



Sensing the Wild London

Connecting visually impaired people to nature



Pilot Project report

Going For Independence CIC (GFI)

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Executive summary

Going For Independence, GFI, is a Community Interest Company that works in England to empower people with sensory and physical impairments to lead active and independent lives. Established in 2008, GFI has a strong track record of running practical, local, person-centred projects particularly with, and for, blind and partially sighted people and older people living in the Northeast of England.

In 2018, GFI was awarded a National Lottery Heritage Fund grant for Sensing the Wild, a project focussing on the Tees Valley region. (See Appendix 1)

This pilot project, Sensing the Wild London 2022, funded by the City Bridge Trust, builds on the expertise, experience and practical skills already developed and refined at GFI. As a pilot project, it tests the framework established by GFI applying it in London.

From GFI's research and work, it was known that people with visual impairment faced varied and multiple physical and social barriers to engaging with nature and the natural environment. It was also known that visually impaired people who had been on experiences in nature tailored to their needs and abilities valued these greatly and reported a better sense of wellbeing relating to new experiences and learning, opportunities for exercise outdoors, developing social connections and developing friendships.

Volunteers reported a sense of satisfaction and pride for being able to share their local knowledge with the participants and being valued for the practical work they do to maintain and improve the green spaces; they gained a greater understanding of the needs of people with disabilities which they are committed to putting into future practice in making their sites more accessible.

Two walks at the London Wetland Centre were offered to blind and partially sighted people living in Southwest London in March and April 2022. Specialist Sighted Guide training was given to the staff at London Wetland Centre by GFI.

This report is a practical “how to’ guide for anyone interested in making green or blue (water) nature centres open and accessible for local blind and partially sighted people. It aims to set out the criteria for a gold standard, to ensure best access and the best possible multi-sensory, safe and interesting experience for participants. It is person-centred, inclusive and respectful of diversity to ensure a barrier-free experience for VIPs.

This ‘gold standard’ can help other providers to improve their own services for older and less able people.

Thanks and acknowledgements

GFI would like to thank the City Bridge Trust for funding this London Sensing the Wild (LSTW) pilot project and for the London Wetland Centre staff and volunteers. GFI would like to thank Josie at Visual Impairment Society of Richmond (VISOR) and Mariza at Kingston Association for the Blind for help in publicising the walks to local people.

The words we use

Rather than use the words ‘sight loss’ we use the term visually impaired people (VIP) or Blind and partially sighted people - phrases with which older people are more familiar, emphasising the person. It is our firm belief that words matter and reflect our values. We believe in the social model of disability [people] rather than the medical model [a condition], the labelling and application of which often disempowers, belittles and negates the experiences of older and disabled people.

NOT JUST WORDS! This is a practical guide – so please try it!

Get in touch with GFI if you need more information and support.

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Background

For people with sensory loss there is currently little practical information available for practitioners, in both the environmental and social care sectors , on the development and delivery of accessible natural heritage and wildlife-for- wellbeing activities.

The original Sensing the Wild project was developed by Going for Independence working originally with the Tees Valley Wildlife Trust to connect visually impaired people (VIP'S) to nature in the north-east of England in 2018 - 2019.

With funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, 4 groups of visually impaired people were able to engage with their natural heritage through a programme of workshops and walks, in each of the four seasons, at their local parks and green spaces. Specialist Sighted Guide Training was delivered to four groups of “Friends of” green spaces which enabled local volunteers to help guide and support participants with sight loss.

Building on the GFI learning and experience, **Sensing the Wild London** aims to show best practice in connecting visually impaired people and older people with nature. This report provides practical checklists for other centres to implement change and make access better.

Academic study - Sensing Nature Extract (2018)

Sensing Nature, an academic study at the University of Exeter and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, ran from November 2016 until November 2018.

“The overall aim of Sensing Nature was to improve the way we understand and enable more positive, inclusive multisensory nature experiences amongst people living with sight impairment, regardless of their life stage.

Throughout, we have emphasised the need to progress from thinking about people’s nature experiences solely in terms of disability (i.e. risking constrained, segregated ‘accessible’ experiences) to understanding people as individuals with diverse nature interests and knowledge who may or may not also have impairments of some kind. This is the first stage in catalysing a broader culture shift towards the promotion of inclusive nature experiences that fully engage

with and respect embodied diversity rather than reproducing identity-limiting stereotypes and misperceptions.”

GFI wanted to build on the Sensing Nature initiative and ***breathe life into the worthy sentiments by providing a practical approach in plain language.***

GFI facilitates and supports inclusive walks for people; Sensing Nature, as far as one can make out, did not actually provide walks. Since the Sensing Nature report was published our research has found no apparent uplift in the few green spaces that ‘go the extra mile’, in making themselves- in reality -fully accessible.

