

# Sensing the Wild – connecting visually impaired people to nature

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Project evaluation report commissioned by Going For Independence CIC

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Barbeque at Errington Wood



Executive summary

Sensing the Wild was a pilot project devised by Going for Independence with the Tees Valley Wildlife Group to connect visually impaired people to nature.

With funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund visually impaired people were engaged with their natural heritage through a programme of workshops and walks, throughout the four seasons, at local four parks and green spaces. Visually impaired groups from the boroughs of Hartlepool, Stockton on Tees and Middlesbrough, Darlington and Redcar and Cleveland participated in the project

Specialist Sighted Guider Training was delivered to four “Friends of” green spaces groups which enabled local volunteers to help guide and support participants.

During COVID restrictions the project maintained its momentum and continued to deliver through a combination of podcast recordings, telephone conversation conferences and delivery of sensory parcels.

### **Key outcomes**

Pre project development work revealed that people with visual impairment faced varied and multiple physical and social barriers to engaging with nature and the natural environment.

Visually impaired participants gained enjoyable immersive experiences in nature tailored to their needs and abilities. They valued these as being enjoyable, increasing their appreciation of nature, furthering their understanding of wildlife and local history. Wellbeing benefits were reported relating to:- new experiences and learning, opportunities for exercise outdoors, developing social connections and 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.

A prominent feature on BBC 1 Countryfile, several podcasts, extensive social media, regional press and local radio coverage has created a “ripple effect” of increasing awareness of the barriers faced by people with visual impairment and how they can be overcome.

### **Why the project was successful**

Strong partnership working and skilled practitioners, good logistics planning, excellent communication, and flexibility were key strengths of the project delivery that ensured successful outcomes.

One of the significant reasons for the success was the extensive development work. GFI conducted a considerable amount of research and communication with partners, volunteers and VI participants before the start. This development work was unfunded, and was a significant investment by both GFI and TVWT.

Other contributing factors for success discussed are:- the importance of peer groups; careful selection of the outdoor sites; training of volunteers; the value of pre walk workshops and the importance of providing lunches.

## **Overcoming challenges**

The visually impaired participants had varied and complex needs, which included other sensory loss, reduced physical mobility and reduced cognitive ability. Understanding and responding to the needs of every individual was a challenge, however it was 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.

Great imagination and commitment of partners enabled the project to be continued to be delivered throughout Covid pandemic restrictions.

The project was completed within the grant budget. This was despite all of the additional work carried out during the Covid pandemic. This was possible because of the tight financial management and voluntary hours contributed for the extended project timescales. A bigger contingency element in the budget would have helped especially as this was a new and previously untested project and there were expenses incurred because of the pandemic.

## **Building on success**

As a result of delivering the project Going For Independence is using the learning they have gained to inform their work in the development of a Soundscapes project designed for the visually impaired.

There is currently a dearth of practical information available for practitioners in both the environmental and social care sectors on the development and delivery of natural heritage and wildlife for wellbeing activities for people with sensory loss. The partners are well placed to take on the mantle to champion this work and develop best practice at a national level. One way to achieve this would be the production of a best practice guide that could be a step-by-step approach, covering delivering sensory impairment training, risk assessments for outdoor visits, ideas, inspirations for tried and tested sensory activities and giving practical tips- a project in waiting!

Dr. Sue Antrobus

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## **1. Purpose and scope of the evaluation**

This report has been prepared for Going for Independence (GFI) to document the outputs and evaluation of the outcomes of the Sensing the Wild Project, with reference to National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) funding objectives:

- A wider range of people will be involved in heritage
- Heritage will be identified and better explained
- People will have developed skills
- People will have learnt about heritage, leading to change in ideas and actions
- People will have greater well-being
- The funded organisation will be more resilient
- The local area will be a better place to live, work or visit
- The local economy will be boosted

It is not intended as a record of the project's delivery, rather an analysis of its outcomes and as a tool to inform future initiatives of GFI with partners in connecting people with sensory impairments with the natural environment.

Throughout this document the term visually impaired (VI) is used to describe people with sight loss. This covers the full range of sight loss experienced by people, from being blind with no useful sight, to those who experience reduced vision that impacts on their daily lives.

### **1.1 Materials and tools for evaluation**

- Figures of delivery outputs from GFI.
- Questionnaire responses from VI people during project development.
- Questionnaire feedback from VI participants post project delivery.
- Podcast recordings.
- Photographs taken throughout the project by GFI and Tees Valley Wildlife Trust (TVWT)
- Voice recordings of VI participants and volunteers during workshops and walks.
- Structured interviews with GFI and TVWT staff delivering the project.
- Structured interviews with volunteers from "Friends of" green space groups.
- Group discussions with VI participants, post project delivery.
- Podcast recordings and film footage captured by GFI.
- Country File filming.
- Press and social media coverage of project.

## **2. Summary of the Project**

GFI is a Community Interest Company that works to supporting people with sensory and physical impairments, empowering them to lead active and independent lives.

They devised Sensing the Wild as a pilot project to facilitate and support walks for VI people to learn about their local natural heritage through the seasons.

TVWT were commissioned to deliver a programme of workshops and walks, to take place throughout the four seasons, at four parks and green spaces in the Tees Valley.

Four VI groups from the boroughs of Hartlepool, Stockton on Tees, Darlington and Redcar and Cleveland participated in the project. Training was delivered to four “friends of” green spaces groups to enable volunteers to help guide and support VI participants. During COVID restrictions the project maintained its momentum and continued to deliver through a combination of podcast recordings, telephone conversation conferences and delivery of sensory parcels.

