

The 'Down to Earth' community engagement process



Background:

Blue Remembered Hills was a five year Heritage Lottery Fund landscape partnership project run by the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership from 2003-2007. The project's main aim was to work with the people of the Shropshire Hills to increase awareness and understanding of the landscape and assist in its conservation and enhancement. Down to Earth was one of a number of elements of the Blue Remembered Hills project.

Down to Earth gave local people the opportunity to explore, enjoy and learn more about their local landscape. It was also their chance to tell us what they valued about their local landscape, what issues they felt affected it, and ideas for local landscape projects. Down to Earth also enabled communities to develop projects that celebrated, cared for and improved their local landscape. Fundamentally, it was about letting the community decide.

What did we want to achieve?

- Bring local people together
- Inspire and facilitate local celebrations
- Allow communities to make decisions about their landscape
- Give grants and advice to community groups that wanted to care for and learn more about their local landscape, landmarks or traditions

Resources:

- Community Landscapes Officer working 3 days a week on this element for 5 years
- Management from Blue Remembered Hills Project Manager
- Advice and support from the AONB Team and Partnership
- Grants - some groups only needed £100 for start up costs. If required, additional funds were accessed from other sources, such as, the Local Heritage Initiative.

How did we do it? Down to Earth was delivered in five phases:

1. Building up local contacts, leading to a public meeting – Initial meeting to present the Down to Earth project, establish if the community wanted to proceed and, if so, conduct a stakeholder analysis exercise to identify all the groups and individuals, within the community, who may wish to contribute to the project and establish a local steering group.
2. Informing the community – On average four events were held in each of the Down to Earth areas to provide the community with information on their local landscape and its constituent features. Different types of events were held to ensure all members of the community were engaged in the process, including guided landscape walks, illustrated talks, story tellers in schools, bus trips, etc. A wide range of landscape features and topics were covered, including archaeology, the natural and built environment, customs and traditions, wildlife, farming and forestry. This raising of knowledge and awareness allowed communities to then make informed decisions on the prioritisation and management for their local area. The events programme also gave us the chance to highlight current landscape issues and potential opportunities/ideas for future projects.
3. Community Consultation – Through the consultation we wanted to establish what people valued about their landscape, what issues they felt affected it, and ideas for community projects. Information was gathered in three ways: questionnaire (attached); post it notes exercises at all events; and, for those who didn't like filling in forms, there was an option of one to one discussions with the officer or other members of the local steering group.
4. Community Action (3 projects) – Results from the community consultations were analysed by the local steering groups. The most popular project ideas were presented back to the

community, at a public meeting, so local people could decide which projects they wanted to progress. The officer would then support the new project groups with initial group set up and general project development. Once the groups felt confident, the officer came off the group, but still provided ongoing support and help. This was made clear to the community from the beginning. An initial aim of Down to Earth was that, although the projects were set up by us, they would ultimately be self sustaining and run by local people.

5. Celebration event – Approximately one year on from the start of Down to Earth a celebration event was held in each of the areas to update the community on what the various groups had achieved to benefit the landscape and to celebrate their success. It was also an opportunity for the groups to inform the community of future plans and offer opportunities for new members to get involved. Facilitated by the officer, the original Down to Earth steering groups were brought back together to help organise the celebration events, along with the project coordinators.

What did we learn?

- The target in the first year was to conduct two Down to Earth projects. Due to the amount of time needed in each area this target was unrealistic. The target was reduced to one per year for later years.
- The strength of Down to Earth is gathering momentum from the start which requires significant input. A lot of time and contact was spent 'getting to know the community' ahead of the initial public meeting – this was time well spent!
- Officer support and facilitation was much more important than money
- The events were crucial in terms of getting people thinking about landscape and inspiring them to want to get actively involved in it.
- Capacity building is vital to the success and longevity of the groups – the AONB and communities are still reaping the benefits. The lapwing work with the Upper Onny Wildlife Group and farmers that is happening now can be tracked all the way back to the start of Down to Earth
- Lack of links to Parish Plans.
- Don't tell, ask. People want to get involved but not always sure how – sell ideas!
- Let the community drive and decide. Enable rather than lead.
- Get to know your communities – build relationships, listen – this takes time but pays dividends!
- Celebrate and have fun!
- Bottom up is best! We did put project ideas forward at the events stage but it was up to the community to decide whether they wanted to develop it into a project.
- Local people do care about their local landscapes and want to be actively involved in conserving and enhancing it. The crucial factor in turning interest into action is in facilitation and support. Most groups need help, support and encouragement at the beginning to help them develop their ideas, group formation, make links to others that can help and sourcing funds.
- Consultation techniques – need a range of techniques to ensure everyone's views are heard
- The Down to Earth process has fundamentally influenced the way we work with communities
- Some of the projects also benefited from Sustainable Development Fund grants

Contact details: Catherine Landles, Community Officer, Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership, The Old Post Office, Shrewsbury Road, Craven Arms, SY7 9NZ. Tel: (01588) 674080, Fax: (01588) 674099, Email: cath.landles@shropshire.gov.uk www.shropshirehillsaonb.org.uk