



CoedLleol  
SmallWoods

# Connecting People, Nature and Place Through Skills and Training

**Blaenau Gwent**

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## Executive Summary

The *Connecting People, Nature, and Place Through Skills and Training* project, run by Coed Lleol/Small Woods, exceeded its targets and delivered a range of impacts across programmes between 2023 and 2024. Designed to promote community wellbeing, mental health and a deeper connection with nature, the project exceeded expectations in several areas and achieved all its attendance targets and positive outcomes for participants. In total, 167 adults and 20 children attended one or more events or sessions, with a total of 365 adult engagements across all events. The project registered 119 individuals, with 58% of registered adults attending two or more sessions. The programmes included monthly gatherings, multi-session courses, stakeholder events, family programs, and both accredited and informal training - all accessible to people of varying backgrounds and needs.

Key targets were surpassed, including:

- **Training and Volunteering:** Four volunteers contributed to 60 sessions and 167 adult participants engaging across all programmes.
- **Health and Wellbeing:** A significant increase in wellbeing was observed, with pre-programme and post-programme assessments showing an average improvement of 3 points on the SWEMWBS scale.

**Connection with Nature:** Participants reported more frequent visits to woodlands, with the percentage visiting weekly rising from 30% to 47% - indicating a lasting shift in outdoor activity.

The project reached a diverse range of participants, with 82% of attendees coming from urban areas, and approximately 79% of participants living in the most deprived areas of Wales. This highlights its relevance and accessibility to urban communities and individuals facing economic challenges. Additionally, 30% of participants reported that their health was limiting their day-to-day lives, demonstrating the project's significant impact on those in need of mental and physical health support. Feedback showed that 96% of participants found the programme enjoyable, and 68% made new friends. Many reported reduced anxiety, improved confidence, and a deeper connection to nature, while others expressed interest in further education, volunteering, or applying their new skills professionally. Participants suggested increasing accessibility through more events, additional funding, flexible scheduling, and partnerships with disability organizations. The overall satisfaction rate was overwhelmingly high, with an average rating of 4.96 stars out of 5.

The project has made a significant impact on community wellbeing, sustainability, and skills development - exceeding expectations. However, there is still a need for continued support and expansion to ensure these benefits reach even more people in urban and rural areas alike, strengthening connections to nature and delivering multiple benefits.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Connecting People, Nature, and Skills Project

The project aimed to deliver green skills courses to support the UK's net zero and broader environmental goals. The initiative focused on equipping individuals with practical training, to enable them to contribute to sustainable practices and the green economy. It aimed to improve confidence, skills and wellbeing by offering outdoor programmes to people in Blaenau Gwent with the highest need.

Key objectives included:

- **Improving Confidence, Skills, and Wellbeing:** Offering nature-based health and wellbeing programmes to support individuals in Blaenau Gwent with their physical and mental health.
- **Providing Training and Volunteering Opportunities:** Building green skills and knowledge through accessible training and volunteering, to allow individuals to gain hands-on experience while making a positive impact on the local environment.
- **Creating Networks and Infrastructure:** Building outdoor health and learning networks to connect communities, promoting a collective commitment to environmental sustainability and personal wellbeing.

The project aimed to deliver the following outcomes and objectives; 18 woodland wellbeing sessions, four six-week wellbeing programmes, and two six-week Agored accredited courses. The project aimed to reach 80 people and supported 54 local events, with 20 participants attending training sessions. The project aimed for 10 individuals to gain qualifications, licences, and skills, and to create 10 volunteering opportunities as a direct result.

Course themes included practical conservation, environmental awareness, mindfulness, flora and fauna observation, coppicing, sustainable woodland management and wellbeing in nature. By connecting people, nature and place, the project aimed to nurture a skilled, engaged workforce committed to a sustainable future.

## 1.2. UK Government's Shared Prosperity Fund

The UK Shared Prosperity Fund is a central pillar of the UK government's Levelling Up agenda and provides £2.6 billion of funding for local investment by March 2025. The Fund aims to improve pride in place and increase life chances across the UK investing in communities and place, supporting local business, and people and skills. The overarching objective of the UK Government Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) is Building pride in place and increasing life chances.<sup>1</sup>

The UKSPF aims to achieve this through three investment priorities:

- Community & Place.
- Supporting Local Business; and,
- People & Skills (including adult numeracy)

The UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) is an initiative aimed at addressing inequalities and supporting local investment with £2.6 billion allocated by March 2025. The Fund focuses on domestic priorities, such as fostering pride in place, delivering high-quality skills training, and promoting pay, employment, and productivity growth to improve life chances nationwide.

