



# GroundsWell

## Community Magazine

Summer/Autumn 2025

# GROWING TOGETHER

**in Belfast, Edinburgh and Liverpool**

**INCLUDING ARTICLES ON: Inclusive Beaches • Ecotherapy • Nature and Neurodiversity •  
Canal Safety • Foraging Recipes and Tips • Wilderness Therapy • Making Schools Healthier •  
Community Gardening... and more!**



# How to get involved with Our Outdoors



## Rating the quality of outdoor spaces in my neighbourhood: the our outdoors mobile app

Outdoor spaces such as parks allow us to engage in a range of activities such as exercise, socialising and relaxing - meaning parks and outdoors spaces can be good for our health!

However, not all outdoor spaces are of the same quality, and some need to be improved so people can benefit from them. We would like your help in identifying the good and not-so-good outdoor spaces in your local area.

### How can you help?

We have developed a mobile app called Our Outdoors that lets people rate the quality of their local outdoor spaces, and how those spaces affect their wellbeing.

We would like you to try the app, and give us feedback on your experience: what you liked about it, and anything we can do to improve it.



### What will this involve?

You can download the app from the google or apple stores, or access it using the QR code. Go and try the app in your local area.

If you would like to give us some feedback, please contact Stephen Malden, the researcher leading the study, at [Stephen.malden@ed.ac.uk](mailto:Stephen.malden@ed.ac.uk) to arrange a time to do a short phone or teams interview. During the interview, the researcher will ask you about what you thought of the app, as well as some questions about how you typically travel in your local area.



# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

## Welcome to the second issue of the GroundsWell community magazine.

This issue highlights stories of change from projects across the GroundsWell network. Many of them are supported through their Community Innovation Fund, which was created to support local initiatives.

GroundsWell is a collaboration between researchers, communities, and decision-makers working in Belfast, Edinburgh, and Liverpool. The aim is to understand how urban green and blue spaces – like parks, gardens, rivers, and canals – can support better health and wellbeing, especially in areas that need it most.

It has been a real privilege to run the community reporter training workshops that led to the creation of this issue. The sessions were held online so that people from all three GroundsWell cities could take part. It was a chance for everyone involved to learn about the work being done elsewhere, and to discover the shared threads that connect them: inclusivity, empowerment, and a deep respect for the value of green and blue spaces.

Throughout these pages, you'll hear from those directly involved in the projects – from community green spaces helping people thrive, to inclusive beach experiences that are truly life-changing. These stories show the difference that access to nature can have.

As with our first issue, this magazine brings together many perspectives – community members, researchers, volunteers, and facilitators. It's proof that when communities are supported to tell their own stories, the results are richer, deeper, and more meaningful.

We hope you find inspiration in the stories that follow.

Warmly,

**Rhiannon Davies**  
*Editor*

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The GroundsWell project is an interdisciplinary consortium led by Queen's University Belfast, University of Edinburgh and University of Liverpool and as well as the University of Exeter, also includes the universities of Glasgow, Cranfield, Liverpool John Moore's University, and Lancaster. The project is funded by the UK Prevention Research Partnership (UKPRP).

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Photo by S. Raduly





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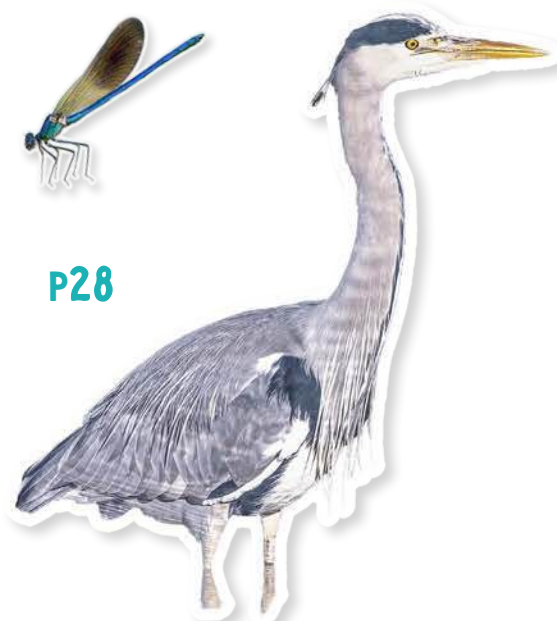
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# GROWING TOGETHER WITH GROUNDSWELL

## How communities are shaping healthier futures

*By Dr Andrew James Williams  
Co-director for Edinburgh and community engagement  
and citizen science*

**W**elcome to the second issue of our GroundsWell community magazine, in which we take a closer look at the projects funded through our Community Innovation Fund. In the last issue, we only briefly mentioned how novel and exciting the GroundsWell Community Innovation programme is, so this time we wanted to give you a bit of background.

The GroundsWell Consortium is funded by the UK Prevention Research Partnership (UKPRP). Twelve funders came together to establish UKPRP in 2017 with the vision to improve population health, and reduce health inequalities, through the prevention of non-communicable diseases – such as heart and respiratory diseases, cancers, strokes and mental ill-health – which affect many people in the UK causing preventable illness and deaths.

To prevent these diseases, lots of changes need to be made – from personal behaviours like diet and exercise, to local and national government policy, and multinational agency and business action. For example, to prevent respiratory diseases you need people to avoid tobacco smoke, employers need to provide personal protective equipment to staff working in hazardous environments, and governments and multinational agencies need to agree and comply with policy on reducing air pollution. This requires lots of people to work together and lots of different forms of research to understand what needs to happen, which is why so many funders joined forces to establish UKPRP – to bring all these different people together.

Within GroundsWell, our focus is on green and blue spaces in urban areas and the role they can play in reducing health inequalities and helping people live healthier lives. When the project was being designed, we recognised that lots of voluntary and community organisations are involved with these spaces, but the funding available for these groups often means that they don't get much opportunity to innovate, and try something which might fail.

Therefore, we proposed the GroundsWell Community Innovation Fund which has the theme of 'Growing Together'. This could refer to personal growth, community cohesion and inclusion, community growing and more – it was open to interpretation.



**‘...we also wanted to give a voice to our partners, and let them tell us about their projects in their own words’**

To be eligible for the programme, project applications needed to:

- align with the theme of 'Growing Together';
- have potential to impact on health;
- have clear indicators of project success; and
- innovate around the inclusion and engagement of people who currently under-use outdoor natural spaces for whatever reason.

People who currently under-use outdoor natural spaces include, but are not limited to, ethnic minority groups, low-income communities, refugees, migrants, asylum seekers, individuals with chronic conditions or disabilities, and people experiencing homelessness. Within this magazine you will read about the diverse and innovative projects we have been able to support.

Through the GroundsWell Community Innovation Fund, we awarded a total of approximately £240,000 — with £80,000 allocated to each of the three cities: Belfast, Liverpool, and Edinburgh. This funding supported 16 projects overall: four in Belfast, and six each in Liverpool and Edinburgh. These projects span a wide range of green and blue spaces, engaging diverse communities across the UK.

Each of the organisations in the programme have been working with members of the GroundsWell research team to help capture the learning from their innovation. We will be using this learning to provide advice on how to work with communities and engage more people in outdoor natural spaces so that we can improve health. Whilst we will be working with our Innovation Fund partners to create outputs, such as impact reports, policy briefs, and videos, we also wanted to give a voice to our partners, and let them tell us about their projects in their own words.

We hope you enjoy reading about all the exciting work our fund holders have undertaken.

# Why we worked with community reporters to tell these stories

By Rhiannon J Davies  
Co-founder of Greater Community Media



**W**hen people are equipped to tell their own stories, something powerful happens – instead of stories being told *about* them, they are created *by*, *with* and *for* them. Communities define themselves on their own terms. That's exactly what this magazine represents: a collaboration between local residents, facilitators and researchers across Belfast, Edinburgh and Liverpool, all of whom are connected to GroundsWell-funded projects.

Earlier this year, participants from a wide range of backgrounds, ages and experiences took part in community reporter training. Together we explored how community journalism can be used to better understand – and shift – power, and how we can strengthen our communities through the information and connections this brings. They also learned practical magazine journalism skills such as interview techniques, article formats, structuring writing and incorporating visuals.

Working with community reporters to tell the stories of GroundsWell reflects the project's core commitment of putting communities at the heart of everything it does – community reporters are part of a process of informing, engaging and equipping people to make positive changes where they live.

## What is community-centred media?

Community-centred media is an approach to meeting communities' needs for information and connection. It is different to traditional journalism through being deeply rooted in listening to and understanding the needs of communities, particularly marginalised groups, centring their voices and concerns, and ensuring the media reflects and serves them.

As well as focusing on listening and building strong relationships with communities, it often goes beyond this through co-creation and active participation. It ultimately aims to build community connection, resilience, and power to make positive change in their lives and communities.

In traditional journalism, framing decisions are often made by editors and journalists, sometimes unconsciously, and often influenced by institutional norms or external pressures. In co-creational media, these decisions are opened up.

