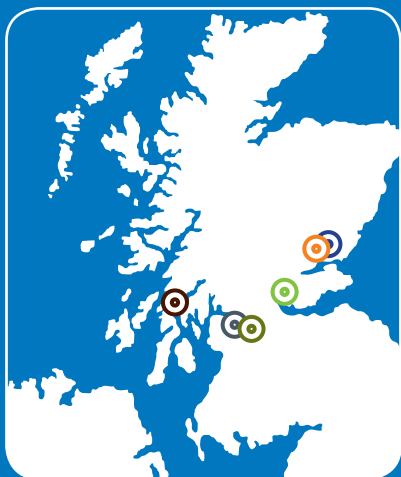


People and nature: learning through doing

Action research programme

Summary and learning outcomes



People and nature: learning through doing was an action research programme which aimed to identify successful approaches to involving people in enjoying, learning about and caring for nature. The programme involved six community and voluntary sector groups across Scotland and was supported by Scottish Natural Heritage and Scottish Community Development Centre.



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This summary report provides an overview of **People and nature: learning through doing**. This action research programme aimed to identify successful approaches to involving people from excluded and disadvantaged groups in enjoying, learning about and caring for nature. The programme was supported by Scottish Natural Heritage and Scottish Community Development Centre.

Context

Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) aims to facilitate enjoyment of the outdoors for everyone in Scotland. In its policy statement 'Enjoying the outdoors — increasing participation, sharing the benefits'¹, SNH recognises and champions the importance of the outdoors to people's health and quality of life. Working with a range of partners, SNH aims to increase the number of people and communities who enjoy these benefits — to support the Scottish Government's strategic objectives for a Wealthier and Fairer, Healthier, Safer and Stronger, Smarter and Greener Scotland.

Scottish Community Development Centre seeks to increase well-being and the quality of community life by encouraging communities to play an active role in understanding barriers to participation and opportunities for change, seeking to influence policies and decisions, and building more effective, sustainable organisations.

People and nature: learning through doing was developed to support these aims.

Aims and approach

People and nature: learning through doing was an action research programme which aimed to identify successful approaches to involving people from excluded and disadvantaged groups in enjoying, learning about and caring for nature. Through increasing understanding of the issues facing certain groups, the programme aimed to improve the ways in which voluntary and community sector organisations, and the agencies and organisations which support them, work to involve a wider range of people in the natural heritage.

Six community and voluntary sector groups across Scotland took part in the programme. Each group carried out their own action research project to explore what could help people from a range of backgrounds and circumstances to get closer to nature, and the benefits they experienced when they did. The programme provided mentoring, guidance and a small grant to each group to help them plan, carry out and disseminate their research.



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. More widely, the **People and nature: learning through doing** action research has provided others with an insight into what works 'in practice' from the perspectives of those directly involved in engaging people with nature.

The programme was funded and managed by Scottish Natural Heritage, in partnership with Scottish Community Development Centre, and ran from Autumn 2009 until Spring 2011.

“Action research is a really powerful way of getting to the heart of the matter. The groups have gathered evidence that is directly relevant to their work and which they can use to demonstrate the value of their activities, support funding applications and lobby for change.”

Scottish Community Development Centre

¹Enjoying the outdoors' policy statement www.snh.gov.uk/about-snh/what-we-do/health-and-wellbeing/enjoying-the-outdoors/

The action research projects

Participating groups	Action research questions
Blarbuie Woodland Enterprise, Lochgilphead	What would enable greater use of Blarbuie Woodland by people in mid-Argyll with a range of mental and physical health problems and disabilities?
Broughty Ferry Environmental Project / DightyConnect, Dundee	To explore the ways in which the Broughty Ferry Environmental Project and DightyConnect activities were successful in engaging a wide range of people.
Clackmannanshire Disability Awareness Group, Alloa	What were the barriers and enablers to people, in the Alloa area, with a physical disability being able to access and enjoy nature?
GalGael Trust, Glasgow	What stops people in deprived communities from accessing and enjoying their cultural and natural heritage — and how do they benefit when they do?
Neilston Development Trust, Neilston	To explore the potential for wider use by the Neilston community of Cowden Hall Estate as a place for enjoying nature and the outdoors.
SAMH Chrysalis Project, Dundee (focus group only)	What helps and hinders people with a mental health issue in engaging with the outdoors?

The groups used a range of research methods including questionnaires, focus groups, outdoor visits, case studies, intergenerational storytelling and 'story dialogue'. Each group produced a research report detailing their aims, methodology, findings and conclusions. DVDs, websites, leaflets, artwork and presentations were also created to disseminate the research findings.

The groups invested over 286 days of their own time, gathering insights and evidence from almost 400 people of a wide range of ages and circumstances.

Three of the action research projects were led by paid workers with support from volunteers. Two projects were carried out entirely by volunteers. A sixth group was unable to undertake a full action research project due to organisational changes; a focus group was conducted instead to capture learning from this group.

A separate case study is available on each action research project with details of their research methods, key findings and the impact on their group.

Outcomes for the participating groups

- ✓ New skills
 - Planning and carrying out research
 - Analysing, interpreting and reporting their findings
 - Recruiting and managing volunteers
- ✓ Improved understanding of the issues
- ✓ Increased confidence and profile
- ✓ Greater community involvement
- ✓ New contacts and access to resources
- ✓ Evidence — to lobby and influence others
- All groups anticipate using their research findings to:
 - ✓ Influence things they want to change
 - ✓ Adopt what they have learned into their own work
 - ✓ Secure funding to develop their activities

Learning outcomes — on people and nature

The research spanned a range of different groups — from people with disabilities to people on low incomes. Despite the differences between the groups, the projects all demonstrated the transformative role that enjoying, learning about and caring for nature can play in improving well-being and building social capital. In particular, people placed great value on the **connections** that they made through getting involved with nature — both to other **people** and also to their local **place**. These links are explored below.

