



# The Great Outdoors project: fresh air and friendship

Time to Shine end of project report

March 2022

Leeds  
Older  
People's  
Forum

Time to  
Shine





## Summary

The Conservation Volunteers knew that a number of the volunteers at Hollybush were older people, and also recognised that for younger older people Hollybush could provide a stepping stone to new social networks. They hoped to use the Great Outdoors Project to engage more older people. The project found both walks and woodworking activity provided hooks to engage people who were then able to make friends independently, but they needed to be clear with people from the start about not offering a service without end in those areas which required equipment and supervision or it became hard to offer a service to new people as places filled up. Once this was clear people were able to make the adaptation and move to alternative activity.

## The Great Outdoors project in numbers

485 people took part in The Great Outdoors between 2018 and 2022, with 121 older people participating regularly

Demographic data was collected for 248 people:

- » 80% were of White British heritage
- » 11% were of Asian / Asian UK heritage
- » 5% were of Irish / Irish Traveller / Gypsy / Other White heritage
- » 2% were of Black African / Caribbean / Black UK heritage
- » 2% were of Other Ethnic heritage
- 45% identified as male
- The Great Outdoors was supported by 8 older volunteers (aged 50 and older) and 1 younger volunteer (aged under 49) and together they gave 584 hours of their time to support the project
- 13 case studies and test and learn case studies were written to share the project's learning and experiences



## Ethos

TCV Hollybush is part of a larger environmental organisation. TCV was aware that outdoor practical activities could offer an effective way to engage men who are often under-represented in voluntary sector settings. Through The Great Outdoors project they aimed to increase the numbers of younger older people (age 50-70) who attended and offer them more support to achieve better outcomes.

For many people, especially men, being able to say “I go to Hollybush to work” was a positive affirmation when many would not see themselves attending ‘self-help’ groups. TCV knew their activities appealed to younger older people no longer in the workforce, some had previously worked in manual jobs and were finding job-seeking a real challenge. Joining The Great Outdoors could provide opportunities where they might use their existing skills and experience to give them confidence to socialise and make new networks.

TCV wanted to use The Great Outdoors project to focus work with older people, both in terms of more targeted recruitment and also working in small groups to enable socially-isolated older people to benefit from better individual outcomes.

TCV’s increasing experience of working with those who are socially isolated had led to a recognition that individuals could become ‘stuck’ in a way that was not helpful to them in the long-run, particularly where they enjoyed themselves and felt safe and valued. The Great Outdoors aimed to make people feel safe and valued, but also to give them the confidence to find a wider social network where they could continue to build their confidence independently of TCV.





# Activities

## Outreach

TCV understands that for much of the population 'the environment' is not something they imagine they can connect with, although The Great Outdoors project knew it was something almost everyone might benefit from or enjoy. They made a considerable effort to reach out to groups who might not feel comfortable visiting the centre at Hollybush, or who might find it hard to get to. They ran taster sessions for lots of groups like Hamara, Prayaas Shakti, OWLs, and in Job Centres and Community Hubs. There were also pop-up sessions in community gardens.

One of the effects of the pandemic was to extend outreach further, with more activities like the Wildlife Walks and community gardening happening in different places across the city. This came both as a result of anxiety about sharing transport, and the need to reduce activity at Hollybush in the short term. Some activities, like woodwork and short courses, still took place in the centre as they required specialist equipment.

## Woodsquad

Woodsquad started with two sessions a week and offered men and women a chance to build things for themselves and as fundraisers for Hollybush (as an environmental centre they sell things like hedgehog boxes and planters). Everyone enjoyed the group and it became oversubscribed (see Case study) with some people moving on to formal courses offered by the centre. It is a perennially popular and creative activity but one that is challenging to expand as space was limited and the use of woodworking machinery meant that people were only able to meet with supervision.



## Wednesday Whittling

Whittling - making things out of sticks - was also a popular activity which grew from ideas suggested by group members. It proved to be an easy one to use at pop-up recruitment events, and was run off-site in community woodlands on request.

## Gardening groups

There were opportunities to take part in a range of gardening activities. There are extensive grounds at Hollybush where people can get engaged in both food growing and wildlife gardening. Those who enjoyed involvement in gardening could join a Green Gym group on site, or take part in a gardening class. As The Great Outdoors project grew it also became involved in helping to set up food growing community gardens at the request of community centres and GP practices.

## Wildlife Walks

Wildlife Walks originally took place on a weekly basis by simply walking from Hollybush. The centre is situated in the Kirkstall valley, with a gate out onto the Leeds Liverpool Canal towpath and access to an urban nature reserve and parks very close by. The staff member was an ecologist who, by using a mix of gentle strolls, lots of enthusiasm, tea and conversation, was able to engage people who had no idea that any of this wildlife was on their doorsteps.

