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SEEING THE WOOD FOR THE TREES



Woodlands as a tool for
engaging people with the
natural environment



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ABOUT THIS PAPER

Welcome to this paper, one in the second series of Early Findings papers. **Here we focus on the experiences of four projects which have used woodlands as a setting to increase access to the natural environment.** It is based on the findings from the projects about their work in woodlands; 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 using woodlands as a setting for increasing access to the 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.



Woodlands are significant assets within local communities. Recent guidance from government has sought to understand and interpret the role and potential of woodland greenspace as a contributor to regeneration, community cohesion and health¹. Supporting this approach, Access to Nature has funded a number of projects which encourage people from disadvantaged communities to spend time in the outdoors and in woodlands, discovering natural assets close to where they live.

A national inventory of evidence that listed the benefits which woodland and forest environments can bring to disadvantaged communities was conducted in 2010². This review asserted that woodlands can be an important part of developing local identity, and that time in woodland spaces can bring social, therapeutic and restorative benefits for local people.

The findings from Access to Nature add to this body of evidence, offering insights into the benefits of woodlands as a place to learn, become involved in community activity, feel good and encounter nature locally.

FINDINGS ABOUT WOODLANDS WOODLANDS ARE GREAT PLACES TO... ACCESS NATURE CLOSE TO HOME

Woodlands provide significant opportunities to enable people to discover the natural environment; wildlife, plants and seasonal change can all be experienced. These opportunities are magnified when woodlands are close to where people live. Various studies support the view that distance is a significant factor in whether people will choose to spend time in woodlands, indicating a preference for woodlands which are within a short walking distance (5 minutes or up to 400 metres) of home^{3 4}.

Access to Nature projects have begun to connect people with the natural assets on their doorstep, giving them opportunities to discover green spaces, often for the first time. Many projects have used local woodlands as the settings for their work, as they provide green space within easy distance of many communities targeted by Access to Nature. Projects have learnt that woodlands can provide an ideal catalyst for engaging people and encouraging them to support and maintain the green spaces close to them. This reflects two factors:

- The potential woodlands have to increase people's sense of identity with where they live.
- The scope for practical activity and tasks in woodlands that allow people to contribute to the life of their community.





A STRONG LOCAL IDENTITY - Ashington Community Woodlands

The woodlands outside the Northumbrian former mining town of Ashington were little used prior to Groundwork North East's Access to Nature project: surveys of the local population suggested over 60% of residents were unaware the woodlands existed. A Community Woodland Officer based in and around the woods has worked with local people and local agencies to provide a variety of practical activities to restore and enhance the woods. Pathways, signs, seats and lots of community events have drawn people into becoming involved. The Friends of Ashington Woods has become a strong local presence in the woods and is coordinating litter picks and footpath maintenance and running their own events at the woods. Usage of the woods by local people has increased – 57 people are volunteers caring for the woods, and partners have described the increase in usage for walking, running, cycling and recreation as “noticeable” and “significant”⁵.

“I like being out in the open air and feel I am giving something back to the community by preserving the natural beauty of the area.”

Ashington resident and volunteer

Key learning: Woodlands close to where people live can provide opportunities to increase a sense of identity, especially if the potential for woodlands to provide practical activities and tasks is well used.

WOODLANDS ARE GREAT PLACES TO... LEARN

The Access to Nature experience shows how woodlands can be valuable as an outdoor classroom. Learning can take many forms – some projects offer informal learning opportunities, some use woodlands as places to structure learning and gain skills and qualifications. A number of Access to Nature projects have found woodlands are excellent places to support schools to deliver the curriculum and help children to be either more mature, or more playful and childlike than would be the case in school. Adult learners too have gained much from working in woodland environments, applying skills to practical tasks in management and conservation. Evidence from projects suggest this is due to a number of reasons:

- Woodlands offer a place with much to learn about – plants, insects, animals, habitats, weather, seasons etc.
- Woodlands are places where people can learn about themselves and about other people through tasks that involve team building and social skills.

