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# NEW DIRECTIONS



Organisations using the natural environment for the first time as a medium for working with their established client groups



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## ABOUT THIS PAPER

Welcome to this paper, one in the second series of Early Findings papers. **Here we take a look at two Access to Nature projects in some detail. Working in the natural environment with their established target groups was new for both organisations,** and they have been able to reflect on their experiences through the Access to Nature self evaluation process, including what has worked and what has not worked for them.

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.



## NON-ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANISATIONS AND THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Access to Nature has an unusual focus in marrying access to the natural environment with 'hard to reach' groups. This suggests that projects would require two distinct skill sets – firstly, in understanding the needs of and being able to engage target groups; secondly, skills and knowledge of the natural environment. However, the programme attracted many projects from organisations traditionally associated with the access aspect of this picture, and fewer from those with direct experience of its target groups.

This paper looks at Access to Nature through the eyes of two of those projects led by organisations not familiar with working in the natural environment, and explores whether this has been a benefit to their work, or if it has created unforeseen difficulties of any kind.

The organisations leading the projects have long track records of working directly with Access to Nature target groups, but little in the way of experience in the natural environment. Both are in the second half of their project delivery and have been able to reflect on what they have learnt about accessing the great outdoors with their user groups. Together this learning provides us with some insight into the degree to which non-environmental organisations can work successfully in the natural environment, as well as the benefits these experienced organisations can bring to the environmental sector. We examine the experiences of these organisations directly as each one has played a central role in delivering their project, with help and support from environmental organisations.



## PROJECT EXAMPLE 1:

### Gateway to Nature

A housing association enables homeless people to access and enjoy nature

**Lead organisation:** Framework Housing Association

**Location:** Nottingham and Nottinghamshire

**Who the project works with:** Adults who are homeless or vulnerable to becoming homeless, and face barriers to accessing nature.

**What the project does:** The principal aim of Gateway to Nature (G2N) is to provide a pathway of opportunities to access nature, which build the confidence, awareness and ability of people from the target group to access nature as independently as they can.

There is a regular programme of activities run with partners, such as:

- Supporting Windmill Allotment – with Groundwork
- A guided tour – with Friends of Colwick Woods
- Willow weaving, site development – with Ecoworks
- Conservation walks – with Sherwood Forest Trust

**Why this project:** Gateway to Nature builds on a pathway to change approach that creates a pathway of opportunities (and new access to existing opportunities) which starts in familiar surroundings to build confidence and skills, and then leads through a series of supported opportunities.

**Homeless people face several problems in accessing nature,** including low self esteem and social exclusion. Low confidence levels can prevent them from searching out information about accessing opportunities, and their lack of transport compounds their difficulties in taking up opportunities that do exist. Fewer than a third of homeless people spend time with non homeless people and almost 38% spend their entire day alone<sup>1</sup>. Isolation of this kind is relevant because it erodes individual's capability (for example, employability, skills, knowledge, etc) as well as their resilience or ability to cope with life's adverse events, including having the ability to overcome difficulties<sup>2</sup>.



**Some of what the project has achieved so far:** People who are homeless or vulnerable to becoming homeless are enjoying taking part in activities in the natural environment: 68% enjoy the natural environment, 27% the social interaction and company, and 25% enjoy the walking / exercise that the activity offers.



**"I like nature. Before, my life was scrambled ...."**

Project User

More people from the target group are reporting that they have increased confidence to access green spaces once they have been on activities with G2N. Not only are they going independently into green space, some have developed an interest in it that has led to regular volunteering, while another has enrolled on a horticultural course. Increased confidence has also led to people joining other community groups and in one case to secure a job.

**"Before G2N I was a recluse. My confidence is better because of G2N and I would go out more now. G2N gives me breathing space."**

Project User

About one third of clients say that learning something new about nature is one of the things they particularly value. What this shows is that the impact that the project is having on individuals' lives is marked.

**"All service users that attend G2N activities from my service enjoy them and get a lot from them; they are meaningfully occupying their time and thus preventing themselves from dangerous or harmful behaviours and triggers. G2N is invaluable for the service users who are trying to remain abstinent from alcohol / substance during the course of rehabilitation. In addition to this they learn new skills and spend social time with others in a safe and supported environment."**

Referral Agency

**The challenges they have faced:**

- The mental health issues of many clients, coupled with chaotic lifestyles, have resulted in varied attendances, a common feature of working with this client group.
- The staffing levels were set too low, particularly given the hazards of lone working.
- Cuts in the host organisation and the wider health and social care sector have resulted in a degree of re-organisation of the project tasks with less reliance of partner input in places.

**Where the natural environment expertise comes from:** G2N delivers its work on the ground through partners that bring natural environment skills and knowledge to the project. The partners are enthusiastic in their support of the project and have described it as a “productive relationship” where “joint work is going well”<sup>3</sup>.

**The added value of a non-environmental organisation:**

- Good knowledge of the challenges and demands of working with people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness – they knew the kind of approach that would be required.
- Hosted within the Housing Association the project has existing relationships with referral agencies.
- Staff have the kinds of attributes required for working with this target group – they are positive, encouraging, tolerant and gentle, and play a key role in creating a safe, reliable, consistent and positive experience in the activities offered by the project.