### **3. Summary of project outputs**

People in the Tees Valley experiencing VI were engaged with their natural heritage through a wide range of immersive learning activities over a two year period. Key outputs were:

1. 53 people took part in a series of workshops and walks celebrating the four seasons in their local park/green space.
2. 28 volunteers, from four “Friend’s of” groups received specialised training in disability awareness and *sighted guider* training.
3. 38 volunteers from friend’s groups assisted with the delivery of the project, taking part in the workshops, walks and podcasts.
4. 3 trainees from the TVWT gained work experience by assisting with the delivery of the workshops and walks.
5. 8 audio podcasts of walks with interviews were created and published, and distributed to VI participants.
6. VI participants received sensory boxes during the covid pandemic and a memory folder at the end of the project.
7. The project was featured on BBC Country File.
- 8.

### **4. Evaluation of project outcomes on HF funding objectives**

#### **4.1 A wider range of people will be involved in heritage**

The project enabled 53 people with sight loss to experience and learn about their natural heritage of local green spaces. Research carried out by GFI, prior to the project, revealed that members of VI groups in the Tees Valley were very interested in nature and wildlife but that they felt excluded from enjoying green spaces and experiencing contact with nature and wildlife. Barriers to participation recorded where:

- Lack of knowledge/information on facilities of sites and accessibility of footpaths.
- 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 for them.
- Not having friends and family to support them and share their interests in nature.

- Lack of confidence in their ability to visit sites safely and meet new people.

Many of the VI people surveyed, who then took part in the project, had additional needs and requirements. Although some had been blind from birth, most had experienced sight loss in later life. This was generally accompanied by other physical health issues that reduced their ability to walk and stand, or other sensory loss such as hearing, and for some people, early stages of dementia. The combined effect of this was that they are excluded from experiencing their natural heritage and therefore benefitting from the stimulation, exercise, social interaction and learning opportunities which nature can provide, that others take for granted.

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.

The scope of this project was small in terms of numbers of VI participants. This was due to a realistic understanding by GFI of the considerable support that VI people would require to participate fully in the project and have a meaningful learning experience. Small group sizes were essential to ensure that the activities were tailored to the individual needs and interests of the participants. This was not simply “a walk in the park” but offered in-depth multisensory experiences, through seasonally themed workshops followed by walks facilitated by specialists in accessing the needs of VI people and led by an experienced wildlife engagement practitioner.





## Example voice recordings from the workshops

### Linthorpe Cemetery:

**Leigh:** When we were walking around the cemetery. Did you learn anything new today? A new experience today?

**Kasia:** Yes, it was very interested to hear about the history of the cemetery it went back to 1600 this was something new for me to know about the cholera in Middlesbrough which I did not know I have lived here for 55 years.

**Leigh:** So what did you learn anything new about the wildlife and the flora and fauna?

**Kasia:** Yes, about the bees and the ladybird. Yes, about the different leaves different trees different seeds, it was very interesting, enjoyed it and it did bring back any memories of childhood, lovely picking up chestnuts and reminded me of childhood. It's the tactile feel of them and the smell. In Poland we call this part of the year golden Autumn and now I know why you saying, golden autumn because of the beautiful golden leaves. Yeah, and the bits and bobs that were collected that will be for our art project which we will be doing with Pam. yes well, I'm looking forward to it.

### Ward Jackson Park:

**Leigh speaking to the group:** Right, so this is the Ward Jackson Park, and this is the workshop and its people from Hartlepool VI Club and we're just doing the evaluation on how they found the session with Tees Valley wildlife Trust- So how have you found it today in general?

**Group voices:** very good, very interesting, and exceptional.

**Leigh:** That's good news and I'm pleased you enjoyed it and what did you enjoy most.

**Group voices:** Being able to touch, touching the animals well they are dead animals but, just being able to feel them and touch touching the skin the grasses it's wonderful. Each thing we touched whether it will be vegetation or an animal, it was new each piece was interesting. I think I've swallowed a bird book today? All the knowledge comes back which is nice isn't it.

**Leigh:** What could we have done better for you today? Do you think?

**Eric:** I just loved it in general I've had a really good time.

**Leigh:** Right William have you enjoyed your walk today?

**William:** yes, it was very interesting, and I've noticed more at my age now than I did years ago.

### South Park:

**Leigh:** we just want to ask you all how have you how have you found it today. Pam said, one at a time?

**Alan:** I've found it absolutely marvellous, wonderful time,

**Jonathan:** I've learned about so many different things each time I visit there is something different! Different leaves of the different trees! So yes, great thank you, the food was great too.

**Rosalind:** It made you look at things in a different perspective. I've noticed things that I would never have noticed before. My helper was really great!

**Mabel:** I enjoyed every minute and what we learned was so informative.

## 4.2 Heritage will be identified and better explained

Voice recording during the activities and conversations with participants demonstrated that a huge amount of heritage learning took place. There was a wide range of knowledge and interest in nature by participants before the project, with all confirming that they had learnt about wildlife (questionnaire responses). The most commonly cited learning referred to was learning about the different bird calls and song and being able to identify birds from their song. This was achieved through listening to recordings during the workshops and then listening to bird song during the walks. This was complimented by an increased knowledge about the different species and their habitats and about migratory and resident birds which the participants found interesting. Participants also recalled learning about trees by being able to feel their bark and the leaves of different species. The taxidermy mammals that formed part of the workshops were an especially valuable learning resource for participants who had no sight from birth. Frank expressed how it enabled him to visualise the shape and size of a badger which was very different than what he had imagined. Another participant, Anne, was able for the first time to match the vocal cries of a fox with what she can hear at night from her home.

