

Community Research Project



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**Exploring
people's
experiences of
volunteering with
Green Hive**



Community Research Project



Pròiseact Rannsachadh a'Coitcheannas

ABOUT

Between July and October 2022, a group of seven peer researchers undertook a research project to explore people's experiences of volunteering with Green Hive and the impact it has on their lives.

Following a process of training and planning, eleven interviews with current volunteers, two interviews with professional partners who support individuals to volunteer with Green Hive, and a focus group were carried out, transcribed, coded and analysed.

Seven key themes were identified, relating to personal development; community development; obstacles to volunteering; inclusivity; ownership and responsibility; social connection and a task based approach to volunteering.

The peer researchers curated an exhibition at Nairn Community and Arts Centre to share their research findings with the wider public.



"Interesting, tiring and I've learnt patience."

"Being part of a group, meeting a nice team of people, making friends and also doing something that I think is very worthwhile and that I'm involved in - especially after two years of the pandemic, it's been great."



"I had no experience of any kind of research, it's a totally new thing for me and it's really opened my eyes to how interesting and useful-- , it's opened my mind and it's been a really valuable experience in many different ways. It's just been really, really valuable."



**What do
Green Hive
volunteers
do?**



The Plastic Workshop

Buth-obrach Coineallach



"The friendly atmosphere and the general good feeling it gives you [...] it just makes you feel useful. You're doing something that's beneficial and that other people can enjoy, like the community orchard, providing good facilities. [Volunteering has] definitely improved my mental wellbeing. It just gives you a bit more purpose and you feel more connected to different people."



"The perspective on things like training and tool use was really just step by step, cos if you're interested in that then they'll give support to use that, so that was very helpful."



"[Green Hive] has provided, quite literally, a lifeline to some of the people I have worked with. That they're included, they feel included, they feel as if it's not "busy work", it's actually work for meaning's sake, and that's a fantastic thing to be able to offer individuals whose experience has not been all that wonderful...The opportunities for people in a relatively safe environment with kind people and like-minded individuals, it makes a big difference."

ABOUT

Green Hive volunteers are involved in developing, testing and refining the production of re-purposed plastic products.

Using waste materials, from milk bottle tops to discarded children's plastic toys to industrial surplus, volunteers have designed and created a range of durable goods, including bird houses, clocks, coasters and benches.



The Fabric Workshop

Buth-obrach Aodach



"You always come back after an afternoon of volunteering, you always come back and you feel a bit uplifted and you've had social contact, you've done something useful and you feel that was a good day."

"[I brought my sons] and they got quite into it and it made them realise what a skill it is and if you buy really cheap fast fashion clothes that somebody's skill has gone into that without them being paid anything for it."



"So, all those [Green Hive volunteer opportunities] for gratification, but also for that giving back, and all of it involves using the brain and using the body in a positive way. I can't imagine many people feeling that it wasn't a worthwhile thing to do."

ABOUT

Green Hive's volunteers help reduce the volume of waste material going to landfill by upcycling, re-designing, repairing and re-purposing fabrics into saleable products, from shopping bags and aprons to stockings and quilts.



"Material is expensive these days so you've got this wealth of material and all it needs is a wee wash and you can make whatever you want which is absolute heaven for me."



Viewfield Orchard & Tree Planting

Lios-mheas agus Planntachadh Craobhan

ABOUT

Volunteers have created and continue to tend to the community orchard at Viewfield where apples, pears, plums, cherries and a host of berries are growing. Volunteers also planted over eighty apple trees on the brae at Auldearn burn along with the Nairn Orchard Group.



"I like the whole idea of that community orchard, that eventually people could just go up there and have a picnic and they'd be able to [...] have fruit there or take it away. So it's a really good thing we've got in the town now, because of the Green Hive."



"I go up to the orchard and sit there on a Sunday. It's nice and peaceful. I like it after church on a Sunday. I stay there half an hour, if the weather is fine. [...] I'll sit and have a smoke and enjoy the peace of it. It'd be great to have more places like that in Nairn."

