

# Executive Summary



## Access to Nature: inspiring people to engage with their natural environment

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## About Access to Nature

Access to Nature is an ambitious grant programme funded by the Big Lottery Fund and run by Natural England as a Changing Spaces award partner. Since it opened for bids in April 2008, Natural England has distributed £28.75 million of funding, through a total of 115 grants, to projects that sought to bring about lasting change in the relationship between the natural environment and people across England.

With a focus on the engagement of people with little or no previous contact with nature, the programme has funded a diverse pool of projects from local community based schemes to large-scale national initiatives. Activities have been wide ranging and have included volunteering and educational opportunities, site improvements and the provision of new facilities or equipment to enable access to the natural environment. Five programme outcomes were addressed through these activities:

**Outcome 1:** A greater diversity and number of people having improved opportunities to experience the natural environment.

**Outcome 2:** More people having opportunities for learning about the natural environment and gaining new skills.

**Outcome 3:** More people able to enjoy the natural environment through investments in access to natural places and networks between sites.

**Outcome 4:** Richer, more sustainably managed, natural places meeting the needs of communities.

**Outcome 5:** An increase in communities' sense of ownership of local natural places, by establishing strong partnerships between communities, voluntary organisations, local authorities and others.

In 2012 the Big Lottery Fund provided a further £1.37 million for Access to Nature projects through Supporting Change and Impact, to enable projects in the last 18 months of their funding to explore how they could be more sustainable beyond Access to Nature funding.

## Learning from Access to Nature

Icarus was appointed in Spring 2009 to develop and implement an evaluation process for the Access to Nature programme. This was a formative approach to evaluation, where the evaluation was on-going and fed back into management and planning processes to inform the development of the programme as it progressed.

The evaluation addressed a series of key questions within an evaluation framework that was developed by Icarus in conjunction with an Evaluation Reference Group. This framework was applied consistently from the start of the evaluation and was the principal guiding document for evidence gathering, analysis and feedback, within what was primarily a supported self-evaluation process.

This paper summarises the significant achievements of the Access to Nature programme. It forms part of the final round up of the evaluation process that has followed Access to Nature programme across its lifetime. In producing this paper, Icarus has drawn on a number of key sources of evidence which include: the final evaluation reports of over 80 projects; interim evaluation reports and learning papers produced by Icarus across the 5 years of Access to Nature; End of Grant reports; and a recent online survey of the programme's Lead Advisers.

## An engagement system

Access to Nature has demonstrated the dynamic inter-relationship between the outcomes brought about by the programme activities, with the achievements associated with one outcome (such as learning) shaping and influencing others (such as the development of ownership).

In this way, Access to Nature was an 'engagement system', with each component and activity contributing at different levels and across different outcomes for participants.

Projects designed and adapted their practice to respond to the situations, needs and aspirations of those they were working with in communities. The evidence has shown that good engagement starts with a sound knowledge and understanding of the people to be engaged and that building relationships between people and nature is dependent on an ability to adapt and respond to participants' needs and ambitions as work progresses. Access to Nature has demonstrated the value of an approach grounded less in convention and more in adaptability, innovation and creativity.

Critically, this engagement system has embraced a new way of working which blended the core knowledge and skills associated with working with nature with the relationship building skills common to community development practice. Other key elements to the engagement system were the habit of forming good working collaborations with partners and organisations already on the ground in communities. These were important in overcoming barriers to engagement and creating resilient local structures and relationships. The need to make it easy for people to connect with nature has also been evidenced; for instance, by providing basic, but essential, resources to overcome practical barriers such as a lack of transport or suitable clothing.

A further pivotal relationship within the engagement system has been that between Natural England and those delivering the programme on its behalf. Natural England has evolved a new way of working, becoming an 'enabling funder', balancing support, challenge and accountability within a spirit of learning. This has facilitated reflective and enquiring practice from projects.

# Significant achievements

Access to Nature has been highly successful. Whether considered in terms of the quality of the outcomes generated for people and nature or the programme's quantitative achievements, Access to Nature accomplished a great deal in establishing the connection and relationship between people and nature.

