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# COMMUNITY WELLBEING AND THE COAST

An Executive summary for the Great Harbour Project,  
North Ayrshire Council

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# Community Wellbeing and the Coast

## About the project

We are working closely with community groups and their representatives to explore how to create inclusive and accessible seaside areas to promote health, wellbeing and environmental sustainability in coastal communities. We are looking to identify barriers to access and prioritise needs from within the coastal town of Irvine as a case study.

This project worked in partnership with North Ayrshire Council and key local stakeholders to co-design community workshops, with the aim to improve the inclusion of underrepresented community voices in the consultation of the Great Harbour Project.

The findings from the community workshops will be used to inform the Great Harbour Project and develop a proposal for future research based on the priorities identified by the local community.

## Key Findings

- Stakeholder workshop:
  - Identified under-represented, ‘hard to reach’ groups, barriers to engagement, and strategies to overcome these.
  - Established approaches to co-design and co-facilitate community engagement workshops with the identified groups.
  - Communicated interest from North Ayrshire Council, Health and Social Care Partners and Police Scotland to work in partnership for further research based on the findings of this project.
- Community Workshops:
  - ‘Anti-social behaviour’ was identified as a key barrier to the use of the harbour and beach area.
  - Connectivity with the town and accessibility of the beach area were found to be limiting the community’s use.
  - A variety of simple solutions to maximise the potential of the natural capital of the harbour and beach were suggested.
  - Leisure and entertainment facilities were priorities for participants, though these were not all costly options; ‘pop-up’ events were a popular topic.

## What we did

This research was co-designed over three stages; stakeholder mapping, local stakeholder workshops and community workshops, each stage informing the next.

- 1. Stakeholder Mapping:** In partnership with North Ayrshire Council, we conducted a stakeholder mapping exercise. This was to identify relevant local representatives across a range of community groups and service providers in Irvine.
- 2. Workshop with local stakeholders:** Representatives identified were invited to a workshop hosted by North Ayrshire Council to shape the design of community workshops. Nine attendees including those working in local government, community development, health and care provision, emergency services and third sector were present.

The workshop was used to elicit stakeholders' understanding of inclusive and accessible seaside areas and how this impacts community wellbeing in Irvine. The workshop provided an opportunity to identify potential groups within the local area that were considered 'hard-to-reach' by the community consultation process on the Great Harbour Project. This informed the participant recruitment strategy and allowed us to refine the design of the community engagement workshops strategies and materials to suit the needs of these groups, as well as designate resources, to help minimise barriers to participation (e.g. providing childcare when working with families; easy-to-read/pictorial copies of the participant information handouts for older adults and individuals with learning disabilities; and methods to allow visual communication of needs for individuals with learning disabilities).

- 3. Community workshops:** Given the differing needs of 'hard-to-reach' groups and the resource constraints of the project, a co-designed and pragmatic approach was adopted to select relevant participants for three community workshops with (1) Families, (2) Learning Disability Community (who represent a range of physical and mental disabilities), and (3) Older Adults.

The workshops varied in their approach and were designed to accommodate the needs of the target participants. One of these was carried out using a focus group style, whilst the other two took a more informal approach, providing the opportunity for participants to contribute, verbally, using post-it notes, drawings, and annotating maps of the local area (using words and images). Catering was also provided for the workshops to establish a welcoming and friendly feeling.

The **questions** asked for all three workshops were:

- ❖ What would you like to see and do in the harbour or beach area?
- ❖ Is there anything that stops you from visiting the harbour or beach at the moment?

## What we found

### Missing voices:

The stakeholder workshop identified **‘hard-to-reach’ groups** within the local community whose voices may offer insights into a more inclusive understanding of community wellbeing in coastal areas. These included; people with disabilities, families with young children, people with other caring responsibilities, older adults, people with drug and alcohol addiction, and young adults.

### Anti-social behaviour:

Following a period of sunny weather, the use of the beach area for **young people** to socialise (and **consume alcohol**) was at the forefront of many people’s minds. Young people travelling from Glasgow for the day were often blamed for anti-social behaviour as a result of this. However, it was also suggested that local youths were participating in this. Participants in all three community workshops related this to the fact that **the beach area is quite isolated** from the town, and there is **little else for young people to do** for leisure in the area. The requirement for an improved police presence was mentioned.

It is important to note that the voice of the young people in question has not been heard in this project, therefore we are not able to offer their perspective on what is considered by the community workshop participants to be ‘anti-social behaviour’.

### Connectivity and accessibility:

A key contributor to the anti-social behaviour is the relative **remoteness of the harbour and beach area**. This is aggravated by the **lack of public transport** (one bus per hour from the town centre) which poses **a common barrier of connectivity and accessibility** to the harbour area among the project participants. Furthermore, there is little in the way of businesses, housing, leisure facilities or adequate/shaded seating to entice people to travel to and spend time on the beach. Participants noted the need for a car to access the beach area, yet stated there was insufficient disabled parking available. A number of those with physical disabilities highlighted that whilst they liked to go to the beach, they tended to sit in their vehicles, as there was no access for them onto the beach, and no shelter if they did get out. **Novel forms of transport** along the harbour to the seafront were suggested, including a tram, road train, bicycle taxis and water bus; these ideas were thought to be appealing to both local people and to those visiting Irvine.

