

# People and nature: learning through doing

Action research programme

## Clackmannanshire Disability Awareness Group



**Clackmannanshire Disability Awareness Group** in Alloa is one of six community and voluntary sector groups in Scotland to have taken part in the action research programme **People and nature: learning through doing**. This programme aimed to identify successful approaches to involving people in enjoying, learning about and caring for nature and was supported by Scottish Natural Heritage and Scottish Community Development Centre.



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This **People and nature: learning through doing** project aimed to find out what the barriers and enablers were to people, in the Alloa area, with a physical disability being able to access and enjoy nature. The research was carried out by Clackmannanshire Disability Awareness Group, with the support of a local charity Action for Change.



## Background

The Disability Awareness Group (DAG) was established in 2002 by a small group of people in Clackmannanshire with a range of disabilities including mobility and sight issues. The group aims to raise awareness of the issues that people with disabilities face in their day-to-day lives and its members are passionate about making Clackmannanshire a place where people living with disabilities can live a full and participatory life.

The DAG has a strong relationship with the Whins Resource Centre in Alloa, a Council-run day centre for adults with a physical or sensory impairment. Together they have established a ramblers group to enable service-users to get out and enjoy nature supported by staff and transport from the Centre. The group really enjoys the fresh air and exercise, seeing and touching the trees and plants, and even getting

soaked in the rain. Several DAG members have undertaken the John Muir Award and have been working with the Fieldfare Trust to map accessible routes for the Phototrails website.

## The research project

The DAG would like more people living with a disability to be able to enjoy the outdoors and wanted to use their research to:

- gather evidence of the barriers and enablers to people with a physical disability being able to access and enjoy nature;
- highlight that the benefits of the natural environment are important to people with disabilities;
- bring these barriers and benefits to the attention of decision-makers and funders in order to increase access to nature for people living with a disability in the Alloa area.

The DAG also wanted to use the research to increase their confidence as a group and raise their profile in the local community. The group developed a questionnaire to ask local people with disabilities how often they got out to enjoy nature, what support they needed to do this and what barriers they faced in doing so more often, or at all. 200 copies of the questionnaire were distributed through Clackmannanshire Council Day Services, libraries and Community Access Points, with a response rate of 15%. The group arranged a focus group to explore issues in more depth and a case study trip to Loch Leven National Nature Reserve. A DVD was produced, based on the group's outdoor trips, to accompany their research report.

**“Getting out and enjoying nature is good for everyone!”**





“I don’t mind getting muddy, I just want the same access as everyone else. There is a great view right at the top.”

## Research findings

People with disabilities do enjoy the outdoors and like to visit a range of outdoor places — from local parks and wildlife reserves to beaches and hills; and do a range of different things — just being in nature, watching wildlife, rambling, volunteering and growing things.

“I enjoyed planting shrubs and flowers at the Whins Centre garden.”

But people with disabilities are less likely to get out into nature than the population as a whole (*from review of published data*).

For people without cars, there is a high reliance on Clackmannanshire Council Day Services for access to nature — through the Whins Centre ramblers group and visits to the Ochil community garden.



The main barriers to enjoying the outdoors faced by people with disabilities in Alloa were:

- Difficulty accessing suitable, affordable transport if you don’t have a car
- Lack of information on where to go and what obstacles might be faced
- Lack of confidence and/or someone to go with
- Limited opportunities for group visits outwith Clackmannanshire Council Day Services — and time constraints within Council services
- Lack of spontaneity as transport and support need to be planned in advance

“We need to plan our trips around the timetable of the Day Centre — if we are late back with the bus then other service-users are unable to get their lift home!”

- Time and logistics can be an issue for group visits — it takes time to get wheelchairs on and off the bus and there can be a long queue outside the disabled toilet — so a few hours can quickly disappear...

“It would be easier if I had more information on accessible routes in my area.”

Things that would help overcome these barriers:

- More **accessible transport** — a more flexible Dial a Journey service and more taxis that can carry wheelchairs
- More and better **information on accessible outdoor places** in Clackmannanshire
- Better **amenities** such as toilets, motorised scooters and facilities for washing muddy wheelchair wheels
- More **outdoor places and activities accessible to people with disabilities**
- More **opportunities for supported outdoor trips** outside of Council Day Services — for instance with volunteer walk ‘buddies’ and other local groups

## Impact on the group

**“Our research has confirmed and validated what we thought the issues were, and given us the evidence and confidence we need to speak to people about our recommendations.”**

As a result of their research, the DAG's profile has been increased and new skills, contacts and confidence developed to support their work. The group has gained skills in planning and carrying out research: choosing appropriate methods, analysing and interpreting the results, producing a report and DVD and sharing the findings with others. They have gained valuable experience in working as a team and in engaging their community and those they wish to influence.

