people in the selection panels also legitimized the process and the nature conservation selection criteria. To help guide the selection panels, notes were provided beforehand where a conscious effort was made to avoid eco-jargon. Site survey sheets were also stripped of professional terminology.

A few Brighton and Hove local sites were selected with potential to raise the eyebrows of the more conservative elements of the ecological profession. Nevertheless their popularity with local people, specifically as places to experience nature, was seen as sufficient justification for the designation under the section criteria used. Since the panel meetings, at least one of these sites has been the focus of much community activity to enhance the site ecologically, by planting a hedge and digging a dewpond. Significantly, there were no questionable decisions regarding the selection of potential local sites with more ‘scientific’ nature conservation value.

Although described above in the context of a predominantly urban area, a community-focused approach to local site selection could be adapted to rural locations. Here intensive agriculture and other practices have often created islands of locally valued nature conservation space in otherwise inaccessible, species-poor landscapes.

The local sites chosen by the selection panels were fed into the Brighton and Hove Local Plan review process and will therefore not be officially ‘declared’ until the new local plan is fully adopted. Nevertheless, broadening the local site selection process by including strong local community input has already given greater weight to the designation within the local authority.

Notes and references

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The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of Brighton and Hove City Council.
Monitoring change

Since the Community Forests’ launch in the early 1990s much has changed – politically, environmentally and socially. Within the context of their long-term vision, the Forests have responded to these changes, influencing policy development, and taking on new national and regional agendas. Environmental regeneration and social inclusion remain key policy concerns. Enhanced environmental image and perception are important drivers in regional economic strategies, while genuine community engagement is now a pre-requisite for sustainable development.

The recent government review of the Community Forest programme identified three key characteristics of Community Forests that have contributed to their progress to date:1

- **broad-based national/local partnerships**, involving a wide range of stakeholders and participants sharing a common vision and recognising the need to work together to achieve it;
- **a shared long-term vision**, to provide environmental, social and economic benefits, encapsulated in well-researched, widely-consulted and Government-endorsed Forest Plans with clear objectives and measurable targets; and
- **a dedicated Forest team**, as a shared resource with a clear mandate to secure the partners, resources and actions required to implement the Forest Plan and an entrepreneurial approach, enabling local Forest partnerships to respond to and capitalise on evolving policy agendas and resource opportunities.

Community Forests vary depending on local circumstance, as do the partnerships of bodies that have developed to implement them, and the make-up of Forest teams themselves. Community Forest teams retain a strategic role, while a wide range of partners manage day to day delivery.

Regeneration and quality of life

Regional economic strategies are recognising the critical role of a high quality environment in both direct job creation and attracting inward investment. For example, the North West Development Agency's Economic Strategy highlights image enhancement as the key factor in improving the potential for economic regeneration in the region. *Unlocking Our Potential*, the Regional Economic Strategy for the North East, identifies "an exceptionally beautiful natural environment" as one of the key characteristics of successful regions elsewhere and calls for a "regional renaissance" as part of its drive for enhanced prosperity.

The Government’s modernising agenda is seeking more co-ordinated action at regional and local level. Community Forests represent a framework for linking multiple strands of public, private and voluntary sector activity within the context of a wider environmental and social vision.

Community Forests are creating a new resource on which programmes are being established to address some of the Government’s more problematic social agendas in key target areas, including:

- **coalfield regeneration**, rebuilding local pride and community capacity in areas damaged by industrial decline;
- **social inclusion**, is at the heart of the Community Forest programme, involving and bringing benefits to disadvantaged communities;
- **health**, promoting access to enhanced physical activity and locally produced, affordable food with local Health Authorities;
- **education**, creating new learning opportunities from pre-school to retirement in partnership with organisations like Learning and Skills Councils and programmes like SureStart;
- **neighbourhood renewal**, giving people the opportunity to contribute to their community through local environmental action; and
- **renewable energy**, particularly in relation to community based biomass and woodfuel initiatives.
European structural funds
The new round of EU structural funds highlights the need to support business and deprived communities, and to regenerate the landscape to provide attractive areas for people to live and for business to invest.

Through Objective 1 and 2 programmes support will be available over the next six years for several Community Forests. The programmes that they implement through these funds will be wide ranging, but are likely to exceed £10m in total, which is a significant boost to project funding in the eligible areas. The Mersey Forest’s Integrated Countryside and Environment Programme looks at strategic land-use planning, support for farm diversification, woodland and other habitat creation and management, as well as support for rural business. One of the key actions of the programme is to develop educational, social and transport links between rural and urban areas.