## Project adaptations following lockdowns and pandemic responses

The Great Outdoors was run by a specialist provider of environmental activities. Some people were clear, even during the pandemic, that what they wanted was that activity, and were content to wait until they were allowed to engage in that activity again. Others, perhaps those who had ended up with TCV for health or social reasons, were very glad to receive social support during the pandemic.

Staff started by delivering plants and seeds during the first lockdown.

“Anne from Hollybush very kindly brought me a Sunflower and a tomato plant and I then bought several more plants including 24 strawberry plants. I have found that gardening, albeit in a small way, has really helped my mental health. It has given me such joy watching as the flowers start to bloom and the plants grow, it’s wonderful.” *project participant*





As the pandemic progressed the great success was wildlife walks run from different locations across the city. These helped to give people the confidence to get out and about again, and meant people could access a walk relatively close to where they lived and didn't have to rely on public transport.

The realisation, whilst setting up these walks, of just how many people needed physical information and maps, led to the production of what became a weekly newsletter. It went to those involved with the walks featuring articles on seasonal wildlife and a space for participants to share photos, sightings and suggestions for good places to walk. It was also emailed out to people that were online. The newsletter later became a way to keep a larger group of people connected and it was mailed and emailed to over 60 people. It has proved a good way to welcome new participants and help them feel part of the walking group. As with other Time to Shine projects it was not easy to get everyone back, but one interesting observation was made about the team taking time to write to everyone - people did comment it was great to receive an envelope addressed to them by hand. This helped them to feel connected to and valued by the project.



Other activities gradually resumed from June 2021, starting with small group sizes. The team offered spaces to those who had been involved previously, in 4 week blocks, until everyone had had a chance to attend. Social prescribers started to refer new individuals to join activities and after some reorganisation of group meeting times and venues the project was able to offer woodsquad, whittling, gardening and walking.





## Legacy

The Great Outdoors project members really enjoyed their experience and some of them plan to join other activities at Hollybush in the short term. Others will find local community environmental activities. TCV has organised Walk Leader training to encourage some of the wildlife walkers to organise walks independently, and many of the walkers are able to meet up and walk locally with new friends.

Feedback around the walks, which were aimed to be accessible to all suggested people wanted to walk further and visit wilder sites, but they didn't want to leave the wildlife walks, they were more interested in organising those walks for themselves.

*"The project opens your eyes to other similar schemes going on in your neighbourhood, whether this be litter picking, planting trees in local parks or in my case making the gardens around our parish church more bee and insect friendly by what we plant, and by adding bug hotels."* project participant

TCV has been able to learn more about involving older people in their general activities.



## Learning

Some older people are ready to take up a new activity, but others might need help to increase their confidence before they will try something new.

People were happy to become 'key volunteers' and take on small tasks to help run activities but the very formal route to volunteering offered by the Conservation Volunteers as a national organisation was not something many people wished to or were able to engage with. Staff reflected it might work better if the organisation was able to be more flexible around the additional issues affecting some older people (eg caring, chronic health problems).

## Case study: How do you get people to try something new?

One of the aims for The Great Outdoors project was to work with older volunteers to encourage them to develop confidence in trying new activities, and through that to encourage them to develop wider social networks rather than becoming reliant on a specific activity. This was important as although people would gain an initial benefit from joining an activity at Hollybush or a satellite site these activities are almost always funded for a relatively short time. The project wanted to help people develop a wider support network which would sustain them as they moved on to other activities or employment.

The Great Outdoors project hoped to do this by encouraging people to move between activities at Hollybush or in the wider community, and asking people to help run sessions and identifying those who might want to become formal volunteers.

In the early part of the project this proved difficult as people settled into a group in a new project with relatively small numbers of participants so they weren't asked to move on. Once they were asked, then people always had a reason why they should not move. Numbers in groups grew as the project became established and it became necessary to limit numbers for safety reasons. Equity meant restricting access to some people who had been there a long time.


Staff tried different ways to achieve this, first splitting the group into two so that people could attend on alternate weeks. This didn't work well as people became confused about which week they could attend and missed sessions or dropped out altogether. In addition some people were reluctant to follow the system and wished to attend every week. Rather than giving up, staff tried another approach, with both Woodsquad and Whittling Wednesdays moving to a block system of a set number of weeks. People found this easy to understand, and because they knew from the start they could only be involved for a set number of weeks, they were pleased to be able to move to another activity, like a course or the gardening group. It was also possible to start referring them to other groups who ran similar activities in the local area.

Clarity about duration of involvement from the start meant that people were more open to changes to their involvement.

## Contact us

To find out more about TCV go to <https://www.tcv.org.uk/hollybush/>

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