



CoedLleol  
SmallWoods

# Coed Lleol – Small Woods Participant Stories 2022-23





## Participant Stories – Case study report 2022-2023



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## INTRODUCTION

Coed Lleol (Small Woods Wales) is part of the National Charity, Small Woods (established 1988). Small Woods is a National Organisation for Small Wood Owners and has a significant track record in Social Forestry. Coed Lleol (Small Woods Wales), established in 2002, develops and delivers community and social forestry activities throughout Wales that help to connect people to their local woodlands. Coed Lleol's (Small Woods Wales') Actif Woods Wales Programme began in 2010 to connect people with their local woodlands for their health and well-being, whilst also helping to maintain and promote healthy woodlands. Since then, Coed Lleol (Small Woods Wales) has expanded to deliver woodland wellbeing sessions in fifteen Welsh counties (Anglesey, Conwy, Gwynedd, Wrexham, Flintshire & Denbighshire, Ceredigion, Powys, Swansea, Carmarthenshire, Neath Port Talbot, Blaenau Gwent, Newport, Caerphilly, Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil).

Coed Lleol's Actif Woods Wales programme engages adults and children who predominantly live in areas that have high health needs, low employment rates and often poor access to services. Additionally, it encourages and supports social prescribing by working in partnership with health services and GPs who refer people to the programme.

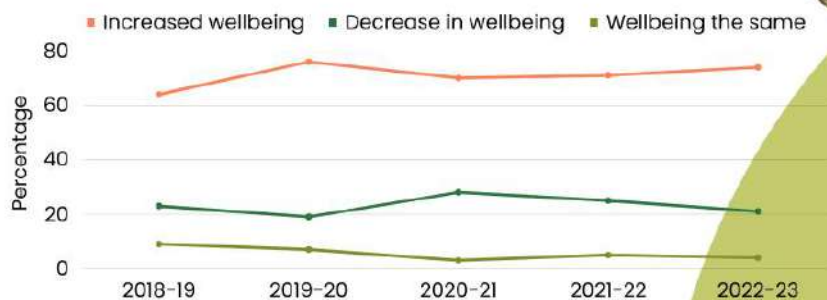


## EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

Coed Lleol has been able to demonstrate a five-year trend in increased well-being of its participants using the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS). 71% of participants who completed both pre- and post-forms<sup>1</sup> (n=100 in 2018-2020, n=330 in 2021-22 and n=567 in 2022-23) evidenced increased well-being following taking part in the sessions.

### Well-being increases across five years

Coed Lleol has used the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale with participants for five years. The results have shown that on average 71% of participants (who complete pre- and post-forms) demonstrate increased well-being.



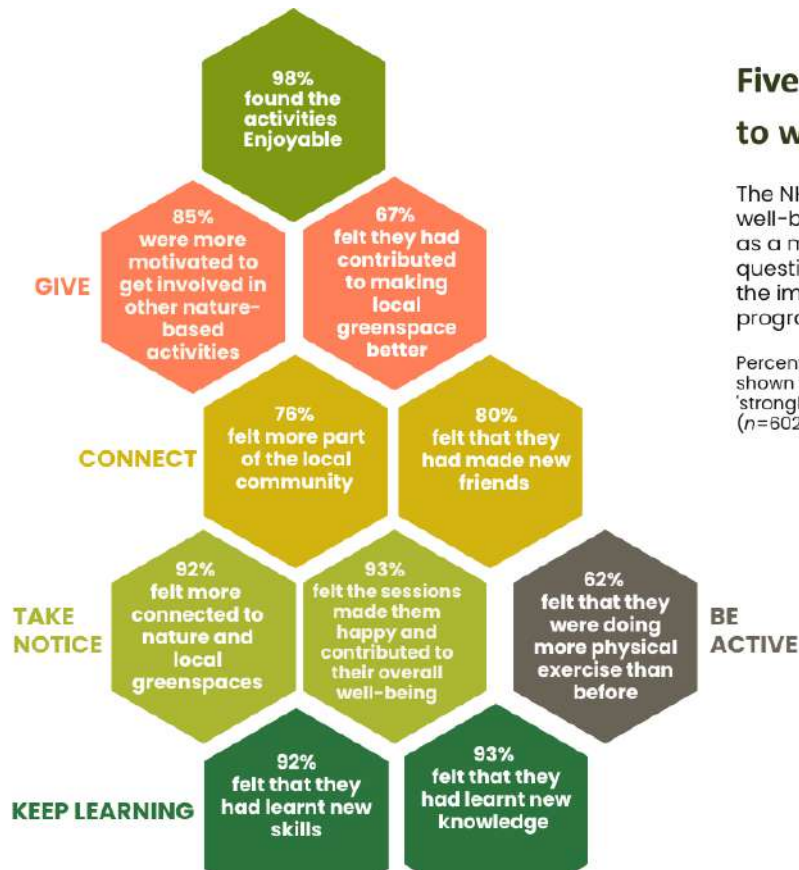
\*this year 567 participants completed pre and post-forms,



Ratings, based on the NHS' 5 ways to well-being have been consistently high, 2022-2023 figures are presented below,

<sup>1</sup> Sample sizes: n=100 in 2018-2020, n=330 in 2021-22 and n=567 in 2022-23





## Five ways to well-being

The NHS' 5-ways to well-being was used as a model for questions relating to the impact of the programmes.

Percentage results are shown for all 'agree' and 'strongly agree' ratings (n=602).



## PARTICIPANT STORIES

Coed Lleol (Small Woods Wales) values the individual stories of change that their participants experience. Each participant is different and has a different motivation for joining a group and a different starting point. Each participant experiences individual impacts, small and large, that are personal and unique to themselves. The participant stories

are participant-led, giving agency to the participant to derive personal meaning and define the impact that the groups have on them themselves.

Coed Lleol (Small Woods Wales) has documented some of these journeys by collecting case studies of participants who have experienced a Coed Lleol group in the years 2021-2022 (note: participants call the groups Actif Woods which is the programme name or Coed Lleol which is the organization name, for this report all have been changed to Coed Lleol). Coed Lleol (Small Woods Wales) conducts participant stories over the telephone. All conversations are transcribed, and the participants' own words are used. The participant has the opportunity to read and edit the story so that it reflects their sentiments and direction. The stories are guided with open questions such as, 'tell me about yourself', 'tell me why you wanted to join a Coed Lleol group?' and 'what do you think you gained from being part of a group?'.

All of the participants have permitted their stories to be documented and used for this report, but due to the personal nature of the stories some have requested that their names be changed.



## SOUTH WALES

SWANSEA, NEATH PORT TALBOT, RHONDDA CYNON TAFF, MERTHYR TYDFIL AND SE  
WALES (CAERPHILLY, NEWPORT AND BLAENAU GWENT)





## MATT

### WOODLAND WELLBEING GROUP – SOUTH WALES



I was a boy scout when I was younger, and I loved being outside in the woods. I had an interest in nature, foraging and bushcraft. As an adult, I'd lost touch with that side of myself, and life became complicated. About two years ago, I was admitted to the hospital with multiple organ failure caused by alcoholism. I am still in recovery from this, but I knew that I had to make some positive changes in my life, and I wanted to do something that I was interested in and that would teach me some new skills and further my knowledge of foraging. I took a look online and found that Coed Lleol had sessions local to me and they sounded interesting.

I started going to the monthly drop-in groups and then went to the 6-week guided walking sessions that helped me to learn more about plant ID and foraging. I began attending more regularly and was building up my interest in all the different activities that the Coed Lleol sessions offer. After a while, the project officer asked whether I'd like to become a volunteer for the group. I thought that this would be a good focus for me, and I enjoy it. The connections that I have made with Coed Lleol have led me to other bushcraft activities in the area including camping out overnight in a hammock!

The groups are great because you meet new people. This is important to me as when I was drinking, I isolated myself and wouldn't see people for weeks on end. These people were outside of the circle of people that I knew and that has allowed me to make new friends and have interesting conversations with them. I love that the activities are so varied, we have done outdoor cooking, foraging, outdoor yoga, bushcraft, woodworking and making paints out of natural dyes – it is so varied.

I struggled at times with some of the physical activities that are part of the group, as I was still in recovery from being in hospital and this has had a long-term impact on my mobility. However, the project officers and leaders were great at supporting me at my level and it has pushed me in a way to do more physical exercise as this is difficult for me to do on my own. It is significant to me that these groups are outside in nature. I like being outside, it makes me feel more relaxed, provides fresh air and releases chemicals in the brain that make me feel happier. I like learning new skills and knowledge and exploring new areas that I didn't know about. An indoor group would just not have had the same impact on me.

Being part of Coed Lleol has really built my confidence in a positive way. When I was drinking initially this gave me loads of confidence, but after a while, it made me depressed and isolated, and I distanced myself from everything because the drinking took over. But now, I am in recovery. Doing this type of thing takes me out of my house and outdoors, and I have seen an improvement in my mental health. My confidence has grown so that I am able to volunteer and seek out other opportunities too. Coed Lleol lit a spark in me and made me want to find out more about the natural world and ecology – when I was volunteering people would ask me questions and I didn't always know the answers, so this spurred me on to find out more. So, this year, I have signed up for a university course in Environmental Sustainability and Climate Change. I don't know where it will take me longer-term, but I am really interested in learning more about forestry and habitats, so hopefully, it will open some new doors for me. I would never have dreamt of going off to university if it wasn't for being part of these groups. I'm looking forward to seeing where this takes me.



## KAREN

### WOODLAND WELLBEING GROUP AND AGORED COPPICE PRODUCTS, SWANSEA



I was born and brought up in South Wales, I am 36 years old. I worked most of my life as a carer, a job that I really enjoyed. I was always out and about in the community and doing voluntary work too. When I was a child, I used to love going out into nature and collecting newts and frogs – I was always out when I was a kid. I was always up the field behind the house building tree houses and being active with my friends.