The tasting exercises were much discussed by participants, especially the rosehip syrup and acorn coffee. The workshop activities such as playing conkers, tasting rosehip syrup and roasted chestnuts over a fire prompted childhood recollections of outdoor play which is part of our shared cultural heritage of the natural environment. The workshops and walks provided opportunities for participants to learn from each other by sharing their knowledge and experiences of wildlife. An example of this was a VI Polish lady, Kazia, she was able to input her knowledge of the folklore of wild plants in her native country.

The reading of nature poetry was also used as an interpretive tool in the workshops. Whilst this was “not everyone’s cup of tea” many of the participants responded enthusiastically to this intellectual and emotional connection with nature. It resulted in each of the groups creating a collective “Tanka” poem in the final workshops.

The green space volunteers made a considerable contribution to the learning about the cultural and historic heritage for the VI participants. Many of the volunteers have considerable local knowledge of the green spaces that they care for. For example, the Friends of Linthorpe Cemetery have social historians who shared their knowledge on the role that the cemetery played in the history of Middlesbrough as an industrial town, whilst the Friends of South Park and Ward Jackson Park were able to tell stories of the Victorian developments of these parks. The Friends of Errington Wood were able to share their childhood memories about the wood as well as their knowledge of the rich ironstone mining history of the area.

The walks and later, the podcasts, also build up an understanding of how the parks and green spaces were managed and maintained for wildlife. All these aspects and the repeat visits built up a multi-layered and in-depth knowledge for the participants. Rosemary from Redcar commented how she had been to Errington Wood and knew it well as a teenager but that she felt that she knew so much more about the site now. Similar sentiments were reported by VI participants from the Darlington group, many of whom knew South Park well from younger days when they were more physically able, but now felt that they knew so much more about its historical development, wildlife and how it was cared for by volunteers.

The podcasts extended the learning. These covered a walk with various staff and volunteers at the sites visited and additional walks, including the River Tees and the Cleveland Coast. These enabled VI participants to find out about the other sites that the other groups had been to. A VI participant from Hartlepool commented *“I liked hearing about the park in Darlington, I want to visit that, oh and the Cemetery in Linthorpe, I would never have thought that a Middlesbrough churchyard would have so much wildlife, yes and those birds at Redcar sounded interesting too.”*

### **4.3 People will have developed skills**

Everyone involved in the project, not just the VI participants, gained skills. Developing and delivering the project was a learning experience for GFI, TVWT and the “Friends of” groups..

The volunteers received specialist training in disability awareness by attending a training workshop. The training programme was delivered by the Project Coordinator. It was based on the *Sighted Guider Trainer* course and was tailored to the needs of the project and the volunteers.

All of the volunteers interviewed found this training to be excellent, both in terms of gaining an understanding of the range of sight loss that people can experience and its causes and practical techniques and practice in guiding VI people. They were able to use these skills and the confidence gained during the workshops and the walks, where they assisted by guiding people around their sites. Only one volunteer had received training on sensory loss before, and that was in an indoor setting, so all of the learning was new to the volunteers. When asked after the project has been completed, all volunteers interviewed, said that they felt confident as a volunteer group to be able to host a group of VI people if they were approached.

Volunteers from Linthorpe Cemetery and Ward Jackson Park also expressed that they had learnt more about their own sites, in terms of wildlife identification skills from the TVWT. Those volunteers who assisted in the workshops also gained skills in how to deliver environmental education and interpretation and how to make the information accessible by watching and listening to how the TVWT presented the workshops. The TVWT considered that the volunteer groups had gained leadership skills by playing a supporting role in the workshops and walks. The Friends of Linthorpe Cemetery also said that they picked up tips on leading guided walks both for VI participants and sighted people from TVWT, which they could use in their own annual programme of public events and activities.

Three TVWT trainees gained training and experience in assisting and guiding VI people and delivering environmental interpretation workshops and walks. These three young people have now gone on to employment in the environmental sector where they will be able to draw on these skills and disability awareness in their careers.

TVWT staff enhanced their knowledge and skills in environmental engagement with people with sensory loss through the experiences gained in this project. The Trust’s Wildlife and People Manager has extensive experience of environmental education and community engagement. He was able to adapt sensory techniques used with children and successfully develop and apply them to engage people with sight loss to create a unique programme of workshops and walks. He also reported that the support of GFI staff during the workshops and walks helped him to improve his audio description skills and he gained a greater understanding of the complex needs of people with sight loss through taking part in the project.

The Director of GFI and the Project Co-ordinator reported a huge amount of learning in skills in environmental interpretation and their local heritage, which is covered in 4.6.

**Example of audio recorded feedback of sighted guiders from Friends of South Park after they assisted with the first seasonal walk.**

**John Throw** "it's a pleasure to take people round to show people the South Park today.....We are very proud of it and we enjoy showing it to people. It's a pleasure to share it with other people."

**Fal Sarker** "I would like to say that I have learnt a lot from the lady that I was guiding and I have suddenly realised how much we could let them have the knowledge of the trees in the plants and everything."

**Wendy Throw.**"I was a bit daunted and I wondered what it would be like, I really enjoyed it especially being with Maureen who I was guiding, we had a good talk and I hope I get you next time Maureen!"

**Mary Atkinson** " Hello this is my first occasion and I have really benefitted from it as I used to have visual difficult and I couldn't see very well myself I know I can see both sides. I've made a new acquaintance, met new people! Delightful people, and many different perspectives on this occasion. Another group that I go to with invented a word means you had a good laugh titterworthy and worthy on this occasion"

**Janet Bradshaw** "yes I agree with that as well, we do love our parks. It's been a precious pleasure to walk round with people and you know and to explain to people what is there And we are going to develop a walk in the park book because we can't remember all the things that here. And we are going to try to describe some of the history with it as well".

