

Changing the Landscape

Communities improve their neighbourhoods and their health to lasting effect

Scotland has a long history of communities transforming their neighbourhoods with environmental improvements, together with improved health outcomes. With little resources, community groups have turned tenement back-courts into safe play areas for children, pleasant seating for residents and cultivated ground for garden enthusiasts. In rural areas, woodlands have been opened up with nature walks, wild life sanctuaries and adventures areas for teenagers.



Young people enjoying the benefits of greenspace at Manor Park (see article on page 4 for details)

More recently, health improvement and regeneration agencies have recognised the significant benefits of working with communities to not only improve the environment, but enhance physical and mental health with educational, recreational and artistic developments. Urban garden schemes, therapeutic allotments, Paths to Health initiatives and community woodlands have sprung up across the country. This has forged a variety of partnership working initiatives between communities and NHS, Local Authorities, Quangos and voluntary sector organisations.

CHEX-POINT is delighted in this issue to create a platform for community groups and partnership initiatives to share their ideas, problems and successes; highlighting creative use of outdoor space, while at the same time building community skills, confidence, connections and cohesion. In our first article, Deryck Irving from greenspace scotland highlights the symbiotic relationship between communities and greenspace and cites the inspiring example of community development with the Greendykes Organic Allotment project based in Edinburgh.

We also hear of a new initiative from Scottish National Heritage and Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC) who have teamed up to launch People and Nature: Learning through doing, which focuses on the relationship between people and the natural heritage. SCDC has a hand in other practice examples via 'Demonstrating the Links', a community action research programme with greenspace scotland, which supported our community-led example 'Healthy Roots' in Aberdeen.

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The organisation transformed derelict land in a council estate into play area for children, picnic area and network of paths. And through the Scottish Community Action Research Fund (SCARF), SCDC supported another example; the 'Blarbuie Woodland' project in Lochgilphead, Argyll. The community action research project, with partners from Reforesting Scotland, the NHS, Argyll Green Woodworkers Association, the Scottish Association for Mental Health and Lochgilphead Community Council, has created a healthy and stimulating environment for the local community.

In addition, this issue's CHEX 'Up-Date' (on the back page) brings to life our first national conference held on 2nd November 2009 and highlights the excellent presentations from community-led health initiatives, Lothian Community Health Projects Forum and encouraging input and dialogue from Shona Robinson MSP, Minister for Public Health and Sport. For further information on any of the articles, contact Tom Warrington on Tom@scdc.org.uk.

Lastly, eagle-eyed readers may notice that we have made a few changes to the layout of this issue. These changes take account of accessibility requirements and are intended to improve readability. We would welcome any comments you may have. Please contact Tom at the e-mail address above.

Communities developing greenspace – greenspace developing communities

Deryck Irving is Partnership and Enabling Manager at greenspace scotland. Deryck coordinates greenspace scotland's placemaking programme - placemaking scotland. His wider remit includes: facilitating partnership working to deliver quality urban spaces and neighbourhoods; supporting the sharing of good practice through the greenspace scotland network and the development of outcome-focused approaches to the creation and management of green and open spaces. In this article, Deryck explains the symbiotic relationship between communities and greenspace and also highlights a perfect example of how effective the community development approach can be in this situation.

Access to quality, safe and inclusive greenspace has been shown to have positive impacts on both the physical and mental health and wellbeing of individuals. People with access to such greenspaces are more likely to be physically active and experience lower levels of stress and associated mental health problems. Quality, safe local greenspaces also encourage community cohesion and contribute to local identity increasing the social wellbeing of communities. Conversely, poor quality, misused and abused spaces have a negative effect on health – increasing stress and fear and deterring people from adopting active lifestyles.

So, as a target, we should be aiming to ensure that all communities in Scotland have well-connected, accessible, high quality spaces which are safe and inclusive. But what about the way in which this target is addressed and realised? There is strong evidence that people's mental health and wellbeing is affected by the degree of control that they feel over their lives. In a greenspace context, this equates to the degree of involvement that people have in the decisions about the way that their neighbourhoods develop. Where communities have a major role in decisions about local greenspace resources and have a hand in the development of these resources, health and social benefits are

increased and the long-term success of the spaces is also enhanced. I'd like to use the rest of this article to outline a project I visited last year which highlights this community development approach to greenspace.

The Greendykes Organic Allotment project (GOAL) was established in 2007 as a result of a consultation exercise led by the City of Edinburgh Council's Concierge service. This aimed to generate tenant involvement in community activity and sought opinions on activities and projects that would be of interest. A number of tenants and staff expressed interest in developing an allotments project on unused residential/ amenity greenspace situated in the shadow of the tower blocks. A steering group was established which quickly agreed and set out the design and size of the allotment site.