This matters because framing influences how people understand issues and what action they feel empowered to take. When communities help frame the narrative, the story becomes more rooted in real experience, and more useful to those it's meant to serve.

## Why focus on solutions?

Many of the stories told in this magazine are also fantastic examples of constructive journalism: highlighting solutions, strengths and possibilities, rather than focusing on problems. Constructive journalism asks: *What's working? What are people doing to make things better? What can others learn from this?*

By spotlighting community-led action through a constructive lens, the community journalism didn't just document the GroundsWell projects, but to help amplify what's possible, share learning between places, and inspire others to take action in their own communities. This kind of reporting encourages hope, agency and collaboration. It doesn't gloss over challenges, but it shows how people are responding to them creatively and collectively.

This is the hopeful, powerful approach I dreamed of when I set up Greater Govanhill community magazine in Glasgow five years ago. This magazine you hold in your hands is evidence that a different way of doing journalism is possible: putting communities back at the heart of telling their own stories, building power and equipping people with the tools to narrate their own stories and make positive change.

Helping more people to do this is why I set up Greater Community Media. I would love to hear your feedback on this magazine, and if you're interested in finding out more about taking a community-centred approach and how you could do it, please get in touch: [rhiannon@greatercommunitymedia.com](mailto:rhiannon@greatercommunitymedia.com).

**GREATER  
COMMUNITY  
MEDIA**

# GROWING TOGETHER

*Projects that received funding from the GroundsWell Community Innovation Fund*

## BELFAST

### **HEALTHY PLACES, HEALTHY CHILDREN**

#### *Belfast Healthy Cities*

This programme helps children understand their local built environment and its connection to their health and wellbeing. Children develop and share their own proposals for improvement, giving them a voice in creating healthier, more child-friendly communities.

### **GROWING UP HEALTHY TOGETHER**

#### *Belfast Hills Partnership*

This initiative gets children outdoors and into the Belfast Hills, using nature to improve their physical and mental wellbeing. The programme aims to provide positive outdoor experiences, teach new skills, and foster a lifelong connection with nature to promote healthy lifestyle choices.

### **INCLUSIVE BEACH PROGRAMME**

#### *Mae Murray Foundation*

The Inclusive Beach programme makes beaches across Northern Ireland accessible to people of all ages and abilities. The Mae Murray Foundation hosts events and provide free loan schemes for specialised equipment, such as beach wheelchairs and walking frames, allowing everyone to enjoy the seaside.

### **COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT**

#### *EastSide Greenways*

Through community engagement and co-design, the programme is exploring the potential to turn an underused community asset into a thriving community hub, connected to greenspace in East Belfast.





# EDINBURGH

## **WATERWAYS TO WELLBEING**

### *Fountainbridge Canalside Community Trust*

This project uses a canal boat on Edinburgh's Union Canal as a unique venue for creative and nature-based activities that support people's wellbeing. It provides a supportive space to build their confidence, try new things, and connect with their local blue space.

## **NEW SCOTS AND COMMUNITY GARDENS**

### *Edible Estates & Growing Together*

This research project explores how community gardens in council estates can be made more welcoming and accessible for New Scots – people who migrated from abroad in the last decade, and who have made their home in Scotland – to support their wellbeing, and inclusion into their local community.

## **ACCESS PLACE GARDEN**

### *Cyrenians*

At a hub providing integrated housing and health services for people experiencing homelessness in the heart of Edinburgh, this project transformed a derelict playground into a community garden, which acts as a green haven and the heart of a wider nature-based health programme.

## **CONNECT NATURE THERAPY**

### *Changes East Lothian*

Changes' Nature Therapy helps people to connect with nature as a way to improve their happiness and wellbeing. An experienced nature guide leads a group through nature-based activities while a trained psychologist leads discussions that help people process their thoughts and emotions during the experience.

## **LEITH SPACES FOR ALL GENERATIONS**

### *Citadel Youth Centre*

This project will bring together young and older people as co-researchers to examine how different generations use green spaces. Together, they will co-design more accessible and inclusive parks.

## **COMMUNITY KITCHEN GARDEN**

### *WHALE Arts*

This project transforms the green space in front of the WHALE Arts building into a welcoming community kitchen garden. Through co-design and community engagement, it aims to promote wellbeing, healthy eating, and social integration by providing a space for residents to grow food, learn new skills, and strengthen community bonds.

# LIVERPOOL

## **NATURE IN LINACRE • *Regenerus***

This project collaborates with residents in Linacre to map their local natural environment and shape the plan for environmental improvements for a sustainable future. Through this mapping and creation of an action plan, the community builds knowledge, skills and confidence, and better understand their relationship with the natural environment.

## **BOOTLE COMMUNITY CANAL PROJECT: SPLASH THE LIGHT FANTASTIC!**

### *SAFE Regeneration*

Through providing inclusive and accessible water and outdoor experiences based in and around the Leeds-Liverpool canal in Bootle, this project connects people with others and with their local environment, while helping them learn new skills. It supports community cohesion and improves the health and wellbeing of the local community, focusing on making this accessible to people from visually impaired groups.

## **DOCK BRANCH NEIGHBOURHOOD**

### **COMMUNITY PANEL • *Wirral Council***

This project supports a community panel advising on the development of significant regeneration projects in Birkenhead: Dock Branch Park and Neighbourhood Masterplans, embedding local residents' voices in the planning. They promote a stewardship approach for maintaining the park, and are identifying opportunities for engaging local people in 'meanwhile use' projects.

## **IMPACT SEFTON: LET'S PADDLE**

### **FOR POSITIVE CHANGE • *Canal & River Trust***

This is a collaborative initiative to explore and harness the potential of waterways, to enhance the physical and mental wellbeing of young people struggling to meet demands of mainstream education. The project aims to develop a sustainable offer at Impact Sefton through the establishment of a paddlesport hub and deliver a comprehensive paddlesport training programme, using a train-the-trainer approach to support staff and students to grow together.

## **'RECONNECTING TO GREEN SPACES': IMPROVING ACCESS FOR HEALTH**

### *Vauxhall Health Centre*

This project focuses on improving physical access to the Vauxhall Health Centre and its surrounding green spaces. It does this through identifying barriers and implementing small interventions like installing dropped curbs and benches, and a dedicated practitioner helps people connect with nature, while tree planting aims to enhance the local environment.

## **NATURAL HEALTH SERVICE – FOREST BATHING**

### *The Mersey Forest*

This project uses forest bathing – mindful, immersive time in nature – as a therapeutic approach to support mental health and wellbeing. It provides calming outdoor experiences in the Bluebell Woodland at Aintree University Hospital for NHS staff on sick leave and adults using the local mental health service.

# GARDENS THAT GROW US

## *On the Power of Community Green Spaces*

By Catherine Moar  
Polaroid portraits by Lili Bor

***“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”***

*– Margaret Mead*

**T**he Fountainbridge Canalside Community Trust's Greenspace Group was established in August 2023. Its purpose is to explore and improve our local public green and blue spaces. We meet on Tuesday mornings and have established a core member group, with many others dropping in as and when they can.

We have dedicated many of our sessions to working on Fountainbridge Green by the Union Canal. The soil quality there is poor, due to its previous use as a rubber factory. We have boosted biodiversity in this area by planting new trees and hedges in collaboration with Edinburgh City Council. We have also created a 'dead hedge' and four wildflower patches.

We collaborate with other local groups, including Friends of Harrison Park, North Merchiston Cemetery, Grove in the Park, and the Phoenix Club, to help out with their projects when more people are needed. We use local cafes for a catch-up over coffee once the gardening activities are finished.

In the interview that follows, members share how the group has strengthened their sense of belonging and supported their mental wellbeing.

### **What motivated you to join the Greenspace Group?**

**Loraine:** I have always loved gardening and nature, and had recently retired when the group was set up. I enjoy connecting with like-minded people and being part of a community network. I also enjoy making lovely spaces along the canal.

**Beth:** I moved back to Edinburgh, needing to rebuild my life after a few difficult years. I had been signed off work with anxiety and depression, and felt isolated and overwhelmed. I needed a routine and to feel somehow anchored. I googled 'volunteering' and up came Greenspace! It was near where I live, and meeting weekly felt perfect. I knew it would be good for my mental health and as a social contact. I'm already passionate about green spaces, so I just knew it would be something I could really get stuck into. I was also missing the allotment I'd had to leave behind in my move.

### **What is your favourite activity around the Union Canal?**

**Loraine:** I love walking along all parts of the canal and spotting wildlife. I enjoy watching canal boats go by. Many are from different groups, and we have linked up with them.

**Beth:** My favourite activity would have to be spotting wildlife. Seeing the swans, ducks, bees, kingfishers... It's a wildlife corridor, a really valuable resource! I love birdwatching. It helps me feel grounded.

### **Can you share a memorable experience you've had while working with the group?**

**Loraine:** Every Tuesday is memorable! There is a great deal of joy in our group. My favourite would probably be learning how to lay cardboard, soak it, then cover it with soil and sow wildflower seeds. The joy of seeing these grow is amazing. They attract wildlife and pollinators where there were previously very few. I also really enjoy our foraging events. We learn so much about plants.



