

People and nature: learning through doing

Action research programme

Neilston Development
Trust



Neilston Development Trust in East Renfrewshire is one of six community and voluntary sector groups in Scotland to have taken part in the action research programme **People and nature: learning through doing**. This programme aimed to identify successful approaches to involving people in enjoying, learning about and caring for nature and was supported by Scottish Natural Heritage and Scottish Community Development Centre.



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This **People and nature: learning through doing** project aimed to explore the potential for wider use by the Neilston community of Cowden Hall Estate as a place for enjoying nature and the outdoors. The research was carried out by volunteers from Neilston Development Trust.

Background

Neilston, a former mill town in East Renfrewshire, is a champion of community-led regeneration. Neilston Development Trust (NDT) bought the former bank building in 2006 as a hub for community development activity and in 2009 Neilston became Scotland's first Renaissance Town¹, publishing the Neilston Charter — a 20-year vision for the sustainable regeneration of the town.

The Charter identified Cowden Hall Estate, the designed landscape of woodland and gardens around the original mill owner's home, as an untapped resource in terms of its heritage and natural environment. In its former glory the estate was enjoyed by mill workers and the wider community, but had fallen into disrepair.

Although Neilston is a rural town, access to the countryside has been lost over time and people generally

travel elsewhere by car to enjoy nature. Development of Cowden Hall Estate would support NDT's interests in health and well-being by making outdoor access easier and more appealing. Their wish is for Cowden Hall to flourish again alongside the community of Neilston.

The research project

The Trust wanted to use their research to find out:

- how Cowden Hall Estate was currently used and valued by the local community;
- why some people did not visit;
- how the estate had been enjoyed in the past;
- how it might be developed to support wider use and access to nature.

A survey was carried out on-site as people visited the estate and in the wider community through local groups and schools. 251 surveys were completed, 5% of the community.



Links were made to a programme of local events marking the importance of the mill in Neilston's history — with an exhibition of photographs and a community walk around the estate. Two school study trips were led by the local countryside rangers, and visits made with the rangers and British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV) to consider site safety, access and management options.

A storyteller was commissioned to bring older and younger members of the community together, to gather memories of work and fun in Cowden Hall Estate and inspire ideas for its future. These were captured in artwork by the children.

To record how Cowden Hall Estate was valued by the community, a website was created drawing together the history of the place and the findings of the action research (www.cowdenhall.org.uk).



“My childhood was spent playing at Cowden Hall — it was magic. The history of the whole place is wonderful and to us children it was paradise to be there...”

¹ The objective of the Scottish Renaissance Towns Initiative is to enable communities to re-imagine their town, to capture a unique, design-led, long-term vision for its future and to build the skills and partnerships to deliver it. <http://scottishrenaissancetowns.com>



“The extent of interest among younger people was striking, and among older people through their knowledge and experience of the place — Cowden Hall is their local place.”

Research findings

- A good number of people didn't know where Cowden Hall Estate was (10% of adults and over half of under 12s).
- Only half of those surveyed had ever visited the estate, and less than a quarter would choose it for an outdoor visit.
- Current use is primarily for walking (33%) and dog walking (27%); also for watching nature and exercise.
- The main reasons for not visiting were: not knowing where it was, not knowing the way around and safety concerns.
- Over 90% would be more likely to visit if improvements were made: such as path maintenance, seating, wildlife areas and bins.
- Several people wished it to be left wild.
- There was considerable interest in activities being organised in the estate: 67% for walks, 49% for conservation and 44% for gardening.

The intergenerational storytelling sessions provided insights from the past and ideas for how Cowden Hall Estate might be developed in the future. These ranged from just tidying it up, to creating walks, play parks and sports areas, to reinstating the original gardens.

“It would be excellent to have walkways through, plant some new trees, nature walks and things like that, it could be really beautiful.”

“I'd put it back as near as you could to the way it was before. Two bowling greens, two tennis courts and the big boating pond.”

“I really don't want to change Cowden Hall, but we should tidy it up and add some flowers.”

A key finding was that the estate's value was complex; it meant different things to different people. For some people its wildness was a barrier, for others it was part of the attraction. For some, it was a beautiful woodland walk. For others, a place of historic interest in the development of Neilston. For older people, it was a place rich with personal associations from life as a mill worker. For the young, it was a place for fun.

Recommendations from the technical site visits were that path and tree maintenance were required to preserve the integrity of the original designed landscape, the fine exotic trees and to improve access around the estate.

“The grounds were really beautiful... the walks, the gardens, the orchards, the nurseries. It would be good to have that back.”



Impact on the group

For NDT, the research was an opportunity to take forward community aspirations in the Neilston Charter, and to bring younger and older residents into this process. It allowed the Trust to build volunteer capacity with new skills in survey techniques, data analysis, website creation and managing volunteers, and to explore opportunities for enjoying the outdoors.

New contacts were made with BTCV and the Dams to Darnley park rangers and two volunteers are now training as 'biodiversity mentors' to record local wildlife and lead community nature sessions. A new contact was also made with the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) who support community-led projects on sites of historic interest.

