

# NORTH ISLES NATURAL WELLBEING PROJECT

## End of Project Report 2023



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The **North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project** engaged with the six North Isles of Orkney between March 2022 to December 2023 to explore and facilitate the communities' engagement with nature for their mental wellbeing. The project was funded by The Ideas Fund<sup>1</sup>, which is “a grants programme run by the British Science Association and funded by Wellcome, which enables the UK public to develop and try out ideas that address problems related to mental wellbeing by working with researchers”. This end of project report assesses the findings from the project and provides a range of best practice recommendations for individuals, community groups, community networks, and NHS Orkney to support the ongoing mental wellbeing of the North Isles Communities.

The report has been produced by Andy Harrod and Louise McQuaid. Andy is the project researcher and is a researcher in health and wellbeing geography with a particular interest in how people's engagement with nature influences their long-term wellbeing and connection with nature. Andy is based in the Lancaster Environment Centre at Lancaster University. Louise is the project officer, with a background in education and interest in practical skills development, enterprise, and innovation. She lives in Stronsay with her family.

The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project Website, including toolkit: [www.northislesnaturalwellbeingproject.uk](http://www.northislesnaturalwellbeingproject.uk)

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# FOREWORD

Good mental wellbeing is recognised as being an essential human right, but, mental health difficulties are common worldwide, with one in eight people living with a mental health difficulty, which impacts the person's quality of life. The Scottish Government has recognised that mental wellbeing is a major issue, estimating one in three people are impacted by mental health difficulties. As such, preventing, supporting, and improving people's mental wellbeing is a strategic and public health priority. The Orkney Islands Council Mental Health Strategy proposes that mental wellbeing needs to be recognised within communities and to be everybody's concern. Subsequently, community-based approaches have potential to help address community mental wellbeing on remote islands.

Taking part in nature-based activities and connecting with nature has been reported to enhance people's mental wellbeing, improving mood, increasing happiness, and reducing worries and stress. As such, engaging with nature for wellbeing offers a potential community-based approach to addressing mental wellbeing. The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project has taken an innovative and creative approach to addressing inequalities in wellbeing at a community level, by engaging with nature as our focus and conduit. The aim of the project was to engage with the six island communities to identify aspects of the natural environment that may support the mental wellbeing of community members.

The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project adopted a research approach that aimed to be accessible, inclusive, and flexible to encourage as many as people as possible within the North Isles communities to participate and add their voice. The communities' voices highlighted that connecting with nature to support and enhance individual and community mental wellbeing was a common practice. Building on this finding the North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project delivered a range of indoor and outdoor nature-based activities to support people's mental wellbeing throughout the year. Feedback from these activities highlighted a range of mental wellbeing benefits, including facilitating connection with people and nature, the sharing of knowledge, helping others during the activities, taking notice of the nature and being mindful during the activities, learning new skills, and being active.

Based on the evidence we have firstly, produced 12 best practice recommendations to continue to support individual and community mental wellbeing. These recommendations are aimed at individuals, community groups, community networks, and NHS Orkney, and are primarily focused on improving the North Isles Communities' mental wellbeing through a connection with nature, but some are also applicable in supporting best practice for future community-based wellbeing projects. Secondly, we have created a website, which contains a toolkit of best practice guides and nature-based activities to enable individuals and communities to continue to engage with nature for supporting and enhancing their mental wellbeing. Thirdly, we provide this report as an evidence base for supporting future funding applications by community groups and community networks regarding engaging with nature for wellbeing.

**Andy Harrod**      **Louise McQuaid**  
**Project Researcher**   **Project Officer**

## A note from the project officer: Community wealth building and wellbeing economy

The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project has taken an innovative and creative approach to addressing inequalities in wellbeing at a grassroots level, using nature wellbeing as our focus and conduit, engaging with communities, and experiencing the multi-faceted challenges in both community wellbeing and the delivery of activities. Living on Stronsay and being part of the community and the challenges that come with it, this project has given insight to integrated and holistic approaches to community wealth building through a wellbeing economy approach.

Stronsay Community Development Trust sought the initial application to the ideas Fund to develop a project that could contribute to the development of activity utilising our remote and rural nature. As a grassroots community research project, we now have data that will not only benefit local and regional developments, but contribute to a national perspective in a variety of voluntary and third sector interfaces and public health initiatives that can utilise our experience and recommendations.

The aims of the Development Trusts across Scotland are “to create social, economic and environmental renewal in a defined geographical area, creating wealth within that area and keeping it there”<sup>2</sup>. The recommendations from this research project intends to support these wider aims and mission of development trusts, across the Orkney archipelago. The challenges faced in each island community have clear commonalities, but our research encapsulates the nuances and cultural differences between them, that are important not only to be acknowledged, but celebrated and given opportunity to grow autonomously to meet the demands of an island community.

Through the development of the North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project, we have adhered to The Islands (Scotland) Act 2018<sup>3</sup> and the National Islands plan<sup>4</sup>; an historic place-based legislation underpinned by three key objectives: promoting the voice of island communities, harnessing island resources, and enhancing the wellbeing of island communities. This national strategy has addressed some of the regional challenges in Orkney addressing the voice of communities, harnessing the natural environment, and utilising it as an enhancement not only to island community wellbeing, but biodiversity and environmental wellbeing. We specifically, have focussed on these objectives on the ferry linked North Isles, addressing the challenges specifically within small, remote communities.

The National Islands Plan Implementation Route Map 2020-2025 outlines a strategic objective to promote health, social care, and wellbeing<sup>5</sup>. This objective has key links to the National Islands Plan Framework underpinned by four principles of fairness, integration, environmental protection (green), and inclusiveness to improve island communities. With an integrated plan to “promote joined-up services based on a cohesive, place based and holistic approach to policy and will build economic, social and environmental considerations in an integrated approach to island policy”<sup>4</sup> this project indicates key partners and resources towards the delivery of the strategic aims by providing an holistic approach with Third Sector Interfaces (TSIs), local authorities and local health boards, as well as capturing evidence to support future community planning partnerships to continue the aims of achieving the strategic outcomes.

# WELLBEING ECONOMY

This project has highlighted the importance of a wellbeing economy approach addressing both community wellbeing and community wealth building through Community Development Trusts. It shows the influence on island development, making shifts from promoting economic growth, to promoting the wellbeing of our people and planet. Such policy design would aim to support the areas of the economy that contribute to collective wellbeing, not only economic growth. Moving from the economy viewed as separate to social and ecological dimensions, but instead seeing the economy of our islands as part of the environment. Economic policies make assumptions based on what people want, but with meaningful community engagement, can create a wellbeing economy that matters to collective wellbeing. This collective wellbeing is the indicator of progress, not the economy at the detriment of human or environmental wellbeing. These indicators are prevalent across the isles in their regard for the community collective and environment.

Several key principles of wellbeing design policy have been addressed through this project:

- **Goal orientated** – Designed to promote the wellbeing of remote and rural communities.
- **Participatory** – Research is created through open, co-creative, and transparent processes. Diverse communities are able to meaningfully engage and contribute throughout the process.
- **Contextual** – There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Economic policies are embedded in local values, culture, context, and objectives.
- **Experimental Policy** processes encourage continuous learning and experimentation to find innovative solutions that foster wellbeing.
- **Holistic** – The economy is part of, and not distinct from, society and the environment.
- **Evidence based** – development is informed through a systematic use of qualitative and quantitative evidence.
- **Strength-based** – Recognising the strengths of communities, focusing on achieving the positive aspirations of society rather than purely mitigating negative outcomes.

This is new territory, understanding actions, behaviours, and institutions in our communities that are aligned with our wellbeing vision and goals. The evidence gathered can be utilised in areas that have not been previously considered or valued as part of the 'economy', to develop a holistic guide to decision making. It will require experimentation and co-creation to find the strategies and policies that can support you and your communities to align your economies with your vision for a better world.

**Louise McQuaid**

**Project Officer**



# INTRODUCTION

The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project involved an innovative and creative approach to addressing inequalities in mental wellbeing at grassroots level, through focusing on engaging with nature as a process to support individual and community mental wellbeing. The natural environment on and around the North Isles is a potentially rich and abundant resource, which may facilitate communities to support and enhance individual and community mental wellbeing, addressing barriers common to remote islands, including reduced facilities and health services. The aim of the project was to engage with the six island communities to identify aspects of the natural environment that may support the mental wellbeing of community members.

Orkney consists of around 70 islands, with 600,000 miles of coastline and a population of about 21,500 people<sup>6</sup>. Six of these islands are grouped together as the North Isles: Eday, North Ronaldsay, Papa Westray, Sanday, Stronsay, and Westray (Figure 1). Each North Isle has its own unique blend of history, culture, wildlife, and population. For example, Westray is home to Castle o'Burrian, an outstanding place to see Puffins, whilst, Stronsay has a rich agricultural history and Papa Westray is home to the oldest stone houses in Northern Europe.



Figure 1: Map of the North Isles in relation to The Mainland and Inner North Isles (Source: ArcGIS Pro).

The communities on the North Isles have access to varied natural phenomena, including

close encounters with seals, otters, and migrating birds, as well as long stretches of sandy beaches and coastal walks. However, living on a remote island also presents challenges, for example, transportation, housing, health support, and depopulation<sup>4</sup>. These societal challenges can adversely affect people's mental wellbeing<sup>7</sup>. However, connecting with nature has been reported to improve people's mental wellbeing<sup>8,9</sup> and offers a potential community-based approach to addressing mental wellbeing.

On each Island there is a Development Trust (except North Ronaldsay where it is a charitable trust), which is a community organisation, which addresses local issues and needs through creating sustainable economic, environmental, and social regeneration within a defined geographical area<sup>2</sup>. Concern for the communities' mental wellbeing coupled with the varied natural environment available led to the development of the North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project. The project was managed by the Stronsay Development Trust for the benefit of all six North Isles.

Throughout the project and in the report, nature and mental wellbeing are defined as:

- **Nature:** The environmental landscape including green spaces (fields, plants), blue spaces (sea, rivers), and other species (birds, fish, marine sea- and wildlife).
- **Mental Wellbeing:** A person's sense of living a good quality of life (fulfilling, joyful), which is influenced by the places and relationships they are part of.

Following this brief overview of the North Isles and the North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project, a background to the project is provided, explaining why it is important to consider the communities' mental wellbeing and the role of nature in maintaining and enhancing community mental wellbeing. Next, an overview of the approaches taken throughout this project to engage with the communities on the six North Isles is provided. Then, the results of this engagement are presented, alongside discussion of the key points from this engagement. A series of best practice recommendations for individuals, community groups, community networks, and NHS Orkney to support the ongoing mental wellbeing of the North Isles communities are then presented.

# BACKGROUND

## Mental wellbeing

Good mental wellbeing is recognised as being an essential human right, which supports people's general wellbeing, connection to others, responding constructively to difficulties, and flourishing<sup>10</sup>. However, mental health difficulties are common worldwide, with one in eight people living with a mental health difficulty, which impacts the person's quality of life. People with severe mental health difficulties may die up to 10-20 years prematurely due to preventable physical conditions<sup>11</sup>. Within Scotland, the Scottish Government has recognised mental wellbeing as a major issue, estimating one in three people are impacted by mental health difficulties<sup>12</sup>. This is echoed by findings from the 2022 Scottish Health Survey, which reported people's wellbeing has decreased since 2019, after being relatively stable since 2008<sup>13</sup>. In the 2022 survey, older people reported slightly higher levels of wellbeing compared to younger people. Meanwhile the proportion of adults feeling lonely 'most of' or 'all of the time' increased from 8% (2021) to 11% (2022), with young people (16-24) reporting the highest rate of loneliness at 17%. Consequently, people's mental wellbeing is an area which requires support.

Good mental wellbeing has been recognised as a priority by the Scottish Government within their Mental Health Strategy<sup>14</sup> and in their reports for A Connected Scotland<sup>15</sup> and The National Islands Plan<sup>4</sup>. Here, preventing, supporting, and improving people's mental wellbeing is a strategic and public health priority. An aspect of supporting people's mental wellbeing is the recognition that loneliness and social isolation can severely impact a person's mental wellbeing, as well as their physical health<sup>15</sup>. For Scottish Islands, it has been reported that mental wellbeing on Islands can be neglected and support under resourced, and it is recommended that the unique characteristics of each island community are taken into consideration in providing mental wellbeing care and support<sup>4</sup>. Hence, a community-based approach has potential to help address community mental wellbeing on remote islands.

## Orkney mental wellbeing

Living in a rural and/or remote community can offer protective factors, supporting people's mental wellbeing, for example, providing deep connections and a sense of belonging<sup>16,17</sup>. The Orkney Mental Health Strategy 2020-2025 notes that Orkney often ranks highly within surveys regarding the 'happiest places in Britain' or 'the best place to live in the UK'<sup>18</sup>. The strategy also reports that prescriptions for mental health difficulties are lower in Orkney than the national average, however this may also be due to the flip side of living remotely, as reduced access to mental health services is often a barrier to receiving support<sup>19</sup>. Meanwhile, living within small communities can also be stressful for a person if they are not accepted, but judged, as well as community members expressing concerns about confidentiality and anonymity<sup>16,17,18</sup>. Finally, stigma around mental wellbeing can also be a barrier to people recognising and accessing support for their mental wellbeing.

A stark example of the reason for concern regarding mental wellbeing within Orkney, and as such, wanting to reduce stigma, and improve access to, and the range of, support is highlighted by the suicide rates within Orkney. The suicide rates between 2014-2018 were the highest in Scotland, which accounted for 22 (17 male) deaths<sup>18</sup>. This follows the period 1981-1999, with Orkney amongst the areas with the highest male rates of death by suicide in Scotland<sup>20</sup>. A recent study regarding Scottish rural mental health has emphasized concern regarding the suicide rates in Orkney and identified that services are required to support people with suicidal thoughts<sup>17</sup>.

Responding to these concerns the Scottish Mental Health & Wellbeing Strategy stresses the importance of prevention and early intervention to create Scottish communities free of stigma and inequality<sup>21</sup>. In these communities, the aim is that people will be supported to flourish and have an improved quality of life. This

aim aligns with the Orkney Mental Health Strategy, which states the goal of proactive provisions, which are stigma free and promote people’s mental and physical wellbeing<sup>18</sup>. To underpin this aim, the strategy suggests that mental wellbeing needs to be recognised within communities and to be everybody’s concern. As noted, social isolation and loneliness can contribute to mental wellbeing difficulties, therefore alongside reducing stigma, regular interactions which connect people and create a sense of belonging and purpose within communities are required too<sup>19</sup>. Finally, island communities have shown preference for approaches to mental wellbeing that are place-based and community led<sup>16</sup>.

Regionally, and in particular across the ferry linked islands of Orkney, the most significant and ongoing project is the Islands Wellbeing Project. The Island Wellbeing Project is a partnership between Voluntary Action Orkney, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Orkney Health and Care and the Development Trusts of Hoy, Sanday, Shapinsay, Stronsay, Rousay, Egilsay and Wyre<sup>22</sup>. The aim of the project is to improve the wellbeing of island residents using a broad definition of wellbeing which encompasses health, economic, social, and place wellbeing. This is achieved through the development of community-led initiatives and the provision of generalised one-to-one support. With wellbeing co-ordinators in this dual role, it enables a response to the immediate needs of the community, whilst developing long-term capacity.

### Five Ways to Wellbeing

As noted, the North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project was focused on understanding nature-based approaches delivered within the local communities and how these influence the communities’ mental wellbeing. To consider people’s mental wellbeing, we adopted the Five Ways to Wellbeing approach. The Five Ways to Wellbeing is aimed at supporting people to change their behaviours and provides five ways people can beneficially impact their wellbeing through their behaviours<sup>23, 24</sup>. The five ways are promoted by the NHS to support people’s mental wellbeing and are: Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning, and Give (Figure 2)<sup>23, 25</sup>.



Figure 2: The Five Ways to Wellbeing<sup>23</sup> (Source: Authors’ own).



These suggestions target the individual to change their behaviours, which may lower the number of people with mental wellbeing difficulties<sup>23</sup>. The Five Ways to Wellbeing can be used to underpin community and organisational initiatives to improve community wellbeing<sup>24</sup>.

## Nature and wellbeing

There is a wealth of evidence that being active with nature either informally on your own or with others, as well as through taking part in nature-based activities, can be beneficial for children, young people, and adults' health<sup>9,26</sup>. This includes improved mental health, for example, reduction in stress, depression, anxiety and increased life satisfaction and happiness<sup>27,28,29</sup>. Studies have also reported improvements in physical health, with reduced morbidity, obesity, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases<sup>27,30</sup>. Finally, reports of increased pro-social behaviours and social connections suggest social wellbeing is also positively impacted<sup>31,32</sup>.

However, how nature is perceived can affect if being with nature is beneficial to a person's mental wellbeing, for example, working in nature may not offer the same restorative benefits as when nature is engaged with for leisure, as the work may be isolating, risky and require high levels of specialist skills in challenging environments<sup>33</sup>. As such, it cannot be assumed that living and working on a remote and rural island will benefit the North Isles communities' mental wellbeing. Subsequently, initiatives that encourage active engagement with nature may provide greater benefits<sup>9</sup>. For example, Green Health Partnerships, which have been trialled throughout Scotland aim to promote nature connection and nature-based approaches to improving mental wellbeing and increasing physical activity. Through providing these opportunities for people to engage with nature, it is proposed that people were introduced to nature-based activities and/or increased their contact with nature<sup>34</sup>. Meanwhile, the Highland Green Health Partnership reports a range of mental wellbeing benefits people experienced from participating in nature-based activities (e.g., walking, forest bathing), including improved confidence, feeling relaxed, connected, and refreshed<sup>35</sup>.

One way to promote engaging with nature for wellbeing is through the 5 Pathways to Nature Connection (Figure 3), which provides a framework to support people to develop an emotional and meaningful relationship with nature for their wellbeing<sup>9</sup>. This framework can support designing and delivering nature-based activities that support people to develop and/or enhance their relationship with nature. As with the Five Ways to Wellbeing, this approach to nature connection was adopted when designing and delivering nature-based activities.

