



# **The Local Environmental Action Fund**

## **Reflecting on Impacts and Lessons Learnt**



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## Executive Summary

Today, our planet faces unprecedented environmental challenges. It is easy to feel overwhelmed about the plethora of issues we now face – air pollution, the global tide of plastic pollution, litter, deforestation, climate change and loss of biodiversity.

Globally, there is a gradual awakening to the damage and consequences of our actions. The environmental impact is increasingly apparent; meanwhile the impact on our health and wellbeing from these issues are only just starting to be understood.

Empowering local communities to take action on local environmental issues which lead to cumulative change, has been at the heart of the Local Environmental Action Fund (LEAF) from the outset. LEAF projects have demonstrated the depth and breadth of the appetite for local action on global environmental issues, and the impact it can have.

The projects provide hope and inspiration, that through individual action, we can start make a difference to these hugely global environmental challenges which seem so far out of our reach to change.

With LEAF, we have started a conversation about the environment among local communities across Tyne & Wear and Northumberland. With over 260 grants made totalling nearly £2 million in 12 years, there is clearly a demand for funding to make a difference to the local environment. The LEAF endowment established so there is a dedicated environmental themed endowment fund for Tyne & Wear and Northumberland in perpetuity. This is something which will grow with time, and is the legacy of LEAF.

# Introduction

The Community Foundation Tyne & Wear and Northumberland (hereafter called the Community Foundation) matches generous people with important community causes. Every year it awards grants to hundreds of small charities in Tyne & Wear and Northumberland, and across North East England, through funds set up by its donors.

Up until 2005 the Community Foundation's activities around environmental issues were modest, but it recognised that the correlation between poverty in local communities and the environment was likely to become much stronger in the future as the impacts of climate change were felt.

In 2005, a Community Foundation donor with a strong personal interest in environmental issues, initiated discussions with the Community Foundation on what more could be done on environmental grant making. This led to research into whether there was scope to increase environmental grant making in the region, and with leadership from, the Community Foundation.

From this evidence, the concept of a collaborative environmental grant programme was born, bringing charitable trusts together, to become more effective grant makers on environmental issues by collaborating and focusing their efforts, and by developing greater knowledge about needs and best practice on environmental grant making in the area.

LEAF, (then known as the Local Action on Global Issues fund) was officially launched in November 2006 with a three-year funding commitment from the Greggs Foundation, the Shears Foundation, the Community Foundation, the private individual donor who was instrumental in advancing discussions on the issue from the outset, and the Sir James Knott Trust.

As a pilot collaborative environmental grant making programme it was believed to be the first initiative of its kind in the country. The objectives of the fund were to achieve:

- More effective, collaborative and focused grant-making on environmental issues.
- Increased knowledge of environmental projects' needs and best practice.
- Make a positive impact on the environment
- Increased education about global environmental issues in local communities.
- Increased knowledge of environmental grant-making amongst other charitable trusts

From 2009 a dedicated staff post for LEAF oversaw both a project management and fund development role, ensuring lessons learnt were gathered and shared both regionally and nationally.

For a large part of the lifetime of the LEAF programme, the fund has operated within a challenging climate of regional, national and global issues, in particular austerity measures and political uncertainty. The continued commitment by the partners to LEAF during these times has ensured valued and much needed support to environmental projects during a period of time where other sources of funding for environmental issues have been cut.

However, the collaboration has struggled to bring on board new partners who could contribute levels of funding to enable the collaboration to continue in the same format. The decision therefore was made to move the LEAF collaboration to an endowment fund, with match funding secured from the Community Foundation's Murray Match scheme. The LEAF endowment has attracted a range of contributions, from existing partners as well as new donors. It leaves a dedicated pooled environmental grant fund that will benefit the area for generations to come.

# Lessons Learnt - Achievements and Impact

A detailed report of impact of the fund was written in 2011, and much of this is still very much relevant and current. A key element of activity with LEAF which has helped to inform and update this information has been the commissioning of a consultant to create an evaluation framework for the LEAF programme. The data that has been collated from this, is also therefore included in the following narrative.

## **1) Being more effective, collaborative and focusing grant-making on environmental issues.**

Pooling of funds has enabled larger, and at times, multi-year grants to be made. This has enabled projects, particularly those in the very early stages, to have some certainty of funding, and to kickstart ideas. LEAF in this sense, has provided a lifeline of mid-range funding for a wide range of local organisations, who may not be known by the larger national grant funders. Community groups have been able to access funding quickly and effectively from one source, rather than having to apply multiple times to individual funders to secure the total project costs.

In order to consider shortlisted grant applications, and steer the direction of the LEAF work, a fund committee was established, with representatives from the key funding partners. Working together in this way over the years has led to sharing of information and ideas between the different representatives, bringing together different perspectives and experts from different fields and exploring what could be done that would really make a difference.

Having a dedicated fund panel to consider the grant applications and the direction of the LEAF programme, has required the time and energy of individuals representing those funding partners, and their individual time and input has been valued enormously over the twelve years.

