



Sharing the Learning

This guide has been developed from the experience of The Conservation Volunteers' Natural Communities programme. It shares learning which we hope will help others to engage communities with the local natural environment as successfully as possible.

The Natural Communities Programme

The Conservation Volunteers (TCV) believe that our natural heritage is something for everyone to celebrate and enjoy. We want to ensure that capacity to engage people with their local natural heritage is increased to achieve wider outcomes for individuals, communities and conservation organisations across Scotland.



“Effective community engagement results in successful programmes as well as positive experiences and outcomes for all participants. Natural Communities supported TCV Scotland to do just this, enabling us to develop and run grassroots projects, matching need to demand.” Jenny Adams TCV Development Manager

TCV's Natural Communities Programme started in 2011 and was funded by Heritage Lottery Fund's 'Skills for the Future'. The programme aimed to increase community environmental engagement skills within the conservation sector. It achieved this by training 35 individuals over 4 years to develop and use skills to engage communities in understanding, valuing and conserving their natural heritage. Natural Communities worked with 24 partner organisations to develop their capacity to engage communities and over 49,000 volunteers from a range of communities to improve their connection to nature in more than 200 green places across the UK. Through the programme TCV have developed the **Natural Communities Approach**: a practical and flexible methodology for engaging everyone to enjoy, understand, value and care for the green places around them.

“Promoting the local environment to the communities that use it offers the best hope to secure the future of vulnerable sites.” Alex Hogg - Assistant Warden and former Natural Communities Trainee.

The Natural Communities Approach

The Natural Communities Approach to community environmental engagement can be simply defined as working together to understand, celebrate and protect our natural heritage.

Natural Communities creates opportunities for its participants to bolster their skills in natural heritage in tandem with community engagement and development which I find incredibly useful and ahead of the game in some respects. Using tools like citizen science surveying/practical conservation to help members of those communities to engage with their environment and each other, has a massive impact in terms of health and wellbeing of participants not to mention the environment itself and the career progression of NC trainees.

Paul Gunn – RSPB Community Greenspace Officer and former Natural Communities Trainee

There are three distinct, integral elements that make up the approach:

- **Community Learning and Development (CLD) techniques**

We use ten principles for engagement which are based on the National Occupational Standards for Community Learning and Development, which advocate self-determination, inclusion and equality, empowerment, collaborative working and lifelong learning.

“The Natural Communities approach is all about legacy and developing systems to allow communities to lead for themselves into the future.”

David Graham – TCV Health Development Manager and host of trainee 2014

“The Natural Communities Approach has allowed us to explore different ways of engaging communities and the trainee has been able to pass on the learning to other team members. The freedom to try new approaches and develop the things that worked has meant that the community engagement in the Living Landscape has increased by several orders of magnitude.”

Ian Mackenzie Scottish Wildlife Trust

- **Space to Innovate**

Integral to the approach is the idea that people and organisations working with communities need a safe, supported space to try out new techniques that they ordinarily wouldn't implement.

- **A Values Based Approach.** Inspired by Common Cause, Natural Communities built on the importance of universal values such as self-acceptance, caring for others and protecting the environment.



Sharing the Learning from Natural Communities

In this section of the toolkit we share case studies and practical tips developed from key learning shared by trainees over 2014/5. These show how key elements of the Natural Communities Approach were applied in practice.

The importance of Community Consultation

CLD OUTCOME: *Enable others to identify needs, plan and take action*

- **Consult with groups** - Invest time and effort into understanding your community before embarking on community effort. Consult before a project, during a project and after a project especially if there is long term engagement with them.
- **Questionnaires are a great starting point** – they can not only give you an understanding of what needs local people have, but also act as a great introduction the project. They encourage people to get involved and if you take on board their ideas and suggestions they're more likely to come along to events in future.
- **Door to door Surveys** – These can be a great way to engage people who might otherwise never hear about the project.

"If we want to successfully care for our environments, we need the support of local communities as they will be the driving force to achieve that change. The Natural Communities approach is the vital bridge between the two."