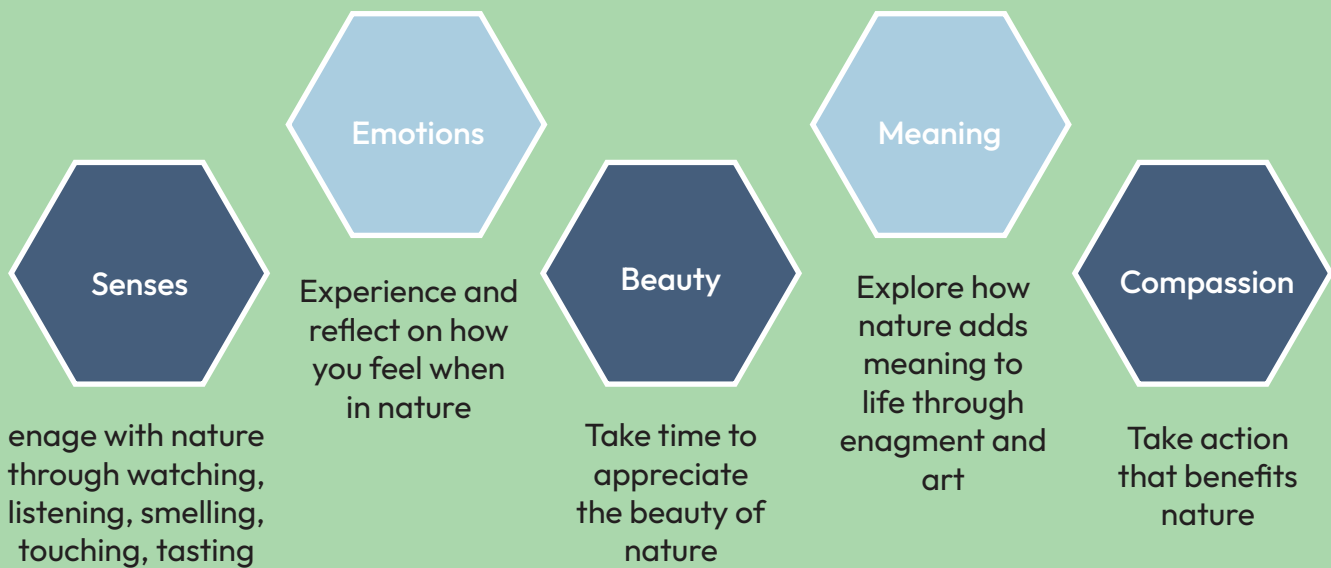


Figure 3: The 5 Pathways to Nature Connection<sup>9</sup> (Source: Authors' own).

### The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project

The National Islands Plan proposes that to provide suitable care for mental wellbeing then the uniqueness of each Island community needs to be considered<sup>4</sup>. Meanwhile, the Orkney Mental Health Strategy 2020-2025 proposes the “development of self-management, self-reliance and resilience”, alongside community-based support<sup>18</sup>. This aligns with a shift towards social prescribing to support people’s mental wellbeing, where people are supported to engage with community-based activities for supporting and enhancing their mental wellbeing<sup>36</sup>. Community-based activities have been found to improve people’s mental wellbeing within the Highlands and Islands<sup>19</sup>.

The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project aligns with this national strategy and addresses some of the regional challenges in Orkney, specifically promoting the voice of communities in community- and nature-based approaches to mental wellbeing, exploring the role of the natural environment in enhancing individual and community mental wellbeing, as well as supporting biodiversity and ecological wellbeing on the islands. To involve the local community into the project, the project began with a baseline survey to ascertain the communities’ current sense of their mental wellbeing and nature engagement, as well as their preferences for nature-based activities. Secondly, a pilot programme of nature-based activities was held on Stronsay to explore the effects of encouraging a connection with nature on people’s mental wellbeing. Thirdly, a series of opportunities to participate in the research was offered across the six North Isles over the winter months, including interviews and a photography competition. Finally, a range of nature-based activities were offered across the six North Isles to further develop the communities’ input into the project.

# APPROACH

The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project adopted a research approach that aimed to be accessible, inclusive, and flexible to encourage as many as people as possible within the North Isles communities to participate and add their voice. These approaches included online and paper surveys, including a version for schools, paper feedback forms, interviews, photography, and community conversations (see appendices A-D).

## Engaging communities

Whilst the project was initially developed by the Stronsay Development trust, we wanted to ensure the project was grounded in the communities' experience of mental wellbeing and nature engagement. As such, we began with a survey, which was open between June and December 2022. The aim of the survey was to gather people's experience of their current wellbeing; their engagement with nature and the influence of this on their wellbeing; the nature-based activities they took part in and with whom; what aspects support and/or challenge their engagement; and finally what resources would help them to engage further with nature. It was important to hear from members of the communities their perception of nature, the factors involved in engaging with nature, and how this connection influenced their mental wellbeing, as this helped underpin the nature-based activities the project delivered.

Alongside the survey several nature-based activities were offered on Stronsay as a pilot during August and September 2022 (Table 1). The purpose of this pilot was to raise awareness of the project, to test out a range of activities, and explore the effects of participating in these activities on people's nature connection and mental wellbeing.

During the winter months, several indoor activities were offered across the six North Isles (Table 1). Engagement with these activities varied and highlighted the difficulty in engaging with people, especially through remote approaches. Anecdotal evidence suggests there is perhaps a level of scepticism regarding the meaningfulness and sustainable impact of short-term projects on the North Isles, including our own project, which can limit people's interest and involvement in them. The North Isles communities have experienced beneficial experiences with previous projects, but also disappointment when the project ends, due to their being no plans to keep what has been offered and developed going beyond the end of the project. This difficulty in engaging with people around mental wellbeing may have also been hampered by similar challenges reported in the Highlands and Islands Connection project, where a grassroots approach to mental wellbeing was not being commonly accepted within the Highlands and Islands, but viewed as an area that required 'proper services'<sup>17</sup>.

During Spring and Summer 2023, further nature-based activities were offered across the six North Isles (Table 1). During this phase we began collecting feedback through 'community conversations' rather than using formal feedback sheets due to the North Isles being small communities. As such, people appeared more comfortable providing feedback during an informal conversation as this was a more typical way of responding than completing feedback sheets. The project officer or researcher would note comments from the community conversations afterwards, typically paraphrasing participants' feedback.

## Activities and participants

Table 1 presents a list of the nature-based activities, including where it was held, who attended and if there was a partner organisation involved. The range of activities included cycling, nature-based art and craft, citizen science surveys (research conducted by the public), and wildlife recording and observing. Outdoor and indoor activities were developed and delivered to take into account the changing seasons, hours of available daylight, and the weather, especially the strong winds experienced on Orkney. The project also worked with partner organisations to deliver a range of activities, as partner organisations could provide equipment and expert facilitation.

Date	Event	Island	Attendees		Partner Organisation
			Adults	Children	
June – December 2022	Baseline Survey	All North Isles	26	4	
August 2022	The North Ronaldsay Sheep Festival	North Ronaldsay	1	1	The North Ronaldsay Sheep Festival
August – September 2022	Up the Garden Path (Nature arts summer programme)	Stronsay	0	4	The Dandelion Schools Growing Initiative
August 2022	Cycling UK Rides (3)	Stronsay	2,2,2	0,4,3	Cycling UK
August 2022	Bike maintenance	Stronsay	7	1	Cycling UK
August 2022	Cycling Drop in	Stronsay	6	12	Cycling UK
August 2022	Nature-based Crafts	Stronsay	5	16	Stronsay Massive Weekend
September 2022	Introduction to Marine Science	Stronsay	12	0	
September 2022	The Big Seaweed Search	Stronsay	5	21	Orkney International Science Festival
September 2022	Papermaking Workshop	Stronsay	3	7	Orkney International Science Festival
September 2022	Wildlife Recording Introduction	Stronsay	3	0	Orkney Field Club
September 2022	Dandelion Harvest Community Event	Stronsay	13	40	The Dandelion Schools Growing Initiative



September 2022	Marine Conservation Society Beach Litter Survey	Stromsay	12	3	
September 2022	Globe at Night Stargaze	Stromsay	3	0	
November 2022	Printmaking Workshops	Stromsay	12	0	Orkney Art Club
December 2022 – July 2023	Stromsay Wildlife Recording Events (4)	Stromsay	4,4,3,3	0	
January – February 2023	Nature Photography Competition	All North Isles	5	0	
March 2023 – July 2023	At Home Nature Kits	All North Isles	52 households (families)		
April 2023	Printmaking Workshop	Stromsay	5	0	Orkney Art Club
June 2023	Sea Snorkelling	Stromsay	12	14	Kraken Diving
July 2023	Papermaking Workshop	Eday	Numbers unknown		
September – December 2023	‘Wir Islands’ Community Weaving Project	All North Isles	8	5 schools.	

**Table 1:** The nature-based activities, including participant numbers and partner organisations, offered by the North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project.

From observations, the adults and children who participated in the nature-based activities were mainly newcomers to the North Isles rather than Orcadians. The number of participants that engaged with the activities and project was considered to be average or above average for community events, based on anecdotal experience of attendance at other similar North Isles events.

## Limitations

Two main limitations were experienced during the project. Firstly, being unable to involve a cross-section of the North Isles communities. This difficulty was highlighted when we had no participants engage with our request for an audio-based activity (see appendix E), whereby a younger person would interview an older person about nature and mental wellbeing. The aim of the activity was to encourage younger people to be involved in research and to provide an opportunity for older people to reflect on their nature engagements, how these may have changed over time, and if any changes to nature-based practices have had an influence on their wellbeing. Unfortunately, we did not have any take

up for this activity either through general advertising or through the schools. As such the findings we present do not capture all the perspectives, attitudes, and interests of each of the North Isle communities. From anecdotal evidence it is understood that Orcadians have established social networks and traditional community events, whilst newcomers are seeking to become part of the community and so organised events are a suitable way for them to meet people. Secondly, with the project being managed by the Stronsay Development Trust and the project officer living on Stronsay this may have acted as an additional barrier to engaging the other five North Isles. As, on each of the other North Isles there was a lack of community representation for the project, especially at the beginning.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Findings from the North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project align with studies suggesting engagement with nature is beneficial for people's mental wellbeing. To recap, the project focused on nature-based and community-based activities to support people's engagement with nature for their mental wellbeing. As such, whilst we recognise there are a range of individual, social and political determinants to mental wellbeing and that good mental wellbeing requires equality, good infrastructure, and facilities in place, responding to and tackling these factors are outside the scope of the project. Subsequently, the focus of the discussion from the findings is on the role of individual and group engagement with nature and nature-based activities and the influence of this engagement on mental wellbeing. However, the best practice recommendations which are informed by the findings do take into consideration that mental wellbeing is the responsibility of everyone involved in the community and as such provide recommendations not just for individuals, but also community groups, community networks, and NHS Orkney.

## **Baseline survey**

At the beginning of the North Isles Wellbeing Project, we wanted to know about the North Isles communities' lived experience of nature engagement and mental wellbeing. For this we produced a survey, for which we received a total of 26 responses, however some of these were partial responses, which is reflected in the different total number of responses per question. All the North Isles apart from Eday were represented in the results (Figure 4), with respondents between the ages of 18-84 (Figure 5), however nearly 75% of respondents were female (Figure 6). Two schools also took part in the survey, Papa Westray and North Ronaldsay, totalling eight children. From the school surveys, the children's responses are not included in the visual figures, but are discussed in the accompanying text.

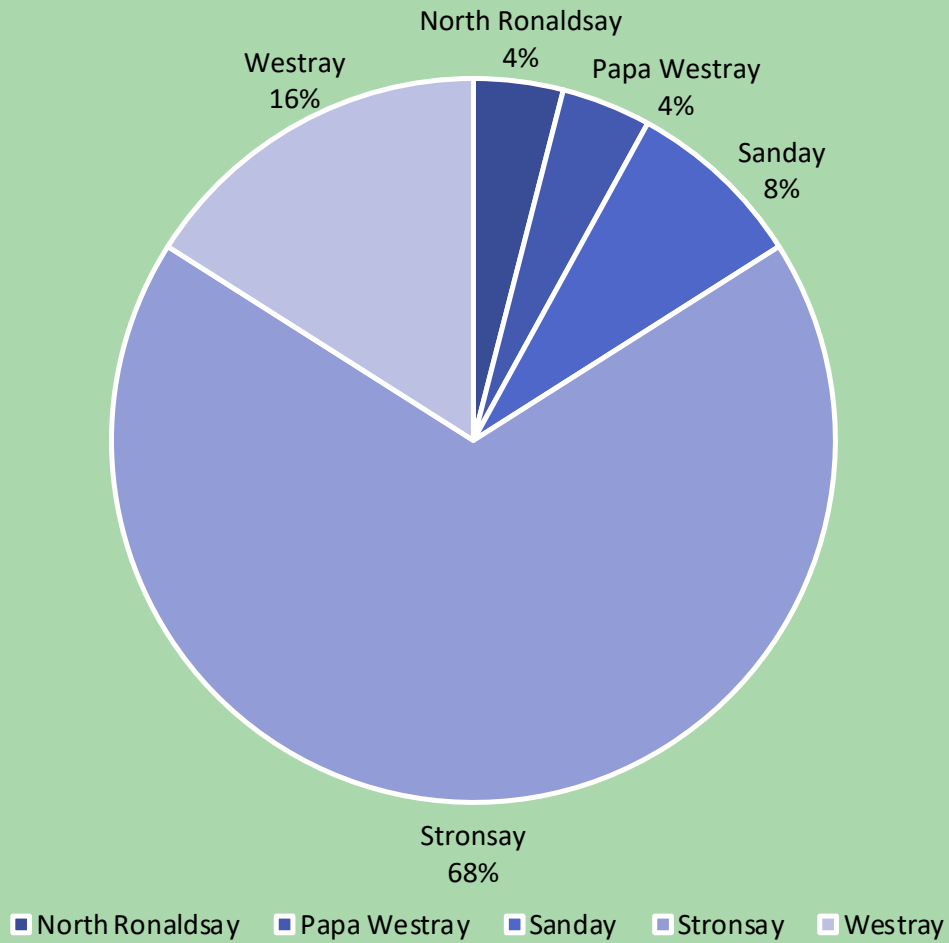


Figure 4: Where the respondents live.

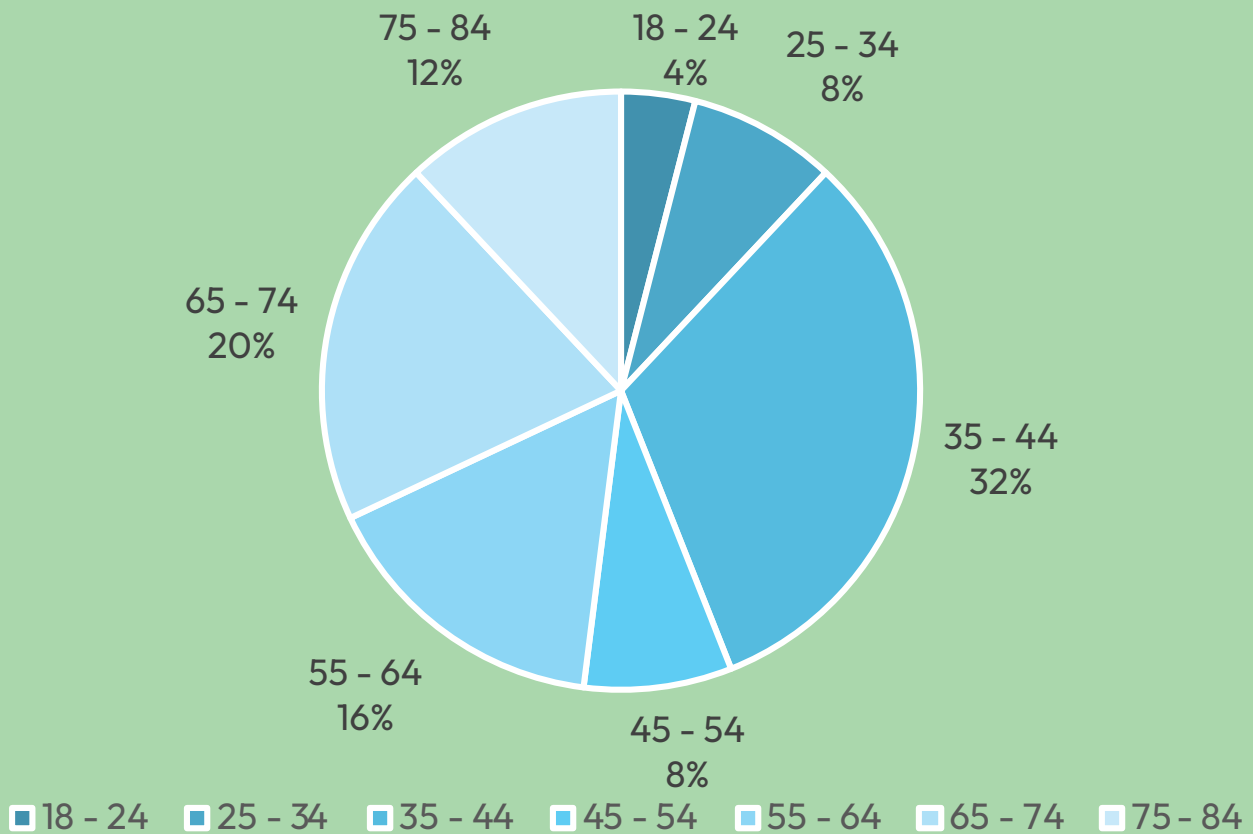


Figure 5: The age ranges of respondents.