BETH & CATHERINE



**Beth:** There are so many positive experiences. Lots of laughter, achieving amazing things together. It's a fantastic group of lighthearted people. Probably what stands out most is when we were planning what we could provide for wildlife at Fountainbridge Green; we did a survey to see what was actually there. For example, we counted birds, and there was a noticeable divide: the north side of the canal had little greenery, whereas the south side had older tenements with gardens and green spaces, accompanied by lots of birdsong. The stark contrast was very memorable, sparking an exciting challenge because we could make a real change. We dreamt up a biodiverse native hedge, and now it's here!

**Have you noticed any personal changes in your wellbeing since you started volunteering here?**

**Loraine:** I feel more positive! I look forward to it every week, and I feel excited about what we are going to do. I feel a sense of wellbeing, a peaceful outlook. There's no pressure, just teamwork. It's a very special group to me. I have experienced past trauma, which was triggered again and brought back memories of a difficult time in life. My anxiety has reduced by being with a group who care, especially since my retirement and reduced contact with colleagues.

Also, there are so many difficult things happening in the world, such as the climate crisis. Doing your bit can ease that anxiety and make you feel you are doing something positive, contributing to enhancing wildlife, pollinators, and more. This is a very special group, and my wellbeing has been greatly enhanced. Every community should have a greenspace group!

**Beth:** When living with long-term mental health difficulties, there are going to be bad days. When I first joined the group, I sometimes felt like I was having a crappy day and wouldn't go along. But the more I went, the more I noticed how much better it made me feel, and how welcome I was made to feel. There was no pressure; I didn't have to put on a brave face. So even on hard days, I went along, and it taught me to accept myself as I am, and push through on the harder days.

**What role does collaboration play in your activities, and how do you engage with the local community?**

**Loraine:** We engage with a variety of local groups, helping with their gardening. We collaborate with the City of Edinburgh Council,

who kindly provide us with bulbs and soil. We have a close connection with Scottish Canals, our local library and sports club. We do shared community events. Local people ask us what we are doing and what group we belong to when they spot us gardening.

**Beth:** Collaboration plays a big role. We are deeply intertwined with other groups, community hubs and even cafes. These are connections I wouldn't have made on my own. It makes you more connected, and that's special. You are accepted as you are. Being part of the group has helped me engage with my local community. These people are incredible, and I wouldn't have met them if I hadn't been part of the group. This also allows me to connect with others in different ways because I now expect and look for the amazing in everyone.

**Have you noticed any changes in your habits or outlook since becoming involved?**

**Loraine:** I'm a more positive person... even doing small things, like litter picking, uplifts my mood and strengthens my sense of community belonging, not to mention a sense of pride in our area. I also now have more awareness of what's good for my own garden and what attracts pollinators. I get a sense of joy when I see areas I've helped create.

**Beth:** It fosters generosity of spirit, which spreads over time. If you're doing something to benefit the community, it can motivate people to do the same. If a street is strewn with litter, people are more likely to do the same. But if you demonstrate paying attention to your surroundings, to the plants and animals, other people are more likely to take an interest too.

**What do you think are the most important benefits of community work like this?**

**Loraine:** It benefits everyone's wellbeing. It brings a peaceful existence to your life, creating special and beautiful things. You feel part of your community, reaching out and connecting with other groups. We live in a more isolated world, and have seen a loss of community connections. The Greenspace



LORAINÉ



Group makes us feel more part of our community, therefore we care more about our local places. It's like a ripple effect in the water as we reach out to others and our group grows.

**Beth:** I'd say it's about human connection with communities, feeling more anchored in your neighbourhood, both in terms of spaces and people. If I see someone from Greenspace out and about, I say hi. It's just a beautiful thing to get to know new people this way, and I feel safer and more seen, especially as I have no family in Scotland. There's something lovely about having this connection with people across different generations.

**What message would you want people to hear about the power of green spaces and community involvement?**

**Loraine:** I would like them to know it is amazing to be part of the Greenspace Group. We learn so much from such wonderful and enthusiastic people. It is a happy, fun and caring group which enhances our local area.

**Beth:** Sometimes, when you're in a dark place, it can be hard to believe green-spacing can be good. There's plenty of scientific evidence about the benefits of connecting with nature, such as touching soil with your bare hands. I'd say go through the motions and let the soil do its work. You don't always need to have deep conversations to feel connected to a group of strangers. Just working alongside in silence is powerful.

**Is there anything else that you'd like to mention or highlight?**

**Loraine:** I will continue to spread the word and joy that our Greenspace Group brings to everyone who walks through the spaces along the canal.

**Beth:** It's a fantastic resource, and we're so lucky to have the facilitators we do. This kind of wisdom is often held by marginalised people and women, who are often undervalued monetarily. It's wonderful to have a community trust to see the facilitators' time is paid for, and as a result, we as a group and the community benefit so much. So, an honourable mention to the facilitators and the trust who secure funding to allow this to all happen!



## Ways gardening groups can help mental wellbeing

1. Gardening helps reduce cortisol, the hormone associated with stress. This can boost immune function, improve memory, and decrease the risk of obesity and heart disease.
2. It offers a technology break that fosters creative thinking and boosts problem-solving skills.
3. It's a mindful activity that directs our focus to the job in hand.
4. For many people, gardening provides a sense of control, achievement, and purpose.
5. It fosters social connections.
6. Connectedness to others is known to increase longevity.
7. Group members can share knowledge and skills while working towards common goals.



# How to preserve spring's abundance

By Lili Bor and Catherine Moar  
Illustrations by Isabella Claydon

The Canalside Greenspace Group in Edinburgh is a community of people who care deeply about the environment. While we mostly garden along the Union Canal, these recipes are inspired by our annual foraging tour around Edinburgh, where we learn about cleavers (known colloquially as sticky willy), stinging nettle, wild garlic and many other edible plants. Fresh cleavers and nettle make a wonderful tea – invigorating and rich in minerals, it's long been cherished as a spring tonic. Wild garlic and few-flowered leek, on the other hand, are ideal for preserving as larder staples. We hope you'll enjoy these recipes!

## GOLDEN RULES OF FORAGING

1. Only harvest plants you can identify with certainty – wild garlic and few-flowered leek resemble toxic plants like lily of the valley.
2. Collect sparingly from abundant populations. Wild boar, deer, rabbits, squirrels and pollinators all love wild garlic.
3. Leave the roots in the ground and allow plenty of flowers to bloom for ecosystem health and regrowth.

### Did you know?

Word has it that few-flowered leek escaped from the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh in 1863 and soon became an invasive species throughout Scotland. Today, it grows alongside the native wild garlic.



## Wild garlic oil

*Perfect for drizzling over warm salads, roasted vegetables and seafood dishes.*

### Ingredients:

- wild garlic or few-flowered leek leaves
- extra virgin olive oil

### Method:

1. Rinse and dry the leaves.
2. Lightly bruise the leaves to allow flavour to escape.
3. Put them in a bottle with olive oil and store in a cool, dark place.



## Wild Garlic Pesto

*Slather this vibrant pesto on bread, mix it into pasta, or serve it as a dip for vegetables and crackers.*

### Ingredients:

- wild garlic leaves
- nuts (pine nuts, almonds or walnuts)
- grated Parmesan cheese (or nutritional yeast for a vegan option)
- olive oil
- salt and pepper
- a squeeze of lemon juice (optional)

### Method:

1. Toast the nuts over medium heat until golden, then set aside to cool.
2. Wash the wild garlic leaves and pat them dry.
3. Add the wild garlic, toasted nuts, and grated cheese to a blender.
4. Blend while gradually pouring in the olive oil.
5. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Optionally, add a squeeze of lemon juice.
6. Use right away – or keep in a jar, topped with a thin layer of olive oil. Seal tightly and refrigerate for up to 2-3 weeks.



## Leek cubes

*Stir straight into soups, stews, or stir-fries to enhance flavour.*

### Ingredients:

- few-flowered leek leaves and stems
- melted butter (or olive oil for a vegan option)

### Method:

1. Rinse, dry and chop the leaves and stems.
2. Pack into ice cube trays and top up with melted butter.
3. Label and keep in the freezer for up to 6 months.



## Pickled leaves, buds

*Here are three options for tangy pickles which can be added to sandwiches, salads, cheese boards, or diced into sauces.*

### Ingredients:

- 1 • few-flowered leek stems, leaves and flowers
  - white wine vinegar or apple cider vinegar
  - salt, whole mixed peppercorns and a bay leaf
- 2 • few-flowered leek bulbils\*
  - balsamic and raspberry vinegar
- 3 • few-flowered leek bulbils\*
  - white wine vinegar
  - chilli
  - kaffir lime leaves

*\*Bulbils are small, bulb-like structures that form between the leaf and stem or in place of flowers*

### Method:

1. Rinse and trim the plant.
2. Pack into sterilised jars.
3. Boil vinegar with salt and spices.
4. Pour the hot vinegar into the jars, leaving a little space at the top.
5. Seal the jars and allow them to sit for a week before use.