**Marie Hirst** "Well I didn't know about this and I really wanted to take part in it Although I am a friend of the park I didn't really know a lot about the trees and that you know But you know Sheila (VI person she assisted) knew quite a bit and Sheila and I got on like a house on fire we are bison buddies now and I picked up so much information from people as well as I was listening as I went around. I think it's fabulous and I really look forward to the next one. "

#### **4.4 People will have learnt about heritage, leading to change in ideas and actions**

This has been covered in 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3. Learning about wildlife by the VI participants in the workshops and walks was extended in the podcasts by the Project Coordinator with interviews with TVWT staff and other local environmentalists. The podcasts also went further in exploring environmental issues, linking local issues with national and global environmental challenges.

This was done in a positive and empowering way, giving suggestions for how everyone, including VI people could play a role. For example, pollution in local streams and rivers was followed by suggestions about disposing of household items such as wipes and reducing plastic. Discussions on the fall in the populations of previously common birds and insects was followed by describing how feeding garden birds and growing plants rich in pollen and nectar can help. Discussions with participants showed they had reflected on their role, and felt empowered and open to take more proactive action in future.

#### 4.5 People will 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 questionnaires 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 live alone and have few opportunities for social engagement, leaving them feeling isolated and lonely.

The post project questionnaire showed all of the respondents reporting that they, as a result of taking part, felt that their wellbeing benefited from being outdoors, learning about nature and being part of a social group. 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”* and *“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”*. Whilst for others 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. For them sharing and building on their interests and being engaged in a meaningful activity was valuable to them *“I have family and they take me out, but it is usually shopping or for a drive out; on these walks we really found out so much about the history and wildlife, it was far more interesting”*

The enthusiasm of all the staff and volunteers delivering the project was infectious and uplifting to the VI participants *“you hear so much doom and gloom in the news these days and here are fantastic people who work to care for animals and keep these parks cared for, it gives you hope doesn't it?”*

The TV filming for Country File was a particular highlight for the Redcar VI participants. Two participants reminisced, with giggles, about how charming the TV presenters were and how they were treated like TV stars, another participant recalled how her taxi driver had recognised her from the show and another on how it was something exciting to talk about to her family and other care home residents.

The sensory boxes were an unexpected gift for the VI participants during the first Covid lockdown. These were boxes that participants had decorated on a previous art project with GFI (more details in 6.2). It was a real boost for many of the participants. These personal boxes, podcasts, and telephone calls were all commented on by the participants as being moments of joy in what was a very lonely and worrying time, especially as the majority of the VI participants were classed as Covid vulnerable and restricted to their homes for the first twelve weeks of Covid restrictions. Feedback from the sensory keep safe boxes and photographs, highlighted that these will be cherished items.

From discussions with participants after the project it was apparent that the experiences of the project had helped to create new and strengthen existing friendships with their peers and a sense of camaraderie.

These relationships are of particular significance as most of their relationships are with family or people who provide them with care, whereas these friendships are of equals and built on shared interests.

There were significant wellbeing benefits for the volunteers from the “Friends of” groups, who participated. The reasons given by them for wanting to be involved centred around the opportunity of sharing their love of the site and enabling all people in their community access, which fitted into their group aims. The volunteers reported feeling a great sense of pride and satisfaction in taking part in the project. They felt valued and respected by the project partners and appreciated by the participants.

Keith Ferry, Friends of Errington Woods *“It was something very different (to what)that we normally do, which is the practical forestry work.....we are a sociable bunch who are good at storytelling, so it was something we all enjoyed after the initial nerves”.*

Malcolm Cummings, Friends of Linthorpe Cemetery *“whereas some of our volunteers are unable to do the gardening and strimming, this was something that all of our group could contribute too, it really helped us grow a team of volunteers.”*

Dorothy Humphreys, Linthorpe Cemetery *“it was so incredible to be given the opportunity to meet and help these people and see how much they loved the workshops, you could see the joy on their faces and how much they enjoyed the walks “*

Jess, trainee Project Officer *“This was the best experience that I have had with the Wildlife Trust. It was really exciting and so amazing to be able to have the opportunity to help people get out and enjoy. It has made me realise what I take for granted. “*

For the TVWT and GFI there were wellbeing benefits associated with satisfaction of delivering a successful project for people in need. Steve Ashton, TVWT *“You could really see the expressions of amazement on people’s faces when feeling the stuffed animals and the joy when listening to the recordings of bird song.....sometimes people were chatting so much about the things that they were learning that it was hard to fit everything in that I had planned!”*

Leigh, Project Coordinator for GFI *“It was really hard work, and very stressful at times, especially during lockdown but it was a brilliant project, I am so pleased that I was part of it. I learnt so much about local wildlife and history, met some fantastic people and it was so worthwhile, it was life changing for some of the people we engaged with.”*

## **5.6 The funded organisation will be more resilient**

GFI are a well-respected small Community Interest Company with a strong track record in enabling people with disability and sensory loss in leading full independent lives. This project has built on their existing expertise of supporting independent, partnership working and management skills. This was an ambitious project for GFI, as it was their first venture into the natural heritage sector, their first NLHF application and their first partnership project with a heritage NGO. GFI thrived on this challenge, delivering a first-class project. During the project’s development, GFI were very open to advice from NLHF staff, the TVWT, local VI support groups and VI people. They benefitted from the input and support from the TVWT in developing the delivery plan and costing of the project.

Although they found the application process daunting, their enthusiasm and in-depth knowledge of the local needs and interests of VI people enabled them to take on a new venture with gusto.