Everything came to a head for me about a year and a half ago when a traumatic experience led to me having a breakdown. I spent almost a year in bed and was barely able to leave the house – especially during the daytime. My confidence and my trust in others were very low. My anxiety levels were sky-high, and I found that the thought of going out and meeting people was terrifying. Eventually, I started to get treatment for extreme anxiety, and I also got help to recover from addiction, which was something I had kept hidden

I started with Coed Lleol because it was suggested by my support worker. What attracted me was the emphasis on survival skills and bushcraft. My husband and I love watching Bear Grylls on the TV – so I thought, I'll try a bit of that. At that point in my life, I needed support to attend as I wouldn't have been able to leave the house on my own and get there without help from my support worker. I really enjoyed it from the first session – and I kept going to each session. Having a small group of people that you build friendships with over the weeks is a good thing – also seeing the different seasons throughout the year is quite special. The group provides a lovely welcome, being outside is a real game-changer as it is so relaxed. They select nice calm areas that are away from traffic and houses. A peaceful location means that you can concentrate on what you are doing – and you don't have to worry about all the other things that are going on in life. I have made so many things that I didn't know I could do – I have made a spatula out of wood and been able to perfect this by doing a follow-on course in woodworking with Coed Lleol (Coppice Products Level 1). I feel really proud of the things that I have produced.

For me, Coed Lleol provided me with the confidence to get back out of the house and to socialise with people again. Gradually, after several weeks, I started to feel like I was getting back to my normal self again. When I first started, my anxiety levels were really high, and I'd

have to take a tablet to help with my anxiety before coming to the group. Over time, as I got to know the group more, I found that I didn't need to take the tablets before leaving the house. This helped build my self-confidence. I started thinking, "I *can* go out and I *can* do these things myself". I have even built the confidence to catch a bus to the sessions now, and that was something I was struggling with before.

As I had been in the house for a year, my physical health had suffered a bit, so being able to get outside once a week with the support of the group was helpful to get me out and moving again. Now I have regained some of my confidence, I can go out more regularly and this has helped build up my fitness levels. I can walk further than I could before.

The Coed Lleol group represented the beginning of a journey for me, I saw my life as a large ball with a crack in it. At that point, I was closed off and didn't want to speak to anyone, but the Coed Lleol programme represented a light within that ball. After the first session, I could just about see the light shining through the crack. Little by little that light got brighter and was able to shine through and light everything up. I feel great now – I can speak to everyone; it has got me back to nearly where I was before I got ill. I still have ups and downs, but I am nearly there. The staff are brilliant and always encourage me to start new courses and challenge myself. I have now completed Coppice Products Agored Level 1 Accreditation, and I absolutely loved that! I'm starting the level 2 course this month. Most of the training that I already had was connected to work or community work, so it is nice that these courses are pure pleasure. I would like to improve my skills to make stuff for my friends for Christmas.

Because I have regained my confidence, I have started volunteering again. I volunteer for a peer-to-peer led drug-prevention programme in Swansea and Neath Port Talbot. This provides life-saving drugs for people who have overdosed. I am so glad that I can help others again.

I think that if I hadn't made that first step to join the Coed Lleol group, I wouldn't be where I am today. It has helped me to regain what I lost during those dark times. It is nice to be myself again.



## CARLEY

### WOODLAND WELLBEING GROUP AND LOST PEATLANDS PROJECT, NEATH PORT TALBOT



I am a 47-year-old single mum. I moved to this area two years ago after a relationship breakdown that left me having a mental breakdown myself. I was diagnosed with PTSD and severe anxiety and depression. I am not working at the moment, but I am a busy mum. I have always enjoyed being in nature, even when I was a young child, I remember enjoying visiting farms. I love the sea and being in the woodlands.

About a year ago I was at my worst mentally, I was finding it hard to cope with everyday life, I couldn't leave the house and I wasn't sure that I wanted to carry on with life. The GPs haven't got the time to accommodate mental health issues that need longer-term interventions and seem to rely on quick fixes like medication, and this wasn't all that I needed at this stage. My support worker helped me to link with Coed Lleol. When I went to the first session, I was so anxious, I was quiet and withdrawn and I was in tears because it was the first step for me in dealing with my issues. The staff and the other participants in the group were so understanding and kind, they gave me the space I needed and didn't judge me. From that moment on it was like a light had gone on in me, I enjoyed being outside and in nature and being around a kind and supportive group.

I then decided to sign up for a 6-week course and I have gone on from there. I have taken part in courses with Coed Lleol and with the Lost Peatlands Project. I enjoy the woodworking that we have done as this has introduced me to new techniques and skills – I have learnt to make roman pegs; I have learnt to use the shave horse and I have learnt new knowledge about nature and the natural environment. I have learnt how to light a fire and now the leader asks me to take charge of that at the sessions and to show the new participants how to do it. This has done wonders for my confidence, before I would have been shying away from people and hiding and now, I am straight in and showing them how to do it. I love the fact that in the groups we use sustainable resources – using the stuff that mother nature provides to benefit us. For me, I needed a continual group to really help support my recovery – a six-week programme would have been good, but it would not have

been enough for me at this point in my life. I'd now like to build my skills and then volunteer to lead and support sessions. When you go through traumatic times as I did, to know that complete strangers are there for you is so reaffirming. The staff have been wonderful, I class them as my friends, and they are. Their support has been fantastic and continual.

The fact that the sessions are all outside is significant for me, they are not done in a workshop or classroom environment. We are always outside learning new things. Just to be away from urban life, away from the stresses of life for a few hours a week and in nature is so 100% beneficial to mental and physical wellbeing. Through attending the sessions, I have learnt self-worth, self-confidence, new skills and hobbies and gained a whole set of new friends. Before I joined this group, I hardly left the house, so my physical activity was very limited, but it is much better now. I even learnt a lot about myself by joining this group – the groups are stimulating and make me feel alive. Before I joined I felt like I was dead – I felt like I didn't have any feelings, I was numb. Coed Lleol relit my fire!

I have even started growing vegetables in my garden. I found some old wood in a skip, and I build my own raised beds. I feel really proud of that, as I have done that myself, with no help from anyone else. It made me realise that I am capable of giving something a go and trying something out. I have now taken my daughter along to some of the family sessions where she got to try out willow weaving and she made bread on the fire. She now loves it too!

I am not the same person now as I was a year ago, and that is solely down to Coed Lleol. Coed Lleol has kept me alive during a really tough part of my life. I was withdrawn and suffering badly from confidence issues, with my mental health and I was on medication. Now I am confident, interested in new things, off medication and looking forward to the future. I'm telling everyone how wonderful Coed Lleol is at transforming my health, I have told the GP that it should be available on the NHS and that it could benefit so many more people. I still have my good and bad days mentally, but I now find that going out in nature and learning about nature is my therapy. I can use the techniques that I learnt with Coed Lleol going forward to help manage my mental health. I can't thank Coed Lleol and the staff enough.

## SIAN AND TOBY

### WOODLAND WELLBEING FAMILY GROUP & LOST PEATLANDS PROJECT, NEATH PORT TALBOT



I moved to Wales three years ago because we love the landscapes, the mountains, the rivers and being outdoors. I work in the evening and look after my two children and my horses in the daytime. My youngest child Toby is nearly nine and is autistic. He is an extremely lovable child with an absolute heart of gold, but he finds some situations really challenging and he doesn't respond to change or new things very well. He needs a lot of reassurance to try new things or be in new environments and this sometimes means that he can be a bit difficult to manage at times. He loves to swim, be with our dog, and play on his computer. Despite the challenges, I know that it is important for Toby to try new things and have new experiences. Being outdoors and engaging with heritage crafts and skills is so important to our family, so when I saw the Coed Lleol Family sessions on Facebook I thought that it might be a good opportunity for Toby to try something new.

The first few sessions were very difficult for Toby because of his autism. He found it difficult to settle into the group and his behaviour was not great. The project officers were really good with him and although he wasn't engaging in the first few sessions, he also didn't want to go home, so I knew that if we persevered, he might settle in. Finally, he got comfortable in the group setting and by the last session, he was really engaged! It was so wonderful to see him chatting and getting on with the activities independently. This might not be such a big thing for many parents, but it is a huge deal for our family. So, we joined another set of sessions this year and Toby absolutely loved it from the outset – he wanted to do it every single day! Because this was a smaller group and because he had experienced it before, he was so much more comfortable in the group and he thrived.

The Coed Lleol Sessions are normally a mixed group and Toby was the only autistic child, that inclusiveness is important so that Toby experiences what other children experience. The project officers were really brilliant at incorporating Toby's interests into the activities that they were running and it was clear that they could be flexible in what they were able to do. Toby is Minecraft mad and the project officers somehow managed to incorporate Minecraft into willow weaving and using natural dyes to dye wooden blocks! They showed such an interest in his life and his interests and that really works for Toby – I could see that

he was growing in confidence and independence working alongside the project officer. That was a real breakthrough for him. He was asking every day when he could come back and do another session. I felt really proud of him that he could overcome his worries and do outdoor activities in the fresh air and take part in activities that we both enjoy. It helps to bond us more. It is so important to get children outside and this can be difficult to do as a family all together.

I so enjoyed the family sessions that I have started going to the adult sessions myself when the children are at school. The sessions are all local and free and that is absolutely amazing – I just couldn't afford to be learning these new skills myself. Being a busy working mum with an autistic child is often exhausting, so to have a group just for me to enjoy, relax and learn new skills is important for me and my well-being. Not only that, but the group enables me to recharge my batteries to be able to better cope with Toby's more challenging times. It gives me more patience.

I love nature and working with natural products, and I absolutely love the sessions – it gives me such a warm feeling, especially around autumn time, when you turn up and there is a fire going with the kettle over and we get a stew on – and we all sit around and do some woodworking around the fire. It is such a nice group, nobody is there to judge anybody else, and you get people from all walks of life coming. The sessions are very relaxing and so well facilitated without being overly officious. Attending the sessions has definitely opened up the local area to me – I have been to parts of the county that I didn't know about before and I now use those paths and trails myself. It has also encouraged me to buy my own whittling knife and I really enjoy doing this in my spare time. I have now done an Agored level 1 accredited course, and I'd love to do more to expand my knowledge and skills in this area. Toby has also become more interested in doing other sessions and is keen to do more.

I think that Coed Lleol sessions are absolutely brilliant and so important for communities to have local groups that bring people together with a shared purpose of being in and learning about nature.