GFI, through this report, aims to provide practical guidance to inspire local VI groups to take the initiative and to demonstrate to green centres that they must do more. Access is not just a statement on a website, ideally it should be embedded in the culture of the centre, part of what staff and volunteers believe in and carry out. This approach is something that people and organisations need to do repeatedly and automatically, to be part of their identity.

Let’s Spread the Word!

- In this project we have built on the experience and knowledge gained from the Tees Valley Wildlife Group walks.
- We chose the London Wetland centre because of its location on a bus route and its high-quality facilities and keen staff and volunteers.
- We worked with local visual impairment groups at all stages, generating interest and making strong connections, which, in turn, led to good recruitment of blind and partially sighted people for the 2 walks.

Our Project

Local groups and finding people

From the previous GFI Project Evaluation report (See Appendix 1) it was known that local groups had to be included right from the start of the project. It is vital to gain trust and good communication with local visually impaired groups or support organisations because they are the way in which local blind and partially sighted can be contacted.

In our case VISOR (the Visual Impairment Society of Richmond) was contacted. An initial email was sent and then followed up with a visit to the office in person and a quick presentation to the VISOR committee.

Once VISOR understood the aims and felt confident that GFI had the skills and experience to provide an accessible tour of a green centre, a connection was established. Trust was created with a common understanding that both GFI and VISOR want to improve access for local blind and partially sighted people to nature. VISOR were vital in helping GFI contact local visually impaired people, confirming their individual assistance needs and whether they were able to attend the walks, which was not straightforward.

This was extremely helpful as it saved time and obviated any need for GFI to gain permissions to store people's personal information.

From local knowledge and familiarity with the venue GFI had decided to approach the London Wetlands Centre as a potential site. Many VISOR members knew of it, and some had visited with family, but others had never visited and expressed enthusiasm for being able to go.

Our Learning from this part of the project – to make contact with groups as early as possible and to research with them where they might like to visit and what they would like to gain from the experience.

Our project was not able to cover local transport or taxi costs and for some people this could have been a barrier.

London Wetland Centre

We approached the London Wetland Centre which responded enthusiastically to the opportunity to take part in the project. GFI project lead Chris Lofthouse visited and discussed the proposed guided walk route and our offer of training for volunteers as Sighted Guides with their Engagement Manager, who was our contact and had experience of access for blind people having supported a guide dog user on a walk a few years earlier. The Centre Manager was very interested and hoped that the volunteers would be able to use the skills for further walks in the future.

Two walks were planned for two separate groups of Blind and visually impaired people, at the end of March and early May 2021.

Sighted Guide Training

The walks could not have taken place safely without the VI participants receiving appropriate physical assistance from Sighted Guiders offering one-to-one support for those requesting it.

For this essential component of the project GFI provided a professional Sighted Guide and Disability Awareness Trainer who came to the Wetland Centre to train volunteers a couple of weeks before the two planned walks, on the 22nd of March 2021.

Sighted Guides give an audio description of the terrain, sounds and location on the route, alerting people to any hazards in their path. The Wetland Centre volunteers in their turn were able to share their own in-depth knowledge with participants and great conversations ensued!

The training also enabled them to carry out risk assessments of their site enabling them to improve accessibility for VI people in the future.

Our Learning from this part of the project – London Wetland Centre staff and volunteers enhanced their knowledge and skills in environmental engagement with people with sensory loss through the experiences gained in this project.

Sighted Guide training is essential to ensure the best experience for walk participants.

The careful selection of the outdoor sites – facilities needed

- *having fully accessible toilets was paramount*
- *stopping or resting opportunities*
- *safe and secure surfaced footpaths*
- *café or lunch facilities with good seating*

Many of the VI participants have limited walking ability, with some requiring walking frames or wheelchairs, so a choice of a suitable route and identifying any hazards in advance is essential.

Sighted Guide training Feedback

1. What did you like about the training day?

- Content and exercises good giving insight into how it feels to have a visual impairment.
- Experiencing what it is like to have sight loss with sleep mask exercise at start a powerful tool.
- I thought the session was very informative and allowed us to understand better the various causes of sight impairment/blindness and how it may feel to have poor/no sight.
- I really enjoyed meeting visually impaired people and learning from them about what they require from a sighted guide. I think this was really valuable information.
- I also thought the glasses with the different sight impairments were extremely helpful in educating me about eye conditions.
- Being led into the classroom blindfolded gave me some idea about visual impairment.
- I liked the fact partially sighted individuals took part on the course. Gave us the opportunity to understand their emotions, requirements and what we shouldn't ask.
- I liked being out of my comfort zone with the blindfold. It was very interesting to appreciate first hand some of the vulnerability and practical difficulties a visually impaired person may have. I particularly enjoyed guiding Josie (or maybe she was guiding me!) - she was very open and informative.
- Small practical information like where to hold the arm, how to negotiate stairs, highlighting changes of walking surface were all very useful.

