

The First Local Geodiversity Action Plan (LGAP): Evaluating the Cheshire region LGAP

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Introduction

The Cheshire region Local Geodiversity Action Plan (CrLGAP) was the first in Britain, launched in September 2003. This paper summarises the review process of the action plan two years on and explains the need for the effective monitoring of achievements and the benefits of regular review and evaluation of the currency of action plans.

Background

The Cheshire region LGAP was launched at the Grosvenor Museum, Chester, Cheshire in September 2003, following a ten month consultation and development period. It was the first LGAP to be established in Britain. The Cheshire region LGAP was financially supported by English Nature to fund meetings to establish a Partnership, to develop a LGAP and to launch the action plan. At the time of establishing the CrLGAP, partners were mindful of the lack of models and approaches to work with from within the geodiversity community. Similarly now, with an increasing number of LGAPs developing, there are few that have reached the stage of review and evaluation. The process of establishing the CrLGAP has already been described briefly elsewhere (Burek and Potter, 2004). This paper thus aims to:

1. briefly summarise the development of the first LGAP
2. report on the achievements and progress of the partnership in fulfilling the action plan during the first two years; and
3. outline the process of review and evaluation undertaken during summer 2005.

CrLGAP establishment

An initial group of 21 people, representing 15 organisations including the Cheshire RIGS group, statutory bodies, local authorities and local conservation organisations were involved in the development of the Cheshire region LGAP. Core to the development were two full-day meetings. These encouraged working in small groups comprising representative of the diversity of the organisations, to set clear tasks that would encourage reflection on what geodiversity conservation meant within their organisations, how it was currently enacted and how it could be more effective. For example, in the first meeting, participants were asked to define and audit the geodiversity resources of the region from their organisational perspective, to identify their organisations' geodiversity conservation objectives and priorities for the coming two years and to explore the synergies and potential links with other organisations that had overlapping or complementary objectives and priorities. From the emerging themes and gaps in knowledge, the first CrLGAP was produced and endorsed as a

collaborative document comprising eight objectives that both covered the geodiversity conservation priorities of the partners and also provided the mechanism for creating the infrastructure to maintain collaboration among the partners to deliver the geodiversity conservation objectives. The final published action plan detailed how to deliver the objectives through a series of interlinked targets and actions to be accomplished within two years. It was described within and outside the partnership as ambitious and diverse and as a result, the partnership committed to undertake a reflective review of progress after two years and to re-evaluate the currency of the plan. The changing external context of geoconservation, the shifting priorities of long-term partners and the increasing number of partner organisations were also key drivers in stimulating the perceived need for a thorough review of the currency of the plan.

Monitoring Achievement

The initial phase of the review process was to collect and collate evidence from the partnership to establish progress made towards the eight objectives, and specifically to identify which of the more detailed targets and actions underpinning the eight objectives had been completed, were underway or had not been started. A quantitative summary of progress could thus be produced (see Table 1).

Table 1 Summary of the progress made in delivering the actions comprising the Cheshire region Local Geodiversity Action Plan between September 2003 and July 2005.

Summary Objective	Actions Completed	Actions Underway	Actions Not Undertaken	Total
Audit local geodiversity resources	6	4	9	19
Audit skill and resources to support geodiversity conservation	3	1	1	5
Embed geodiversity in relevant policy	2	1	2	5
Raise awareness of geodiversity	17	3	3	23
Increase community and business participation in geoconservation	5	5	1	11
Disseminate information on geodiversity	5	3	1	9
Create feedback, reporting and monitoring mechanisms	4	0	1	5
Create infrastructure and mechanisms to enable CrLGAP process to continue	6	5	4	15
Totals	48	22	22	92

The summary shows that 52% of the 92 original identified actions were completed and a further 24% were still in progress at the time of review. Of the actions that were not undertaken, many could be broadly themed as proactive actions to engage organisations beyond the partnership that could be of potential value in furthering the CrLGAP aims. Monitoring achievement as a quantitative summary of progress was suggested as one of six potential indicators of the success of an LGAP by Burek and

