

Access to Evaluation

SUMMARY EVALUATION REPORT
December 2011



1. Introduction

This bulletin summarises the headline learning from the annual evaluation report for the Access to Nature programme, produced in December 2011.

It has been a challenging year for many Access to Nature funded projects as they have faced organisational restructures and difficulties accessing matched funding due to the uncertain economy. However it has also been a year in which the political climate has started to emphasise the potency and value of projects such as those funded through Access to Nature. At the core of the Government's vision of the Big Society is the belief that people should be empowered to improve their communities and shape the services they receive. Similarly the Localism agenda is concerned with the transfer of power and resources from the central to the local level, where decisions are taken as closely as possible to the people they affect, and where citizens are involved in setting priorities and contributing to the decisions about the future of their area.

It is clear that Access to Nature has a key role to play at this critical time of change, through encouraging and facilitating community involvement and action, particularly among those who have little or no previous contact with the natural environment. Such a philosophy is embedded across the funded projects and equally chimes with the priorities of Natural England and the Big Lottery Fund's Changing Spaces goals¹. It is timely that this bulletin provides evidence of the ways in which Access to Nature projects are reaching out to and engaging communities and what approaches are working.

2. About the evaluation

Icarus was appointed in spring 2009 to develop and implement an evaluation process for the Access to Nature programme, with the overall purpose of assessing progress in achieving the Access to Nature outcomes. This is what is described as a formative approach to evaluation, where the evaluation is ongoing and feeds back into management and planning processes to inform future development of the programme.

Icarus collected and analysed data during the autumn of 2011 to produce the third annual evaluation report for the programme, based on evidence from a number of sources. For example, there have been interviews and a focus group with Access to Nature staff, online surveys of key stakeholders and of funded projects (which achieved a 60% response rate), and a review of the evaluation reports produced by projects.

¹ Access to Nature is one programme within Big Lottery Fund's Changing Spaces.

This year has also seen the publication of four Early Findings papers that provide a detailed summary of the learning to date across four areas that Access to Nature projects are focusing on: children and young people, volunteering, engaging black and minority ethnic communities, and working with people with enduring mental health problems². More Findings papers will be produced as the programme continues and more evidence emerges about projects' approaches and impacts.

3. Learning about projects' methods and approaches

By this stage in the programme's lifetime, some Access to Nature projects are in a position to reflect on the methods and approaches they have been using to reach their beneficiary groups, establishing what works and what does not. As time progresses we are developing a picture of this learning and the good practice in terms of engaging people who have little or no previous experience of the natural environment

What is clear is that Access to Nature is entering new territory in marrying the natural environment with people who have traditionally had little or no contact with it, and projects need to think and to act differently as a result.

Key learning:

Working with new kinds of audiences requires organisations to work in different kinds of ways.

What is needed is a comprehensive understanding of the needs of the target audience, and most importantly what their starting point needs to be in order for them to engage with the project and indeed the natural environment. If organisations continue to work in the same kinds of ways they will not attract different kinds of people. Rather, organisations need to find different ways of working, which in some instances can challenge their prevailing culture. Projects that have sought to consider the needs and previous experiences of their beneficiary groups have been successful in reaching out and building bridges with new kinds of people.

² The early Findings papers can be viewed at www.naturalengland/accesstonature

Key learning:

Working with people who have little or no previous experience of the natural environment is resource intensive.

Engaging people with little or no previous experience of the natural environment can be exceptionally resource intensive work; it runs at a slow pace, and a lot of time is needed to secure the interest and trust of those unfamiliar with the natural environment. This is particularly true where the focus is on sustaining involvement rather than one-off activities or events.

There is a lot of detail that underpins these two key points, but in a bulletin of this kind it is only possible to give a flavour of what we are learning about projects' methods and approaches; **the following tips** reflect some of that detail.

Reaching and communicating with beneficiary groups:

- Use established networks and local contacts to reach beneficiaries.
- Find the method of communication that is right for the beneficiary group.

Understanding the beneficiary groups:

- Understand the target groups and reflect their interests and experiences.
- Do focused work with groups in a way that is tailored to their needs.
- Consider using a 'hook' that is not initially or explicitly about the natural environment.
- Be prepared to respectfully challenge people's perceptions of the natural environment.

The organisational mindset:

- Projects need to be 'fleet of foot' to react to opportunities as they arise; the organisational culture needs to embed flexibility and responsiveness.
- Bring in specialist help where required; it is not always practical to try and do everything in house.

The activities on offer:

- Use taster sessions to illustrate what a project event or activity will be like.
- Use multiple strands of activity to appeal to different audiences; a 'one size fits all' approach will not work.
- Run open events to generate interest in a project's work.
- Run family events to attract children in the first instance and who will then bring their families along.

Sustaining engagement:

- Be aware that it takes significant resources to encourage people to move from being project beneficiaries to project volunteers, particularly those who have little or no previous experience of the natural environment.
- Projects need to consider individuals' motivations for wanting to be involved in their project and reflect these in the opportunities that are offered to them.
- Offering a range of volunteering opportunities - in terms of commitment level and type of task - will help attract a variety of people.
- Provide good levels of support for volunteers and make them feel part of a team.

