

# LeedsACTS! Seedcorn Funding 2023 'A Right to Greenspace'

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Common Health Evaluation  
for Community  
Environmental  
Projects

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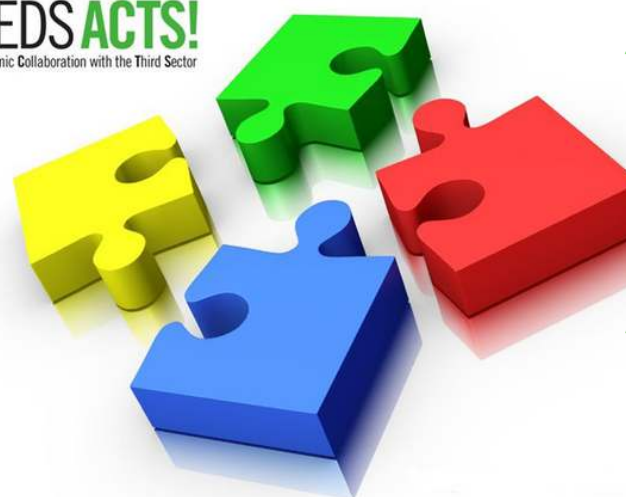
An Academic Collaboration with the Third Sector



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## Introduction

This Vignette describes the delivery and outcomes of the Common Health Evaluation Framework for Community Environmental Projects' Seedcorn project. This project was delivered between Leeds Green Activity Provider Network and Leeds Beckett University and funded by the LeedsACTS! partnership.

## Background - Overview of LeedsACTS!

LeedsACTS! is a partnership between Leeds Beckett University, Leeds Trinity University and the University of Leeds, and the many voluntary and community organisations in Leeds. LeedsACTS! works to build closer relationships between researchers, students, charities, voluntary and community organisations to support joint work that benefits the communities of Leeds and to shape how the higher education sector engages with others in the city.

A core principle of our approach is co-production ensuring work develops jointly with mutual respect and learning.

The aim of the Seedcorn projects is to help stimulate collaboration. This may be achieved by:

- helping people to get to know each other better.
- identifying joint interests.
- developing/providing expertise that can be shared.
- raising awareness of the benefits of collaboration.
- helping to break down some of the barriers to joint working.

## Background - Overview of Collaborating Organisations

Leeds Green Activity Providers (LGAP) is a Third Sector led network consisting of organisations delivering activities in outdoor spaces. The network was formally established early in 2021 by four organisations, following discussions in Leeds around a West Yorkshire bid to the national green social prescribing pilot programme. Since its inception LGAP has grown to include over thirty members and has become a valuable asset for the Leeds system. [Leeds Green Activity Provider Network \(lgap.co.uk\)](http://lgap.co.uk)



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Leeds Beckett University, School of Health is home to the Centre for Health Promotion Research and Anne-Marie Bagnall, Professor of Health and Wellbeing Evidence, has authored several papers on community engagement to reduce health inequalities.

[Passionate about challenging social and health inequalities | Leeds Beckett University](#)

<https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/research/centre-for-health-promotion/>

## What is the Seedcorn Project?

The LGAP capacity development project July 2022- March 2023 identified that a common evaluation process would be beneficial especially when organisations collaborating on a common delivery programme.

Recent discussion with a Pathway Integration Leader in the Integrated Care Board (Leeds Office) raised two important issues.

*How to effectively fund projects that work with people who have a wide range of main health conditions, or multiple conditions (Type 2 diabetes, hypertension, tobacco, alcohol or other substance abuse, are under treatment for cancer or in remission, physical or sensory impairments as well as those with a primary mental health diagnosis, and how to demonstrate the impact of this work in a compelling way to the commissioners. The process needing to be proportionate and sensitive to the participants.*

## What does the Project do?

We held two sessions for staff from across the network to discuss evaluation approaches with two different researchers from Leeds Beckett (Jenny Woodward and Anne-Marie), 17 in attendance from 13 different organisations, and a lot of apologies from those who would have attended but couldn't make the date. The first meeting was at the Leeds Climate Hub and the Second at TCV Hollybush.

We had planned two sessions: one mid-afternoon and one early evening at the Climate Hub but these failed to attract interest from volunteers, so these were moved to one at Hyde Park Source (Armley Colour Garden) with 8 participants in a sunny garden and one worker and TCV Hollybush 6 participants (it was a very wet day) sheltering in the polytunnel. This session followed with a discussion with 4 of the TCV staff who were on site that day.

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## Achievements and Key Outcomes

The main focus of the four sessions was an open question: “*what do we want from evaluation?*” We took lots of notes, but did not make recordings or take consent forms for direct quotations, because we wanted these discussions to feel different from an evaluation – we wanted people to be able to share their experiences and their thoughts without feeling as though they themselves were being ‘evaluated’.

