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ABOUT EARLY FINDINGS

Welcome to this paper, one in the second series of Early Findings papers. **Here we draw on the experiences of 13 projects that are engaging urban communities in green spaces on their doorstep.** It is based on the findings from projects about their work in urban communities; it includes their experiences of what has worked and what has not worked for them, as identified through the Access to Nature self evaluation process. This is distilled into a number of key learning points about engaging urban communities in their local natural environment.

These papers are being produced across the lifetime of Access to Nature and demonstrate what is being learnt about encouraging people who have little or no experience of the natural environment to go out into the outdoors. This includes messages to inform the continuing work of Access to Nature projects and the work of other organisations interested in or committed to this kind of work. More Findings Papers will be produced as Access to Nature progresses and as we build on our learning to date.

THE CURRENT CONTEXT

The current political agenda parallels the goals of many of the Access to Nature projects. The vision for a Big Society focuses on a belief that people should be empowered to improve their communities and shape the services they receive. The three core strands of the current Localism agenda – promoting social action in communities; empowering communities; and opening up public services – all reflect the kinds of ambitions of many of the funded projects. Within Natural England, the commitments to reconnect people with nature; protect natural assets; and maximise the opportunities offered by a greener economy are all priorities that underpin and complement Access to Nature.

A recent report commissioned by Natural England highlighted the significant inequality in access to the natural environment[1]. While a half of the people surveyed said they visit a green space at

least once a week, 9% had not visited at all in the last 12 months. Levels of participation were lowest for population groups that tend to be concentrated in urban areas – namely BME communities and members of the lowest (DE) social economic groups. Other research has revealed that people living in deprived urban areas underuse the spaces that are most convenient to them because they are of poor quality and feel unsafe.[2] Because of this, significant local green space resources remain unexploited. **The 13 projects that have informed this paper all set out to address these trends. Working in urban communities across England, the projects have found ways to connect people of all generations and cultures with their local urban natural environment.** Although their activities are many and varied, they offer some consistent messages about how to overcome barriers and build awareness and appreciation of local green spaces within urban communities. They also reveal the many positive things that can happen when children and adults have a sense that their local green spaces are 'free to explore'.

ABOUT THE PROJECTS:
where, what and why?

"When we were children in the 50s and 60s we naturally used the woods but over the decades it's got that nobody goes in them anymore. To get people to have confidence to do that again – young mums, children and families - is fantastic."

Fryston Woods Access and Improvement Project

Through Access to Nature, urban communities from as far afield as Plymouth, Bristol, Hastings, Coventry, Newcastle, Wakefield, Bury and Hull have been encouraged to engage in their local green spaces. Although geographically varied, most of these communities experience some common barriers associated with accessing local green spaces which include:

- Negative perceptions and safety fears associated with visiting local sites
- Poor accessibility to some sites
- Lack of confidence and knowledge amongst locally / community based organisations and residents about how to use the outdoors for fun, recreation and education

In their efforts to address these barriers, the 13 projects that have informed this paper have worked closely with a range of local service providers including schools, faith forums, grassroots

community groups and children's centres They have introduced a range of activities that have changed the way people think about their natural environment. At the same time many projects have helped to improve the accessibility and appearance of urban sites. Some examples of their activities are highlighted below:

Engagement of residents in the creation of nature areas, community gardens and wildlife corridors

For example: **Wild Places,** led by **Octopus Community Network** has involved residents of the London Borough of Islington in the design, building and maintenance of four new wildlife habitats in the grounds of four well used local community centres.

Excursions to urban parks, forests, city farms and local rivers

For example: **Wild about St Werburghs,** led by **St Werburghs City Farm** targets people from inner city areas of Bristol who have a lack of garden space or green school grounds. They make full use of local sites such as the City Farm and Narroways Nature Reserve to deliver hands-on learning and environmental play activities.

Events and courses that provide an introduction to wildlife whilst also teaching observational and practical skills

For example: **The Sowe Valley Project,** led by **Warwickshire Wildlife Trust** has engaged children and adults in practical nature conservation activities across sixteen sites around Coventry.