- As there are rarely any expectations of prior knowledge about woods, most new learners start off on an even keel with others around them, and learn with them as they spend time in the woods.
- Children and young people are likely to continue to benefit from the experience of spending time in woodlands as they grow; research suggests that the frequency of child visits is the single most important predictor of how often adults will access woodlands in later life⁶.



DELIVERING LEARNING IN WOODLANDS - Hastings Wild Things

Learning through woodland discovery has been a key activity for this RSPCA project delivered in woods near to the south coast town of Hastings. The project has helped young people, many of them out of school, work or training to gain new skills and qualifications, and has also provided a learning environment for young parents and their children.

The project shows how good a setting woodlands can be for learning. The practical nature of the skills and knowledge on offer, the supportive learning environment provided by the project and its partners and the absence of the usual 'rules' for classroom learning have given young people who have struggled at school the chance to gain qualifications and move on, in some instances to college.

For young parents, the woodlands have provided the chance to learn more about their children through shared outdoor play. This has enabled relationships to be developed and for parents to communicate better with their children and find out more about what they can do. Nine out of ten parents involved said they would visit other natural places with their children as a result of their learning at the woodlands⁷.

"I have seen how valued this (gaining a qualification) makes people feel, striving towards a goal and achieving that goal is something that doesn't happen very often for these young people."

Work placement student, Hastings Wild Things

Key learning: the variety of nature present in woodlands and the scope for discovery and practicality mean woodlands provide good environments for learning and personal development for children and adults, whether informal, linked to a curriculum or qualification.

WOODLANDS ARE GREAT PLACES TO... FEEL GOOD

Research has established that spending time in woods can have therapeutic benefits⁸. Access to Nature projects have added to this picture, providing learning about different aspects of wellbeing such as physical exercise, (either through walking or undertaking tasks to help manage the woodlands), spiritual benefits (people feeling better about themselves, or feeling more relaxed) and social benefits (making friends, being part of social groups). Some of the learning points from the projects are:

- Woodlands can be a place of high energy, especially for children and young people, and play, often linked to learning, has been a common feature within woodland projects.
- Many people use woodlands for exercise, particularly walking or dog walking, and opening up access has increased these kinds of opportunities for many.
- Projects have noted the capacity of woodlands to help people relax as they encounter sights, sounds and scents that are different from their everyday experiences.



AN UPLIFTING EXPERIENCE - Faith Woodlands Communities

Woodlands in and around Bedford and Luton have provided the place for the Luton Council of Faiths to give people from faith communities, many of who are from minority ethnic backgrounds, the chance to experience natural places for the first time. The project was aimed particularly at people who had not visited woodlands in the UK before.

There is evidence that people from migrant communities value the experience of being part of organised groups when accessing natural spaces⁹, and the project has worked in this way, providing guided walks, community events and educational activities to enable people to discover peaceful and relaxing places. The project has also worked to bring people of different faiths together in the woodlands, enabling them to make new connections and strengthen relationships.

“People from Poland came and told me that it feels like Poland. Somalian people have said it feels like Somalia to them. Someone else came and said it is just like Mauritius. It’s painting a picture of a childhood and bringing back memories for people.”

Project Worker, Faith Woodlands Communities

Key learning: spending time in woodlands can provide a change in routine and sensory experiences and contributions to overall health and wellbeing in the form of physical, spiritual and social benefits.

WOODLANDS ARE GREAT PLACES TO... BE INVOLVED

The changing nature of woodlands, and the need for them to be managed, cared for and maintained, provides opportunities for a wide range of involvements. Projects which have offered these opportunities to local people, and sought their involvement as volunteers, report that woodland volunteering has the capacity to genuinely engage people and generate high levels of commitment. This is consistent with established knowledge, which suggests that feeling more active and wishing to meet new people are often initial motivations to become involved in a local environmental activity¹⁰, and that the offer of training and skills development can be strong factors in committing further time to a group or a project¹¹.