4. Learning about projects' impact

Access to Nature has five outcomes and the evidence shows that good progress is being made across them all. While it is early days for some, we are starting to see the impact that projects are having and the changes they are effecting. Within this overall picture lies life affirming stories about how projects have changed individuals' lives, engaged a diverse range of people in the natural environment, and made high quality improvements to natural places. It is not possible to do justice to the full range of impacts here, but the following examples give a flavour of what is happening out there on the ground.

The natural environment providing positive and transformative experiences..

Vision South West is a project under the auspices of the Field Studies Council that provides residential experiences for children and young people with visual impairment. A course participant was a young woman, aged 12 who was nervous about going away on her own, particularly since she did not know anyone else who would be there. Afterwards her parents discovered she had a great time and had been interested in everything she had done – which was somewhat different to her usual fixations with Facebook and make up! They overheard her talking to a visually impaired friend and now her friend also wants to come on the next course.

Building self confidence and self esteem through the natural environment.

Call of the Wild is a project being run with the Circle of Life Rediscovery Community Interest Company in the South East and has demonstrated a number of benefits for the young Travellers it has engaged, including their effect on young people's self esteem and self confidence – for example, *"it has made me more confident in meeting new people because I've gone through life making friends and stuff but I have found that hard, but it's such a positive environment here that I have found it a lot easier just to be myself"*.

The benefits from training volunteers.

Walk on the Wildside is a partnership project between Wild Things, Groundwork Greater Nottingham and the Castle Cavendish Foundation in Nottingham. Wild Things recruits volunteers to lead environment education sessions and one such volunteer, recruited from the project's beneficiary groups, attended Forest Schools training. She has now been able to secure employment travelling around the Czech Republic and delivering Forest Schools activities. A second volunteer had worked in the NHS before coming to the project. Her experiences with the project prompted a change of direction in her life and she has now got a job running a community allotment project that focuses on growing and healthy eating.

Improving the natural environment.

Scarborough Borough Council's *Dell-ve into Nature* project reports that 80% of respondents to an online public survey said that the Dell is more welcoming following the site enhancements that have been made - meadows created, new interpretation boards, litter picked regularly etc. In the words of the Parish Council; "*not a day goes by without someone mentioning how beautiful the Dell is looking, it has given the people of Eastfield a much needed sense of pride*".

5. Learning about how projects are managed

Some Access to Nature projects are well managed, some are functioning well with a degree of organised chaos, and others are struggling to cope with the demands of running a project and the associated reporting and accountability requirements. What we see is a link between the level of efficiency in project management and its impact on project delivery.

The evidence tells us is that there are several areas which affect the efficiency and effectiveness of how projects are managed. Some of this appears quite obvious, but the point needs to be made that **how** a project is managed is as important as **what** it does. At this stage there are three very clear areas of learning emerging, plus several that are worth noting and keeping a watching brief over as Access to Nature progresses.

Key learning:

Organisations with what we are describing as a good ‘state of readiness’ are most able to get their project up and running quickly and to reach their target groups.

By this we mean that organisations that have previous experience of working in the project area and with their target beneficiaries have been better prepared to get their Access to Nature project off the ground. Alternatively, they may have put in place a strong partnership that helps build a full picture of beneficiary needs, knows and understands the locality, and provides a strong foundation for the project.

Key learning:

Steering Groups work add value when they have a clearly defined and articulated purpose and function.

Ideally Steering Groups should provide a diversity of experience and expertise to projects to supplement internal knowledge, and they require a clear purpose and role. It needs to be absolutely clear how they ‘add value’ and help guide projects’ management and delivery.

Key learning:

Relationship building and strong partnerships provide multiple benefits to projects.

Developing good partnerships requires an investment of time that benefits projects in a number of ways – for example, by providing an understanding of the beneficiary groups and / or the local area; adding specific areas of expertise to the project; providing client referrals; or delivering specialist aspects of the project

In addition, **three further points** are emerging as relevant pieces of learning about project management.

- Projects thrive when they are fully supported by their host organisation and where there is a clear and obvious link to the overarching organisational goals.
- An effective management infrastructure and internal systems have significant knock on benefits for project delivery. They allow project staff to work in a supportive environment and to be focused on their key delivery tasks.
- It sounds obvious to say that effective project delivery relies on the availability of adequate funding and resourcing. What we know, however, is that the projections and budgets of some projects were ill thought through, while some were deliberately kept to a minimum in the belief this would be a more attractive option to the funder. The result is the often same in both cases – over worked and under resourced staff.

6. Conclusions

Access to Nature is a programme that is on track to achieve what it set out to do in providing opportunities for people to experience the natural environment; delivering learning and skills development; improving access to natural places and networks between sites; increasing the quality of natural places; and developing communities' sense of ownership of local natural places.

Evaluation over the last two years of the programme will build on this picture further as our knowledge of the changes projects are bringing about continues to grow, and detailed learning will be made available in further Findings papers as they are produced. However, in the words of one project, we hope to find even more evidence about *“the sheer emotional power of when it works”*.