

# People and nature: learning through doing

Action research programme

## Blarbuie Woodland Enterprise



**Blarbuie Woodland Enterprise** in Lochgilphead 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 would enable greater use of Blarbuie Woodland by people in mid-Argyll with a range of mental and physical health problems and disabilities. The research was carried out by staff and volunteers from Blarbuie Woodland Enterprise.

## Background

Blarbuie Woodland in Lochgilphead opened to the public in 2007 after the neglected woods around the old Argyll and Bute Psychiatric Hospital were restored for the benefit of mental health service-users and the wider community. The woodland has all-abilities trails, picnic areas, shelters and interpretation, and provides health walks, woodcraft and arts activities, training, volunteering and job creation.

People residing in the psychiatric hospital have been one of the main beneficiaries of the woodland, through walking there and getting involved in woodland activities. Previous action research had shown the positive impacts of this on mental health and well-being<sup>1</sup>. Blarbuie Woodland Enterprise wanted to extend these benefits to the wider community by raising awareness of the woodland as a valuable resource for promoting health and supporting recovery.

Blarbuie Woodland Enterprise is a new organisation taking over from the Blarbuie partnership of Reforesting Scotland, NHS Highland, Argyll Green Woodworkers Association, Scottish Association for Mental Health and Lochgilphead Community Council.

## The research project

Blarbuie's previous research had given them strong evidence of the health and well-being benefits of walking and working in the woodland. They wanted their new research to help them reach more people, particularly those experiencing physical or mental ill health or disability, and they set out to explore the issues that might be faced in getting to, or finding out about, Blarbuie Woodland and its activities.

A questionnaire was sent to 34 organisations representing the users of health and social services in Mid-Argyll. Follow-up contact



helped achieve a good response rate — 36 returns in all due to some forwarding. Some organisations also visited the woodland or met the research team to discuss their responses.

The questionnaire was designed to find out:

- whether people had heard of Blarbuie Woodland, how frequently they visited and how they travelled there;
- whether they had any difficulty getting to the woodland, finding someone to go with, finding the woodland entrances or finding out about woodland activities and open days;
- whether any specific conditions or circumstances prevented them from getting to the wood as often as they would like — such as disability, ill health, lack of confidence, money or time.

“What conditions and situations restrict some people’s access to the woods?”



<sup>1</sup> 'The impact of working and walking in Blarbuie Woodland at Argyll and Bute Hospital on mental health and well-being' (Blarbuie Woodland Partners, 2009) [www.reforestingscotland.org/pdf/BlarbuieHealthResearchReport09.pdf](http://www.reforestingscotland.org/pdf/BlarbuieHealthResearchReport09.pdf)



“People’s own transport and confidence issues need to be considered alongside the accessibility of the woodland.”

## Research findings

The key factors that restricted access to Blarbuie Woodland for people experiencing ill health or disability were:

**Information.** Almost everyone had heard of the woodland and many had visited a few times, but more could be done to make people aware of the woodland’s activities and open days.

**Transport.** Many had difficulty driving or being driven to the woodland, or walking there. Many people relied on the hospital service bus, or transport provided by their support group, to make a trip to Blarbuie.

**Disability and ill health.** Both were diverse, but involved support needs and lack of independence in getting to the woodland.

**Lack of confidence.** This was associated with disability, ill health or other issues.

**Support.** The need for support could be a restriction in getting to the woodland, as could time constraints with carers. But support was also the means by which people could and did get there.

“Through our research we’ve learned that just letting people know about the woodland is not enough — we need to do more to encourage and assist them to visit, such as providing transport or walking programmes.”

As part of the research, a group from Neighbourhood Networks, a support organisation for people with disabilities and learning difficulties, visited the woodland. They suggested that much more could be made of the hospital service bus for promoting and bringing people to Blarbuie Woodland — advertising activities and open days and even putting ‘Blarbuie Woodland’ on the front of the bus.

Blarbuie Woodland was designed with all-abilities access, so physical access was not expected to be a barrier, although there is still room to extend this within the site.

The key finding for the Blarbuie team was that company and confidence were significant issues for people with ill health or disability in terms of getting to the woodland. In networking with the other action research groups it became clear that people of many different circumstances can need ‘buddies’ to give them support and confidence in visiting the outdoors.

“Although many people with MS would not go alone, they could be encouraged to go in a group.”



## Impact on the group

The Blarbuie team built on the research skills and confidence gained through their previous action research and developed new skills in questionnaire design and data analysis. Awareness of the woodland has been raised through presentations and woodland visits associated with their research and new links have been made with local groups supporting people with ill health and disabilities.

They have increased their understanding of the complex issues of health, disability and exclusion and gained new insights and evidence to support their work in helping more people benefit from Blarbuie Woodland. This is particularly important at a time when the psychiatric unit at Argyll and Bute Hospital is downsizing with a greater emphasis on community mental health services.

**The project involved 44 days of staff and volunteer time, and was led by Blarbuie Woodland Enterprise co-ordinator with key support from a woodland volunteer and walk leader plus other woodland participants.**

## Future actions

**“The research has brought us into contact with new groups and prompted us to work with the hospital service bus to promote this vital connection to Blarbuie Woodland.”**

Blarbuie Woodland Enterprise hopes to work with the hospital service bus company to advertise the woodland and its activities. They also hope to encourage local groups with minibuses to bring their service-users to the woodland. A colourful woodland mural is to be painted on a wall near the entrance.

The research confirmed the value of Blarbuie's health walks and this evidence has supported a funding application to Paths for All to continue the walking programme. They plan to extend it to involve patients at the adjacent Mid Argyll Community Hospital and other local groups.

More widely, Blarbuie would like to build ongoing research into its work to gather further evidence of the positive impacts on health and well-being of walking and working in the woodland — to encourage more doctors and consultants to prescribe 'green exercise'.



**“We've seen that many people value health walks at set times.”**

**“I like the open days and activities and meeting other people.”**





## What did Blarbuie Woodland Enterprise learn from the action research process?

“Just doing the research has helped us bring more people to the woodland. It is a discovery process — we are constantly uncovering new insights and groups to make connections with.”

For Blarbuie, their action research is just the start. The process itself has introduced more people to the woodland and the knowledge and contacts gained will shape Blarbuie’s ongoing work in promoting and developing their activities.

The research team found that designing and distributing the questionnaire and gathering responses was more complex and time-consuming than anticipated. Each questionnaire was followed up with personal contact to achieve a high response rate and to capitalise on opportunities to promote the woodland. However this left no time for focus group discussions as originally planned. In future, the group would allow more time for this kind of research.

## Key learning for other organisations

- People’s own transport and confidence issues need to be considered alongside the physical accessibility of outdoor places
- Public transport, service buses and support group minibuses are important in getting people with support needs to outdoor places — these services should be promoted and protected
- Having someone to go with is a key factor in overcoming barriers that people can face in being able to enjoy the outdoors — such as transport and support needs or lack of confidence
- Group activities can help people to participate who would not do so otherwise
- People of many different circumstances can need ‘buddies’ to give them support and confidence in visiting the outdoors

“Our research has shown the importance of company in getting people to the wood.”

## 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 Blarbuie Woodland Enterprise see [www.reforestingscotland.org/projects/blarbuie.php](http://www.reforestingscotland.org/projects/blarbuie.php) or email [hugh.fife@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:hugh.fife@yahoo.co.uk)

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*)

“More people now know about Blarbuie Woodland and that it is a public wood which they can visit any time.”

Blarbuie Woodland Enterprise



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