Potter (2002); however, the process of detailed review highlights some of the issues associated with interpreting the validity of a summary quantitative approach. Largely, this is a result of the way some of the targets and actions have been written. For example, those without a clearly defined time and / or scale for delivery were by necessity recorded as incomplete or underway but many within this category were by necessity on-going, such as, “establish geodiversity awareness within partner organisation thinking, activities and bids” and “developing fact sheets on geodiversity issues targeted at professional groups”. In other cases, actions had not been undertaken because after discussion among partners, they were deemed unnecessary. For example, “produce themed GAPs for local geodiversity that is under threat or needs enhancement” and “produce an annual report”. This reflects how priorities and ideas changed among partners of the CrLGAP during its two years’ existence. Finally, the corollary of the previous point, actions and achievements that took place opportunistically that forwarded the objectives of the LGAP but were not described in the original action plan were not captured and recorded as achievements. During the initial phases of the partnership, where new partners bring new opportunities and partners are working together to establish common goals and shared language to record how they will meet them, a quantitative summary of completed actions as a record of monitoring achievement gives a skewed view of the success of an action planning partnership in meeting their shared objective. However, the process of monitoring success in delivering actions is a vital component of the process of action planning and one that can effectively feed forward into revitalising and renewing action plans to reflect the objectives of LGAP partners.

Review and evaluation

The process of review and evaluation was initially raised in November 2004 at the biannual partnership meeting when partners worked in small groups to record their contributions to meeting the targets and actions since the publication of the action plan. Following discussions, it was felt that the review and evaluation process would dominate the biannual meetings’ agenda and thus a series of three monthly meetings, each with specific goals, was established between May and July 2005. The intention was to engage as many partners as possible in the review process by offering several opportunities to engage in the discussions as well as to contribute by offering suggestions and views by email to a central co-ordinator who also ensured that the outcomes of meetings were shared among the partnership.

The mechanism (a mixture of meetings and interaction through a centrally co-ordinated email distribution list) was believed most effective to keep all partners included because of the substantial growth both in the number of individuals and partner organisations now involved. This had grown from 21 individuals representing 15 organisations in January 2003 to 73 people representing 34 organisations in July 2005. Not all individuals and organisations regularly attend meetings or contribute to the delivery of the action plan: this is both a function of access to meeting venues (meetings are now held at differing locations across the sub-region where possible to improve this) and a lack of awareness of how to contribute within some of the organisations that have most

recently joined the partnership. These organisations have contributed to the LGAP to date as participants at events aimed to raise awareness, such as workshops on geodiversity for planners and for site conservation managers, but are not among the 23 organisations that have directly contributed to the delivery of actions through leading on actions or contributing funding, time or other resources during the first two years.

The broad aim and the underpinning eight objectives were endorsed as still valid by the partnership and therefore the majority of discussion and the focus of the review and evaluation fell onto targets and actions to meet the objectives. Developing opportunities to directly engage the greatest number of partner opportunities and individuals as possible in the future delivery of the revised action plan was perceived by partners as both critically important and one of the biggest challenges. One of the recurring themes raised by existing partners was the need to work effectively and efficiently and in an integrated way to achieve the overarching aim and the objective of the CrLGAP. It appears that a new way of thinking and working to meet the common goals of the partner organisations within the CrLGAP is emerging that may necessitate a less rigid and more flexible framework of actions in the revised action plan. Past experience shows that opportunities and ideas develop as a result of delivering actions and from the creative synergy that develops among the partners. The latter has developed and been nurtured at meeting with a strong focus on sharing practice and experience. The ideas raised during the review process have expanded the potential breadth of activities the revised CrLGAP could accomplish. However, it is possible that the revised action plan may have fewer specific and detailed actions than the original plan as it may be just as important to 'leave space' that allows the partners to interpret the document and work with it as an evolving, rolling process of geoconservation to which they can add and record their own actions. Such a system would have the benefits of a plan that not only set the agenda for local geoconservation action but could also respond and develop to changes and, if well constructed, offer integrated recording and monitoring of the on-going activities and actions of the partners.

Summary

The Cheshire region LGAP is now at a critical moment in its development after two years of sustained growth of the partnership and considerable success in delivering actions identified in the original action plan as well as responding to opportunities that have arisen in the past two years. The review and evaluation process has played a crucial role in engaging new partners and re-engaging established partners to take an active role in reshaping and delivering the new action plan. Monitoring the achievements of working in partnership to deliver an ambitious and diverse range of goals is an important component of the action planning process. Ensuring that the monitoring process captures and accurately records achievements and the contributions of all partners is critical and successes need to be communicated both within and beyond the partnership in a way that is sensitive to the fluidity and changing nature of priorities and the potential opportunities that arise. As LGAPs establish across England, it is incumbent on the partnerships that deliver them to document and celebrate their achievements, both planned and unplanned, to re-evaluate regularly their progress and

priorities in order to maintain the currency of their action plan, the enthusiasm and commitment of partners and thus obtain the greatest benefit of geodiversity conservation.

References

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