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Power to the People

Nextdoor Nature's legacy for
communities and wildlife

Authored by Sophi Ducie, Evan Rolfe
and Richard Newman (M.E.L. Research)

RTS REAR

Contents

Contents 1

Main points 3

About Nextdoor Nature 7

Why was this project important? 8

How did we evaluate the project? 9

We used six outcomes to measure the success of the project 9

We collected data in different ways 10

Problems with the data..... 10

Results..... 11

Strand 1: Has the project helped a wider range of people to act for nature? Did it help by using a community organising approach? 11

Strand 2. Does community organising help people to feel pride in their area, and does it help people to make improvements for nature? 20

Conclusions 22

Results..... 23

Strand 1: Has the project helped a wider range of people to act for nature? Did it help by using a community organising approach? 23

Strand 2: Does community organising help people to feel pride in their area, and does it help people to make improvements for nature? 23

Recommendations 24

Nextdoor Nature

Evaluation findings at a glance 2022 – 2024

The programme brought people and communities together to help nature flourish where they live and work. Utilising a community organising approach, the programme supported and enabled each Wildlife Trust to engage communities, providing encouragement while developing skills, creativity and confidence in taking ownership for nature connection.



The programme involved communities that were traditionally less likely to be able to access nature and green spaces

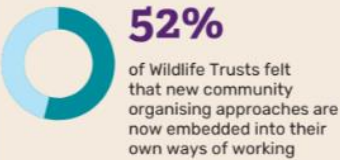


Since taking part:



44 Wildlife Trusts across four nations collectively delivered the Nextdoor Nature programme

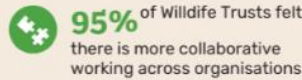
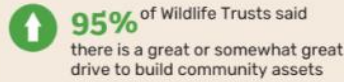
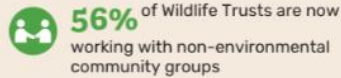
The programme helped Wildlife Trusts and local communities develop a community-led approach



The programme supported people becoming more active in their community, improving nature and enhancing well-being

21% of Wildlife Trusts told us about helping provide access to funds or grants

The programme boosted how Wildlife Trusts share best practice with one another and in their local communities



The programme aimed to reach 200 communities but actually reached over 1,600



The programme helped people to understand how they can act for nature



The programme helped foster a sense of place and local pride

"It's definitely contributed to a sense of purpose and empowerment towards the cause. You don't feel so hopeless."
Participant

"...when people chip in to help and support, which leads to a greater understanding on how they can improve nature."
Community Organiser



Main points

The Nextdoor Nature project ran between 2022 and 2024. The aim of the project was to bring people together so that they could help nature, wherever they live and work.

They used a method called community organising.

Community organising describes a way of working with a community. It starts with community organisers listening to people in a community. Together, they talk about what the community wants to do. Then, the community organisers work with the community to help them reach their goals.

The Wildlife Trusts asked MEL Research to find out how well The Wildlife Trusts used community organising, and whether the Nextdoor Nature project has made a difference in people's lives and where they live. This report will explain what worked, and what The Wildlife Trusts still need to improve.

<i>What changed?</i>	<i>How Nextdoor Nature made the change</i>	<i>The measurement of the change</i>
<p>The project got more people involved in nature activities than before. These communities usually have less access to nature.</p>	<p>The project went directly to people and listened to them. They used a wide range of creative methods to work with people. They listened to many different people.</p> <p>The Wildlife Trusts went to work with people they hadn’t worked with before.</p> <p>Community organisers were essential links between the Trusts and the local communities.</p> <p>The Trusts used people who were already well-known in their areas for working with nature. This helped the communities to be less worried, and to gain more confidence.</p> <p>The project activities gave people an easy way to get involved.</p>	<p>88% of Wildlife Trusts said that they found these listening exercises were useful.</p> <p>Since the start of the project, the Trusts said that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 43% are now working with people facing poverty • 41% are now working with people with a long-term health need • 40% are now working with migrants, refugees and asylum seekers • 35% are now working with minoritised ethnic groups
<p>The project helped people to understand how they can do things for nature, and how they can act on their own.</p>	<p>The project gave people more skills and helped them to overcome things that stopped them acting for nature. This helped people to feel more motivated.</p> <p>The project had a lot of different ways that people could get involved at their own pace.</p> <p>The project offered a network of support for local people who were already acting for nature. These people gained confidence and leadership skills.</p>	