# A JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY DOWN EDINBURGH'S CANALS

*By Allan James McNaughton*

I was born in Edinburgh in 1959, but while I have lived in the city most of my life, it was only when they started work on the Falkirk Wheel in 1997, that I found out about the canal on our doorstep.

The Falkirk Wheel now links the Forth and Clyde Canal (which runs from Glasgow to Falkirk) with the Union Canal (which runs from Falkirk to Edinburgh). It is the world's only rotating boat lift, and while it has become a tourist attraction in its own right, there's loads more to see on the canals.

For the past ten years, I've been volunteering as a helmsman on the Lochrin Belle based at Fountainbridge – a fully accessible boat that can be rented out for different activities. I have developed a keen interest in the history and heritage of the canals. In 2024, I joined the Seagull Trust Cruises at Falkirk. The Seagull Trust has four boats at Ratho, two at Falkirk and two at Kirkintilloch. They run pleasure trips for residents of care homes and for children with additional support needs. The two at Falkirk can travel through the Falkirk Tunnel, the Falkirk Wheel and into the basin and back.



*A selection of the old images and posters on display in the Seagull Trust Cruises boathouse in Falkirk.*

There are five Scottish canals in total, which make 141 miles of linked waterways: the Caledonian, Crinan, Forth & Clyde Canal, Monkland, and Union. The original purpose of the canals was to transport goods between towns and cities, and they originally used Clydesdale horses to pull the barges.

In the early 19th century the Lord of Callender refused to allow canal boats to go through his land so the engineers came up with a plan to build a tunnel going not through his land but underneath it. That is why the Falkirk Tunnel (pictured above) was built, and completed in 1822 – to allow the canal boats to pass through to get to the locks going down to the Forth and Clyde Canal.

The tunnel is three-quarters of a mile in length and now has colourful lights that guide the way through what was once solid rock – hand carved and blasted by the navvies

who built it. After the canal boats pass through the Falkirk Tunnel, the boats travel along the Union Canal for 20 minutes until they reach the turning point to start down the fourteen locks of the Forth and Clyde Canal.

There would have been whole families living and working along the length of the canals. There would be lock keepers who would operate the locks to let barges and boats change heights to cross the hills of Scotland.

Families lived in the stable blocks to look after the horses. There were nine stable blocks to rest the horses for the night, so they would be ready for the next morning. Some stables have been demolished while others have been repurposed for community use. There were three in Edinburgh – one in Fountainbridge, another in Polwarth and another located on the site which is now Bridge 8 Hub in the Calders, Wester Hailes. The next stables were





located at Ratho, Broxburn and Winchburgh, which is now home to a scout hall. Next were Linlithgow, Polmont and Falkirk.

There are three bridges in Edinburgh and one near Falkirk. Bridge 49 has two faces on it – one side has a crying face, the other a laughing face – each telling a story. The crying face looks west to Falkirk, built by Highland navvies who faced tough terrain, a tunnel, and eleven locks – so difficult that the contractor went bankrupt. The smiling face looks east, where Irish navvies had a much easier job and the builder made a tidy profit.

The other three bridges are in Edinburgh between Polwarth and Harrison Park. These are painted in blue, black, brown and red, representing different aspects of the canal. Blue is for sky or water, black is for the coal that was transported, brown is for bricks or wood, and red is

for the men and women and children who lost their lives building them.

For me, it's a great honour to be a volunteer on the canal boats. I enjoy what I do and like helping people as well as welcoming guests onto the boat. When I'm on the boat I always wonder what the canal would have been like 200 years ago. I would have loved to have seen the horse-drawn barges and boats, or the ones with coal fires, as well as visiting the stable blocks and speaking to the teams that managed them. I would have enjoyed getting the chance to speak to the people that worked along the canal and hearing their stories in their own words.

It is a privilege to be part of the canals' history – and I hope to continue to do so.



# Finding calm through ecotherapy and art in the heart of Edinburgh

*By Kevin Ferguson  
Photos provided by programme leaders*





## The art of slowing down

As we paused on the path, we were introduced to the art of 'slow walking'. Instead of marching along to 'get fit', eyes fixed on the middle distance, we were encouraged to take our time, and look downwards instead. And there it was. Tiny. Almost invisible – certainly missed by anyone marching past on a mission. A ladybird. Just sitting there, doing its thing.

How many times do we walk on autopilot, minds elsewhere, gazing at the 'scenery' far away from us? This is the alternative: ecotherapy in action. Move slowly, pay attention and let nature surprise you.

The group carried on through Saughton Park in Edinburgh, taking time to notice sights, sounds, smells – and even stopped to read the inscriptions on the monuments and learn more about local stories.

Park and Stride is one of a variety of ecotherapy programmes offered by Health All Round. Their range of services focus on physical, social and emotional wellbeing, reaching some 250 people per week, with a view to helping them live longer, healthier lives.

## So what exactly is ecotherapy?

Ecotherapy is an umbrella term that encompasses nature-based activities and nature therapy programmes that aim to improve mental and overall health. It might sound like a new idea, but the concept of nature as a healer has been around for millennia. In India, the ancient and traditional medical system of Ayurveda relies on natural or nature-based approaches. Similarly, traditional Chinese medicine is based on the belief that humans are interconnected to nature.

The session I experienced in Saughton Park is one example of a variety of activities which fall under the general idea of ecotherapy. This also includes practices like animal-assisted therapy, wilderness experiences, forest bathing, and horticulture therapy, among others. Through a separate Edinburgh-based group, I was thrilled to join an alpaca-walking session near a lochan (small loch) in the Pentland Hills.

## Experiencing the city from a new angle

Another way of slowing down is by drifting along the Union Canal, often being overtaken by dog walkers and others who pass on the towpath. It's a delightful way to contemplate a very different viewpoint of nature – especially given that we boarded the barge at a point which is just yards from Tollcross and Fountainbridge in Edinburgh city centre – and yet the journey is as quiet and peaceful as you'd expect out in the countryside.

After our safety briefing (in case we fall into the five-foot-deep water), we were encouraged to sit out in the prow area so that we could see a view which is only available to relatively few people as they make their way along the canal itself. It's amazing that all sorts of flora and fauna are visible, basically within about 500 feet of the huge Fountain Park complex. A variety of birds and squirrels watch us as we pass nearby – totally unfazed by our presence.

Once we'd had a chance to appreciate the beauty of our surroundings, we were led in a guided meditation which allowed us to clear our minds and focus on the peaceful nature of our situation. Even the boat hardly made a sound as we potted along at a couple of miles per hour. It's a wonderful way to travel and we all naturally felt calmer and slowed down by the experience.



Afterwards, Mandy, a fellow group member commented: "Ecotherapy has taught me to look up to the sky, to my left and right, to see and appreciate what is around me. It gives me time to switch off from the pressures of everyday life and just be in the moment."

## Experiencing creativity as a means of connection

This is another strand of Health All Round's support. By promoting art, they aim to enhance wellbeing, foster social connections, and cultivate a sense of belonging within the community. The programme is designed to help by: distracting from stress and anxiety; giving a sense of meaning and purpose; creating a sense of achievement and self-worth; encouraging relaxation and enjoying the here and now; improving awareness of the world around us.

My first experience of this was a visit to the Travelling Gallery, a touring exhibition which visited the Community Wellbeing Space on the western outskirts of Edinburgh. This fascinating display of photography was housed in a converted bus, which allowed the collection to travel the length and breadth of the country to bring the exhibition to a wide variety of communities. The exhibition featured photography by Carolyn Scott – powerful social commentary capturing people and communities worldwide, including many taken in and around Edinburgh.

My second visit with the Art for Health group was to Stills Centre for Photography in Edinburgh city centre. We saw an exhibition entitled *At The End of History*, curated by Johny Pitts, and featuring British Working Class Photography taken between 1989 and 2024. We were fortunate to have a guided tour, which helped to interpret and explain some of the many works on display.

Those who have attended the Art for Health groups have also thoroughly enjoyed themselves, with one commenting: "It has given me a positive focus to look forward to, where previously I shut myself away rather than face the world. It has also enriched my appreciation of art and given some confidence in attempting my own art and writing". Another attendee said: "I now use spontaneous art to relieve stress. It's good to see the progression towards wellness, not just in myself but in others whom I have met in group activities".

Ecotherapy and Art for Health are two valuable forms of mindfulness that help open our eyes to appreciate what's around us – and are just part of the support offered by Health All Round.

# ROOTS OF CHANGE

## How Belfast pupils are making their school healthier

By Maeve Brennan, Belfast Healthy Cities

**T**he Healthy Places, Healthy Children teaching resource includes lesson plans, presentations, and background information to allow primary teachers to educate students aged 8 to 11 about the built environment and health.