## PROJECT EXAMPLE 2:

### Play on the Wildside

A toy library ventures into the great outdoors

**Lead organisation:** Bulwell Community Toy Library

**Location:** Bulwell, Nottingham

**Who the project works with:** Children and families in Bulwell, an urban area with high levels of multiple deprivation

#### What the project does:

- Four natural environmental play sessions per week with both under 5s and over 5s
- Monthly family sessions
- Occasional trips to other areas of natural interest
- Producing themed activity packs as Toy Library resources
- Training volunteers in natural environmental play
- Making improvements to the local woods

**Why this project:** Having worked closely with children and families in the area for over 30 years, the Toy Library has observed how children do not go out into the area on their own and are wary of all things natural and 'dirty'. They could see the impact of what has been described as '**nature deficit disorder**' by Richard Louv<sup>4</sup>. That is, the possible negative consequences to individual health and the social fabric as children move indoors and away from physical contact with the natural world, particularly to indulge in unstructured and solitary experiences. Louv cites research pointing to attention disorders, obesity, a dampening of creativity, and depression as problems associated with a nature deficient childhood.

Access to Nature provided the opportunity to fund work with the Toy Library's existing constituency, and across Bulwell, **to use play in the natural environment as a way of tackling nature deficit disorder**. This was the first time they had a primary focus on the natural environment in their work.

As a starting point on this journey, Play on the Wildside is **seeking to re-connect children and their families with their local natural environment, increasing their understanding and respect for nature and its value as a play resource.**



**Some of what the project has achieved so far:**

Children are enjoying being out in the natural environment, sometimes to the amazement of their parents:

*“My girls love coming to the sessions ... they’re not really outdoorsy at all .... I’m amazed, they can’t wait to leave for the sessions after school.”*

Parent

Children are trying new things – like cooking on a campfire, climbing trees, building dens – and simply having the freedom to explore the woods for the first time. They are bug hunting, looking for tadpoles and frogs and really enjoying getting dirty!

*“I can’t believe he’s doing that....normally he doesn’t like getting dirty and he’s rolling in the mud on the floor.”*

Parent

Children and their families are learning about the natural environment and some are experiencing the natural environment for the first time. Parents are becoming more tolerant of dirt and more resilient to bad weather:

*“I’ve learnt how to laugh at mud.”*

Parent

Volunteers have been trained in leading play sessions in the natural environment and are helping with and running sessions with children.

**The impact of these experiences can’t be under estimated.** These are children from an area that is one of the most health deprived in England and where green spaces have traditionally been under used<sup>5</sup>.

**The challenges they have faced:** The amount of time needed to prepare for sessions, manage and support the project was greatly underestimated and the project has had to re-think its allocation of work as a result to increase the use of volunteers and sessional staff.



### Where the natural environment expertise comes from:

The project recognises that while it has excellent play skills and knowledge, at times there have been shortfalls in skills and knowledge in woodcraft and the natural world. These gaps have been overcome by providing training to staff and volunteers, and by seeking support from City Council Park Rangers and the local Wildlife Watch group.

### The added value of a non-environmental organisation:

- Existing relationships with people from the target groups – the project did not have a 'cold start'.
- A long track record in the area – they are a well known and trusted organisation.
- Well developed play skills and knowledge which form the basis of their approach.
- Good contacts with relevant referral agencies, for example, the City Council Inclusion Team.



## THE KEY LEARNING

These are two examples of projects led by organisations without a track record of working in the natural environment. Both have established links with their target groups and relevant referral agencies and with that comes their detailed understanding of both engaging their audiences in the most appropriate way and the kinds of approaches that work best with them. These are key strengths that have enabled them to create **projects that have a meaningful and transformative impact on people's lives**. It does not appear to be a disadvantage that they are new to working in the outdoor environment. In both cases they have been able to capitalise on their own skills in understanding and building trust with their target groups, and then access the relevant skills and knowledge of the natural environment through a combination of training and partnership working. They have travelled in new directions, and in doing so shown that non environmental organisations offer a new dimension to a programme like Access to Nature.



Project Fact File

Name *Play on the Wildside*  
Lead *Bulwell community Toy Library*  
Where *Bulwell, Nottingham*  
Website *<http://www.toy-library.co.uk/>*

Project Fact File

Name *Gateway to Nature*  
Lead *Framework Housing Association*  
Where *Nottingham and Nottinghamshire*  
Website *[http://www.frameworkha.org/pages/gateway\\_to\\_nature.html](http://www.frameworkha.org/pages/gateway_to_nature.html)*



## 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 Crisis, 2003: *Homelessness Factfile*, London: Crisis
- 2 Smith, J. et al (2008): *Valuable Lives: capabilities and resilience amongst single homeless people*, Crisis, London
- 3 All evidence and quotes are taken from Gateway to Nature Interim Evaluation Report, March 2012.
- 4 Louv, R. 2009. *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder*. London: Atlantic Books.
- 5 All evidence and quotes taken from the Play on the Wildside Interim Evaluation, May 2012.

## 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.

Please Contact: Natural England Enquiry Service

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## PHOTO CREDITS

The pictures used in this publication have been kindly provided by Guerilla Gardening, the Ruperts Wood Environmental Project and the Give it a Go Arts Day.