

Natural Gyms

Organisation	Mourne Heritage Trust
Location	Near Killeel, Co Antrim, Northern Ireland
Programme	Active Lifestyles
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Project description

The Mourne Heritage Trust (MHT) was established as a charitable organisation in 1997. It looks after some 57,000 hectares of the Mourne Mountains, designated as an Area of National Outstanding Beauty, with only 7 full time and 7 temporary staff.

For some years MHT has run a volunteer ranger programme, but it was open only to those aged 18 and older. In response to many enquiries about taking on younger volunteers it has created a new programme under the Active Lifestyles theme.

This is a £72,000 programme over three years, with £30,000 coming from the Big Lottery Fund and the balance from the Environment & Heritage Service, under its Access and Countryside theme.

The new programme is comprised of two distinct elements. The first is a ranger programme for young people aged 14-16, and the second is an Active Lifestyle Group for people with learning disabilities and school groups.

The youth ranger programme is the first of its kind in Northern Ireland.

Project aims and objectives

The aim of the project is to provide an opportunity for people who would not normally get a chance to be in the outdoors to learn about the environment and have an opportunity to be physically active at the same time. Specific objectives are to:

- develop 7 youth rangers (the number of seats available in the Land Rover);
- achieve 200 volunteer days within a year;
- use volunteer input to help to create and manage a tree nursery, which in time will create saplings sufficient to plant 6,000 trees a year in the Mourne area;
- customise sessions to match abilities; and
- provide a valuable experience to all volunteers.



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Project delivery and impact

How it works

The youth ranger scheme invites applications and selects seven people who will volunteer one day per week for eight weeks during the summertime. Priority is given to those who are not part of other schemes. The first programme was completed with no dropouts and a very high level of attendance.

The programme is run by an in-house ranger and includes:

- o practical tasks and health & safety in the tree nursery;
- o navigation training, map use and GPS;
- o field surveys;
- o biodiversity study;
- o practical conservation tasks; and
- o access and countryside maintenance.

The Active Lifestyle groups are run by a staff member who works two days a week. At present four groups come for a day each on a two-week rotation. Mostly these groups are people with learning disabilities from Down & Lisburn NHS Trust. They undertake practical tasks in the specially adapted tree nursery, including weeding and planting.

The part time staff member also develops programmes for the youth rangers.

Targeting participants

The project worked with the Health Trust and Volunteer Bureau to involve people with disabilities who have been less able to get involved in outdoor physical activities. These groups make up more than half of all participants in the project as a whole, including Youth Rangers and Conservation Volunteers.

Project Links

The project links into the Environment & Heritage Services strategy of Access for All and also into the Mourne Heritage Trust's own operational plan to open up access and meet the demand for younger volunteers.

Project performance and impacts

The project is exceeding its expectations. The first youth ranger programme has completed, with 100% of people seeing it through to the end. Volunteer days have exceeded annual targets after the first six months.

Though there is no clear evidence of physical benefits, what is clear is that all the activities on both the youth ranger programme and the Active Lifestyle groups are hard, physical activity performed over a sustained period of a day, and undertaken on a regular weekly basis.



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In terms of community benefit, young people who are not engaged in other programmes get a chance to experience the countryside and gain skills and knowledge whilst being physically active. People with learning disabilities are getting a regular physical workout, with the added benefit of socialising and a change of environment. This is a big improvement to their quality of life.

The added value is significant for a small organisation like the MHT, covering a massive geographical area. The input from the volunteers helps the trust get things done which have to be done – from conservation tasks such as cutting down invasive plants to access issues such as replacing stiles. Importantly, volunteers have helped to create and maintain the tree nursery, which will nurture 6000 indigenous trees per year which will be planted in the area – all for free.

Issues or barriers to progress

Only 7 seats in the Land Rover – One limitation for the youth ranger scheme is that the scheme is limited to seven people because of the size of the Land Rover. However, having a bigger vehicle is not seen as a solution – seven is considered to be an ideal group for the purposes of instruction and supervision. Another vehicle would require another ranger, so the current limitations with the vehicle don't cause an issue.

Nursery tasks too repetitive? – The project initially was concerned that the nursery tasks were quite repetitive. However, the learning disabled volunteers seemed to warm to this, because it gave them some certainty and control over what they were doing. In fact, there is research that shows that people with learning disabilities tend to have an extraordinary knack for anything that requires a repetitive action. What was perceived as a barrier has fortuitously turned out to be just the right thing for this client group.

Getting the staffing right – Having a person working two days a week has meant that the demand has had to be capped. It is felt that there is easily sufficient demand for a five day a week job, and a larger grant would have enabled a full-time person to be appointed. An important issue in rural areas is that good rates of pay are required to make it possible to attract and retain people with the right skills. Getting a part timer with the right skills to do this job is a rarity, the Trust just happened to be lucky in that it already had a volunteer who could step into the post.

Good practice

Something that works really well here is that it is not activity for the sake of activity. Everything that is done is done for a purpose. This creates a tremendous feeling of camaraderie and achievement, as things are built, cut down or grown. It doesn't seem like physical exercise, because that is a by-product of everything else that goes on.

Although the original plan was to offer one-off visits to people with learning difficulties, the project has evolved to offer weekly visits to a smaller number of people. This enables the participants to develop skills, social relationships and ongoing satisfaction. Even with fewer participants, the project exceeded its first year's target volunteer hours by 50%.



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Future

The project is essentially building a volunteer base for the future. All youth rangers automatically become Friends of Mourne, and they have a pathway into becoming volunteer rangers at the age of 18.