GFI gained experience of heritage project management and administration through delivering the project. The Covid-19 pandemic was a challenge for all organisations, large and small but GFI were quick to respond and were creative in how they adapted the project plan and continued to deliver the project despite the pandemic's restrictions. The Project Coordinator brought a great deal of experience of social work with VI people into the organisation, complimenting and extending the existing experience. There was a very steep learning curve in terms of use of digital and technical skills, which enabled the project to continue to deliver through lockdown. For example, the use of audio-recording, video and the production and distribution of podcasts. Skills were also gained in the use of social media, and experience of working with a national TV crew. All this has increased the capacity of the organisation.

The publicity around the project, (especially TV coverage, social media, and podcasts) has raised the profile of GFI both regionally and nationally. It has already resulted in GFI broadening its horizons with the development of new projects and funding applications. The experience gained from delivering a successful NLHF funded project will enable the organisation to benefit from a wider range of funding streams, making it more financially secure. GFI is also planning a project which will include the production of saleable items to generate a small amount of income, making the organisation more sustainable.

#### **4.7 The local area will be a better place to live, work or visit**

As a result of the specialist training and experiences in guiding people with VI, the participating "Friends of" groups are more aware of the hazards on their footpaths, such as overhanging branches and uneven footpath surfaces that are encountered by people with low vision. This knowledge is already influencing how these green spaces are maintained and improved. For example, the chairperson of the Friends of Ward Jackson Park has set out proposals for improvements and discussed these with Hartlepool Borough Council, which are now being integrated in to the park management plan. The Friends of Errington Wood are taking a conscious effort of making sure that their woodland management work does not create a hazard and that major routes are more accessible. They plan to make additional benches to allow rest alongside key footpaths as well and this winter they will be thinning an area near the car parking to allow for people with reduced mobility to have a woodland experience without walking any distance. The Friends of Linthorpe Cemetery and the Friends of South Park have walked all the footpaths to assess for hazards. In South Park the project has been an impetus for the redevelopment of the Parks Sensory Garden with Groundwork. All of the groups have also learnt how to improve their leaflets and other site information which they will be able to implement when they update these publications.

The project has made a contribution to local pride. The podcasts have been listened to by people throughout the UK and beyond. This along with the Country File programme has shone a positive light on the Tees Valley as an attractive place to live and a forward-thinking inclusive society. The profile of volunteers in the green spaces has been enhanced. This is all welcomed, as a boost to the national perception of the area, often portrayed as suffering from economic and social deprivation. People who were not directly involved in the project were also proud of the project being delivered in their local green space.

Marie Hirst from South Park *“When we put up posts on our Facebook page showing VI people on the walks and workshops, we received many shares and positive comments. This was followed by spikes in the number of followers. Our Facebook page now has over 4,000 followers compared to around 1,000 two years ago. Some of this is a result of Covid as well as this project.”*

#### **4.8 The local economy will be boosted**

GFI and TVWT are both local organisations employing local people and services. Local, small independently run cafes and catering companies were used to provide catering for the project and minibus transport was provided by an independent local firm.

### **5. Reasons why the project was successful**

#### **5.1 Project development and planning**

One of the key reasons for the success of the project was the extensive development work carried out. This development work was unfunded, and was a significant investment by both GFI and TVWT.

GFI conducted a considerable amount of research and communication with partners, volunteers and VI participants before the start, as part of the project planning and National Lottery application process. This included; taking advice from the TVWT on natural heritage interpretation, working with the Tees Valley Wild Green Places project (a NLHF funded project) to identify potential “Friends of” parks and green space group volunteers and discussions on need with local disability support organisations. This was followed with visits by GFI and TVWT to all of the sites to assess their accessibility and suitability for VI visits. Meetings were held with representatives of Friends groups to explain the draft project and to gauge their interest in taking part in it and undergoing specialist sensory loss awareness training. Further conversations and questionnaires with potential VI participants helped to refine the project plan. All of this took time and was a considerable unfunded investment by GFI and TVWT.

As a result of this crucial development work all of the partners, volunteers and potential participants were enthused and committed to the venture. When funding was secured from NLHF, it enabled the project to hit the ground running in terms of delivery, with everyone having a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in the project delivery. A disadvantage was that for the volunteers, it felt like a long wait between the initial meetings and the project starting. Whilst most of the groups understood the grant application process, some of the volunteers from the Friends of Errington had not appreciated how long this would take and needed to be re-energised when the project did start.

#### **5.2 The importance of peer groups**

From previous experience both GFI and TVWT knew that if they offered this programme as open to bookings by individuals who were visually impaired directly that it would be unlikely that they would raise interest even with careful targeting of promotional material. Attending a new activity where you don’t know anyone who is delivering it or the other people attending takes a lot of confidence and is even more challenging for people who are VI. 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.



In addition, all but the Middlesbrough participants had attended art and craft workshops with GFI so there was an already established relationships and trust. During the project four additional VI people joined on the recommendation of people already attending.

### **5.3 The careful selection of the outdoor sites**

The initial idea was for the project to take place in Tees Valley nature reserves which would provide an immersive experience in nature. However, from GFI's knowledge of the varied and complex mobility needs and health issues of the potential participants, urban parks were chosen instead. The need for accessible toilets was paramount and as many of the VI participants also have limited walking ability, with some requiring walking frames or wheelchairs, surfaced footpaths were required. Ward Jackson Park, South Park and Linthorpe Cemetery Local Nature Reserve all had the benefit of an indoor meeting room, enabling the workshops and walks to take place in the same location. All three had been in receipt of previous National Lottery Parks for People grants, resulting in high quality infrastructure.