2. What do you think could have been better?

- No introductions, overview of the session or housekeeping. Introductions especially important as a mixed group of WWT/VISOR staff and volunteers, some of whom had visual impairments.

- Timings and late running of facilitator. Initial discussions were for a 3-hour session which then became a 2-hour session when joining instructions sent through, with the session itself lasting over 2 ½ hours.
- We started late and ended very late. I think this was mainly due to the trainer not really taking charge and allowing the session to drift.
- At beginning of the course when we entered the room – the instructions should be clearer, for example: the aim of the activity, please remain with your “sleep mask” inside to perceive the environment by the point of view of a partially impaired person.
- Noise control – sometimes it was very difficult to hear the instructor as other participants were talking too loud.
- I would have liked some more introductions. I didn’t know who Chris was or his role and similarly with the other people who came along.
- I don't think there's anything that could have been "better" since it was all new to me. I do welcome a lot more practice at being the guide though! I guess the forthcoming tour/s will give me sufficient confidence to lead.

3. Any suggestions for improvements or ideas for other *Sensing the Wild* venues or anything you would like to say?

- Allow more time to focus on the practical element.
- Be clear on what the session objectives are and structure the session.
- Awkward ‘us and them’ situation at start with VISOR/TN volunteers sitting on one table and WWT on another – also rather too long spent outside at start when we could have been making a start.
- Useful to have those people with lived experience there, but make proper use of that experience. Were often talked down or talked over by facilitator.
- Better outline the relationship between WWT/VISOR and the Talking Newspaper.
- An outdoor classroom – e.g pond dipping area, as we will be guiding people outdoors, I would like to be trained outdoors, so we know what to expect from our own guided tour. For example, how to use the contrast cards.
- I’m also a Royal Parks volunteer - specifically at Richmond Park which might also be considered as a venue. Another lovely place near where I live is Fulham Palace. Maybe also Kew Gardens.
- The tricky thing with guiding will be what to point out and when to point it out. I was tempted to start describing what was around us as soon as we set out in the Courtyard when we had a go at leading last week. Should I go round the Centre beforehand to make note of what may be appropriate stuff to pass on to the person I'm leading? For example - tactile things/plants/leaves. I'm thinking the West Route would offer more interest in that category.

Our Learning from this part of the project -

The rushed nature of the training session and the poor timings were a result of two GFI staff arriving late, having been held up in London rush-hour traffic. This was such a shame as the training was well received overall.

All the comments received will be taken on board in future training programmes.

Two tours of the London Wetland Centre

We organised 2 walks for people – one for 10 people on Wednesday 30 March and Thursday 5th May for 5 people.

For the first tour of the 10 people who attended, 7 people were partially sighted, one was fully sighted, there was one person who was totally blind. All were members of VISOR

Feedback from Tour 1

From feedback scores, the tour was rated as follows:

9/10 – 3 people

9.5 – 1 person

10/10 – 6 people

Quote from one attendee:

At the Wetlands tour, having an interesting and knowledgeable tour guide makes the visit worthwhile and my assistant Kathy was also very good and the refreshments at the end of the tour makes the visit worthwhile. The only suggestion I have is keep it well publicised.

Score 10 out of 10!

The following is feedback from one VISOR staff member who attended:

1. What did you like about the tour of the Wetland Centre?

The Wetlands tour was extremely well organised. Nick Oliver greeted the group and asked members to indicate whether they required one-to-one assistance. Once the volunteer guides had been assigned, the tour commenced.

Nick Oliver provided the visually impaired group with an excellent description of the flora and fauna that we encountered on the route. He stopped to point out differing birdsong and picked leaves from some bushes to hand around, giving a very worthwhile tactile experience. At the herb garden, Nick took a sprig from many of the herbs to pass around in order that the group would enjoy the various aromas of the different herbs. While observing a field of wildflowers, Nick highlighted the yellow cowslips by placing a black covered file behind the flowers, enabling those with partial sight to have a clearer view of

them. Throughout the tour, the personal guides were observant of any potential obstacles or change in the terrain, advising those they were assisting throughout the walk.

From those I spoke to afterwards, my view is that the group thoroughly enjoyed the tour and were looking forward to another visit in the future.