"We can complain about the state of a place, but just leave it at words, or we can actually think about getting our sleeves rolled up with others and actually going on and tackling something. I think that's one of the best things about Green Hive, is that they're not afraid to get their sleeves up."



Invasive Plants

Lus Gallda Sgaoilteach

"I actually feel as though I've got a friend for life in Green Hive."



ABOUT

Green Hive volunteers take part in scout walks alongside the River Nairn and other water courses to identify invasive plant species such as Himalayan balsam, Japanese knotweed and giant hogweed. Work parties are assembled to eradicate these non-native plants which can cause damage to our local ecosystem.

"I do the balsam. Now that's great fun because you get this machete thing and you just go in and you bash it and it really is super."

"I'm really interested in plants and different species of trees, so when I noticed [Green Hive] were doing a lot of invasive species work [...] that was something that really intrigued me...I've definitely learnt a lot [...] about different species of plants, what to look out for, the dangers, and then how to safely remove the species."



"I suppose going along the river, you feel more involved with it. You feel that you're part of it."

"I think [Green Hive are] contributing to a positive message about Nairn and the community and citizenship."

Beach Cleans & Litter Picks

Glanachadh Murag agus Togalachd Praicleis



"It's all to do with the environment and the area I live in and I don't want to live in a tip."



"When people see that people are making an effort to clean the beach and they do it on a fairly regular basis, that probably encourages people to think more about keeping the beaches clean and taking pride in them."

ABOUT

Huge numbers of Green Hive volunteers come out to help with our organised litter picks around Nairn. Whilst it is disappointing to find so much litter, our plastic workshop volunteers are continually finding new ways to make use of it.

"[I enjoy the] feeling that you've done something worthwhile cos there's just such big, big global environmental problems and you can get quite depressed if you think about that, but if you do just a little thing like pick up litter on the beach you feel like well, I've done something."

"I think you notice things more. You're walking around the town and you're thinking, well that's not right, and that needs sorted [..] I think you notice more when you're with people that care about the environment and they're willing to do something about it, it does rub off on you and you start caring more and you start doing more."



**How do
volunteers
describe
Green Hive?**



Community
Healthy **Citizenship** Accessible
Appreciative Welcoming Useful
Uplifting
Equal Inspiring **Inwigorating** Encouraging
Helpful Caring Environmentally Friendly Diverse
Great
Sociable Positive
Green Hives...
Lifesaving Innovative Inclusive Creative Fabulous
Warm Relaxed Lifechanging Good
Fun Sustainability Teamwork Wellbeing
Open Fantastic Mindful Action
Enjoyment Volunteering Lifeline



**What did our
research
reveal?**





Volunteering with Green Hive can offer opportunities for **PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT**, including new knowledge, abilities and experiences, as well as enhancing pre-existing awareness and skills and improving confidence.

Green Hive volunteers often develop a sense of **OWNERSHIP & RESPONSIBILITY** in relation to patches of their community, such as the beach, riverside and green spaces.

Green Hive volunteers described the mental and emotional benefit they derive from the **SOCIAL CONNECTION** provided through their volunteering experiences.

The actions of Green Hive's volunteers can contribute towards wider **COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**, for example by modelling the importance of caring for our shared spaces and creating a positive ripple effect.

Green Hive offers a genuinely **INCLUSIVE** volunteer experience, where everyone is made to feel welcome and provided with meaningful ways to participate.

People enjoyed Green Hive's **TASK BASED APPROACH** to volunteering which allowed them to feel useful by contributing to global environmental challenges through action in their local area.

Sometimes people experience **OBSTACLES** to volunteering, such as confidence or health issues, but Green Hive staff work hard to help volunteers overcome any obstacles they face.



Key Findings

"I would say certainly individuals lacking the experience or afraid of social interaction and people have acquired some quite marked changes in their ability to communicate with others. I've seen that happening quite often. And that then allows people to think about their situation in a different way because they're now no longer trying to avoid where they might bump into people and that makes a huge difference in all sorts of ways [...] It has made a difference and allowed people to just get that bit of confidence."