<p>The project has helped Trusts and communities to listen to communities first when making things better for nature.</p>	<p>The role of community organisers was very important because they:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listened to what the community wanted • Changed things from the ground-up • Took time to build trust • Used existing relationships and worked with important people in the communities • Offered knowledge and advice to help communities reach their goals 	<p>52% of Trusts now use community organising ways of working in their own work.</p>
<p>The project has improved how Trusts work with each other and with the local community.</p>	<p>The Trusts used normal conversations rather than formal consultations to work with communities.</p> <p>The project adapted its support to what the communities needed. They helped to restart projects that had stalled.</p>	<p>56% of Trusts are now working with non-environmental community groups.</p> <p>95% of Trusts said there is a great or somewhat great need to build on existing community strengths.</p> <p>95% of Trusts said that there was joint working between organisations and groups.</p>
<p>The project helped people to feel a stronger sense of pride where they lived.</p>	<p>The project provided chances for people to meet and work out what they wanted for their local area.</p>	
<p>The project supported people to be more active in their community and to make things better for nature. This also helped their well-being.</p>	<p>The project provided activities that were easy to access and were practical.</p> <p>The project targeted people who were not able to get into nature or natural spaces. The project looked at why people couldn’t access these nature spaces, and then worked to make it easier for them. For example, the project:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Created safe spaces or group activities so that women, and/or people of colour felt safer. 	<p>21% of Trusts (at the time of writing the report) said they had provided access to funds or grants.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gave support, clothing, equipment or access to funding. This helped people get outside in all weathers and meant they could carry on acting for nature all year. <p>The project connected people together so they felt less lonely.</p>	
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About Nextdoor Nature

In 2022, the National Lottery invested £22 million pounds to celebrate the late Queen's Platinum Jubilee. £5 million pounds came to The Wildlife Trusts. They were asked to create something that would help communities and nature all over the UK. This project had to create something that would last for a long time.

The project concentrated on people who lived in areas where they didn't have much access to nature. This was for a lot of different reasons. Some people lived in very urban areas, and some people didn't feel comfortable or welcome in nature because of their race, ethnicity or class. Some people couldn't access nature because there was no transport, or they had health needs or disabilities.

The project took place across the UK in four nations – England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. There are 44 separate Wildlife Trusts in the UK nations and each one took part in the project.

Why was this project important?

Organisations realise that they need to change how they work. Communities and people need more power to shape their own areas and to make decisions about nature where they live. When communities make their own decisions, this means that they are in charge of what happens, and they can make the changes last longer.

People feel better when they are in nature. There is a lot of research that proves that taking an active role outside can help people's mental and physical health to be better.

How did we evaluate the project?

We asked MEL Research to assess the project. They are not linked to The Wildlife Trusts.

We divided the project into two parts, called strands.

Strand 1: Has the project helped a wider range of people to act for nature? Did it help by using a community organising approach?

- Has the project motivated more people to do more things with nature?
- Has the project benefited people? Did they feel better well-being, less anxiety, or have more control over their lives?
- Has the project helped people to work together?

Strand 2: Does community organising help create a sense of local pride? Does it make an area better for nature?

- How has the project helped people to feel healthier?
- How has the project given people the chance to be involved in nature activities in a positive way?
- How has the project made people see their local area in a different way?
- How has the project helped everyone to understand more about how behaviour can change after taking part in a project like this?
- How has the project influenced local communities to take decisions to improve nature?

We used six outcomes to measure the success of the project

Outcome 1: A bigger range of people feel more connected to nature

Outcome 2: People understand more ways they can improve nature

Outcome 3: Communities and local people feel more pride where they live

Outcome 4: People are more active and feel improved well-being

Outcome 5: Wildlife Trusts are being led more by their communities

Outcome 6: Wildlife Trusts are working better with their local communities and local partnerships

We collected data in different ways

MEL Research visited projects around the UK.