Starting in September 2024, ten primary schools in the Greater Belfast area have used the resource, as part of a small, funded cohort of trained schools. As a result of their learnings, each class has developed a project proposal and case of evidence showing how they would plan to make changes within an identified space on the school grounds, to promote a healthier school environment.

This resource uses a child-led approach to provide children with knowledge and skills to be active citizens and a voice for change. It empowers them to solve problems and challenges to make their environment healthier, through the development of a child-led green space project.

Thanks to funding from GroundsWell, the children's projects have been able to come to life and have included: planting trees, planting bulbs, building school gardens, mud kitchens, meditative gardens and purchasing outdoor play equipment. Children have also developed Class Community Charters to call the school to provide children with the right to safe, clean, fun and healthy environments.



**"We enjoyed being outside and getting to do stuff with other people"**











# HOW URBAN NATURE CAN HELP CHILDREN BUILD RESILIENCE

Nature has the power to heal – especially for children facing adversity. In this piece, Tara McCaughan explores how access to green space builds resilience, supports mental health, and sparks moments of unexpected transformation.

*By Tara McCaughan,  
Belfast Hills Partnership  
Photos by Tara McCaughan  
and Elaine Armstrong*



**T**he Bug Boys’ – a group of four P5 students – were fully immersed in woodland exploration; drawing, recording and inspecting insects with magnifying glasses. But when a little green creature was accidentally squashed in their eager hands, they were devastated. That single moment sparked a powerful, spontaneous discussion with the whole year group on compassion for others, the fragility of life and nature, and our shared responsibility to care for the world around us.

As a former family support worker in Belfast city, I strongly advocate that every child matters and deserves the best start in life, regardless of background.

Wilderness therapy is becoming known as an emerging health intervention. So over the last year, Belfast Hills Partnership brought almost 400 children from the areas of highest deprivation in the city of Belfast out into local green space, through the GroundsWell-funded Growing Up Healthy project. Although sessions complemented the primary school curriculum element of



instilling a sense of 'awe and wonder', the NHS public health initiative 'Five Steps to Wellbeing' was the key focus point.

I know firsthand that many children are living in poverty. Some are on the Social Services' Child Protection Register or the Looked After Children's Register. Others live in fear of becoming homeless or are vulnerable to paramilitary influence. Many have experienced domestic violence, parental substance abuse, or the imprisonment of a parent. These factors place them at higher risk of entering the youth justice system.

Children who have experienced trauma, family instability, or parental stress often become easily triggered. An unstable home life, especially one lacking routine, can greatly affect their emotional regulation. These challenges frequently manifest as poor behaviour choices, low academic performance, and a lack of aspirations for the future.

Despite the efforts of the NHS and smaller charities, children in deprived areas across the UK continue to face disproportionately high rates of poor mental health, obesity, and physical inactivity.

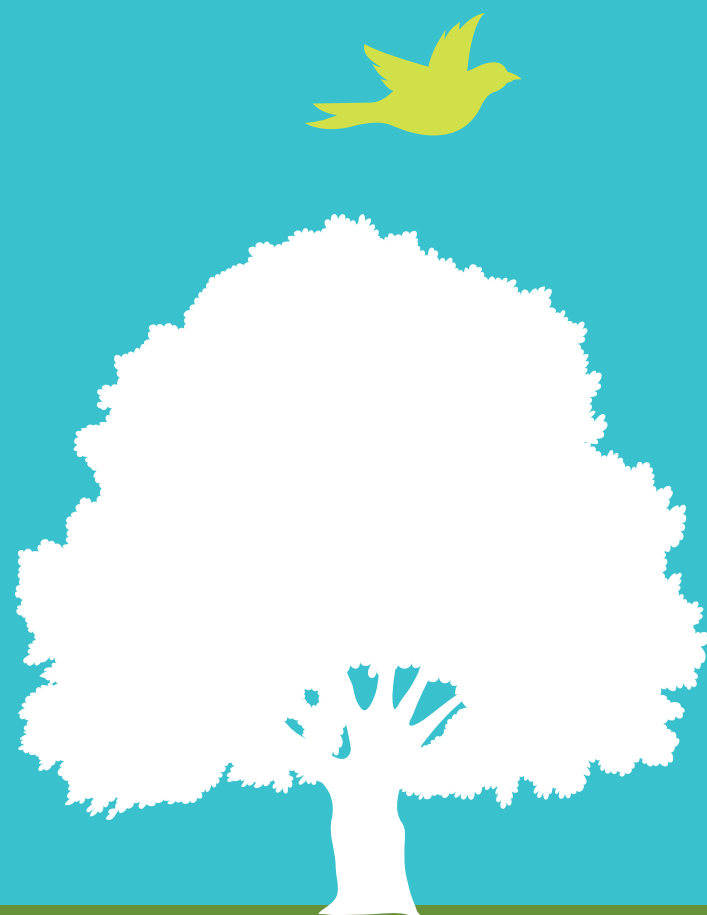
At the same time, we are seeing more frequent news reports of risk-taking and anti-social behaviour among young people. This highlights the urgent need for wild adventure spaces. These outdoor environments are essential for building sustainable communities, promoting social and environmental equity, and encouraging healthy lifestyles.

Yet, many children today are experiencing an outdoor play deficit. Research shows that children's access to the outdoors has become increasingly limited to backyards, basements, playrooms, and bedrooms. However, regular exposure to green spaces during childhood is strongly linked to better physical and emotional wellbeing in adulthood.

UNICEF reports that time spent in natural environments supports children's physical, mental, and social health. It also enhances their focus, learning capacity, and creativity. Outdoor play gives children opportunities to take risks, develop executive functioning, collaborate with others, and form a deeper appreciation for the natural world.

The NHS Forest initiative has shown that therapeutic green spaces offer hope and comfort. They help us connect with our emotions and with the living systems that support our growth and wellbeing.

On a personal level, after my 2020 brain cancer diagnosis, I found deep healing in nature through observing seasonal changes, breathing fresh air, and reconnecting with the world around me. It made me more





thoughtful about how humans throughout history survived in partnership with the land. This 'free medicine' of green and blue space can profoundly centre and restore us. I believe that children growing up with adversity can build resilience and heal emotional wounds with a deep connection to nature.

Children deserve to be free, wild, happy, and engaged, rather than worrying about the adults they love, their home situation, or even their own survival. I believe the Growing Up Healthy project provided a safe space for many children to connect with nature and the world around them. It also allowed them to connect with others, and most importantly with themselves – to take risks, try new things, to learn, and to find joy in little things.

I like to imagine The Bug Boys one day hunkered down in the grass with their own child, marvelling over a new creature. In that moment of wonder and care, I hope they feel the echo of what they learned that day – proof that healing, resilience, and responsibility can take root, even in the smallest corners of the world.







# MAGIC MOMENTS IN THE OUTDOORS



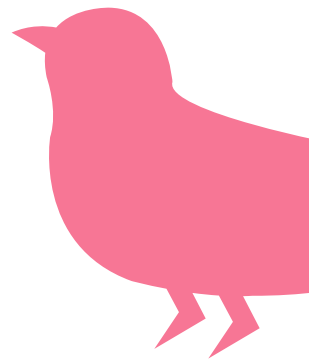
While guiding a group of children along a forest trail, we paused to engage our senses, taking in the scent of the trees, the crunch of the trail, and the chatter of squabbling magpies overhead. After, the group became fully immersed in nature's textures and surprises – collecting conkers, leaves, acorns, pinecones, and twigs they likened to various animals – some made nature art and others independently initiated imaginative play. Later, returning to the bus, one particularly inquisitive child walked beside me and confided, “Before you took us out in nature, I hated it. I thought it was boring! I just wanted to play Xbox in my room but it made me angry all the time. Now I know I can go outside and feel better straight away. I love nature now! Especially big cool trees!”

I worked to support a young person with a physical disability to join a group hiking activity. Together with his teachers, his family, and the child himself, we carefully safety-planned to make it possible. He was one of the most enthusiastic students in the group, shouting words of encouragement like, “Keep going!” as we climbed. Despite needing rest and support, he completed both hikes with a huge smile on his face telling me he was “buzzing”. His family, once unsure he’d ever walk, were evidently so proud when collecting him that afternoon.

This child has a statement of special educational needs and is a Looked After Child, who finds it difficult to regulate emotions. These words articulated what cannot be planned for in a classroom – a shift in perspective. At the family celebration event, their Granny came up to me gushing with enthusiasm about the recent transformation in her grandchild – coming home telling adventure stories and checking their handmade bug hotel every day.

One child, often struggling with behaviour due to his home situation, was sent to the head teacher for being disruptive and damaging school property. Knowing he enjoyed sports, I invited him to lead a team in orienteering at Cave Hill, framing it as a chance to support others who might tire during the run. He embraced the role, shouting encouragement up the hill and inspiring his teammates. I publicly praised his leadership at the school assembly and suggested he explore clubs like Scouts, where he could thrive in similar activities. In a later session, during a forest mindfulness session, he eagerly shared that he was grateful for his mum, his family, and how much he now enjoys the outdoors – especially orienteering. In that moment, he felt safe enough to allow himself to just be a child; free to explore his surroundings and his emotions.

