

Wildlife recording with participants with complex support needs



Pilot Summary

The Conservation Volunteers worked with Cornerstone, one of Scotland's largest charities and a leading provider of services for people with disabilities and other support needs to carry out a pilot with service users. Working with Cornerstone's Galashiels centre, we trialled a variety of methods to allow the people they support to interact with nature, express their interests and enthusiasm for being outdoors.

The pilot aimed to;

- enable the attendees of the Cornerstone Nature group at Cornerstone, Galashiels to undertake wildlife watching and recording activities (Citizen Science)
- trial a methodology for Citizen Science activity with this volunteer group with a view to produce guidance for other similar groups to use.
- learn how best to engage informal groups of adults with physical or learning difficulties in Citizen Science activities
- Increase participants' skills and knowledge about wildlife

Pilot Methodology

On discussion with Cornerstone, we agreed to set aside a day per week where a wildlife group would engage volunteers from their centre. We'd trial various CS activities to get the mix right for the audience.

- 8 x 1 hour (perhaps longer) sessions involving up to 10 attendees per session, supported by Cornerstone staff
- 1 staff discussion session, 6 supported group sessions and an evaluation session with both staff and group. Ongoing contact to assist throughout.
- A report on the outcome of the methods trialled is produced.

From the initial staff discussion between TCV and Cornerstone, it was apparent that the methods ordinarily used to engage people with Citizen Science would need to be carefully trialled to suit the needs of the individuals involved. We looked at several routes of Citizen Science engagement

- [Nature Detectives](#) – a flexible website with clear and easy to recognise images for younger participants. Easy to manipulate into a treasure hunt type exercise
- [OPAL Tree Health](#) – One of 5 OPAL surveys which comes with supporting material to help participants through the set piece survey
- [FSC Guides](#) – Laminated, picture guides that cover most plant and animal groups. Very bright and colourful.

We allowed the participants to see all the material and adapted our approach to the individuals in the wildlife group, according to their interests and abilities. We adapted parts of the material to suit.

We set up a calendar of events, which took us on outings to local wild sites and managed estates and organised indoor wildlife discovery days for when the weather or staffing levels prevented us from venturing out.

The Cornerstone centre in Galashiels has inherited a wildlife garden near their centre and we briefly used this as well. This will be an asset for their future continued wildlife work.

The Pilot Group

The pilot group consisted of 9 adults with complex learning disabilities with additional support needs. The pilot was supported by 4 Cornerstone staff who gave overall care to the participants at various points during the pilot. 3 TCV staff participated at various points during the pilot.

The Monitoring Activities

Indoor work consisted of using very bright and clear, visual images of animals, insects, birds and plants we asked the participants, what their favourites were. They were asked to draw what they saw on their way to the centre, what they saw from their window and what they'd like to see. As the pilot progressed we asked them to remember what they saw on the outings and to draw, name or identify them.

On visits outside we took bug pots and butterfly nets, so live specimens could be caught and viewed closely by the participants without issues of fear or stings etc. This also protected the insects from damage and allowed them to be released when safe to do so. Leaves were collected for identifying. Birds on trees and on the wing were spotted.

Pilot learning

We gathered learning throughout the pilot in order to ensure that the experiences of the pilot help inform our future approach, noting as much detail as possible of the progress made throughout. From these experiences below we can make some recommendation to help improve similar future projects.

Engagement

We met with a Cornerstone area manager to outline the pilot and from there set up a planning meeting with the Galashiels centre staff to establish how the project would work in practical terms. It was important to have this face to face meeting with the centre manager and support staff in order to understand the needs and interests of participants and establish a good relationship with the centre team.

During the activities we used a range of visual and colourful materials, agreed on at the planning meeting to engage the participants. It was essential to hold their interest and take a different approach for each individual. Using hands on materials that provided lots of stimulus and running outdoor sessions was successful. These were needed to keep participants interested as they can be easily distracted. The centre offers many other activities so the level of weekly participation often depended on what else was going on.

Participants chose to be involved because they were interested in birds, animals and insects and enjoyed hands on activities and exploring nature together with others.

