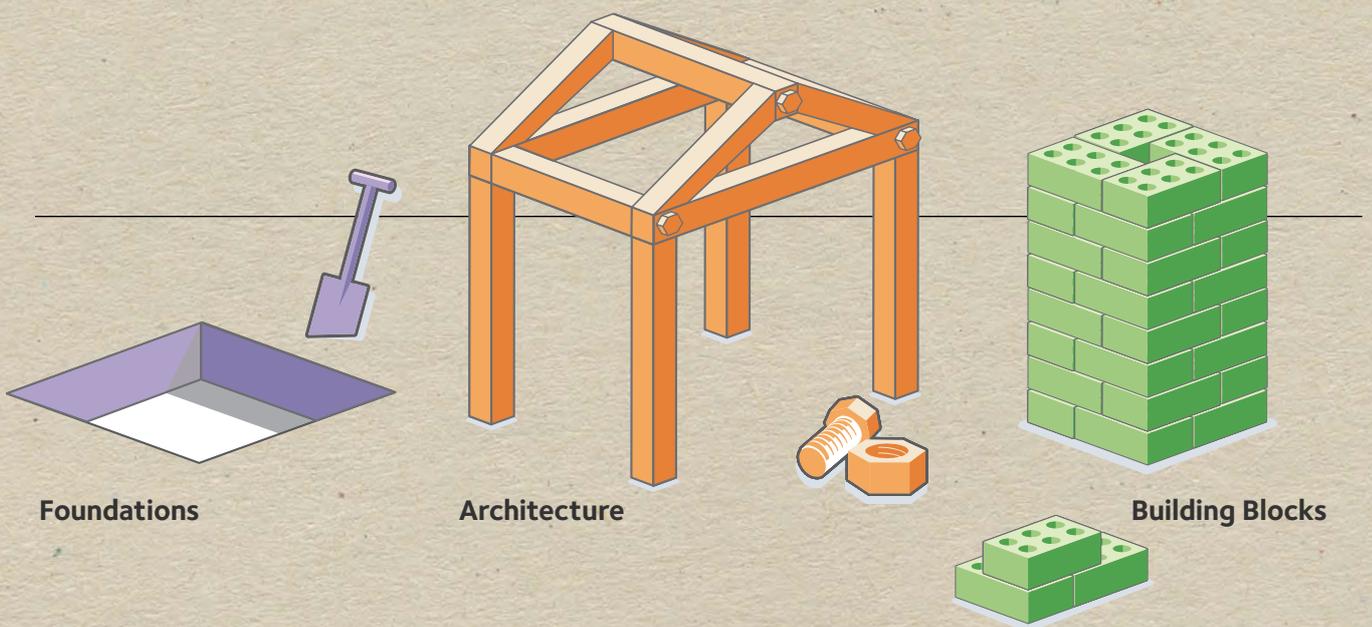




December 2012:

Building Good Grant Programmes

Learning from the evaluation of Access to Nature



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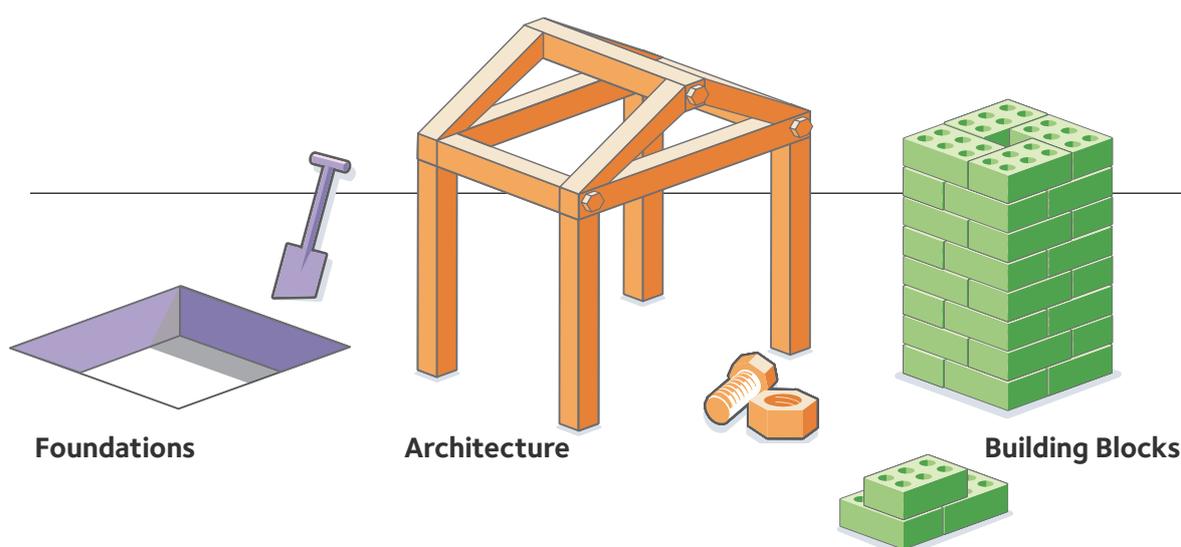
Executive summary

Building Good Grant Programmes provides practical, grounded learning drawn from the reality of designing and delivering Natural England's Access to Nature programme, a Big Lottery Fund (BIG) programme which connects people and communities with the natural environment.

This paper identifies the learning that can inform Natural England, partner organisations and other grant makers, in the design, construction and operation of future grant programmes. It draws wider application from the lessons learnt from Access to Nature as a result of Icarus' independent, external evaluation of the programme, creating a series of prompts which the designers of upcoming grant programmes can use to guide their work.

Building Good Grant Programmes uses construction as a metaphor to explore and illustrate the planning which needs to take place to create quality grant making. It proposes that funders and grant givers need to establish **strong foundations** for their programmes, design and build a **cohesive architecture** (or grant making structure) and then put in place **key building blocks** to deliver the work. This summary provides a note of the key issues identified at each planning stage. These issues are fully explored within the main body of the paper.

The key message from *Building Good Grant Programmes* is to place a high value on planning, and to be systematic, integrated and pragmatic in that planning.



Process overview



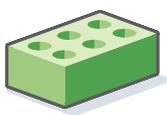
The foundations of a good grant programme

- A clear programme vision that articulates the desired changes
- Clear, understandable targets and outcomes
- Good alignment with organisational purpose, aims and priorities
- Good alignment between the goals of the funder and the grant giver
- Clarity over the nature of the relationship between funder and grant giver, and between grant giver and grantees
- Shared understanding between funder and grant giver over accepted levels of risk
- Shared understanding between funder and grant giver over what they wish to learn from the programme



The architecture on which good grant programmes should be built

- Clear, shared, governance arrangements
- Clarity about the kind of organisation(s) needed to deliver the programme
- Clear and explicit expectations for grantees, and a way of conveying these expectations
- A clear and explicit structure to the programme (grant size, permissible items, matched funding, use of grant rounds etc)
- Clear choices made over demographic and geographic targeting
- Clarity over the level of support for applicants / grantees, and how it will be delivered
- Agreement over the level of internal resources available to manage the programme



The building blocks of good grant making practice

- A clear and explicit application process, chosen to fit the desired outcomes and targets
- Clear and explicit programme guidance that sets out all that will be expected and required of grantees
- Clear and transparent assessment and decision making processes
- A proportionate and easy to understand monitoring and reporting system
- An appropriate model for evaluation
- A system to enable learning to be identified and shared
- A system to identify and manage risks

About Access to Nature

Access to Nature is a £28.75 million grant scheme to encourage more people to enjoy the outdoors, particularly those with little or no previous contact with the natural environment. Funded by the Big Lottery Fund's Changing Spaces programme and by Natural England, Access to Nature is run by Natural England on behalf of a consortium of major environmental organisations. Funded projects include very local schemes run by small community based groups, through to national initiatives from large organisations. Diversity in scale is mirrored by a diversity and richness of projects including for example equipment to allow people with disabilities to access the natural environment across the South West; supporting black and minority ethnic (BME) communities to visit the countryside; as well as many projects which are providing a range of volunteering and educational opportunities for local communities and young people.