The main themes from the discussions were:

- The need to collect data on health outcomes for health funders – this was reported to be difficult for organisations due to lack of ‘hard’ data, and intrusive for volunteers who wanted to think about something other than their health problems while volunteering in a green space. However, everyone understood why these outcomes needed to be collected.
- Feeling that evaluations are missing the point – no one ever asks about what we are doing here e.g. The gardening. More relevant outcomes could be to do with increased wildlife, biodiversity, birdsong, reduced air pollution, visual changes to a space.
- The way that data is collected – volunteers on the whole seemed to prefer talking or being videorecorded to filling out forms, which were often seen as meaningless. However, talking in a group situation – especially about health – could be difficult and talking in private was preferred.
- Who collects data – volunteers said they felt more comfortable talking to other volunteers than to external researchers– a recent project that involved peer evaluation was given as an example.

The benefits of this project for Leeds Beckett and for LGAP are that it helped to inform the design of future research and evaluation projects that will `be co-designed to collect relevant outcomes and reduce the risk of volunteers feeling like ‘guinea pigs’.

The benefits for the staff and volunteer participants are that their views will be reported and they will get a copy of these reports. We will try to collect more relevant outcomes and use more participatory and visual methods in future research.

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## What went well

There is widespread interest in the topic amongst staff, The volunteers/participants who engaged do understand the importance of reporting to funders and explaining to prospective funders what the impacts have and will be LBU perspective.

It was very powerful and moving to hear from volunteers and staff in the spaces where they worked. The findings were different than expected – instead of ideas about what health-related outcomes we should measure, we were told that nature-related and social outcomes were more important to volunteers, and that being asked to talk about their health in a non-health setting could be very difficult for them. It was also very clear that future research should involve visual methods such as photovoice, as well as peer research and interviews, and that researchers should take in the whole story of what goes on in a project or organisation, not just a narrow set of pre-supposed outcomes. Ideally, researchers would stay with a project or organisation for a few months to years.

The discussions with LGAP staff suggested that a common theory of change or logic model should be developed – this could demonstrate the health impacts of volunteering in a green space based on existing evidence that links outcomes such as ‘time spent in nature’ with improvements in health. This could reduce the need to collect direct health outcomes from volunteers as frequently, reducing the emotional burden on them.

## Wider Impacts

Research funding: We would like to apply for funding from UK research councils (e.g. <https://www.ukri.org/opportunity/esrc-responsive-mode-research-grant-round-one/>) to develop a common theory of change to inform future evaluation, and to carry out collaborative research projects that measure the holistic impact of LGAP projects. Funding for the time of LGAP project staff and volunteers would be included in these proposals. We are currently looking for the best funding opportunity.

## Challenges and Barriers Faced

It is a tough and competitive funding world and most organisations are under pressure, also delivery is spread throughout the week so there is no single best fit day to call a meeting.

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NHS and Public Health funders are very interested in the health outcomes and their outcomes reporting templates focus on that. Asking participants who may be battling physical and mental health issues and other challenges in their lives complicated questions about how they feel, can be intrusive and really they just want to get on with the gardening etc which is helping them feel better.

## Future Potential and/or Impacts

See “research funding” under Wider Impacts section above.

We can't publish the findings of this project as a research paper, as we deliberately did not approach it as 'evaluation' and therefore did not seek research ethics approval, but we could publish a joint blog.

We could seek funding for a PhD student or research assistant to become an 'embedded researcher' with LGAP projects.

## Contribution to Collaboration between the Third Sector and HEIs for the benefit of the communities of Leeds

The funding programme and the successful award of funding has resulted in a relationship being formed between the LGAP core group and Anne-Marie Bagnall's team at Leeds Beckett University.

Developing a theory of change is an interesting suggestion as several organisations are busy seeking major funding. The suggested funding source has a 28th September deadline, however grants are not awarded until Spring 2024

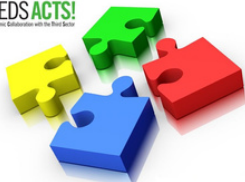
## Concluding Remarks

It was very useful to hold this discussion with the guidance and input of an external partner.

The LGAP core group will be discussing whether to actively pursue the suggestion of developing a collective theory of change.

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It is recognised within the wider Social Prescribing movement that generating robust data that proves fully the benefits of encouraging people with physical and mental health issues to undertake exercise, cultural activities, volunteering and social activities is very difficult. The full clinical approach would require control groups and a massive level of research investment, attempting to get participants to fill in lots of forms and probably be disproportionate to the NHS investment in the services!

If a “collective” of LGAP members are to make a funding bid together it would probably be worthwhile to undertake a Theory of Change exercise and also to explore the common and differentiating approaches to deliver and to organisational values. This would make for a more effective and disagreement free collaboration. However how do we fund this.

## Future Potential and/or Impacts

The academics welcomed the chance to have open and frank conversation with frontline workers and for there to be no rigid agenda (c.f. working on a specific evaluation brief).

The project staff made good use of the opportunity to share their experiences and at times frustrations with the methods currently being used.

The challenge now is to find the resources to make some changes to the systems used and to convince funders that this is a good way forward.

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