2. What do you think could have been done better?

Personally, in my experience of past tours, there are always instances of when the leader becomes inaudible, due to people being too far away or the guide's voice being quiet. Most of the time, Nick having loud clear speech, this was not an issue. Once I felt I had missed an explanation, due to some distraction. However, the use of a microphone/headset system which are now widely used on tours, would remove such a problem. This would be especially beneficial to the visually impaired and those with hearing loss.

3. Marks out of 10 – tell us overall how you found the tour?

9/10 – It was a very enjoyable event and I very much appreciate the effort and consideration that had been given to achieve such a successful tour.

See more feedback in Appendix 2

Feedback from tour 2 Thursday 5th May 2022

4 people attended – 3 people had dropped out. Of the 4 people, 3 were partially sighted and the fourth person was 'almost totally' blind.

1. **What did you like about the tour of the Wetlands?**

Loved the information on grasses and bird song and ducks. Specific details on the reed grasses etc, good volume and clear voice. Right length

Easy pace. Able to sit down as and when I needed. Leader was very accommodating of pace and peoples' needs.

The ambience and very nice atmosphere. Birdsong. Touching different plants and weather warm and sunny

Friendliness of staff and volunteers. Environment – smell and sounds – it felt like the countryside. Lots of information, easy to hear and staff were knowledgeable.

2. What do you think could have been done better?

More seating. See more of the Centre itself

More seats for people who are not so mobile

Have more tactile experiences.

Some people might find the wooden bridges a bit rickety under foot.

3. Marks out of 10 - overall how you found the tour?

9 out of 10 – 1 person

10 out of 10 – 3 people

4. Any other comments you would like to make?

Made me want to come back again.

All very beautiful and I was very impressed. I will bring my grandchildren here!

Nick (*walk leader*) was very clear and good descriptions and information.

I would come again and, depending on the cost, would arrange a trip with Kingston Association of the Blind.

Putting Principles into Practice

Inclusion and diversity are principles often used. To make these words meaningful and real, there has to be a lot of work to put these principles into practice.

Inclusion means involving local VIP organisations and making contact with local blind and partially sighted people.

Inclusion means co-production - involving the people in the design of the programme to access their local green spaces.

Don't 'do things for people' – do things with people so everyone learns.

Diversity means involving all members of the community from different economic backgrounds and ethnic communities and this is so important. Use the local organisations and voluntary centres to help to make this happen.

For these kinds of guided walks to continue long term and not just be a 'one-off', these principles need to be PART OF THE CULTURE OF THE ORGANISATION, NOT JUST AN ADD-ON. Ideally, the Wetland Centre would have a commitment to accessibility and inclusion at all levels from the Board to the CEO of the Centre, informing the policies and procedures which mean that staff and volunteers are aware. It needs commitment at every level of the organisation – not just a limp after-thought.

There are distinct advantages for organisations running inclusive nature walks in the countryside or in parks and woodlands, including in the promotion of their events and being able to demonstrate to funders continuous improvements in making spaces accessible (e,g for Green Flag Accreditation).

User involvement is key so that it is steered by people who know!

Practical Guidance for making green spaces more accessible

Overview - To 'open up' green centres to blind and partially sighted people:-

- Involve local VIP organisations – contact local blind and partially sighted people – ask them to visit and do a recce – be open to criticism and listen to suggestions
- Co-produce a programme of engagement with local VI People
- Strong partnership working and skilled practitioners
- At the centre, find committed people who are practical in approach and who are enthusiastic about being inclusive.
- Have a Sighted Guide Training Session for staff and volunteers.
- Lunches are vital - having a social lunch together (before or after the walk) with the VI visitors and volunteers allowed everyone to chat more about the centre and the wildlife.
- With the local VI participants draw up a health and safety checklist/ risk assessment
- Arrange a timetable well in advance for the VI groups to advertise in their networks
- Allow plenty of time to liaise with peer group partners, agreeing walk routes, booking venues, arranging transport where applicable, organising and liaising over lunches
- In discussion with local groups draw up a list of criteria for future locations

From the Sensing the Wild report (Appendix 1), the skills and approaches that are needed include:

- Good logistics planning
- excellent communication, and flexibility
- the importance of having good contact with peer groups
- careful selection of the outdoor site
- Persistence, empathy and patience
- Willingness to learn about the needs of people as people and to problem solve
- Awareness of the communication needs of VI participants- large print, email, audio messaging and the need for telephone calls and in person contact

About the first GFI Sensing the Wild project

1 How it started and what we did

At a meeting looking at Heritage funding in 2018 the GFI MD met with a contact from the Tees Valley Wildlife Trust and discussed the potential for a project working together.