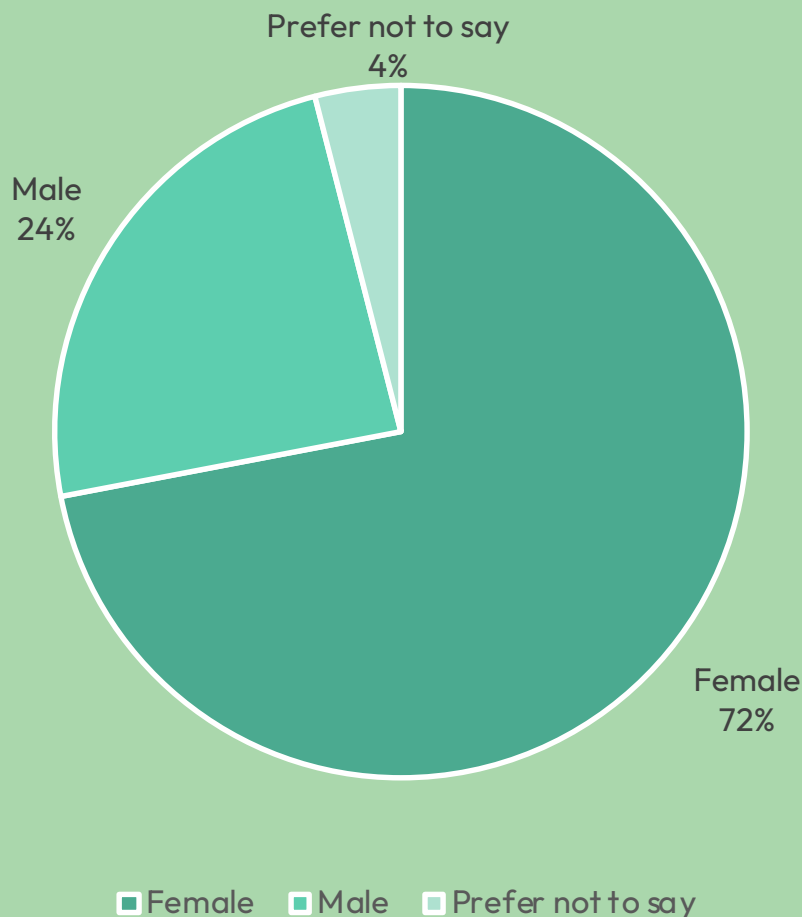


Figure 6: The gender identity of respondents.

When considering the North Isles communities' current mental wellbeing the Five Ways to Wellbeing was used as a framework. From the respondents there were mixed results (Figure 7), with the response 'neither satisfied or dissatisfied' being a common response for the components, except for being physically active, which prompted a polar response. For physical activity, 42% of respondents were 'satisfied' with the amount of time they were physically active, but 46% were either 'dissatisfied' (19%) or 'extremely dissatisfied' (27%). Regarding the other four components people tended to be either 'neither satisfied or dissatisfied' or 'satisfied' or 'extremely satisfied' with those aspects of their wellbeing. For connecting with other people, 31% were 'neither satisfied or dissatisfied', whilst 58% were either 'satisfied' (35%) or 'extremely satisfied' (23%). For giving to others, 31% of participants reported they were 'neither satisfied or dissatisfied' and 46% 'extremely satisfied' with this aspect of their lives. For being mindful, 42% of respondents reported they were neither 'satisfied or dissatisfied' and 46% were 'satisfied' (19%) or 'extremely satisfied' (27%). Finally, a similar picture was reported for learning new skills, with 31% of respondents 'neither satisfied or dissatisfied', whilst 54% were 'satisfied' (19%) or 'extremely satisfied' (35%). The results suggest that improving physical activity is an important area to focus on, as improved physical activity can prevent and support mental wellbeing<sup>37, 38</sup>. However, activities which helped improve the other aspects of the Five Ways to Wellbeing would also be beneficial for many of the residents' mental wellbeing. For the four children at North Ronaldsay, they all agreed being active (playing and games), connecting with people (friends or family), giving to others (helping friends or family) made them happy, whilst three children agreed learning new skills made them happy, with one child agreeing it made them happy sometimes.





Figure 7: Respondents perception of their current wellbeing.

Meanwhile, nearly two thirds of respondents reported going outdoors either daily (42%) or around 2-3 (23%) times a week to engage with nature (Figure 8). All the school children went outdoors on a daily basis. So, for nearly a third of respondents they are frequently engaging with nature, however, for the other third there is potential for this engagement to be increased. Research suggest nearby nature is important for good mental wellbeing, however actively engaging with nature supports creating a sustainable practice, which can further enhance people’s mental wellbeing<sup>9</sup>.

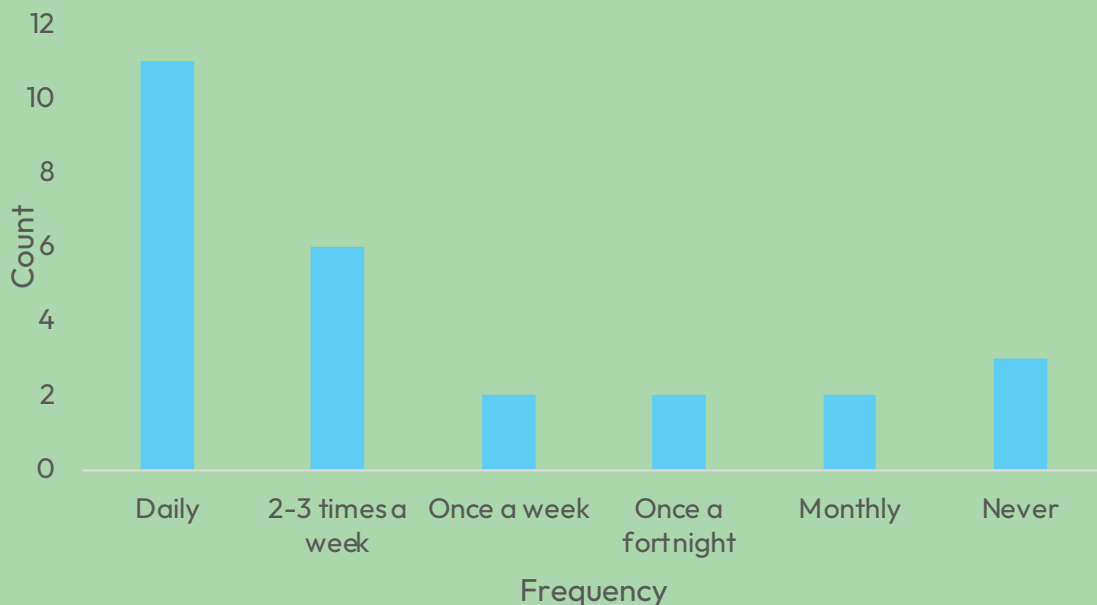


Figure 8: How often respondents go outdoors and engage with nature.

For respondents, they typically went outdoors with members of their own family (23%) or on their own (20%) (Figure 9). This was followed by going outdoors with pets (13%), a partner (13%), or with one or two friends (13%). For all the school children they went outdoors either with family or friends, whilst for a couple of the children pets helped them go outdoors too. For one respondent to the survey going outdoors was for work (other).

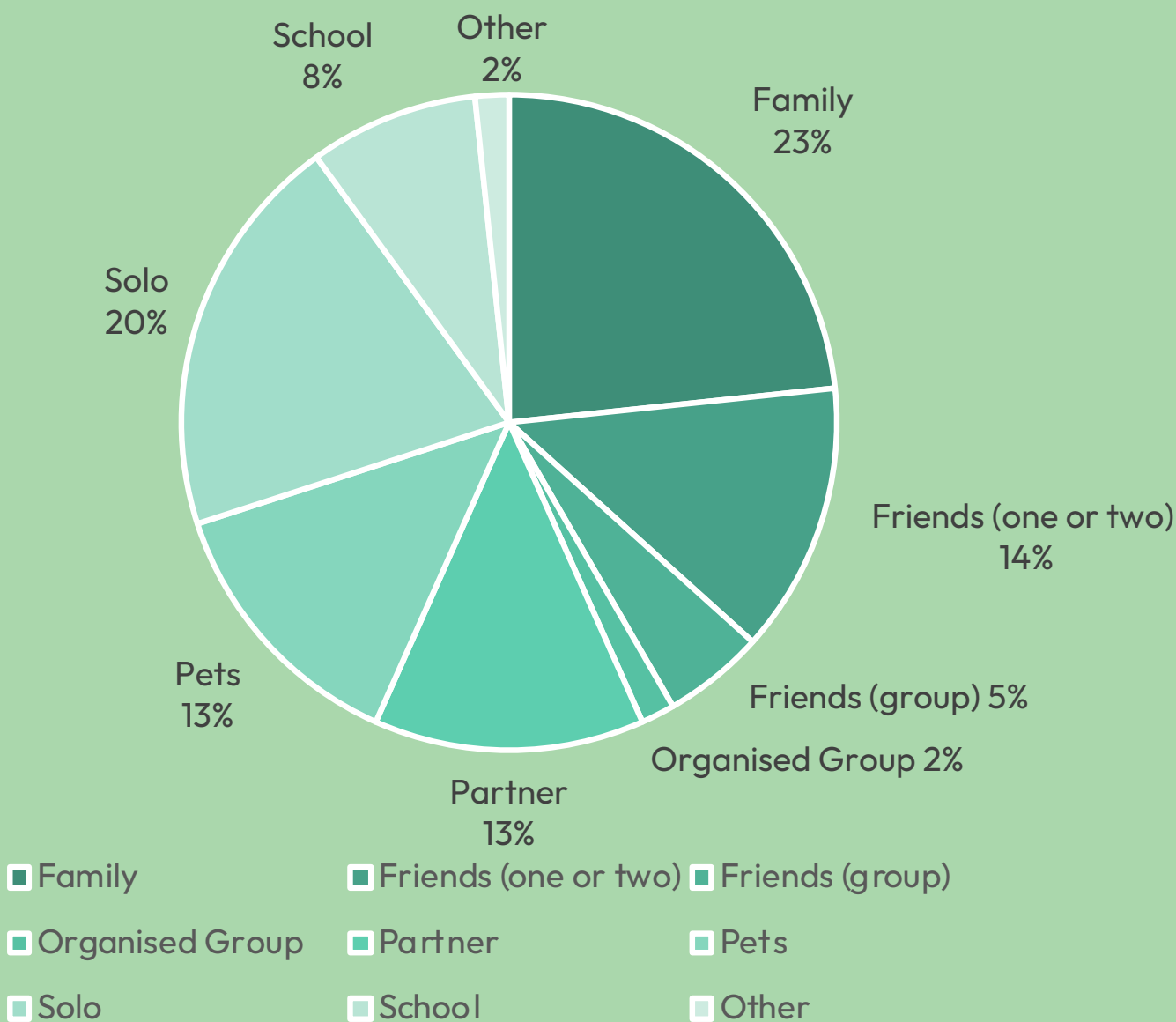


Figure 9: Who respondents go outdoors with.

Respondents reported a range of activities they engage in, with walking (14%) and gardening (16%) frequently reported (Figure 10). Two respondents noted other activities, this involved for one respondent some farm work, whilst the other respondent wanted to note that they do not go outside, however the reason for this was not stated. For all the school children they also engaged in exercise outdoors, including walking, cycling, swimming, and trampolining, as well as gardening and playing. The range of nature-based activities paints an encouraging picture in terms of the variation engaged with and available to the communities.

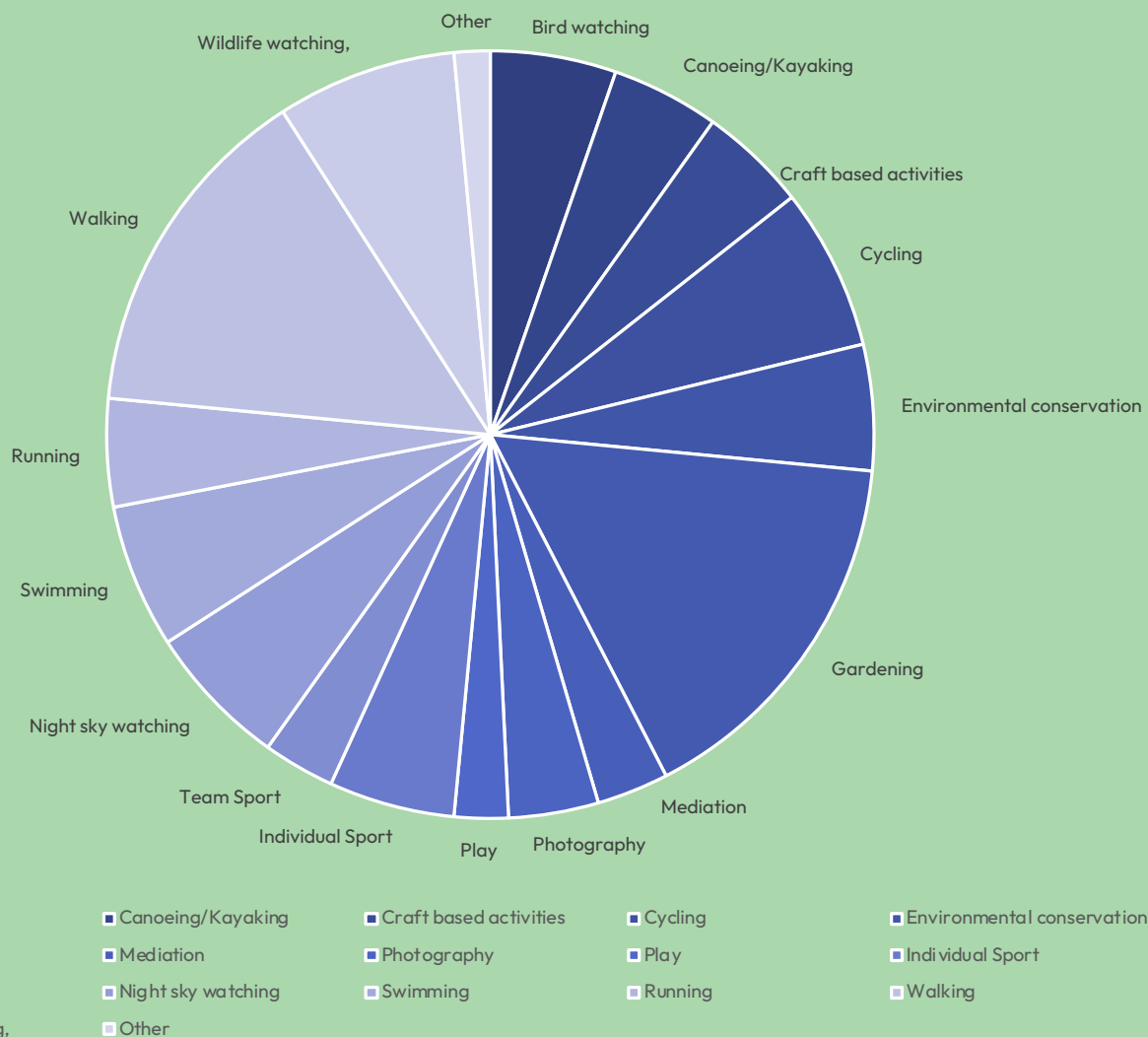


Figure 10: The range of nature-based activities respondents engage in.

This engagement with the nature and/or nature-based activities appears to support being physically active, with 50% of respondents ‘strongly agreeing’ engaging with nature helps (Figure 11). As nearly half (46%) of respondents reported being ‘either extremely dissatisfied’ (27%) or ‘dissatisfied’ (19%) with their levels of physical activity, nature-based activities could be a way to improve physical activity, which in-turn supports mental wellbeing<sup>37, 39</sup>. For the other components of the Five Ways to Wellbeing, there appears more uncertainty regarding the role of nature on mental wellbeing. For connecting with people, 27% ‘neither agreed or disagreed’ that it helps, whilst 27% ‘agreed’ it helped, but 42% ‘somewhat’ (19%) or ‘strongly disagreed’ (23%) that nature helped with connecting with people. For giving to others, 50% of respondents ‘neither agreed or disagreed’ it helps, with 35% ‘somewhat’ (12%) or ‘strongly disagreeing’ (23%) and 16% ‘somewhat’ (12%) or ‘strongly agreeing’ (4%) regarding the role of nature in supporting them to give others. For being mindful, 35% ‘strongly agreed’ that nature supported this aspect, however 34% ‘somewhat’ (19%) or ‘strongly disagreed’ (15%), with 31% ‘neither agreeing or disagreeing’ regarding the influence of nature on being mindful. Finally, 38% of respondents ‘somewhat’ (23%) or ‘strongly disagreed’ (15%) regarding the role of nature in learning new skills, with 35% ‘neither agreeing or disagreeing’, and 27% ‘somewhat’ (15%) or ‘strongly agreeing’ (12%) regarding the role of nature in supporting them to learn new skills. For the four children at North Ronaldsay they all agreed being outdoors helped them with being active (playing and games), connecting with people (friends or family), and giving to others (helping friends or

family). Regarding learning new skills, three children agreed being outdoors helped with this and one child agreed it helped them sometimes. The survey results suggest there is scope to improve people’s connection with nature. Nature-based activities that actively encourage developing a connection with nature could be beneficial in supporting and enhancing people’s mental wellbeing.