This combination of opportunity and encouragement, coupled with the sense of identity offered by working in woodlands close to where people live, has been a valuable means of recruiting volunteers. Further reading linked to volunteering and the Access to Nature programme is available through another paper in this series: Volunteering in Nature¹².



THE POWER OF VOLUNTEERS - Woodland Communities

People living near to the urban woods of Runcorn and Warrington were drawn into the range of activity provided by the Woodland Communities project, delivered by the Woodland Trust. Large scale community events, sessions for schoolchildren, training for their teachers, Nature Detectives Clubs and new Friends groups all attracted volunteers and contributed to a significant shift in attitude among local people¹³, who have begun to value the natural places nearby to their homes.

The project generated over 1500 volunteer workdays, removed over 5 tonnes of rubbish, erected over a kilometre of fencing and generated marked increases in repeat visits to local woodlands¹⁴.

“We fenced a woodland at the back of a housing estate which was full of rubbish and old fridges. Now the fly tipping has stopped and more people are using the woods. They say they love it now, and when it’s sunny they want to take their kids for a walk. Before, they didn’t want to go there.”

Volunteer, Woodland Communities

Key learning: woodlands provide ideal settings for volunteering as they offer ongoing opportunities for active involvement in practical tasks and the chance to develop and practice new skills.

BARRIERS TO USING WOODLANDS

Although woodlands provide significant opportunities for groups to experience and enjoy the natural environment, people are often prevented from taking up these chances. The national inventory of woodland research found that concerns about safety, crime and anti-social behaviour act as a barrier to woodland access for many people, especially women, those from an ethnic minority background and children¹⁵.

Access to Nature projects have encountered physical challenges which they have needed to overcome:

- Fly-tipping
- Vandalism and anti-social behaviour,
- Fire-setting
- Poor signage, access routes or pathways.

Where woodlands are not local to communities, or groups such as people with disabilities are scattered across a town or city, transport will often be the most significant barrier. These challenges also create perceptual barriers: that woodlands are unsafe and unpleasant places, used only by those with anti-social intent.



INCREASING ACCESS TO WOODLANDS - what's worked?

Access to Nature projects have learnt that addressing these barriers requires flexibility and persistence. A range of methods has been used to engage local people and increase access to woodland areas:





- **Practical activities** have been critical to encouraging involvement, particularly in the care and maintenance of local woodlands, as they offer people the chance to be physically involved and see the products of their work. Projects have encouraged people to believe they can contribute, and have often provided training to develop skilled tasks such as coppicing. The Faith Woodlands project found that hands-on tasks with young people, such as treasure hunts and den building, supported learning and built relationships.
- **Community events** have provided the chance to bring people together in or around woodland spaces, giving people the chance to experience them or to undertake activities in the woods. Guided walks, fun days, litter picks, woodland surveys, treasure hunts, art events, wildlife watches and campfire cooking are a few of the approaches which have drawn people into the woods and encouraged further involvement, such as volunteering. In Hastings, the project site had not been previously open to the public. The workers hosted monthly 'open wood events' to offer local people the chance to discover the woods, which attracted hundreds of new visitors.
- **Volunteering** has formed the principle approach many projects have used to encourage people to become involved. Where volunteers are recruited from communities local to a woodland a sense of local pride and ownership and can sometimes lead to increased commitment, such as involvement in Friends groups. In Ashington, Groundwork have noted the strong sense of local identity which has developed among some volunteers as a result of working on the project and motivated volunteers to continue their involvement.
- **Physical improvements**, either remedial works or enhancements, have been needed in many woodland settings. By delivering upgrades or repairs to paths, signs or fencing, or by clearing rubbish, projects have increased ease of access. In one instance, people with a disability worked with the project to conduct access audits of woodland sites which then informed future works.
- **Flexibility** has been a necessary characteristic of successful Access to Nature projects, responding to shifts in expectation, community perceptions, practical obstacles and weather. In Warrington and Runcorn, the Woodland Communities project needed to adapt to needs, levels of interest and negativity in some communities, working creatively to re-shape the project and find new contacts to take the work forward in some neighbourhoods.