MEL Research developed a list of questions. These asked people to think about what had changed because of the project, why the change was important, and what made the change happen.

The questions could be asked and answered in different ways. Often, it was easiest to just have a simple conversation.

MEL Research also had conversations with people who took part in the project, with Trusts, and with organisations that were involved.

MEL Research held Ripple Effect Mapping workshops with Trusts. These are a way to find out what changes have happened, and how they happened.

Every three months, Trusts wrote a report which was sent to the National Lottery Heritage Fund. They also wrote case studies and sent in photos.

MEL Research examined 23 other reports about this way of working, to find out how other organisations have used community organising.

MEL Research sent their members of staff to observe meetings and workshops, such as the Share Learn Improve webinars.

MEL Research created an online survey for Trusts and partnership organisations. Unfortunately, this was not very useful, because not everyone completed it.

Problems with the data

This data is not perfect. Not all Trusts provided the same amount of information. People chose what information to give, but there are no independent observations, so the data is based on how people felt at the time. There is no control group – that is to say, there isn't a separate group of people who didn't take part in the Nextdoor Nature project, for us to compare our results to.

Results

Strand 1: Has the project helped a wider range of people to act for nature? Did it help by using a community organising approach?

How did the project reach a wider range of people?

The project successfully reached a wider range of people. However, this wasn't consistent everywhere. And it needed there to be people in communities who were already committed to nature to take the first step.

There were a lot of different reasons why people wanted to be involved with the project and with nature. These included:

- Some people just loved nature
- Some people wanted to make a difference
- Some people wanted to get more professional or personal skills
- Some people wanted to be more involved with their community in general
- Some people wanted to help the environment
- Some people thought it was just the "right thing to do"
- Some people wanted to meet more people

People were keen to share what they knew, improve their mental health, be involved in environmental projects, and to connect their communities with nature.

What worked well?

Active listening. This means going out to meet people and listening to what they say, without trying to steer the conversation. Community organisers knocked on doors, went to events, went to meetings, and ran workshops. They reached more people by being creative, using arts, and trying new things.

Regular communication. Staying in touch with community groups built strong relationships and trust. Community organisers were trained and paid positions in each Trust and this meant that they were important links between Trusts and local communities.

Providing knowledge, and using community members who were already active for nature. Many people said that they didn't know how to get involved in nature, or that they didn't think they knew enough. Community organisers were trusted experts who answered questions and linked people together so they could support one another.

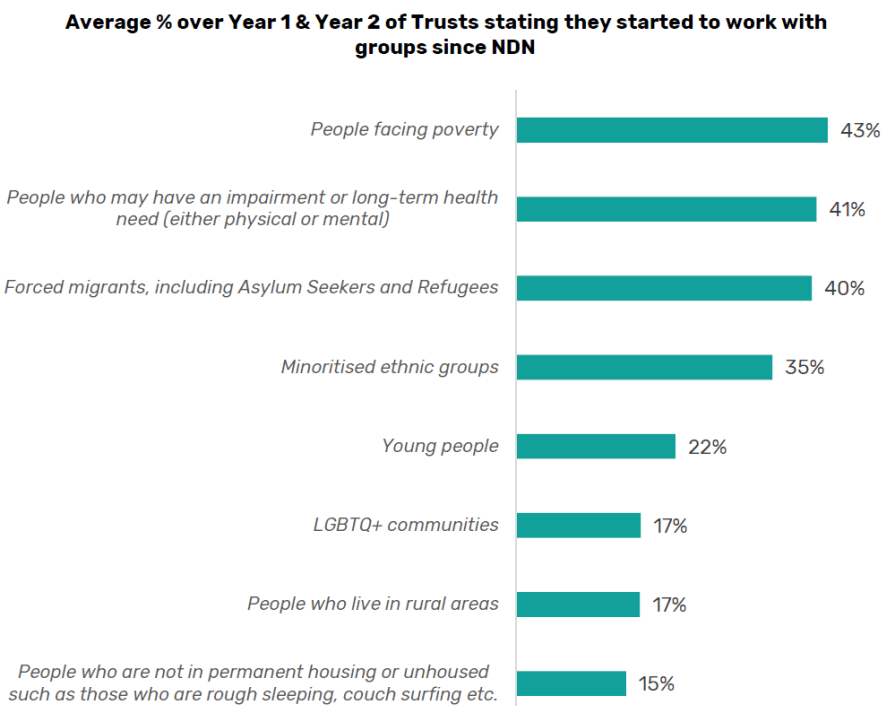
Connecting people with other organisations. The project worked to connect people within communities, and to make new links with local organisations and with councils, so that everyone could help one another.