Access improvements to sites through community engagement

Stepping Stones led by **Plymouth City Council** addressed the physical barriers to accessing sites in the city by working with the communities to install paths, information boards and bridges.

Green gym activities that introduce residents to the health benefits of outdoors

Bury Accessible Natural Greenspace Project led by Bury Council used Green Gym sessions to engage the local community in the maintenance of woodlands whilst also providing opportunities for health and wellbeing improvements.

Play related sessions that demonstrate the recreational value of the outdoors

For example: **Urban explorers,** led by **Groundwork West Midlands** started pre-school and after-school clubs to introduce children and early-years workers to the many ways that they can use their natural environment for play and learning.

CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

Recent research from Natural England reveals that the more frequently people visit the natural environment, the more likely they are to appreciate it and be concerned about its maintenance and care[3]. It is not surprising then that Access to Nature projects working in urban communities have focused their efforts firstly on **creating a varied range of opportunities** for people to experience outdoor spaces in different ways and secondly on offering **repeat** (rather than one-off) experiences. **Their efforts have highlighted that in order to engage people, and convince them to keep coming back, it is necessary to work in new ways.** Outlined below are some of the critical success factors that the Access to Nature projects have identified.

Reaching adults through their children

"Our family events have been the most successful. Often the parents have never been to their local woodland because they don't know they can; they don't think there is anything there for them or they don't know how to equip themselves for bad weather. However we've found that parents will bring their children to participate in activities and by default get involved and gain interest, confidence and learning to come back independently."

Stepping Stones to Nature

By delivering school and children's centre workshops prior to neighbourhood community events, it has been possible to raise awareness and increase local involvement in community events. Parents and grandparents are curious to see what their children have been doing and are more prepared to come along to family events as a result.

Working through existing groups and organisations

"Instead of creating a whole new community group to carry out the care and maintenance of their local park, I decided it would be easier to try and influence an already existing group to adopt their local green space."

Urban Explorers

Projects have collaborated with a range of groups and organisations, from tenants and residents associations to children's centres, schools and council departments. Benefits have included:

- Direct and easier access to residents (people are more likely to attend an activity if there are familiar people involved)
- Partners benefitting from being able to provide a wider range of experiences to their clients / customers that help them to achieve their own organisational objectives. (For example, Children's Centre staff are coming on board, as they can see how outdoor activities are having a positive impact on children's language development)
- 'Piggy backing' onto other events in the community
- Accessing additional resources, for example staff skills and time, to support the projects' aims

Promoting fun, informal and theme-based activities

"Our walking groups have been most successful when they are themed, such as a 'bat walk' …once people are there we can more subtly introduce message that get them thinking about nature, care for the environment and health."

Stepping Stones to Nature

Recognising that people can be reluctant to get involved in activities because of competing demands on their lives, the projects have tried to make their 'offer' as appealing as possible. This has meant playing down any requirements for formal commitments and offering new experiences that are friendly and welcoming. Messages that they have been keen to convey include: 'drop in at any time', 'all ages welcome', 'free of charge', 'within walking distance of your house', 'lots of activities in one event'.

Building relationships with local people

> "I helped every child in the primary schools to plant a pumpkin seed. What I found in the summer, after I had done this, was that I walked through the estate to a chorus of my name. They all knew who I was."
>
> Fryston Woods Access and Improvement Project

The projects have demonstrated how important it is to establish a foundation of trust by building relationships with people early on. Some have worked through other organisations, such as schools, to build these relationships (see above). Others have taken the time to meet people in a space that they feel comfortable and have one to one conversations with them before inviting them to visit somewhere new or unfamiliar. There has been a recognition that the process of building and maintain relationships takes a lot of time and requires particular skills.

Responding flexibly to local ideas and needs

> "The community has been approached for their ideas and input rather than trying to get them to do what the 'project' wanted them to achieve."
>
> Sowe Valley Project

Involving residents in the design of activities through community consultations, has worked very well, particularly for engaging young people.   It has been equally important to respond to feedback and adjust activities to accommodate the ideas that people have put forward.   Essentially, this has been about meeting people 'where they are at' rather than imposing a particular approach on them.

