What is OPAL?

OPAL (Open Air Laboratories) is a Big Lottery Fund project that encourages people to spend more time outdoors enjoying and studying their local environment. Since its inception in 2007, OPAL activities have helped provide more than half a million people with the skills, tools and confidence to identify and monitor the wildlife near where they live. Through events and resources, OPAL has helped inspire and train the next generation of naturalists, as well as produce new data on the state of the environment across England.

OPAL Support for Natural History Groups

One of the primary goals of OPAL is to promote and support existing natural history societies and recording schemes, and to facilitate new groups where there is demand. The Natural History Museum coordinated a dedicated programme of support for local and national schemes and societies to enable them to benefit from the funding, outreach and publicity opportunities that OPAL offers.
The Grants Scheme
A key limitation for many natural history groups is a lack of available funds, and limited experience in finding and applying for funding opportunities. OPAL tried to address this directly by setting up a simple and accessible grants scheme that offered small amounts of money for specific projects aimed at supporting day-to-day operation of groups, as well as enhancing their development and outreach activities.

All national and local natural history societies, recording schemes and similar groups active within England were able to apply, including regional branches of national organisations. The main criterion was that all groups applying had a biological focus.

Four themed rounds took place between 2009 and 2012

Each funding round had a specific theme that acted as a focus for applications. These were based upon common barriers and goals identified as being important for natural history groups.

2009 Making it Easier - Helping groups to continue their current activities, expand their activities, and try new things.
2010 Extending Your Reach - Public facing projects increasing awareness of groups within the wider public.
2011 Sharing Your Skills - Projects that focused on the transfer of knowledge and skills.
2012 Looking to the Future - projects specifically aimed at facilitating groups’ continued operation in the future, as well as expansion of their work.
Number of applications

The total number of applications received to the OPAL Grant Scheme was 418. Only in 2012 were fewer than 100 applications received. Roughly a quarter of all applicants were successful.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Applications received</th>
<th>Percentage of successful applications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>418</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Grant scheme funding – key figures

At the time of writing, 2012 projects had not been completed. As a result, most figures relate to projects completed in 2009, 2010 and 2011 unless stated otherwise. Figures provided by groups should also be seen as approximate and used as a guide only.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of projects funded</th>
<th>Amount distributed (£)</th>
<th>Number of beneficiaries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>38,983</td>
<td>17,873</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>72,534</td>
<td>23,054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>64,922</td>
<td>8,376</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>44,300</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>220,739</td>
<td>49,303</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The total number of projects funded was **96**. This does not include the four groups that returned their funds in 2009 as they were no longer able to commit to the project stated in their applications. A total of **£220,739** was distributed to natural history societies and recording schemes through small grants of £500 to £5,000. The **mean size of grant was £2,304**, and 57% of grants were between £1,000 and £3,000.

### Number of groups funded

Groups funded by the grant scheme: **81**
Groups funded on more than one occasion: **14**
Groups funded on two occasions: **12**
Groups funded on three occasions: **2**

### Grant size

The minimum and maximum amount that groups were able to apply for varied within each funding round.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grant size (£)</th>
<th>Number of projects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;1,000</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,000-2,000</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,000-3,000</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3,000-4,000</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4,000-5,000</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Project outputs

Direct outputs of completed projects can be measured through:

- Increase in membership
- Benefits to members as a direct result of projects
- Benefits to the general public as a result of projects
- Acquisition of new equipment and resources
- Delivery of outreach events, training, and workshops
Increase in membership
Over two-thirds of groups reported that membership increased as a direct result of OPAL-funded projects, and 40% of groups had an increase in membership of over 10% during the project period.

Involvement and benefits of project to members
Projects varied in the extent to which members were involved. Some were specialised, involving just one or two members, or brought direct benefit to a small number. Others included more widespread involvement, whereas some were targeted more at the public.

- 34% of projects directly involved or benefited at least half of all their members;
- 52% of projects directly involved or benefited at least a quarter of all their members;
- 70% of projects directly involved or benefited at least 10% of total membership.

Involvement of and benefits to the general public
This is harder to quantify, but it is estimated that 38,684 members of the general public had direct contact with groups as a direct result of the 74 OPAL-funded projects that ran from 2009 to 2011.

Acquisition of new equipment and resources
Figures supplied by groups suggest they purchased approximately:

57 new microscopes
52 pieces of hi-tech / specialist equipment (e.g. GPS, sound recorders, moth traps, video / audio equipment, computer software)
9 new projectors
13 new laptops
550+ pieces of survey equipment (e.g. bat detectors, sweep nets – not including smaller items such as specimen tubes)
600+ ID guides and reference books

Development of new resources
37 new teaching resources developed (e.g. ID guides, quiz sheets, information sheets)
9 new websites developed, including 6 new online recording scheme resources
4 new citizen science projects developed.