A total of 115 Access to Nature grants have been made, and in 2012 the work of 52 of the Access to Nature projects was enhanced by additional grants focused on sustaining the benefits of their activities through BIG's Supporting Change and Impact programme.

Introduction

“Spending money is easy. Spending limited resources effectively and efficiently is extraordinarily difficult; doing so in ways that please everyone is impossible as long as demand for money exceeds supply.” Big Lottery Fund¹

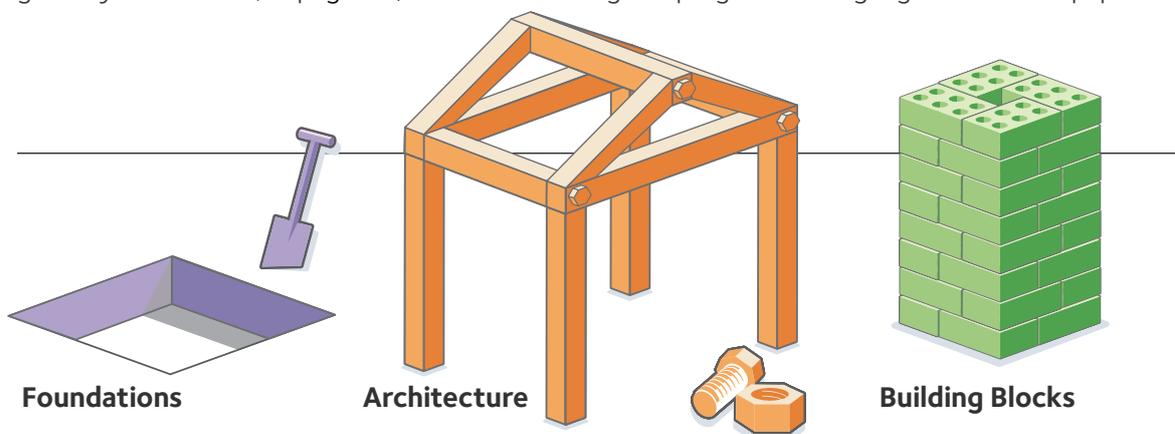
Are you involved in the planning of a new grant programme?

Are you thinking about how to make grant money work in communities?

Do you need to get the best from investments you’ve made to bring about change?

If you have answered ‘yes’ to any of these questions, *Building Good Grant Programmes* could be just what you need. Based on the independent evaluation of Natural England’s Access to Nature programme by Icarus, this paper provides practical, grounded learning drawn from the reality of designing and delivering a national, Big Lottery Fund (BIG) programme which is connecting people and communities with nature. The paper will inform and guide future practice within and beyond Natural England in the design, construction and operation of grant programmes.

It identifies the key questions which need to be considered and addressed at each stage of the life of a grant programme, from conception to commencement (what the paper refers to as the **foundations of programme planning**), through design and construction (**the architecture of a grant programme**), to operation and delivery (**the building blocks of good practice**). Each section of the paper focuses on the fundamental issues that relate to that stage, and highlights the key questions that grant programme designers need to address as a result. A glossary is included (on page 31) that defines the grant programme language used in this paper.

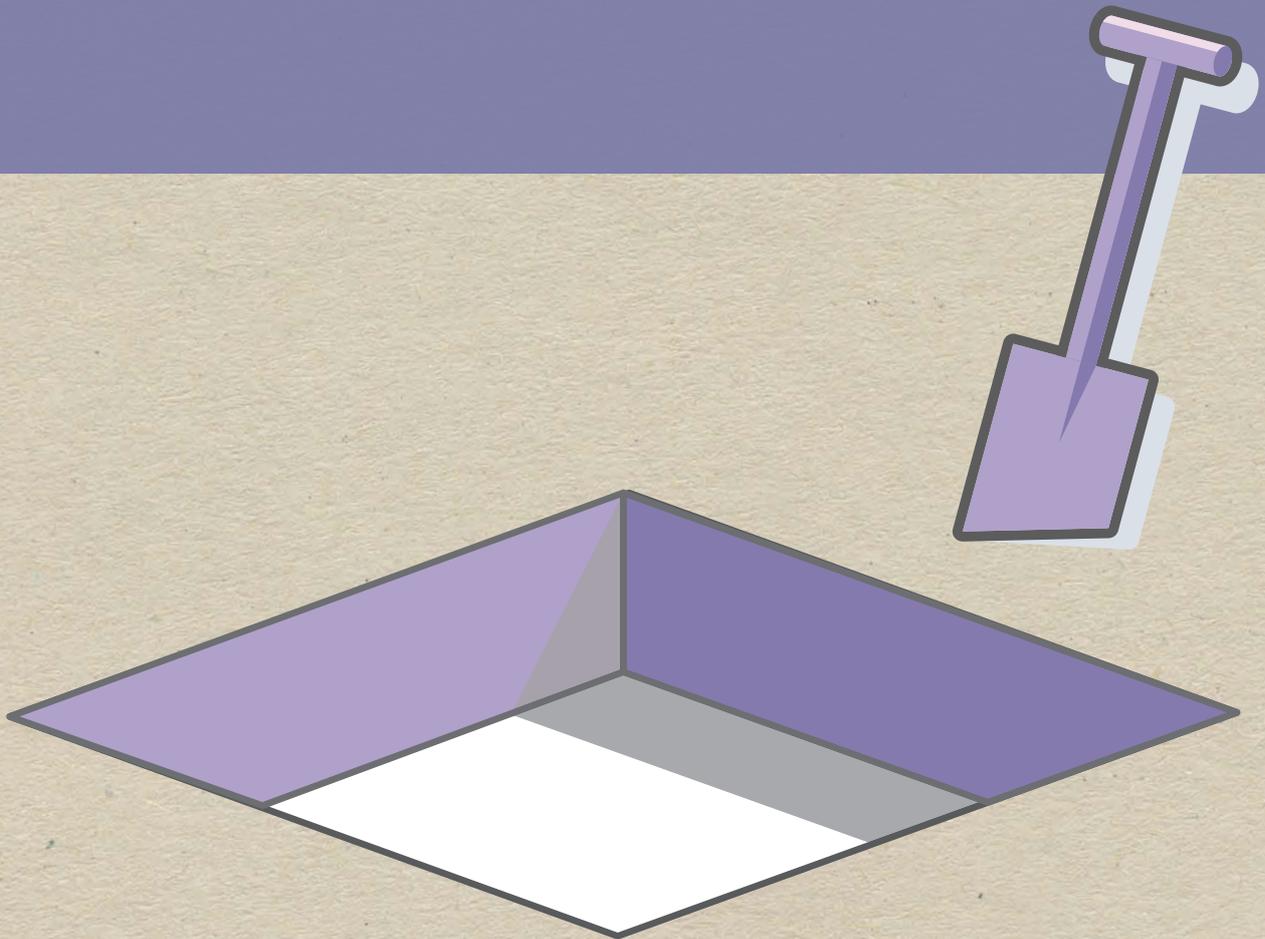


Footnote 1 Big Lottery Fund (2005); *Research Issue 17: A discussion paper on risk and good grant making*. UK: Big Lottery Fund

1

Section one:

Foundations



Foundations

The quality of the initial thinking and planning work for any programme to distribute funds will substantially impact on all aspects of that programme's future life.