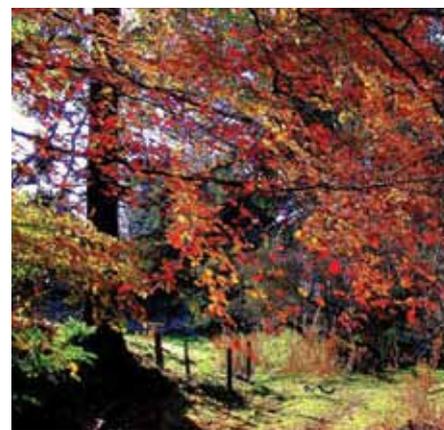
The project involved 100 days of volunteer time from Neilston Development Trust and the local community. It was carried out by a team of eight volunteers, led by the Trust's cultural convenor.

Future actions

"The research uncovered a deep vein of interest about Cowden Hall Estate. This, and the many views on what improvements would make people more likely to visit, will help us take forward aspirations to make it once more a valued place for enjoying the outdoors."

A 'Cowden Hall Matters!' group will develop an action plan covering immediate aims of improving access and more strategic ideas around the site's heritage and recreational value. BTCV has offered a volunteer work team for initial path clearance and this has been approved by the landowners.

The research has enthused NDT in exploring outdoor aspects of sustainable place-making and led to several new initiatives. Two local nature walks were included in the 2011 East Renfrewshire Walking Festival, a programme of monthly nature days is planned, and the Trust hopes to build on the interest expressed by the schools and uniformed groups to make more of the local outdoors. Links are also being explored with Paths for All and Cycling Scotland for walking and cycling initiatives.



"Cowden Hall Estate sits on the edge of Neilston as an untapped resource for enjoying nature and supporting health and well-being in a community committed to sustainability and community life."



Key learning for other organisations

- Establishing a cultural link between people and places can spark interest and encourage enjoyment and care
- How a community values an outdoor space is complex — it can mean different things to different people, at different times
- Storytelling can be a powerful way of capturing how a place is valued and using this to inspire ideas and improvements
- Involving young people in community research can give them a voice on their future and provide links to the curriculum
- Community-led research can require significant resources of volunteer time as well as office facilities, insurance, childcare and experience in managing volunteers

“Through visiting Cowden Hall Estate and hearing stories from its past, young people have come to enjoy its beauty, realise its value and care about its future.”

What did Neilston Development Trust learn from the action research process?

“We started off thinking this was a modest project, but it turned out to be very involved and challenging. But definitely worth the effort!”

By linking their research to other local activity and bringing in expertise from other organisations, NDT greatly expanded the scope and reach of their project. More people were drawn into the research and several new contacts made for ongoing collaboration. Skills and knowledge were uncovered within the community and a legacy was created in the website.

However, it was challenging for a community-led organisation with no core funding to take on a project of this size — especially the time and resources needed and huge reliance on one person. It was important to get the landowners' permission before starting the research, but this meant that timings slipped and some volunteers became unavailable.



People and nature: learning through doing

was an action research programme supported by Scottish Natural Heritage and Scottish Community Development Centre which ran from Autumn 2009 until Spring 2011 with six participating groups. The programme aimed to increase understanding and improve the ways in which voluntary and community sector organisations, and the agencies and organisations which support them, work with excluded and disadvantaged groups to involve them in the natural heritage.

Action research is often defined as research done *of and by* a particular group of people, rather than *on and to* them — and with the aim of achieving change. The benefit of this approach is that the skills, knowledge and understanding developed through the research remain within the group and are directly relevant to their work. The wider benefit from the **People and nature: learning through doing** research is in providing others with an insight into what works ‘in practice’ from the perspectives of those directly involved in engaging people with nature.

Each group had mentoring support from Scottish Community Development Centre to help them develop and carry out their research, plus a small amount of funding for research and dissemination expenses. All of the groups gained new skills and contacts from their action research, as well as insights and evidence that will shape and encourage support for their work in helping more people to enjoy Scotland's nature and outdoors.

To find out more

Read the full action research reports at www.snh.gov.uk/learning-through-doing

For more information on SNH's work on increasing and broadening participation in outdoor recreation, see www.snh.gov.uk/increasing-participation or contact Elaine Macintosh at Scottish Natural Heritage elaine.macintosh@snh.gov.uk, 0141 951 4488

For more information on Neilston Development Trust see www.neilstontrust.co.uk or email laura.carswell@neilstontrust.co.uk

For more information on action research see www.scdc.org.uk/what/community-led-action-research

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The People and nature: learning through doing projects

- **Blarbuie Woodland Enterprise**, Lochgilphead
- **Broughty Ferry Environmental Project / DightyConnect**, Dundee
- **Clackmannanshire Disability Awareness Group**, Alloa
- **GalGael Trust**, Glasgow
- **Neilston Development Trust**, Neilston
- **SAMH Chrysalis Project**, Dundee (*focus group only*)

“The research has created a body of work to support the Trust's aims around heritage and place-making, community learning, health and well-being and possible social enterprise opportunities in horticulture and conservation.”

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