An equally important consideration on the choice of urban parks and green spaces was the existence of a strong network of "Friends of "groups. The NLHF-funded Tees Valley Wild Green Places project was able to identify candidate groups and arrange and attend introductory meetings with GFI. Because this previous TVWT project had been so successful and had established positive relationships, volunteers had confidence in the new venture that TVWT would be a partner in and were they were keen to get their volunteers involved, despite it being something new to them.

Errington Woods differed from the other three sites in being a woodland local nature reserve that is managed as a countryside site for informal recreation. It has no tarmac surfaced footpaths, toilets, or indoor venue. Its selection was made as the TVWT considered that the mature woodland and far-reaching views over the Tees estuary would provide an exhilarating walk for the participants. In addition, the friendly Friends group volunteers were experts at hosting fire circles, outdoor cooking, and green woodworking, which would provide a unique experience. It is also one of the few woodlands in the area with fairly level terrain. The choice of this site necessitated additional expenses of hiring a disabled access Portaloo. The disadvantage was mud - especially on the winter walk. Two participants, with wheelchairs returned from the trips with muddy equipment which was not well received by their care workers! However, both participants felt that this inconvenience was worth the experience. The lack of an indoor venue necessitated the workshops taking place in an alternative local location. After lockdown there was a change in location to Locke Park in Redcar. This was equally enjoyed by the participants, especially as it had a lake where they could feed the waterfowl, however it meant that the Errington Friends group volunteers were not involved. Other local volunteers were recruited and trained including a GP and a local councillor.

Post project reflections by the TVWT was that they would have liked to extend the experiences of the participants to the more natural surroundings of their nature reserves. Whilst acknowledging that there would be practical issues, they considered that some of the younger and more physically able participants may be motivated to extend their experiences with a more challenging outdoor experience. after enjoying the workshops and the parks visits.

## 5.4 Training of volunteers

The training of the volunteers was an essential component of the project. The walks could not have taken place safely without the VI participants receiving physical assistance from visually sighted guiders as some individuals needed one to one support. GFI identified the need to have a trained Sighted Guide to tell them where they are and to prompt them to dangers in their path. There are few experienced volunteers in this and it was very beneficial to train the volunteers from the “Friends of” groups because they could also contribute their in-depth knowledge about their site. The training also enabled them to carry out risk assessments of their sites enabling them to improve accessibility for VI people. Project Coordinator Leigh Nicolson *“We needed our guests to be able to safely explore their surroundings in unfamiliar places.*

*The training was essential to manage health and safety and it was a way in which to bring people together.*

### **Examples of audio recorded feedback from VI participants during a season walk:**

**Sheila Oulton who has sight loss and hearing loss :** “without the one-to-one help I would not hear it! It made it so special, thank you.”

**Maureen McClelland:** “I enjoyed my guide, not being able to see and her describing stuff and I’ve seen trees since I were young, and I really enjoyed it!”

*The visually impaired guests enjoyed the company of the guiders and they made friendships. The trainees enjoyed the experience of doing something new and enjoyed learning together. In the evaluation of the session, the trainees said they had gained more confidence and had learned new skills. They had a raised awareness of the needs of the visually impaired guests. We as an organisation felt more confident on taking people with disabilities on walks outside with our volunteers competently trained as sighted guiders. Most of the volunteers had little awareness of the effects of sight loss, and the consequential effects this would have on mobility and orientation.*

## 5.5 The value of the workshops

Each seasonal walk was preceded by an indoor workshop. This was a departure from how the TVWT normally work with groups, preferring to do as much of the engagement outdoors as possible. Post project evaluation revealed that the workshops were an integral part of the project’s success. The workshops enabled everyone to get to know each other in advance of the walks. The initial workshop built up trust of the participants with TVWT staff and the volunteers who they had not met with before. The participants expressed that they felt welcomed by the volunteers and it enabled them to become familiar with the layout of the buildings used for the workshops and lunches, and the toilets, in advance of the walks, something that GFI recognised was important for people who are visually impaired. The volunteers reported that it was valuable to them in calming their nerves, as they were able to gain a greater understanding of how volunteers needed supporting on the walks. This was apparent as those volunteers who chose not to attend the pre walk workshop (Friends of Errington wood) expressed their anxiety prior to the

morning of the first walk, whereas, having met the participants in the workshop the week before, the volunteers from the other friends groups reported feeling confident.

As well as an introduction to the walks the workshops were valuable learning experiences in themselves, with all of the participants recalling knowledge that they gained. Sitting comfortably and not worrying about hazards whilst walking for visually impaired people allowed them to concentrate fully on the activities and enabled round table discussions. It was so successful that the TVWT is considering making more use of indoor workshops with other groups that they work with.

### **5.5 The importance of providing lunches**

During the project development the provision of social lunches, to round off each workshop and walk, was factored into the project costs. This was because GFI recognised that with travel time, especially by minibus, the mornings would be very long for participants. This would have meant that some of the participants would miss their main cooked meal of the day. The provision of nutritious lunches enabled the activities to run for an entire morning. The lunch times provided opportunities for the sessions to be extending in a more informal way with the volunteers staying for lunch and engaging in wildlife themed conversations with the participants. Both participants and volunteers mentioned the lunches as being a real treat, making the day something to look forward to. Many of the participants are on very reduced economic means so eating out is a rare treat. The lunches also gave a rare opportunity to socialise and build on existing and new friendships.