Devoting time to this initial thinking and planning in an ordered and logical fashion is likely to both improve the efficiency and cost effectiveness, and increase the potential impact of any programme². It will also put in place the solid foundations on which more detailed design can build.

We have identified six key foundation issues that need considering in the design of any grants programme.

Foundation issue 1: **Vision**

Key question for future grant programmes:

What is the overall vision that will drive the programme? What is the desired change the programme seeks to achieve?

Programme design cannot start without a clear picture of the change that is desired as a result of the investment that is to be made. This sense of vision and purpose needs to be shared between those seeking to achieve the change and those who will be funding the activity to bring change about.

Access to Nature was the product of energy and vision from a consortium of leading environmental organisations which aspired to connect more people to nature, particularly those with little or no previous contact with the natural environment, through the experience of being outdoors. Once provided with the impetus of investment, in this case by BIG, other foundations can begin to be developed.

Footnote 2 National Audit Office (2009); *Making grants efficiently in the culture, media and sport sector*. UK: National Audit Office

Foundation issue 2: Outcomes and targets

Key question for future grant programmes:

Is the overall vision of the programme to be expressed through targets or outcomes?

The balance between aspiring to generate activity (and to quantify what has happened as a result of a programme), and to create change (and interpret the quality of that change), is a fundamental challenge in planning grant activity.

Most grant programmes seek to balance these two goals to a greater or lesser degree, creating an imperative for those delivering the work to reach a certain number of people, or to create a certain volume of products or activities (targets) *and* to do this in such a way as to enable certain changes to come about (outcomes).

These targets and outcomes need be clear, unambiguous and understandable to all involved in the programme. Access to Nature used both numerical targets and a set of outcomes linked to improved opportunities, learning, access to the natural environment, richer natural places and ownership of those places. An example from Access to Nature of how the programme's vision was expressed through targets and outcomes is shown below:

Desired overall change	Target	SMART outcome
(in this case an Access to Nature Programme Outcome)	(taken from an Access to Nature project)	- specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time based (taken from an Access to Nature project)
More people have opportunities to learn about the natural environment and gain new skills	100 young people aged 14-25 will gain accredited qualifications in skills linked to environmental conservation	Young people aged 14-25 will be able to identify their specific learning gained through accredited training and / or other learning opportunities accessed through the project

Striking the balance between targets and outcomes can be challenging, particularly in the early stages of a programme. Targets and outcomes need to be effective for the funder (in this case BIG), the grant giver (in this case Natural England) and the grantee (in this case the funded projects delivering the programme and working with beneficiaries). They should also connect well with the wider understanding of effecting change within that particular sector (in this case, engagement in the natural environment). This principle has also been reflected in some recent thinking across a coalition of voluntary sector organisations, 'think tanks' and funders, including BIG. They have identified the need for clearer, joined up standards and principles linked to the measurement of change, proposing grant givers place a priority on setting good quality indicators of change and productivity³.

Footnote 3 Lumley T., Rickey B. & Pike M. (2011); *Inspiring Impact, Working together for a bigger impact in the UK social sector*. UK: Views, New Philanthropy Capital

When the Access to Nature programme was developed a set of outcomes and targets that would underpin its work were written. This set of statements collectively gives a good sense of the overall goals of the programme, but individually lack the specificity to guide grantees effectively. This can be illustrated by looking at one example, Programme Outcome 3 – *more people are able to enjoy the natural environment through investment in access to natural places and networks between sites*. The way this was drafted combined an outcome (enjoyment of the natural environment), a quantity measure (more people doing this) and an approach (investment in access to natural places and networks) within the one statement.

As a result some Access to Nature projects initially experienced difficulties in understanding the relative priority of their targets and outcomes, and the Natural England Lead Advisers (the support team in place within Access to Nature) struggled to guide them appropriately. This illustrates the tensions posed in interpreting a programme vision and the need for clear outcomes and targets. It is part of a picture of evidence that led to the 2011 programme evaluation recommending a shift towards a requirement for quality engagement at the expense of higher target numbers.

The weaknesses in programme outcomes were further exacerbated by the Access to Nature application form which asked applicants to list their own outcomes, which were commonly not well linked to those of the programme, nor well formulated to be SMART, (or Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time based). In order to ensure good alignment between grantee and programme outcomes, and to provide a common framework for the programme evaluation, Icarus created a process to co-write / edit the outcomes proposed by each project. This practice has been built on with the creation of model 'change statements' for use by Supporting Change and Impact projects in evaluating their sustainability work.

This 'targets / outcomes' or 'what will happen / what will change' tension is strongly connected to other issues at the foundation stage, namely the relationship with the funder and the level of risk agreed for a programme (see Foundation issue 5: Risk). The selection of targets and outcomes goes on to inform the basis of decision making over a range of other aspects of programme construction, including the choice of delivery agents or partners, or geographic coverage. A key piece of learning for grant programme design is therefore the need to invest early on in the life of a programme to create a clear set of targets and outcomes.

Foundation issue 3: Alignment

Key question for future grant programmes:

Is there a good, or sufficient, fit of the programme with the grant giver's purpose, aims and priorities? Is there sufficient alignment between the goals of the grant giver and the funder?

There is a need to gain good alignment of programme goals with the strategic objectives and the wider work of the key stakeholders, in particular the grant giving organisation and the funding organisation; otherwise there can be substantial consequences later in the life of the programme. Isolation, irrelevance, misunderstanding or a lack of engagement between the programme and its host organisation are all the potential effects of poor misalignment with strategic goals and organisational structures or priorities.

Consideration of alignment with wider organisational goals will also assist in planning for the ending of the programme, allowing choices to be made over how and when the work will be brought to a close, extended or sustained, and enabling an effective exit strategy to be created. While the proposition of planning an exit strategy before a programme has started may seem premature, it will help in assessing whether there is sufficient alignment.

Alignment in the design of a grant programme will often work from the top down: a funder sets out strategic goals and connects with a grant giving organisation to deliver those goals; managers in the grant giving organisation find the best departmental 'fit' for the proposed programme and task that department to create a programme; those who become the programme managers look outward into their sector to identify potential delivery organisations.

The Access to Nature experience suggests that this process also needs to work from the ground up to ensure good alignment, for conversations to take place internally over the links to the organisation's strategic priorities and the best fit internally for the work⁴. Alignment is also likely to remain a key task over the life of a programme, as the context changes and new policies are developed.

The more diverse the proposed programme, and the wider the range of key stakeholders involved, the more critical the need for good alignment is likely to be. It will ensure that everyone involved has a sense of shared understanding and purpose.