Discussing and deliberating each application, and in particular the more unusual ones which captured the imagination, helped to firmly plant those projects in the minds of the panel members. The learning from individual projects was further embedded through committee members attending annual project visit days where 3-4 groups were visited in a day to directly see the impact of the grant.

Collaboration has required flexibility and the ability of each of the funding partners to let go of individual decision-making processes to work to a greater aim, and this has been a challenge when trying to bring on board new donors from other Trusts and Foundations. LEAF has at times, partnered with other funders to match fund projects, as a way of overcoming this issue.

LEAF has attracted one off donations, as well as contributions from Muckle LLP, which was the first company in the region to donate the financial equivalent of its carbon footprint to LEAF to support local environmental projects. To date, over £11,000 has been donated to LEAF to support different environmental projects. These have been selected through a staff vote on a shortlist of recent LEAF supported projects. It was hoped that this would act as a catalyst for other businesses to do the same. However, to date Muckle LLP continues to be the only business that has supported LEAF in this way.

LEAF was set up as a pilot, to test the demand and appetite for environmental grants in the region. It has successfully demonstrated that there is indeed much demand. What it has also shown however, is that there this demand unfortunately is not balanced with the same level of interest in environmental philanthropy. The protracted period of economic austerity has inevitably impacted on the ability to secure new funding partners due to budget constraints.

While LEAF is used as a model of best practice, it has been a challenge to get the importance of the environment across to attract new donors or indeed to encourage others to work together elsewhere to support environmental grant making. As one LEAF donor added “environment isn’t high on grant makers’ list of priorities.”

In addition, as one of the LEAF partners highlighted, ‘to gain traction, we need to have direct impact on people’s lives.’ People give to people yet by their very nature, some environmental projects may not immediately be seen as having a social impact. Therefore, while the environmental impact of LEAF projects was monitored, it would have been beneficial to have a means of collating the social impacts which, while harder to track, would have aided with demonstrating wider impact to potential new donors.

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*“Environmental grant making needs to be recognised as benefiting communities and at the same time impacting on wider social issues  
“ – LEAF partner.*

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One person’s understanding of what environment means, can be very different to another’s. Struggling to effectively communicate the narrative on environmental impact is something that LEAF is not alone on. This is something that is reported back from other environmental

funders. LEAF however, may have had more success at attracting additional donors by focusing down on one particular environmental issue to make the communications clearer to potential new donors. That said however, LEAF would not have been able to support the breadth and diversity of projects that it has over the last 12 years, if the focus of the fund had been very narrow.

## **2) Increasing Knowledge of Environmental Projects’ Needs and Best Practice**

LEAF spearheaded innovation and priority themes, often ahead of the national ‘trends’. Litter, waste and pollution for example, were priority themes well before the impact of the Blue Planet 2 series was felt in terms of the tidal wave of public demand to address marine pollution. Priority themes were reviewed and revised annually, based on national and regional data and discussions with networks such as the Environmental Funders Network (EFN).

However, there were times where prescribing specific themes did not have the impact LEAF was expecting. Themed ‘Challenge Rounds’ which offered larger amounts of funding, did not inspire the innovation the collaboration were hoping for. Instead it lead to a number of applications predominantly around match funding for large scale capital costs, or full staffing cost requests for existing schemes.

The fund saw ‘trends’ in what the community were looking to develop project wise, including community allotments/ gardens and renewable energy projects. In the case of renewable energy projects, LEAF supported a wide range of demonstration schemes, before the Feed in Tariffs (FiTs) came into force. Once FiTs were introduced, LEAF was inundated with groups wanting to make the most of the FiTs. LEAF had the learning to share with groups, had demonstrated what worked and therefore took the decision to say that capital projects weren’t eligible for funding from LEAF any more. Instead, groups were signposted to other sources of funding.

As such, LEAF was very much about funding the initial innovation of an idea, and being able to show that projects worked. Once a project concept was proven, LEAF was then able to



signpost groups to other sources of funding. Just as important was demonstrating and learning from the projects which didn't work out or faced challenges along the way and sharing that learning with groups approaching the fund with similar project ideas.

The nature of environmental grant making also means that it can at times be a slow process to see change, and sometimes the very nature of the projects that came forward for funding, meant that it was difficult to show in the short term, how much difference they could make to environmental issues.

We have learnt as an environmental funder that flexibility is needed and communication with grantees. It has been important to work together to achieve a positive outcome. Environmental projects also face many hurdles – the impact of weather, the seasonality of some projects, engaging hard to reach groups and the time it takes, vandalism, planning conditions, securing

match funding and the impact on soil quality from the region's industrial past, are all some of the plethora of challenges environmental projects have had to overcome. Projects have seen better outcomes when there has been good communications between grantee and LEAF, enabling a proactive and flexible response to challenges.

Best practice sharing seminars organised on a particular theme, covering these challenges, and providing top tips for those groups who were in the early stages of developing similar projects, were well received by groups.

Knowledge gained through the LEAF grant programme led to the decision to develop a 'fast track rolling small grants application process which is open for applications at any time, with a proportion of the annual LEAF budget. This has enabled community groups to request small amounts of funding, and get a decision in a much shorter timeframe. This maximised the potential for success for small community groups, retaining the initial enthusiasm and energy that comes with seeing an environmental issue and wanting to do something about it quickly.