A highlight for the participants and volunteers at Errington Wood was the BBQ, with food cooked over an open fire using wood from forestry tree felling operations. For some participants it was a new experience, with one woman in her 80s experiencing roasting marshmallows for the first time. This warming food was welcomed on the winter walks, with the added benefit of the fire keeping people warm and created a natural circle where Friends group volunteers could share stories of the site. For the final summer walks, that took place after the Covid lockdown, lunches took the form of picnics instead of indoors. Although this was weather-dependent and we had to re-schedule one of the walks, this had the added benefit of extending the time that participants were outdoors, and several people reported that this made the sessions feel like a special day out, bringing back memories of countryside picnics of their childhood or with their children when they were young.

### **5.6 Partnership working and skilled practitioners**

GFI were the project leaders and acted as the funding body, but this was a partnership project in the full sense of the word. Partnership working in NGO's is common, but less common across different sectors. GFI and TVWT brought very different and complimentary skill sets to the project. Neither partners had worked together before, having met by chance on a NLHF grant workshop in East Cleveland. Their shared desire to connect VI people to their natural environment resulted in the development of the project. A strong relationship was built during the project development based on mutual respect. The post project interviews enabled both parties to recognise that they could not have delivered the project without the partner.

*Pam Bennett, GFI "The Wildlife Trust were key throughout. Kate gave us so much help in developing the project, and Sue introduced us to the "Friends of" groups and visited potential local*

*sites with me. Steve had so much knowledge and wonderful ways of making nature accessible, I was confident that we were in safe hands when it came to the workshops and walks.”*

*Steve Ashton, TVWT “We would never have been able to reach out to visually impaired people without GFI. As well as their knowledge in that sector they also worked with the people who came before so they understood their needs and had built up relationships with them.”*

Although the project could have been delivered in green places without friend’s groups it would not have been as rich an experience for the VI participants and there would not have been the learning, skills, and wellbeing outcomes that the volunteers gained.

There was very clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of each partner in the project delivery plan, which avoided any duplication or confusion. This enabled the project to run smoothly. During the workshops and walks the TVWT were able to fully concentrate on environmental interpretation, confident that all the logistics, such as transport, room booking, and catering were taken care of by GFI.

The staff from GFI and TVWT who developed the project also played a key role in its delivery. These staff have considerable expertise and practical experience in their professional fields. The ecological knowledge of the TVWT staff was important but it was their skills in communicating this knowledge in an accessible and engaging way, that made the heritage learning 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. A project of this type does require a great deal of project management and community engagement skill to be as successful as it was in this case.

## **5.7 Good logistic planning, communication, and flexibility**

The delivery of the project required a considerable amount of logistical arrangements and communication by GFI, especially by the Project Coordinator. This involved the usual arranging dates with all partners, booking of venues, arranging transport, liaising over lunches, with four different VI groups, four Friend’s groups, four locations and the TVWT. Whilst this is typical of all community engagement projects, an additional consideration was 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. The fact that the VI participants and volunteers reported all the organisation to be excellent with no issues recalled, demonstrated how carefully all this work was carried out, with an attention to detail. The volunteers interviewed reported that they understood the aims of the object from the start, were clear what their role was, were kept informed throughout and that their role was valued.

## **6. Challenges**

### **6.1 The varied and complex needs of VI participants**

Whilst all of the participants were visually impaired, sight loss covers a wide range of conditions and levels of impairment. Most of the participants had experienced sight loss in later life, the common causes being age-related macular degeneration, glaucoma, cataract, and diabetic retinopathy. As well as sight loss many of the participants had age related health issues that result in reduced physical mobility and other sensory loss. Some participants were also challenged with

short term memory loss, and a reduction in cognitive ability and a few were in the early stages of dementia. Understanding and responding to the needs of every individual was a challenge.

It was 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.

## **6.2 Changes in delivery in response to the Covid-19 pandemic**

The lockdowns imposed due to the Covid-19 meant that delivery of the final set of four Spring workshops and walks were suspended in 2020. A project extension was granted by NLHF and these final activities took place in the late summer of 2021.

GFI were extremely proactive and creative in their response to the pandemic. They recognised that, due to their age and associated issues, that the VI participants would be especially vulnerable to Covid and be isolated. They responded by carrying out an IT audit of the needs and abilities of the participants. This revealed the extent of how limited their access is to methods of communication. Some have no internet connection at all or are not able to use computers. The landline was their main link plus mobile phones for others. The Project Coordinator quickly learnt about audio video recording and created a podcast of a walk. This was published online. It was also recorded on to memory sticks for participants who had access to a laptop or Daisy reader and onto CDs for those who did not. The feedback from the participants was very positive, so that 8 podcasts of walks were recorded over the length of the project and distributed during the pandemic. <https://uk-podcasts.co.uk/podcast/sensing-the-wild>

In response to the Covid cancellations and to support the participants, GFI put together keepsake boxes – wooden boxes which had been decorated by participants in some of the GFI activity groups held prior to the lockdowns. These were filled with multi-sensory contents (touch, smell and taste) including items collected on the walks - feathers, pine cones, lavender, leaves, acorns etc. plus a wrapped chocolate and a lemon sherbet, NLHF stickers, a TVWT sticker and a covering letter in large print ( one copy made in Braille) to send out to all participants as a surprise. These were very well received, and there was some great feedback.

To continue keeping in touch GFI also sent out a CD of bird song in October with a hand-made tactile Halloween card (a raised and outlined pumpkin picture designed specifically for our Blind and visually impaired people with a chocolate spider inside.) We again put an upbeat message in and had a Braille copy of that made. GFI made use of the Post Office “Articles for the Blind” free postal service for these items, which has made it possible.