Footnote 4 Bovey H. (2010); *Access to Nature Interim Evaluation report 2*. UK: Icarus

Foundation issue 4: Relationships

Key question for future grant programmes:

What is the desired relationship between funder and grant giver and thereafter the grantees? How will this be established? What level of independence does / should the grant giver have?

The nature and culture of the relationships between funders, grant givers and grantees can act as an exemplar of the style in which the funded work should be carried out.

The relationship between a grant giver and a funder (or between grantees and a grant giver) can be extremely complex despite the seemingly simple transaction – ‘we’d like you to give us some money to do this’ or ‘we’d like to give you this amount of money to do that’. Common stumbling blocks can be a lack of communication, unwillingness to fund core costs, unrealistic response or turnaround times, a bias towards larger organisations, lack of trust, lengthy or disproportionate reporting, and lack of flexibility. A possible response to these challenges can be a relationship that resorts to minimalism, and becomes focused on accountability, rather than outcomes or learning.

A desirable relationship would arguably be one which is characterised by good communication, flexibility over what can be funded, planned response times, an even handed, trusting approach and proportionate reporting. This kind of relationship is one that needs to begin as the programme does, and be reflected in early activity to establish roles, decision making protocols, lines of communication and boundaries⁵.

The relationship also needs to be realistic and pragmatic in acknowledging the nature of the organisations. For example, in the instance of Access to Nature it has been important to understand that Natural England and BIG are large organisations with complex structures and are reliant on tiered management arrangements. Equally, it has been necessary to understand the differences between Natural England, as grant giver, and some of the grantee organisations, which have been small, local voluntary organisations.

The Access to Nature evaluation suggests that, certainly in the early stages of the programme, a more confident relationship between Natural England and BIG i.e. one that is based in a desire to learn, is assertive and built on a clear understanding of each other’s capacity, strengths, limitations and cultures may have been beneficial to programme development, establishing early on the boundaries and freedoms around which the programme could be developed over time⁶.

A desirable relationship between grant giver and grantees would also be described by the characteristics noted above. This can be complicated by the scale of the relationship (Access to Nature, for example, has 115 projects with which to build relationships) and by the availability of support. The Access to Nature programme sought to provide, through the Lead Advisers, personal points of contact for each project who became knowledgeable about the specific practice of that project as well as the vision, practice and requirements of the programme. In this way, the support function was broadened beyond a basic minimum (which could have been seen as financial and target accountability) to one which enabled a working dialogue with the potential to add value to individual project performance.

Footnote 5 Wells P. et al. (2012); *Research study into outsourcing grantmaking*. UK: Big Lottery Fund, Sheffield Hallam University

Footnote 6 Bovey H. (2009); *Access to Nature Interim Evaluation report 1*. UK: Icarus

Foundation issue 5: Risk

Key question for future grant programmes:

What levels of risk are acceptable for the funder and for the grant giving organisation?

A strong relationship will enable an informed discussion as part of programme planning around risk. Risk is a key foundation issue and it will be important to establish the levels of risk which both funder and grant giver are willing to accept.

The principle risks associated with making grants include balancing innovation with stewardship; speed with due process; accountability with flexibility; organisations with track records versus untried providers; and the relative merits of short-term grants against those of longer term awards⁷.

A sound relationship between grant giver and funder will enable agreed levels of risks and boundaries to be established, and translated into working processes within a programme.

Footnote 7 Unwin J. (2005); *The Grantmaking Tango*. London: The Baring Foundation

Foundation issue 6: **Desired learning**

Key question for future grant programmes:

What do the funder and the grant giving organisation wish to learn from the programme?

The drives towards understanding outcome achievement, the return on investments, and the broad value of activity across the triple bottom line of social, economic and environmental change have heightened the need for informed and intelligent dialogue around learning.

BIG's aspiration to become an 'intelligent funder'⁸ demonstrating values of flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness, and Icarus' work to develop the concept of an 'enabling funder'⁹ are both rooted in the premise of the funder as a learner.

Traditionally, emerging learning from a programme has been compartmentalised within the role of evaluation. Historically, this has taken the form of a summative process, reflecting on progress once the work has been completed. Modern evaluative practice suggests a formative approach, enabling an iterative process of dialogue in which evaluators, funder, grant giver, grantees and their beneficiaries are all active participants in identifying, and acting on, learning from their experience of the programme. A formative evaluation approach requires the embedding of the evaluation very early in the life of the programme, and for the foundation planning to identify the desired areas of learning.

It is a formative approach which has been adopted within the Access to Nature programme, with ongoing data gathering, periodic reporting, learning documented through specific Findings Papers, and reflections and dialogue with those responsible for programme governance and management. This approach has proved a significant asset to the Natural England team, being described by one manager as *"the gold standard in evaluation"*.

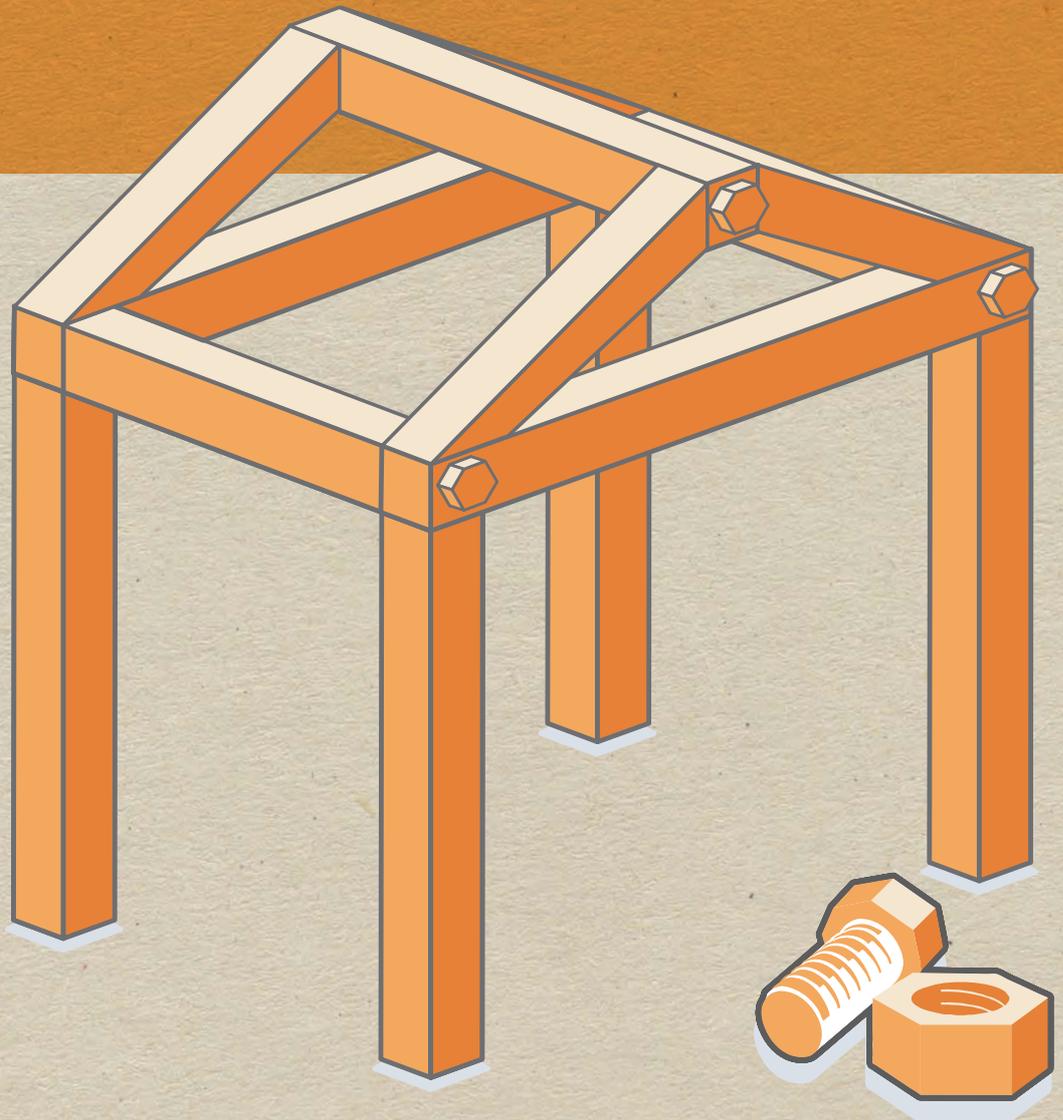
Footnote 8 Big Lottery Fund (2008); *BIG as an Intelligent Funder*. UK: Big Lottery Fund

