

RESEARCH IMPACT | GROUNDSWELL CONSORTIUM

From Barriers to Bridges



A Community Researcher Model for engagement and participation
in Nature-Based Health Interventions

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The research centre for inclusive
access to outdoor environments



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
Edinburgh College of Art

GroundsWell Research Consortium

Transforming our cities from the ground up

Role: Research Associate, OPENspace Research Centre, University of Edinburgh
Programme: GroundsWell Consortium (UKRI-funded)
Focus: How urban green and blue spaces can prevent non-communicable diseases

GroundsWell is a UKRI-funded consortium investigating how urban green and blue spaces can prevent non-communicable diseases, working across Edinburgh, Belfast, and Liverpool through co-design with communities and policymakers.

PROBLEM IDENTIFIED

THE PROBLEM

Communities who stand to benefit most from greenspace investment were systematically invisible in the research evidence base.

Linguistic barriers

Standard tools untranslatable or culturally inappropriate

Cultural mistrust

Communities wary of external organisations collecting data about them

Low participation rates

Conventional methods failing to generate meaningful engagement

THE RESPONSE

A Community Researcher (CR) Model

Rather than researchers going into communities, individuals from within those communities — with lived experience of the issues — were recruited, trained, and supported to act as trusted bridges between the research team and community members.

Trialled across three distinct contexts:

The Welcoming

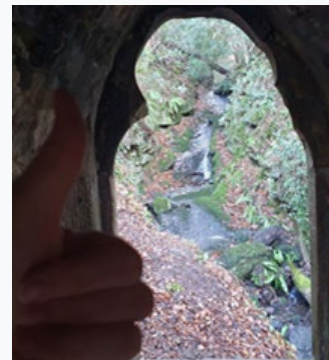
Refugees & Asylum Seekers

Midnight & Beyond

Young Male Offenders

Edible Estates

Social Housing Residents



Published: Wendelboe-Nelson et al. (2024). Outdoor health intervention for refugees, migrants, and asylum-seekers: A mixed-methods pilot study. *Health & Place*, 91, 103387.

WHAT WE DID: Core Activities

1

Identify

Recognised failure of standard methods with marginalised communities



2

Recruit / Engage

Selected community members with lived experience from within target groups



3

Train

Equipped community researchers with data collection, facilitation & engagement skills



4

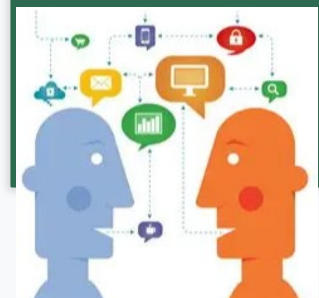
Embed

Community researchers conducted fieldwork in trusted, culturally safe settings

5

Disseminate

Published findings & shared methodology across GroundsWell Consortium and beyond



WHO WAS ENGAGED: Stakeholders

Refugees &
Asylum Seekers



Third Sector
Organisations



Young Male
Offenders

Community
Researchers

GroundsWell
Consortium

Disadvantaged
Housing Estates



Academic
Partners



Also engaged::

Evaluation Support Scotland · Greenspace Scotland · Public Health officials & local authority practitioners

HOW WE WANTED PEOPLE TO RESPOND

Community Participants

Heard & Safe

Not studied by outsiders — engagement facilitated and research conducted by known, trusted community members in familiar settings



Community Researchers

Empowered & Valued

Active, skilled contributors to the engagement and research process — not passive subjects or mere data collectors



Partner Organisations

Confident

Assured that engagement and evaluation is producing valid, meaningful evidence about programmes and activities they deliver



Academic & Practitioner Audiences

Convinced & Inspired

Methodology seen as credible, transferable, and replicable beyond this study



WHAT THEY LEARNED & GAINED

100%

**Participation in
pre-post measures**

The Welcoming study

82.6%

**Participation in
focus groups**

*vs. typical low rates with
marginalised groups*

3

**Distinct community
contexts**

Refugees · Offenders · Estates

Community Researchers

Research & facilitation skills, confidence, ongoing role beyond project

Partner Organisations

Self-evaluation capacity, reduced reliance on external consultants

Academic Team

Richer, more authentic and ecologically valid data

Sector Bodies

Awareness of replicable approach for engaging marginalised communities

WHAT WE HOPE WILL CHANGE: Behaviour & Policy Change



Adopted Across Consortium & Beyond

Community researcher model embedded into further GroundsWell projects and beyond the consortium — no longer a single-study experiment



Advocacy - National Policy Reach

Sharing with Greenspace Scotland board — aiming to inform how local authorities approach community engagement for greenspace



Sector-Wide Dissemination

The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) and Evaluation Support Scotland exploring model for charities & NGOs across Scotland.

WHAT DIFFERENCE CAN IT MAKE?

01

Visible in Evidence

Communities with greatest need for greenspace investment now generate evidence about their own experiences — previously underrepresented or invisible in the data

02

Lasting Local Capacity

Community researchers sustain skills and roles beyond project timelines — reducing external dependency and building genuine local evaluation capacity

03

Better Intervention Design

Evidence informs nature-based health interventions, social prescribing, public health commissioning, and greenspace management for under-served populations

04

Equity in Greenspace Access

Long-term goal: greenspace provision that genuinely works for communities that need it most — not just those who already use it

KEY REFLECTIONS

Lessons from Navigating Complexity

- Impact through this work is non-linear — it required recognising existing methods were insufficient and designing something better with full stakeholder buy-in
- The most meaningful outcomes were not all planned from the outset — they emerged through doing the work and responding to what was actually happening on the ground
- Relationships were central throughout: without trust — with community researchers, partner organisations, and sector bodies — the model simply would not have worked