GFI did a survey of the visually impaired people in local groups to see if they would be interested in walks – they were

Follow up – A plan was proposed with TVWT staff for workshops and walks in each of the 4 seasons – a programme was then agreed. Appropriate places to walk were visited and volunteer “friends” groups at those sites (Parks and Woods) were contacted and met with to discuss the project idea, recruiting their help to support the walks.

Letters of support were requested – from TVWT and the leader of FoV, a local support organisation for visually impaired people.

Then a funding application was prepared!

2 Lessons learned

A lot of work was needed – before and after

Having 4 groups in different areas made it difficult - One group and one venue would have been better than 4 different groups and locations!

Travel costs can be expensive - however it is key to getting people to the walks.

Providing refreshments and lunches is important to encourage the social side.

Others – family members etc really wanted to do the guided walks, however the numbers were limited.

Outcomes for all involved include improved health and wellbeing, better appetites, fresh air, sensory stimulation, fun, meeting new people, discovering new places, learning about wildlife. Plus ripple effect for all those involved.

Before preparing your funding application check out the checklist below!!....

Checklist for Your Project

1 Carry out Local Research

- Demographics/stats to demonstrate need
- Consider scope and size of project- one group or more
- workshops and walks? How many/ how often?
- ID Local nature reserve(s) walk sites/ centres and check facilities – ask people where they would like to go
- Make contact with potential walk leaders- you may know someone
- ID Local support organisations
- Find and talk to relevant Volunteer groups about sighted guide training – this is necessary
- Consultation- you will need to evidence that people want to do this
- Stress potential benefits for all involved –e.g. making sites more accessible, welcoming more visitors, updating / improving literature and site information, using audio options, disability awareness, training for staff and volunteers, new promo opportunities, wider benefits to families etc.etc.

2 Identifying the people to take on the walks

- Contact local support groups – meet and discuss what we are planning
- Survey – ages, mobility, if they are interested etc.- (GFI have a sample survey)
- explain clearly how the walks work
- Determine numbers so know size of walking group(s) – max 12 any more would be too big
- Will need a person to lead and a person at the back of the group

3 Programming and planning walks and workshops

- Discuss with the sites/centres in advance what you are wanting – multi sensory experiences, audio descriptions of wildlife and surrounds
- Smells, tastes, sounds as well as sights in workshops
- Pre-walk Site visit – ID venue for workshops/ lunches / refreshments/ toilets (space should be provided free but may need to negotiate?)
- where to purchase lunches locally etc. and costs per head

- Travel arrangements
- Accessibility
- How walk leaders can make themselves heard by all- check
- Covid restrictions?
- Workshops – accommodation, what will be covered
- How to record – pictures, feedback, videos, sounds etc-
- Get permissions from participants to use the above

4 Working with volunteers

- Make contact with existing volunteers at centres and see if they would be interested in supporting walkers who are visually impaired. They should have proper training if going to do this.
- If so GFI can arrange and provide specialist Sighted Guide training for them – includes disability awareness
- This training can also be offered to family members of blind people

5 Working out estimates of cost

- Make contract with the centres you are using if they are to lead walks – also may do a short talk or workshop as well – two separate sessions? – ideally under 10 K so you do not need to go out to tender
- Treat as a pilot project- hopefully will lead to more
- Cost for a Project coordinator part time salary – we have a JD example
- Project management costs
- Office overheads – insurance etc
- recruitment costs – staff and volunteers
- Volunteer expenses
- Sighted Guide training costs
- Transport and travel – if included
- Refreshments and Lunches
- Equipment – might need to provide a wheelchair, walker, umbrellas, loudspeaker, blankets, wet proofs, guider arm bands etc

6 Contacting potential funders

- Find potential funders – HLF for natural heritage

- Others ? locally for sponsorship for lunches or transport contributions?
 - Eligibility check- do you meet their criteria?
 - Their expectations/ reporting/evaluation etc
 - Update policies and procedures in readiness- Equal Ops, Safeguarding etc
- 7 Start drafting funding application – offline!**
- May need to apply with an expression of interest first
- 8 Source letters of support**
- From centre / nature reserve
 - From local support organisations
- 9 Finalise funding application**
- Include detailed project plan **with lead in time**
- 10 Prepare the ground- you might be successful!**
- What to do first! – recruitment planned
 - Press release
 - Social media
- 11 Once funding agreed:-**
- Let everyone know – plus media
 - Appoint project coordinator asap and train/induct
 - Meet with Wetland Centre to determine potential safe walk route(s) and timetable
 - Set and agree dates and prepare literature/letters/ adverts- once funding agreed
 - Confirm participants /contact details– **keep data safe re GDPR**
 - Audit of participants, their levels of sight, mobility, guide dogs and hearing levels too, if they would have carers walking with them...also dietary needs- for Health and Safety. This will determine how many sighted guiders you might need.
 - Prepare and deliver guider training for volunteers
 - Meet with Centre walk leader and train/cover blind awareness.