The smaller, very grass roots groups often are more comfortable applying for smaller amounts of money, and this is where the LEAF fast track, and now the endowment fund grant is now very much focused.

A key impact of changes to the funding in this way however, though has led to small shorter term projects being supported rather than longer term sustainable terms. A LEAF partner reflected that "initially, we were looking very broadly to find out what projects were out there that we might like to fund. In many ways, by narrowing our scope, we have probably missed out on some of the more innovative opportunities."



### **3) Making A Positive Impact on the Environment**

Since the fund was launched it has received just over 500 applications totalling over £5.1 million. Of those, over 260 applications have been funded, totalling nearly £2 million.

An environmental evaluation framework was developed in 2011 to collate quantitative data on the environmental impacts on the environment of LEAF projects. Data was recorded under six specific headings: Awareness; quality; resources; biodiversity; energy; and resilience.

It is fair to say that the figures are likely to be far higher given that the framework for monitoring was not implemented from the start of the LEAF programme in 2006, so some data will have been missed. Data is also likely to have been underreported by groups in their feedback forms.

The figures are staggering and highlight the huge impact that LEAF projects have had on the local environment:

- Over 38,000 participants in environmental education sessions
- Over 101,000 people with raised environmental awareness
- 854 networks or events were created.
- At least 13,000 people directly improving local environmental quality
- At least 15 hectares of new green infrastructure created
- Over 2,000 people growing food
- At least 12,300m<sup>3</sup> of mains water saved
- 74 projects had climate change adaptation benefits
- Over 1,000 hectares of habitat improved
- More than 130 native species protected
- Over 7 hectares of alien species removed
- 1,228 mWh of energy saved
- 130,101kW of renewable energy capacity installed
- 792 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> saved
- At least 19 projects directly reduced the impacts of severe weather
- Over 28,600 people have raised awareness of climate change

#### **4) Increasing education about global environmental issues in local communities**

The scale of global environmental issues that we are experiencing is unprecedented and for local communities knowing how they can make a difference to such global issues can be overwhelming and daunting. LEAF projects have always been focused on engaging people at a local level to change their behaviours, having a positive cumulative effect. LEAF projects have successfully helped to engage local communities in environmental issues that are very local, and small scale.



Engaging communities in supporting their local wildlife with bird box making, wildflower meadow creation, local litter picks or recycling projects for examples, builds an interest in these activities and enables individuals to see what can be done at a local level. Gradually weaving in wider environmental messages into conversations, then enables individuals to see how their input directly helps and impacts on the wider global issues.

The impact of austerity measures in recent years, have led to financial and economic issues being a priority for many. As a result, some LEAF projects have been able to engage local communities through focusing on how they can help to reduce household costs, but weaving environmental messaging in afterwards. Examples of these include energy saving awareness projects, and local food growing schemes.

#### **5. Increasing knowledge of environmental grant-making among other charitable trusts**

A dedicated staff post for LEAF has enabled in-depth evaluation and learning to be gathered and shared with others in a range of forums locally and nationally. Engagement in the Environmental Funders Network (EFN), has been invaluable and undoubtedly been a key conduit for successfully sharing this information with other Trusts and Foundations across the UK. Membership of EFN has enabled the grant making of LEAF to be put into context with what is occurring nationally, gaining perspective on themes, challenges, and issues. LEAF data has been fed into the annual EFN publication 'Where the Green Grants Went'.

LEAF has been considered an example of good practice in environmental grant making at all levels and has been a go to for enquiries from other Trusts and Foundations. The learning that has come from collaboration of the partners has been used to apply to good effect in the Greggs Foundation, a key partner in LEAF, when it took on the carrier bag tax money raised by Greggs Plc, and had to work out how best to apply this for environmental benefit.

What has been more difficult has been engaging wider Trusts and Foundations to consider establishing a collaborative fund of their own, for reasons already touched upon.

## Conclusion

LEAF has demonstrated that there is a place for environmental themed giving within funds, and that collaboration between funders brings many benefits. LEAF has also highlighted that there is a strong demand from community groups for dedicated environmental grant funding. Despite this, LEAF continues to be the only known collaboration of its kind amongst Trust and Foundations to date.

The impact of the fund has been profound; seen in the hundreds of successful grants providing sustainable environmental and social improvements in areas across Tyne & Wear and Northumberland, and in the thousands of individuals who have been inspired to improve their local environment.

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*“The lasting impact of LEAF is the impact on all those people who have been funded to do things, which will stay with them for life, and help them to do more for the benefit of the environment.” – LEAF funding partner*

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Philanthropy by its very nature can run out of steam and needs to adapt to survive. While LEAF struggled to find a strong message to attract more partners or assist in securing other funds, it has adapted over time, and its success is seen in the creation of the environmental endowment which will remain to provide grants to environmental projects in perpetuity.

Over time, this endowment will grow as people increasingly come to realise that the environment is intrinsically linked to our wellbeing and that we need to encourage more people to take local action on global environmental issues.