

## Hector McNeil Greenock's Secret Garden – June 2021



**Organisation name:** The North Ayrshire Beekeepers' Association

**Project name:** Hector McNeil Greenock's Secret Garden

**Location:** North Ayrshire, Scotland

**Grant amount:** £8,379

**Award date and duration:** May 2018, 1 year

**Project context:** Within the North Ayrshire Beekeepers' Association there is a subgroup called Inverclyde Buzz that aims to develop new habitats for bees by creating mini wildflower meadows. This subgroup consists of two volunteers, one of whom was the lead for this project.

**Project aims:** The aim of this project was to turn a derelict site (an old swimming pool that had been abandoned for 20 years) into a wildflower garden to act as a habitat for bees and other wildlife.

## Project aims

The project aimed to regenerate a derelict site, a swimming pool that had been abandoned for around 20 years in one of Scotland's most deprived wards, to create a wildflower garden that would serve as a new habitats for bees; and offer a space for people to learn about gardening and ecology in the process.

## About the grant

The project focussed on taking a derelict space and turning it into a communal garden using local volunteers who were able to develop gardening skills in a social setting. The grant itself paid for the site to be cleared, materials used to develop the site and for a team of local artists who came in and painted a mural on the surrounding walls. The site was 'common good land', owned by the council but not in use or under development.

Inverclyde Buzz ran a core team of six volunteers, alongside Laura, the project lead. Other volunteer groups were brought in to help with various elements including the Bowling Club next to the site, who provided refreshments to volunteers; the West of Scotland Dry Stone Walling Association, who brought 12-14 of their volunteers across two days; the Inverclyde Development Trust, who brought 10 volunteers in for 3 days a week over 6 months; and dozens of individual local volunteers.

Laura works in the third sector and has professional experience building partnerships, including with some of the organisations that became involved in the garden. She used this experience and these contacts to reach out to the various local volunteer organisations that became involved in the project. For example, she came into contact with Ryan of the Inverclyde Development Trust at a local voluntary sector forum event shortly after the grant had been awarded.

## Project set up and delivery

The garden gave the volunteers an opportunity to develop new skills and practice existing ones. For individual volunteers drawn in from the local urban community, working in the gardens allowed them to develop gardening skills they would otherwise have had limited chance to do. For the other volunteer organisations brought in to help, the

"We were tending raised beds, growing vegetables, flowers and learning about how to grow flowers... learning about bumblebees and flowers and how they're necessary to us."

**Brenda, Volunteer**

garden allowed them to develop and showcase existing skills. The wallers came in and built a drystone wall over two days, which allowed them to practice and promote a traditional skill that their volunteer organisation is committed to preserving and expanding. Volunteers brought in through the Inverclyde Development Trust helped to clear the site; develop the pollinator tunnel; build a path through the garden; and build the raised beds, working three days a week on site. Alongside this, the project lead held learning sessions about ecosystems and pollination that trainees and other volunteers attended.

## Project impact

### Key highlights

#### Numbers supported

- They have had between 40 and 60 volunteers working at the site.
- 6 volunteers from Inverclyde Buzz.
- 12-14 volunteers from the West of Scotland Dry Stone Walling Association
- 10 of the Inverclyde Development Trust's trainees
- "*Dozens*" of individual local volunteers

#### Key impacts

- Turn a derelict site in a deprived ward into a wildflower garden, including many habitats for bees.
- People were able to improve their knowledge and skills related to gardening, ecology and drystone walling.
- Trainees from the Inverclyde Development Trust were enjoyed improved employability.
- Volunteers enjoyed greater social contact.

#### Website

[Inverclyde Buzz](#)

## People's education and development improved

One aim had been to develop knowledge and interest in horticulture and ecology,

"The people involved were able to provide some learning sessions around horticulture and they also got to learn about ecosystems and the whole point of pollination, which would never have been accessed."

**Ryan, delivery partner**

which those leading the project felt had been achieved. The Inverclyde

Development Trust, whose primary interest was in developing employability skills, found that their trainees came away with an unanticipated knowledge of ecology and pollination. All volunteers were able to

attend the ecology learning sessions which improved knowledge of ecosystems and green issues.