Involving local people in simple, visible green space improvements

> "The community garden has had a positive impact on the local community. Not only does the garden help to improve the look of the estate, but also there is a committed gardening group who have enjoyed the work in making the garden possible."
>
> Access to Nature in Sussex

Practical volunteer days have involved residents in achievable tasks that deliver visible improvements whilst also giving them the

opportunity to use new tools and learn new techniques; wildlife projects have brought children, young people and adults together to create new spaces and encourage new wildlife. A clear message from some projects has been that it can take time for people to feel comfortable or motivated to volunteer to improve the appearance of sites. It is important to build awareness of the benefits of sites before trying to recruit volunteers.   Some projects have therefore sought additional funding or the involvement of other partners to deliver access improvements, whilst ensuring that they consult local people about the changes that they would like to see.

Utilising a number of avenues for communication and publicity

"At first activities were promoted through the Wildlife Trust website and events guide but we found that people attending weren't from the target area. Now we promote upcoming activities at community events and we've also held a promotional day in the major hub of the target community — the local shopping centre."

Creating a living landscape in Hull

In addition to using leaflets, posters, radio programmes, websites, campaigns and social media to raise awareness of local green spaces and activities, the projects have worked hard to build a local reputation through word of mouth and direct contact with local people and the organisations that work with them.

WHAT'S CHANGED?

There is evidence that shows that when people value their local green space and feel safe in it, they use it more.[4] The experience of the Access to Nature projects working in urban communities certainly reinforces this. The projects have shown that given the right kind of opportunities, information and encouragement, people living in urban areas can benefit from their local woodlands, parks, rivers, meadows, gardens and ponds. As more people use these green spaces for fun and recreation, and get involved in their physical improvement and upkeep, concerns about their safety, lack of access or poor quality gradually diminish.

These projects have brought about numerous changes.

People are more aware of urban greenspaces

"I've lived here for 40 years and I never knew this place was right on my doorstep. I'll bring my grandchildren next week. Thank you so much for showing me this wonderful place." (Wildways)

Sites look better and are more accessible

"Without the physical improvements people wouldn't go into the woods because it was a bit of a daunting area. Now its much more inviting because it looks nice. Also it gives out a message that people care about the woods." (Fryston Woods Access and Improvement Project)

Reduced antisocial behaviour

"The police told us that anti-social behaviour in the woods is down, with very few incidents over the summer." (Stepping Stones)

New knowledge and skills related to the outdoors

"The project has given us more local knowledge of the area we work within so we are able to share this with our service users." (Children's Centre Staff, Sowe Valley Project)

New confidence about being outdoors

I've got more resilient to the weather instead of just saying we're not going out because its raining. It's good to be outside and experiencing different activities." mum with 2 boys under 5 (Play on the Wildside)

People take care of local greenspaces

"Five site based Friends Groups have been established bringing together residents and local organisations. They meet regularly with the shared aim of improving their greenspace." (Stepping Stones)

Improved biodiversity value of sites

"In two years the project turned a derelict piece of land prone to flytipping into a thriving nature garden containing herbs and wildflowers and habitat that attract reptiles, insects and birds." (Access to Nature in Sussex)

Organisations supporting access to green space are better networked

The project is unique because it does not duplicate, but instead knits together organisations across the borough making them more effective." (Wild Places)

A PROJECT EXAMPLE

Stepping Stones into Nature, led by Plymouth City Council, provides an illustration of the multiple individual, organisational and environmental benefits associated with engaging people in the untapped green resources on their doorstep. Seeking to change the way the residents of five of Plymouth's most deprived neighbourhoods use the green spaces in the city, the project has developed partnerships with over 43 different organisations. By investing in site improvements and promoting a flexible package of free, facilitator led outdoor recreational and educational opportunities and trips, the project has made considerable progress on a number of fronts.