Small, practical actions in local areas. People were keen to take part in activities that had a community focus. Sometimes, if the nature or environment focus was too strong, it put people off. It worked best if activities took place where people lived and worked rather than taking them out of their local areas.

What changed?

Trusts worked with more groups and they worked with groups they had not worked with before. This included children and young people, migrants and refugees, minoritised ethnic groups, people in poverty, faith groups and community associations. See Chart 1.

Chart 1: Results from the Trust survey from 2023 and 2024



Better relationships with local people. By having regular contact with groups, and being a consistent presence at local events, community organisers built trust and stronger personal connections.

More people engaged with nature. Some people said that they weren’t the sort of people to get involved with nature, because they didn’t have the right skills or knowledge. Community organisers held a range of events, workshops, campaigns and offered resources. This all helped more people to get involved.

What were the challenges?

Money and time. People were often struggling with money which stopped them being able to take part. They could not afford transport, childcare, or take time off from work.

There needed to be people in a community to take the lead. These people were called “established nature actors” which means community members who have the time, motivation and energy to take on leadership roles. Trusts helped people to take on these roles, but it takes a lot of time and trust to support someone, especially if they are minoritised, have limited English, low income, insecure housing and other barriers.

How did the project help people understand how to take more action for nature?

The project used community engagement, empowerment and practical skills to show people how to make changes for nature. The projects around the UK have not only made local areas nicer, but have boosted community well-being and local pride. New gardening and outdoor community groups have formed.

What worked well?

New skills, learning and knowledge. Participants gained more confidence when they learned new things from experts and experienced people. This gave them more motivation and they got more involved.

Different ways people could act for nature. People led the way in deciding what was needed, and this meant that there were lots of different approaches. People were more likely to get involved if they had made the choices about how to get involved.

Supporting local champions. The project worked with people who were already taking action for nature, and supported them with tools, advice and advocacy. This boosted their efforts. One very important part of the work that community organisers did was when they helped local champions overcome barriers around access and working with local authorities and councils. They were very valuable as networkers and making introductions.

Handing over direction and responsibility. The project gave the power to make decisions to communities and this meant that communities felt they were in control. They did this in a number of ways:

- Communities led the decisions from the start
- Project staff supported communities at the start but gradually reduced direct involvement to let communities take the lead
- Project staff showed communities where to find resources such as tools, funding and materials
- Gradual handover process. Project staff remained available for support so that communities did not feel abandoned.

What changed?

Communities were empowered and began to feel shared responsibility for nature. Because communities were making the decisions, they could see that they were making real-life contributions to improving their local area. The process sometimes took time to happen, but once it gained momentum, participants and communities gained more confidence in making changes for nature.

The project helped people ask questions. Because of the relationships that grew between the community organisers and the communities, people felt more able to ask questions. People also appreciated being able to attend hands-on demonstrations. The project created opportunities for community-led discussions and forums where people shared their experiences and supported one another.

When people gained more knowledge, they were more motivated to take action. As people learned more about nature and the environment, they learned more about the impact of their actions too. Because they were being supported by community organisers, they were then more confident to take action. Their improved knowledge also helped people to feel more connected to nature.

What were the challenges?

These were the barriers that stopped people taking part:

- People did not have enough free time. Often they had to care for family.
- Lower income participants found it particularly difficult to find free time because they often worked long hours to survive.
- People, especially lower income participants, often didn't have access to transport.

How did the project help Wildlife Trusts and participants to use a community-led approach?