In the early sessions of a nature-based programme, a particular child was tearful and refused to engage in group games. During offsite sessions I invited them to be my helper and entrusted them with responsibilities like carrying the tarp and guiding the group along footpaths – which seemed to spark confidence. Later, during a tree-planting activity that required group work, they opted to plant independently and immersed themselves in the task with quiet support from our woodland officer. They were smiling and participating comfortably in the company of others. On our final trip to the hills, I sat beside them on the bus, and we shared light-hearted moments and discussed the plan for the day. By the end of the session, this once-anxious child emerged as a confident leader, rallying their peers with: “Come on guys! We want to have enough time!”



# Nature Nurturing Neurodiversity

By Hiba Obaid, Changes East Lothian

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***“Be brave and go along. You might, like me, reconnect with a lost bit of nature. Embrace it. It will embrace you.”***

*Group member*

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**W**hen mental health and wellbeing charity, Changes identified a lack of nature-based interventions tailored for neurodiverse people in East Lothian, a new nature therapy group was proposed to help meet local mental health needs.

This specific initiative was made possible with funding from GroundsWell's Innovation Fund.

Changes already runs several nature therapy programmes – including Connect Nature and Women in Nature – but this exciting new initiative marked the first time a group was funded specifically for individuals with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Psychological therapist Samantha Bennett co-leads the group alongside a trained nature guide, supporting its structure and delivery. She said:

“I oversee the therapy aspect. Nature is at the centre of this therapy but what makes this offer different from wellbeing in nature groups is this group isn't about being well. This therapy invites us to think about what isn't going well in our lives. We aim to create a non-judgemental therapeutic space to help address issues. This can bring up difficult feelings and thoughts, which we encourage to be felt and processed in a safe therapeutic way.”

## Why nature?

Research shows that spending time in green, outdoor spaces can significantly reduce symptoms of ADHD. It supports greater focus, calm, and mental clarity.

Many of the group's participants had sought support from Changes while struggling with ADHD. One attendee said: “I go to [other] group things and don't feel like I fit in. I've felt like I fit in here. I've realised that I don't actually switch-off when I am outdoors until I actually switched-off here.”

Explaining the need for this group, Samantha said: “With so many people on the waitlist for diagnosis, many people are looking for new ways to understand their experiences. Even with a diagnosis, people still need to go on and figure out how to live their lives.”

## Embracing neurodiversity

Changes welcomes individuals at any point in their ADHD journey – whether they have a diagnosis, are awaiting one, self-identify, or simply want to explore whether this space might benefit them.

To complement the nature therapy groups, Changes also runs an interactive workshop all about ADHD. This ultimately opens a pathway for people to sign-up for its ADHD support and therapy groups.

At the workshop, the focus is on embracing neurodiversity and encouraging people to think about what would allow them to thrive if the world were truly built to accommodate different ways of thinking, doing, understanding and connecting.

The overwhelming message from participants was the desire to connect with others who share similar life experiences – and to have a safe, non-judgmental space to share their stories.

## A journey through nature and self

**Week 1:** *Connect to the Body*

**Week 2:** *Connect to Thoughts*

**Week 3:** *Connect to Emotions*

**Week 4:** *Connect to Creativity*

**Week 5:** *Connect to Resilience*

**Week 6:** *Connect to Hope and Strength*

The nature therapy group spans six weeks, each session gently guiding participants on a deeper journey of reflection and self-awareness. The process is structured, yet organic, and leaves many feeling more grounded and emotionally regulated.

Samantha explained: “We invite the 12 participants to take time out in nature to slow down and to relate to themselves, their thoughts and their emotions – helping them become the observer of their thoughts and emotions that may consume their focus within the calm setting of nature.”

With the conclusion of the first session, one participant noted: “This is the calmest I have ever felt in a very long time – this is time for me.”

Another said: “I've tuned in a lot more to what's around me. The nature has really helped to ground me. I've learnt some coping skills for an ADHD brain. I've shared these with others. The group has given me reassurance that it's not just me.”

Participants found that compared to indoor therapy which can often be difficult to focus on, outdoor nature therapy allowed for them to focus better on themselves and the structured activity, as well as allowing their inner child to come out.

One said: “This is the one space where I can be playful and creative for myself without judgement.” Another said: “This is the first time I have lay down on the grass and I look forward to doing this next week.”

The group is more than a therapeutic intervention. It's a space where people are not defined by a label, but seen as whole individuals.

Samantha noted that the term ADHD was not used by facilitators or participants in the first few sessions. By connecting to nature participants found calm, connection, and a sense of shared understanding.









# ORANGEFIELD PAVILION

*By Hannah Thompson and Brendan Murtagh,  
Queen's University Belfast  
Photo by Stephanie Wynne*

## A NEW HEART FOR AN OLD FRIEND

A once-vibrant bowling pavilion in East Belfast's Orangefield Park is set for a new lease of life. With help from the local community, researchers, and architects, the space could soon become a welcoming hub for all generations.

**I**n 1938, as industrialisation spread across East Belfast, the Belfast Corporation (the predecessor to Belfast City Council) purchased part of the Orangefield estate with plans to develop it into a public park. Those plans were put on hold with the outbreak of the Second World War. Instead, the site was used as a training camp for the US Army, while a German prisoner-of-war camp was set up nearby.

Today, Orangefield Park is home to a children's play area, a popular velodrome, tennis courts, an ecotrail and outdoor gym. It was also immortalised in the title of a Van Morrison song and it was once the site of a grand stadium home.

That's the beauty of the park – it's more than just a neighbourhood amenity. It's a shared space that means different things to the many people who live beside it and use it.

At the heart of the park stands the bowling pavilion, once a lively community and social centre as well as the base for the local bowling club. It still has the original mahogany scoreboards as well as a list of past presidents, and the green itself remains intact. But the building has fallen into disrepair. It's now underused, considered an eyesore by many, and widely seen as a missed

opportunity to improve the park and offer better services for the community.

The GroundsWell Innovation Fund provided a budget that enabled Eastside Greenways to work with local people, user groups and politicians to evaluate how it could be brought back into community use.

This support allowed architects to develop redesign options, consulting both the community and technical experts to assess the building's potential and estimate redevelopment costs. Queen's University played a key role in helping to gather evidence on what local people wanted from the space and how that could shape its future design and use.

The research involved: a questionnaire survey of 334 users; five participatory workshops with local people; and a technical analysis of the cost and design in response to community priorities.

The survey showed that local people are most dissatisfied with: the physical condition of the building (47%); its appearance (45%); and anti-social behaviour around the facility (44%). Only 13% are satisfied with the community's role in its management and 14% with the range of activities it offers.

A big concern for local people was that while Connswater Greenway and the wider park had seen considerable investment and improvements, the neglected state of the pavilion was undermining that progress. Many felt that the bowling green could be an asset for children and young people – if only the building itself could be developed to support greater use and integration into the park.

Five interactive workshops, held between June 2023 and October 2024, used the survey data to explore local





concerns, see what options for redevelopment might be and discuss how different users could be accommodated on the site. Each focused on a different theme – looking at, for example, what people felt was wrong with the building, the types of activities and services that could be provided, how it would be managed and options for its redesign. A family fun session allowed children to give their opinions on the building as well as ideas for its redevelopment.

The proposed redevelopment (right, bottom) aims to transform the current structure into an accessible, functional space that welcomes a diverse range of users. People wanted to see a place that offered intergenerational services and prioritised play activities for children, a hang-out for young people and a warm space for the older community to meet.

Management of the space was also a key topic. Local people felt that, ideally, it should be community-led, but acknowledged that Belfast City Council would need to retain legal and financial responsibility for its day-to-day operations.

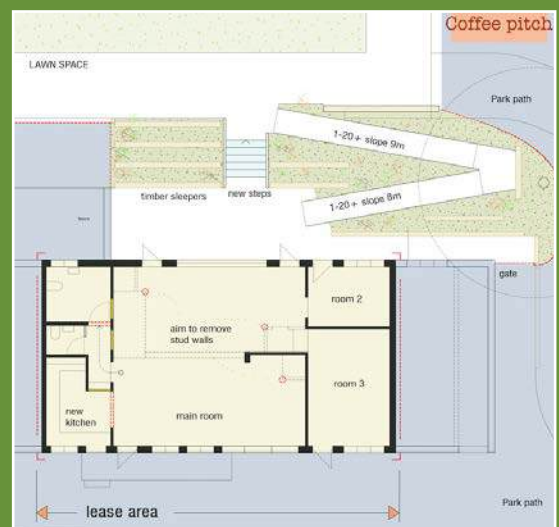
EastSide Partnership continues to work with Belfast City Council and elected representatives to get the work done and agree on the way forward for the management of the facility.

The main lesson is that local people and users must be central to all these discussions – this inclusive approach needs to be at the heart of the next phase of building work, how the facility is managed and what programmes are delivered. That's how the pavilion can once again become the beating heart of a park that means so much to the East Belfast community.