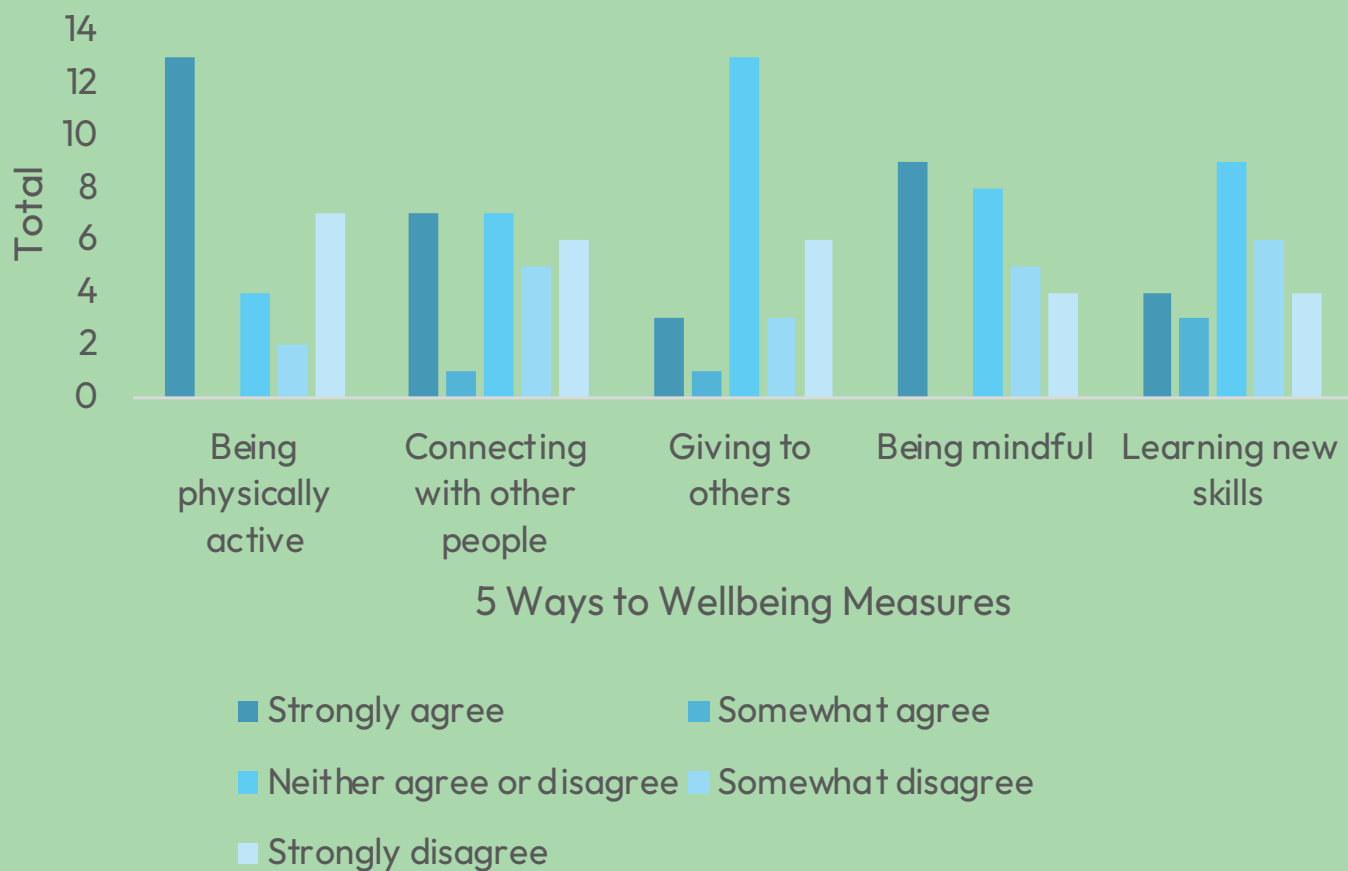


Figure 11: Respondents perception of the influence of engaging with nature on their mental wellbeing.

People’s engagement with nature will be affected by how nature is perceived, as such we were interested in understanding what the North Isle communities liked and disliked about nature and being outdoors. Respondents, including the school children at North Ronaldsay and Papa Westray, reported a range of reasons regarding what they liked about being outdoors and nature, which included; a sense of wonder and connection from the nature present, including the changing of the seasons and the dark skies; the beautiful scenery which is open and quiet; a sense of freedom when outdoors; that nature can help you feel better and is experienced as calming, grounding and supports being in the moment; being outside also provides space and time to be by oneself; being able to get fresh air and the sense that it is good for you; and a space in which to exercise or for messy play. Figures 12 and 13 highlight some of the aspects of nature the children at Papa Community School liked. Meanwhile, the weather, especially the strong winds was a dominant theme reported regarding disliking being outside; as well as difficulties with access, regarding suitable tracks and accessible spaces, some respondents also reported mobility difficulties and fitness levels affecting their engagement with nature; and difficulties with animals, specifically cows and for the children, insects. Figures 14 and 15 highlight some of the aspects of nature the children at Papa Community School disliked.

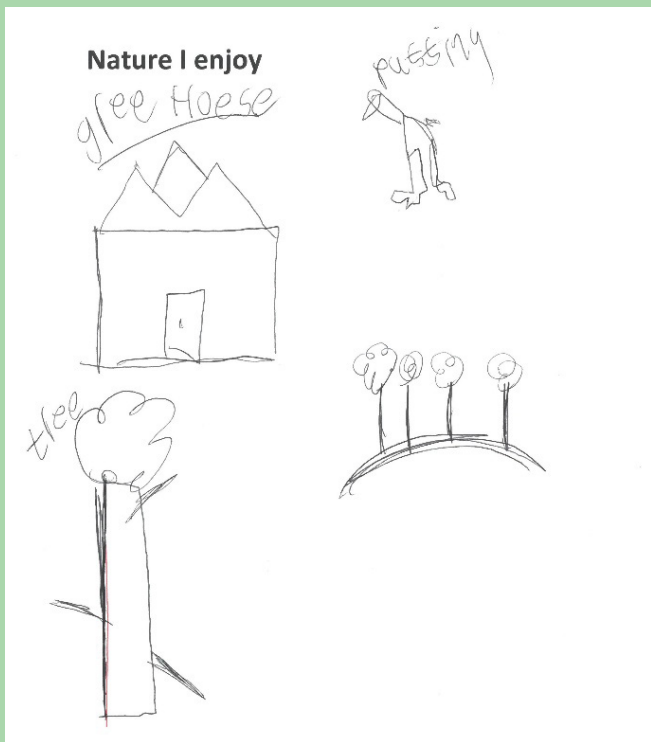


Figure 12: Nature enjoyed by a child at Papa Community School (Source: The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project).

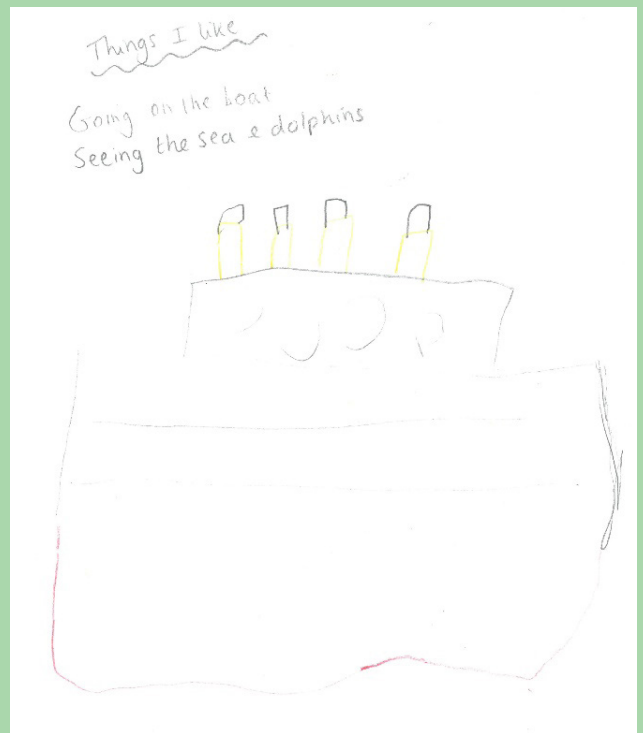


Figure 13: Nature enjoyed by a child at Papa Community School (Source: The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project).

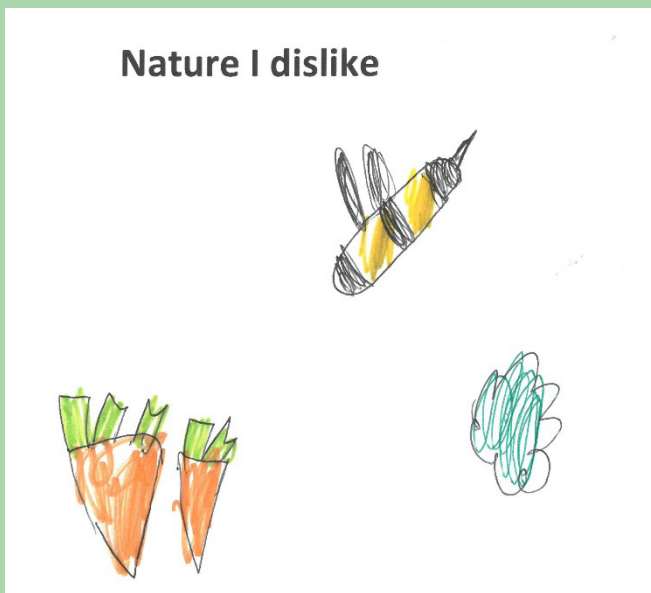


Figure 14: Nature that was challenging by a child at Papa Community School (Source: The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project).

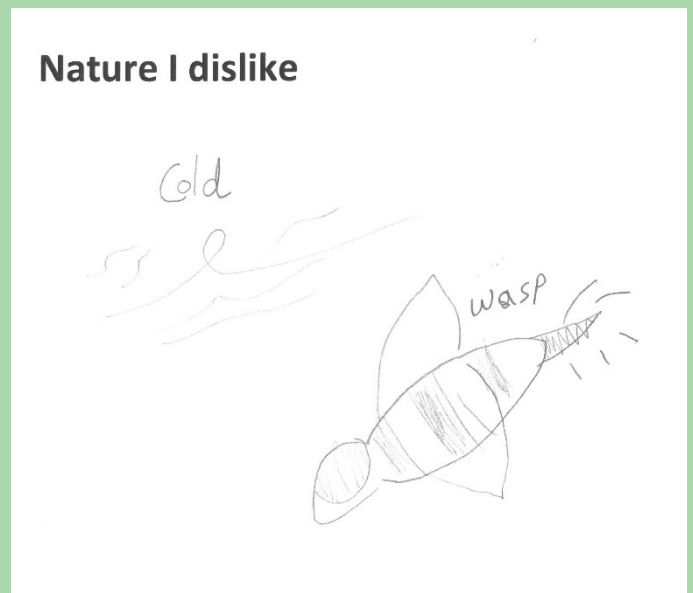


Figure 15: Nature that was challenging by a child at Papa Community School (Source: The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project).

People’s engagement with nature will also be influenced by what they perceive support (Figure 16) or challenge their engagement (Figure 17). Availability of time and access came up in both sets of responses. Access to green and blue spaces and spending time in them supports children’s and adult’s mental wellbeing at the time of engagement, as well as support people’s continued engagement with nature throughout the lifecourse<sup>28, 40</sup>. Having available time (28%) and appropriate access to spaces (20%), clothing/footwear (11%), and paths (9%) where important aspects in supporting respondents’ engagement with nature. To note, under other, two respondents reported that good weather supported their engagement with nature. Meanwhile, a lack of available time (23%) and poor access to spaces (10%) and poor paths (10%) were barriers to respondents’ going outdoors. However the weather (19%) was also a significant challenge to people’s engagement with nature, this was true for the school children too. To note, under other, two respondents reported caring responsibilities was a factor in reducing their engagement with nature.

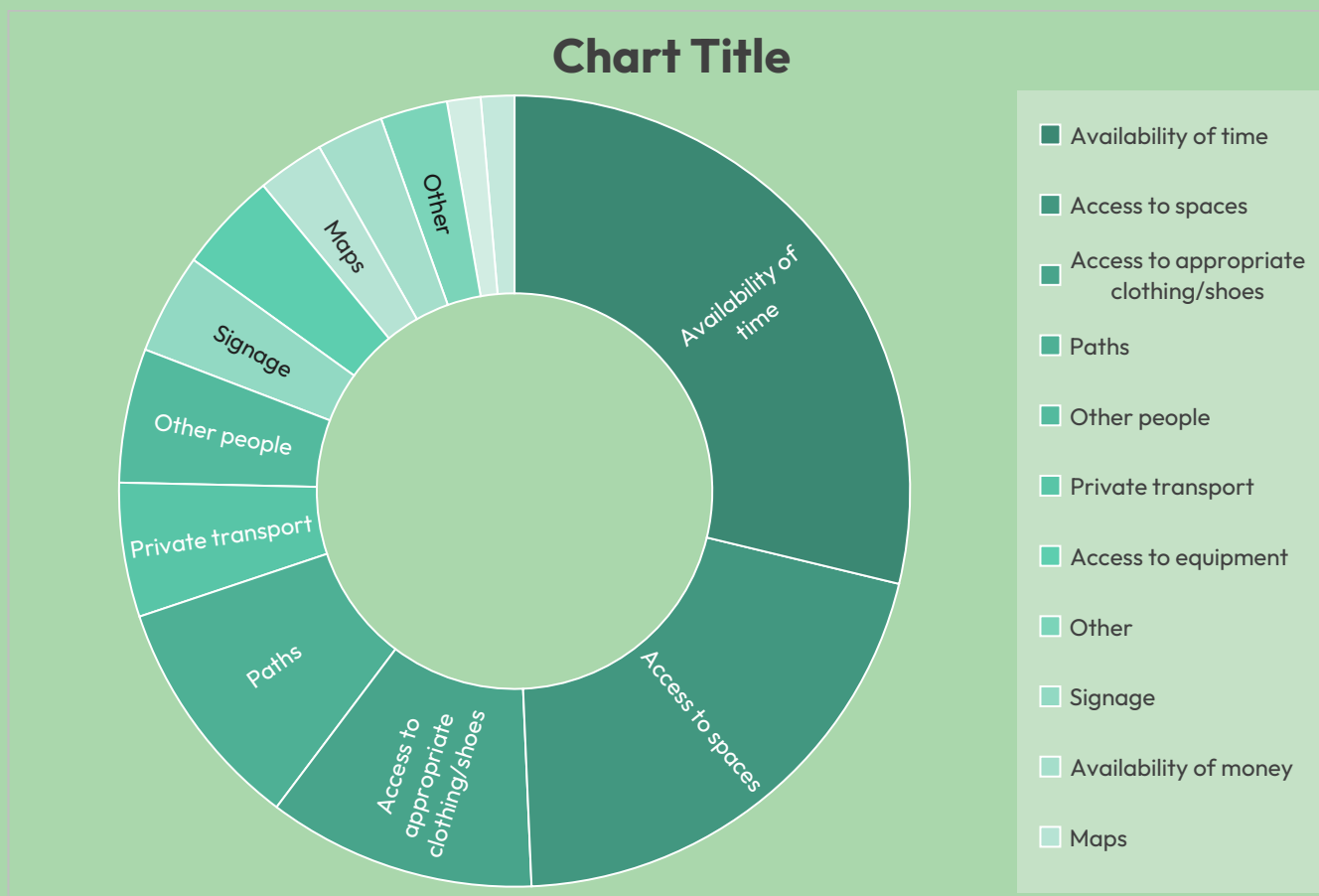


Figure 16: Which factors supported respondents’ engagement with nature.



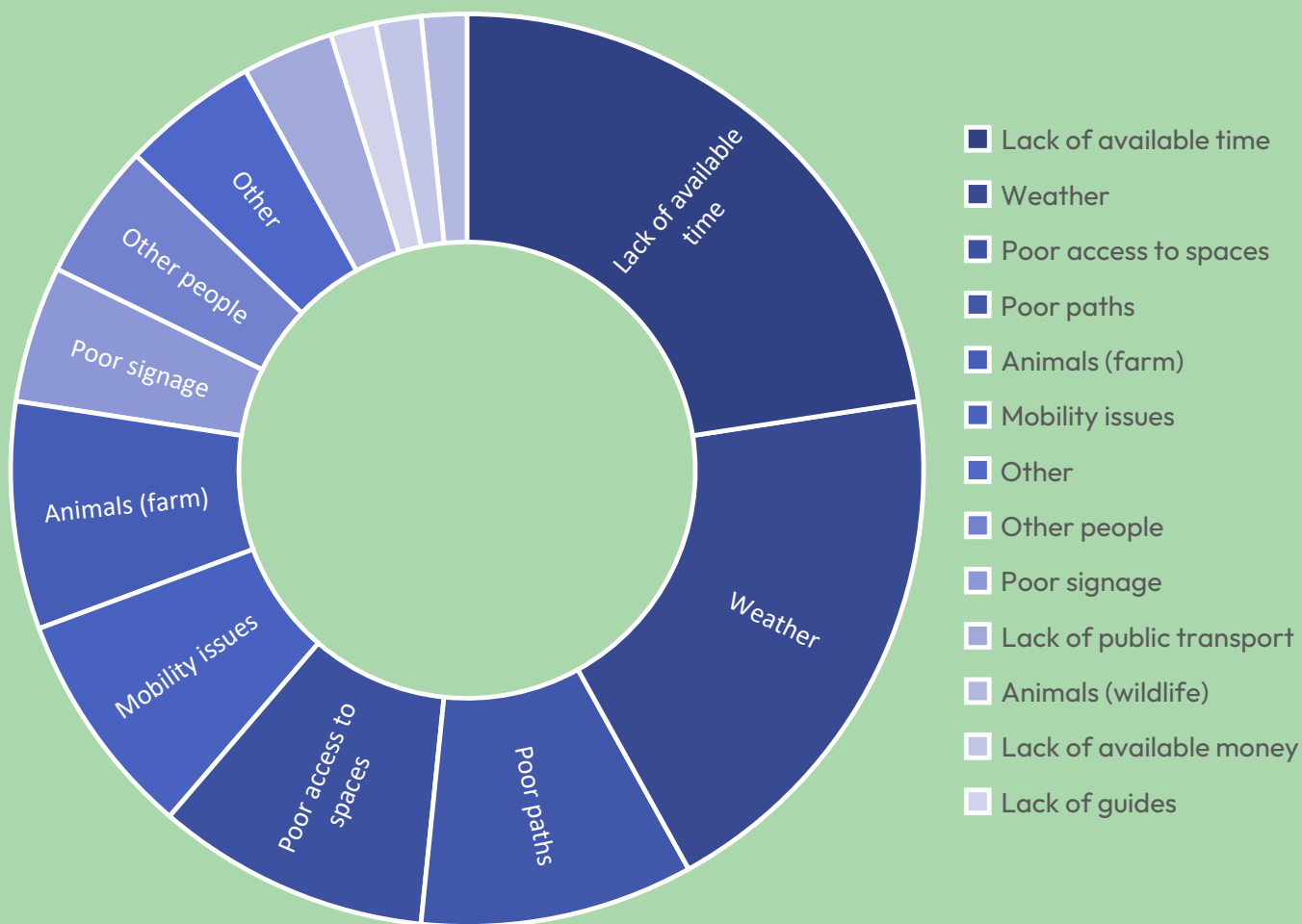


Figure 17: Which factors challenged respondents' engagement with nature.

Finally, we were interested in which resources respondents would find helpful in supporting their engagement with nature for their mental wellbeing (Figure 18). Respondents noted organised activities (20%) and events (17%) would help, which is interesting as only 2% currently engage with organised groups when going outdoors. As such, organised events involving nature-based activities could be very helpful for improving the North Isles communities' engagement with nature for their mental wellbeing. Some of the respondents provided further information regarding organised events, suggesting they need to be inclusive, flexible, suiting a range of mobility and fitness levels, have equipment to hire, as well as be provided indoors over winter. Respondents also noted access to space (12%) and equipment (10%) were important factors to consider when developing and delivering nature-based activities. Regarding access, a few respondents noted improvements to tracks could help increase access for people with mobility difficulties. Other suggestions, also included infrastructure improvements, including improvements to fencing, signage, and public facilities. For the school children at North Ronaldsay they suggested equipment to support playing would help and would like activities involving swimming, paddleboarding, orientating, and the development of new walking routes.