Footnote 9 Casey A. (2012); *Neighbourhood Challenge Learning Paper*. UK: Nesta

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Section two:

Architecture



Architecture

Addressing the foundation issues prior to the commencement of a grant programme will provide a sense of purpose, coherence and boundaries. This foundation can then be built upon through the design and construction phase of a programme to develop the foundation thinking to provide the architecture for the programme.

The evaluation work across the Access to Nature programme suggests a number of design and construction issues which it would be prudent to consider in developing new grant programmes.

Architecture issue 1: **Governance**

Key question for future grant programmes:

How will the programme be overseen and guided?

Many funding programmes are constructed as collaborative ventures, or have a collection of relevant stakeholders brought together for the purpose of overseeing, guiding and directing their work. It is unusual for such groups to have managerial roles, though not uncommon for them to have levels of decision-making authority within the programme structure. Access to Nature has benefitted from this type of arrangement - initially with a Steering Group and a Project Board and latterly a Strategic Working Group - drawn from the 11 partner organisations in the consortium which has led the programme and remains part of the ongoing governance.

The evaluation evidence from the programme suggests that for bodies such as the Steering Group, Project Board or Strategic Working Group to play an effective role in the programme, they should have clarity of role and purpose¹⁰. Crucially, the role and purpose of such a group may change as a programme develops and moves through different stages, and flexibility (for example ending some aspects of governance if their role has naturally come to an end) will be important to maintain their effectiveness as well as connections and levels of commitment, as has been the case with Access to Nature.

Footnote 10 *ibid*, reference 4

Architecture issue 2: **Delivery organisations**

Key question for future grant programmes:

What kind of organisation does the programme need or want to deliver the desired changes?

Having determined the desired targets and outcomes for the programme, choices can be made concerning the kind of organisations needed or wanted to deliver those changes.

This can prove challenging for a grant giver, and the dilemma inherent in playing safe in seeking providers with a good track record or taking a managed risk with new, unproven, suppliers will need to be addressed. Other questions for planners to consider include the desired size of delivery organisations (this may depend on the size of grants on offer – see Architecture issue 4: Boundaries), the degree of readiness to deliver and whether the nature and ethos of the programme means that attracting a certain type of organisation will be desirable.

The Access to Nature experience may be informative. The programme chose an open approach to recruitment, prioritising the content of applications over the type or size of organisation. This attracted applicants who were not the ‘usual suspects’ that might be expected to deliver projects linked to the natural environment, in addition to those familiar with the sector. As a result, the portfolio of grant holders within Access to Nature includes organisations from a wide range of sectors including health, children and play, and housing, as well as many traditional environment sector providers such as Wildlife Trusts, local authorities and Groundwork.

The evaluation evidence suggests that neither the type of organisation providing the work, nor the size of the organisation have been key determinants of quality in delivering the work¹¹. Rather, the key factors affecting quality have been capacity – the ability of an organisation to set out plans for work, know the resources needed, manage them well, and reflect on the effectiveness of the work – and the ability of organisations to forge linkages and partnerships with local community and beneficiary groups which have opened possibilities to increase access to the natural environment.

This suggests that there is a need to look to capacity, and the ability to engage effectively with beneficiaries, as key factors in choosing what mix of organisations should participate within similar future programmes. In other situations there may also be a desire for the grant giver to strike a balance between funding an organisation to deliver activity, and investing in the building of grantee’s capacity. In this context the term capacity is not about an organisation’s size – it’s much more about their state of readiness and whether they have the building blocks in place for a project to run effectively.

Footnote 11 Bovey H. (2011); *Access to Nature Interim Evaluation Report 3*. UK: Icarus

Architecture issue 3: Expectations

Key question for future grant programmes:

What expectations will be placed on the grantees? How and when will they be conveyed?

The task of setting out the expectations on grantees is one where investment in good early planning will reap rewards as the programme develops – saving time in correcting assumptions or mistakes as it develops and reducing the risk of reputational damage and ongoing dissent.

This is particularly, though not exclusively, true of expectations regarding monitoring, evaluation and reporting. These three issues can act as ticking time bombs within the early life of programme, and need to be de-fused through good communications and clarity from the grant giver. To illustrate the potential disruption a lack of clarity over expectations can cause, two recent final evaluation reports from early Access to Nature projects reference what was perceived as confusion at the outset of the programme regarding targets and outcomes.

“There were numerous changes to the reporting formats in the early stages of the project. Some of these have now been addressed, but the issue of double counting people when they have done two distinctly different training courses, for example, but can only be counted once against the ‘training’ target is outstanding.” Access to Nature Project Final Evaluation report, 2012

“The process of managing the project has been challenging due to the fact that the external bodies overseeing the grant developed their processes after the award of the grant. These have included the late onset on the evaluation procedures, recording processes, and changes in objectives and targets.” Access to Nature Project Final Evaluation report, 2012

It is telling that these organisations felt the need to comment on these concerns three to four years after experiencing them.

This issue is closely linked to risk, and the funder and grant giver will need to use their agreed understanding over the level of risk they are willing to take to inform delivery organisations what is expected of them. The four key factors identified through the Access to Nature evaluations that will affect delivery organisations reactions around expectations are:

- Clarity – unambiguous, simple guidance
- Timing – ensuring expectations are made clear from the outset
- Proportionality – the reporting level needs to be relative to the size of grant received
- Consistency – providing a commonality of logic and language across guidance notes, application forms and monitoring requirements for example, will establish and reinforce grantee expectations. While evidence based changes can support and enhance consistency, a common fault with new grant programmes is a tendency to evolve systems in practice, leading to changes in forms, volumes of reporting or deadlines, and this should be avoided wherever possible¹².

Footnote 12 *ibid*, reference 4

Architecture issue 4: **Boundaries**

Key question for future grant programmes:

How will the funding on offer be structured?