"[Volunteering for Green Hive has] given me back my love of actually being in the garden."

"When I first started volunteering I wasn't working at the time and [participating as a volunteer] actually gave me confidence cos [...] Green Hive would take your ideas and then they did listen and then they would bring them forward, so yes, it's been a good way of building your confidence and thinking that the ideas you have, they're not really silly pie in the sky ideas, people do appreciate hearing them."

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT
Green Hive volunteers tend to be drawn to the organisation because it reflects their ongoing interests and values. However, participating in activities can lead to the development of new knowledge, abilities and experiences, as well as enhancing pre-existing awareness and skills. Some volunteers also gain a boost to their confidence, social skills and physical, mental and emotional health.

"[Volunteering for Green Hive] makes me more concerned and more active and more likely to sign up to various petitions that come around on emails, like Greenpeace things and all that, which I was thinking along those lines anyway but it just reinforces it."

"I've learnt a bit about mulching cos we did that at Viewfield, collected all the leaves and put them in bins and that. And I've learnt new skills about the recycling and what's involved in the recycling. So as the project progresses, I think I'll learn more."

"I'm really interested in plants and different species of trees, so when I noticed [Green Hive] were doing a lot of invasive species work [...] that was something that really intrigued me...I've definitely learnt a lot [...] about different species of plants, what to look out for, the dangers, and then how to safely remove the species."



"I think you notice things more. You're walking around the town and you're thinking, well that's not right, and that needs sorted [...] I think you notice more when you're with people that care about the environment and they're willing to do something about it, it does rub off on you and you start caring more and you start doing more."

"You look around Nairn and then you see the rubbish [...] and then you think well, that's somebody else's job, but at the same time it annoys you so you think well, you have to go and do something, don't you? And it's great that there's a group out there that you get the support to do it."

"I suppose going along the river, you feel more involved with it. You feel that you're part of it."

RESPONSIBILITY & OWNERSHIP

Feelings of ownership were explicitly evident in many people's experiences of volunteering with Green Hive, such as becoming partly responsible for the beach and other places in or around Nairn such as Tradespark Woods, Viewfield Orchard and the River Nairn. Less commonly directly explained, but implicit in several accounts, was a sense of being part of and having a duty of care towards the planet, and doing your own small bit locally to contribute positively what you could.

"It's all to do with the environment and the area I live in and I don't want to live in a tip."

"[Green Hive is] a means by which people acquire skills, but also feel part of something and feel part of solutions rather than problems, which traditionally I think some of the folk I work with have always been seen as a source of problems rather than a source of solutions, so it's a lovely thing to turn on its head and the Green Hive certainly allows that to happen."

"It felt quite special the day that we were all planting the trees [...] I can remember saying to [my husband], maybe in twenty years' time we will be walking along here and we'll be in our seventies and we'll be seeing an actual orchard and going, we helped do that."



PERCEPTIONS OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

As well as the more tangible benefits to the wider community, such as cleaner beaches, new trees and accessible e-bikes, participating in Green Hive projects appeared to help reduce feelings of frustration or hopelessness about tackling environmental issues as an individual. Mention was made of the positive energy or 'buzz' a larger group could create tackling something, whether clearing rubbish or invasive plants, or planting and tending saplings. Several volunteers observed that cleaning beaches and woods models the importance of looking after them to others, and has a ripple effect, with other organisations or individuals doing some litter picking too.

A few volunteers who had grown up in Nairn specifically mentioned they saw it as a positive development that Green Hive would have the Seaman's Hall as a base, as this has been an important venue for the community

"I think [Green Hive are] contributing to a positive message about Nairn and the community and citizenship."

"When people see that people are making an effort to clean the beach and they do it on a fairly regular basis, that probably encourages people to think more about keeping the beaches clean and taking pride in them. And then they can see the orchard, the actual process of growing. It's grown already in this fairly short time, there's actually fruit coming on some of the trees already. So, it makes an impact on the town, a positive impact."

"I like the whole idea of that community orchard, that eventually people could just go up there and have a picnic and they'd be able to [...] have fruit there or take it away. So it's a really good thing we've got in the town now, because of the Green Hive."