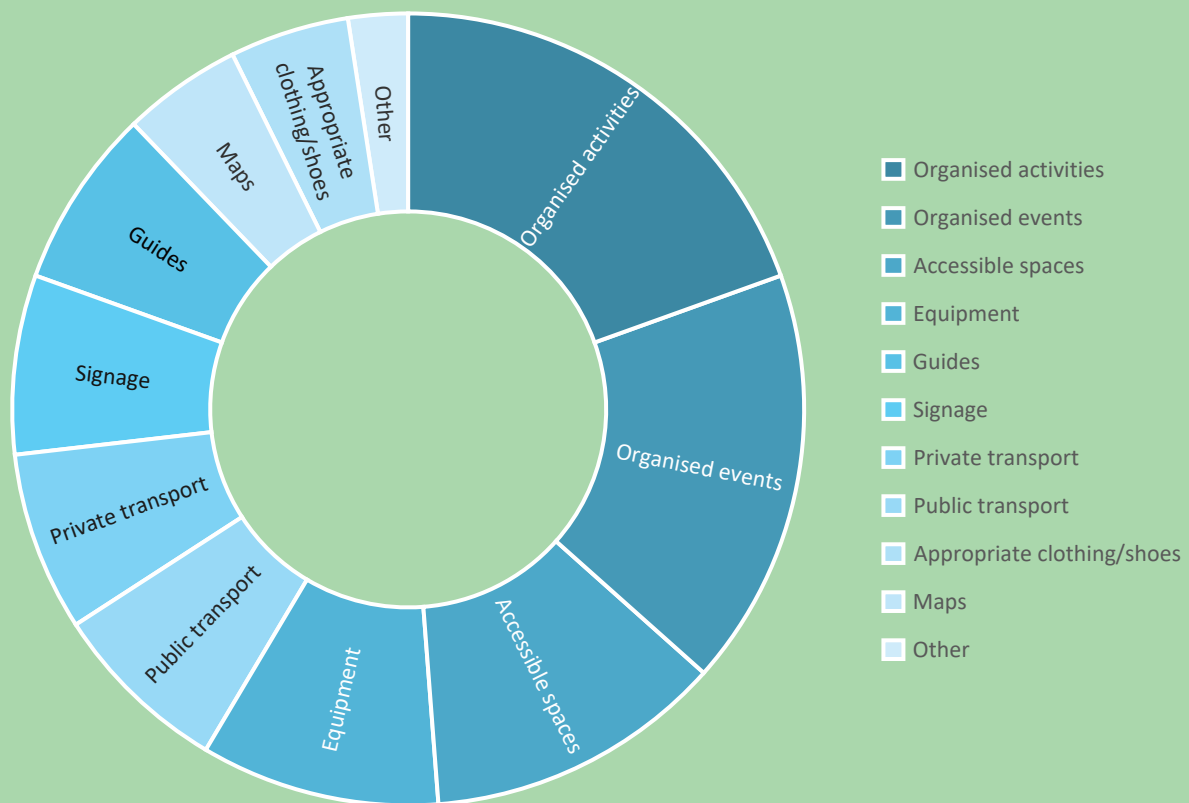


Figure 18: Which resources would support respondents' engagement with nature.

These findings helped underpin the nature-based activities offered by the North Isles Wellbeing Project during the Winter of 2022-23 and throughout 2023. Core themes regarding the mental wellbeing benefits from engaging with nature, the aspects which support and/or challenge nature engagement, and the types of activities engaged in are developed through considering the responses received during the interviews, community conversations and nature-based activity feedback. These themes are considered in more detail in the following sections.

### Case study: Stronsay pilot nature-based activities programme

During August and September 2022, a series of nature-based activities were offered on Stronsay as a pilot. During this pilot we tested out a range of activities and received feedback regarding the participants' enjoyment of the activity and nature and if engaging with a nature-based activity benefited their mental wellbeing. The nature-based activities offered included cycle rides, nature-based art and craft activities, and citizen science activities (beach litter survey, dark skies survey, seaweed survey). The events were aimed at children, young people, and adults, and a cross section of age ranges engaged with the activities. The activities were often in conjunction with partner organisations (Cycling UK, Orkney Art Club, and Orkney International Science Festival). Engaging with partner organisations and established citizen science activities provided a basis for bringing people together; to support people's engagement with the nature on and around Stronsay; and for people to experience how engaging with nature influences their mental wellbeing.

Overall, from the feedback received the nature-based activities offered positively impacted on the people's wellbeing and their awareness of and connection with nature. The respondents also noted they enjoyed the various events and would take part in them again. We used the Five Ways to Wellbeing as a measure of how the activities offered impacted people's wellbeing. People responded that taking part in the activities improved their wellbeing in all five areas (being physically active, connecting with other people, giving to others, being mindful and learning new skills). Respondents also indicated that they enjoyed the nature involved in the activity, either as a base for art and crafts, or as a setting, noting they became more aware and knowledgeable about nature, and developed an improved connection with nature. These findings align with research into nature-based activities for young people and adults, which through providing meaningful activities in nature promoted improvements in the participants' creativity, social interactions, physical health, mental wellbeing, and supported the development of new skills<sup>41, 42</sup>.

More specifically, for the Cycling UK rides (Figure 19), the feedback received indicated that the adults and children enjoyed the rides and the nature during the ride. Regarding the Five Ways to Wellbeing, all five respondents strongly agreed the cycle rides helped them with being physically active and connecting with other people. From the activity the respondents enjoyed trying something new, meeting other people, feeling relaxed during the rides, and spending time with their family. Being able to use e-bikes also helped mitigate against inclement weather, as highlighted by the following two quotes:

*"I loved it, even in the rain."*

*"The e-bike made it enjoyable even in the rain."*



Figure 19: Cycling UK Rides on Stronsay (Source: North Isles Wellbeing Project).

Meanwhile, from the stargazing activity, all three participants provided feedback, noting that they enjoyed the activity and the nature involved. The participants took part as they were either interested in astronomy or wanted to learn something new. Regarding the Five Ways to Wellbeing, all five respondents strongly agreed the stargazing helped their wellbeing in all components, apart from being physically active, as it provided social connection, opportunities to help others, be mindful during the activity and learn new skills. For example:

*“It definitely made me feel better and more revived being outside at night.”*

Two of the respondents noted it would be good to continue the activity either via a Facebook group or teaching children about the night sky. These comments are encouraging, as an aspect of the North Isles Natural Wellbeing project is to encourage members of the communities to take ownership of nature-based activities and to share their experience and skills to help their own and others mental wellbeing.

Finally, the Nature Arts Summer Programme (Up the Garden Path), held within the Stronsay community garden, provided children with the opportunity to take part in nature-based arts and crafts (e.g., clay work, decoupage using plants and flowers, flower pressing, natural candle making) and growing fruit and vegetables. The respondents enjoyed the activities and the nature involved. Regarding the Five Ways to Wellbeing, both respondents agreed that taking part benefitted their wellbeing due to being physically active, connecting to friends, helping each other out and through learning new skills. For example:

*“The atmosphere was very relaxing, and I enjoyed socialising. I loved the candle making and learning more about my friends.”*

*“I liked the space, the gardening, the activities.”*

A key resource developed from the Stronsay Pilot programme was The North Isles Wellbeing Project Guide to Citizen Science (Figure 20), which was included in the At Home Nature Kits. The guide provides information on a range of suitable citizen science schemes which can help people connect with nature, whilst also supporting their mental wellbeing through connecting with others, learning new skills, being physical active and giving back to society. Promoting connecting with nature as a way to improve quality of life has been shown to improve individual mental wellbeing, through increased happiness, purpose, and facilitating exercise and social connections<sup>43</sup>.



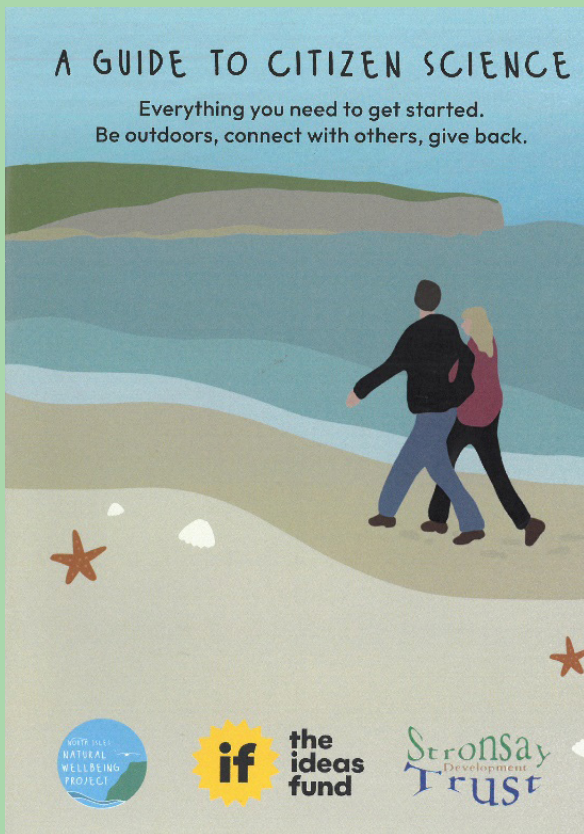


Figure 20: The North Isles Natural Wellbeing project Citizen Science Guide (Little Hoose design)

### **‘Sideways gravity’: Understanding seasonal variations in nature engagement**

An aspect that arose in responses to the survey, and was further developed in interviews, community conversations, and the photography competition was the influence of the weather on nature engagement. The wind, in particular, was signalled out as a challenging aspect, which one interviewee referred to as “sideways gravity”. Interviewees recognised that the strength of the wind was a barrier to going outdoors and engaging in nature-based activities. For example, an entrant in the photography competition recognised that engaging with nature-based activities is challenging in stormy conditions (Figure 21).

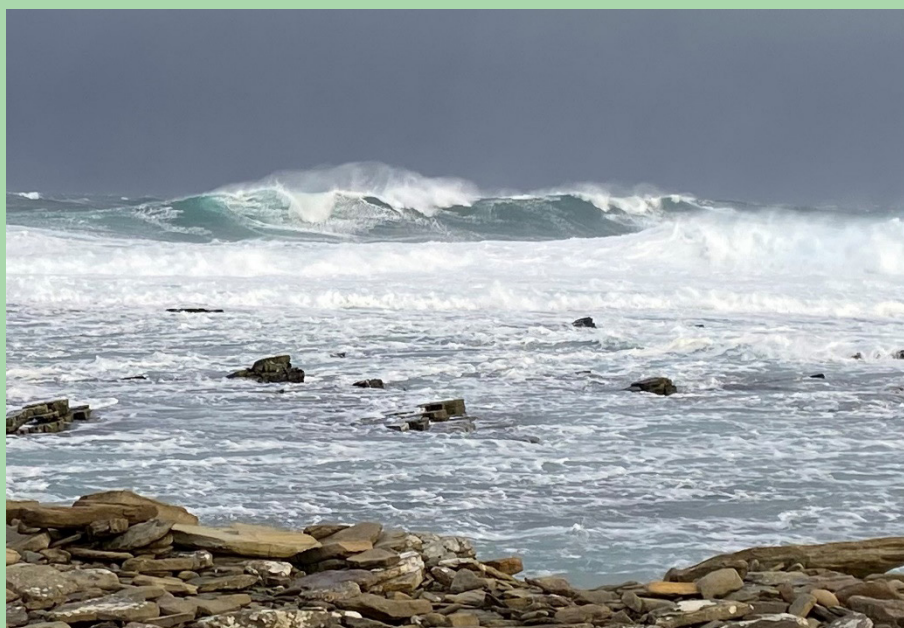


Figure 21: “Rough Seas - when it’s too wild to swim” (Source: June Purvis).

However, it wasn't just the wind and storms which created barriers to engaging in nature-based activities, but also the short cold days in Winter and the wintery weather. In these conditions, moving around was reported as being more difficult, but nature was still enjoyed (Figure 22), as well as reducing the desire to go outdoors, where nature was instead appreciated by viewing it from a window (Figure 23).



Figure 22: "Moon light snow - In the short time we had snow it was challenging trying to get the children to school and getting supplies, but I, they, did love the snow" (Source: Adam Tango Holland).



Figure 23: "Bleak but Beautiful - when the view from the kitchen says, 'stay indoors'" (Source: June Purvis).

"[Y]ou have to accept that you can't do something you might have planned."



Due to the climate Orkney experiences, the role of acceptance arose across the interviews and community conversations, where people suggested several different ways being accepting of the weather helped them to stay in contact with nature. For example, individuals and groups would embrace the weather, especially the wind, and accept that it was an ever-present aspect of living in Orkney - that they would work with it, perhaps by adapting a planned walk. One interviewee recognised accepting and engaging with the climate, added to their walks or cycles:

*“You really feel like you’ve had an adventure.”*

One interviewee noted they would bring nature indoors and complete nature-based art and crafts, which continued their nature connection as their art is inspired by the nature they see when outside:

*“You do get those spells when the wind doesn’t drop below 30 for a week or two weeks at a time. But we do a lot of stuff inside. So, I do a lot of nature related arts. I do a lot of bird carving. I’ve started doing linocut and woodcut prints while we’ve been up here, and my wife does a lot of weaving.”*

Finally, people recognised that accepting the variation in weather supported them to appreciate the nature around them. On calmer days, there was a sense of people making the most of them, and valuing and taking in the beauty of where they lived. The type and flows of weather (wind, light, rain/snow) has been found to influence if engaging with different intensities of weather is comforting or disabling, with living well with variations in the weather requiring adapting, enduring, and making the best of it<sup>44</sup>.

Recognising seasonal changes also supported people to engage with nature and appreciate the dynamic nature of the coasts and the flows of birds. Several people discussed enjoying bird watching and sharing unusual sightings with others, often via social media groups. Seeing and hearing the birds provided opportunities for people to learn about different species of birds, offered moments of joy, and connection with nature and other people. For example, bird migrations provided people with opportunities to encounter seabirds around the coasts, as well as up close, through nesting sites at home (Figure 24), which provided meaningful and emotional connections.



Figure 24: “Swallows - First time I have had them nest on our house, and it was great to watch them grow up and build another nest on the house. In the evenings you would see them diving past the windows for flies” (Source: Zoe Dearness).

Finally, being able to watch the night sky and the aurora were encounters people appreciated during the Winter months (Figure 25).



Figure 25: “Northern Lights between the stars - I love being able to catch the Northern Lights on the rare occasion, even without it the stars are amazing” (Source: Adam Tango Holland).

One interviewee enjoyed being able to see the Milky Way clearly:

*“[I]t’s just as exciting, to be honest. Certainly, when you see the Aurora moving, when you see the movements of the clouds, it’s very exciting. Exhilarating, I suppose.”*

However, the interviewee noted they do not have that much knowledge of the constellations and thought having nature-based activities focused on the night sky would be appealing to the community and a good way to learn more about the stars and bring people together. This aligns with the feedback from the stargazing activity on Stronsay, where the activity promoted both learning more and sharing of knowledge.



Through community members adapting to seasonal variations in the weather and light levels, a year-round connection with nature is possible, which supports their mental wellbeing. As such, nature-based activities which focus on seasonal variations and are flexible in their delivery could help promote mental wellbeing. For example, the Health Walks on Westray are provided all year, with adaptations being made in adverse weather conditions. Through being a consistent presence, a core group has developed, which support the individual members mental wellbeing.

### **Case study: Community gardens**

On each North Isle there is a community garden, which supports food growing and typically consist of a polytunnel(s) and outside space. The purpose and how each one is managed varies per island. As part of the project we visited four of the community gardens (North Ronaldsay, Sanday, Stronsay, Westray). On Stronsay, the purpose of the community garden is to provide a space for food growing, where residents can rent plots within the polytunnel, which is very well established (Figure 26). As already discussed, the outside space at the Stronsay community garden has been re-engaged with through this project and after Up the Garden Path was turned into a sensory garden (Figure 27). However, there are uncertainties how the sensory garden will be maintained and utilised beyond this project due to the funding stopping.



Figure 26: Stronsay community garden (Source: The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project).





Figure 27: Sensory garden at Stronsay community garden (Source: The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project).

On Westray, the community garden is managed to grow affordable organic fruit and vegetables for the local community, extending the season fresh produce is available on Westray (Figure 28). The garden consists of a greenhouse, glasshouse, an indoor propagation & cloning grow tent, and outdoor beds, all used for fruit and veg production. The produce is sold through the three local shops, which provides economic benefit to the island. The garden employs a head gardener and one assistant gardener on an hourly basis. The Westray Development Trust have a strong commitment to engaging the community, with plans to use the garden as a tool for knowledge exchange and boosting food sovereignty in Westray, as well as making the garden a nice natural space for residents to enjoy.



Figure 28: Westray community garden (Source: The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project).

On Sanday and North Ronaldsay the community gardens are community spaces. Firstly, the community garden on Sanday has several established areas, as well as plans for new areas and works in progress (Figure 29). There are two polytunnels, as well as several raised beds and outside planting areas. One of the new projects is the development of a sensory garden between the two polytunnels, which could provide beneficial wellbeing through supporting a sensory connection with nature and providing a space for rest and relaxation. The community garden employs a gardener, who helps runs session and maintains the garden, alongside a team of volunteers. The gardener noted before Covid-19 the school



was beginning to become involved in the gardening activities, but this has not been picked back up since the school children returned from the various restrictions in place. The challenges of obtaining funding to ensure the long-term sustainability of the project, as well as engaging with all members of the community were also noted by the gardener. The later possibly in part due to many residents having their own polytunnel for food growing.



Figure 29: Sanday community garden (Source: The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project).