- **Access to sites has been improved** as a result of capital works and better communication. Most of this work has been undertaken by volunteers from Groundwork and BTCV. It has involved cleaning woods of litter, creating new paths, building natural play areas, introducing interpretation panels and constructing new bridges and pond dipping platforms. Anecdotal evidence suggests that more people are now regularly using the sites.

- **General usage** of the improved sites in turn appears to be decreasing anti-social behaviour (according to Police feedback).

- **Local staff** that previously lacked the confidence to take clients out to the local green spaces, **have gained new skills and knowledge** and are now using these sites to deliver their own activities.

- **Local people who have participated in trips to green spaces further afield are more confident about accessing green spaces** in Plymouth's surroundings, particularly where there are good value public transport options. A number of schools and organisations have invested in National Trust membership as they are now aware how close these sites are and what they offer.

- **Well-being improvements have been reported** owing to children and adults enjoying a sense of space, calm and optimism that comes with being active outdoors in nature with friends and family.

- **Collaboration** between organisations and teams to encourage people to access natural spaces is greatly improved. The project has successfully built relationships across agencies with different interests such as Schools; Children's Centres; Planning Officers; Parks Departments; Landowners; NHS and Community based groups. There is a general optimism amongst organisations that this multi-agency approach will contribute to the sustainability of a range of health and social benefits associated with accessing green spaces. Building on this success, the project has developed a 9 month 'Embedding Change Partnership Programme'. This aims to links partners together, building strong working relationships and creating a new network which will be sustained beyond the life of the project.

Like Stepping Stones into Nature, all the projects that have informed this report have demonstrated the gains associated with engaging urban communities in natural spaces. More information about these projects can be found by following the links below:

Project Fact File

Name	Access to Nature in Sussex
Lead	Sussex Wildlife Trust
Overview	To engage urban communities within their local natural green spaces. They provide opportunities for participants to learn new skills whilst also making the urban landscape more permeable to wildlife by enhancing wildlife corridors.
Website	www.sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk

Project Fact File

Name	Bury Accessible Natural Greenspace
Lead	Bury Council
Overview	To make small scale access and capital improvements to sites that are local to the target urban communities. It also aims to improve understanding and appreciation of the natural environment through interpretation and training courses and through the engagement of children and young people in play and educational activities outdoors.
Website	www.bury.gov.uk

Project Fact File

Name	Creating a Living Landscape in Hull
Lead	Yorkshire Wildlife Trust
Overview	To engage and inspire the residents of three specific areas in Hull to discover and use the natural spaces in their area. Activities include practical work days on site involving local residents and tailor made sessions for local schools.
Website	www.ywt.org.uk

Project Fact File

Name	Fryston Woods Access and Improvement Project
Lead	Castleford Heritage Trust
Overview	To encourage residents in two areas of Castleford to use the woodlands on their doorstep for the benefit of their health and well being and encourage greater stewardship of the spaces by local people. Activities include the creation of accessible entrances, signage and interpretation, community-based events and activities.
Website	www.castlefordheritagetrust.org.uk

Project Fact File

Name	Play on the Wildside
Lead	Bulwell Community Toy Library, Nottingham
Overview	To re-connect children and their families from one area of Nottingham with their local natural environment. Activities include weekly natural environmental play sessions, monthly family sessions, occasional trips to other areas of natural interest, production of themed activity packs as Toy Library resources, volunteer training and woodland improvements.
Website	www.toy-library.co.uk

Project Fact File

Name	Ruperts Wood
Lead	SCAN – Student Community Action Newcastle
Overview	To provide volunteer-led opportunities for children and young people to explore nature and environmental issues through guided investigation, outdoor woodland experiences, conservation activities and play. One aspect of the project involves 'guerrilla gardening' which involves transforming uncared for gardens in the local communities and securing a commitment from owners and tenants of multi occupancy households to maintain and upkeep their transformed gardens.
Website	www.nusu.co.uk/scan