**Before**



**After**



# Young explorers making waves in **CANAL SAFETY**

*By Year 5 children of Lawrence Community Primary School*

Year 5 pupils at Lawrence Community Primary School won a special Eco Week competition with their article about a canal safety project. Working with the Canal & River Trust, the children explored Liverpool's waterways – learning about water safety, local wildlife, and how to care for these important spaces, while becoming proud ambassadors for their environment.

**T**here's something truly inspiring happening at Lawrence Community Primary School in Liverpool.

The students have been stepping out of the classroom and into the great outdoors. Not just for fun, but to learn how we can all enjoy our rivers and canals safely.

Thanks to a special partnership with the Canal & River Trust, children from Year 5 have taken part in an exciting programme exploring the waterways that wind through their city.

From learning about local wildlife to understanding the history of Liverpool's canals, the pupils have been discovering just how vital these spaces are to our communities.

But perhaps most importantly, they've been learning how to enjoy the canals safely.

The children walked the towpaths, took part in water safety workshops, and even helped to spot signs of pollution and wildlife along the banks.

With guidance from Canal & River Trust volunteers, the young learners discussed the risks around open water and how to respond in an emergency.

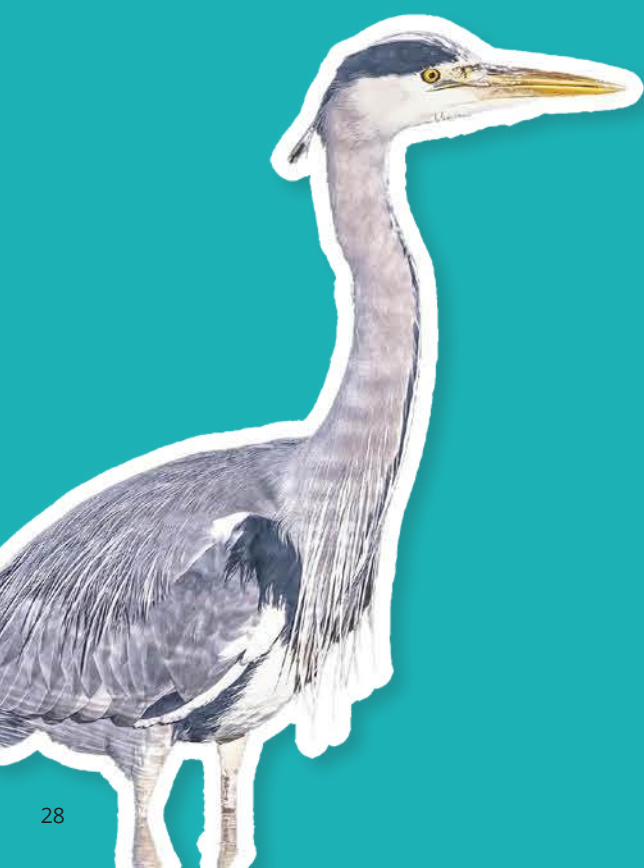
"I didn't know how deep the canal was", said one Year 5 pupil. "Now I understand why we mustn't play near the edge. I also learned that canals are full of nature and we need to look after them."

The project has been more than just educational. It has encouraged a new generation to connect with their local environment and take pride in protecting it. Teachers at Lawrence Community Primary have seen a real interest spark in their pupils – many of whom now talk passionately about keeping canals clean and respecting the rules around them. The children didn't just learn, they had fun.

"It's been brilliant watching the children grow in confidence and awareness," said Mr. Belger, one of the teachers involved in the project. "They're not just learning how to stay safe; they're becoming ambassadors for our local waterways."

As summer approaches, the lessons these students have learned couldn't have come at a better time. With more families spending time near water during the holidays, the messages of care, respect, and safety championed by Lawrence Community Primary pupils will ripple throughout the community.

Here's to our young canal custodians, showing us that even the smallest hands can help protect the biggest treasures.







**Editor:** Sangita  
**Assistant Editor:** Jan  
**Journalists:** Luna, Ananjha, Catarina

*We would like to express our gratitude to the Canal & River Trust for giving us this opportunity to let the children of Lawrence Community Primary School experience this exciting excursion.*





# LET'S GO TO THE BEACH

*A researcher's reflection on a  
beach programme designed for everyone*

By Niamh O'Kane, Queen's University Belfast  
Photos by Stephanie Wynne



# *“Water makes me happy”*

*Mae Murray Foundation member*

**F**or many of us, a day at the beach is a simple joy we often take for granted. There's the splash of waves at our feet, the cool water on our hands, the saltiness of the sea on our tongue. There's a certain magic in immersing ourselves in the vast blue sea, leaving our worries behind on the shore.

But for many others, this seemingly simple pleasure is out of reach.

Those who use wheelchairs, live with physical disabilities, or have complex medical needs face multiple barriers – from the challenges posed by sand and uneven terrain to the lack of suitable facilities and appropriate equipment. The result? Far too many are excluded from enjoying the beach and the sense of freedom it brings.

That's where Mae Murray Foundation steps in.

The beach setting is more than just a leisure destination – it's a therapeutic 'blue space' that can improve mental wellbeing, reduce stress, and provide opportunities to be active and social. Yet many are excluded due to the environment not being suited to their needs.

Mae Murray Foundation, a membership-led charity shaped by lived experience, created the concept of the Inclusive Beach. These are environments that have been carefully planned to ensure that people of all ages and abilities – including those with a physical, sensory, or learning disability, as well as complex medical needs – can enjoy a day at the beach.

Inclusive Beaches offer access, designated parking and Changing Places toilets, as well as specialised beach equipment available for loan. Mae Murray Foundation has two specially adapted sit-down surfboards, allowing people with disabilities to experience the thrill of catching a wave.

***“He'd never be able to experience surfing otherwise”***

*Parent of a Mae Murray Foundation member*

Through the GroundsWell Innovation Fund, Mae Murray Foundation were able to purchase additional equipment including a specialised sit-down paddle board, adapted so that members can take part alongside their friends and family. This is the first adapted paddle board in Northern Ireland.

Mae Murray Foundation also has a series of events running through the summer season called the Inclusive Beach Programme. These events provide a range of



activities which take into consideration differing needs and abilities, particularly those with more complex requirements. Activities range from adapted surfing and adapted paddle boarding to beach art workshops and sensory-friendly beach experiences. Some lucky attendees might even get to meet an alpaca or two!

***“I've been the person sitting waiting for my family at the beach. I used to dread it – and now, me and my daughter were buzzing about coming to the beach today and that's only because of Mae Murray Foundation”***

*Mae Murray Foundation member*

A team of GroundsWell researchers, along with other researchers from Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University, partnered with Mae Murray Foundation in the summer of 2024 to take a closer look at the roll out of this paddle board, and to conduct an evaluation of their Inclusive Beach Programme.

Joining the research team were seven peer researchers recruited from Mae Murray Foundation members. The aim was to promote inclusivity, build trust, and enhance meaningful engagement with other members during the evaluation. A peer-led approach also amplified the voices of the peer researchers, offering them an opportunity to be upskilled in knowledge, confidence, and communication skills. They were trained in, and used, a method called 'PhotoVoice' with participants, a visual participatory research method combining photograph-taking and interviews.

The interviews conducted by our peer researchers were combined with other data collected by the research team, via surveys with Mae Murray Foundation members, and with general public beach users. This data was compiled to form a clearer picture of just how impactful these Inclusive Beach events are on those who take part.



***“He feels relaxed when he’s here, as he knows anyone who is connected to Mae Murray Foundation will adapt things as necessary in order for him to have a great time”***

***Parent of a Mae Murray Foundation member***

It became clear that these events delivered impact across three key areas: physical health, mental wellbeing, and social connection. Not only were members and their families able to benefit physically from the events – including an opportunity for exercise, fresh air and time outdoors, and sensory benefits – but they also felt that they benefitted significantly with regards to their mental health. “Happiness and joy”, “[being] seen as a valued person”, and “feeling included” are only some of the many positive impacts identified by members.

Beyond physical and mental health, members enjoy the benefits to their social life. The events provide an opportunity to meet new people, spend quality time with friends and family, and feel part of a community. It was clear that these events break down barriers and challenges faced by those with differing needs, who simply want to enjoy a day at the beach.

***“It’s nice to actually see them in real life on my own rather than having to rely on other people describing the things to me or having to pretend I’m there”***

***Mae Murray Foundation member***

Beyond the impacts of the Inclusive Beach Programme on members and their families, the events also had an impact on us as researchers. The value of the work Mae Murray Foundation is doing across Northern Ireland to improve our beaches and make them accessible for everyone to enjoy cannot be overstated.

The joys and the health benefits of blue space are vast and varied, but it is clear that the barriers to enjoying them must be addressed and challenged. It is easy to stand back at an Inclusive Beach event in awe and wonderment and imagine what could be if we, as a society, strive to improve our outdoor spaces for everyone. To dream of a future where all of our green and blue spaces are inclusive of everyone.