Meanwhile on North Ronaldsay, the community garden was recently established in 2022, after two newcomers secured funding (Figure 30). The aim of the garden is to help North Ronaldsay transit towards Net Zero (zero additional CO<sub>2</sub> emissions), whilst supporting community wellbeing. The funding included funds to pay a head gardener and equipment for three years. The objective of the garden is on providing a space for people to grow and a veg box scheme, which in the long-term may help to self-fund the community garden. An additional and unexpected benefit reported by the head gardener was the influence on the communities' social wellbeing. A weekly gardening session is held, which non-gardeners also often attend, with the garden acting as a hub for the community to connect socially. Improvements in social wellbeing is a typical finding from research into gardening schemes, which supports an increase in a sense of belonging, engagement with the activities, and supporting others<sup>45, 46</sup> – all factors in supporting good mental wellbeing.





Figure 30: North Ronaldsay community garden (Source: The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project).

The community gardens are already established and have the potential to be a mental wellbeing resource for each of the North Isles. As reported in the baseline survey, gardening is also a popular activity for many of the respondents. Community gardens offer people the chance to engage with all aspects of the Five Ways to Wellbeing and the 5 Pathways to Nature Connection. A good next step would be to develop a network between the six community gardens to discuss ideas, funding opportunities, and best practice. For example, could schemes and activities be developed at all the community gardens to offer both good quality local produce to the community, alongside supporting individual and community mental wellbeing, and providing an open and accessible social space. Each of the gardens are moving in at least some of these directions, and in communities where time, resources and finances are often stretched, coming together as a collection of community gardens could reduce these challenges whilst also enriching each of the communities.

### **Developing a connection with nature for mental wellbeing**

People discussed having a connection with nature supported their mental wellbeing, with this connection supporting them to immerse themselves in the nature around them and connect with a range of different species, which provided opportunities for connection, enjoyment, and fascination.

*“[B]eing able to swim and have the seals come up to you ... I think it’s being next to a wild creature and obviously the personalities because they’re so curious. It’s brilliant because you’re staring at them and they’re staring at you and it’s just you’re both thinking whoa. But yeah, it’s the fact that you’re very close to wild animals. I think that’s what it is. And the sea is just invigorating anyway.”*



*“[T]hey’re [birds] just doing their own thing. They’re not that interested in human beings at all. They’re just, they’re just living, living their lives, whatever they are. It’s interesting.”*

*“[Y]ou’re seeing beautiful things every day and that definitely has an effect on you.”*

People recognised that an aspect they enjoyed about living on a North Isle was the richness of the bird- and wildlife and the natural environment, which supported a range of nature-based activities (Figures 31 and 32).



Figure 31: “Playing in the Waves - enjoying the sea whatever the weather” (Source: June Purvis).

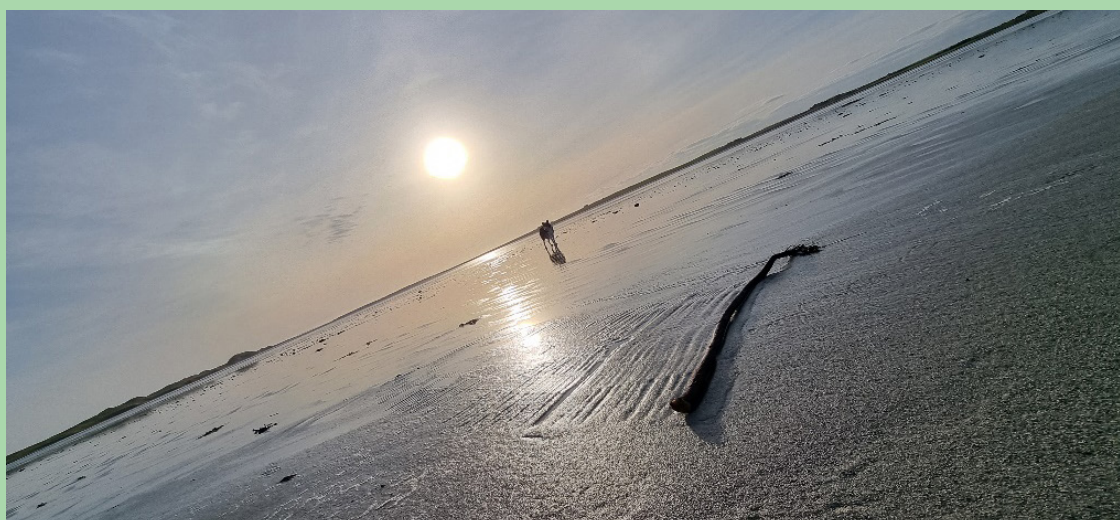


Figure 32: “Walkies with Alfie - I love to take Alfie to the beach as he gets so excited by new smells and running and running for miles, and on top of seeing his happiness you get breathtaking views and photo opportunities. Just amazing” (Source: Zoe Dearness).

Participating in activities, such as swimming in the sea, walking, and bird watching, provided people with opportunities to immerse themselves in the moment and escape their everyday. This supported people to relax, process their thoughts, and improve their mood. These findings align with research regarding the role of activities and the natural environment in supporting restoration, processing thoughts, and reducing stress<sup>47, 48</sup>.

*“[S]ometimes I’ll just wander along and sit somewhere and think I’m so lucky to be here, to be able to just wander down to the shore and just sit.”*

*“Because you’re watching things around you. So, you’re not actually in your mind, but sometimes you focus, watching something for a few minutes. Probably you’ll have cleared your brain as it were.”*

*“[I’ll] come back about and realise I’ve been out for about three hours without thinking about it.”*

For several people their connection with nature enriched their lives through providing meaning, purpose, enjoyment, and regular activities that supported them to get outside. This connection helped them to adapt to different challenges, for example, the weather, low mood, and supported them to go outside, which helped them to feel better, as well as be present in the moment<sup>9</sup>.

*“[I]t’s always been such an important part of my life ... it’s just what I enjoy doing so and I would really miss it if I wasn’t able to just go out.”*

These rich connections with nature that can support a person’s mental wellbeing, are the nature connections the North Isles Wellbeing Project aimed to help foster for all members of the community, to see if a connection with nature could beneficially influence people’s mental wellbeing. One way this was approached was through making available nature-based kits aimed at children, which could be used at home and in schools (Figure 33).





Figure 33: At Home Nature Kits (Source: The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project).

These kits contained a range of activities, including, growing your own pizza kit, acrylic pens for rock and shell painting, a beach finds journal, binoculars, a magnifying glass, bug collection pots, and a guide to citizen science activities. Community feedback indicated that the kits were well received and supported engagement with nature, with younger children (6-9 years old) loving the pizza growing kit and rock painting. These two activities were also enjoyed by the children at Papaya Westray Community School (Figures 34 and 35), where children painted on rocks, the nature they enjoyed. Meanwhile older children enjoyed using the binoculars, magnifying glass, and bug collection pots to look at the natural world up close.



Figure 34: A planted pizza growing kit at Papa Community School (Source: The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project).



Figure 35: Painted rocks by children at Papa Community School (Source: The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project).

On Eday, the kits prompted a range of discussions with suggestions to either to link up with existing groups and utilise the activities as a focus; or to form beach walks between families to make use of the journal; or that the kits could be used to provide creative activities for children to occupy themselves instead of engaging with technology or the TV. The kits also allowed for activities to be sustained, for example, a rock painting session had recently been held, which the children enjoyed and the pens allowed the children to continue this nature-based activity.

Nature-based arts and crafts was also a popular approach with communities across the North Isles for fostering a connection with nature (Figure 36). On Stronsay, a printmaking workshop inspired one participant to continue printing linocut and woodcut prints at home, as an activity to complete when the wind makes it challenging to go out and birdwatch.



Figure 36: Completed prints from a printmaking workshop (Source: The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project).

*"I love all the things I can put in my paper its sooooo cool."*

*"What I get to keep this all for myself and it will grow stuff!"*





Meanwhile, on Eday, a papermaking workshop (Figure 37) provided participants with multiple opportunities to connect with nature, including through the act of creating seed paper; collecting flowers during a nature walk; gaining inspiration from the landscape; and later watching flowers grow from the paper.

Figure 37: Natural materials gathered from a nature walk for a papermaking workshop (Source: The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project).

Participants liked that this creative activity offered links to the above range of activities. The children noted they enjoyed making new paper from old paper. Meanwhile, the adults also liked that the nature-based activity could be easily replicated at home with items in the home. Other benefits reported included people taking the opportunity to socialise, with many staying beyond the workshop to continue chatting and to eat together; for a teacher it inspired him regarding new activities at school; whilst, a local artist was not sure it was her thing, but stayed and loved the idea of creating her art within the paper and being introduced to another medium. She especially enjoyed linking it to her walks and work she does on sunsets and landscapes. She also went away and brought back a friend to have a go, and so it inspired her to share the activity with others. Engaging with nature through art is an element of developing a connection with nature, which for children has shown to improve their happiness and the time spent outdoors<sup>49</sup>.

The North Isles Wellbeing Project final activity was a community weaving project ('Wir Islands'), which involved members of the communities creating a sample square. The aim of the project was to encourage people to think about the nature of their island in the piece they were weaving, whether that is the landscape or even the materials themselves from local wool. The woven squares would reflect individuals' interpretations of nature specific to each island. They are very simple 6-inch cardboard squares, in which the wool or chosen material is weaved in and out, making it suitable for all ages and abilities. YouTube instructions were also provided from Orkney Art Club. Weaving looms were provided to all schools if they wished to experiment and create bigger pieces, and we welcomed more complex woven samples from communities' members who were skilled in weaving or spinning their own wool. All the samples will be created into one large community piece of art that will tour the North Isles.

At Eday Community School, children aged 3 to 12 weaved their own square (Figure 38). The art teacher reported that the weaving was greeted with enthusiasm, with the older children helping the younger children with threading needles and keeping on track with their square. From this activity, there was several spin offs, with the children requesting further textile lessons (knitting, rag rugging) and lessons on North Ronaldsay Sheep, which whilst near to Eday the children did not know about, Angora Rabbit wool from Sanday, and small craft business across the islands.



Figure 38: Woven squares created by children at Eday Community School (Source: Eday Community School).

*“I get a lot of enjoyment from taking other people out.”*

Citizen science activities can also support people to develop a connection with nature, as these encourage people to learn more about and appreciate the nature around them through their senses and develop a meaningful connection through an activity which can help us understand and support nature. On Stronsay, a year long wildlife recording activity was set up, to support people to develop their wildlife identification skills, whilst also contributing to local and national records. The activity was led by David Askew, a newcomer to Stronsay, who wanted to become involved with the community and share his enthusiasm for wildlife identification and recording. The activity involved four guided events during 2023: Moth trapping and otter tracks survey walk (April); Bumblebees identification and transect walks (June); Dragonflies and Damselflies identification and walk (July); Wildflowers identification and walk (July). Members of the Orkney Field Club supported David with the bumblebees and wildflowers identification and walks. The activity also involves an active Facebook group, where people can report their sightings to be included in the recorded records. Whilst there is a right to access land in Scotland, David recognised that it was important to involve the farmers, whose land the group accessed



and for the farmers to be included – creating more of a community feel to the events. The farmers were happy to be involved and supported access, as well being important sources of knowledge regarding wildlife sightings and locations. David noted participants appeared to enjoy learning about wildlife and taking part in the walks, and recognised an additional benefit to wellbeing, through the events promoting social interactions.

*“[O]ften the social side comes out quite a lot that people really enjoy just getting together and having a bit of a chat while you do it.”*

Supporting social connections was also a recognised benefit of the Health Walks on Westray, where weekly walks (short (20 minutes), medium (40 minutes), long (1 hour)) provided a regular opportunity for members of the community to come together outdoors. The focus is on getting people outside to promote mental and social wellbeing rather than physical fitness. Nature is often reported as providing an affective setting for bringing people together<sup>45, 50</sup>. As with the wildlife recording on Stronsay, the Health Walks also benefited from a member of the community being able to provide their time and expertise for free.

Finally, an aspect of developing a nature connection is for a person to find what type of activity and nature fits them. On Stronsay, sea snorkelling (included free equipment hire) was offered to the community, for people to try out and see if they enjoyed it (Figure 39). The opportunity to use drysuits for free, and attend for free, helped remove financial, equipment, and personal (anxiety regarding sea temperatures) barriers to people’s participation. For one participant, being able to meet as a group, but then having the independence in the water to explore and not have to engage with anything other than nature was a major attraction. As the people nearby provided security and support, which supported their sense of security without having to socialise. Participants reported a range of benefits from the activity, including enjoying being in the water and seeing the wildlife (crabs, seals); feeling grounded and at peace; a sense of being immersed in the water, which supported forgetting about the everyday; and wanting to sustain snorkelling on a daily basis.



Figure 39: Enjoying sea snorkelling and swimming in Stronsay (Source: Bill Hodgson).

However, for one participant they didn't enjoy the activity, but was please that the opportunity was offered, so that they could see if it was for them. Since the activity, two participants reported they have continued swimming in the sea and enjoying their connection with nature:

*"I now swim every Sunday in the sea with a group of friends. I love being in the water and use the community pool but the cold and being in the sea always worried me. Since the sea snorkel I now go in the sea every week and love it. ... Being in the sea, even when the weather is a bit wild, it's great feeling the waves come over you. I loved seeing what was under the sea in the sea snorkelling."*

*"Formed a small group initially then joined another group already engaged in this activity - to swim in the sea at least once a week ... Being able to observe nature close up."*

These beneficial engagements with the sea echo findings regarding research into island living that being by and in the sea provides residents with a sense of belonging and identity, as well as support improvements in physical activity, social interactions, and mental wellbeing, through immersive moments of renewal, getting away, and valuing the natural environment<sup>51, 52</sup>.

An individual's nature connection can become a reliable and significant relationship to them, supporting their mental wellbeing, as recognised by Karen, with her contribution to the photography competition regarding why she enjoys nature (Figure 40).



Figure 40: "Love is all we have. The Rock IS Love. Nature knows that. - Nature has its own energy, is universal and grounding. To connect with the fierceness or calmness of nature connects us to our God source. It cleanses and realigns our own energies of anxiety or stress of everyday living with that of balance" (Source: Karen Belz-Wing).

## Project Officer insights

Finally, we present some reflections from the Project Officer, Louise McQuaid, on delivering The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project. These reflections consider the challenges the project faced, how these were addressed, examples of successful nature-based activities, and future recommendations for projects focused on individual and community mental wellbeing.

*“[T]he term wellbeing itself has caused more challenges for me than anything ... It was a bit of a deterrent, so I just stopped saying they were activities for wellbeing. I started referring to it as a research project rather than it’s a wellbeing project and that seemed to help people.”*

*“[T]here have been so many drives and projects based around wellbeing and it seems there’s only certain demographics on the island that access them and that isn’t always regarded in a positive way from everyone else on the island.”*

A major difficulty the project encountered was negative assumptions regarding mental wellbeing, with mental wellbeing being judged and stigmatised, as it is often viewed as being connected with being unemployed or requiring state support to survive. Consequently, when nature-based activities were first offered with a focus on wellbeing, this acted as a barrier towards participation. However, when the wellbeing aspect was dropped and the focus shifted to the project being concerned about research and finding out how people engaged with nature and what this meant to them, then people were more forthcoming and willing to share their experiences. Alongside this shift in language and focus, was the development of community conversations to collect feedback regarding the impact of the nature-based activities on the participants mental wellbeing. Finally, having the project researcher external to the North Isles communities also supported people’s engagement as Andy was not a member of one of the small communities, which supported people to share their experiences.

An important lesson learnt was projects need to clearly establish their aims, scope, and potential impact on communities’ mental wellbeing in-order to be able to deliver the aim(s) of the project, get the community onboard, and meet community expectations. During this project there was confusion between the North Isles Wellbeing Project and the Islands Wellbeing Project, consequently people had different expectations to what the North Isles Wellbeing Project was about and could deliver.

*“[C]ertainly schools and through education, I think it’s probably one of the best ways to research and to embed this idea of wellbeing not as something negative, and then they [the children] will obviously take that knowledge and share it.”*



A potential way this could be improved is to connect with the Island schools and through engaging with the curriculum, by offering community education programmes and activities. Through these activities awareness of the project can be created with the children, who can then feed back to the wider community.

*“The reach of the project, I think was far too big and one island would have been fine for several reasons, not necessarily just the travel implications ... but more the actual building relationships.”*

A second significant lesson learnt was the reach of the project was too large considering the timescale (18 months) and the funding allocated to staff costs. To be able to co-ordinate awareness of the project, build momentum, offer similar nature-based activities, and gather feedback across the six North Isles was very difficult logistically. Through offering the pilot programme on Stronsay, it became clear it would be difficult to replicate a similar programme of events on the other five North Isles solely reliant on volunteers. Future projects that wish to involve all six North Isles, maybe best to run each project individually with their own allocated member of paid staff, with regular meetings to support sharing best practice and learning from each other. Subsequently, this desire to share best practice and our learnings is one of the reasons behind this report, the creation of the website and toolkit. So, community groups and networks from each North Isle community can build on the nature-based activities offered and the learnings from this project.

*“[V]olunteer burnout, they’re [projects] just not sustainable without paid member of staff to support them.”*

*“[T]he weather, I would say is definitely one. So, in summer you can see people are much more willing to take part in things.”*

There was also several other challenges faced, these included: volunteer burnout, whereby it was difficult to recruit people to support delivering the project across the North Isles due to people not having the capacity to offer their time for free and constraints on their available time; a divide between the people who engaged with the project, with newcomers mainly becoming involved in the nature-based activities rather than Orcadians, who may already have their own networks and activities in place; an understandable desire for communities to want improvements to infrastructure and facilities, which whilst we understood as a significant factor in supporting individual and community mental wellbeing, was outside the scope of the project; and the weather, where seasonal variation plays a role in people’s engagement with outdoor events, which is why the project also offered indoor nature-based events.

*“Orkney Art Club again that was new for Stronsay, but the fact that India had already had this entire program of workshops that she developed herself and it had already been embedded across many of the Isles for the last 12 months. It meant that that was very*

*easy for us to bring someone else into deliver that because she had all the planning and the infrastructure in place.”*

One way to meet some of the above challenges was to create partnerships with partner organisations, for example, Cycling UK or Orkney Art Club, who provided equipment, resources, and expertise, which facilitated people’s engagement with the nature-based activities. For both activities with partner organisations and activities offered by the project, repeat visits and the establishing of presence was important to building relationships with the community.