## LESLEY

### SUPPORT WORKER, ATTENDED WOODLAND WELLBEING SESSIONS (CLOSED GROUP) WITH DYFFODOL GROUP, NEATH PORT TALBOT



Dyffodol is a substance misuse agency supported and funded by G4S. We work with people coming out of custody with substance misuse issues. We believe that providing alternative opportunities that take people outside of their patterns of behaviour and provide positive learning and support experiences which are vital to helping people out of addiction and help guide them into new ways of experiencing life. My role as well-being officer is to look for new and interesting, structured activities that service users can take part in. I saw Coed Lleol's Actif Woods programme on Facebook and it appealed to me because it is accessible, local and appropriate for our groups. I thought that outdoor activities would be great for this group as they enjoy doing practical things with their hands. Coed Lleol were able to run a 6-week closed programme for our group of eight. We supplied some waterproof clothing and socks and Coed Lleol also helped us to supply walking boots to some of the group. This can be a barrier to some – if they haven't got the right clothing. The project officer was great at adapting to our group and making sure there was time for food before the session started as many of the group had not eaten before they attended.

The group did a range of activities including fire lighting, charcoal making, bushcraft, foraging, using the shave horse, campfire cooking, and drawing and we made spatulas from green wood. They all loved the campfire and learnt how to light a fire safely. One of our group has a disability with their hand and thought that he wouldn't be able to do some of the activities – however, he was able to challenge himself and use the shave horse and he ended up making a spatula. In fact, lots of the group benefited from pushing themselves a bit out of their comfort zone. I think being outside and in nature was important – the fresh air and open spaces. All the sessions took place in local nature spots/parks, so being part of the sessions showed them new places where they could go independently if they want to be in nature, get some peace or do exercise. Being outside doesn't confine you and I sensed that many of the group were able to relax and open up about how they were feeling in their recovery journey. A couple of the group went on to do some of the accredited courses that Coed Lleol offered.

Overall, all the participants got something out of it. The most significant thing was to get them out of their usual routine and doing something that they enjoy, with people that they knew, that offered a positive experience for them. Dyffodol provided additional support for them

coming out of addiction but the experience with Coed Lleol helped to bring the group together and provided them with new opportunities and experiences. Crucially, I noticed that the campfire had a major impact on the group as it evoked positive childhood memories that took them all back to when times were simpler and happier for them before the addictions took hold. It is these small things that can often lead to bigger changes. The fire was a great focus. The sessions allowed me the time and space to get to know the service users on a deeper level and to understand their needs and backgrounds, in addition to finding out what other provisions they might need and enjoy. Personally, for me, the sessions also had a great impact and introduced me to new areas in the county. It was also good for my well-being – being in the woods and sitting around a fire – I loved it. It is a great part of my job that I get to experience these things. One of the activities was drawing using the charcoal that we had made on the fire – it was twenty minutes where I was totally engrossed in what I was doing and even though I am not normally good at art, I produced a really beautiful picture - I didn't know that I could do that! I've kept it as a bookmark and it is a permanent memory of my time with Coed Lleol.

The group have all progressed in different ways since the session. Some have gone on to employment or volunteering. One of our group had worked as a carpenter and being part of Coed Lleol and working with wood had reminded him of that time. He realised that he had more potential than he thought, and he has now gone into employment. Some of the others had smaller gains. One of the men in the group hadn't talked much throughout the sessions, however, on the last session we were sitting high up in the Country Park, we had this enormous vista right in front of us – stunning – we had a cup of tea – and he just started telling me his journey. This small thing is really significant as this person was able to open up and talk about where he was emotionally. He made a beautiful spatula that he was going to take home for his mum. I think being outdoors in a supportive environment really helped him to start to move on. At Dyfodol we work closely with our service users, but we need organisations like Coed Lleol to add value and provide interesting new things for people to take on and run with, the accredited courses are a bonus. Coed Lleol needs to be an ongoing thing – somewhere that provides ongoing support and outdoor activities especially as the activities reflect the 5-ways to well-being so well!

## CLIVE

### SE WALES WOODLAND WELL-BEING GROUP & DROP-IN SESSIONS

I am 61 years old. I worked for years managing a large team of over 500 staff. I then worked as a researcher for a few years with a large company. I loved being out in nature as a child, I was very active and even did my Duke of Edinburgh Gold Award. I always got an enormous sense of peace being outside and part of nature.

Just before lockdown, I developed chronic fatigue syndrome which has had serious impacts on how I can live my life. The illness affects my memory, my ability to order my thoughts, my speech and my mobility and energy levels. The impacts have been so huge, that I have had to leave work and I can no longer enjoy many of the activities that I previously enjoyed. Coming to terms with this illness was like a bereavement – I had to learn to live differently. My mental health also suffered as I felt that I had lost the ability to do all of the things that I had loved doing before I had the illness. Having a disability meant that I felt excluded from society as there are lots of places that I couldn't access, and people treat you so differently when you have a disability. My illness, followed by covid, meant that I had become very isolated. I was really struggling.

I signed up for the 6-week woodland well-being sessions with Coed Lleol after hearing about them through another support service. My mobility is poor, I can walk with support and I have an electric wheelchair, so it was great that the woodland site that had been selected was accessible and that I could park near the entrance. I was lent a pair of walking boots by support staff, and they were able to help me to walk the short distance into the woods. The project officer understood my needs straight away and had a chair ready for me to sit on. The group was very welcoming, and the sessions are very person-centred. They even had an icebreaker activity that helped me to remember people's names. The group gelled together straight away.

We did several activities during the sessions including fire lighting, mindfulness, charcoal making, art, mallet making, learning knots, and whittling. I enjoyed the six weeks so much and it made such a difference to my mental health, I started attending the monthly follow-on sessions too. If I can't do an activity, I am given other tasks that I can do like cutting the wood for the fire – and that is very important as it gives me a sense of purpose. The project officer always takes the time to show me how to do things and makes sure that I remember the things that I have learnt. He has even asked me to show new people how to do things. The project officer took the time to find out what my needs were and fitted the activities to what I can do, at the same time he stretched me to do a few things that I thought I couldn't do. The sessions make me feel good, welcomed, and included. The group is so positive – and has reinforced to me that I *can* do things and people are accepting and welcoming to me as I am now. I love humour and it helps that the project officer is really funny. He is such a bubbly character and the whole group has great banter. We are all interested in the same things and enjoy learning new things together.

I lost so much of myself through my illness, but the Coed Lleol sessions have been able to bring me back – the part of me that loved being out in nature and being social – and they have reminded me that there is still a lot of me left. I can enjoy the things that I *can* do. The

sessions have had a significant impact on my well-being. It has helped me to maintain my social skills and use my mind again. I have regained my confidence to get out and about in nature again. I have discovered other outdoor places like the wetland centre that have accessible routes that I can visit independently.

I think many more people would benefit from this type of programme – it has given me something regular that I can look forward to. If I'm having a bad or a difficult day, I just think that the woodland group is coming up soon and it makes me feel better.

The whole experience has been literally life-giving for me. It has made such a significant difference in my life, and I am so grateful and thankful for this opportunity.





## MORGAN

### WOODLAND WELLBEING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE, SWANSEA



I have struggled with speech and communication my whole life. I was a late talker and only learnt to speak when I was four years old and then for many years only used one-word answers like 'yeah' and 'no'. Because of this, I was bullied at school and found it hard to fit in. It is still difficult for me to express myself fully, but I am very open about talking about my experiences. I suffer from anxiety and depression, and on occasion, I have anger issues. The worse my mental health got, the more I stopped doing things that I enjoyed when I was younger like sports and exercise.

I was referred to Coed Lleol's Woodland Wellbeing Project through the Sunflower Lounge Project which supports young people who are in care or have experienced being in care in Wales. I joined this programme to get out of the house, to help with my anxiety, and to help me to feel more comfortable in group settings.

In the beginning, I felt anxious about being around a new group of people and travelling there by bus. I was able to attend the first session because my support worker came with me, and we travelled to the session together. At first, I was nervous to chat with new people, but the project officers and staff made me feel comfortable and welcomed.

During the 6 week's project, we did lots of different activities. I learned survival skills like how to light a fire correctly, how to feather wood using a knife safely, and shelter building. We foraged and made a 'heal all balm' and mocktails with ingredients we found. I also learnt how to cook over a campfire, we made chocolate damper bread and Welsh cakes. We improved our mindfulness through activities like nature walks and journalling, happa zome art, and leaf rubbings. As it got closer to Christmas, we made natural bath salts with essential oils and put them inside a Christmas bauble to give as a gift to someone.

Being part of this project has helped to distract me from my mental health struggles. I spend a lot of time alone at home which can get me down. Coming here has made me feel so much better - I don't feel as lonely. I don't have to feel depressed when I'm here in nature. I feel more understood when I'm talking to people here. It has improved my concentration and I am able to focus more time on a task. Being part of this group, and doing activities, means that I'm distracted and not thinking about my problems.

The group is very supportive, normally when I try something and I don't do it right, it triggers my anger but here, when I try a new challenge, even though it can be stressful, I don't get angry like I would on my own. I have the support of everyone around. It's a safe place to try out new things. I act different, it's like I'm a different person here. I'm more in control of how I feel around the other participants. When my anger rises at home I just flip straight away but here it's important for me to be a positive role model around the younger boys. I am now able to attend without my support worker and I am more confident walking up to the group at the beginning of the session for a chat.

After each session, I have a positive outlook for the rest of the day. I'm distracted from my mental health and motivated to try new things. I used to be really sporty when I was younger, I took part in loads of different sports but when my mental health got too bad I stopped it. Last week, I went to the gym and I was able to jog for 10 minutes on the treadmill and I was so surprised. I even ran a bit more after that. I started a diet to be healthier and I've signed up to do the couch to 5k.

This project has helped me feel more relaxed and positive and being in nature does the same. This project has been amazing. I want to continue to spend time in nature and I'm going to look at some other projects that Coed Lleol offer.



## JAIME



### WOODLAND WELLBEING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE, SWANSEA

I am twenty years old. I have always had a fascination with nature from when I was a really young child. When I was younger my parents had to keep a very close eye on me because, at any given opportunity, I'd sneak off to go and look at nature. If I was out in the park, they wouldn't be able to find me because I was off talking to the animals, building a fort or teaching other kids how to make little dolls out of sticks! I was always out in nature doing something. I've got lots of lovely memories of lying in the grass and making daisy chains looking up at the sky. Whereas all the other kids would be out on their bikes, I would be planting or digging and getting dirty. If I went to the beach, I would be looking at the unique patterns of the shells or finding out about marine life. I was also very drawn to climbing mountains. Nearly every day, after school or on the weekend I would be climbing up the local mountain with my friends. I am a very creative person and I often draw inspiration for my music, art or writing from nature. However, once I got into the adult world, I found it harder and harder to take the time to be in nature and take the time for my creative hobbies. After finishing school, I found employment in several places, the convenience shop, the call centre and bar work. My life became busier and more stressful and that meant that I never had the chance to really connect with or spend time in nature.