Choices around the nature of the changes desired for a programme at the foundation planning stage will strongly influence the architecture of the actual grants to be awarded. Other influences will come from the funder, the most challenging of which is likely to be a need for speedy, visible achievements. A strong relationship between grant giver and funder will aid in managing these influences. Critical issues to be considered in planning the shape of the grants will be:

- The size of grants – Options include open ended, tiered, capped, phased etc.
- Matched funding – Will this be essential, desirable or unnecessary? At what level or percentage? How will it be evidenced?
- Scope of funding – What will it be possible to fund? What will not be permitted? Will core costs be allowable?

There are no firm rights or wrongs, and the choices made should ideally be specific to the needs of that programme (rather than chosen as a result of common prior practice for example).

There is a need to think broadly about the most appropriate and productive processes that will offer a good fit with the ethos of the programme and achieve the best delivery potential. One model to consider is that of phased awards. This allows a grant giver to build potential and capacity within potential delivery partners, and avoid a good piece of work being lost if the applicant organisation is assessed as not yet ready to deliver the work. Crudely, a grant award is made which can be accessed in the future when the organisation has addressed the capacity concerns noted at assessment.

A further consideration in structuring funding will be choosing whether to use grant rounds. Grant programmes are traditionally structured to provide staggered, or periodic, opportunities for applicants to apply for funds. Grant rounds, with fixed deadlines, are common tools to enable access and allow a relatively even distribution of funds over time. Good planning on this issue will support the development of detailed application processes (see Building Blocks section).

The practice of grant rounds has evolved partly to enable the grant giver to manage applications efficiently and predictably: a series of deadlines allows a grant giver to arrange the resources needed to assess and make decisions neatly and in a cost effective manner; the gaps between rounds allow for small changes in process or emphasis and a review of the reach / coverage of the programme, and the use of deadlines focuses applicants' work.

Two alternative models exist: open access and invitation. Open access arrangements have a potential limitation to overcome in managing what can be a very uneven and unpredictable assessment workload. Alternatively, inviting applications from specific organisations can allow gaps in desired provision to be addressed and ensure the right fit of grantee with the programme's ethos. However, this method can also be perceived as unfair or biased, and could be interpreted as commissioning rather than grant making.

Access to Nature used a hybrid of these approaches, with grant ‘windows’ and regular award panels across those windows. This offered applicants the opportunity to apply in line with their own resources and timetables, and enabled Natural England to support applicants in developing their proposals. This system required efficient internal processing of applications and good resource management to assess applications and bring them to panels. Limitations identified through the programme evaluation included: some applicants submitting poor quality initial applications rather than fully developed projects¹³, a tendency for early decision making to be less stringent or developed, partly through newness, partly through a need to show progress¹⁴, and very competitive panels towards the end of the windows.

Architecture issue 5: Coverage

Key question for future grant programmes:

Given the desired changes, what will the most appropriate demographic or geographic coverage be?

Demographic and / or geographic coverage will also be strongly influenced by the foundation planning around desired changes, and what is known about the pattern of needs and the resources that are available to meet those needs.

Good data concerning the strength of the delivery market (whether, for instance, there are sufficient organisations available with the requisite experience and skills to deliver the programme goals) and the levels and patterns of need linked to targets or outcomes will allow informed choices about coverage. Within Access to Nature, Natural England’s Regional Targeting Plans were used to inform coverage and identify areas where investment would be most desirable.

It may also be valuable to consider the history of previous investments to understand if it is necessary to offer higher levels of resources to some areas, or if additional promotion of opportunities may be needed to increase take up. If regional, sub-regional, or themed budgets are to be considered, there needs to be a clear rationale developed that is made available to address any questions from potential applicants.

Footnote 13 *ibid*, reference 4

Footnote 14 *ibid*, reference 6

Architecture issue 6: Support

Key question for future grant programmes:

What level of support is appropriate or possible from the grant giver?

Arguably, good quality support to grantees can contribute to the effective delivery of their work. While it does not guarantee successful projects, good support, if used well by grantees, has the potential to drive up quality for the programme beneficiaries. This will not be universally true as some projects may still underperform or be adversely affected by circumstances. Within Access to Nature, grantees have reported that the availability of accessible and knowledgeable support has provided an effective sounding board, allowing them to pose questions, discuss options and make good choices¹⁵.

Access to Nature provides an insightful case study in supporting grantees. The team of Lead Advisers has offered support at each stage of the life of the grants, from pre-application advice and guidance, assessment of applications, informal contact point for questions and concerns, periodic visits, guidance on the quarterly reporting and financial claims procedure and liaison between projects and the independent evaluators.

The evidence from the evaluation indicates this has been a successful model, which has been valued by grantees and has provided Natural England a means of ensuring the processes through which the programme has been delivered (monitoring, reporting, claims, evaluation)¹⁶ have been applied, and allowing strong relationships to develop which have been valuable in addressing challenges, gathering learning and communicating expectations and requirements. Grantees have reported that access to someone who knows their work and can negotiate frankly, openly and from an informed position has significant merit as an approach to support delivery¹⁷.

“The constant support and advice from the Natural England Adviser has been an invaluable aid to the effective management of the project. The Adviser has been available at each step of the projects development and addresses every question quickly and effectively. The Adviser’s approachable nature means the project officers feel comfortable in sharing project concerns early which enables them to be resolved quickly.” Access to Nature Final Project Evaluation report, 2012

While this model may not necessarily be possible or desirable for other future programmes, the Access to Nature evaluation suggests that this pairing of support personnel with projects is advisable, and that ongoing contact which allows the building of relationships with grantees is desirable.

Footnote 15 *ibid*, reference 11

Footnote 16 *ibid*, reference 11

Footnote 17 *ibid*, reference 11

While the programme evaluation has not sought to assess the impact of the support given in terms of cost versus benefits, it is possible to conclude that the model, and the flexibility with which it has been delivered, have been highly valued by grantees and that, should the support have not been available, the quality of interpretation of targets and outcomes and the reporting delivered by some grantees may have been diminished. A factor that has aided the delivery of the Lead Adviser role has been a relatively stable set of staff with minimal turnover during the programme. Clearly, this cannot be guaranteed when planning support mechanisms.

A further challenge for a grant giver is the cost of delivering support, as it will usually be the case that resources dedicated to support will reduce those available for grant giving. It should be noted that the support levels within Access to Nature have needed a high resource commitment from Natural England and BIG.

Architecture issue 7: **Management capacity**

Key question for future grant programmes:

What levels of internal resources are needed / available to manage the programme?

In addition to the outward facing support to projects, architecture planning also needs to identify and agree the level of internal resources needed to administer and manage the programme effectively. Key functions such as leadership, management, administration and internal liaison each require resourcing within the peaks and troughs of activity within a programme and across the wider organisation.

The evaluation of Access to Nature suggests that it is not always easy to get the balance of these functions correct, especially within a large organisation where internal priorities and the shape and structure change periodically. The functional management of the programme (day to day running, administration, finances) has largely been effective, though the more pro-active side of internal management (aligning the programme with organisational priorities, exerting influencing on behalf of the programme) has been more challenging at times¹⁸. A particular aspiration within Access to Nature has been that of a senior level 'champion' for the programme who would have been able to connect the programme and the emerging learning more dynamically and explicitly with other parts of the organisation or with key strategic stakeholders.