The Fund encourages local places to build on their strengths and address specific needs, emphasising pride in place and improved life opportunities. It complements other funding streams and integrates with mainstream employment and skills programmes to enhance impact and streamline delivery. Councils and mayoral authorities in England, Scotland, and Wales lead the planning and implementation of the Fund's interventions, working collaboratively with local partners and the devolved governments of Scotland and Wales. This approach aims to ensure targeted investments that lead to visible, tangible improvements in both infrastructure and human capital, giving communities more reasons to take pride in their local areas.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, visit <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-shared-prosperity-fund-prospectus>.

### **1.3. About Coed Lleol/Small Woods**

Coed Lleol/Small Woods was established as Coed Lleol (Small Woods Wales) in 2002, the Welsh branch of the Small Woods Association, an organisation supporting woodland practitioners in sustainable woodland management since 1988 (originally as National Small Woods Association). In 2010, Coed Lleol/Small Woods launched a successful woodland health and wellbeing programme, known as Actif Woods Wales. The programme ran for a decade and established the charity's expertise in social forestry, connecting people with their local woodlands and natural spaces, whilst promoting healthy and sustainably managed woodlands. Since that time, Coed Lleol/Small Woods has expanded to deliver woodland wellbeing sessions in most counties of Wales. At time of writing, Coed Lleol/Small Woods is working on the Isle of Anglesey, and in Conwy, Pembrokeshire, Powys, Swansea, Carmarthenshire, Neath Port Talbot, Blaenau Gwent and Rhondda Cynon Taff. Small Woods also delivers social forestry work over the border, in Shropshire.

The woodland wellbeing programmes predominantly engage adults and children who live in areas with high health needs, low employment rates and poor access to services. Additionally, they encourage and support social prescribing by working in partnership with health services and general practice surgeries, which refer people to programmes. Coed Lleol/Small Woods has actively professionalised and promoted social prescribing to outdoor health activities through the development of outdoor health clusters in four areas in Wales: The Dyfi Valley; Pembrokeshire; Gwynedd; and Rhondda Cynon Taff. Coed Lleol/Small Woods also has an established and well-respected training programme for staff, leaders, providers and health professionals to up-skill and embed wellbeing in nature into their everyday practice.

Coed Lleol/Small Woods aims to protect and develop woodlands for current and future generations by encouraging the use of woodland resources for the long-term health and wellbeing of people and the environment – creating healthy woodlands and healthy people.



## 1.4. Wellbeing in nature and social prescribing

Evidence demonstrates that outdoor, nature-based activity can improve mental health, increase lifespan, and reduce the incidence of chronic disease<sup>2;3;4;5</sup>. Even a view or suggestion of nature via another sense (e.g. hearing birdsong or other natural soundscapes, smelling natural oils secreted by plants) can have potent effects in indoor environments, reducing stress and anxiety and boosting immune function<sup>6;7;8;9</sup>. The health and wellbeing benefits of time spent in – and connection with – nature is an area of research that has gained momentum in recent decades, reinforced by many studies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

People who live in greener neighbourhoods, or those close to the sea, report higher positive wellbeing, but only in response to recreational visits<sup>10</sup>. Frequency of visits to green spaces, inland waters and coastal areas has been shown to be associated with higher wellbeing and lower mental distress. During the COVID-19 pandemic, greater greenness within a 250m radius of a person's post code was a good predictor of higher levels of mental wellbeing<sup>11</sup>, suggesting that proximity to nature is an important factor in accessing it.

A longitudinal study of 2.3 million adults in Wales showed that greater exposure to green spaces was associated with reduced risk of future common mental health disorders, especially for those living in deprived communities<sup>12</sup>. While further research is needed into the causative pathways for the links between nature and wellbeing<sup>3</sup>, additional health benefits associated with undertaking nature-based activities include statistically significant reductions in diastolic

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<sup>2</sup> Lovell, R., Depledge, M. and Maxwell, S., 2018, Health and the natural environment: A review of evidence, policy, practice and opportunities for the future, Defra Project Code BE0109.