Finally, it was pleasing to see the project have an influence on people’s nature engagement and mental wellbeing. Two particular nature-based activities have been developed by some members of the community. The first is the people that are now swimming regularly in the sea because of the Sea Snorkelling event. Secondly, the Stronsay Wildlife Recording Project, which has been led by David’s enthusiasm for the topic and supported different ways for people to engage. This particular series of activities have had multiple benefits, at the time of the wildlife walks, through the Facebook group, and the publication of the report, which will benefit Stronsay, as well as national records. This activity has been successful as David is able to volunteer his time and expertise, which highlights the reliance on people’s time and skills. However, it also shows that when community members can share their knowledge and build momentum, projects can become established and have positive benefits on individual and community mental wellbeing.

## SUMMARY

The North Isles Natural Wellbeing project set out to understand the North Isles communities engagement with nature and how this influenced their mental wellbeing. To support this aim the project offered a series of activities at first focused on Stronsay, but then across the North Isles to support the communities to foster a connection with nature and understand if this helped their mental wellbeing.

The findings from the North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project suggests that connecting with the nature on and around the North Isles can be beneficial for individual and community mental wellbeing. Participants who reported an already established nature connection highlighted how this connection supports their sense of belonging to nature and their appreciation and valuing of the nature on and around the North Isles. Then through this engagement with nature, individuals reported how it helped to ground them, providing a space in which to process thoughts and escape everyday concerns, providing a sense of calm and relaxation, and supporting their mood. The participants' nature connection also provided moments of joy and awe, which provided positive experiences. Finally, the participants reported enjoying sharing their connection with nature with others at the time or through participating in in-person or social media groups, as well as through giving back by sharing their passion and knowledge with others and supporting their learning and connection with nature. Subsequently, a connection with nature may help reduce social isolation and loneliness, and in-turn support and enhance individual and community mental wellbeing.

Similar themes were reported from participants of the nature-based activities offered by the North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project, who found engaging in the activities beneficial to their mental wellbeing at the time. Benefits recognised matched the Five Ways to Wellbeing, including connecting with people and nature, sharing knowledge, and helping others during the activities, by taking notice of the nature and being mindful during the activities, learning new skills and trying new activities, and being active. The nature-based activities also supported people to connect to nature through the 5 Pathways to Nature Connection by providing opportunities for people to connect to nature through their senses, to appreciate the beauty, to be creative and develop a meaningful and emotional connection and have compassion for nature.

Based on the evidence developed during the North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project we have produced 12 best practice recommendations regarding continuing to support individual and community mental wellbeing. These recommendations are aimed at different levels of the community and are primarily focused on improving the North Isles Communities' mental wellbeing through a connection with nature, but some are also applicable in supporting best practice for future community-based wellbeing projects.



# BEST PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

Informed by the findings of The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project and experience of delivering it this report presents the following best practice recommendations for individuals, community groups, community networks, and NHS Orkney. The best practice recommendations are firstly, for supporting and enhancing the North Isles Communities' mental wellbeing through engaging with nature; and secondly, for enhancing future community-based projects.

These best practice recommendations align with The Scottish Government's vision and priorities for mental wellbeing, through improving population mental wellbeing, promoting shared responsibility for mental wellbeing, undertaking a collective and holistic approach to mental wellbeing, improving awareness of and access to support, and reducing stigma<sup>19</sup>. As recognised within the Orkney Mental Health Strategy maintaining and enhancing individual and community mental wellbeing requires mental wellbeing to be recognised as a significant factor in people's quality of life and for individuals and the community to take responsibility for their own and each other's mental wellbeing<sup>16</sup>. However, whilst the individual is at the heart of the following best practice recommendations, individuals' actions to improve their mental wellbeing can only occur alongside community support and the provision of professional health services (Figure 41).

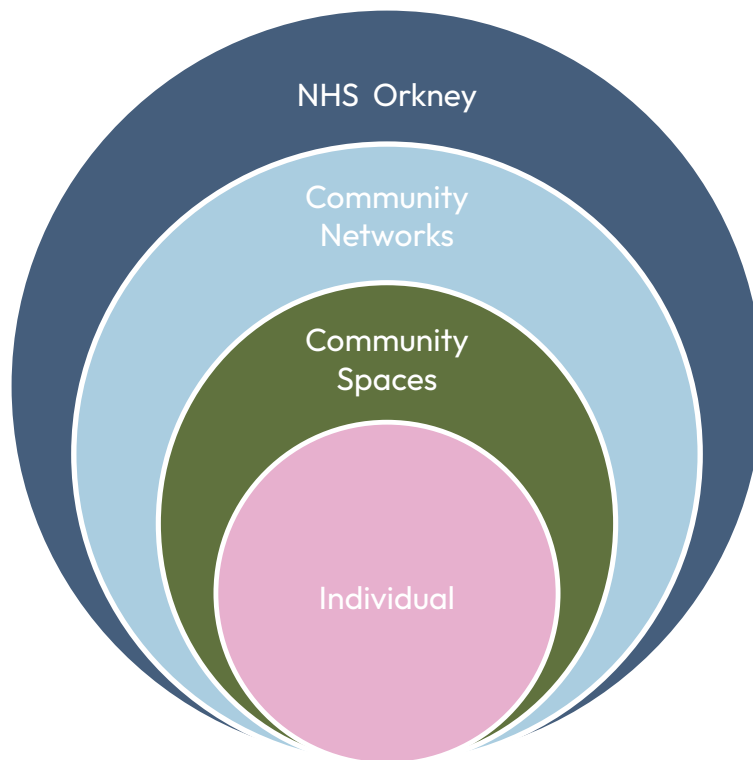


Figure 41: Venn diagram highlighting that supporting and enhancing individual and community mental wellbeing is the responsibility of all in society.

# INDIVIDUALS

## **1. Recognise the importance of your personal mental wellbeing and prioritise maintaining and enhancing your mental wellbeing.**

Actively prioritising your mental wellbeing will help underpin a flourishing life and reduce stigma within the community as mental wellbeing is recognised as something we all have.

## **2. Developing and maintaining a connection with nature can support your own mental wellbeing, as well enhance community mental wellbeing and support nature.**

Having a connection with nature by developing your interests with nature, can support your mental wellbeing, as well as the communities through giving back to others by sharing your interest. In-turn, this can improve individual's sense of belonging to the community. Recognising nature connection as an important factor in mental wellbeing can also support valuing and protecting nature.

# COMMUNITY SPACES

## **3. The development of multi-use natural spaces can provide accessible and comfortable spaces for all community members and a base for a wide range of nature-based activities.**

For example, community gardens can provide opportunities for socialising, restoration, art and craft activities, and school projects alongside traditional food growing.

## **4. Supporting engagement with nature can increase a sense of belonging to the community and island, countering social isolation.**

A connection with nature can also include engaging with the history and heritage of the North Isles landscapes, expanding the scope for being active outdoors and developing the mental wellbeing benefits from an active and meaningful nature connection.

## **5. Digital spaces and communication can increase awareness of and engagement with available spaces and activities.**

Social media groups (e.g., Facebook, WhatsApp) can support awareness of nature-based activities, connect people, and allow people to participate in activities.

# COMMUNITY NETWORKS

## **6. Recognise the importance of embedding projects in community interests and expertise.**

To reduce project fatigue, ensure new projects are supported by the community, which will help with engagement and maximising potential benefits across the community. The North Isle communities are also a vast source of expertise and lived experience, which can enhance the development, delivery, and success of projects.

## **7. Develop good working relationships with partner organisations and projects.**

Working with other organisations can enhance a project due to sharing key information, resources, equipment, and expertise, which can increase the reach of a project and the range of people who benefit from it.

## **8. Ensure benefits of previous projects are sustained through maintaining a core team.**

Projects are often short-term due to funding restrictions; however, it is important to be able to maintain the benefits and momentum of these projects through retaining the expertise developed. For example, the team involved in Orkney Research Centre for Archaeology's Tombs of the Isles project are now involved in From Peat Spade to Tangled Trade: Industrial heritage of North Isles. Maintaining the core team involved in successful projects means the relationships between the project and communities remain in place, which support continued access, engagement, and beneficial practices.

## **9. Schools can be an important focal point for introducing and sharing new ideas.**

Through the Island schools, projects can link up with the curriculum, which can ensure children become involved and benefit from the project, as well as creating wider awareness through the children feeding back to the wider community.

## **10. Ensure funding applications are fully costed and include appropriate staff costs.**

Projects often rely on volunteers, but volunteer burnout and a shortage of volunteers can reduce the reach and influence of projects. As such, projects need to secure funding for not just primary project staff, but also supporting staff to help ensure projects achieve their aims.

## **11. Map community asserts and develop awareness of them within NHS Orkney on the North Isles.**

To support people's mental wellbeing through individual and community-based activities requires awareness of what is available on each North Isle. Having an in-depth and accurate map of community nature-based activities can help prevent, support, and enhance communities' mental wellbeing.

## **12. Support people to connect to nature through community and individual activities.**

Through this map, people can be actively encouraged to develop a connection with nature, which is meaningful to them, and helps them to belong and support their mental wellbeing.





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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Baseline survey (including school version)



### North Isle Natural Wellbeing Project

#### Survey

The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project is a funded project ([The Ideas Fund](#)) seeking to develop community-led initiatives utilising the geography of the North Isles to improve the wellbeing of the local communities.

The aim of this survey is to understand how people engage with the local natural environment and the effects of this engagement on their wellbeing. As well, as to to refine our ideas of what resources the community needs to support nature-based wellbeing initiatives.

To gather initial thoughts and ideas we are asking any interested members of the community to complete this survey. The responses received will help us to develop initiatives that are in the best interest of the whole community. Please note that your participation is voluntary and that you are under no obligation to answer any particular questions.

The information you provide will be kept for the length of the North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project and may be pooled with other participants' responses, anonymised and may be published in reports and presentations. All data will be kept in line with the Stronsay Development Trust General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) Policy.

If you have any questions about this survey or the project, please contact the project's Project Officer Louise McQuaid by email, [sdtprojectofficer@gmail.com](mailto:sdtprojectofficer@gmail.com) or the Project Researcher, Andy Harrod by email, [a.harrod1@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:a.harrod1@lancaster.ac.uk).

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To take part in this survey please confirm that you are over 16 or have parental consent to take part.

I confirm I am over 16 or have parental consent to take part.

The questions begin on the next page.

1. How would you rate your current wellbeing in the following areas? (tick the appropriate boxes)

	Extremely dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Moderately satisfied	Extremely satisfied
Being physically active					
Connecting with other people					
Giving to others					
Being mindful					
Learning new skills					

2. How often do you go outdoors and engage with nature? (for example, wildlife, birds, landscapes, coasts, water) (tick one box)

Daily	2-3 times a week	Once a week	Once a fortnight	Monthly	Never

3. Does engaging with nature help you with your wellbeing in the following areas? (tick the appropriate boxes)

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Somewhat agree	Strongly Agree
Being physically active					
Connecting with other people					
Giving to others					
Being mindful					
Learning new skills					

4. What kind of activities do you take part in when outdoors? (tick all that apply)

<input type="checkbox"/>	Activity classes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Bird watching
<input type="checkbox"/>	Canoeing/Kayaking	<input type="checkbox"/>	Craft based activities
<input type="checkbox"/>	Cycling	<input type="checkbox"/>	Environmental conservation
<input type="checkbox"/>	Gardening	<input type="checkbox"/>	Mediation
<input type="checkbox"/>	Photography	<input type="checkbox"/>	Play
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sport (individual)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Sport (team)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Star gazing/aurora watching	<input type="checkbox"/>	Swimming
<input type="checkbox"/>	Running	<input type="checkbox"/>	Walking
<input type="checkbox"/>	Wildlife watching	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (please write below)
<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	

5. Who do you typically go outdoors with? (tick all that apply)

<input type="checkbox"/>	Family	<input type="checkbox"/>	Friends (one or two)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Friends (group)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Organised group
<input type="checkbox"/>	Partner	<input type="checkbox"/>	Pets
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sole (go out on your own)	<input type="checkbox"/>	School
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (please write below)		
<input type="checkbox"/>			

6. Which of the following aspects helps you to go outside and engage with nature? (tick all that apply)

<input type="checkbox"/>	Access to spaces	<input type="checkbox"/>	Availability of time
<input type="checkbox"/>	Availability of money	<input type="checkbox"/>	Access to appropriate clothing/shoes
<input type="checkbox"/>	Access to equipment	<input type="checkbox"/>	Guides
<input type="checkbox"/>	Maps	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other people
<input type="checkbox"/>	Paths	<input type="checkbox"/>	Signage
<input type="checkbox"/>	Transport (private)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Transport (public)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (please write below)		
<input type="checkbox"/>			



7. Which of the following aspects do you find challenging when going outside? (tick all that apply)

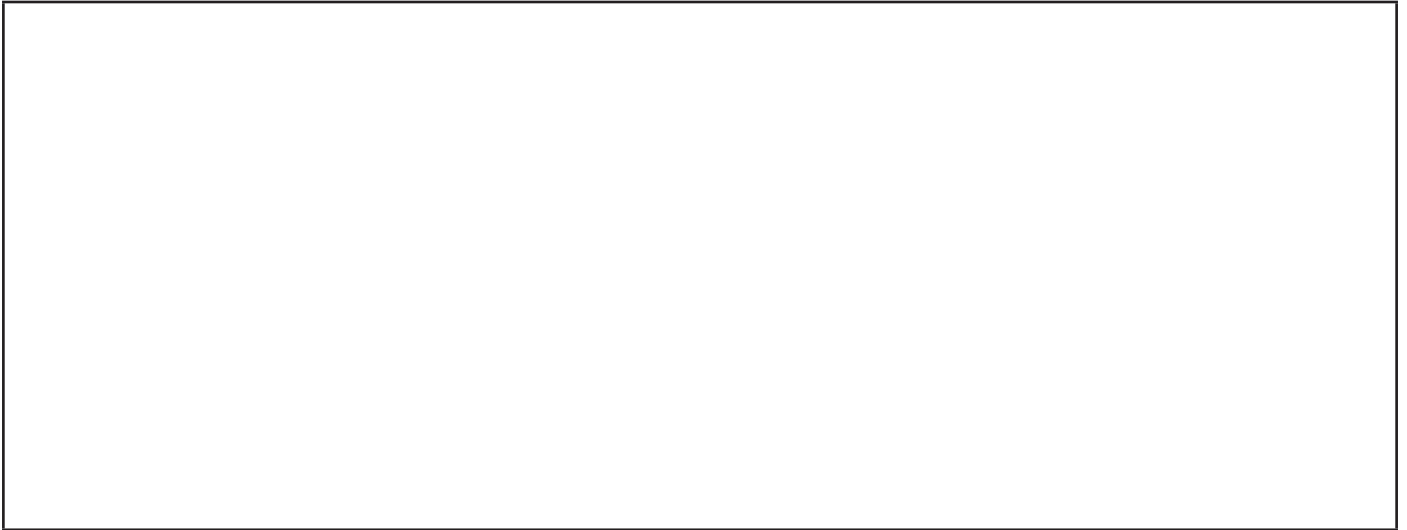
<input type="checkbox"/>	Poor access to spaces	<input type="checkbox"/>	Lack of available time
<input type="checkbox"/>	Lack of available money	<input type="checkbox"/>	Animals (farm)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Animals (wildlife)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Lack of equipment
<input type="checkbox"/>	Lack of guides	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other people
<input type="checkbox"/>	Phobias	<input type="checkbox"/>	Poor paths
<input type="checkbox"/>	Poor signage	<input type="checkbox"/>	Mobility issues
<input type="checkbox"/>	Lack of transport (private)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Lack of transport (public)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Weather	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (please write below)
<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	

8. What resources would help you to engage more with nature for your mental wellbeing? (tick all that apply)

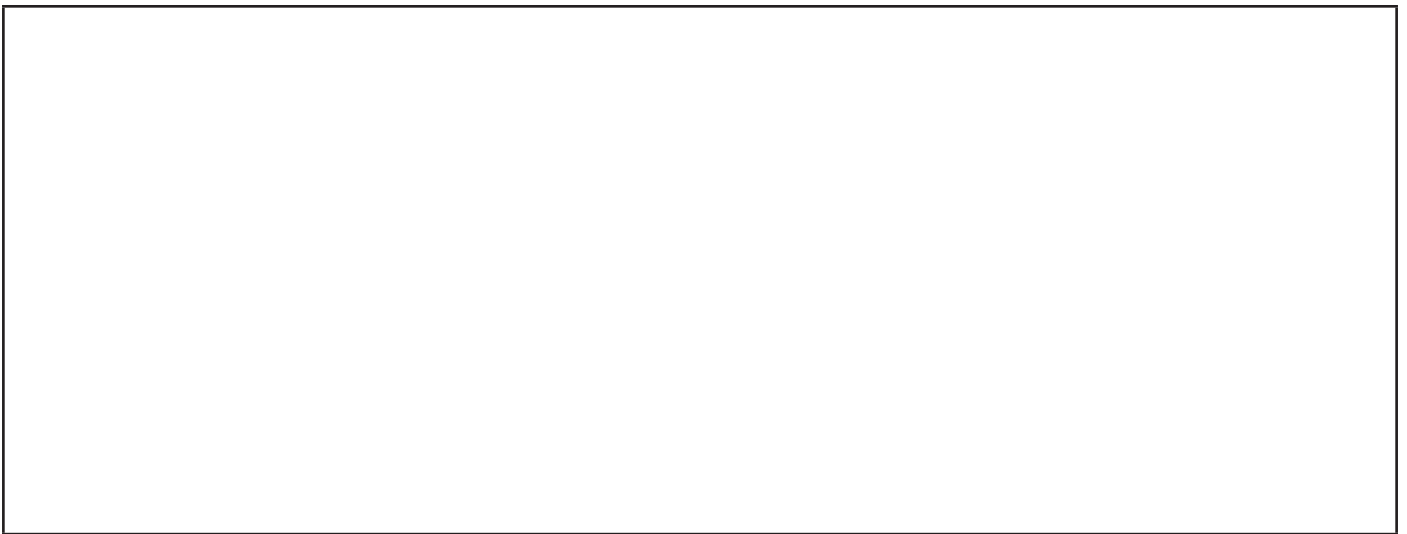
<input type="checkbox"/>	Accessible spaces	<input type="checkbox"/>	Access to equipment
<input type="checkbox"/>	Access to appropriate clothing/shoes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Access to guides
<input type="checkbox"/>	Access to maps	<input type="checkbox"/>	Organised activities
<input type="checkbox"/>	Organised events	<input type="checkbox"/>	Signage
<input type="checkbox"/>	Transport (private)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Transport (public)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (please write below)		
<input type="checkbox"/>			

9. What do you like about being outdoors and nature?

10. What do you dislike about being outdoors and nature?



11. Considering your answers above, what factors would you like us to consider when creating resources to support engagement with nature for wellbeing?