The beginnings of physical works, and people starting to work on their own plots generated further interest and the allotment site quickly became full. Men In Mind, a project for ethnic and black minority men with mental health issues, operate one of the plots. The ethos of the project has now spilled out into neighbouring greenspaces with local residents taking responsibility for the development of garden areas to the front and rear of the flats and even creating better 'kick about' areas for local kids.

When asked to identify the outcomes of this work, GOAL came up with the following:

- 'The spaces around the flats now function for local people, providing the allotments and gardening spaces that were wanted. This is a direct result of the work done to consult, engage and respond to the views of tenants.'
- The development of the allotment project has not only generated and sustained the involvement of people in developing and improving their local greenspaces; it has also strengthened the whole social and community fabric. For example, neighbours are meeting each other for the first time and new tenants are being welcomed and introduced to the area and the community.'
- The views of tenants have directly shaped the development of the allotments and their



*Greendykes Organic Allotment project
(photo courtesy of greenspace scotland)*

involvement as project partners means that they directly inform and influence their management and development. Tenants have direct ownership of their local greenspace through managing their own plots.

- GOAL has established excellent links with local regeneration, housing and neighbourhood organisations, which have assisted and contributed to the project's development. Partnerships with local agencies and groups have, and are, being established to increase the impact of the project and deliver wider benefits.'

And it is giving people physical exercise and cheap organic fruit and vegetables - not bad for a small allotment project! What is particularly interesting from our perspective at greenspace scotland is that the only real resource that this group of local residents needed was permission – a lesson for all of us working to transform unused urban spaces.

Deryck Irving
Partnership and Enabling Manager,
greenspace scotland

For more information on greenspace, communities and health and on these specific projects, go to www.greenspacescotland.org.uk.

Healthy Roots at the heart of Manor Park

Healthy Roots was established in 2003 with the aim of regenerating two hectares of formerly derelict land in Middlefield, a council estate in Aberdeen that is home to around 2,900 people. At the time, it was the largest Social Inclusion Partnership area in Aberdeen and had very basic greenspace and play provision, partly because of problems with vandalism. The area had a very negative image locally and much of the housing was considered 'hard to let'. Alan Carter, Secretary of Healthy Roots, the charity set up to create and run Manor Park, explains how greenspace can impact not just on the health and well-being of a community but also aid regeneration.

Ten years ago, a plea went round Aberdeen for ideas for what to do with a piece of derelict ground on the edge of the Middlefield housing estate. The land had once been allotments, but problems with the estate had led to most of the allotments being abandoned, leaving a gardener's nightmare of willowherb and bishop's weed growing amongst fences of rusty barbed wire and asbestos sheets. The estate itself was in trouble too, with record numbers of unlet properties (one entire street was practically empty).

This was the start that led to the creation of Manor Park, now a thriving public park with an estimated 25,000 visits per year. The derelict fences have gone, replaced by climbing frames, flowers, picnic benches and a network of paths. The park still retains more than a hint of wilderness though, with areas left undeveloped for wild play. Middlefield itself has changed too, and now has a waiting list for housing.

Half of the original site remains as allotments under the stewardship of the Heathryfolds Allotment Holders Association (HAHA): these too have undergone a renaissance and have a waiting list. Several local groups have allotments where their members can learn about veg growing and healthy eating.

This didn't all happen overnight. In fact, it was 2003 before physical work even started. A project like Manor Park could not happen without thorough community involvement and the ideas-gathering process took three years to complete. A key lesson here was that there is no way to address 'the community' as a unit: we tried many methods, from going to youth clubs and using the local newsletter to holding open days attended by hundreds, and each brought in a different cross-section of the population.

Community involvement has stayed central to the project and this lesson has stayed with us. For all the formal methods of engaging with people, the most important one has simply been to be open to people while working in the park, chatting with dog-walkers and allowing kids to help with tasks. In too many places, this role of the traditional 'parkie' has been lost with contracted-out competitively-tendered greenspace management.

Over the last year, funding from Marks and Spencer's Greener Living Spaces Fund has enabled the most recent phase of the park's development, putting in exciting new play equipment. In keeping with the park's ethos, this was chosen by parents from the local parent and toddler group.

Capturing the health benefits of a project like this is notoriously difficult, with so many other things going on in the area at the same time. However, we can certainly say that walking and active play are the two main activities in the park. Contact with nature has been shown time and again to benefit people's mental health too and more than one person has told us that Manor Park has kept them sane during a difficult time.

In the future, we want to develop the arts side of the park and make more wildlife improvements. On the 5th of December 2009 we will be planting 50 new trees as part of BBC Breathing Places' Tree O'Clock record attempt. We'll also stay involved in the Middlefield regeneration process, which could see big changes to the area in a few years time: hopefully Manor Park will still be at the heart of it.