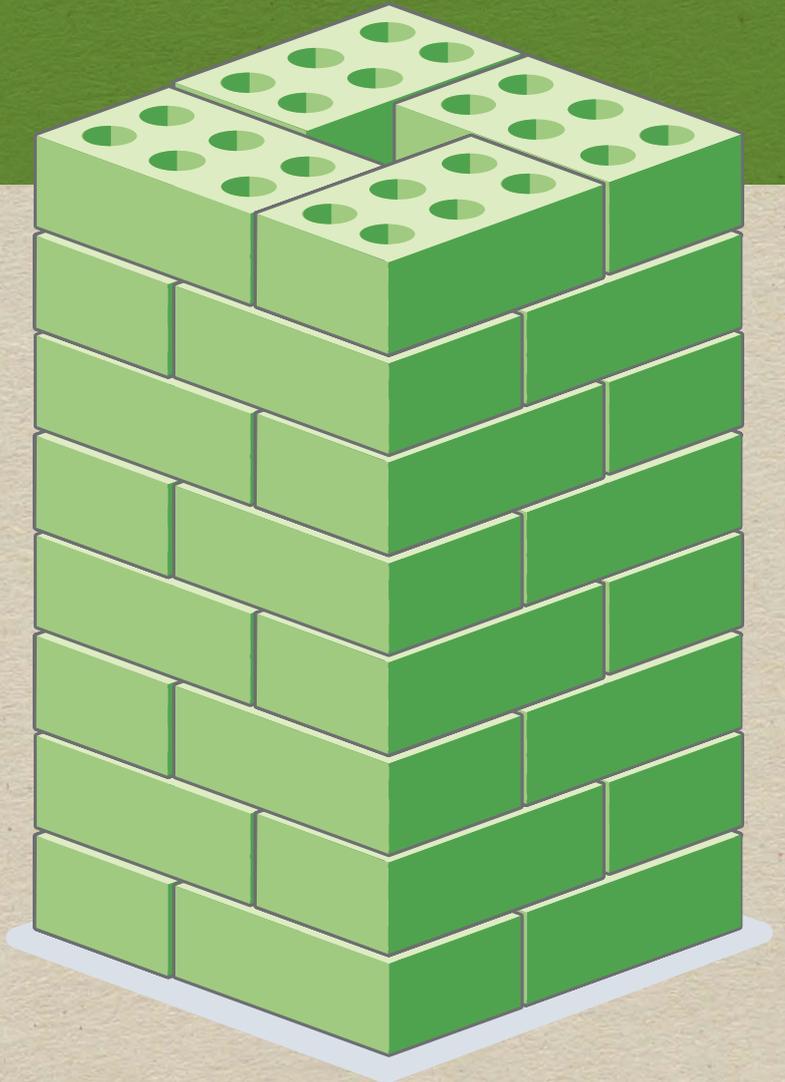
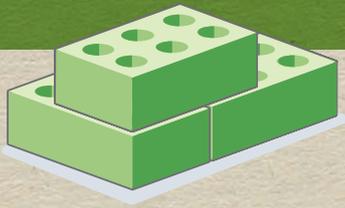
As with the support function, the balance needs to be struck between the costs of good internal resourcing and funds available for grant giving.

Footnote 18 *ibid*, reference 11

3

Section three:

Building Blocks



Building Blocks

Work on the architecture of a grant programme will provide a shape to the delivery of the work, enabling detailed planning of the elements that will enable its implementation. These building blocks will be informed by the earlier planning, which should be regarded as an investment in the programme.

The evaluation work across the Access to Nature programme suggests a number of building blocks are key to good programme management.

Building block 1: **Application process**

Key question for future grant programmes:

What is the most appropriate application system for the programme?

Building on the choice made over how potential applicants will access the programme, designing the application process is arguably the pivotal point in the life of a grant programme. A good application process gathers relevant information, in the right amounts, to enable sound and efficient assessment and decision-making and, ultimately, good practice on the ground. It should also provide an information feed into the monitoring, evaluation and reporting mechanisms for the programme (which, as noted earlier in this paper, should be designed and developed concurrently). A poor process will compromise the ability of the programme to make good choices over where grants are made, and can result in misaligned work, investments in weak organisations or poor project ideas. A poor process is also wasteful: recent analysis concluded that poor application and reporting requirements from funders cost much in time and resources for both grant givers and grantees¹⁹.

The Access to Nature evaluation provides some insights into the key challenges in shaping a good application process:

- **A phased or filtered process**

The process can be designed to act as series of filters (the first being an eligibility check, the second an outline project proposal to assess fit and quality, the third a full application). This approach concentrates assessment resources where they are best used as it avoids

Footnote 19 Ainsworth D. (2012); *The paper mountain of grant applications*. UK: Third Sector

inappropriate or very weak applications reaching the third stage. One principle of such a process is that one phase feeds the next, meaning that an applicant organisation should never need to submit anything more than once.

- **Good quality systems, especially if using on line systems**

The systems used by applicants to submit their proposals need to be easy to use and navigate, irrespective of the medium used, and ideally, designed to fit the specific needs of the programme. On line systems should be well tested before use and fit for purpose.

- **Clear guidance materials**

(see Building block 2: Promotion and guidance)

- **Clear and consistent language**

The terms used by all those involved in communicating about the process and the programme need to be simple, explainable and consistently applied.

- **Clear requests for information**

The process, whether in phases or through a single stage, must gather the information required to assess and make choices. This means there needs to be clarity over the information needed (and what is not needed) and the requests for information within the process must be clear and specific where necessary (for example, a set of budget headings may be desirable).

- **Proportionality**

The planning of the process needs to consider the level of work required by a potential applicant to complete the process. If different levels of award are being used, should the process for smaller awards be simpler and shorter? Is the process likely to favour larger organisations with higher resources and staff levels? If so, should / could a 'light touch' process be available for small grants?

- **Support**

If support is to be made available to applicants in compiling / advising on their applications, it will need to be on offer universally, and there will need to be clear boundaries around what the support can, or cannot, offer. Those giving support should not then have responsibilities or involvement in the assessment of applications which they have supported, thus separating out the support and assessment tasks and ensuring objectivity in the assessment process.

Building block 2: Promotion and guidance

Key question for future grant programmes:

How will the programme be advertised and promoted? What guidance needs to be issued, and when?

Discussions during architecture planning will have identified the potential grantee organisations and the geographic coverage of the programme, and the promotional activity to stimulate interest will need to be focused on these areas and within this audience.

Programme guidance should be comprehensive and easily accessible, whether delivered through written guidance or through verbal support from staff. A key learning point from the Access to Nature experience is the need for guidance to set out clearly **all** that will be expected and required of an organisation receiving a grant²⁰. Unless this is done at this stage, firstly it is likely that applications will not address all the desired requirements and secondly, that grantees will find themselves surprised (and probably poorly resourced) to address requirements once operational. Areas which guidance should cover are:

- Application process and expectations
- Selection / decision making process and timetables
- Monitoring requirements
- Reporting requirements
- Outline financial / payment process
- Evaluation requirements or expectations
- Networking or learning event expectations
- The support available from the grant giver to grantees.

Footnote 20 *ibid*, reference 11

Building block 3: **Assessment and decision-making**

Key question for future grant programmes:

What systems will be used to assess applications and decide which receive grants?

