data^[1], Green Minds coordinated 419 events to create a connection with nature (online and in person) and 31,597 people were engaged in nature connection activities. Some 40% of the participants were from more deprived neighbourhoods and 58% were participants children and young people.

[1] Green Minds Interim Report- 7.2.1

Institutionalisation of co-stewardship schemes for city's green spaces

The project aimed to increase awareness about nature connectedness and empower citizens to become actively involved in green space management. For that purpose, Green Minds supported nature-based enterprises with grants to further increase their positive impact on the natural environment beyond their scope for working on greenspaces. In total, more than 8 community businesses received advice and funds from the project to strengthen their role in collectively caring for the city's green spaces. For example, the Village Hub, is a community enterprise which was created as part of the Green Minds project. It currently has 6 members, and they are responsible for managing part of Blockhouse Park.

The pandemic – a challenge and an opportunity

Public participation was central to the Green Minds project. Consequently, the pandemic outbreak hampered the engagement and participatory activities. However, the project explored alternative methods to keep the activities going. Besides leveraging the advantages of digital tools (e.g., coordinating webinars, social media campaigns), Green Minds created a family activity guide to encourage people to connect with nature. The guide focused on the use of natural public spaces to support mental and social wellbeing during the pandemic. This in fact increased the audience being reached, in other words a new audiences learnt about the scope and purpose of the project.

Moreover, an opportunity that emerged during the pandemic was re-shaping an existing programme for physical activities in parks, called 'Fit and Fed', to engage vulnerable groups in the Green Minds community activities. Before the pandemic, the city received government funding for coordinating physical activities and providing free lunches to the participants during school holidays. The project team identified an opportunity in the concept of this already popular programme led by the Community Connection Department and integrated the Green Minds community engagement activities into these events - and saw great success in participation rates. More specifically, instead of inviting social groups to indoor spaces (e.g., community centres) they ran activities outdoors in the green spaces across Plymouth in parallel with the 'picnics in the parks'. By doing this, the team managed to reach out to low-income groups that were already attending those activities led by the Community Connection Department.

3. What can cities learn from the Green Minds governance?

Keys to success

- Establishing cross-sectoral collaboration between city departments and joining forces for complementary projects secures increased outreach to diverse social groups and more resources for coordinating participatory activities.
 - Pursuing a specific goal ensures an appropriate sequencing of projects and the best use of the available budget. For example, two previous projects in the city, 'Future parks' and 'Enrich', shaped the guidelines for the objectives of the Green Minds projects and prepared the baseline for Green Minds' multi-stakeholder collaboration and the core community activities (e.g., licensing procedure for managing green spaces).
 - Due to the lack of secured funding streams, thinking out-of-the-box about how to find the required resources has led to identifying new collaboration and funding opportunities.
 - System mapping to identify the key partners (e.g., large agencies, community-led organisations); the ones you need to convince to make some change in their everyday work to secure the sustainability of the project beyond the pilot's lifecycle.
 - Engage hard-to-reach social groups (e.g., different ethnic groups, low-income communities) by going where they live and getting them interested in their neighbourhood.
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4. Scaling up and replication potential

Like other community projects, Green Minds understood that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Every pilot case focused on greenspaces with different characteristics and a surrounding community with a different profile. Therefore, in response to this diversity and to support scaling up and replication in other areas of the city, Green Minds developed a spectrum of participatory methods and case studies to provide examples that will inspire further nature-based co-stewardship schemes.

A key element to sustaining community businesses that adopt the co-stewardship scheme is to create an enabling legal environment for such enterprises to form, operate, and grow smoothly. Therefore, Green Minds worked with the Real Ideas Organization to create an online resource hub, providing resources such as a series of how-to videos. This hub will support social and environmental entrepreneurs with taking forward their initiatives on the topic of nature and urban parks.

Additionally, to facilitate the replication of the project beyond Plymouth to other UK/EU cities, Green Minds produced a policy briefing pack with evidence-based tools (e.g. digital tools for nature connectedness), resources (e.g. methods for effective participation in nature with diverse groups) and lessons learned (e.g. case studies for collective nature-based land management) drawing on projects of various scales such as the National Marine Park and the South Devon Community.

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