Alan Carter is the Secretary of Healthy Roots, the charity which was set up to create and run Manor Park. Healthy Roots' email address is healthyrootsaberdeen@yahoo.co.uk. Manor Park does not have an up-to-date website but would welcome help to create one!

People and Nature: learning through doing

Scotland's outdoors is undoubtedly one of its greatest assets. Amazing wildlife and spectacular scenery are at the heart of Scotland's tourist industry, and there are a range of opportunities for people in Scotland to participate in activities linked to the natural heritage. Research has also highlighted a wide range of health and social benefits associated with enjoying the outdoors and community involvement in improving and managing green spaces.

Unfortunately, for many communities in Scotland the natural environment seems very distant for everyday concerns and significant barriers to accessing greenspace, and enjoying the benefits it offers, remain. There is still a perception that people participating in activities in the natural environment are predominantly white and middle class, and working with excluded and disadvantaged groups continues to be identified as an area for training and development.

Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) and Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC) have teamed up to launch People and Nature: Learning through doing, a new initiative to look at the relationship between people and the natural heritage. The project involves SNH and SCDC working with voluntary and community sector organisations to undertake a series of action research projects.

The focus of the action research is connecting new audiences with the natural heritage – whether this is through enjoying the outdoors, learning about the environment or getting involved in volunteering.

The aims of the project are to:

- improve our understanding of what works 'in practice' from the perspectives of project participants; and
- help organisations like SNH better understand how they work with voluntary and community sector groups.

People and Nature: Learning through doing will provide mentoring, training and guidance to help voluntary and community organisations develop and undertake their own action research project. We hope that working in this way will mean that the findings from action research are directly related to developing the work of the participating groups, and that the skills, knowledge and understanding developed through research remain within those groups.

The project will also run learning networks and 'sharing practice' events linked to the action research to ensure that information is shared as widely as possible.

If you are interested in finding out more about People and Nature: Learning through doing, please contact Scott Ferguson on 0141 951 0825; scott.ferguson@snh.gov.uk.

Healthy Woods, Healthy People

Blarbuie Woodland at Argyll & Bute Hospital

The Blarbuie Woodland project is restoring and enhancing the woods around Argyll and Bute Hospital. A diverse range of people use the woods and they come for many reasons: to walk, work, find out about the Blarbuie project, for the animal and plant life, for fresh air, for a break (e.g. from work or the hospital ward) and to find peace and tranquillity. In this article, we hear how the resulting impact on health and well-being has been substantial.

In 2003, a number of people started to discuss the potential for restoring the neglected, unwelcoming woods around Argyll and Bute Hospital. Extensive consultation was carried out by Reforesting Scotland, plans were made and a Partnership was formed comprising Reforesting Scotland, the NHS, Argyll Green Woodworkers Association, the Scottish Association for Mental Health and Lochgilphead Community Council. Funds were raised and work began on the ground in 2004, involving many users of mental health services, disabled people, young people, contractors and volunteers, and the site was opened as a public park in 2007 with all-abilities paths and facilities and interpretation.

In 2008, research was carried out into the impact of working in or using the woodland on people's health. The research was supported by the Scottish Community Action Research Fund (SCARF) which was active from 2002-2009 and which was administered by the Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC), using Scottish Government funds aimed at allowing community-based projects to achieve recognised research via funding resources and expertise. The research was designed and also carried out by a group of people who were involved in developing and maintaining the woodland and was also intended to increase the skills and confidence of members of the Blarbuie woodland community.



Researchers capturing data in Blarbuie woodland

All of those interviewed for this research thought that coming to the woods impacted on their health and well-being in some way. Over a third thought that coming to the woods improved their physical health and fitness and 85% said that coming to the woods improved their mental health and well-being. Some participants described how the woods helped them feel more alert, active and stimulated. Others found that the woods were calming, giving opportunities to relax, reflect, and find 'peace of mind'. Woodland workers experienced many of the same health benefits as visitors. Their work also offered opportunities to develop skills, confidence, satisfaction and relationships with other workers.

'Healthy Woods...Healthy People!' That's what we wanted to shout out early on in our project. In recent decades, the Hospital has become much quieter than it was, but it's still here, and these days there are more and more people in the Woods – walking and working, and getting healthier in mind and body. We can say that now – they are healthier. We believed it, but we were able to prove it too – thanks to the Scottish Community Action Research Fund.

For further information, contact Hugh Fife, hugh@reforestingscotland.org.

Community Woodlands Association 'Roots to Health'

The Community Woodlands Association (CWA) was established in 2003 as the direct representative body of Scotland's community woodland groups. CWA help their member groups to achieve their aspirations and potential, providing advice, assistance, and information and facilitating networking and training events. Rosslyn Mills, West Central Scotland Woodland Advisor, tells CHEX-Point about some of their members and about a recent CWA event.

