



# Green Academies Project 2018-19

Evaluation summary for the  
National Trust Executive Board

November 2020 final version



National  
Trust



Our environment  
is our future



# An impactful project, needing time to embed

This executive summary highlights the key points from our evaluation of the **Green Academies Project**, which we conducted in 2019 with the support of the National Trust's staff.

Partner organisations have been **delighted** by the impact they have observed in their communities and once **neglected spaces** have been enhanced. Young people have been **empowered** to take ownership of green spaces and have **grown in confidence** and commitment to protecting their local environment.

But now at the end of the project, most partners are **not equipped** to continue without the Trust's expert support. A **transition stage** working with partners to embed GAP in the communities is needed to **ensure the legacy** of this valuable project.



**Funded through Our Bright Future:** GAP is one of the projects that form Our Bright Future, an innovative partnership led by The Wildlife Trusts bringing together the youth and environmental sectors. This £33 million programme, funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, is formed of 31 projects across the UK. Each project is helping young people aged 11-24 gain vital skills and experience; improve their wellbeing; act as catalysts for delivering change for their local environment and community; and contribute to a greener economy.

## A successful project, exceeding most of its aims

The National Trust's Green Academies Project has proven to be a deeply impactful project and a positive experience for the participants, partners, staff and communities involved.

It identified four primary aims at the start of the project, three of which have been exceeded:

- To raise awareness and **engage** local

communities with their local green spaces

- To **empower** young people to take ownership of their green spaces and equip them with the skills needed to be part of the future of nature conservation
- To **enhance** local spaces

The fourth aim 'to **embed** the programme and pass on the skills and capabilities needed to manage green spaces to the local communities' was not consistently achieved (see the next page).

## Participants were happier and more confident as a result of taking part

A significant outcome of GAP was that the wellbeing of communities and participants was enhanced through spending time in nature. The projects have delivered this in abundance, with participants and partners reporting significant improvements in the confidence, resilience, health and wellbeing of participants, many of whom were emotionally vulnerable, disabled or who had struggled in a traditional educational setting.

**The Trust may wish to consider using evidence from this pilot project of GAP's ability to boost health and wellbeing to expand its scope.** NT could reach out to public health providers, for example, and promote GAP as a joint project focusing on conservation and wellbeing in equal measure.

## Forgotten land was transformed into valued community green spaces

Partners, participants and members of the community alike noted that the green spaces in GAP's care had visibly improved. Community members and partners commented on how sites which had been forgotten, overgrown or unsavoury were now pleasant and accessible.

Participants noted pride in what they had achieved and one reflected happily on the state of the site at Erddig before and after GAP. There have been signs of local interest in helping to maintain the sites by the community, but this is not yet embedded. **Continued outreach is required to empower communities to manage sites independently.**

## Flexibility, sustained commitment and genuine interest in youth work identified as critical success factors

Partners, participants and staff all contributed to the evaluation to explain why they felt GAP had worked as well as it did. The critical success factors included:

- NT making a long-term commitment to engaging underserved communities from the outset. Partners and staff alike have seen shorter term projects fail to gain traction, but the three-year commitment investment in GAP has helped

ensure its success

- NT's flexible approach in working with partners, forging truly equal partnerships and not being prescriptive about YP achieving XYZ to meet the Trust's outcomes. Flexibility helped partners and NT to develop trust and rapport with young people and helped improve retention

NT staff being genuinely interested in young people and treating them as equals was key in empowering them to challenge themselves and have a real sense of achievement.

## More input required from an earlier stage to embed the projects locally

The fourth aim of this project was to **embed** the programme and pass on the skills and capabilities needed to manage green spaces to the local communities the sites belonged to.

Partners believe in GAP and are keen for the current programmes to continue with NT support, and increased NT capacity if possible. However, communities and partners are not yet at a point where they feel confident in managing these sites alone and rely on the Trust's specialist knowledge in conservation to make the GAP sessions so engaging for YP. Partners were also keen to convey the importance of making a lasting commitment to the communities served by GAP:

**'We are talking about youngsters that have been extremely damaged sometimes and so actually**

**to see the effect that we have had will take some time... Our faces need to be around for the foreseeable future.'** GAP Partner

## Initial GAP sites have changed focus to suit the property's needs and goals

Inevitably with the changes in funding, staffing and strategic goals at property level over the past two years, the understanding of what GAP now means at different properties has changed.

It is right that properties adapt to their own unique situation, but this does have implications for the understanding of GAP as a brand which should be considered. The overall GAP brand may be diluted as individual projects diverge from the pilot, but this could be a strength if the GAP model could be developed to accommodate this in the form of an overarching GAP framework.