**The project involved 82 days of volunteer time from the DAG and Action for Change, plus staff time and transport from the Whins Resource Centre for outdoor trips.**

## Future actions

As a result of their action research, the DAG has been invited onto the Council-led steering group for developing Gartmorn Dam Country Park in Alloa and has applied to the BIG Lottery Community Spaces fund for a partnership project to restore the park's sunken garden as a place where people of all abilities can enjoy nature.

They have been awarded funding by Awards for All to develop a map pack of accessible trails in Clackmannanshire and hope that their research might encourage more people to volunteer as walk buddies. They would like to buy their own bus and make it available to groups who, like themselves, want to get out and enjoy nature.

More widely, the DAG plans to share their report and DVD with other Access Panels to collaborate on issues around access to nature for people with disabilities and lobby for better transport provision.

**“Access to a flexible, accessible community transport service would be great.”**



## Key learning for other organisations

- People with disabilities **do** enjoy the outdoors and want to access a range of outdoor places and activities
- Many people with disabilities rely on having someone to go with — for transport and support needs — and for building confidence
- Limited accessible transport can be a real barrier for people with disabilities
- Support services, walking groups and community gardens can provide opportunities for people with disabilities to get out into nature
- Information on accessible routes and possible obstacles can help people visit the outdoors with confidence — eg [www.phototrails.org](http://www.phototrails.org)
- Motorised scooter hire and facilities to wash muddy wheelchair wheels could make outdoor visits more enjoyable
- Visitor surveys should include questions on disability and accessibility

“Many people rely on having someone to go with them.”

### What did Clackmannanshire DAG learn from the action research process?

“We could easily design another questionnaire based on what we’ve learned. But next time we wouldn’t waste time putting copies in libraries and Access Points — we’d get more volunteers and do the survey face to face. We’ve realised that the only way to get a good response rate is to sit down with people and help them fill it in. But the DAG profile has definitely been raised through the questionnaire.”

The group found their action research project to be a lot more work than anticipated — a big commitment in terms of time — not least in writing up the final report. The specific support needs of the group meant that a lot of assistance was required. This support was provided as an in-kind contribution by local charity Action for Change.



## People and nature: learning through doing

was an action research programme supported by Scottish Natural Heritage and Scottish Community Development Centre which ran from Autumn 2009 until Spring 2011 with six participating groups. The programme aimed to increase understanding and improve the ways in which voluntary and community sector organisations, and the agencies and organisations which support them, work with excluded and disadvantaged groups to involve them in the natural heritage.

**Action research** is often defined as research done *of and by* a particular group of people, rather than *on and to* them — and with the aim of achieving change. The benefit of this approach is that the skills, knowledge and understanding developed through the research remain within the group and are directly relevant to their work. The wider benefit from the **People and nature: learning through doing** research is in providing others with an insight into what works 'in practice' from the perspectives of those directly involved in engaging people with nature.

Each group had mentoring support from Scottish Community Development Centre to help them develop and carry out their research, plus a small amount of funding for research and dissemination expenses. All of the groups gained new skills and contacts from their action research, as well as insights and evidence that will shape and encourage support for their work in helping more people to enjoy Scotland's nature and outdoors.

## To find out more

Read the full action research reports at [www.snh.gov.uk/learning-through-doing](http://www.snh.gov.uk/learning-through-doing)

For more information on SNH's work on increasing and broadening participation in outdoor recreation, see [www.snh.gov.uk/increasing-participation](http://www.snh.gov.uk/increasing-participation) or contact Elaine Macintosh at Scottish Natural Heritage [elaine.macintosh@snh.gov.uk](mailto:elaine.macintosh@snh.gov.uk), 0141 951 4488

For more information on Clackmannanshire Disability Awareness Group, or to request a copy of their action research DVD, see [www.clacksdag.org.uk](http://www.clacksdag.org.uk) or email [AlisterDAG@gmail.com](mailto:AlisterDAG@gmail.com)

For more information on action research see [www.scdc.org.uk/what/community-led-action-research](http://www.scdc.org.uk/what/community-led-action-research)

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## The People and nature: learning through doing projects

- Blarbuie Woodland Enterprise, Lochgilphead
- Broughty Ferry Environmental Project / DightyConnect, Dundee
- Clackmannanshire Disability Awareness Group, Alloa
- GalGael Trust, Glasgow
- Neilston Development Trust, Neilston
- SAMH Chrysalis Project, Dundee (*focus group only*)

“Overcoming the obstacles that you face out in nature builds confidence and encourages us to keep going.”

Clackmannanshire Disability Awareness Group



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