On Friday 6th November, the CWA held a very successful one day "Roots to Health" seminar in Inverness. This inspirational event highlighted various ways that community engagement with woodlands contributes to physical, mental and social wellbeing, bringing together an array of expertise and providing ample opportunities for debate, discussion and networking. Speakers included health promotion specialist Dan Jenkins of NHS Highland, Dr Rebecca Lovell, a social scientist working for Forest Research, Hugh Fife of Woods for All and Hilary Quick from the Scottish Orienteering Association.

Roots to Health was also an opportunity to highlight the successes of member groups and the numerous health walks, green gyms and forest school activities taking place in community woodlands throughout Scotland.

CWA is also keen to showcase specific innovative projects developing within the membership, such as Milton Community Woodland Trust's "Stepping Stones" training programme, where hands-on practical woodland skills are taught to individuals who are finding changes to their lives difficult to cope with. The life-skills learned increase the self esteem and confidence of the individual while the natural setting of the woodland enhances participants' mental and physical wellbeing.



Planting a memorial oak tree in Anagach Community Woodland in Granttown on Spey

Likewise the Galgael Trust, Govan have their "Navigate Life" learning community which, using traditional skills as a vehicle and working with natural materials such as wood, stone and metal, provides opportunities to pick up new skills, and get into good life habits.

Learning and knowledge share are key elements of all CWA's events, and examples of good practice elsewhere were provided by Hill Holt Wood, an environmental social enterprise in Lincolnshire, and the Forestry Commissions' Branching Out project, which promotes the benefits of scheduled hands-on activities in a woodland environment, for adults who use the mental health services within the Greater Glasgow and Clyde region.

For more information about community woodlands, or to find a group in your area that might offer any of the activities mentioned, please visit

www.communitywoods.org or contact rosslyn@communitywoods.org.

‘CHEX Points to the Future’ - report from CHEX’s 1st National Conference

“A very grand yet welcoming” venue is how one delegate described St Andrew’s in the Square, the Glasgow setting for CHEX’s very first National Conference which was held on Monday 2 November 2009. The event, entitled ‘CHEX Points to the Future...’ set a strong foundation for future development of the CHEX Network.



Minister for Public Health and Sport (centre) with Dawn and Akin from Health in Mind Lothian

Deftly chaired by Stewart Murdoch (Chair, SCDC of Board of Directors), the day provided an opportunity to both celebrate and consolidate the work of the organisations in the CHEX network. More than 100 delegates were provided with a varied programme that included presentations from three network organisations:

- Gary O’Connor and Carol Queen told us of the work of Health Spot, an innovative youth project in Glasgow’s South East area
- Akin Fatunmbi and Dawn Mackay from Health in Mind Lothian described their information service and work with minority ethnic men to support mental well being
- Steven Watson from Stepwell Consultancy Ltd shared his experience of developing the organisation as a social enterprise with a presentation entitled ‘Becoming a Social Enterprise without selling your soul’.

The keynote speech was delivered by the Minister for Public Health and Sport, Shona Robison MSP, who highlighted the importance of the work undertaken

by the organisations within the CHEX network and the contribution they make to Scotland’s health. The Minister also took questions from delegates and was happy to provide a photo opportunity for presenting organisations.

Emma Whitney from NHS Health Scotland (HS) provided the final presentation of the morning by describing the support that HS has provided to CHEX and Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC) over the past decade, summarising the different phases of that relationship from ‘launch’ to ‘reaching for the sky’ into ‘infinity and beyond’.

To mark the 25th Anniversary of the Pilton Community Health Project from North Edinburgh, Emma presented the organisation’s Chairperson Irene Garden and Co-ordinator Dave Hewitt with a commemorative plaque on behalf of CHEX, SCDC (CHEX’s parent organisation) and Health Scotland.

After lunch, CHEX network member Universal Comedy (a Glasgow charity which delivers comedy workshops and training courses for people experiencing the downside of ill health, depression, anxiety or employment problems) entertained delegates with a series of light-hearted sketches before delegates then got down to the rather more serious business of looking at how the sector might be strengthened and become more influential.

Inputs from CHEX Manager Janet Muir, Brendan Rooney of the Scottish HLC Alliance and Penny Richardson, Chairperson of the Lothian Community Health Projects Forum set the scene for the World Café discussions which provided CHEX network members with an opportunity to have their say. Feedback from this session was translated into what actions the network would like to see happen and a number of delegates volunteered to take that work forward in partnership with CHEX. So, watch this space!



Views expressed in CHEX-POINT are not necessarily those of CHEX, unless specifically stated.

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