Company and support

- People of many circumstances rely on **having someone to go with** for company and support in the outdoors
- People's own **transport** and **confidence** issues need to be addressed alongside the physical accessibility of outdoor places
- Access to transport can be limited for people on low incomes or with disabilities
- **Group activities** such as walking programmes and volunteering — or trips with **support groups** or **'buddies'** — can help address confidence, company, transport and support needs

Range of activities

- Environmental activities can have **practical, cultural, creative and social** dimensions — different things interest different people
- People take **pride in making a difference** in their local area
- Reclaiming vacant land in deprived communities for nature or growing can give people a **sense of ownership and purpose**
- Activities that bring people of different generations and circumstances together can help create **stronger, more inclusive communities**

Purpose and meaning

- Having **something to do there** and information to help **interpret what you see** can give purpose and meaning to outdoor visits
- Establishing a **cultural link** between people and places can encourage enjoyment and care, and underpin a **sense of identity and connection**
- **Local heritage, knowledge and skills** can create unique place-based projects — a community's connection with their place can be key to getting people involved
- Doing things in the company of others is important for **shared experiences** and **being part of something bigger**



Better places and information

- **More and better urban green spaces** are needed as well as **information on places that can be reached by foot, bike or public transport**
- More opportunities are needed for **meaningful activity** — such as community gardens or practical conservation projects
- **Amenities** such as paths, seating and toilets can make the outdoors more accessible for some — but **people like wild places too**
- **Information on all-abilities paths** would help people with disabilities to visit the outdoors with confidence — and **motorised scooter hire** and **places to wash muddy wheelchair wheels** could make visits more enjoyable

People reported many benefits from getting involved with nature

Peace and perspective, being part of something bigger, making a difference, making friends, fresh air and exercise, building confidence, learning new skills, a sense of achievement, improving health and well-being, a sense of heritage and identity, creative inspiration and spiritual reflection.

Learning outcomes — on action research

What did the groups think?

- The groups invested large amounts of their own time, energy and resources in their research — and in return gained evidence to support their work and skills for future projects
- Almost all groups felt they had under-estimated the time commitment needed — however all were certain that it had, in the end, been worth the effort
- In particular, groups found that writing up their research reports, including the time needed to analyse their findings, took much longer than anticipated

“We didn’t know what we didn’t know until we got started!”

Capacity and commitment

- The enthusiasm and commitment of the groups in carrying out and completing their research cannot be over-estimated
- Some groups had previous research experience, others none; some were led by paid workers, others by volunteers — accordingly, some needed more support and direction than others

- The projects were led by busy people in active groups with a range of competing priorities — in all cases there was a huge reliance on one person
- Designing questionnaires, analysing data, creating charts and writing the final report were daunting tasks for some groups with no previous experience
- Community and voluntary sector groups can be fragile and their capacity can change in a short space of time — several projects dropped out during the development phase of the programme due to staff or funding changes

Support and resources

- The varying capacity within the groups meant that flexibility was required in the number of mentor days available and the time allowed to complete the research
- It was important that funding was available to cover research expenses and for groups to know this at the outset
- Community groups with no core funding or staff incurred additional expenses for office costs and volunteers’ childcare
- Templates and guidance notes helped the groups to produce comprehensive research plans and final reports

- Networking days were valued by the groups as opportunities to share experiences of their research and get insights from groups in other sectors

Gauging success

- Developing the ability to plan research, carry it out and report on the findings is in itself a measure of success
- The key measure however will be how the groups use their findings: to support and develop their own work, and influence others, to help more people from a range of backgrounds and circumstances enjoy nature
- It would be worth reviewing in five years time to see whether the potential developed by the action research was realised and sustained in practice

“The groups have gathered first-hand evidence which will inform their own activities, influence others and support SNH’s work in encouraging wider participation in enjoying nature.”

Scottish Natural Heritage



Outcomes for the groups

All of the groups gained new skills, insights, evidence and contacts from their action research which will support their ongoing work and, they hope, inform the work of others. Their action research is just the start!

For **Blarbuie Woodland**, awareness of the potential of the wood for health and well-being has grown and their research has supported an application to Paths for All to expand their health walk programme. **Broughty Ferry Environmental Project** has gained a new evaluation technique in 'story dialogue' and their evidence has supported a BIG Lottery application to continue their DightyConnect project. **Clackmannanshire Disability Awareness Group** has been invited onto a steering group for improving access at Gartmorn Dam Country Park and has secured funding to produce a map pack of local accessible routes. **GalGael** are using their new research skills on an enquiry into the health benefits of the local community garden and hope to use their evidence to demonstrate the healing power of nature to health and addiction agencies. For **Neilston Development Trust**, new contacts have led to a programme of local wildlife sessions, landowner permission for path clearance work and plans for walking and cycling initiatives.

“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.”

Clackmannanshire Disability Awareness Group

“When we spoke to the other action research groups it became clear that people of many different circumstances need ‘buddies’ to help them enjoy the outdoors.”

Blarbuie Woodland Enterprise

“Our research has helped us realise the depth of the problem when people are disengaged with nature.”

GalGael Trust

“We started off thinking this was a modest project, but it turned out to be very involved and challenging. But definitely worth the effort!”

Neilston Development Trust

“Our action research will inform the future for Broughty Ferry Environmental Project — and we expect benefits to emerge long into the future.”

Broughty Ferry Environmental Project

To find out more

Read the **People and nature: learning through doing** action research reports and case studies 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 Scottish Community Development Centre and action research see www.scdc.org.uk/what/community-led-action-research

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