# *Life Before and After Mae Murray Foundation*

*By Katie Douglas  
Photos provided by Katie*

**I** don't know where to start. I will maybe start from the beginning when I was a child trying to go to the beach for a family day out, especially during the summer months.

As a child, I was very outgoing and always wanted to swim and get in the water with my dad. It was quite easy for me to get down to the water when I was younger because I was a lot more mobile, and my family members were able to lift me. But, of course, that couldn't last forever.

I realised things were going to change one day when we went to the beach as a whole family. The tide was far out, and I knew my wheelchair wouldn't make it across the sand. By that time, I was older and I was starting to feel embarrassed about being carried in public, even though my older cousin offered to lift me safely.

As the years went on, we eventually stopped doing family beach days altogether. My family said it wasn't fair on me having to sit up on the tarmac, watching everyone else have fun while I missed out on family bonding. So, not only did I lose out on family beach days, but my younger sister and cousins did too. And I felt like it was my fault they missed out on something every child should get to experience.

But then along came Mae Murray Foundation.

I'll never forget the day my mum told me I was going to be able to get down onto the beach safely – without needing to be lifted. Not only would I get a full day out at Benone Beach with my family, but I was going to get the chance to surf as well!

That day at the beach was amazing – not just for me, but for my whole family. When we met the team from Mae Murray Foundation, I immediately gave them a hug. They had given me something I never thought I'd experience again in my lifetime. And I got to watch my cousins laughing and playing in the water and on the sand.

I also met Dan, Eunan and other staff from Longline Surf School who gave me an experience I never thought I would be able to do: surfing. I won't



lie, I was nervous, but I was more excited and kept asking if it was my turn yet.

Then it was.

I was lifted into the beach chair, and throughout the transfer, they kept checking if I was comfortable and happy with how everything was being done. It was all handled with dignity and patience. The team not only reassured me, but also my mum – who was the most nervous of us all!

When I got down to the water, Dan explained how I was going to get from the chair onto the board. I can't even explain how it felt to have the sea water on my legs for the first time in years, but I think my face said it all.

It's an experience I will never forget. And, from that day, I have surfed every summer with Mae Murray Foundation alongside the support of Longline Surf School. I want to say a huge thank you to Dan and Eunan for this experience and for the amazing memories we've made over the years.

Lastly I want to say a very big THANK YOU to Mae Murray Foundation for giving my family, friends and me back our beach days.



# I RUN, THEREFORE I EXIST

In Edinburgh, staying active is woven into the fabric of everyday life. With its hills, paths, clean air, and easy access to nature, the city quietly supports movement, health, and healthy ageing.

*Words and photo by Dr Luis Soares*

**S**port – particularly running – has been a part of who I am for as long as I can remember. The rigour and commitment I bring to everything I do are closely tied to the discipline I've developed as a sportsperson, namely a long-distance runner. Through running, I've learned to challenge myself beyond what I once thought possible.

Reaching the summit of Arthur's Seat or the peaks of the Pentland Hills, heart pounding and breath quickening to draw in more oxygen, has taught me resilience and perseverance.

I share these personal experiences because I truly believe that I live in a city that offers everything to those who love sports and nature, and who aspire to maintain a high standard of health and wellbeing – central elements of my healthy ageing approach.

Edinburgh has it all: fantastic running and cycling paths – my favourites include the Innocent Railway, Roseburn Path, and Union Canal – and a variety of blue spaces perfect for open-water swimming. If you enjoy long-distance cycling, you can head just 10 miles out of the city to Threipmuir Reservoir – a beautiful spot for a wild swim.

Beyond the obvious amenities, there is another factor I call the invisible ally – Edinburgh's excellent air quality. It makes commuting by foot or bike not only viable but genuinely enjoyable. While some raise concerns about the need for improved cycling infrastructure in the city centre, the current network still provides safe and accessible routes for most commuters. Coupled with initiatives like the Cycle to Work scheme and broader policies promoting healthier, greener lifestyles, these efforts play a crucial role in making Edinburgh a truly healthy city.

For me personally, Edinburgh gives me the opportunity every day to live out my philosophy: I run, therefore I exist.





# PUZZLES

## Quiz

How much do you know about the green and blue spaces around you – and how they shape our health and communities?

### 1. What are 'blue spaces' in a city?

- A) Public swimming pools
- B) Places with calming blue paint
- C) Natural or man-made bodies of water like rivers, canals, lakes
- D) Areas used for recycling

### 2. True or False: Spending time in nature can help lower stress levels.

- A) True
- B) False

### 3. Why do some people use green or blue spaces less than others?

- A) Lack of time
- B) Poor public transport links
- C) Feeling unsafe
- D) All of the above

### 4. What is Shinrin-yoku, a practice linked with the benefits of green space?

- A) Urban bird watching
- B) Japanese forest bathing
- C) River kayaking
- D) Nature photography

### 5. Which of these is a proven benefit of spending time in green or blue spaces?

- A) Improved concentration and reduced stress
- B) Better vision in low light
- C) Stronger immune response to vaccines
- D) Faster reaction time in sports

### 6. Which of the following is an example of a community-led green space?

- A) A private golf club
- B) A rooftop bar
- C) A shared garden cared for by local residents
- D) A motorway verge

### 7. What term describes differences in health that are systematic, avoidable and unfair?

- A) Health gaps
- B) Health inequalities
- C) Health habits
- D) Wellness gaps

### 8. Which group might face barriers to accessing nearby green or blue space?

- A) Older adults
- B) Disabled people
- C) Low-income households
- D) All of the above

### 9. Which of these animals is often used as a symbol of clean rivers in urban areas?

- A) Fox
- B) Otter
- C) Hedgehog
- D) Badger

### 10. On average, how much time in nature is shown to boost wellbeing in measurable ways?

- A) 5 minutes
- B) 20 minutes
- C) 2 hours
- D) A whole day

## Wordsearch

Find 10 hidden words related to green and blue spaces. Words may go forwards, backwards, diagonally, or vertically.

R I V E R Q G S A P T  
B E A C E A P Z O T L  
I S T R A I L W U R K  
T G R A S S Y I E E A  
R X I V H E A L T H S  
E O E N N D B M R T S  
E U P R A R K A E K B  
S M E T R E E S L C K  
G H G D A R D E N A R  
L K A Q W I R B I K E

Words to find:

- PARK
- RIVER
- HEALTH
- TREES
- GARDEN
- BIKE
- WATER
- GRASS
- PEACE
- PATHS

## What's Your Urban Nature Personality?

Find out how you connect best with green and blue spaces near you. Choose the answer that fits you best, then tally your most frequent letter.

### 1. It's a sunny Saturday morning. Where are you headed first?

- A) The local woodland or city arboretum
- B) A quiet walk along the canal towpath or riverside
- C) The community garden to check on the veg beds
- D) A nearby park with a good bench and a decent coffee

### 2. You're most likely to use a green or blue space to...

- A) Switch off and recharge
- B) Walk, jog or cycle part of your commute or errands
- C) Volunteer, meet others or get involved in growing or tidying
- D) Take time out alone or reflect away from the bustle

### 3. What's your favourite outdoor sound?

- A) Birds singing in the trees
- B) Water gently flowing or lapping
- C) People chatting, children playing, dogs barking
- D) Wind rustling through leaves or long grass

### 4. Your ideal lunch spot is...

- A) A picnic beneath the trees on a shady woodland path
- B) Sitting near a canal, a riverbank or by the sea on an inclusive beach
- C) Somewhere lively in the park where neighbours and families gather
- D) A quiet green space off the main road – perhaps a small park or roof garden

### Mostly As: The Woodland Wanderer

You're happiest under a canopy of leaves. Time in tree-filled spaces helps you slow down, reflect and reset.

### Mostly Bs: The Water Seeker

Whether it's canals, rivers, lakes or the coast – being near water restores you. You enjoy movement, rhythm and space to think.

### Mostly Cs: The Community Cultivator

Nature, for you, is about connection and care – shared gardens, local green projects, or just a lively local park bring you joy.

### Mostly Ds: The Quiet Restorer

You value stillness, even in small doses. A peaceful bench, a green verge or a tiny city square is enough to help you breathe and pause.

- ANSWERS
1. C – Natural or man-made bodies of water like rivers, canals, lakes  
2. A – True  
3. D – All of the above  
4. B – Japanese forest bathing  
5. A – Improved concentration and reduced stress  
6. C – A shared garden cared for by local residents  
7. B – Health inequalities  
8. D – All of the above  
9. B – Otter  
10. B – 20 minutes

COMMUNITY WELLBEING  
HEALTH GREEN SPACE  
URBAN WILD SWIMMING  
ENVIRONMENT ACTION  
INCLUSION BLUE SPACE  
WILD FLOWERS  
SOLUTIONS IMPACT  
ECOLOGY INEQUALITIES  
DIVERSITY OUTDOORS  
SUSTAINABLE SYSTEMS  
POWER COLLABORATION



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