10. Any other thoughts or comments in relation to your wellbeing and nature engagement?



11. To help us with developing relevant nature-based wellbeing initiatives, please can you tell us which island you live on?

	Eday
	North Ronaldsay
	Papa Westray
	Sanday
	Stronsay
	Westray

12. To help us with developing relevant nature-based wellbeing initiatives, please can you tell us your age range?

	Under 12		12-17		18-24		25-34		35-44
	45-54		55-64		65-74		75-84		85 or older

13. To help us with developing relevant nature-based wellbeing initiatives, please can you tell us your gender?

	Female		Male
	Non-binary / third gender		Prefer not to say

14. We would like to understand people's experience in more detail. If you would like to have a further discussion, please leave your name and contact details below.

17 The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) mean that if you do leave your personal details, we have to check you are happy with what happens with your personal details. If you have left contact details above, please tick the relevant boxes.

I consent to the North Isle Natural Wellbeing Project storing my contact details for the left of the project

I consent to the North Isle Natural Wellbeing project contacting me about this project.

Not applicable as I haven't left my contact details.

Thank you for completing the survey for the North Isles Natural Wellbeing project. **Please return to: Natural Wellbeing Project, Stronsay Development Trust, Unit 1, Woods Yard, Stronsay, KW17 2AR.** If you have left your contact details Louise McQuaid or Andy Harrod will be in contact with you, regarding arranging a discussion to chat about your experiences regarding nature engagement and wellbeing.





## North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project

### School Survey

The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project is a funded project (The Ideas Fund) seeking to develop community-led initiatives utilising the geography of the North Isles to improve the wellbeing of the local communities.

We are asking you to complete this survey with the class as we would like to know how being outside makes the children feel and what they like and dislike about being outside. The responses received will help us to develop activities and resources that are suitable for the whole community. Please note that your participation is voluntary and that you do not have to answer any particular questions.

The information you provide will be kept for the length of the North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project and may be pooled with other participants' responses, anonymised, and may be published in reports and presentations. All data will be kept in line with the Stronsay Development Trust General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) Policy.

If you have any questions about this survey or the project, please contact the project's Project Officer Louise McQuaid by email, [sdtprojectofficer@gmail.com](mailto:sdtprojectofficer@gmail.com) or the Project Researcher, Andy Harrod by email, [a.harrod1@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:a.harrod1@lancaster.ac.uk). Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Please return to Louise or Andy in-person or by email.

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**Location (island):**

**Year group (age range):**

**(To read out to the children)** We are asking you to complete this survey as we would like to know how being outside makes you feel and what you like and dislike about being outside. The responses received will help us to develop activities and resources that are suitable for everyone. Please note that you do not have to take part and/or you do not have to answer any particular questions.

Please ask the children the following questions (they begin on the next page).

1. Does the following make you happy? (please include the total number of raised hands for each answer in the boxes below)

	Yes ☒☒	Sometimes ☒	No ☒☒
Playing and games			
Being with friends or family			
Helping friends or family			
Learning new skills			

2. How often do you go outdoors? (please include the total number of raised hands for each answer in the boxes below)

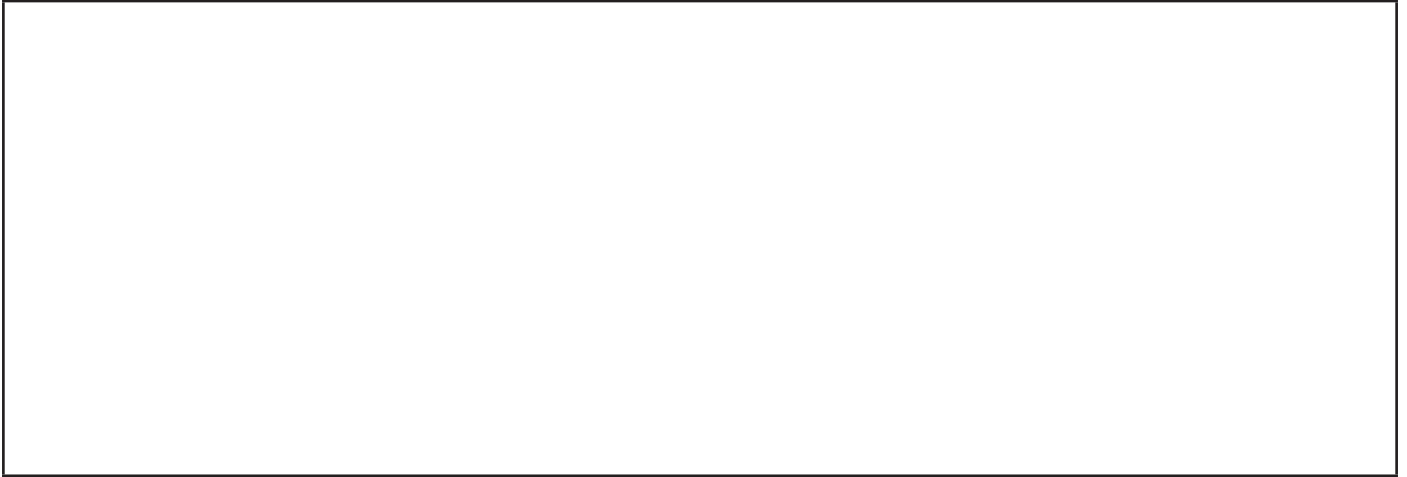
Daily	2-3 times a week	Once a week	Once a fortnight	Monthly	Never

3. Does going outside help make you happy in the following areas? (please include the total number of raised hands for each answer in the boxes below)

	Yes ☒☒	Sometimes ☒	No ☒☒
Playing and games			
Being with friends or family			
Helping friends or family			
Learning new skills			

4. What kind of activities do you take part in when outdoors? (please write down their answers below)

5. Who do you go outdoors with? (please write down their answers below)



6. What do you like about being outside? (please write down their answers below)



7. What do you dislike about being outside? (please write down their answers below)





8. What would help you to go outside? (please write down their answers below)

9. What new/other activities would you like? What would be on your wish-list? (please write down their answers below)

**Thank you for your answers. Please return to Louise ([sdtprojectofficer@gmail.com](mailto:sdtprojectofficer@gmail.com)) or Andy ([a.harrod1@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:a.harrod1@lancaster.ac.uk)) by email.**

## Appendix B: Activity feedback form



### North Isle Natural Wellbeing Project Activity Feedback

The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project is a funded project (The Ideas Fund) seeking to develop community-led initiatives utilising the geography of the North Isles to improve the wellbeing of the local communities.

The aim of this questionnaire is to understand how people engaged with the nature-based activity and the effects of this engagement on their wellbeing. To gather initial thoughts and ideas we are asking participants of the activity to complete this questionnaire. The responses received will help us to develop initiatives that are in the best interest of the whole community. Please note that your participation is voluntary and that you are under no obligation to answer any particular questions.

The information you provide will be kept for the length of the North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project and may be pooled with other participants' responses, anonymised, and may be published in reports and presentations. All data will be kept in line with the Stronsay Development Trust General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) Policy.

If you have any questions about this survey or the project, please contact the project's Project Officer Louise McQuaid by email, [sdtprojectofficer@gmail.com](mailto:sdtprojectofficer@gmail.com) or the Project Researcher, Andy Harrod by email, [a.harrod1@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:a.harrod1@lancaster.ac.uk).

**1. Name of activity:**

**2. Location of activity (Island):**

**3. Age (please tick one box):**

	<b>Under 12</b>		<b>12-17</b>		<b>18-24</b>		<b>25-34</b>		<b>35-44</b>
	<b>45-54</b>		<b>55-64</b>		<b>65-74</b>		<b>75-84</b>		<b>85 or older</b>

**4. Did you enjoy the activity? (please tick one box)**

<b>Yes (loved it)</b>	<b>Sometimes (liked it)</b>	<b>No (hated it)</b>

**5. Did you enjoy the nature during the activity? (please tick one box)**

<b>Yes (loved it)</b>	<b>Sometimes (liked it)</b>	<b>No (hated it)</b>

**6. Why did you take part in the activity?**

**7. Did doing the activity help you with your wellbeing in the following areas?**

	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Somewhat agree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Somewhat disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
<b>Being physically active</b>					
<b>Connecting with other people</b>					
<b>Giving to others</b>					
<b>Being mindful</b>					
<b>Learning new skills</b>					

**8. Would you complete the activity again?**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>Maybe</b>	<b>No</b>

**9. What did you like about the activity?**

**10. What did you dislike about the activity?**

**11. Any other comments about the activity?**

**12. Any other comments about your wellbeing and being outdoors?**

**Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Please return to Louise or Andy in-person or by email.**

## Appendix C: Interviews (participant information sheet and interview guide)



### Participant Information Sheet

#### Interviews

Hello, we are Louise McQuaid, Project Officer, and Andy Harrod, Project Researcher, and we are involved in The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project. We are inviting you to take part in an interview about your engagement with the local natural environment and the impact of this on your wellbeing.

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

#### **What is the project about?**

The North Isles Natural Wellbeing project is seeking to develop nature-based community-led initiatives to support the wellbeing of the local communities. As part of the project, we wish to explore how people engage with the local natural environment and the effects of this engagement on their wellbeing. This will help us understand people's nature-based engagement and refine our ideas regarding what resources and activities the community needs to support nature-based wellbeing. For this we are wishing to interview people who are interested in sharing their nature experiences. We are interested in gathering feedback from all members of the community. If you are under 16 you will need parental/guardian permission to take part. The responses received will help us to develop initiatives that are in the best interest of the whole community.

We would really like to hear about your experiences and would be very grateful if you decide to take part.



## **What will I be asked to do if I take part?**

Taking part would involve an interview, where you will be asked about your experiences of your engagement with the local natural environment and the impact of this on your wellbeing, as well as your thoughts on the nature-based activities you would be interested in

participating in. The interview would take between 30–45 minutes.

## **What are the possible benefits from taking part?**

**Taking part in this study will allow you to share your experiences of** engaging with the local natural environment and the impact of this on your wellbeing, as well as your suggestions of nature-based activities for the community. By sharing your experiences, you will contribute to our understanding of which types of nature-based engagement people enjoy and how it helps them. At the end of the project a summary of the results will be available to participants, and you are welcome to receive a copy.

## **Do I have to take part?**

No. It is completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time during the interview process and up to 2 weeks after your participation has finished, without giving any reason.

## **What if I change my mind?**

**You are free to withdraw at any time** during the interview process and up to 2 weeks after your participation has finished. **If you decide to withdraw within 2 weeks of participating, we will not use any data that you have contributed to the study and delete any in our possession. Data means the information, views, ideas, etc. that you and other participants will have shared with us.**

**If it is more than 2 weeks after you have participated, your data will not necessarily be withdrawn as it may have already been anonymised or pooled together with other people's data or used in the analysis. However, we will not use any direct quotes from your data in our writing about the project.**

## **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

It is unlikely that there will be any major disadvantages to taking part. Though reflecting on and sharing your experience may be emotive. If you experience any distress following participation you are encouraged to inform the project office, Louise McQuaid or the project researcher, Andy Harrod, and/or contact the resources provided at the end of this sheet.

## **Will my data be identifiable?**

After your participation, only we, the project officer and the project researcher will view the data you share with us.

We will keep all personal information about you (for example, any information that can identify you) confidential. We will anonymise the data. This means that we will remove any personal information. A pseudonym will be used instead of your real name when writing about the research.

## **How will my data be stored?**

All data will be kept in line with the Stronsay Development Trust General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) Policy. Your data will be stored on Lancaster University's secure server, and only the project researcher will be able to access the data. The data you provide will be kept for the length of the North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project.

## **How will I use the information you have shared with me and what will happen to the results of the research study?**

**We will use the data you have shared with us for the purpose of the project. This will include reports and presentations. Publicising the project generally may also involve the use of social media, for example, Facebook, Twitter.**

**When writing up and discussing the findings from this project, we would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with us. This will involve sharing your experiences or extracts from it in the form of quotes.**

## **What if I have a question?**

If you have any questions about the project, please contact the Project Officer, Louise McQuaid by email, [sdtprojectofficer@gmail.com](mailto:sdtprojectofficer@gmail.com) or the Project Researcher, Andy Harrod by email, [a.harrod1@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:a.harrod1@lancaster.ac.uk).

## **Sources of support**

I hope that you if you choose to take part, that you will find it interesting and will not be upset by any of the topics discussed. However, if you find any part of this experience to be distressing you may consider contacting your GP for an appointment or contacting the NHS through their 111 service, by calling 111 or going online at <https://111.nhs.uk/>. You may also consider Mind, a national charity, who provide advice and support about mental health, by calling 0300 123 3393 or going online at <https://www.mind.org.uk/>.

**Thank you for considering participating in this project.**

## **Interview guide for The North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project**

The below themes and questions will provide the basis of my semi-structured interviews.

**Interview length:** 30-45 minutes.

1. How long have you lived on Name of the Island?

Prompts: Born, Moved, Role of environment in staying or moving to

2. What do you enjoy about the nature on and around Name of the Island?

Prompts: Coast, Fields, Birds & Wildlife, Wildflowers, Weather, Seasons, Dark/Light

3. What do you find challenging about the nature on and around Name of the Island?

Prompts: Weather, Seasons, Dark/Light, Birds & Wildlife, Coast, Fields, Vegetation (trees)

4a. How do you feel when in (and with) nature on and around Name of the Island?

Prompts: **In the moment and over time** in relation to the five Ways to Wellbeing (Being physically active, Connecting with other people, Giving to others, Being mindful, Learning new skills)

4b. If moved to Orkney - Has your relationship between nature and wellbeing changed since moving to Name of the Island?

Prompts: Impact on mental health, enjoyment of nature, Getting outside

5. What do you enjoy about the outdoor activities (from survey) you engage in?

Prompts: In relation to the survey responses - Wellbeing, Supports, Challenges



6. What factors would you like us to consider when creating resources (activities, equipment, groups) to support engagement with nature for wellbeing?

Prompts: activities, equipment, groups

7. Anything else you like to say about your experiences of nature and wellbeing?

8. How did you find the interview?

Appendix D: Nature photography competition



## North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project

### Nature Photography Competition

The North Isles Natural Wellbeing project is seeking to develop nature-based community-led initiatives to support the wellbeing of the local communities. As part of the project, we wish to explore how people engage with the local natural environment and the effects of this engagement on their wellbeing. We want to involve all members of the community and the **North Isles Nature Photography Competition** is an exciting way to get involved.

For the **North Isles Nature Photography Competition**, we are inviting people to share images of the nature they enjoy and/or of the nature they find challenging, accompanied with a brief description. All images submitted will be entered into the North Isles Nature Photography Competition, where winners will be selected by a public vote and prizes awarded. The images and accompanying descriptions will also help us understand the nature people enjoy and find challenging and why this is. This will help us understand people's engagement with nature and shape our ideas of what resources and activities the community needs to support nature-based wellbeing.

#### Age Categories

There are three age categories.

1. Under 12
2. 12 to 18
3. Over 18

#### Image Categories

There are two image categories. You are welcome to submit a max of two images to each image category.

1. Nature you enjoy
2. Nature you find challenging

Images need to be in a jpg or jpeg format (standard for smart phones) and between 1MB and 5MB (typical sizes on a smart phone). Please label each image with your title for the image and your full name, for example, Puffins Flying\_Andy Harrod.

## **Prizes**

There are prizes for each age group in each category. For under 18s a £20 Grooves voucher and for over 18s a £20 Jolly's of Orkney voucher.

## **Closing Date**

Please submit your entries by 31<sup>st</sup> January 2023.

## **To Take Part**

Please send your images (max 2 in each category) to Andy Harrod by email: [a.harrod1@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:a.harrod1@lancaster.ac.uk). Please enclose the following information with your images.

1. Your full name
2. Which North Isle you live on
3. The age category you are entering
4. The category each image is being submitted to
5. A title for each image
6. A brief description (1-2 sentences) for each image explaining either why you enjoy the nature or why the nature challenges you

## **After the deadline details of the public vote will be announced.**

Please note that by submitting your photo(s) to the competition you give the North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project permission to use the images and accompanying text in reports, marketing, and digital content. Credit will be given to the original artist.

Thank you, Louise McQuaid (Project Officer) and Andy Harrod (Project Researcher)

## Appendix E: Intergenerational interviews



### North Isles Natural Wellbeing Project Intergenerational Interviews

The North Isles Natural Wellbeing project is seeking to develop nature-based community-led initiatives to support the wellbeing of the local communities. As part of the project, we wish to explore how people engage with the local natural environment and the effects of this engagement on their wellbeing. We want to involve all members of the community and the **Intergenerational Interviews** is an exciting way to get involved.

For the **Intergenerational Interviews**, we are looking for children and young people to interview older members of the community about their experiences of nature in childhood and as an adult. The conversations will help us understand the nature people enjoy and find challenging and why this is. This will help us understand people's engagement with nature and shape our ideas of what resources and activities the community needs to support nature-based wellbeing.

#### The Activity

Children and young people will interview older members of the community about:

1. The older person's childhood experiences of nature
2. If these childhood nature experiences influence their adulthood engagement with nature
3. How being outdoors influence the older person's wellbeing and if this has changed over time
4. The types of outdoor activities they are currently involved and if this has changed over time
5. What the older person would like to see to support their nature-based wellbeing
6. What the older person thinks would help children to engage with nature based on their experiences.

The chats are will last approximately 20-30 minutes and will be recorded on a smartphone.

Please send your audio file to Andy Harrod by email, [a.harrod1@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:a.harrod1@lancaster.ac.uk). Please enclose the following information in your email.

1. The full name of the interviewer(s) and the interviewee
2. Which North Isle you live on
3. The age ranges of the people involved

Thank you, Louise McQuaid (Project Officer) and Andy Harrod (Project Researcher)