Events and activities run
300+ workshops / training events / survey sessions / other outreach activities
11 BioBlitzes, most of which were the first for their region

Long term benefits
The numbers acquired from groups relate only to the year during which they ran the funded projects, so do not take into account the long-term outputs and benefits that would come from repeat use of equipment, resources, and expertise acquired. The outputs and benefits are therefore likely to be on-going.

Further positive effects of the grant scheme
Overall, the increase in group capacity as a direct result of OPAL-funded projects is considerable. The numbers above tell some of this story, but it is also important to consider the value of the experience gained through project delivery. Just over half of all successful applicants (54%) had never applied for funding before. As a result, there was potentially a lot of new experience to be gained. It was important that the experience was a positive one.
A review of comments expressed in groups’ end-of-grant reports, showed several common positive benefits.

**Projects served as a practical focus and increased group confidence in their capabilities**
This was a frequently repeated comment. Having a formalised project and timescale in place was seen as an important factor for success, and the existence of a contract for delivery with an external partner (OPAL) added an extra incentive for successful completion of the project. Most groups seemed to respond well to having a set project to deliver, and rose to the challenge.

Funding was described as a “motivator for us to deliver a project within a timescale” and also a “shove in the right direction”. Groups said the experience lead them to gain confidence in what they do, and also initiative to develop their work was very common. An important factor for the legacy of the grant scheme is the fact that many groups have been inspired to continue elements of the project beyond the one year timescale of the project, as well as develop new projects as a direct result of OPAL-funded projects.

**Delivery of OPAL-funded projects directly led to other group projects and work opportunities**
Again, this was a common response from groups. New projects or work opportunities came as a result of increased confidence and experience within the group, new working relationships formed during the project, new funding opportunities that emerged as a direct result of the project, or direct external requests for further events or resources.

**Collaboration and partnership work – utilising and strengthening old partnerships and developing new working relationships**
This was an important direct benefit of OPAL funded projects. 92% of projects involved collaboration with another organisation, and two thirds of projects involved collaboration with multiple organisations. The
most common collaboration was with other societies or recording schemes (59% of projects), and collaborations with recording centres, wildlife trusts or government wildlife agencies, were also common, (58% of projects). See pie chart below for further details of collaborations. These collaborations are important for developing a network of natural history societies and recording schemes both locally and on a national scale. Benefits include the sharing of ideas and resources, and new work and projects have emerged as a direct result of new partnerships. There is a strong case for nationally facilitating and formalising these networks.

![Pie chart showing collaboration percentages]

**An increased professional presence**

A lack of funding often means that groups are unable to afford high quality promotion, publicity, and teaching material, or equipment for events. The result is often an ‘amateur’ public facing image that doesn’t do justice to the expertise and knowledge held within the group. A common comment made was that OPAL funding enabled groups them
to have a far more professional presence. This has a direct positive result on the way they are perceived by the public, increases their profile in the eyes of other organisations, and helps increase recruitment.

**Improved relations within groups**

A recurrent benefit that emerged was that in addition to attracting new members, projects re-engaged current members with the work of the group, and improved relations between members. Projects such as those funded by the OPAL grant scheme help demonstrate to members that the group are active and looking to the future, and worth staying with. Many groups described the “excitement” and “buzz” that receiving the OPAL grant caused within their groups.

**Additional ‘unexpected benefits’**

Aside from the benefits already discussed, 60% of groups reported unexpected benefits that emerged as a result of planning and delivering the project, such as:

- Attendance at public events resulted in obtaining new records from the public
- Projects generated media interest in the area, which helped promote and generate interest in the group and their activity.
- Donations and services offered in kind increased the impact of OPAL grants, often due to the positive nature of the project, and would not have been offered without the OPAL-funded project.
- New discoveries on heritage or wildlife in the area as a direct result of project activity

**Project delivery**

The OPAL Grant Scheme had the specific intention of being straightforward, unintimidating and supportive in order to encourage
applications from those with little experience of funding and grants.

Just over two thirds (68%) of groups completed projects using just funds from the OPAL Grant Scheme or had money left over (this does not include projects with previously-arranged co-funding). Where there was a significant underspend following completion of the project, arrangements were made for the funding to be used on alternative, associated group activity.

Nearly two-thirds of groups managed to achieve all elements outlined in their original applications. The remaining portion (34%), found some elements of their project could not be achieved. There were varied reasons for this, and in all instances, OPAL was supportive and flexible in accepting changes.

In total, 95% of groups completed their projects with no changes, or what they determined as minor changes to project plans, and 5% needed major changes to plans in order to achieve their goals, such as purchasing different equipment, running more or fewer events than planned, technological difficulties causing delays (e.g. broken computers) and problems due to natural causes (e.g. poor weather or no bats to survey).

Many changes were minor, and the scheme was intentionally flexible to accommodate. Careful assessment of well thought-out projects, at the right level of ambition, with a shared responsibility, and that were low risk, was an important factor in ensuring few projects became unstuck. Overall, most OPAL-funded projects were delivered successfully.