Project Fact File

Name	Sowe Valley Project
Lead	Warwickshire Wildlife Trust
Overview	To engage communities along the Sowe Valley in environment-based activities, that will lead to increased access to and engagement with the natural environment. Activities lead to habitat improvements whilst also providing opportunities for skill development.
Website	http://www.warwickshire-wildlife-trust.org.uk/community--youth/sowe-valley-project.aspx

Project Fact File

Name	Stepping Stones to Nature
Lead	Plymouth City Council
Overview	To change the way the residents of five of Plymouth's most deprived neighbourhoods use the green spaces in the city. The project works in partnership with over 43 different organisations, invests in site improvements and promotes a flexible package of free, facilitator led outdoor recreational and educational opportunities and trips.
Website	www.plymouth.gov.uk/steppingstones

Project Fact File

Name	There is Space Here
Lead	Wiltshire Wildlife Trust
Overview	To work with military dominated populations across Salisbury Plain, improving access and providing opportunities for children, young people and adults to learn and enjoy activities in the natural environment.
Website	www.thereisspacehere.org

Project Fact File

Name	Urban Explorers
Lead	Groundwork West Midlands
Overview	To encourage children under 11 to play in their local parks. All activities take place in parks and include den building, natural arts, bow and arrow making, bug hunting and bird feeder making. Children and families are engaged through clubs roadshows, training courses, taster sessions and 'Friends of' groups.
Website	www.westmidlands.groundwork.org.uk

Project Fact File

Name	Wild About St Werburghs
Lead	St Werburghs City Farm, Bristol
Overview	Project aims: To encourage inner city children and families in Bristol to have access to and understanding of the natural world. The project targets children that have limited access to garden space or green school grounds. The project makes full use of varied local wildlife sites to deliver hands-on learning and environmental play activities.
Website	www.swcityfarm.co.uk

Project Fact File

Name	Wild Places
Lead	Octopus Community Network, Islington
Overview	To bring together four community centres based in the London Borough of Islington and provide excursions, learning activities and community-based biodiversity activities. The project also supports the creation of four urban 'Wild Place' habitats involving users of the community centres and other members of the local community.
Website	www.octopuscommunities.org.uk

Project Fact File

Name	Wildways
Lead	South Gloucestershire Council
Overview	To engage people from the eastern fringe of Bristol in new opportunities to access, enjoy and learn about nature. Activities include a Community River Festival, wildlife gardening projects, guided wildlife walks, 'Walk Fit' and 'Walk to Health' programmes, the development of a new orienteering trail, establishment of five community orchards and an orchard heritage research project.
Website	www.southglos.gov.uk/wildways

ABOUT ACCESS TO NATURE

Access to Nature is a scheme run by Natural England and funded by the Big Lottery Fund. Natural England works on behalf of a consortium of eleven other major environmental organisations and distributes £28.75 million Lottery funding under the scheme, which has been developed to encourage more people to enjoy the outdoors, particularly those with little or no previous contact with the natural environment.

Funded projects range from local community based schemes through to national initiatives from large organisations. Diversity in scale is mirrored by a diversity and richness of projects, from equipment to allow people with disabilities to access the natural environment; supporting disadvantaged groups and those who ordinarily face barriers to visiting the countryside; as well as many projects which are providing a range of volunteering and educational opportunities for local communities and young people.

FOOTNOTES

1   Natural England, 2011. *Monitoring of Engagement with the Natural Environment: The national survey of people and the natural environment.* Natural England

2   CABE Space, 2011. *Community Green – Using local spaces to tackle inequality and improve health.* CABE Space

3   Natural England, 2011. *Monitoring of Engagement with the Natural Environment: The national survey of people and the natural environment.* Natural England

4   CABE Space, 2011. *Community Green – Using local spaces to tackle inequality and improve health.* CABE Space

ALTERNATIVE FORMATS

Our documents are available as pdf downloads from our website, suitable for text reader technology. We may be able to provide other formats (e.g. Braille, a minority language, or large print) for special documents where there is a proven communication need.
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PHOTO CREDITS

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