My mental health hit an all-time low point a few months ago. This impacted how I was able to do my job and, in the end, I found I wasn't able to go to work. I was then coping with the idea of losing my job and a significant drop in income. I was worried about how I was going to survive on a day-to-day basis with no money and I was at risk of becoming homeless. I also had to give up my pet to save money. My mental health got so bad that I wasn't able to hold any of my relationships and I didn't have anyone to support me and say: 'Hey you're not doing well, let's put life on pause for a moment'. I didn't know how to go about navigating all of this on my own. At that time, I didn't feel like a person, I felt like everything I had and everything I was doing wasn't real. Eventually, I was diagnosed as suffering from an extreme episode of borderline personality disorder (BPD). It was an extreme low in my life that is hard to talk about. People with BPD get put in a box a lot and people don't want to be around us and that makes it even harder for me to feel that I can be part of a group.

I was referred to Llamau which supports homeless people, and they told me about the Coed Lleol (Small Woods) Youth Group. It sounded interesting, but I was very nervous about going because I still wasn't fully all there in myself or feeling comfortable being around people that I'd never met before. But after the first session, I felt amazing. I felt like I was starting to feel like myself again. I didn't feel judged or like I was being monitored or under surveillance. It gave me a lot of clarity and the realisation that: "I am ok" and just because I didn't have help then, doesn't mean I can't have help now. It made me realise being outside and in a group of like-minded people was really helpful for me.

In the sessions I learnt about bushcraft, making balms, foraging, survival skills and outdoor cooking over the campfire. It was nice to use new skills, especially about being in nature because you never know when you might need them, if something goes wrong in these surroundings it is very helpful to know how to survive in the wild. I learnt so much more than these skills, I learnt how to slow down, focus on small tasks and not be so hard on myself – after all, you can't build Rome in a day!

Continuing with the weekly sessions was very helpful for me because I found that I now had the energy to do all of the things that I'd been putting off the entire week. As soon as I came home from the session, I'd be able to tidy my house and get back to reality a little. Then when I finished the project, I was offered the Woodland Wellbeing Volunteer position. I jumped on board because I felt like, 'this is a place that appreciates me as an individual and I feel like I can genuinely do something and make a difference to somebody else's life like they made a difference to mine'. I went from being a participant to volunteering on the same project to help other young people.

The project itself gave me time and space to stop worrying about everything that I had been stressed about for four months straight. It gave me time to just go 'Ahh, I'm in the woods, I'm surrounded by people who are intelligent, who are caring, and who see me. I don't feel invisible. I don't feel like a burden now. I don't feel like I'm taking up someone's space that I shouldn't be.' I felt like I deserved to be there. Having support from Llamau and Coed Lleol has brought me back to being myself. I feel like a better version of myself, calmer but more energized. Of course, my mental health still affects me but now I have the skills and understanding to be able to support myself in a way that I didn't have before.

I feel like I have grown mentally and spiritually through being part of Coed Lleol and my confidence has grown too. I have started making the balms we learnt about during the session at home and selling them to family and friends. I've also registered to study Horticulture at college next year. I want to be able to get to the point where I'm well enough to turn this into a career whether that be working in the woods, horticulture, or agriculture. I feel that I have been given the time and space to rediscover that nature is my passion. Before this project, I never really had access to the means of putting that into action. Now I do it

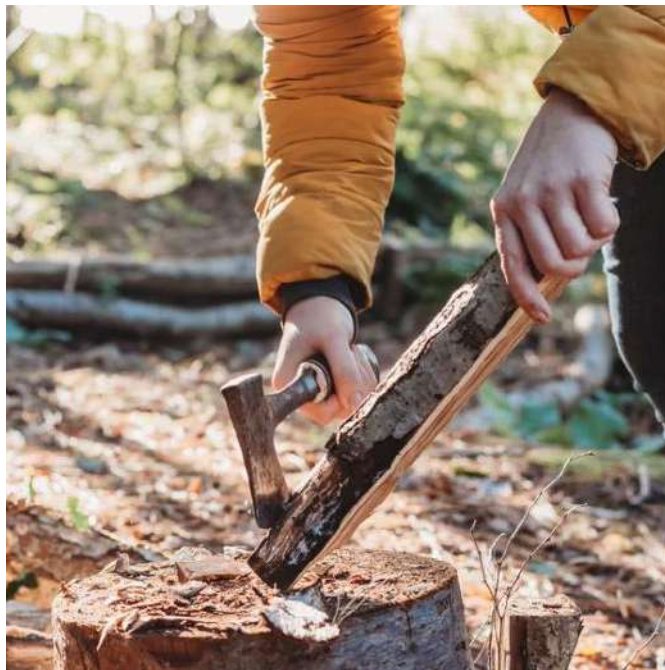


feels really good and affirming. This is what I want to do. I want to make a difference whether that is in working in nature or working with people or young kids. I just want to make a difference. This project has helped me rediscover who I am, and it feels nice to be Jaime again.



## MID AND WEST WALES

PEMBROKESHIRE, CARMARTHENSHIRE, POWYS AND CEREDIGION



## ADRIANA

### WOODLAND WELLBEING CLOSED GROUP FOR WOMEN WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED DOMESTIC ABUSE, CARMARTHENSHIRE



I am a busy mum of a young baby. I am Italian and I have been living in the UK for just under ten years. I grew up in a very small town in the countryside of Southern Italy. We didn't have any close neighbours, so I spent all my time as a child playing in the fields and playing around in the mud. That is where I learnt to explore nature and appreciate it. I have always had a connection with nature, but life gets busy as you get older, and that connection is harder to realise – but even so – when things get complicated in my life, I always take myself outside for a walk. I have even walked up Snowdon and that was one of the best things that I have done in Wales.

Due to personal circumstances, I am currently living in a women's refuge with my young son. It was the refuge that told me about the Coed Lleol Woodland group and asked if I wanted to attend. Because of my interest in nature, I said yes straight away and I could also take my baby along to the group. It was a closed group of women who had all experienced domestic abuse.

During the six weeks, we learnt new things about crafts and nature. We did foraging and cooking in the outdoors, we made plantain balm, we weaved willow Christmas decorations and we had music and mindfulness sessions and yoga. I did it all, and as my baby is so easygoing and loves being out and about, he did it all too. It is really important to me that my baby also gets this experience of being in nature and it really gave me such happiness that he was able to share the experience with me. He is very happy when he is outside.

The group provided us all with way more than just nature activities – it was able to connect us– we were able to have conversations that helped us to understand each other and ourselves. The best part of this experience was that these conversations happen naturally, people shared their feelings about their lives or their experiences or how they see themselves. It was a touching experience and the fire was a fantastic focal point for the group. The group made me feel closer to people, and that wasn't something that I expected from a group about nature. Being part of the group gave me a different perspective on people as we are all part of nature too.

The nice thing about the group is that we are active and move around doing gentle exercises throughout the session. The group is very flexible and there is no pressure for people to do everything and there is always an alternative thing that they could do if they chose to. The staff are so kind and thoughtful and make everyone feel welcome. Everybody's needs were catered for during the sessions by the project officer. I have some food allergies, and this was considered during the sessions too. Being part of the group has really made a difference to my well-being and how I can make nature more part of my life going forward

The refuge has supported me in training in community work and mental health support and this is something I want to pursue in the future as a career, but I am now interested in how this intersects with nature too – so I'd love to do more training through Coed Lleol as I have seen the positive impact that this has had on myself. For all the women who attended these sessions, it gave us a little break from our complicated lives and the personal tragedies that we had experienced. It was such a lovely thing for us to have all done together.



## SUE

### WOODLAND WELLBEING DROP-IN GROUP, CARMARTHENSHIRE



I am a retired insurance broker. I worked from when I was 18 years old to when I retired at 61. When I was little, I loved being outside and especially helping my dad in the garden - sweeping the leaves, digging and weeding the flower beds. I was also a keen Brownie and Girl Guide and I absolutely loved camping. In fact, I would have my bag packed and ready a month before the camp because I was so excited, I loved it that much. I had 43 years of mainly working behind a desk and had a busy work and home life, so I had lost a bit of contact with what I had loved so much as a young girl. Unfortunately, as soon as I retired, I was struck by ill health and then COVID hit, and we were all locked in. My husband also has poor health and mobility issues, so I now spend a lot of my time looking after him.

I was looking for something that would get me active, take me outside and be in a group environment. I found out about the Coed Lleol programme from a poster on a gate that was advertising sessions in the woods where you could meet other people, and learn woodland skills and new knowledge, so I thought 'hang on a second! I fancy that!' It fitted right in with that side of me that I loved as a young girl.

The first session that I went to was willow weaving. I was totally overwhelmed after the first session. I came back and said to my husband, 'I have just had the most amazing three hours' – it just flew by, and I was totally engrossed in the activity. It was such a sensory experience as well, we had the smell of the fire, the heat of the sunshine, the bird song and the activity of weaving. I had three hours of a clear head – without thinking about any worries. In the nicest way, I wasn't thinking about my caring duties with my husband for any of that time. It was a time just for me, doing what I love to do.

I was so impressed with the organisation of the group and how much had been thought about to make the group feel welcomed and looked after. The project officer had thought of everything! She had chairs, a kettle, mugs, she had the fire going and she had organised



brilliant activities for us to take part in – and she had managed to do all this by hand using a wheelbarrow to transport all the equipment! It was so wonderful that tea and coffee were offered, and we could all sit around the fire surrounded by nature. The group is so relaxed, and the staff are accommodating of everyone's needs – so if people don't want to take part in the activity that day or people arrive late, there is a warm fire and a cup of tea where you can sit around and chat instead. This is because of the sense of freedom and space that being outdoors can provide

The second session I attended was foraging, we learnt loads about the plants and had a really good laugh about not picking plants that are at floor level! What is so special about the group for me is that I am outside, I am learning, I am listening to others, *and* I get to cook bread on the end of a stick – I love all that kind of stuff!