The Nextdoor Nature project emphasised a community-led approach. This was done in various ways. The community organisers held events, attended meetings, and ran listening exercises. There were challenges. Some people were reluctant to take the lead. Many groups of people who have not been considered part of traditional nature work faced barriers that stopped them getting involved. However, the project did create a sense of ownership and empowerment in the community. The project was successful in making community networks stronger, supporting new community-led initiatives, and created a stronger collective vision for nature conservation.

What worked well?

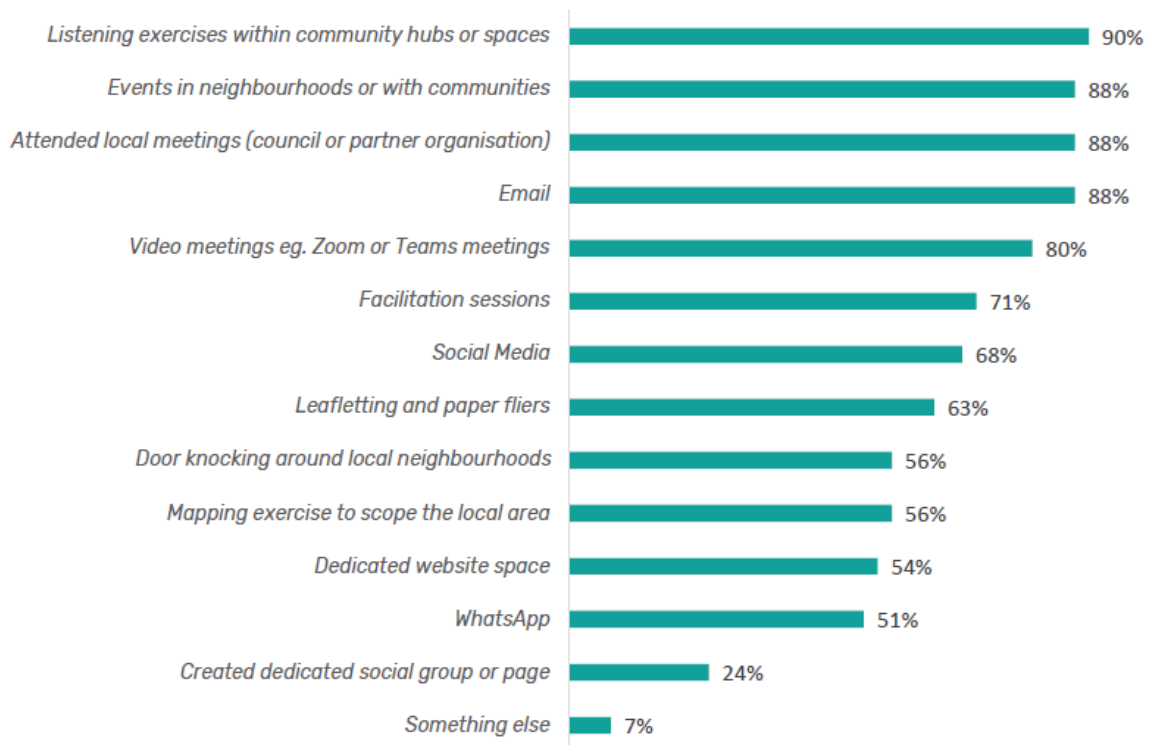
Community organisers were vital for the success of the project. Community organisers are described as connectors, catalysts for action, and relationship builders. They empowered people which increased community pride. 44 Wildlife Trusts took part in the project, and 42 of them completed a survey in the second year. Every one of the 42 surveyed Wildlife Trusts said that having a community organiser in the Trust worked well. Over half of the Trusts also said that community organising methods are now part of their way of working.