Those volunteering at the site came away with new skills or expanded interest in their skills. The drystone wallers were able to promote and practice their skill and raise the profile of their work to other volunteers. As a result of this Brenda said she had subsequently attended one of their training courses.

"It was dual function: we do a nice job for them... our volunteers get training building a nice wall... and then [Laura's] volunteers learned about it."

**James, volunteer**

## Peoples' employment situation has improved

For the trainees with the Inverclyde Development Trust, their aim had been to improve their employability by learning basic skills (e.g. use of tools, timekeeping, teamwork) on site. Ryan, of the

Inverclyde Development Trust, was extremely positive about the opportunity the Hector McNeil garden offered for this, suggesting that it had offered them three 'hard' outcomes in the form of an improved CV, work experience and adjustment to the routine of regular work. He also felt that there were several 'soft' outcomes in the form of improved confidence and mental

"They were given practical on-site training, (the use of strimmers, mowers, shovels, spades) which shows they've gone and done something...an improvement to CV and then the other angle of being somewhere on time each day... then there's the outcomes I can't measure, mental health and wellbeing... from being able to invest in your community and say 'we did this.'"

**Ryan, delivery partner**

health and wellbeing, which were aided by the community focus of the project. All of these boosted their trainees' future employability. As an indicator of this, three of their ten trainees left the project early to enter full time work or education and the remaining seven left having gained these skills (they did not have data on the

progression of all of the remaining seven but one did go on to full-time employment with the Trust).

### People had more social contact

Volunteers found the site to be highly social. Local volunteers from within the community felt able to drop in and enjoyed other social events from the connections made in the group, such as bike rides and cooking courses, and other events at the garden, including a mindfulness course. The other volunteer organisations that came in for the day found it welcoming and social: James said that there had been a barbeque and music on the days they built the wall, creating an upbeat, friendly atmosphere.

"It's a place that's welcoming, you can pop in at any time and feel most welcome."  
**Brenda, Volunteer**

Volunteers were given a positive experience of volunteer-run projects, which led to some further volunteering opportunities. For Brenda, the garden was a welcome first volunteering experience that motivated her to seek out further opportunities, and she

"I just wish some people would try it, because there's a lot of people living in social isolation... there's been a lot of people who have been isolated in this pandemic so I'm glad I got out and did it"  
**Brenda, Volunteer**

now volunteered at a country park, alongside continuing to tend the Hector McNeil garden and another of the Inverclyde Buzz sites. She initially got involved to counter isolation after stopping work, and she had been in contact throughout the

pandemic with a group of friends made at the garden.

### Improvements to the local environment

The primary aim of the project was to turn a derelict site into a community garden and habitat for bees. The result was a garden with a large habitat for bees including a number of flowers for bees to pollinate; a large drystone wall, the spaces in which act as bee boles (alcoves in walls that are a suitable space for bees to build hives); and a large green space in an area where this was previously limited.

### Overall reflections

Unfortunately, the council is now planning to build on the site, despite Laura checking about their intentions for the land and signing an agreement with the council for its use. However, Laura was working on building relationships with the council to ensure as much of the site as possible is retained, and that they give Inverclyde Buzz as much warning as possible of potential changes to site plans. She

was optimistic that some of the garden, at least, would remain intact and the positive impacts felt by the volunteers were valuable in any case.

Laura was pleasantly surprised by the number of volunteers that worked at the site. Volunteers that worked on the site described a welcoming and friendly atmosphere, often with food and music, which ensured people wanted to come back. This welcoming, social atmosphere was an important factor in the reach of this project in terms of the number of people volunteering on site.

The partnerships that Laura had been able to cultivate with other local organisations were key to the success of this project. Ryan noted that there was a strong voluntary sector network in the area, with regular events and forums (including the one in which he met the project lead), which aided the development of the partnerships at the heart of this project. Bringing in the Inverclyde Development Trust, the West of Scotland Dry Stone Walling Association and the local artists provided them with the labour and skills to create some of the central features of the garden, and some of the elements that were most exciting for the volunteers.

### About the case study

As part of this case study, IFF Research spoke to Laura, the project lead and part of the Inverclyde Buzz team, along with a volunteer from the West of Scotland Dry Stone Walling Association, James\*, delivery partner from the Inverclyde Development Trust, Ryan\* and a volunteer, Brenda\*.

*\*Names have been changed.*