Joining the sessions has had knock-on impacts by extending my social circle locally. It has introduced me to new people, and we have all shared knowledge of the local area and what is going on. It is lovely that it is a mixed group of people in the woodland, both women and men because my other social outlet is dancing and that tends to be just women.

I think that continuing with these sessions will really benefit my well-being long-term – the group is so welcoming and supportive, and it gives me something once a month that is just for myself.

Because of my husband's mobility issues, he and I would never just go for a walk, so even though I have got the reservoir on my doorstep, I wouldn't really walk there on my own even with the dog as I would be nervous to walk alone. So, to have a safe group that meets and explores the local area together is brilliant for me.

The Coed Lleol sessions are just fabulous. For me, it is my once-a-month special time in the woods.

## DEBORAH

### WOODLAND WELLBEING 6-WEEK COURSE & AGORED COPPICE PRODUCTS, CARMARTHENSHIRE



I was brought up in the countryside on a farm and have always had an interest in nature. I am often out and about in local woodlands walking my dog. I worked for years in childcare, and I am a mum of a teenage daughter. When I first received an email from Coed Lleol offering woodland well-being sessions I was in a pretty terrible place mentally and physically. Years of being a single parent, work stress and dealing with the covid lockdowns had taken its toll on just about every aspect of my personal, physical, and financial life. An email offering open-access well-being sessions and woodland crafts for adults seemed to me like it could potentially be the remedy I might need.

It was difficult to attend at the beginning because mentally I was not in a place where I could easily join in new things, and I couldn't find the motivation to leave the house. At the time, I had been having difficulties at work and had not spoken to many adults outside the work environment in a long time. Prioritizing my own well-being seemed like too much of an unnecessary distraction from the many other challenges requiring immediate attention. However, the Project Officer at Coed Lleol was very patient, and she was always pleased to see everyone when they did make it. She was able to gently encourage my attendance.

Through these sessions, I have been able to participate in experiences usually very much out of the reach of many people, such as willow weaving, pewter casting, and orienteering. These are activities that I have wanted to do for years but were out of my financial reach. The sessions have increased my interest in nature and how we can use natural resources to make new things. They have introduced me to experts in different areas that I can learn from. What was important for me was that I could be myself at the sessions – I didn't have

to be a mum or put on a professional working persona – and that was liberating for me. It has been a massive learning and social experience for me.

The experience of Coed Lleol is very collaborative, the project officer made sure to ask what people wanted to do at the beginning of the six weeks and she delivered on every request! She is an awesome human! What I like about the Coed Lleol sessions is that they are voluntary, there is no pressure, and no stress and you can get on and learn new things, socialise and be surrounded by nature. You can do this in a way that suits you, and that is due to the skill of the project officers and leaders. I had been advised to join a stress reduction course through the NHS, but that just isn't my thing – it gives me anxiety just thinking about going to something like that. I don't enjoy talking about my feelings, I prefer doing things that take me away and immerse me in new experiences.

Since attending the woodland wellbeing sessions, I have now completed an Agored Coppice Products course and that has given me something new to work towards and a new focus. I have drawn on this to start to reassess what I want out of life and the direction that I want to go in.

Through the well-being sessions and subsequent coppice products course, I have been able to redevelop some of the cognitive and social skills that I felt I'd lost during covid. It has increased my confidence, sense of peace and love of being outside in nature. More than this, it has allowed me the permission and space to prioritize my own well-being. I am eternally grateful to the Coed Lleol staff and team and I am looking forward to building on the new skills that I learnt long into the future.



## CATRIN

### WOODLAND WELLBEING 6-WEEK COURSE, CARMARTHENSHIRE



I took early retirement from university administration a few years ago. I was born and brought up on the coast and it has always been important for me to be near the sea, I spent all my summers either on the beach or in the sea. I never really explored the countryside or woodland areas during childhood, as I had chronic hay fever which meant that the great outdoors was always restricted for me. I have three dogs and I spend a lot of my time outside, walking the dogs and being in the fresh air. I enjoy being creative and I am training to be a swim teacher.

We moved to Wales in the middle of the pandemic. First inland, and now we live on the coast. It was challenging moving during the pandemic and settling into a new area was made even harder by not being able to easily socialise with our new neighbours. I also am caring for my 91-year-old elderly mother who lives with us, so I spend a lot of my time looking after her and the three dogs; one of which is very anxious and needs a lot of attention from me. This can be quite isolating. In 2019 I suffered from a really bad bout of serious depression, and that impacted me quite badly, and I am still recovering from this. I found out about Coed Lleol via a Facebook post, and I thought that it might be a good way for me to meet people and do creative things. I also felt like I needed something that would give me a bit of time for myself, where I wasn't thinking about feeding or looking after anybody else. What piqued my interest was the range of activities being offered as part of the 6-week course. I thought that it sounded like the perfect antidote for my daily life, which can be stressful. So, I attended the 6-week woodland well-being sessions and have also been to a monthly drop-in group.

I get quite anxious going to new places but was welcomed by the project officer - there was no pressure, and the sessions are very relaxed. During the sessions, we were shown nature journaling and it was a lovely way to connect with others in the group. The leader's knowledge was phenomenal and to be able to wander around freely in the woodland was just lovely. We also made natural dyes with wild plants and flowers. We learnt about plant ID and foraging and made plantain balm. We did one exercise where we had to make friends with a tree – this was completely out of my comfort zone and I wasn't sure about it, however, I challenged myself to take part and as a result, I ended up writing a lovely poem

about my tree. So, although I felt awkward, it ended up with me producing poetry that I haven't done before. I needed to remind myself sometimes to 'go with it' as this was my time for myself. I really pushed myself out of my comfort zone for some activities as they were just not what I would have done in the past at all, like playing instruments and meditation but I felt comfortable, and I felt confident to do them and I'm glad I did because it was just lovely and relaxing! The group really bonded, and we had a common interest in being outside and trying new things.

The activities we undertook have really inspired me, making natural dyes was a revelation! I love it and have now done this at home, using a camping stove and old pots to create my own natural dyes. I can make people unique gifts for Christmas now. I have also noticed that my knowledge of wildflowers, trees and plants has improved, and I am pointing out plants to my husband when we go on walks. I am finding that I am slowing down, taking things in and much more conscious of the flora and fauna around me. I remember a time when I was in the woods and my husband and I just stopped and listened – and you couldn't hear anything but the sound of the rustling of the trees and the birds, it was just so peaceful. Being in Wales I am discovering so much more about the countryside and woodlands. This wasn't part of what I did before, so I have had to seek out being in nature. Now I have done this, I feel that it has opened up a whole new world for me to explore. I am amazed by woodlands and how varied they are, and I have even noticed areas where the leaves are breaking down that are warmer than the rest of the woods, and that is amazing for me!

The group has been fantastic for my well-being and helps me to stop sinking into depression again. It provided me with time for myself and introduced me to new people. It has also fired up my creative and learning skills. I have a sewing room at home that I hadn't been in for a few months and being part of the group gave me the creative drive to get back in my sewing room. I love the camaraderie, friendliness and supportive nature of the staff and the group. I have been blown away by the knowledge of the staff and leaders. I have never known anything like this before in England – Coed Lleol is the most amazing thing!



## NORTH WALES

ANGLESEY, CONWY, GWYNEDD DENBIGHSHIRE AND WREXHAM



## ZAINAB

### WOODLAND WELLBEING AND WALKING GROUP, GWYNEDD



I have always loved nature. My formative years were spent in a little village, and I think this is where my love of nature stems from. However, when I was around seven, we moved to the city, and I have mainly lived in cities before moving to Wales a few years ago. Typically, Asian families who live in the cities don't traditionally access the countryside regularly. but I have always taken the opportunity to get into nature and shared this with others.

I have an adult son who suffers from mental health problems. Initially, I contacted Coed Lleol because I thought that it might be a good thing for my son to do. He came to a few sessions, but he didn't engage. At the time, life was complicated as he has quite severe needs and I was looking after him on my own, so as a parent and carer I was neglecting my own needs. I was stressed out and exhausted. I had really enjoyed the sessions that I'd taken my son to and I thought that I might be able to benefit myself, so I re-joined once the time was right.

I attended woodland sessions and walking groups. The sessions provide me with a safe space where I can be just myself without being called on for any reason. They have enabled me to get in touch with my creative side again because there is always something interesting to do. We have done weaving and painting with natural dyes, and we have made lanterns. The project officer always makes us feel welcome and cooks locally sourced healthy food over the open fire. It is like going to camp! We all gather around the fire, and this is such a nice antidote to being in front of a computer all day.

The Coed Lleol model where you are outside and doing activities is just fantastic, as it gives another dimension to the experience of nature. I have learnt about coppicing and woodworking and have made a gate, and this has built up my skills. I'd like to do more courses with Coed Lleol in the future. I have been inspired through doing activities with Coed Lleol to take up weaving which I am really enjoying and would love to learn how to grow and coppice willow that I can use for that purpose.

The groups themselves are great as there is no pressure put on anyone and they are very inclusive – people of all abilities can join the group. It is good to meet people from all walks

of life, and it is a space where we can all be equal and have fun together. The groups provide gentle exercise and help motivate people to get out in the open. I think that having a dedicated team doing health and well-being in a natural environment is fantastic – the social prescribing element is brilliant as nature itself provides the well-being remedy. It takes you out of your head and into your body and that is so important. People say that these types of activities are '*alternative*' but I don't see it like that at all, I see it as using the natural resources that are around us to help to maintain our health. I have been lucky in life, I have a good career and material comfort, but I also have a lot of pressure in caring for my son and his needs. The Coed Lleol group provides me with that space where I don't have that burden of responsibility for a few hours. It is somewhere where I am the one being looked after instead, and that means so much to me because I am usually the one doing that.



## MAGGIE

### WOODLAND WELLBEING 6-WEEK AND MONTHLY DROP-IN GROUP, GWYNEDD



I have lived by the sea all of my life and love being by the coast. As a child, I spent most of the day playing on the beach but was rarely in the woodlands. I have done lots with my life. I have always worked in the caring professions including learning support and working in a care home and working in an independent living facility with older people. I am also a volunteer for guide dogs for the blind and I care for my elderly parents. I am now 63 years old and have two grown-up daughters and grandchildren.