There are eight things that are important to a community-led approach:

- Listening to people and having meaningful conversations
- Make plans for change which start with what people want
- Taking time to build relationships and trust
- Being a friendly, approachable person
- Making the most of existing relationships and networks
- Paying attention to how people can access events, meetings, workshops and nature itself, and using lots of different ways to reach out to people
- Providing resources and knowledge, from funding, habitat management and species, to information about local organisations and other sources of support
- Ongoing support and follow-up, and not suddenly stopping the work and leaving the community on their own

It was important to use a range of approaches. The project allowed community organisers to try a lot of different ways to work with communities. The top three approaches were using community spaces for listening exercises, hosting or attending events, and attending local meetings held by other organisations. Other approaches included knocking on people's doors, working with other professional organisations, doing mapping sessions with communities, using social media, dropping leaflets, and developing innovative tools like the interactive "Nature Scape in a Box" from Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust.

Chart 3: What approaches using community organising principles have you used as part of your work on the Nextdoor Nature programme? (n=41) (Year 2 Trust survey)



It was important to go into communities with an open mind. The project did not have a set agenda. Instead, it started from the point of listening to communities first. It emphasised community leadership, which meant that local residents took the lead. This meant that the project aims matched the community’s vision and values, and this helped people to feel more motivated and engaged. The project stayed adaptable and flexible, and could change if the community’s needs changed.

What changed?

Attitudes changed. Communities began to feel more in control over what they could do in their area to improve it for wildlife.

More independence. Community organisers didn’t tell people what to do. However, it is important to note that the project wasn’t just about getting people to lead. The project also allowed people to be part of the work as participants and didn’t put pressure on people to be in charge if that wasn’t what they wanted.

New relationships and bigger networks. There were more links made between communities and local organisations.

Community ambitions. People began to make bigger plans when they realised they could achieve them.

Better working together. The Wildlife Trusts began to work more effectively with communities.

What were the challenges?

People didn’t always want to be in charge. Most Wildlife Trusts found that some people didn’t want to be leaders. It was often difficult to withdraw support, because when a Wildlife Trust had started a project, the participants expected the Trust to continue to lead.

Time pressure. People were often busy with families or work.

Sometimes, people didn’t want to change how they worked. It took time to allow both Wildlife Trusts and communities to adjust to a new way of working.

Not enough resources. The project was a two-year project, and some Wildlife Trusts felt that they couldn’t commit to helping a community when they knew things would soon end.

Too much red tape. The community-led approach was slow, and some people felt frustrated.

Chart 4: What challenges have you experienced when emphasising a community organised approach in your local area? (n=42, Year 2 Trust survey)



How did the project improve how the Wildlife Trusts work with each other and their local communities?

The project encouraged Wildlife Trusts to share what they have learned with one another and with local communities. They did this by starting with a simple approach and building gradual relationships. Sometimes they used creative methods like spoken word and visual art events. This shift towards community-led working has helped Wildlife Trusts to understand local issues better.

What worked well?

The project built stronger connections between Wildlife Trusts and local communities. In particular, Wildlife Trusts built new and stronger connections with parts of the community that they hadn't worked with before.

Community organisers shared what they learned with each other. The community organisers met regularly in a session called Share, Learn, Improve. The project also had a buddying system so that community organisers could support one another at a local level. The project also provided a range of online resources and information.

What changed?

The project helped to empower communities. The project sometimes helped a community go back to an old project that had stalled, and helped them restart it.

The project helped communities to feel respected. Communities felt that the Wildlife Trusts were listening to their concerns and making them feel that their voice was heard.

There was a greater involvement from a wider range of people. 95% of Wildlife Trusts felt that there was more collaborative working with more groups of people than they had done before.

What were the challenges?

There needs to be more time to develop relationships. Most Trusts were frustrated that the short project didn't allow enough time to build real change.

It was important for people to understand what a community organiser could, and couldn't, do for them. Every organisation has its own needs and priorities. Community organisers needed to be very open and honest about what they were offering, and what they couldn't offer.

Strand 2. Does community organising help people to feel pride in their area, and does it help people to make improvements for nature?

How did the project improve people's sense of pride where they lived?

The Nextdoor Nature project improved how people felt about their area by creating more community connections and making local areas nicer to be in. This reduced feelings of social isolation, and the activities helped people to meet new people, connect with neighbours and discover local organisations. People felt good about being part of a community and they also felt good when they contributed to local improvements. People reported a new sense of purposes, better mental and physical health, and stronger community ties.