Tracy Lambert – Natural Communities Trainee

Harry carried out door-to door surveys using a questionnaire to consult his community for his project during his placement at Buglife

It is difficult work, but can give excellent information on local opinions of green spaces. When writing the questionnaire? always get it checked multiple times by different people, it will always require improvements, no matter how good the first draft is. A tip for door-to-door surveys: it is really useful to have an A5 flyer detailing an upcoming event happening. Then, when someone opens their door to you, you can first tell them about an exciting event upcoming in their area, and then ask the question: "Am I able to ask you a few questions?" This technique gave me much more success than just asking questions straight away.



Engaging people and promoting your project

CLD OUTCOME: *Effectively engage individuals and communities*

- **Dedicating time to promotion is important:** without it even programmes with great potential can be poorly attended.
- **Offering free taster sessions or workshops is an excellent way to work with new groups and make contacts.** This can just be a single session or a nature walk which allows you to show the group what you can offer and meet them face-to-face. It also allows you to assess the potential for future partnership work. Talking to people will also provide “evidence” for the “need” for the project, as well as acting as a consultation to find out what the group are actually interested in.
- **Simple, personal advertising can work best.** Sometimes simple techniques near the time of events, like knocking on doors in the local area, can make a big difference to attendance.
- **Think about the best way to ensure people attend.** Whilst free and ‘just show up’ events may be flexible and approachable, they can be very difficult to manage without knowing contact details or who is planning to turn up. So it is often best to ensure participants ‘book on’ events.

Ami managed to boost event attendance by knocking on doors in the local community during her placement at Butterfly Conservation

Some events were getting only 5 or 6 people attending, so I decided to try door to door leafleting for the first time, just a couple of days before a family event I was running. We ended up with 33 people attending, despite poor weather. Sometimes giving people too much notice means that they'll forget by the time you event comes around. Going door to door means that everybody sees your advertisement.

Making engagement engaging

CLD OUTCOME: *Develop and maintain effective relationships*

- **Give groups ownership of activities** - work with the group to identify tasks and responsibilities, to shape them and take on individual roles.
- **Try to get community members participating at community events as soon as possible**, even if it's something like taking meeting notes or helping out with organisation of an event, to help initiate community empowerment. Be aware that some might not feel comfortable with traditional approaches such as taking minutes, but may be happy making notes as a group on a flipchart.
- **Practical workshops are the often the best way for people to learn**, rather than hours of presentations or powerpoint slides, its great to get people involved in hand's on activities.



- **Know your audience** – It is important to understand the group you want to work with. This could be by researching in advance or simply by spending time and having conversations with them. This will allow you to understand their interests, existing networks they may be involved in and allow you to target promotional work in the correct areas.
- **Targeting:** Make sure the activity is right for the group. Even activities which are supposedly “one size fits all” generally require significant adjustments depending on the group.

Lorna worked on a programme to engage communities such as hill walkers and climbers in Citizen Science projects to survey upland birds during her placement with BTO.

Really getting to know the hill walking and outdoor communities, thinking about websites they used, locations they visited and magazines they read was key to engaging them in the project. Then tailoring the training to match their needs and interest made the project much more accessible to a new audience.



Lorna training Citizen Science volunteers up in the hills.

“Having a Natural Communities trainee allowed us to see the hillwalker audience with a fresh perspective (of personal experience) and tailor resources and communications accordingly. There is no doubt that our work engaging with this audience was enhanced as a result of this perspective, and marketing voluntary opportunities benefited as a result of her integration/networking with these groups. More than simply having an additional member of the team, Lorna's clear understanding of the audience that she was engaging with helped us pitch things in the right way, and via the right channels. Invaluable!” Ben Darvil BTO

- **Use a range of sources for engagement** – for example social media, adverts in relevant magazines, adverts on websites and in specific locations.
- **Using wildlife folklore, myths, and stories is an excellent engagement technique.** It can be used to inspire both adults and children in the natural world, especially those who do not know much about nature or are not able to engage with it regularly. It is important to tell stories with passion and inspiration. Getting people to sit down or pause and focus on you while you tell them can help.

- **Mixing creative art, nature and outdoor activities can be a great way to engage new audiences** – it worked very well for engaging older people both in care homes and housing associations.
- **Gardening can also be a great accessible activity** – Again improving gardens and providing opportunities to engage in gardening activities has proved an excellent way to engage older residents in care homes and housing associations to enjoy connecting with nature.