As I live on my own, and my daughters live far away, the pandemic really hit me hard. At the beginning of the Pandemic, I began working 12-hour shifts at the independent living home, supporting elderly residents. We understood that the residents couldn't see their families, so we became their only contact and support. At that point, nobody knew what was happening. I was trying to support the people at work and I was supporting others in my neighbourhood who were isolated too. I was doing all the shopping for my parents and trying to keep them safe. The lady that I support with her guide dog was taken into hospital and I had to find a new home for her wonderful guide dog. I had become very close to both and this was a terrible wrench for me, especially at that time when the world had stopped. I was just on autopilot doing everything for everybody else, and I forgot about myself. I became lost; I didn't have anyone to talk to and the strain of everyday life became too much. I knew that I wasn't okay, and soon my friends started messaging me and asking whether I was okay too. They could see that I wasn't myself.

One day, I was surfing the internet and came across the local health centre website and it had a little advert for Coed Lleol on it. I thought, 'this is just what I need!' – I knew that I needed help and something in my life that was going to make me feel better, I am not a tablet taker, so this seemed like a good solution. I loved the idea of doing something in the woods. Initially, I did a 5-weeks course in Woodland Wellbeing and then I started attending the monthly drop-in sessions.

This course absolutely came along at the right time for me – it saved me – and I say that because I'd forgotten who I was. I was so busy looking after everyone else, I forgot what I

needed to make me feel like me. I have always loved doing arts and crafts, but with such a busy life, I rarely had time to do anything like that.

Being in a beautiful woodland location was the key for me. Hearing the wind in the trees, the fresh air and being able to learn how to identify the trees and learn new crafts. It introduced me to a beautiful woodland, that I have now visited independently. The staff are wonderful and there is a calmness about them that really helped me to heal. There is no pressure on the group, people can decide what they would like to do, and that is important. We did all sorts of activities during the 5 weeks, including mindfulness, willow weaving, making clay figures, leaf printing and wool wrapping and mobile making. Of course, we also had lots of nice cups of tea or soup made over the fire. We try to use resources that can be gathered from nature in the local area. I am on a carer's allowance so I couldn't have afforded to do these things. I love doing the activities because I am totally absorbed in them and not thinking about anything else. I even brought my friend along who also loves it and I've been telling everyone about the sessions.

Through these sessions, I have learnt to put myself first, which I find very hard as I am so used to doing things for others. But when I am there, those two and a half hours are totally for me. This group has been about going back to nature and letting mother nature heal me rather than turning to tablets. I feel so much better just knowing that I will have that time outside with the group.





## TOM

### WOODLAND WELLBEING 6-WEEK COURSE AND AGORED COPPICE PRODUCTS COURSE, ANGLESEY & CONWY



I am 41 years old, and I have three young daughters ranging from ages one to seven – so life is lively - my wife and I even got married during lockdown! We moved to this part of Wales because it was near to my job at the time. It is a beautiful part of Wales, and we were lucky enough to buy a lovely cottage just outside a small town - with some land. As a child, I was always outdoors and playing in nature, but somehow that part of myself had been taken over by work.

My job was high-level and very pressurised, and I was a successful manager for seven years. Things changed for me during the covid years, my job in management became even more pressurised and I got little to no support. The pressures mounted up and it resulted in me having a mental breakdown. I made myself really ill and eventually, I had to quit my job – I just needed to stop. I was suffering from anxiety and stress, and it hit me pretty hard. So, I just had to walk away from it.

From that point, I needed to slow down and refocus on what was important and what I wanted to do. I had been offered a coracle-making course to go on in Coed Llwynonn in Anglesey with a tutor who also is a leader for Coed Lleol. The course was transformative, as I found that it wasn't just the skills that I was learning that made a difference to me, but that it was being in the woods itself. I could feel the healing process going on by just being in the woods – it was incredible.

I then got the bug and signed up for a gate-making course and a charcoal-making course. Then I started on the Coed Lleol Agored-level Coppicing and then the Coppice Products course, and I attended a Foraging course with Coed Lleol too. These have helped me to keep on track mentally and I have learnt loads. I learnt all about coppicing techniques and how to use the products effectively, sustainably, and to benefit the health of the woodland. I now have a better understanding of coppicing and the cycles of growth and I have two

accredited courses behind me. It is something I am excited to get started this winter on my own land.

Although these were learning experiences, I gained so much more than that – they really helped my well-being too. The tutors are incredible, and you just learn so much from the wealth of knowledge that they have. The fire was a great focus for conversation and connecting with the other participants and everyone had their own story to tell.

My well-being has massively improved – it's been a rocky old road – but I feel like I have finally healed. For me, it was the combination of being immersed in nature and learning about the processes and skills of traditional crafts that have been one of the drivers for my recovery. It was both a sensory and an immersive experience – I particularly remember a day when I was working in the woods with the draw knife, the fire was crackling, there was the smell of the smoke and, in the distance, someone blacksmithing – I just felt all of that tension I had built up start to wash away. It is being in nature and having a sense of purpose that is a great healer for me.

The skills that I have learnt through all these courses, including the ones run by Coed Lleol, have helped me to understand the land and our natural resources better and helped me to manage and use my own land more effectively and start to specialise in some traditional crafts. I hadn't done anything like this previously – I worked in an office! My kids have also benefited – we go on walks, and I am teaching the oldest one the tree names – she is super keen to learn more. They all love being outdoors – even the baby. She has a hearing issue, so being outside and using all her senses, is even more important for her.

My ambition is now to buy a small woodland and set up a forest school, where people can sit in nature and tell stories, relax and have the space to recover from mental difficulties. I have been on a journey over the last year and with the help of Coed Lleol and its leaders not only do I feel restored mentally, but I also have a brand-new focus and career trajectory!

## DIANE AND RYAN

### WOODLAND WELLBEING WEEKLY DROP-IN GROUP

(OPEN TO ALL BUT SPECIALISES IN ENGAGING PEOPLE WITH ADDITIONAL NEEDS)



Ryan has learning and mobility difficulties, he also has limited communication. He uses walking sticks or a mobility scooter to get around. Ryan's first language is Welsh, but he understands Welsh and English, and he often communicates using Makaton and keywords. Ryan loves the emergency services and in particular Fire Engines. When I first started as his support worker, we would often visit the fire station to see the fire engines and Ryan loved that, but we needed something that would provide more physical and social constructive activities for Ryan long-term.

I heard about Coed Lleol through other support workers and families who already attend. We started going straight away and that was it – we went every week from then on. It has become a central part of Ryan's weekly routine. Anglesey is very limited for outdoor activities that are suitable for people with physical or learning difficulties. Coed Lleol is one of the only programmes that I know of that supports people's well-being and physical health outdoors all year round. Coed Lleol is great because it runs in various locations around the Island and it gets Ryan out and about all over Anglesey, and he loves that. He enjoys being outside in nature and meeting people. The fact that the sessions are bilingual is fantastic for Ryan, as he is a native Welsh speaker – and this means that he gets to hear and communicate in Welsh and English during the sessions.

The Coed Lleol Staff are fantastic with him – they will tailor the activities to suit the participants and will work out ways that Ryan can be included even if he can't manage to do the whole activity. He enjoys helping make the tea (Panad) and getting out the biscuits. He enjoys seeing the fire, especially when they make soup or stew over the fire. Every week, part of the session is a green gym, this helps to get Ryan active and moving each week. Ryan likes being out in the trees and likes the games that the group play around the woods. Ryan has a mobility vehicle with a tail lift for his scooter – a few weeks ago we had a great session at the nature reserve. As Ryan couldn't manage the long walk, we walked part of the way and then we set up Ryan's tail lift as a little 'café'. Ryan then had a job to help give out the teas and coffees to all the other participants once they had finished the long walk. For someone else, that doesn't seem a lot, but for Ryan, this is a massive thing as it is *his* van, and *he* is helping the leaders and *he* is manning the café and in charge of it. These small

activities make huge differences in Ryan's well-being as they give him a sense of purpose and build his confidence.

The Coed Lleol Sessions have given Ryan so much more confidence with his mobility and it has increased the types of pathways that he can walk, previously he would not have attempted to walk on woodland pathways with his sticks as he would have been too nervous. With the support of Coed Lleol, Ryan has built up his confidence to walk across different terrains – even through the woods. The group meets in different locations, and we often go to places where I think it might not be manageable for Ryan, but because he enjoys the group, he encourages and challenges himself and he does it. Ryan can't communicate fully, but his actions often speak louder than words – when he started going to the group, he would want to stay for an hour or so before asking to go home, now he stays well after the session has finished as he is interacting with everyone and helping pack up. Often, we will be there for over three hours now. Ryan always has a big smile on his face when we are at a Coed Lleol Session.

I absolutely love attending Coed Lleol with Ryan too – I have been working in and around support work for over 25 years – I love being out in the community and seeing first-hand the impact that these sessions have on Ryan and me. Coed Lleol is an inclusive group with people from all walks of life and abilities and everyone gets on with the activities and with each other. I will often go away to get a cup of tea and find Ryan chatting and having a laugh with someone quite happily and independently. This is so good for Ryan's confidence and independence, and it allows him to have a normal life – just like his peers. Ryan attending Coed Lleol has also been good for Ryan's mum. As he has made so many friends through the group, this has linked Ryan's mum up with a wider network of parents and support workers and this gives her support and friendship.

When I first started looking after Ryan, he wouldn't want to leave his mum, especially following the Covid lockdowns. Now, through Coed Lleol, he has built up his confidence to do different things, explore new areas on foot and meet new people. Coed Lleol has helped to ensure that Ryan has a normal life for a boy his age.

## GAVIN AND OWEN

### WOODLAND WELLBEING WEEKLY DROP-IN GROUP

(OPEN TO ALL BUT SPECIALISES IN ENGAGING PEOPLE WITH ADDITIONAL NEEDS)



I have been a carer for Owen for six years now. Owen is 40 years old he has severe autism and downs-syndrome. He lives at home with his mum and dad. When I first started caring for Owen, six years ago, he wasn't very sociable, and he didn't walk very far at all. Because I am quite sporty, I decided that it would be good for both of us to get outside and start walking, gradually we have built this up. Now we walk 5-6 miles a day together. Owen likes to watch the ferries as we walk, and everyone knows him and says 'hello' to him along the route we walk.