What worked well?

Local people valued being able to be involved. Participants felt good about being part of the design and delivery for making improvements in their areas. People also appreciated that they could choose how to be involved, whether leading or supporting.

The project gave people meaningful opportunities to come together. People chose what they wanted to do, and how, and when. This meant that when they came together, it was decided by them and it had meaning for them.

Working with and supporting local organisations. The project made new links between local organisations, groups, charities, schools and other initiatives. These partnerships shared resources and knowledge, with meant the project reached even further.

What changed?

People felt better about where they lived. Many participants said that they felt a new sense of purpose, and felt more connected to their community.

The project built new relationships and strengthened existing ones. The project provided new opportunities for people to meet one another and to learn about new organisations and groups. People said they felt more connected to their neighbours.

How did the project get people to be more active in nature and improve their wellbeing?

The project offered people the chance to be active in local nature. It gave people a purpose to interact with their local environment. People said that they felt happier and had better mental and physical health. These reports match other research from outside this project, which say that when people can access natural spaces, they feel better.

What worked well?

Hands-on activities helped people to connect to their environment. Activities needed to be easy to access, and practical.

The project worked to help people access nature. There are many reasons why people can't get out into nature, and the project identified these reasons and then took action to overcome the barriers. The barriers included:

- The project offered safe spaces and safe group activities. This helped women, and people of colour, to feel safer in their community.
- The project gave people the right outdoor clothing or equipment, either directly or by helping them to find funding to buy the right things.

What changed?

People were more active. For some people, this was because their local outdoor spaces were nicer places to be. For others, this was because they had learned more about activities such as gardening.

People felt better. People said they felt happier and more at peace after taking part in nature-based activities. People also said that they felt more hopeful about the future because they had taken action for nature and seen things get better.

People felt less alone. People appreciated being able to work together and this meant people felt less lonely. For many people, this was the first time they had done this sort of work. It gave people happiness and a sense of purpose that they were bringing something valuable to their community.

What were the challenges?

Weather. The only reported challenge was that people were less likely to get involved in the colder, wetter months.

Conclusions

The project was successful in working with a wide and diverse range of people and communities across the UK. The dedicated community organiser in each Trust acted as a key staff member who connected people and built relationships that directly led to positive change.

The project was successful in helping people gain more skills. The community organisers offered advice and information, and this made people feel more confident. It inspired creativity, collaboration and a sense of community spirit.

Results

Strand 1: Has the project helped a wider range of people to act for nature? Did it help by using a community organising approach?

- The Nextdoor Nature project successfully worked with a range of people and communities from different places, ages, cultures and backgrounds.
- The role of the community organiser was a key factor for success.
- The project gave people new skills and knowledge which helped them to be confident and committed to improving nature around them.
- The project gave people a feeling of power and responsibility by providing tools, guidance and motivation. It helped to improve people's leadership skills and helped them talk more confidently about nature in their communities.
- The project emphasised communities working together. This gave people a sense of shared responsibility for nature, and helped them to work more closely with local organisations.
- There were some challenges. The cost of living crisis stopped some people from being as involved as they wanted to be. Some communities relied too heavily on community organisers and struggled to take on the leadership themselves.

Strand 2: Does community organising help people to feel pride in their area, and does it help people to make improvements for nature?

- The Nextdoor Nature project improved people's local pride by helping them to contribute to their local area. This made them feel more connected.
- The project made people in communities feel more strongly connected to one another by giving them chances to connect, work together and build relationships through shared projects.
- People were more active and felt better after taking part in accessible, hands-on activities. They felt less isolated.

Recommendations

Projects need longer funding periods.

Be more transparent, especially when working with communities in crisis.

Community organisers need to be honest and clear with communities about what can be achieved. They can do this by giving examples of how they have worked in similar ways before.

Wildlife Trusts need to make sure they have enough time and resources allocated to help develop local skills from the start of the project.

Wildlife Trusts could offer more training to communities, following Scotland's Pioneers Programme, which would help the projects last longer and be more sustainable by the communities.

Wildlife Trusts could start supportive networks so that people with experience could help new people.