Engaging with specific target groups

CLD OUTCOME: *Work with individuals & communities to achieve change*

- **To engage with groups who have complex needs, such as those with mental health needs or additional support needs, it is important to be prepared to be very flexible in the sessions you lead.** This will mean that you can adapt the information you present, in case the knowledge level is not as you expected. Also, if you have back up activities to do, it will mean that you are able to keep participants engaged, especially if they become distracted or bored and want to change what they are doing.
- **To work with schools:** think about the best ways to make contact - School teachers can be difficult to get in touch with. Ask at reception when the best time to phone is, and/or who the most appropriate contact is. Or get schools you have worked with to send an endorsement email to other schools. Liaise with schools well in advance of intended project delivery dates, i.e. at least two terms in advance
- **Use simple language** - Words like “conservation” and “natural heritage” may not be so well understood, for example by young people. Ensure you check that you have a shared understanding of phrases you may be used to using, or change your terminology to use phrases that the group understands.
- **Working with small children.** When working with small kids in a new habitat – allow time for them just to play and explore. They’re often really excited and so working within any kind of structured activity plan can be difficult. Including play can be the best way to get them to explore and enjoy nature without defining exactly how that has to be done.
- **Working with care homes** – Phoning activity coordinators, proved to be the best way to get in contact with care homes and was more effective than other methods tried such as email. Another valuable way to engage with care homes is through the popularity of sensory gardens or through offering cheap, simple and repeatable activity ideas which they can use with their residents.

“I believe the Natural Community programme not only has had great benefits for the trainees who have taken part in it but also for a great number of people who have been involved in natural projects around Scotland. Trainees have worked with people with a wide range of abilities and needs throughout the country (e.g.: minority ethnic groups, schools from disadvantaged areas, the elderly, deprived communities), engaging them with nature in a variety of ways.”

Noelia Collado, Natural Play Development Officer (TCV Scotland) and former Natural Communities Trainee



Conclusions

- **Always identify clear project aims** to make it easy to communicate your project to communities. It will also help when approaching external organisations to work in partnership. If you know your project then you can show those organisations the benefits to them of working together.
- **You need enthusiastic & knowledgeable staff and volunteers** to make community projects a success.
- **Keep it simple!** elaborate equals time and money (commodities you often don't have too much of).
- **Share ideas** - you will gain as much if not more than you give.
- **Link up with other groups** - tying in work with another project greatly increases the volunteers and resources available and also really helps draw in more people as it gives a project a much bigger profile.
- **Identify prominent 'key' people in each community who knows all the right people and can get folk to attend your events and care about what you're doing.** Finding this person and making friends with them can be hugely helpful and can get you out of sticky situations.
- **Don't be afraid to ask...** Most organisations are keen to get involved, to work in partnership and appreciate the opportunity to be included in the projects.
- **Always accept volunteer help**, even if a volunteer is keen to do something that may not be needed/wanted, once they are involved their efforts can be guided.
- **Make it personal**, it builds stronger relationships, mass emails are often ignored, so if you are going to send them, think of them as the first step in a communications process and be sure to follow up next with a phone call.
- **Think outside the box and try new ideas.** Don't be afraid to try a new approach, a new audience or a new methodology – not all of them will work but it is the only way to develop new ideas.
- **Take cake/biscuits** when introducing yourself to a new group or have a practical day; groups and volunteers are giving you their time and this is a practical way of showing you appreciate that. Also a great ice breaker.
- **Enjoy yourself:** If you are enthused about your project it becomes contagious and the community will pick up on that.



Case Study 1 Harry Woolner - Parks and Pollinators Officer with Buglife.

About Harry's placement:

Harry helped communities across the central belt engage with their local green spaces. He developed a broader understanding of the conservation sector, learnt about invertebrates, made contact with community groups and delivered bug related sessions as well as representing TCV/Buglife at various public events.

During the second six months of his placement Harry built on this experience by completed a personal project which involved developing experience through carrying out community consultation, project planning, fundraising, habitat management, volunteer management, budgeting, monitoring, evaluation for funders, and leaving a legacy.