GFI were also able to draw down a range of small Covid specific grants to compliment the Sensing the Wild Project. This enabled them to set up telephone conferences using landlines rather than zoom which was not accessible by most of the participants. Memories of the walks and workshops formed the basis of many of the discussions and the Project Coordinator was able to stimulate environmental discussions based on the podcasts, encouraging the feeding on garden birds for example.

This work through the pandemic, was considered essential by GFI, in maintaining the momentum of the project and keeping in contact with the VI groups.

## **6.3 Transport**

The pre project questionnaires highlighted that the lack of appropriate transport was a major barrier in preventing VI people from accessing nature and wildlife.

The provision of transport, whilst a significant cost, was vital to the project. Minibuses with a driver were hired to transport the participants to the workshops and walks. Without transport being provided it is unlikely that many of the participants would have been able to take part. Whilst a few of the participants were confident to use buses, the majority were not. In addition, the locations of most of the sites made access by public transport either not possible or involved two or three busses from people's homes and added additional complications and anxiety for participants.

The GFI project coordinator accompanied the driver and assisted participants on one of the journeys. She reported the advantage was that the journey was part of the adventure and an opportunity for people to chat. However, there were initially issues with the suitability of the vehicles for wheelchair users which was very stressful on the first trip and it meant a very long day for the project worker. The novelty also soon wore off for the participants, especially on the return trip, with the time taken to drop people off at their homes. For the post Covid trips taxis were used to enable more social distancing. This proved to be a better alternative as the participants were able to arrange their own transport, usually with a known company and driver who were familiar with their needs, and then they claimed the money back from the project.

#### **6.4 Weather**

Whilst before the project VI participants were confident in being prepared to go out whatever the weather with comments such as *"no such thing as bad weather just need the right clothes"* and *"a bit of rain never hurt anyone"* it became apparent to the organisers that weather did play an important role in the enjoyment of the walks. Due to the limited mobility of many of the participants, including some people in wheelchairs, they were much more likely to be affected by adverse weather, especially getting cold. The project was designed for the participants to experience all the seasons, and despite the cold the winter sessions were still successful. GFI on reflection consider that they would be reluctant to plan outdoor walks during winter months again. Another option, suggested by the TVWT staff would be to have a combination of workshop and walk whereby participants spent a shorter amount of time outdoors. The confidence to make decisions to cancel in poor weather is also important. The cancellation of one summer walk due to driving rain was made. This was the right decision but as it was last minute it did have costs of cancelled transport and lunches as well as additional organisational time.

#### **6.5 Coordination time and costs**

The project was completed within the grant budget. This was despite all of the additional work carried out during the Covid pandemic. This was possible because of the tight financial management however a bigger contingency element in the budget would have helped especially as this was a new and previously untested project.

When questioned on the costing of the project management and project coordinator costs, it is apparent that both the Managing Director of GFI and the Project Coordinator put in many hundreds of hours of additional unpaid work to make the project successful. Considerable work was required on logistics and communication with VI participants to ensure the smooth running of

the project. This was particularly time consuming as the VI participants had varied communication needs (large print, email, audio messaging telephone calls).

In addition, the project took opportunities that arose during the delivery such as involvement in the BBC Countryfile programme, local radio interviews and presentations to other organisations and extensive social media posts. The TVWT felt that they were able to deliver their contributions to budget, demonstrating that it is the coordination and logistic time costs that were under costed in the grant application to NLHF. However, if GFI were to submit an application with the true cost of staff time it is unlikely that the application would be considered value for money by NLHF due to the small number of direct VI participants. It is important for NLHF to acknowledge that high quality heritage engagement with people with sensory loss is expensive and that this project, through its ripple effect had far reaching benefits in terms of the wider outcomes and legacy.

## **9. Legacy**

The project has had a large ripple effect for a local project, achieving a much wider impact than the VI participant, volunteers, and delivery partners could have imagined. GFI and TVWT always considered this as a pilot project that could contribute to learning within their sectors, and they have been proactive in sharing their experiences. Key examples are:

- Featured as a case study in a Wildlife Trust caring for green spaces manual- a tool box for green space projects and volunteers.
- Mid-project presentation by GFI with 3 visually impaired participants to north east and national NLHF staff, and featured on HF website.
- Presentation by Darlington volunteer, Fal Sarker, at a national meeting of the Botanical Society of Great Britain and Ireland.
- Communications by TVWT to the Wildlife Trusts People and Wildlife staff of the national network of Wildlife Trusts.
- Publication of podcasts on YouTube and other digital platforms.
- Interview by (Royal National Institute of Blind People) RNBI of the Project Coordinator.
- Shared learning through Tees Valley Nature Partnership.

## **10. Building on success**

As a result of delivering the project the experience gained in the use of specialist informant technology and the use of sounds to evoke memories of places, GFI and TVWT is being used to inform their work in the development of a Soundscapes project designed for the visually impaired. In addition, GFI is exploring the development of new partnerships in Richmond and central London looking at training volunteers in heritage interpretation for VI people.

There is currently a dearth of practical information available for practitioners in both the environmental and social care sectors on the development and delivery of natural heritage and wildlife for wellbeing activities for people with sensory loss. The interest in the project from other Wildlife Trusts and the current recognition of the value of regular access to nature demonstrates that there would be great value in GFI and TVWT sharing their approach. This could be achieved by the production of a best practice guide that could be a step by step approach, covering delivering sensory impairment training, risk assessments for outdoor visits, ideas, inspirations for tried and tested sensory activities and giving practical tips.

Seasonal wildlife walks - exploring nature





Seasonal workshop at Linthorpe Cemetery



Preparing the Sensory keepsake boxes



Countryfile filming at Errington Wood, New Marske



Group photographs from South Park