Set Up

Certain clients have Autism Spectrum Disorder, so too much advanced dialogue can cause an issue. It was often easiest just to do the activity without lead in or set up, pre planning with support staff to fit in with other centre activities.

Training

Very basic wildlife training was required for support staff, similar to that aimed at young primary child age level. The staff were able to prepare for the sessions by simply looking over material provided or developed for the sessions.

Tools & methodology

We were able to rely on the Support staff's experience to judge on the success of our method. They concluded that the continued participation of clients was a good guide to whether they enjoyed the last activity or not. There was a level of trial and error in the methodology required in the context of this pilot group. The methods trialled were judged as being suitable, but can and needed to be adapted using support staff experience and judgement to suit the needs of the individual participant.

Data

The data retrieved from this pilot was very basic. Staff verified what clients sighted to support their identification. Any data collected needed to be recorded by support staff.

Feedback

Participants were encouraged to explore and expand their knowledge about their natural environment. The support staff continuously monitored the participant's engagement levels and praised them on the responses to the activities. Some clients can be very subtle in the way they express themselves so required support workers to judge understanding of feedback. The support staff used the previous activity materials (drawings etc) to recall memories and prompt discussion for the next activity. This was a suitable form of feedback for the level of the pilot participants.

Participants

Participants were clients of Cornerstone. Due to their conditions, they were purely participants in this pilot, playing no part in the preparation or design. They displayed a mixed response to the pilot, with gentle but repeated motivation required to keep them interested, but activities were generally enjoyable for them.

Outcomes

Support staff were enthusiastic and learned a lot about outdoor group activities, working with adults with complex needs. They learned lots of new things about wildlife and were made more confident on using basic wildlife ID materials with their clients. Participants enjoyed outdoor nature contact, for some, this was the only outdoor experience they have had. They were able to explore their own wildlife interests and learned new plant and animal names.

Management of the centre report that this pilot has allowed staff and participants to connect more with the local community and rural area. The outdoor activities help drive forward other activities planned for the centre around developing a new wildlife garden.

Support staff report that the pilot helped develop new interests for staff, which will help drive it forward. Initial uncertainty over wildlife knowledge levels of staff were dispelled as the pace of the activities allowed assimilation of new knowledge. Both staff and clients are more aware of environment.

This was seen as a very worthwhile new activity, which fitted well with Cornerstone's new wildlife garden development, making the garden suitable for wildlife/pollinators and measuring and recording the improvements using Citizen Science activities. Practical skill workshops can make rain gauges for weather recording and craft group can work on bug hotels, bird feeders and bird boxes.

Recommendations

From the lessons learned in the previous section we recommend that those wishing to carry out Citizen Science projects with a group of disabled participants should;

- Make the activities very hands on, making, touching, feeling, seeing, smelling. Take trips out. Watch wildlife documentaries if weather poor or staff shortages prevent outdoor work. Collect insects and leaves.
- Mix activities with craft skills. Make bug boxes, bird feeders etc.
- Advertise wider to supporters or supported living staff. Spread their wildlife interest further than just with the group.
- Be aware that too much advanced warning and alternatively a surprise change to a routine can cause disruption for some participants.
- Aim to give staff a primary school level knowledge of wildlife – such as OPAL or Forest Schools – Level 1 to high Level 2, depending on client's needs. Build staff confidence to deliver activity, with perhaps just one session looking at basic wildlife aimed at young primary school age children.
- Use support staff familiarity with participants and previous experience from other activities to gauge the differing, often limited abilities to communicate approval or disapproval of an activity, perhaps using smiley face/sad face stickers as a guide to judge whether activities were a hit or not.
- Make provision for collating and submitting of any accurate records that support staff or supported living staff can verify from the sighting participants make (eg online submission or [BRiSc](#) sheet)
- Run through an album of results, drawings or records collected during the activities with clients to jog their memories as session warm ups or roundups.
- Offer roles to participants to help out with the activity set up but be realistic as to how able they will be. The more complex the participant's issues, the greater outside activities will need supported, but getting out and about is totally worth it!