

Exploring private actors' experiences and expectations of NBS

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SUMMARY

This briefing is an interim report from project 'Aim NBS', corresponding to WP4 milestone Mfg "Exploration of private actors' experiences and expectations to understanding the barriers to motivating and enabling involvement in NbS".

BACKGROUND

Involving the private sector in Nature-Based Solutions is essential if NbS are to be enabled at scale, with support from all of society. However, to date there has been very little attention on the factors shaping private sector involvement in NbS. This is especially true for small businesses in rural contexts – any frameworks and examples that are available generally focus on large multinational corporations or urban settings.

One strand of AIM NbS has therefore focused on exploring if and how small businesses may get involved in NbS local to their operations. The methodology uses a qualitative interpretive approach, conducting data from business owners using semi-structured interviews.

The site in which this is being explored is Anstruther, the site of an ongoing project related to NbS (the Dreel Burn Project) and in which we have also situated companion work on citizens and householders. This is not reported here but should allow for shared learning with the community, later in this project.

So far, 6 semi-structured interviews have been carried out with the owners of small businesses. Businesses have been chosen from those that operate in or close to Anstruther and that whose business model may be expected to have a partial dependence on the local natural resources or landscape (e.g. tourism-related businesses, agri-food related businesses).



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INSIGHTS TO DATE

Nature-related businesses are varied. The different business owners we spoke to have different relationships with nature. For some, mainly those running what we call *nature-based businesses* (e.g. market gardening, harvesting seaweed, making flour), working with nature is a core part of their business model that shape their operations and customer engagements. The landscape is seen as a critical resource. Many of these business seek to offer health and wellbeing to people who buy from them. For others – what we call *nature-benefiting businesses* – mainly those linked with offering tourist accommodation, the local landscape is just one asset needed, albeit a very important one for recreation and aesthetic benefits, also featuring in marketing. This is a more traditional business model but sustainability is increasingly seen a concern for the operators, and as a subject of concern to tourists.

Varied business models affect involvement in NbS. Business owners currently contribute to NbS being undertaken by local groups and organisations in a variety of ways, including by: donating staff time (e.g. volunteering – organising and contributing to events), donating resources (e.g. bags for beach clean), promoting (i.e. signposting events/ projects and encouraging others to get involved and promoting nature as a selling point of the area – hidden gems to visit)

Nature-based businesses actively contribute time to and resources and enthusiasm to nature-related initiatives led by others, such as local tree-planting. Nature-benefiting businesses have not so often done this, but are motivated to seek and enhance a sense of community and place. The physical infrastructure controlled by a business – which varies – may be linked to the amount of activities seen as feasible to support. Often infrastructure assets are not owned by a business owner, although many cited good relationships here and they felt they could – but had not yet - made suggestions to owners.

Very few nature-related businesses had considered initiating NbS themselves to alleviate specific socio-economic challenges. Those that had were medium sized enterprises who owned land.

The personal is professional. For small businesses, the personal commitments and interests of the owner are strong influence over the business operations. It isn't possible or sensible to separate these. Some businesses are family run, by people who also live locally, so a sense of legacy and place will influence the evolution of the business.

The landscape is a source of risk as well as an asset. Whilst the landscape and local natural resources were valued, they were also perceived to offer risks or threats to businesses, especially if degraded. These risks are listed in the table on the next page. Although 'risk' represents a negative framing of a business' relationship with the landscape, it may be a powerful motivator to act to protect or enhance local natural resources, as seen by the actions taken.

Business risks/ challenges	Impacts on business	Any action taken?
Strong wind	Physical assets being lost and damaged. Reduced customer experience when moving around outside.	Tree (willow) planting as a natural wind break. Earth mounds.
Terrestrial flooding	Visitors cancelling Visitors access hindered Reduced customer experience when moving around outside.	Seeking solutions to car park flooding that doesn't involve mass concrete/ fits with landscape ethos
Coastal flooding/ storms	Damage to iconic recreational infrastructure (e.g fife coastal path) Damage to physical infrastructure (holiday homes along the shoreline) Infestation of flies/ pests	
Water quality (sea and Dreel Burn)	Reduced customer experience after swimming in the sea (poor health)	Contributing to the Dreel Burn project
Too little water	Reduced production (growth of plants)	Irrigation pond dug by landlord adjacent to site – not used yet
Not enough beneficial plants, insects etc for nature pest control	Increased pest outbreaks and disease, reducing reliability, quality and quantity of growth	Farming practices to encourage beneficial biota, for example planting fruit trees
Litter	Reduced place aesthetics	Time and labour (i.e. volunteering) and donating equipment
Over managed site	Disconnect with business ethos and surrounding aesthetics	Selective weeding – using plants to guide customer access routes to reduce erosion

Although the business owners that we spoke to are already doing one or more activities to support working with nature locally, they also identified a range of opportunities and challenges to doing more:

Factors constraining or blocking support for NbS:

- Access to tools and expertise and equipment (e.g. to create raingardens)
- Cost of investment (especially in large scale action)
- Limited spare time and energy
- Mindsets of business owners, including;
 - A narrow focus on profit
 - Not viewing nature as relevant/ not seeing interdependencies

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- Perceiving connections between nature and business but perceiving action as someone else's responsibility
- A need to prioritise activities directly beneficial to business
- Lack of support available to medium size business who can help coordinate action
- Uncertain policy environment (e.g. agricultural policy)
- Lack of local leadership
- Not knowing who to talk to locally to get involved and/ or seek advice

Opportunities/ ideas to increase support by business:

- Connect with a desire to build a legacy/ or to redress prior impact or inaction
- Strong community leadership
- Better institutional support for businesses and people to allocate time and energy to community nature-based initiatives (e.g. Universal basic income)
- Better support for NbS (e.g. NbS ideas and resources for implementation)
- Enhancing local visitor experiences, e.g. circular walking routes and board walks along the Dreel Burn
- Local demonstration of actions and benefits of NbS (e.g. to neighbouring landowners)
- Promoting food related businesses that highlights the links to the landscape
- Increasing support between business sectors (e.g. tourism and food production).

An additional theme arising from the whole dataset is that we need to **understand landscapes as co-constituted by the natural and social**. The flow of resources from landscapes is shaping the type of nature-based businesses present in Anstruther. For example, the cleanliness of the shoreline is vital for any business linked with seaweed. However, the social-economic 'ecosystem' is intertwined and a key part of this landscape. For example, a local estate both directly shapes landscape, e.g. by undertaking organic farming, and also seems to provide resources and attract other businesses to set up locally. Is it useful to think of 'business ecosystems for nature'? This can shape interventions to promote working with nature locally; a collective or coordinated approach may assist in motivating and enabling businesses to come together to work with and for nature.



NEXT STEPS

The themes presented above result from the analytic memos curated during research; a more detailed thematic analysis supported by Nvivo will commence in autumn 2024.

We also plan to carry out further interviews, to validate and extend the themes explored in analysis. The sample so far is likely from those business owners that already perceive a link with nature and landscape: we will use snowballing for our future recruitment efforts to seek input from business owners who may not already share this view.

Later in 2025 we will seek to discuss the resultant insights with participants and other stakeholders in Anstruther. The format of this will be decided in conjunction with Anstruther Improvements Association (AIA), a community based organisation supportive of NbS, and also informed by the timings and insights arising from companion work into Anstruther citizens' views on NbS.

Eventually we plan to submit an academic publication as well as produce an accessible output that reflects final insights about the opportunities and challenges for involving small businesses in NbS.

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