

People and nature: learning through doing

Action research programme

SAMH Chrysalis Project



The **SAMH Chrysalis Project** in Dundee 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 helped and hindered people with a mental health issue in enjoying nature and the outdoors. The SAMH Chrysalis Project was unable to undertake a full action research project, so a focus group was held instead. SAMH is the Scottish Association for Mental Health.

Background

SAMH, the Scottish Association for Mental Health, is Scotland's leading mental health charity. SAMH provides community-based support services and believes that people with mental health issues can and should be ambitious about their futures. One of SAMH's employment and training services is the Chrysalis Project in Dundee — a horticulture training service that offers progression towards SVQ qualification in horticulture and the John Muir Award.

SAMH had observed that although trainees at the Chrysalis Project had chosen to pursue careers as gardeners, they did not in general appear to have much connection with nature and the outdoors outside of Chrysalis. SAMH was keen to explore this through an action research project, however organisational changes meant

that they were unable to take on this commitment. The possibility of the Chrysalis Project trainees themselves taking the lead (with support from a sessional worker) was explored and although two trainees expressed interest, in the end this was not something they felt they could take on.

The research project

As Chrysalis was unable to undertake a full action research project, focus group discussions were held instead, led by Scottish Community Development Centre and Scottish Natural Heritage.

The first focus group involved four Chrysalis Project horticulture trainees and a sessional worker and explored the question:

- what helps and hinders people with a mental health issue in engaging with the outdoors?



The focus group was held in the Chrysalis Project greenhouse, with maps of the Dundee area providing a focus for the discussion. Trainees used sticky dots to indicate where in the outdoors they went at present and what activities they did there; and another set of maps to indicate places they would like to go and things they would like to do. The discussion explored:

- what motivated them to visit the places they did;
- what stopped them from going to the other places or doing the other activities that they wanted to;
- what would help them to do these things.

A follow-up focus group was held, with an additional five trainees, to validate and expand on the points raised in the first session. A discussion with Chrysalis Project staff provided additional insights.



“The service-users really enjoyed being involved in the focus group. Perhaps a modified version of action research would have been possible, with additional support.”



“Having someone to go with adds purpose to the outdoors – sharing the experience – but not everyone likes large groups or organised trips.”

Research findings

The key factors that helped and hindered people with a mental health issue in enjoying nature and the outdoors were:

Someone to go with. Having company in the outdoors added purpose, through sharing the experience. People felt self-conscious going for a walk alone. *“It’s better to go with someone – good to have someone to talk to about a place”*. However, trainees did not appear to socialise with each other outside of Chrysalis – and group or club activities were not everyone’s cup of tea.

Conditioning. People lacked confidence and connection in the outdoors if they’d had no experience as a child. They felt they didn’t know ‘the rules’. Outdoor recreation was seen as a middle-class pursuit – not for inner city people – although two trainees were involved in the local SAMH hill-walking group.

You don’t miss what you’ve never had. Linked to lack of past experience, was not knowing what the benefits of enjoying the outdoors might be.

Motivation. Participants recognised that they needed to decide to do it and get organised – *“give yourself a kick up the bum!”* and not think *“there is always tomorrow”*.

Transport. Few participants owned a car, and infrequent public transport was seen as a barrier for getting out into nature. Council-run bus trips were felt to be for *“older people”*. Trips organised by Chrysalis were liked – but not attended by everyone.

Cost. Transport costs and entry fees were seen as a barrier. Participants thought they had to pay for entry to many outdoor places. However, what they got out of it – whether it was *“worth the money”* – was more important than cost.

Self-confidence. *“Knowing what is expected of me”* – the unknown – was a common concern for many Chrysalis service-users in getting involved with something new.

John Muir Award. Undertaking the John Muir Award *“opened up almost everyone at Chrysalis to enjoying natural spaces”*.

Key learning for other organisations

- SAMH believes that organisations promoting the outdoors to people with mental health issues should get people out to experience nature ‘hands-on’ – so they can discover the benefits and gain confidence
- Environmental volunteering could fill the gap for *“something to do”* expressed by some at the end of their Chrysalis training – but organised group activities do not suit everyone
- For outdoor places that charge entry fees, free entry for support workers who accompany service-users could encourage more visits



“When you haven’t tried something, how do you know you are missing it?”

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

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

For more information on the SAMH Chrysalis Project see www.samh.org.uk/our-work/community-based-services/employment-learning or email kevin.bruce@samh.org.uk

For more information on action research see 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*)

“Organisations promoting the outdoors to people with mental health issues need to engage them ‘hands-on’ — get people out to experience nature — to learn the benefits and gain confidence by doing it.”

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