"The beach cleans have inspired quite a lot of different organisations to do similar things [...] People want to [...] have a nice, clean, safe beach and people that aren't even volunteering with Green Hive just now, they might see what Green Hive is doing and they'll pick up a little bit of rubbish themselves [...] so I think that does have a snowballing effect."

"[Green Hive] has improved Nairn up to now in gathering people together with different skills and interests but at one level having the same goal, if you like, to improve the environment."

"We can complain about the state of a place, but just leave it at words, or we can actually think about getting our sleeves rolled up with others and actually going on and tackling something. I think that's one of the best things about Green Hive, is that they're not afraid to get their sleeves up."



OBSTACLES TO VOLUNTEERING

Some volunteers experienced a few obstacles to volunteering including lack of time, or sessions clashing with other commitments; personal confidence; location; transport; not being au fait with social media; and health issues. However, in many instances Green Hive staff and volunteers had worked collaboratively to identify and put in place solutions to overcome obstacles, such as personal phone calls or texts to inform about upcoming events; changing session times; meeting volunteers before sessions to boost their confidence in walking through the door; identifying a flexible range of tasks at events to suit diverse abilities; and supporting volunteers to carry out tasks at home (see also section on inclusivity). More tricky was the notion expressed by one volunteer that skills learnt at Green Hive lacked transferability to their everyday life and therefore did not support them to make environmentally beneficial changes in their personal circumstances, leading to a withdrawal from volunteering.

"Any obstacles that we've encountered we've actually worked on and sorted. So I suppose that's the beauty of my particular profession, occupational therapy, what's the problem and we'll look to sort it, rather than think it will always be a problem [...] Everything that could be seen as being a problem or an issue we sort of iron out as we go along and Green Hive has always been very, very good at helping with that."

"I never promise something unless I feel ninety-nine percent sure that I can undertake it [...] that's just one reason I have pulled back and said I've got to concentrate on myself and not go and do it when I shouldn't because I know then I could have days, a week, flat out on my bed."

"One of the issues is what can be taken away? [...] I think that's maybe one of the reasons why I've withdrawn a bit cos I'm not quite sure if I'm going to focus on that and I don't tend to have those tools around at home."

"Because of my situation with my health, my back, I can't stand long, I can't sit long, cement floors just kill me, and I thought well, I can do half an hour there or an hour there, and I just thought well, if I can do it in the comfort of my home it would be better because then I can stop when I have to stop."

"Sometimes things happen and we don't know. I'm not great at reading emails. I know they're there but it's not my favourite job."

"The barrier was almost stepping outside my own front door."



INCLUSIVITY

Every volunteer commented on the welcoming and friendly nature of Green Hive staff and events. However, for many, Green Hive's inclusive attitude extended beyond mere hospitality to a willingness to adapt to and support their individual needs (see also section on obstacles to volunteering). Indeed, this approach to providing bespoke volunteer experiences frequently appeared to be the crux of why an individual was able to begin and continue volunteering.

"Very easy. Very welcoming, very inclusive. Some of the folk that I've worked with have experienced profound loneliness alongside mental health challenges, but that never made any difference to how people were accepted and included in the activities."

"[Green Hive staff] value people in a very equal sense from my experience."

"It was a very welcoming approach as it were, just coming in, seeing what I wanted to do, what my interest was, so that was really helpful. And a very slow start in terms of introduction to the themes [...] particularly because it was around plastic, what it was about and what they were trying to do here, so that was really helpful and very relaxed here, just a few folk around so it felt quite comfortable."

"[If I'd had] to be there on my own I couldn't have processed that, I couldn't have broken it all down, I couldn't have managed the A to Z of doing it, but being able to send a text and say is it ok to meet Caroline or Carmen or whoever it might be on the day, that's--. I'm just thankful to Green Hive and I always will be."

"Even if you don't know anything about the thing you're doing, they don't make you feel like oh, well, it would be better if there was someone here who had more experience. I've never felt like that at all."

