



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs



Forestry Commission

For more information about the Woodland Creation Accelerator Fund visit: www.adeptnet.org.uk/woodland-creation-accelerator-fund

More information about ADEPT can be found on its website: www.adeptnet.org.uk

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Summary of final assessment

Overview

The £10 million Woodland Creation Accelerator Fund (WCAF) was launched in 2022 aiming to enable local authorities to recruit the right people to plant the right tree in the right place.

The Fund, delivered by the Forestry Commission in partnership with DEFRA, and promoted by ADEPT, provided local authorities with financial support to boost capacity and resource, helping local authorities to employ, train up and bring on board professional expertise to drive tree planting and woodland creation commitments.

The WCAF supported local authorities in helping to tackle the two biggest environmental issues facing society - addressing climate change and reversing the decline in biodiversity.



Objectives

As well as proposed scale of planting (in hectares), there were a number of other selection criteria in the awarding of funding. These included evidence of need, commitment to planting, deliverability and authority deprivation.

Results

From the perspective of the 57 authorities awarded funding, the WCAF has been a great success, providing much needed revenue resource to support and accelerate their respective planting programmes. In total, 113 posts were filled. This involved a wide range of roles and responsibilities.

Over 3.3 million trees (3,625 ha) have been reported as planted or confirmed as a result of the WCAF funding. A further 318,000 trees are forecast to still be planted during 24/25. Only 24% of the WCAF authorities (both county and metropolitan) achieved or exceeded their submitted planting targets. However, the Nature for Climate Fund's internal target for local authorities - a minimum of 3,000 hectares - was achieved by the programme.

Reasons for the shortfall

The principal challenge (reported by 75% of authorities) was the lack of suitable and available land and the time taken to fully engage landowners. The programme has come to its end as some authorities stated they are finally gaining momentum in planting.

Although WCAF provided valuable and dedicated resource, the wider staffing pressures within the team, authority and stakeholder partners (including parishes, district and town councils and schools) contributed to further delays.

Many authorities, particularly the smaller metropolitan ones, required additional time and resource to plan and organise themselves to start delivering the funding objectives. This included navigating internal HR recruitment processes and policies.

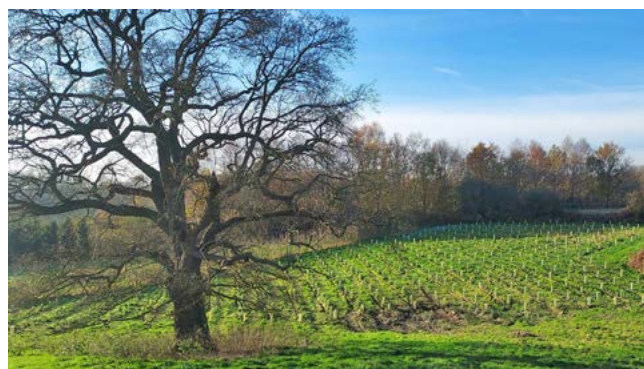
The wet weather was also a significant contributory factor.



Additional benefits of WCAF reported by authorities

Planting aside, the WCAF authorities reported many significant additional benefits:

- The building of support and commitment with communities, landowners and businesses - if this is maintained it will help ensure the future development of woodlands and tree planting.
- Improved site evaluation, landscape mapping, woodland planning and tree survival rates were also achieved.



Future planting

Only 9% of authorities confirmed that will be able to meet their planting targets without future WCAF funding. 29% stated that would be unable to meet the targets and the remaining 62% are 'unsure'.

This is largely down to the continued downward pressure on local authority budgets. When asked 'In the next five years, if there were one thing which could make a difference to your continued tree planting, what would it be?', over 80% of respondents stated continued funding, specifically a stable, long term revenue stream to guarantee the resource necessary to deliver the programme.

The WCAF programme

The inclusive and shared experience ethos of the programme has been very well received.

During the programme 13 webinars were held. The feedback from the bi-monthly webinar has been excellent, with very high attendance levels. Attendees commented on the relevance and value of the presentations from other authorities and sector organisations. Many authorities expressed their thanks for the support and assistance provided by the Forestry Commission and ADEPT.

An online discussion forum was created for sharing knowledge and information and facilitating discussion. The Forum was considered useful, inclusive and well-managed. Over a two-year period, the WCAF forum had a total of 215 members and saw 279 posts.

In July 2024, the WCAF Conference was held which brought together 100 participants, including representatives from 47 local authorities, for the first time for a day of knowledge sharing, collaboration and discussions. The conference was a great success, with fantastic engagement and enthusiasm from everyone in the room. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive.



Lessons learnt

1. The value and benefits of providing revenue funding, that goes directly to the authority (without the need for consultants) and for a specific purpose has been clearly demonstrated by the WCAF programme, and in turn has been greatly appreciated by the recipients.
2. The planting projections submitted in the original bids were in the majority of cases, significantly over optimistic. The sponsors of future grants and funding need to encourage authorities to be more realistic in their projections and to build in a shortfall contingency or optimism bias when assessing the bids.
3. Many authorities, particularly the smaller metropolitan ones, required additional time and resource, to plan and organise themselves to start delivering the funding objectives. For WCAF this included navigating HR recruitment policies and processes. Implementation and performance monitoring should commence after a reasonable set-up and planning period has been agreed.
4. As highlighted during the programme, the primary challenge for WCAF authorities has been finding suitable and available land. In many cases, this has taken well over a year. Unfortunately, the programme closed as some authorities were finally gaining momentum in planting. The timescales for future schemes should reflect the challenge of identifying and acquiring appropriate planting sites.
5. The provision of stable, long-term funding would greatly assist authorities in realising their tree planting objectives.
6. The inclusive and shared experience ethos of the programme has been very well received. In particular, the feedback on the bi-monthly webinar has been excellent, with very high attendance levels. Attendees have commented on the relevance and value of the presentations from other authorities and sector organisations.
7. The WCAF online forum served as a valuable resource for sharing information and materials related to the WCAF. However, active discussion and interaction among members was limited, so it was less successful in terms of input and contributions.
8. Originally there was no budget allocated for WCAF Learning and Development. However, as demonstrated by the success of the programme and feedback provided, the benefits of allocating and funding L&D resources is significant and can be critical to realising the objectives of the programme.
9. The self-assessments were a key criterion of the funding and provided valuable information as to the progress of the funding. However, for approx. 20% of authorities, it required repeated communications and effort for the questionnaire to be returned and three local authorities failed to return the final evaluation.

