

Adult literacy and the John Muir Award

Summer 2018



Laura Finlay, Inverclyde Council, describes how a Community Learning & Development partnership with horticultural charity Parklea Branching Out used the John Muir Award to help vulnerable adults build literacy skills through working towards a John Muir Award.

Meeting needs through community partnership working

Improving life chances, achieving goals and tackling real everyday issues in peoples' lives are at the heart of Inverclyde Council's community-based learning and action.

For Parklea Branching Out, a holistic approach is central to its education, training and employment opportunities for vulnerable adults, aiming to foster independence, dignity and fulfilment while respecting the individuality and rights of each person.

Forging a partnership with the CLD Adult Literacies team enabled clients to access support to help them achieve personal literacies and numeracy goals through their community gardening activities at Parklea.

With projects underway to improve Parklea's site by developing a pollinator corridor and preparing visitor information and signage in the wildlife garden, the mix of practical and creative activities on offer to clients were a natural fit with enjoying, connecting with and caring for nature through a John Muir Award. In summer 2018, Parklea's gardens became the focus for a 5-week pilot Discovery Award with embedded literacies and numeracy work, engaging 10 clients alongside staff, volunteers and CLD workers.



Two peacock butterflies recorded during a survey

The group participated in range of varied and fun activities including:

- Reading, watching videos and undertaking quizzes to learn about John Muir's life, conservation work and National Parks' legacy
- Multi-sensory walks, where participants recorded what they saw, heard, smelled and felt as they explored Parklea's wildness
- Butterfly and bee citizen science surveys, feeding into national environmental initiatives
- Planning a pollinator garden, including reading exercises about pollination and pollinator-friendly plants, measuring proposed sites and selecting suitable plants for the site

- Art and creative writing activities, including photography of

Parklea’s flora and fauna, pebble poetry, butterfly drawings, creating poems, writing about ‘what Parklea means to me’, flower pressings and producing evidence boards

- Developing IT skills through undertaking research for the site’s new information boards and sharing their activities, poems and thoughts.



Building literacy skills through a range of practical, creative and scientific activities gave participants opportunities to draw on their own experiences and demonstrate existing skills, as Parklea Branching Out staff member, Darren reflects:

“The session I attended was both helpful and interesting. Not only did it show that there is a clear need for adult literacies learning but also showed what other knowledge participants had. Although focusing on literacies, other skills that the learners have become apparent throughout the session. There was great communication between the tutors and the learners, with learners being continually encouraged to participate.”

How did participants find it?

James: “Interesting – like learning more about the John Muir Trust”

William: “Brilliant. Really like learning about all the animals and everything else. Also like mixing with the group”

Anne: “I can struggle to hear, but still really like taking part”

Recognising and celebrating achievements

Nine clients from Parklea Branching Out completed a John Muir Discovery Award, alongside seven supporting staff and volunteers, receiving their certificates at a small celebration event attended by a local councillor. Tasks undertaken for the Award - such as exploring their local area, participating in community events and improving their eco-awareness - also helped demonstrate learning and skills, contributing to SQA Personal Achievement Awards being undertaken by eight individuals.

Staff recognise the benefits of taking a partnership approach, helping offer access to meaningful community-based learning opportunities and important recognition of achievements that would not have otherwise been possible. CLD input and support in designing the pilot ensured a wide range of core skills were embedded into sessions, allowing individuals to improve and enhance their skills in literacy, numeracy, communications, ICT, problem-solving and working with others.

CLD Literacies Development Worker, Laura Finlay describes the partnership’s impact:

“This has been a hugely valuable piece of partnership working, with fantastic opportunities for delivering contextualised literacies learning to individuals who might not have engaged with literacies support services otherwise. The support, sharing of knowledge and active participation of Parklea staff and volunteers was integral to the success of the pilot. Clients particularly enjoyed communicating their own thoughts and feelings about Parklea and creating poetry from their words, in many cases, for the first time in their lives. A number of learners have also undertaken writing tasks for the first time in many years and have expressed their feelings of pride in being able to do so. Their

John Muir Award experiences have encouraged and motivated them to continue and develop these skills within ongoing CLD literacies sessions within Parklea Branching Out.”

Parklea Branching Out Manager, Sharon Gemmell, notes the value of creating opportunities for clients to build positive relationships with the CLD workers, something that has already benefitted their engagement and learning going forward:

“I see many positive changes in service users’ attitudes – they are engaging positively in the group workshops and they are gaining confidence in their learning which enables them to contribute their ideas to future planned project activities”



Participants observe & record the sights and sounds of the beautiful pond area, where their poetry will be displayed.

Leaving a legacy for people and nature

Participants’ hard work will have a creative legacy at Parklea Branching Out, with plans to produce glass panels displaying pebble poetry created by the group, forming a permanent record of the heartfelt emotions the learners expressed in appreciation of Parklea’s beautiful natural environment.

Seeing tangible outcomes of their work becoming important parts of the garden’s development has helped the group take pride in their achievements, building their sense of

belonging and ownership in their local environment.

Looking ahead, Parklea Branching Out and Inverclyde CLD plan to provide an ongoing summer programme of John Muir Award learning opportunities with a literacies focus, opening it up for all of Parklea’s clients to participate, whilst also supporting those from the pilot who wish to progress onto the next level of the John Muir Award in the future.

Find out more about the John Muir Award at johnmuirtrust.org/award