Nature conservation
The Community Forests’ vision is not just about trees; the landscape change involves meadows and hedges, ponds and reedbeds, orchards and heathland. All the Forests have worked closely with local wildlife trusts, English Nature, RSPB and the like to develop the nature conservation element of the Forest Plans. Several forests now have Biodiversity Action Plans that are being implemented and indeed the forest partnerships are amongst the most successful in the delivery of the woodland and non-woodland habitat targets. The Mersey Forest Nature Conservation Action Group is due to produce Native Woodland Planting Guidelines to maximise new planting that best mimics the natural woodlands of the area.

The 12 Community Forests are also working with Landlife, the wildflower charity on a Woodland Wildflower project, to increase the amount of native wildflower seed available for sowing in new and existing woodland.

The heart of the forests
Community Forest partnerships are being asked to identify how they contribute to quality of life, regeneration and health issues. One senior Economic Development Director in a local Community Forest suggested that the Forests had helped his ability to market an area for new inward investment. When asked to quantify it he suggested that the value was “ungetatable”. But despite not being able to put a figure on the value he sees a business advantage in his department promoting community forestry.

The delivery of Community Forests is more than the numbers of trees, footpaths created, events organised and funding raised. But how do we measure the specific impact of community engagement, quality of life improvements or landscape regeneration? At present the best we can do is to assemble case studies. But perhaps this is exactly what we ought to do. Disentangling the impact of the Forests from the effects that the wide range of other initiatives is a statistical nightmare, with potentially dubious results. Our monitoring needs to look at our impact using case studies and study groups. The data is perhaps less rigorous but it might tell a powerful story.

Case study: community woodland at Littlewood, Stockbridge Village
A wide range of initiatives have been developed as part of the Mersey Forest to increase the opportunities for public involvement. The Community Contracting Initiative is one such project – it encourages long term community stewardship of woodlands.

The initiative has included the site of Littlewood in Stockbridge Village, Knowsley. This is an area of high deprivation, and target for SRB Funding. The area has an unfortunate history, following a riot in 1980, the estate name was changed from Cantril Farm to Stockbridge Village.

Staff from the Mersey Forest have worked with the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, the Local Authority and Icarus, a private consultancy, as part of a programme involving nine community groups. £90,000 over three years has been provided by the Countryside Agency, European Funding through Objective 1 and sponsorship from United Utilities.

The area’s woodland was previously neglected and fly tipping, car dumping and tree burning were common occurrences. The targeting of the site for ‘community stewardship’ was seen as a great challenge. The response by the community has been very positive. A local steering group has been formed and over 200 local people attended a recent event in the wood. A local community newsletter recently ran an article telling people not to dump rubbish in “our” wood.

Local Councillor Angela Dillon says: “Improvements in Littlewood will help quality of life in the neighbourhood. There is very strong support for the improvement to the wood. It is all about neighbours working together for the benefit of the neighbourhood. It will be a huge bonus for the community”.

Through The Mersey Forest Community Contracting Initiative, an action plan has been put together, including a management plan for the woodland. The aims are to increase the beneficial uses of the wood, improve and increase access, use the woodland for training in woodland crafts and skills leading to future jobs, reduce crime, and create new amenities.

In a survey carried out amongst local residents nearly 50% said that they used Littlewood. Most used the wood for walking and taking their children out, many said that they used it for jogging or cycling. 50% of all respondents said that they would be prepared to help improve Littlewood.

When asked what would encourage more use of Littlewood, the answers were:
- Country Walks 51%
- Clean Up 44%
- Made Safer 42%
- Vandalism Stopped 30.5%
- Fly tipping Stopped 23%
- More Trees 8%
A community grows in pride: rubbish clearance in Stockbridge, in the Mersey Forest.

Locals set the agenda: people are invited to suggest priority actions in the Mersey Forest.

WE COULD DO IT
JOINTLY
WITH THE COUNCIL

Start securing boundary fence by planting native hedgerows by end of March 2001. Organise as CHSA event.

4*
The idea of "country walks" on the edge of a deprived estate indicates the real need of people to have access to a good quality environment that they can use for exercise and enjoyment in safety.

The choice of Littlewood as part of the Community Contracting Initiative was controversial because of the known problems in and around the site. The project's success in delivering benefits to the community and helping to re-establish some local pride shows how community forestry and environmental improvement can be a galvanising force for communities.

Challenges
The Community Forests are 7 years into 30 programmes of work. In the best case, approximately 25% of the planned target for community woodland has been achieved. Forests are still learning how best to deal with the planning system to get consistent positive benefits, changes to the Common Agricultural Policy have yet to produce meaningful benefits for woodland planting and there is increased competition for brownfield land for development. Community Forests are now grappling with urban issues whilst trying also to address the urban fringe issues that they were initially set up to deal with.

It is still early days, but perhaps the Forests are starting to show they can help improve health, help the regional economy and provide safe amenity areas on people's doorsteps, even if it is just the local people who say so!

Reference

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This paper represents the personal views of these two project directors.