I found out about Coed Lleol through the Holyhead Disability Centre. I really wanted to take Owen, because it was a large group of adults, most of whom also have learning difficulties. I liked the idea that it was outside, in all weathers, and it was somewhere where Owen can meet other people and socialise. We loved the first session and we have gone ever since. We have now been attending for over 5 years. It is the first thing that Owen asks me about when I arrive on a Monday morning. At one point I actually changed my working day with Owen from Monday to Friday just so that we could both attend the Sessions. Coed Lleol was the beginning of Owen coming out of his shell and developing his social life. Beforehand, he was quite reserved and found being in a crowd difficult, but now he goes around the group saying 'hello' to people. Because of his autism, the noise that is created in indoor environments with large groups of people is too much for him, but because Coed Lleol is outside, the noise doesn't overwhelm him, and he has responded so positively. This development has had a knock-on impact on Owen's general socialising outside of the group – this has really improved – which has transformed how he lives his life now. He now talks more and socialises with others. Another impact on Owen has been addressing his phobia of dogs. From childhood, Owen had developed a fear of dogs, and this was problematic and caused a barrier for him to go out for walks in the park where there might be lots of dogs. Through attending Coed Lleol's Actif Woods Programme over several years, we have gradually been able to address this with Owen, as sometimes people will bring their dogs along to the session. Owen has now become used to the dogs and over time we have encouraged Owen to stroke the dogs and give them treats. This was unheard of before. This might sound like a small thing to anyone else, but it is a massive achievement for Owen and has knock-on implications for Owen and his parents. Now they can go for walks where there may be lots of dogs and Owen will put his hand down to touch a passing dog. The calm and

nurturing nature of the people at Coed Lleol and the outdoor environment has helped this change in Owen's behaviour. His confidence and abilities have grown.

Owen loves socialising around the fire with a cup of tea and a biscuit. This allows him to sit outside with a group in a calm environment surrounded by nature. Owen hasn't got the capacity or dexterity to undertake many of the activities, but we generally go off for a walk at that point so that he gets the exercise and a bit of time away from the group which benefits him too. If it is raining, Owen likes to wear his wellington boots and jump in the puddles – it provides a sensory experience for him, which is so important for someone like Owen. It is the environment of a Coed Lleol group that is significant. When you are outside, it can bring out an aspect in someone that they are unable to do in an inside environment – especially for someone with autism. Also, the support given by the staff and the inclusiveness of the group means that everyone feels supported. The group evolves organically, by responding to the group and its needs – and this constantly means that the group develops, grows, and pushes itself forward. Because the group moves around to different locations, Owen and I have been introduced to different areas of Anglesey that we have never been to before. I've since passed this information on to others and shared these places with my own family.

For me personally, being part of Coed Lleol has made a difference in my life. I was a consultant in the construction industry, I started caring part-time because I wanted a job that would get me out of an office environment and give something back to the community. I have enjoyed it so much that I do it full-time now. The work I do now gives me more in my life than my professional role. But as a carer, I can't do it all on my own, we both need places where we can go to learn, grow, be active and socialise. I enjoy Coed Lleol as much as Owen does. It has allowed me to learn more about the massive cross-section of learning difficulties and I have made new friends. Often the group can have about 40 or 50 people attending and this is great for everyone – I just see happy faces.

Coed Lleol makes our Friday. You look forward to Friday and you look forward to being with the group. It is the feel-good factor for all of us – for both the support workers and the participants.



## OUTDOOR HEALTH PROJECTS

PEMBROKESHIRE, GWYNEDD, POWYS AND RHONDDA CYNON TAFF



**SJ**

### **PEMBROKESHIRE WILD SWIMMING FOR WELLBEING**



I am Danish and 53 years of age. I have been living abroad since I was 26 and have lived in Wales for over 10 years. I like spending time in nature. I enjoy being creative, photography and contemplating reality. I am interested in the connection between mind and body. I am trained in massage therapy, and I have an interest in polyvagal theory, which examines the communication of the body and the brain and nervous system when faced with stress. I enjoy time with animals and find being around animals very grounding.

I suffer from autism-related anxiety, ADHD, depression, and low mood. I usually become filled with a sense of dread when winter approaches because I traditionally have taken an emotional dip at this time of year. Although I enjoy connecting with people, social interactions create quite a lot of anxiety for me. I find cultures and their implicit meanings confusing, most of the time.

Before I started this programme, I was interested in the effects that cold water can have on the body. In 2018 I began taking cold showers after my warm ones and I noticed that my overall immunity and well-being improved. I used to live by a river and would regularly take a dip throughout the year. I also visited local waterfalls from time to time and have felt the benefits of these excursions.

When I learned about the well-being and wild swimming course with Wild Swim Wales, under the banner of Coed Lleol's Outdoor Health Network, I intuitively knew that this would be something that would be good for me to commit to. This was a major challenge for me in the middle of winter!

Because of the harsh winter weather, every Wednesday I had to battle my mind to rise to the challenge of attending the wild swimming group, however every time I decided to go, I was always so grateful that I did. Pembrokeshire is beautiful and this group has provided me with the additional treat of going to various stunning locations with our leaders and the group for a swim. We all venture into the waters together and support one another.

When I experienced wild swimming it felt like a complete reset of my nervous system, and the calm quietness of the experience would stay with me for days. The feeling I got from the

experience made it easier for me to manage my emotional state. I have noticed a clear improvement in my resilience to take on the challenges of my life. During the sessions, I felt very safe and held. The leaders encouraged and guided me to explore and stay within my limits. The group provided more opportunities than just wild swimming, I have also enjoyed the beach cleans and learning about the seas, tides, waves, rip, swell and currents of which I had no previous knowledge. I have also appreciated the social connections and the bonding of doing something like this in a group.

All in all, I feel a huge improvement in my mental health and my emotional well-being. I would warmly recommend, no pun intended, to others to explore; it feels to me a very safe and guided way to experience winter wellness, increasing confidence and boosting moods. It is great that we are using nature to achieve this.



## CATH

### DOG WALKING FOR WELLBEING, RHONDDA CYNON TAFF



I am an active person who loves getting involved in different activities. I like walking and meeting people and going to different groups. I volunteer at my local charity shop and enjoy writing the newsletter for an organisation that supports people with learning difficulties, mental health, or well-being issues, like me, to live independently.

I suffer from anxiety and have had some experiences that have made me quite wary of people. I spend a lot of time in my flat on my own, which is very boring. So, I need things to do that get me out and about and keep me out of trouble! I have a few other health issues including poor eyesight. Because of this, I prefer to do activities that are supported so that I feel safe.

It was my support workers that told me about Dog Walking with Cariad Pet Therapy and Coed Lleol's Outdoor Health Network. My grandmother had a dog when I was a little girl and I have always liked dogs. I thought that it would be a good idea for me to try walking with dogs to see if I could take to it. I wouldn't be able to have a dog myself, so having the opportunity to walk them is a lovely idea, it gives me the experience of being with dogs.

We met at a local park that was easy for me to get to with my support worker. There were two dogs that I was able to walk – Idris and Gwen. I really loved Gwen and wanted to take her home! We went for a walk up the hill and went quite far. It was a great way to burn calories! I went on 5 out of the 6 walks and really enjoyed having the dogs and their owners walk with me. Having the dogs there made me feel more confident. I got on very well with the dog owners too – it was nice to be able to get to chat with new people as this is something that normally worries me a lot – I get quite anxious. I think having the dogs there helped to make me feel less worried about this and helped me to relax. I felt that the whole experience was good for me, especially for my well-being. I'd love to continue to do this as it would be a brilliant thing for me to do for both my physical and my mental health. Having something that is a regular activity is much better for my mental well-being than activities that stop and start. The dogs are lovely and calming and help build up my confidence whilst pushing me on to walk more in the fresh air – I even walked them in the rain! I think that taking part in this activity has spurred me to look at taking part in other activities locally that are outside, like the gardening group.

I enjoyed the experience so much and I miss it now that it has stopped. I have written about my dog walks in the Drive newsletter, and the dogs I walked featured in the Mail on Sunday newspaper article about well-being and loneliness. It is such a good idea to support people using animals, as we are not all lucky enough to be able to own them.



## TAZ

### TRYWYDD IACH OUTDOOR HEALTH PROJECT, DYFI VALLEY



I am approaching 50 now. I am a massive music fan and a collector of vinyl. I do a bit of art and I am a great lover of animals, especially cats. I heard about the Dyfi Donkeys project through Trywydd Iach (The Outdoor Health Network), previously I had taken part in Coed Lleol's woodland well-being sessions, but I had moved on from these and needed something new in my life. I knew straight away that this was something for me – and I said, 'sign me up!'. Before this course, the only experience I had had of donkeys was a ride on the beach when I was a child.

I was diagnosed with ADHD and Asperger's in later life, and this has prompted me to make adjustments to my life and how I spend my time to help me to better understand myself and what contributes to my well-being. Part of this is being involved in the animal-assisted therapy group run by Dyfi Donkeys. I am a bit of a hippy at heart, so I value being outside and around animals.

Being part of the Dyfi Donkeys project has been a godsend for me. Because of my ADHD, I am not always the most patient of people, but this project has helped me with this. At first, I thought that I should approach the Donkeys and that they would accept me straight away. I soon learnt that I needed to slow down and wait until the Donkeys approached me, it was a slower process than I thought it would be. This helped me to reflect on my approach and understand that trust needed to be built up with the animals. It has been a great learning experience to find out more about animals and how they interact with humans. It has opened up an interest for me in learning more about the importance of Donkeys to society and their role in history and trade routes. It has also been a journey of discovery for me on Donkey behaviour and psychology too, I have got to know different Donkeys through the sessions and learned about their different personalities and traits. We have one Donkey, Twister, who intuitively goes to people with additional needs – he accepts all people regardless of who they are. We did a lovely session centred around aromatherapy where I really felt a strong emotional connection with my favourite Donkey, Mosses. I felt really special after that experience. The staff and volunteers at Dyfi Donkeys have been amazing and are very open and supportive.

The social aspect of being with a group of people is important, it is great to meet new people. I have found that people tend to come out of their shells a bit quicker around



animals – even shy people. I noticed that other people in the group were benefiting from being with the Donkeys too. After a few sessions of being in each other’s company and with the Donkeys as a focus, we organically started to talk and share problems or issues that we were having, and we were able to support each other. It is especially good for men to be able to get in touch with their emotions, I have worked on building sites for years, so I know how important it can be for men in particular to be able to express their emotions and share what they might be feeling with others.