## Connecting with communities

The scale of the programme's reach into communities, and the degree to which it has enabled positive outcomes for those who became involved, has been impressive. Nearly 950,000 people took up the opportunity to experience and enjoy nature, many for the very first time. Investment in local green spaces, many of them in the heart of communities, has been substantial; access improvements were made at over 2,800 sites across England and improvements to the quality of the natural environment undertaken at over 2,500 sites. This opened up the potential for those sites to reach new and wider audiences, and the aggregated figures show that nearly 640,000 people used the improved access to sites, and over 800,000 benefitted from the improvements to quality.

Crucially, the programme also enabled people to move on from their first encounters with the natural environment, offering them the chance to learn about nature and apply that learning through practical work in natural places. Over 640,000 people undertook a learning activity through Access to Nature, and nearly 42,000 people took the next step in their learning by participating in a training or development programme. This in turn generated commitment, leading to over 34,000 people volunteering to regularly give their time in caring for and maintaining natural places.

These opportunities to engage with the natural environment have generated substantial impact in three areas; wellbeing, learning and ownership, while simultaneously improving the quality of, and access to, local natural places.

## Wellbeing benefits

The wellbeing benefits created by Access to Nature came about through the emphasis on the provision of new opportunities. As projects hooked people into first encounters with nature, they gave the chance for people to explore and discover new environments, and all they have to offer. This led to people describing and reporting a range of benefits, all of which have enhanced the wellbeing of participants.

- Children have found new places to play and to develop social skills.
- Adults have discovered nature (and things about themselves).
- People are more active, feel calmer and more relaxed.
- New friendships and connections have formed.
- Family relationships have been strengthened through the experience of doing things together.

Access to Nature has been excellent at providing this first connection with nature, and in helping people to feel confident to take the next step, often through the simple act of making it easy for people to know where they could access nature, how to get there, and what they could do when they got there.

## Learning benefits

As people came into contact with nature, the programme gave them chances to learn. A great success of Access to Nature was its ability to use the outdoors as a classroom, where people gained an understanding of the natural world, how it works, and how it can be supported. A potent mix of simple learning opportunities combined with practically applying skills and knowledge in the outdoors alongside others was highly effective.

The programme gave people new knowledge that was brought to life by using it to improve local natural places, and encouraged many to move on to gain a formal qualification. It also supported mainstream learning for children and built a body of people in schools, children's centres and community organisations who are now confident outdoor learning practitioners. This means the programme has substantially added to the volume of people in England who know enough about their local green spaces to enjoy and appreciate them, to conserve and maintain them, and to help others to learn about them.

## Ownership benefits

The relationships built through Access to Nature have been critical in achieving a sense of ownership and commitment among participants towards nature. The programme has provided strong evidence that, for people with limited experience of nature, a first encounter is not enough to change the way they think about, feel about or use the natural environment. It also demonstrated that building on first encounters *can* bring about those changes. Through a 'stepping stones' approach which works at the pace of those involved, an empowering style that gives people the chance to grow and do things themselves, and a belief in offering people the chance to work on projects that matter to them, Access to Nature fostered a sense of ownership of local natural places by local people.

The time now being spent by people outdoors, the new groups formed to care for local sites, the new activities being hosted by local people, and the new learning about the natural world, are all indicative of a step change in how people have come to regard and care for the natural environment.

## Benefits for natural places

The success of the programme has been possible because of the focus on improving quality and access to local sites, and the willingness to offer people the chance to discover, learn and care for places close by. The combination of well targeted investment and people volunteering time and skills learnt through Access to Nature has meant that many natural places are now more visible, easier to access and navigate, better used, better managed, cleaner and more hospitable for wildlife habitats. The programme also contributed to increased biodiversity that will only be fully realised in years to come.

The shifts in knowledge and ownership achieved by the programme suggest that increases in quality and access will be lasting, as people use their new-found enthusiasm and skills to continue to conserve and manage natural places. In this way the programme has created a substantial legacy in the volume of people in communities who now know about, care for and have an active role in conserving the natural places around them.