Key achievements:

- Experience of writing, carrying out, and analysing a door-to-door community consultation survey with 19 Toryglen residents.
- Writing two funding applications of £500 and £4,000 for a community engagement project with a conservation focus.
- Co-ordinating five practical outdoor sessions that engaged 53 people in creating a 400 square metre native wildflower meadow.
- Writing regular articles for three blogs/websites detailing the successes and activities of the project.
- Generating a legacy for the project by writing a management plan for the community to use in the coming years, and preparing a funding bid to expand the project into next year.

Suzanne Bairner, Buglife

We were able to reach people we would never have been able to reach before through Harry attending and running events with several community group... without Harry we definitely would not have been able to do this many events on our own.

Harry Woolner – Natural Communities Trainee 2014-15

The Natural Communities approach allows people to come into the conservation sector who have a slightly different approach to the natural world, in comparison to traditional conservation. I think, and hope, that the NC approach has made the sector more inclusive and accessible to a wider group of people. Traditional conservation is extremely exclusive, and includes pretty much only people with higher level education, are non-BME, and with scientific knowledge of ecology. I really believe that conservation needs to change this if it will really make the environmental changes it aims for. I hope the Natural Communities approach is a big step towards achieving this.



How did Harry apply the Natural Communities Approach?

Space to innovate

- In terms of the Wildflower Meadow Project I set up I was able to use the specific advice of Buglife regarding developing meadows and the advice of TCV in terms of community engagement. My space to innovate was in being able to operate between the two organisations, taking from each what I saw as best for the project and perhaps doing things that neither organisation would have done alone.
- On a personal level I was given the space to develop the project myself and follow something that I really wanted to do. I gained a huge amount of ownership over the project which made me more passionate and engaged in it.

The Values Based Approach

- The Values Based Approach provided an appealing and positive framework for engaging people. It proved useful in particular when carrying out the community engagement and designing questionnaires to engage people.
- It also helped me make sense of the third sector.
- It helped to provide clarity in terms of underlying targets that helped me throughout my project.

Community Learning and Development

Harry used his CLD diary extensively throughout the placement to reflect on his work. Below are a few selected key examples of how the CLD objectives were applied in his project:

Effectively engage individuals and communities

The project was centred around engaging local people from Toryglen. This was achieved through the community consultation and the practical activities. In total, 19 people were consulted directly and up to 65 indirectly through wider community consultation activities; a further 53 volunteers and schoolchildren and two staff took part in practical activities.

Enable others to identify needs, plan and take action

- The community consultation gave local people a chance to identify their needs, especially in relation to their local green space.
- During the practical work, volunteers were regularly given opportunities to identify the needs of a given task and take action on how to complete it.
- The partner organisation Urban Roots have been enabled to take action on future meadow management through the advice and support I have given.

Reflect on and develop own practice

- The project gave me great opportunity to reflect on my practice, particularly through writing and publishing regular articles/blogs about the work.
- I was able to develop my practice through direct experience throughout the project, as well as through advice and guidance from colleagues and completion of the weekly Natural Communities CLD diary.



Work with individuals & communities to achieve change

- By engaging with local people through the consultation and then working closely with Urban Roots, genuine change was achieved at Toryglen.
- The local environment was changed to increase plant and pollinator diversity.
- People were given real opportunities to learn new skills, knowledge, and socialise.

Case Study 2

Faith Hillier is now customer Service and Engagement Officer, Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, Caerlaverock Wetland Centre. She was previously a TCV Natural Communities Trainee with Froglife.

About Faith's placement

As Community Engagement Assistant with Froglife, Faith was based in Cumbernauld, North Lanarkshire. Her focus was on their 'Living Waters' project, which aims to restore prime wildlife habitats in both urban and rural locations using networks of local volunteers, with community involvement central to the work.

Personal Project

The aim of Faith's personal project was to increase community use and appreciation of Ravenswood Local Nature Reserve in Cumbernauld. In July 2012, a community consultation survey was carried out in the Ravenswood community in order to gauge the level of interest in the reserve and found that a majority of residents supported the formation of a group. A series of community events were held in order to encourage further support for the group and to encourage people to visit the reserve. Following these events, community meetings were held at Westray Community Centre in Ravenswood and ideas of how to improve the reserve and its use by local people were discussed. The outcome of this was that the group decided not to form a 'Friends of' group but to join with the Seafar and Ravenswood Community Council as part of its 'improvements' group – future developments of Citizen Science activities with local residents and schools are still in progress.