"I am quite a shy person, so just going to the very first thing I would have felt nervous, but everybody was really welcoming."

"Because of my medical problem, I can only work at things for so long and I can't guarantee when I can do it [...] For me personally, it's far better to say there's such and such a job, can you do it in the next two or three weeks?"



"[Volunteering] meant that when I was walking round Nairn, people would see me and go "oh, hi", or whatever, so you started to feel a little bit more like you lived here or belonged a wee bit. So that was really nice, to have that feeling that you're seeing people that you recognised, out and about."

"I actually feel as though I've got a friend for life in Green Hive."

"It's just meeting different people, different backgrounds, and just having a few hours that you've got company."

SOCIAL CONNECTION

Volunteers described the mental and emotional benefit they derive from the social contact provided through their volunteering experiences. They value their time spent volunteering with Green Hive because it provides an opportunity to meet and spend time with like-minded individuals who share their own values and priorities and also allows them to feel connected to people from different backgrounds. It lets them share their own knowledge, skills and experience with others, whilst contributing to the Nairn community and giving something of value and continuity for future generations, thus connecting them with people beyond their immediate volunteering experience.

"It's very inclusive as well. It's like you could be having the worst morning ever, but when you get [to Green Hive] people are like "how are you doing?" Sometimes it's not in words, but spending the amount of time that I'm with the people at Green Hive, staff and volunteers."

"You always come back after an afternoon of volunteering, you always come back and you feel a bit uplifted and you've had social contact, you've done something useful and you feel that was a good day."

"I've got a lot of good knowledge that I'd like to pass on and I think working with Green Hive and the different volunteers has helped me share that knowledge as well, cos I've kind of been on my own outdoors."

"I've got somewhere to go if I'm feeling a bit rubbish."

"[Volunteering with Green Hive has] definitely improved my mental wellbeing [...] It just gives you a bit more purpose and you feel more connected to different people."



A TASK BASED APPROACH

Volunteers enjoyed participating in a practical task because it helped them feel more connected and integrated within their community, allowed them to meet people, feel useful, gain confidence and learn new skills. They are able to share their new knowledge which in turn benefits the wider community, not just now but for the future too. Volunteers appreciated that a small task such as beach cleaning or making a bag contributed to an improved environment locally, but also to addressing global challenges.

"I like to go to bed at night and know that I've achieved something."

"Physically at times I'm absolutely knackered and I'm sore, but mentally I feel a lot better cos I know I've done something for other people."

"Nature is constantly changing and there's times where necessary action like we're undertaking in getting rid of a lot of the invasive species, like the balsam or the Japanese knotweed, this is all going to have a benefit in the years to come."

"We did one of the litter picks out at the Tradespark wood and there was about fifty people turned up to that and there was a load of rubbish found and it was just such a good community. There was a bit of a buzz around it and the people enjoyed it because you could see what it was like beforehand and you saw what it was like afterwards so there's that real difference."

"Sometimes that's the best thing is if you are having a bad day is to just actually get yourself out and go and do something and then you can look back later and think to yourself look, that's a huge improvement."

"It just makes you feel useful. You're doing something that's beneficial and that other people can enjoy, like the community orchard, providing good facilities."

"[I enjoy the] feeling that you've done something worthwhile cos there's just such big, big global environmental problems and you can get quite depressed if you think about that, but if you do just a little thing like pick up litter on the beach you feel like well, I've done something."





Green Hive is a truly inclusive organisation, providing individually tailored volunteering experiences which take into account people's personal situations. This allows volunteers to participate in ways which are appropriate and meaningful to them, thus accruing a range of benefits. This approach requires a significant investment of time and energy by staff to facilitate. Striking a balance between growing an even more diverse volunteer base and remaining loyal to this genuinely inclusive and labour intensive approach to people engagement will be a key consideration in any future development of the organisation.



Final Reflections

The Green Hive Community Research Project was funded by the Highlands and Islands Community Climate Change Grant, a grants programme run by the British Science Association and funded by UK Research and Innovation, which supports communities to connect with researchers to inform community action and use research to respond to climate change.

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