The assessment and decision making processes linked to grant making are generally labour intensive and conducted within a specified timetable. Good planning and resourcing of the process will generate the right information from applicants and alleviate potential stress for all those involved. Good planning at an early stage can anticipate pinch points in timelines or resource needs and reduce the challenging nature of decision-making.

The levels of resource needed to make good decision will be dependent on the scale of the task (how many applications / the size of the grants), the time available to make choices, the experience and knowledge of those making decisions (and whether they require briefing or training), and the complexity of the assessment. Good planning at the foundation and architecture stages will ensure the criteria for use within the process are clear (generally speaking, the broader the criteria, the more time it will take to assess) and will help in identifying the skills and experience needed of both assessors and decision makers (these functions are usually separated to ensure propriety).

The Access to Nature evaluation suggests a number of key questions for consideration when planning assessment and decision making processes:

- What skills and knowledge are required for the assessment process?
- Who is most appropriate to make assessments of applications? Should this be internal staff, or could independent, freelance specialists be used?
- Who needs to make the decisions? What requirements exist within the grant giving organisation and the funder? What skills and experience are needed? Which partner organisations wish / need to be involved?
- What decision making structures are required? What Panels are needed and at what stages?
- How transparent will the process be? What feedback will be given? Will there be a complaints / appeals process?
- How can the process retain objectivity and integrity?
- What criteria / scoring system will be applied, and will there be any flexibility in its application?

Building block 4: **Monitoring and reporting**

Key question for future grant programmes:

How light touch can a monitoring and reporting system be while meeting the information needs of the grant giver and funder?

The process of overseeing, checking or keeping an eye on progress (all alternative interpretations of monitoring) is one that is frequently criticised by grant recipients across many grant programmes. The desire for a light touch process, a degree of trust from a grant giver and for monitoring requests to seem as though they have a value, are common requests from grantees²¹.

Over complex monitoring systems can be the result of weak foundation planning. In some instances this might mean that a grant giver adds everything but the kitchen sink into a monitoring form, thereby effectively disabling at least one funded member of staff for a couple of days every quarter while they compile data which the grant giver may or may not need:

“Grant making processes can pick up extraneous requirements like boats pick up barnacles... assess what information is most essential to your organisation to... measure success, and request only that information.” Grant Managers Network²²

In other cases, the monitoring requirements have not taken account of the need to report to the funder nor of the desire to really understand what projects are doing and achieving. They do not ask for enough or the right kinds of information.

What is needed is foundation planning which identifies what needs (as well as what doesn't need) to be gathered from grantees on an ongoing basis. A good starting point is to ask why each piece of proposed content needs to be included – how and when will it be used? If the answers are unclear it is likely that the information does not need to be asked for. This will also help in communicating with grantees how the information they supply will be used as this can often be a frustration for monitored organisations.

Footnote 21 Our Community (2007); *Grants Management Quarterly, Edition 19*. Australia: Our Community

Footnote 22 Carroll A. (2010); *Right-sizing the grantmaking process*. US: Project Streamline

The Access to Nature evaluation identified a number of challenges within the monitoring processes for the programme. Most have been addressed as the programme has developed, although it would be interesting to test now how much of the information gathered has been used, and in what way – it is possible that a slimmer version may have been possible with more robust foundation planning for the programme. Learning from the evaluation does suggest other issues for consideration in constructing monitoring and reporting systems:

- Frequency – What is the minimum frequency which would be prudent to gather monitoring data? Should this be a static time period (usually 3 months) or linked to project milestones?
- Proportionality – Does the chosen system fit well with the size / capacity of funded organisations?
- Double counting – Clear and consistent guidance needs to be provided around how the achievement of targets / outputs can be interpreted
- Cumulative counting – Clear and consistent guidance also needs to be provided around whether targets are counted in each period, or added to previous totals.

Building block 5: Evaluation

Key question for future grant programmes:

What is the most appropriate model of evaluation? How will expectations be conveyed to delivery organisations?

Evaluation is strongly linked to the foundation issues of learning and impact. As suggested earlier in this paper, a formative approach points to an early consideration of the style, approach and content of programme evaluation, and the construction of a working model which means it can be included in the guidance issued to potential applicants to the programme.

Evidence about the Access to Nature process gathered through the evaluation itself suggests the choice of model (guided self evaluation for the projects, formative learning process alongside Natural England) has been appropriate and effective, and has built evaluation skills for both the grant giver and the grantees²³. While this suggests a similar approach would be beneficial for similar programmes, the thrust of this paper is that the planning process will determine the most appropriate route for evaluative practice for future programmes, with the approach for each being considered separately.

A key piece of learning from Access to Nature has been the need, as noted above, to set out clearly the expectations which the grant giver will make of delivery organisations with regard to evaluation.

Footnote 23 *ibid*, reference 11

Building block 6: **Using the learning**

Key question for future grant programmes:

How will learning be transferred and absorbed at project and programme level? How will learning be disseminated beyond the point at which it is identified?

Learning can be a dynamic (though reflective) process, based in interactions between people and, for an agency such as Natural England, between people and the natural environment. The transfer and sharing of learning can, ideally, be equally dynamic, with the potential to engage and excite those who encounter it.

Identifying mechanisms within the planning of a programme to share learning, either between practitioners, with the grant giver or funder, or through the evaluation process, would seem to be a valuable building block, especially given the developing context noted elsewhere in this paper of demonstrating impact and value.

Access to Nature offers some insights as to effective sharing, such as the Making Links events which bring projects together to share and learn; the process of shared training linked to the evaluation; and the Findings Papers which highlight emerging themed learning from the work²⁴.

This is an area of developing potential however, with social media offering new and exciting ways of sharing, conversing and learning from practice.

Building block 7: **Managing risk**

Key question for future grant programmes:

What process is in place to identify and manage risks?

The management of risks is part of the good governance of all grant programmes. The processes noted above – monitoring, support and, to a degree, evaluation – each offer checks and balances which help both the grant giver and the grantees to identify risk.

The evaluation of Access to Nature suggests the support model used, coupled with the periodic monitoring, represent a good 'early warning' system for the grant giver, and the relationships developed through the support model also offer good potential routes to address and mitigate risk, or manage issues such as complaints²⁵.

Footnote 24 See www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/enjoying/outdoorsforall/accesstonature/default.aspx

Footnote 25 *ibid*, reference 11

Glossary

Lead Advisers	The title given to the support function within Access to Nature – each grantee has a designated Lead Adviser from Natural England.
Application process	The sequence of events used by organisations to submit information requesting a grant.
Assessment process	The sequence of events used by the grant giver to judge the merits of individual applications.
Change	The difference(s) which will occur, or be contributed to, by the grant programme.
Evaluation	The process by which those involved in a programme gather, collate and analyse information to understand whether desired outcomes are being achieved, or contributed to.
Funder	The organisation which supplies the investment for the programme.
Grant giver	The organisation which is responsible for turning the investment from the funder into grants.
Grantee	The organisations which receive a grant from the grant giver.
Monitoring	The process by which the grant giver collects data concerning the progress made by grantees.
Outcome	The changes and benefits that will be influenced by a programme or project.
Output	The activities or products intended to be delivered by a programme of project (this term is often interchanged with 'target').
Reporting	The process used by the grant giver to gather periodic assessments of progress and is likely to be more reflective and discursive than monitoring.
Target	The activities or products intended to be delivered by a programme of project (this term is often interchanges with 'output').