I really miss the course – I can feel that my mood is dipping a bit since I finished it and I can’t wait to get back to see the Donkeys again. I am moving house in the next few weeks, there are many reasons for the move, but one reason is that I will be closer to the Dyfi Donkeys site so that I can continue to engage. The course has massively contributed to my mental and physical well-being, 1000%. I feel that these types of sessions that holistically treat people’s health, for me, are so much more beneficial than a pharmacological approach. I think if more people were able to connect with animals through projects like this, they would have a different outlook on life and be able to cope with the ups and downs of life better.



## WARREN

### TRYWYDD IACH OUTDOOR HEALTH PROJECT, DYFI VALLEY

#### Animal Assisted Therapy



I am 42, I moved to the area a few years ago. My accommodation didn't work out, so I fell into temporary accommodation that I have now been in for over a year. I was in a very low place a year ago, I was suffering from severe depression and was finding it hard to leave the house. Luckily it was my doctor who suggested this project, she called me and asked me what I'd think about doing a programme at the Donkey Sanctuary. I was really surprised and delighted because I like animals and I needed something that was going to help me to get out of the house and lift my mood. I hadn't had any experience with Donkeys before, so I was a bit nervous at first.

I signed up for a seven-week course at Dyfi Donkeys. When I first started the course, I didn't have much confidence and I was a bit unsure about taking part. The lady who runs the sanctuary is really good and helped put us at ease and of course, being around the Donkeys themselves helped to calm my nerves.

We did a range of activities during this time including learning about the Donkey's behaviour, walking the Donkeys and spending time getting to know them – we even did some mucking out. The course was really good, I really enjoyed it. The course has been brilliant for my well-being, being with the Donkeys really cheers me up! I like being around animals because they are nice, and they don't give you any trouble. Being around Animals is calming and they don't judge you. The course took place in the summer, so it was wonderful to be outside each week in the sunshine. The fact that this programme takes place with a group of people is important as we get to know each other over the weeks, and we formed a good team.

Following the seven-week course, I became a volunteer at the Donkey Sanctuary, so I now go twice a week to help out. This means that I have learnt so much more about how to care for and look after the Donkeys. I can now clean out their feet, measure their breath rate and heart rate and of course, help with the mucking out.

This whole experience has helped me, it has given me more confidence overall. Now, getting stuck in and volunteering is second nature to me and I have gained so much more confidence around animals.

I have built up my confidence so much through attending this group that I now volunteer at the local Cattery and Kennels and at a Charity Shop in town, both of which I pursued independently. So, I only have Sunday and Monday at home now. I'd love to look for employment, but my housing situation needs sorting first. However, I feel that I am in a good place to pursue this once my accommodation is sorted out.

I still suffer from depression now and again, but it is so much better and more manageable as I now have so much to focus on during the week. The doctor who first referred me to the Dyfi Donkeys doesn't know what an impact it has had on me yet – but I am looking forward to telling her.



## JULIA

### OUTDOOR HEALTH NETWORK GWYNEDD, WOODLAND WELLBEING



I have lived a really exciting life as an artist and have been able to travel some of the world with my work. I was brought up appreciating nature and was always gardening and growing food with my close relatives. My parents gave me my own little garden under a lilac tree when I was five and I'd spend hours planting bulbs and shrubs there. My grandparents had a small holding surrounded by woods, so I was fortunate to be able to explore their land as a child. I remember how amazing the strawberries were in those days! I was fascinated by the woodland plants and flowers and even started my own botanical drawing book. I'd spend hours diving into my grandparents' illustrated encyclopedias and researching all the plants to name them in my book. I just loved being outdoors, I was a girl guide and enjoyed the freedom that the outdoors provided. My work as an artist took me to Egypt, Sweden, Greece, Peru, Brazil, and the USA.

I returned to Wales to help my parents in 2006. Caring for my parents meant that my life shrank, and I became quite isolated. Both my parents have since passed away and unfortunately, I am now disabled and have mobility issues that mean that I walk with a frame. I have also been diagnosed with ADHD and PTSD and recently I was diagnosed on the Asperger's spectrum. This all means that life is a lot less free than it was for me in my younger years. I try to be as active as possible, and I also support others in my community to do the same. I take an 88-year-old friend swimming each week and I attend a monthly art group.

I found out about Coed Lleol and thought that it would suit me because I wanted to make new friends and I enjoy being outdoors. Because of my disabilities, not wanting to use the car all the time and because I am living on my own, I also received Coed Lleol's nature chat telephone service. This provided me with weekly phone calls that focused on talking about nature. This is a fantastic service that made me feel human – it gave me weekly human contact with a like-minded person, and I got to talk about nature each week.

At the sessions, we participated in many lovely craft activities such as: making paper lanterns with willow and autumnal leaves; paper and paste angels, willow stars; and wreaths ready for Christmas using red dogwood and foliage we picked. These are all displayed around my house now and the wreath is on my front door. Having a group that

meets outside regularly is really good for me as it connects me to new people and allows me to do all sorts of arts and crafts. I can also share my artistic knowledge with others too.

Spending time doing arts and crafts makes me feel healthy – it makes me feel that I am doing something true to myself and I get absorbed in the activity. It is great that the group uses natural resources and not plastics with which to craft. As I live by the coast and marshes, spending time in the woodlands is lovely as it enlivens all the senses. I love seeing an open fire – the smell of it and cooking over it. We even made bread and jam from foraged berries one week. It is so evocative to cook over an open fire. The project officers are welcoming and ensure that vegan options are available.

Being passionate about the environment I always try my hardest to be environmentally friendly, help educate others, and live true to myself. I really love nature and believe we all need to look after her as she supports everything, including our well-being. I feel that these sessions have absolutely helped improve mine.



## NATHANIEL

### RHONDDA CYNON TAFF OUTDOOR HEALTH PROJECT, WOODLAND WELL-BEING AND COPPICING



I am 20 years old. I enjoy watching TV and playing on my Playstation. I sometimes go out with my mates at the weekend.

I have been suffering from anxiety that got worse during the lockdown. Early in the lockdown, it got so bad that I wasn't able to leave the house and I confined myself to my bedroom. I was referred to the early intervention team and they suggested that I look at doing an activity locally. The Coed Lleol programme looked interesting, but I was sceptical at first because I am wary of new things and hadn't been out of my house for a long time. My mum agreed to come with me to take me to the sessions – that was the first time that I had left the house in a year.

The first session was at a local community garden that has a small woodland. It is a lovely location and a very peaceful place to be. The staff are welcoming and very relaxed, non-threatening, knowledgeable and make me feel supported.

I enjoyed the sessions. We did bushcraft, and I even tried willow weaving. I am quite a shy person, so for the first few sessions I didn't say much, but after a while, I chatted with some of the people in the group and that helped me to become a bit more confident.

Doing the initial 6-week course got me interested in doing a more skills-based course. So, I signed up to do the Agored Coppicing Level 1 course with Coed Lleol's Outdoor Health project. It was at the same location so I felt comfortable attending straight away. This course taught me about Coppicing and how to use coppiced wood to make items. The tutor is really good at explaining how to do things that put me at ease. I have really enjoyed learning new skills and working with wood. It has opened up a new learning opportunity for me. I love the hands-on element as this is the way that I prefer to learn things.

Being outdoors is important for me as I tend to spend a lot of time indoors, it makes me feel relaxed and gives me fresh air. Being outside has helped improve my physical health too as I wasn't motivated to exercise in the house.

The Coed Lleol sessions have made a difference in my life, every time I came home from a session, I'd be so much happier, and I felt a huge sense of achievement that I had gotten



out, done new things and learnt new skills. I'd like to develop my skills further; I would like to do more Coppicing work and find out about jobs working outdoors with wood and I am looking into how I can do this. My mum has seen a huge difference in my behaviour too – she has noticed that I have grown in confidence socially and that the programme has helped to ease my anxiety.

I am so thankful to Coed Lleol for getting me out of the house – it has made an impact on my life in terms of my mental health and got me interested in new things again.



## NATURE CHAT

### ELISABETH



I am nearly 60 and have lived mainly in the South of England. My childhood was spent very close to nature – we lived in a rural setting, and I'd spend a lot of my time roaming around the woodlands. In a lot of respects, it was an absolutely glorious place to be. However, I had a difficult past with lots of abuse. The woodlands provided me with that sense of peace that I needed to cope with the other things that were happening in my life.

I moved to Wales about a month and a half before the first COVID lockdown. Pretty much as soon as I moved, I was isolated straight away in a new location where I didn't have friends or family around me. I ended up with two and a half years of my own conversation and although I am not what you would call a social person, even I realised that I needed some company. As a result of the lockdowns and being so isolated I had lost all confidence. I really wanted to start going outside at that point, but I have physical disabilities that mean that I can't walk very far and I had become very anxious.

I was not in the best place at all, and I knew that I needed help. In the end, I reached out to the Crisis team in my area. It was the Crisis team that told me about Coed Lleol's Nature Chat service. I immediately thought that it was right up my street because of my interest in woodlands. I was paired up with my nature chat caller and we arranged a set time and day each week that she would call me for 12 weeks.

The opportunity to talk to someone each week who also loves and is knowledgeable about nature was just so lovely. I am not always the most sociable of people, so having nature as a focus gave us something to talk about. In the end, we would have great conversations where we would swap knowledge. There were little bits that I knew that she didn't and little bits that she knew that I didn't. I have had lots of counselling in the past, and the nice thing about this is that it *wasn't* counselling. We weren't talking about personal things we were talking about a shared interest – it was a refreshing alternative to give me time to talk about nature especially as I was unable through my physical disabilities to access it at that time.

The experience of Nature Chat took my mind off my worries and helped me to refocus on my interest in woodlands and nature. I would often spend the time between our calls

reading up and researching things that I could then talk about the following week. Having the Nature Chat calls also gave me the stimulation to finally type up a book that I had been writing. I was able to re-find my confidence. Since that time, I have now joined a local club which gets me out of the house each week and I have started writing another book.

From the first conversation I had with her, when I was in such a bad place, to the last one that we had - I was feeling so much better. There is no doubt that the nature chats helped me to get there. It surprised me how a simple chat could do so much. I didn't need counselling at that point in my life, what I needed was for someone to wake me up and get me back outside and do things that I love – my Nature Chat caller absolutely did that.