Whilst the future of GAP has been uncertain for much of 2020, the recent establishment of fifteen Children and Young People (CYP) hubs can support its legacy. We understand that each CYP hub site will have committed staffing resource to support engagement with diverse communities of CYP. **All six GAP properties have been identified as hubs, which will better enable 'GAP' approaches to continue at these sites. Additionally, a national CYP network will support the sharing of GAP's practice amongst the wider group of CYP hubs across England, Northern Ireland and Wales.**

## Key statistics and quotations



### Engage

*Aim 1: To increase local involvement and appreciation of nature and green spaces*

- 73% of community users strongly agreed that using these green spaces makes them fitter and 68% that it makes them happy (Base: 48 people, all from Erddig)

**'We've lived here for about 20 years and Morden Hall Park was always underused and downtrodden. But now is the first time that we see this wonderful community and these activities here, so we're quite enjoying it.'**

Local resident, Morden Hall Park



### Empower

*Aim 2: To ensure young people have the skills and knowledge to look after green spaces*

- 84% of participants gained skills
- 69% of participants said they were more confident because of GAP
- 79% said they felt proud of their achievement
- 51% said they will speak to people about the importance of nature (Base: 61)

**'[There's] always new skills to be learned and new people to meet. I like how every day or work placement is never the same. I really enjoy volunteering.'** GAP Participant



### Enhance

*Aim 3: To enhance the quality and condition of local green spaces*

- 96% of community users said the space was well maintained and looked after (Base:30)

**'Even if people don't particularly use it, it's not seen as a bit of a grot spot any more. It's seen as something that's nice.'** Local resident, Erddig

**'Today was mostly maintenance in the form of watering, deadheading... It's nice to have a session like this sometimes, it reminds me of how much this space has changed over the years.'** GAP Participant



### Embed

*Aim 4: To develop the confidence and skills of Trust staff, volunteers and partners, to collaboratively look after green spaces*

- 92% of partners want to continue with GAP and 95% want to continue to work with the Trust
- 58% feel confident to deliver future conservation programmes, but with support. (Base: 38)

**'It was a 50-50 relationship. The National Trust have got all the knowledge to do with the wildlife, the environment, the tasks. Whereas I was making sure that the students were behaved, [that] they listened.'** GAP Partner



# Recommendations

## **Enhance more local spaces, with a signature combination of accessibility and wildness**

The ability to find the balance of being wild yet accessible seems distinctive to NT. The Trust should promote this as its USP for engagements in outdoors spaces in the context of the urban places programme.

## **Plan for a long-term handover of sites to communities, passing knowledge to partners**

Future sustainability of the programme post-NT is a key issue for partners and NT staff. In future, projects will need to plan how to deliver guidance, training and support to handover long-term responsibility to communities from the outset.

Partners do not possess the specialist knowledge that NT staff hold around wildlife and nature or necessarily with engaging young people. So enabling partners to feel that they nevertheless have enough knowledge will be important.

## **Highlight GAP's impact on wellbeing and applying for new funding streams**

Evidence for how the sites improve health and wellbeing is especially strong. NT could consider prioritising programmes that emphasise the use of

its spaces for health and wellbeing and join with public health partners to champion GAP as a joint initiative for conservation and increased wellbeing of vulnerable people.

## **Develop a GAP alumni network and/or youth steering group**

The project needs to sustain and further develop young people's interest as it grows. Signposting GAP alumni to any known stepping stones to further their development in NT or wider sector organisations will be key to maintaining momentum. Developing an online GAP alumni social network and/or a face-to-face youth steering group could also help.

## **Continue to invest long-term with low-income communities to increase NT diversity**

The decision to work with vulnerable young people and other groups to improve NT's inclusion requires a long-term commitment. It also suggests this was key to the success of initiatives to engage communities in the 'Places where people live'. This might mean the NT and its partners need to establish further links with specialist providers and it may take longer than anticipated to handover responsibility for sites.

## **About the evaluation**

MHM conducted depth interviews with National Trust staff to gather information to form our strategy tree and evaluation framework. [Base: 9]

We collected data from GAP participants via paper surveys administered by GAP staff. 4 participants took part in a digital diary ethnography study to record their experiences. [Base: 96 survey, 4 diary]

We administered an online survey and conducted depth interviews with GAP partners. [Base: 38 survey, 12 interviews]

We supported GAP staff in collected data from community members via recorded vox pop interviews and paper surveys. [Base: 48 survey, 26 vox pops]

We conducted a one-day workshop in August 2019 with NT staff and partners and sent a final evaluation sheet to GAP staff in March 2020 on the legacy of the project. [Base: 16 workshop, 4 legacy sheets]

Full research parameters can be found in the main report (*Needing protection and space to grow*, March 2020).

Morris Hargreaves McIntyre is an international consultancy. We work with charities, heritage and cultural organisations of all sizes.

We're fascinated by what makes people and organisations tick. Our strategic thinking, insight and creativity transform how our clients see their world.

Our clients use our work to connect more people, more deeply, with their causes, fuelling their success.



**‘[There’s] always new skills to be learned and new people too meet. I like how every day or work placement is never the same. I really enjoy volunteering.’**

GAP participant

**‘The respect the children give your staff - that respect is going both ways, as well. It’s brilliant.’**

GAP partner

**‘We are clear in what we are trying to achieve and [that] it ties in neatly not just to the wider NT strategy but also to the property vision.... [But] we are less optimistic about the financials.’**

National Trust staff member working on GAP

[mhminsight.com](http://mhminsight.com)