- **Local partnerships** have provided routes for projects to connect with a wider range of people. Partnerships with schools, colleges, community or resident groups, other environmental agencies or providers and landowners have been important. The Woodland Communities project attracted over 40 partners into their activities, ranging from local residents groups to specialist environmental providers, schools, youth groups and Local Authorities. This boosted connections and expertise available to the project team. Further reading linked to partnership working and the Access to Nature programme is available through another paper in this series: Making Partnership Work.¹⁶
- **Transport** has been a critical factor where distance or a lack of public transport has prohibited access for people or groups, or where disability prevents easy access. The Faith Woodlands project has made good use of hired minibuses, and has also funded the use of public transport to overcome actual and perceived barriers to involvement.



IN SUMMARY

Woodlands provide significant opportunities for those who would not usually spend time outdoors to encounter and discover the natural environment. These opportunities will be magnified for people living close to woodlands. The learning from Access to Nature shows the value of good quality engagement and facilitation work in bringing people into active contact with woodlands. This work has enabled people to gain new skills and knowledge, become physically active, made social connections and discover places which can be invigorating and relaxing.



Project Fact File

Name	Ashington Community Woodland
Lead	Groundwork North East
Overview	A range of outdoor activities aimed at young people, local schools, colleges and organisations and designed to involve people in exploring, using and caring for local woodland in Northumberland.
Website	http://www.northeast.groundwork.org.uk/what-we-do/case-studies/2009/ashington-community-woodland.aspx

Project Fact File

Name	Faith Woodlands Communities
Lead	Luton Council of Faiths
Overview	The project works through faith and religious community networks delivering guided walks and learning activities to those from BME backgrounds who have not previously visited woods in the UK.
Website	http://www.faithwoodlands.org.uk/



Project Fact File

Name Hastings Wild Things

Lead RSPCA

Overview Opens public access to a RSPCA woodland site for the first time, providing opportunities for enjoyment, learning and engagement with nature. Particularly focused on involving young people and teenage parents.

Website <http://www.rspca.org.uk/allaboutanimals/wildlife/centres/mallydams/education/wildthings>



Project Fact File

Name The Woodlands Communities Project

Lead The Woodland Trust, Cheshire

Overview The project aims to inspire people living near 10 selected urban woodlands to regularly use their local woods as places within which to exercise, enjoy nature, spend time with family and friends, relax, learn, and play.

Website <http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/en/our-woods/windmill-hill-cheshire>



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 Forestry Commission, 2011. *UK Forestry Standard 2011*. Edinburgh: Forestry Commission
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- 4 Ward –Thompson C., Aspinall, P., Bell, S., Findlay, C., Wherrett, J. and Travlou, P., 2004. *Open Space and Social Inclusion*. UK: Forestry Commission
- 5 Ashington Community Woodland Interim Access to Nature Evaluation Report, 2011. Groundwork North East
- 6 *ibid*, reference 4
- 7 Hastings Wild Things Interim Access to Nature evaluation report, 2012. RSPCA
- 8 Morris J. & Doick K. 2009, 2010. *Monitoring and Evaluating Quality of Life for CSR07*. UK: Forest Research
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- 10 O'Brien, L. Townsend, M. and Ebdon, M., 2010. 'Doing something positive': volunteers experiences of the well-being benefits derived from practical conservation activities in nature. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Non profit organisations*, Issue 21:525-545
- 11 O'Brien L. & Morris J., 2009. *Active England: The Woodland Projects*. Report to the Forestry Commission. UK
- 12 Bovey H., 2011. *Volunteering in Nature*. UK: Natural England, 2011 (<http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/209164>)
- 13 Woodland Communities Final Access to Nature Evaluation report, 2012. The Woodland Trust.
- 14 *ibid*, reference 11
- 15 *ibid*, reference 2
- 16 Bovey H., 2012. *Making Partnership Work*. UK: Natural England

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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