Rob Williams, Froglife

"We hope that by working with local communities around our project sites, the community will be able to carry on the good work of projects long after the funding has finished. This gives these short-term funded projects the chance to have a real long lasting legacy and bring wider benefits to both the local community and area."

Key lessons learnt

Reflecting back Faith picked out a couple of key things she learnt during her Natural Communities Placement:

- **Encouraging involvement from the local community is crucial.** I learnt the value of community engagement, for the nature organisations, local community and the environment.
- **The importance of working in partnership with other organisations.** As well as being crucial for the project itself, this can also help to increase participation from the local community.



- *“The Natural Communities programme brings organisations together to complete projects for local communities. This increases knowledge of the sector among communities who previously knew little about it. It gives opportunities for trainees to network and gain a broad understanding of how the sector works which then increases future contact between organisations.”*

How did Faith apply the Natural Communities Approach?

Space to innovate

- The placement allowed Faith to provide new capacity for Froglife, allowing them to try new techniques and invest considerable time to reach new communities requires.
- She invested considerable time in meeting the Ravenswood community, going door to door and speaking to local residents.
- She also ran community meetings in the local community hall in the evenings, asking people for their opinions on how they could use their local green space.
- This engaged people who were not already part of active local environment-related groups. Many of the people I met knew that the reserve was there but were not aware of the important wildlife that was present.
- It also create opportunities for other organisations such as TCV and Plantlife to be involved with further work in the community.

The Values Based Approach:

- The project maintained core values of community empowerment and self-sufficiency.
- It was key to Faith and Froglife that the project continued after the placement finished.
- They therefore focused throughout on deeper community engagement and capacity building to ensure the community interest and ability was there to continue the project in the long term.

Community Learning and Development:

Effectively engage individuals and communities

- Community consultation survey in Ravenswood, Cumbernauld: doing a survey door to door about how people use Ravenswood LNR, how often and if they would like to set up a ‘Friends of’ group for the reserve.
- Organising, advertising and delivering a series of events for the public, including a mini-bioblitz, green gym taster day, woodland craft event and a pond workshop.
- Holding community meetings in Westray Community Centre in Ravenswood, Cumbernauld
- Working with Ravenswood Primary school on the Tadpoles in the Classroom pilot project and delivering Froglife’s ‘My Wild Life’ project at the school.



- Working with St Mary's Primary school, delivering Froglife's 'My Wild Life' project at the school and leading a nature walk around the reserve with the P6 class.
- Having a stand at Greenfaulds High School's Health and Wellbeing event, to promote Ravenswood LNR to teachers, parents and children.
- Organising a talks programme for the Ravenswood community group in 2013, with speakers from local community groups and conservation charities.

Enable others to develop skills

- Local people gained skills in identifying pond creatures, terrestrial invertebrates and plants at the mini-bioblitz event.
- Local people gained pond creation skills at the Green Gym taster day.
- Local people gained woodcraft skills at the woodland craft event.
- Local people gained pond creation and management skills at the Pond creation workshop.
- Children at Ravenswood Primary school P3/4 class learned about the lifecycle of frogs through the Tadpoles in the classroom pilot project.
- Children at St Mary's Primary school learned about the nature at Ravenswood LNR during a nature walk, including identifying tree buds, birds and plants, looking at lichen and moss and they also gained map reading skills.
- Children at Ravenswood Primary school and St Mary's Primary school learnt about different natural history items, including conkers, acorns, skulls and dragonflies, through Froglife's 'My Wild Life' sessions.

Provide advice, support and guidance

- Advice, support and guidance were provided to the Ravenswood Primary school during the Tadpoles in the Classroom project and St Mary's Primary school for ideas on outdoor learning.
- Advice, support and guidance were provided to the Ravenswood group and Seafar and Ravenswood Community council.
- Guidance was provided to stakeholder organisations through recommendations to develop the project into the future.

How do I find out more?

Contact us for more information on using the Natural Communities approach:

Email: d.hall@tcv.org.uk

Phone: 0141 552 5294