Other ideas to add to enhance future experiences

With permission, take voice recordings during the activities and conversations with participants.

Also take photographs for use in promotion and communication with participants who may like copies – always ask for their permission

Introducing subject areas that are often inaccessible to blind or partially sighted people such as:

- different bird calls and song in different seasons and being able to identify birds from their song
- trees by being able to feel their bark and the leaves of different species
- Other flora and fauna- including the feel of lichen, fungus, herbs and flowers, and information about animals and insects and their sounds

And take with you:-

- Take a small container to capture an insect so that it can be passed round for listening to its sound or for close-up viewing
- Take magnifiers to pass round for all to use
- Take black paper to hold behind a leaf or flower so it shows up for those with partial sight

Consider offering tours that are at different speeds - some of the younger and more physically able participants may be motivated to extend their experiences with a faster, more challenging outdoor experience.

Offer hands-on workshops to complement the walks (See Appendix 1)

In workshops previously, there have been tasting exercises, for example, Herb sessions – the smell, texture, taste and feel of herbs

The reading of nature poetry was also used as an interpretive tool in the GFI workshops.

Promotion

GFI contacted the following local visual impairment organisations:

Visual Impairment Society of Richmond (VISOR): <http://visor.org.uk>

Richmond Talking News: <https://www.rtn.org.uk>

Kingston Association for the Blind: <https://kingstonassociationforblind.org>

It was through these organisations that GFI publicized the walks to the local visual impairment community. Without such a network, it would have been difficult to find people. VISOR was particularly helpful as they provided a list of attendees which meant it was not necessary for GFI to contact individuals directly to confirm their details and whether or not they would be coming.

VISOR were contacted at the start of the project. Early contact is vital to gain credibility, gain trust and establish a personal relationship. It is not so good to go after a project has started because this give the impression that local visual impairment community are just an afterthought in the project plan. Disabled and older people are particularly sensitive to this subtle form of exclusion to just “tick a box”.

GFI approached VISOR with an already established venue for the walks – the London Wetland Centre. This decision had been reached based on criteria that GFI had drawn up from experience gained on previous walks.

Timing

Richmond Talking News was contacted and some people from their network came on the walks. However, there was not time to publicise the walks as an audio news feature via the Talking Newspaper, whose main aim is to provide an audio account of local borough news.

Lesson learnt

Local organisations need a few weeks of notice to be able to put out publicity to their network of local people. Therefore, it is important to establish an advance timetable a few weeks in advance. This enables the network to ‘put the work out’ and for individuals to check their diaries, think about coming and then contact the organization to book a place. Many people are not online and therefore contacting people takes time as can be mainly by telephone.

Conclusions

The Sensing the Wild London project has been a wonderful experience for all those involved, and the legacy of the learning will continue to inform the work of the Wetland Centre which is planning more accessible walks in the future.

The visually impaired participants experienced guided walks in a wetland area that would otherwise have been inaccessible to them, and the volunteers trained as Sighted Guides will carry their increased knowledge of disability awareness and sensory loss with them into the future, for the benefit of their own families and friends.

In addition, the project has given GFI essential feedback on how to improve our own services and our training programme as we develop more inclusive and accessible walks for people with sight loss in the North East and in the Greater London area in 2023 and beyond.

We hope this report acts as a catalyst to open up more environmental, natural heritage and wildlife spaces for people who are older and have limited sight.

Legacy, like fame and smoke, can easily disappear over a short time. So rather than legacy, we hope the words in this document jolt you into action.

If you do something – tell others – and set up a walk for blind and partially sighted people or older people; then this work will have been worthwhile.

Please get in touch with GFI if you want more information and to develop your local green space into an inclusive green space.

Make it accessible to more people including Blind and partially sighted people, older people, people with Dementia or Learning Difficulties as well as designing walks for children, as many of the multi-sensory ideas in this report will increase the enjoyment of a walk in nature for everyone.