<sup>3</sup> Cervinka, R., Hölte, J., Pirgic, L., Schwab, M., Sudkamp, J., Haluza, D., Arnberger, A., Eder, R. and Ebenberger, M., 2014. Green public Health – Benefits of Woodlands on Human Health and Well-being. [Zur Gesundheitswirkung von Waldlandschaften]. Vienna, Austria: Bundesforschungszentrum für Wald (BFW).

<sup>4</sup> Pretty, J., Peacock, J., Sellens, M. and Griffin, M., 2005. The mental and physical health outcomes of green exercise, *International Journal of Environmental Health Research*, 15 (5) 319-337.

<sup>5</sup> Park, B., Tsunetsugu, Y., Kasetani, T., Kagawa, T and Miyazaki, Y., 2010. The physiological effects of Shinrin-yoku (taking in the forest atmosphere or forest bathing): evidence from field experiments in 24 forests across Japan, *Environmental Health and Preventative Medicine*, 15 (1) 18-26.

<sup>6</sup> Ulrich, R. S., 1984. View through a window may influence recovery from surgery, *Science*, 224, 420-421.

<sup>7</sup> Ratcliffe, E., Gatersleben, B. and Sowden, P. T., 2013. Bird sounds and their contributions to perceived attention restoration and stress recovery, *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 36, 221-228.

<sup>8</sup> Gould van Praag, C., Garfinkel, S., Sparasci, O., Mees, A., Philippides, A., Ware, M., Ottaviani, C., and Critchley, H., 2017. Mind-wandering and alterations to default mode network connectivity when listening to naturalistic versus artificial sounds, *Scientific Reports*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Li, Q., Kobayashi, M., Wakayama, Y., Inagaki, H., Katsumata, M., Hirata, Y., and Miyazaki, Y., 2009. Effect of phytoncide from trees on human natural killer cell function, *International Journal of Immunopathology and Pharmacology*, 951-959.

<sup>10</sup> White et al., 2021, Associations between green/blue spaces and mental health across 18 countries, available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-021-87675-0>

<sup>11</sup> Robinson et al., 2021, Nature's role in supporting health during the COVID-19 pandemic: a geospatial and socioecological study, available at: <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/18/5/2227>

<sup>12</sup> Geary et al., 2023, Ambient greenness, access to local green spaces, and subsequent mental health: a 10-year longitudinal dynamic panel study of 2.3 million adults in Wales, *The Lancet – Planetary Health*, available at: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(23\)00212-7/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(23)00212-7/fulltext)

blood pressure, salivary cortisol and heart rate, and statistically significant reductions in the incidence of diabetes and cardiovascular mortality<sup>13</sup>.

Following a consultation period, where over 1,000 stakeholders were engaged, a National Framework for Social Prescribing was released by Welsh Government in December 2023<sup>14</sup>. In it, social prescribing is defined as being ‘an umbrella term that describes a person-centred approach to connecting people to local community assets. Community assets include community groups, interventions and services which could be delivered online or in person, as well as buildings, land or even a person within a community’. The intention of social prescribing is to connect people with their community to improve their health and wellbeing.

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<sup>13</sup> Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018, The health benefits of the great outdoors: a systematic review and meta-analysis of greenspace exposure and health outcomes, available at:

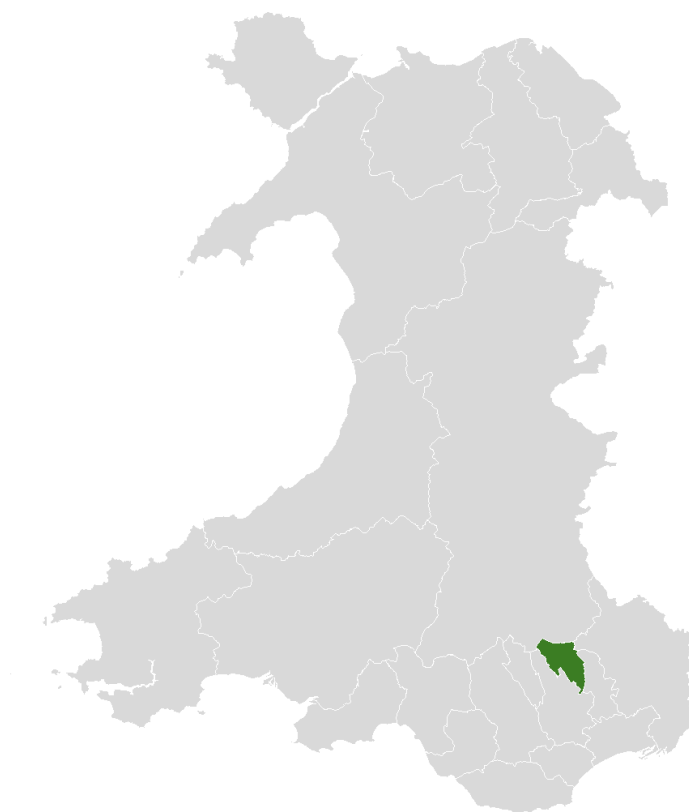
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0013935118303323>

<sup>14</sup> Welsh Government, 2023, National framework for social prescribing, available at:

<https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2024-02/national-framework-for-social-prescribing.pdf>

## 2. Approach

Between September 2023 and December 2024, the Connecting People, Nature and Place Through Skills and Training project with Coed Lleol/Small Woods delivered a variety of programmes aimed at promoting a connection with nature as well as promoting health and wellbeing in Blaenau Gwent (see Figure 1). These included stakeholder events, monthly gatherings, multi-session programmes, formal training, Agored courses and family programmes, providing opportunities for people of all abilities and backgrounds to participate.



*Figure 1 The project ran in Blaenau Gwent between September 2023 and December 2024.*

The *Connecting People, Nature and Place Through Skills and Training* project with Coed Lleol/Small Woods delivered a variety of initiatives throughout 2023 and 2024, aimed at promoting community wellbeing, mental health, and a deeper connection with nature. In addition to stakeholder events, the project provided a wide range of programmes, including monthly gatherings, multi-session courses, formal training and family programmes, accessible to people of all ages and backgrounds.

The project featured Agored Level 1 accredited courses, including “Coppicing Products” running from 13th February to 19th March 2024 and “Practical Skills” running from 10th October to 24th November 2024. These courses helped participants gain practical, nature-based skills, and a deeper connection with the environment. In addition, monthly drop-in sessions between October 2023 and November 2024 provided individuals and families the opportunity to take part in activities such as bushcraft, foraging and nature walks, supporting

health and wellbeing in an engaging and relaxed setting. The family-focused sessions also aimed to involve children, with a series of family-oriented events designed to promote shared experiences in nature.

The project aimed to build green skills, promote sustainability, and enhance wellbeing by offering outdoor programmes. It focused on training, volunteering, and creating networks to support both environmental and personal growth in Blaenau Gwent. A summary of the activities run over the course of the project is provided below.

*Table 1 Summary of all adult courses and events, dates and number of registered adult participants*

Course Name	Number of Sessions	Dates (From - To)	Total number of adult individual attendees over the programme
Monthly Drop-in Sessions (including family sessions)	12	October 2023- November 2024	51
Adult Programmes	24	October 2023- November 2024	30
Adult training courses	7	28/02/2024 – 20/08/2024	27
Agored level 1 Coppicing products	6	13/02/2024 - 19/03/2024	11
Agored level 1 Practical skills	6	10/10/2024 – 24/11/2024	5
Agored taster session	1	12/09/2024	6
Stakeholder event	2	September 2023 & September 2024	24
Closed group with adult community learning	2	20/02/24 & 18/06/2024	16
Closed group with Traveller community	2	28/02/2024 & 07/05/2024	11
<b>Total Adult Sessions</b>	55		167*
*Note this is total individual adults per course, in some cases some individuals will have participated across multiple programmes			

*Table 2 Summary of all child courses and events, dates and number of registered child participants*

Course Name	Number of Sessions	Dates (From - To)	Total number of child attendees over the programme
Monthly Drop-in Sessions (including family sessions)	5	12/02/2024 - 30/09/2024	20