### **Maximising the natural capital:**

The majority of the **ideas** suggested by the community workshop participants to make them **more likely to visit** the harbour or beach were **simple, low-cost solutions**, which would **work with or utilise the existing space and natural capital**. These ideas included: nature walks amongst the dunes, utilising regular information boards; bird hides for birdwatching; improving the boardwalk to allow access for those with mobility issues; extending the boardwalk and creating paths to allow longer walks/cycles along the coast; a sensory garden, showcasing local plant species; picnic tables; multi-use games area; obstacle course; putting green; a sandpit and splash area for those who are unable/unwilling to access the beach or the sea; using the pond for water-based activities; and developing the pontoons for sea-based water activity. One of the simplest solutions that people suggested would make them more likely to visit and spend time in the harbour area was **a sheltered seating area** - somewhere they could sit and take in the sea air, yet be protected from the natural elements of sun and rain. Also highlighted were issues of **general upkeep**, for example, beach clean-ups, more litter bins, and better, accessible changing places toilets.

### **Big ideas for the Harbour space:**

There were significant discussions around the **scarcity of leisure facilities** in the harbour area, with many offering memories of ‘The Magnum’, and recollections of the participants' youth spent in this vibrant leisure facility, which drew people to the harbour area. Most participants acknowledged that funding would be difficult to come by for any major infrastructural projects in the harbour area at this point, but some interesting suggestions were put forward, essentially framing the area between the dunes and the pond as an area ideal for **‘pop up’ events**; music events, markets, a marquee to host weddings and other events, and an open-air cinema were some of what was suggested. Regular, **smaller and constant events** which would energise the harbour area seemed **to be preferred over larger, infrequent and more costly events**.

There was also significant interest in **access to the Ardeer Peninsula**, in particular the re-opening of the footbridge, and use of the Big Idea building. There was a sense of dismay that this facility was on the community's doorstep but was left unutilised. It was suggested that if this building could be purchased, it would have the potential to host a range of leisure facilities (swimming pool, skating rink, soft play) and/or events (concerts and exhibitions), which would **revitalise the community and provide a focal/attraction point**, particularly for younger people, in addition to its wider financial return for the area.



## Going Forward →

- Working in partnership with North Ayrshire Council allows the project team to feed forward the findings and community voices into the Great Harbour Project consultation towards maximising the community benefit of their local natural area:
  - We recommend the **needs voiced by the under-represented groups** in this project are considered in future planning of the Great Harbour Project. In particular, we point to the wide range of **‘simple solutions’** identified by the community groups, which focus on **maximising the potential of the existing natural environment**, without the need for costly infrastructural development.
  - We recommend future developments of the harbour area focus on **catalysing the social capital of the local community** by utilising intergenerational and disability friendly facilities that are accessible and affordable for a wider range of affluence, focusing on the locals first in addition to the visitors to the area.
- In terms of a **future research** proposal informed by this community engagement activity, the issue of ‘anti-social behaviour’ has been identified as an interesting angle. We suggest that this issue could be explored further, whilst addressing the lack of voice of young people and potentially those with alcohol and drug addiction identified in the project. This can provide an in-depth understanding of the rights of young people to their local blue space to promote their wellbeing and that of the wider community. We recommend including the perceptions and experiences of young people to better understand:
  - their **use of and relationship with** the blue space to identify and understand social and spatial patterns of healthy and/or risky behaviour and use that would impact the degree of the benefit gained for younger people first and the wider community second from the blue space;
  - their **sense of stewardship** of the blue space, and what might institute and/or increase this; and
  - their **aspirations of potential provisions of land/water-use** to facilitate healthier interactions with the blue space environment to improve their own and the wider communities’ sense of wellbeing.

Lastly, addressing the research need above, we are looking to build on the connections and partnerships we have established in this project, identify other case studies in Scotland that share similar characteristics with Irvine, and work towards the development of a larger research proposal.

## About us - The project team

We are an interdisciplinary team of early career researchers who are leading on the project of *Health and Place*, bringing together expertise from across Public Health, Geography, and Environmental Science.



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We are working in Partnership with North Ayrshire council, and our project team includes the council lead for the Great Harbour project, who has an interest in peer-research to support and enhance the consultation process and reach disadvantaged area users.



**Kasia Smith**

North Ayrshire Council

## Our Funder



This project was made possible by funding and support provided by the **British Academy's Early Career Researcher Network**.

<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/early-career-researcher-network/>



## More information

This document was produced as a deliverable of the research project “Health and Place: Developing a Co-Created Research Design for Inclusive and Sustainable Blue/Green Spaces”. This project was funded by the by the British Academy Early Career Research Network Scotland Hub Seed Fund 2023.

This document is available online with background information about the project and its stages, as the the **Project Blog**: <https://healthandplace8.wordpress.com/>

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### Contact Us:

If you have read/used this document and you have any comments or feedback you would like to share with us, we would love to hear from you. Please contact [Natalie.Dickinson@uws.ac.uk](mailto:Natalie.Dickinson@uws.ac.uk)

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