Contact Going For Independence at

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Appendix 1 –

Sensing the Wild NE project evaluation report extract 2019 by Dr Susan Antrobus

This report to the National Heritage Lottery Fund, found the following positive outcomes:

- A wider range of people involved in heritage
- Heritage was identified and better explained
- People developed skills
- People learnt about heritage
- People gained a greater well-being

It was found that although many people are interested in wildlife, people with Visual Impairment (VI) felt excluded from fully enjoying green spaces and experiencing contact with nature because of certain barriers including:

- Lack of knowledge/information on facilities of sites and accessibility
- No appropriate transport to visit sites.
- Lack of facilities on sites (e/g toilets, accessible footpaths).
- Public events and activities in parks and countryside were not suitable
- Not having friends/family for support to share their interest in nature.
- Lack of confidence in their ability to visit sites safely and meet new people.

Publicly owned parks and green spaces are there for all sectors of the community to enjoy and yet for people with sight loss there are significant social, physical, and economic barriers that prevent their access and enjoyment.

People have greater well-being

One of the most significant achievements of the project was the huge amount of pleasure and enjoyment that the VI participants gained from taking part. The pre-project survey revealed that participants had none or very limited opportunities to gain the health and wellbeing benefits associated with being outdoors and experiencing nature.

In addition, many of the participants lived alone and had few opportunities for social engagement, leaving them feeling isolated and lonely.

In the post-project group discussions, VI participants were very vocal in their appreciation of being involved with animated descriptions and conversations about their experiences. During these discussions they spoke at length of the simple pleasures of hearing bird song and finding out about flowers and trees. They spoke enthusiastically about how well they were looked after, how welcoming the volunteers had been and simply how much fun it had all been.

Comments included:

“It was the highlight of my week”

“It shows you are never too old to learn”

“It was a real adventure.”

For some, learning the names of trees and birds had been a totally new experience.

“It really made me appreciate what was around me, that was right on my doorstep, and I never knew”.

For some it was an opportunity to rekindle a deep interest in nature that they had not been able to enjoy since their sight and mobility loss.

The project highlighted the key elements to success which included:

- Project development and planning
- The importance of peer groups
- The careful selection of the outdoor sites
- Training of volunteers
- The value of the workshops
- The importance of providing lunches
- Partnership working and skilled practitioners
- Good logistic planning, communication, and flexibility

The importance of peer groups

From previous experience it was known that it is difficult to reach visually impaired individuals directly because people would be unsure about attending

a new activity where ‘you don’t know anyone’. If you don’t know who is delivering the walk or the other people attending, or the layout of the venue, it can take a lot of confidence and can be more of a challenge for people who are Visually Impaired.

By working with VI people who were already in well-established support groups, this enabled people to attend with their friends or at least with one other person that they knew.

The careful selection of the outdoor sites

From GFI’s work with blind and partially sighted people and older people, certain requirements of ‘green centres’ had to be met:

- having fully accessible toilets was paramount
- stopping or resting opportunities
- safe and secure surfaced footpaths
- café or lunch facilities with good seating

Many of the older VI participants have limited walking ability, with some requiring walking frames or wheelchairs.

The importance of providing lunches

Lunches gave an opportunity to socialise and build on existing and new friendships.

Both participants and volunteers mentioned the lunches as being a real treat, making the day something to look forward to.

Partnership working and skilled practitioners

Could the project be delivered in green places without friend’s groups or volunteers? Health and safety is needed so NO!

Without partnership working with the Tees Valley Wildlife Trust there would not have been the learning, skills, and wellbeing outcomes that the volunteers and participants gained.

Room booking, and catering were taken care of by GFI meaning the workshops and walks could be focussed on by the TVWT leader.

The ecological knowledge of the Tees Valley Wildlife staff was important but it was their skills in communicating this knowledge in an accessible and engaging way that made the heritage learning so successful. In addition to the experience of social and wellbeing care of people with sensory loss the GFI team were skilled at sharing these skills with TVWT staff and volunteers through training and mentoring.

Good logistic planning, communication, and flexibility

The delivery of the project required a considerable amount of logistical arrangements and communication because of the wide range of individual communication needs of the VI participants, ranging from emails, post, messages, and telephone calls; due to short term memory needs some of the participants also needed reminders the day before each activity.

In all the communication, care in this work with an attention to detail, understanding and non-patronising empathy for the needs of everyone.

People as people

Whilst all of the participants were visually impaired, sight loss covers a wide range of conditions and levels of impairment. It was key to let people disclose their level of sight loss in a safe environment. It was important to ensure access to people with reduced physical mobility and other sensory loss, and to understand and respond to the needs of every individual was a challenge.

These issues were overcome by the small group sizes, and the experience and patience of GFI staff in treating every person as an individual with unique needs. This enabled all of the participants to gain maximum benefit from taking part.

Dr Susan Antrobus - 2019

Appendix 2

WETLANDS CENTRE TOUR Weds 30th March 2022

Visitor Feedback

1. What did you like about the tour of the Wetlands?

The Wetlands tour was extremely well organised. Nick Oliver greeted the group and asked members to indicate whether they required one-to-one assistance. Once the volunteer guides had been assigned, the tour commenced.

Nick Oliver provided the visually impaired group with an excellent description of the flora and fauna that we encountered on the route. He stopped to point out differing birdsong and picked leaves from some bushes to hand around, giving a very worthwhile tactile experience. At the herb garden, Nick took a sprig from many of the herbs to pass around in order that the group would enjoy the various aromas of the different herbs. While observing a field of wildflowers, Nick highlighted the yellow cowslips by placing a black covered file behind the flowers, enabling those with partial sight to have a clearer view of them. Throughout the tour, the personal guides were observant of any potential obstacle or change in the terrain, advising those they were assisting throughout the walk.

From those I spoke to afterwards, my view is that the group thoroughly enjoyed the tour and were looking forward to another visit in the future.

I had visited the Wetlands before but had no guided tour so only remember the black swans with red beaks. According to Nick, our guide, they have left. He and Alison made this a very memorable visit, one human guide is worth all the audio cassettes and large print handouts in the world. Nick assured me for Wetland disabled groups would always have a human guide. He was excellent and the atmosphere was friendly. They wanted us to enjoy our visit and encouraged us to ask questions. They couldn't have been more helpful and it so interesting. One hour is long enough and the sit downs were very welcome.

I love looking at things. Flowers very interesting and to be told about them. Loved sitting in the hide – listening to the birds. Tour leader very good. Would love to come back again!

Informative and fun enjoyed the hide and bird song

Well planned and the Guide and volunteers very helpful, The pace wasn't too fast and the weather cooperated. Enjoyed the variety of birds and plants throughout the tour.

Loved hearing all about the birds and plants – particularly the geese. I thought Nick was excellent and also the other supporting staff. They were very aware and helpful.

2. What do you think could have been done better?

Personally, in my experience of past tours, there is always instances of when the leader becomes inaudible, due to people being too far away or the the guide's voice being quiet. Most of the time, Nick having loud clear speech, this was not an issue. Once I felt I had missed an explanation, due to some distraction. However, the use of a microphone/headset system which are now widely used on tours, would remove such a problem. This would be especially beneficial to the visually impaired and those with hearing loss.

Nothing

I can't think of anything

Nothing – the staff were very helpful. The birds were in full song.

3. Marks out of 10 - overall how you found the tour?

9/10 – 1 person and 10/10 – 3 people

4. Any other comments you would like to make?

As I probably mentioned before, such events must be publicised widely across visually impaired associations as it is a very worthwhile venture.

It is a bit much for a blind person using public transport, but it can be done if accompanied.

Once inside, though the paths are manageable with no steps which are my bugbear. A blind person would need a personal guide as there are not handrails and erecting them would be very expensive and not practical. I found it difficult to go into darkness in the hide, but it is all flat. I wouldn't have known there were benches.

I'm sure the Wetlands want natural wood, but would it be possible to paint them white? I could not see the birds, and could they lend binoculars? Richmond Council or Richmond and Twickenham Times should do more advertising for your tours.

It would be good to have something about visual impairment on the Wetland Centre website – under additional needs – like contact us if you need a sighted guide.

Appendix 3

WETLANDS CENTRE TOUR -Thursday 5th May 2022

4 people attended – 3 people had dropped out.

Sensing the Wild London Visitor feedback:-

1. What did you like about the tour of the Wetlands?

Loved the information on grasses and bird song and ducks. Specific details the reed grasses etc, Good volume and clear voice. Right length

Easy pace. Able to sit down as when I needed. Leader was very accommodating of pace and peoples' needs.

The ambience and very nice atmosphere. Birdsong. Touching different plants and weather warm and sunny

Friendliness of staff. Environment – smell and sounds – it felt like the countryside. Lots of information, easy to hear and staff were knowledgeable.

2. What do you think could have been done better?

More seating. See more of the Centre

More seats for people who are not so mobile

Have more tactile experiences.

Some people might find the wooden bridges a bit rickety under foot.

3. Marks out of 10 - overall how you found the tour?

9 out of 10 – 1 person

10 out of 10 – 3 people

4. Any other comments you would like to make?

Made me want to come back again.

All very beautiful and I was very impressed. I will bring my grandchildren here!

Nick was very clear and gave good descriptions and information.

I would come again and, depending on the cost, would arrange a trip with Kingston Association for the Blind.