*Table 3 Summary of volunteer activities*

Activity	Total number of volunteers over the programme	Dates (From - To)	Total of sessions volunteered
Volunteers	4	October 2023- November 2024	60

## **2.1. Adult and family programmes**

The project offered a variety of monthly drop-in sessions from October 2023 to November 2024, designed to promote wellbeing and space to deepen their connection with nature. These free sessions provided opportunities for adults and families to gain skills and knowledge in activities such as mindfulness, bushcraft, fungi identification, bird identification and woodwork, while improving their knowledge and skills of the natural world. The sessions were designed to support health and happiness, offering hands-on nature-based activities that helped participants build a stronger connection to the environment and promote both physical and mental wellbeing in a welcoming, outdoor setting.

## **2.2. Multi-session programmes**

Coed Lleol/Small Woods delivered a range of multi-session programmes aimed at over-16s throughout 2023 and 2024. These seasonal programmes were designed to improve participants' knowledge and skills of the natural world while building practical skills. The Introduction to Woodland Skills and Bushcraft Programmes gave participants hands-on experience in woodland management, bushcraft techniques and other nature-based activities. The Woodwork Programme at Sirhowy Woodlands, a free 6-week programme, allowed participants to build outdoor furniture, learn new woodworking skills, and connect with others. Throughout the year, these sessions helped participants develop practical skills, deepen their connection to nature, and support their mental and physical wellbeing.

### **2.1. Training**

Coed Lleol/Small Woods ran several woodwork training sessions throughout 2024, designed to improve participants' skills and techniques in woodworking. These sessions, held on multiple dates, provided valuable opportunities for participants to enhance their craftsmanship while building confidence and connecting with nature.

### **2.2. Agored Courses**

Coed Lleol/Small Woods delivered a range of Agored Level 1 accredited courses in 2024, aimed at developing practical skills in nature-based activities. These courses included Coppicing Products, Practical Skills, and a Taster Session, all designed to provide participants with hands-on learning experiences. The Coppicing Products course, running from 13th February to 19th March 2024, introduced participants to sustainable woodland management and the making of products that result from this. The Practical Skills Programme, running from 10th October to 24th November 2024, taught a range of essential outdoor skills. Additionally, the Taster Session held on 12th September 2024 offered participants a brief introduction to woodland skills, providing a practical foundation for future training. These courses aimed to improve participants' confidence, equip them with practical skills, and increase their understanding of sustainable practices.

## 2.3. Volunteering

In 2024, 4 volunteers supported the project by contributing to over 60 sessions. They helped with various activities, gaining practical experience and assisting in the delivery of the programmes. Their support was invaluable to the success of the project.

## 2.4. Publicity

Sessions were promoted, and various posters were designed to highlight all the planned sessions. All staff were informed about the necessary branding for the project. Regular email updates, including bilingual publicity, were planned for both new and existing partners.



Figure 2 Example of bilingual publicity for a bushcraft session for young people in Blaenau Gwent in both English (a) and Cymraeg (Welsh; b).

## 2.5. Welsh Language

All posters and promotional materials were created in both Welsh and English to ensure accessibility and inclusivity for a wider audience.

## 2.6. Equalities

All programmes were designed to be inclusive, to make them as accessible as possible. Efforts were made to assess the sites, particularly for wheelchair users, with adaptations made where possible. Collaboration with referral agencies was actively pursued to support individuals in accessing the programmes through a range of channels. The team worked to establish strong connections with these agencies, promoting inclusivity for all participants. Sites were carefully evaluated to assess provisions like accessible toilets, phone signal and car parking facilities.

### 3. Evaluation Methodology

Many of the registration forms were completed online, using Microsoft Forms, however a paper version was also available for those that requested it. All registrants agreed to collection and storing of their personal data via a General Data Protection Regulation statement. Where respondents did not want, or could not complete the questionnaire, a member of staff or carer was able to read and gain assent.

#### 3.1. Demographics

The adult registration process included the collection of demographic data to ensure a clear understanding of participants' backgrounds. The data captured key details such as gender, age, and ethnicity, alongside information about employment status and socioeconomic circumstances. Additionally, health-related information was gathered to enable a risk assessment to be carried out, to help tailor the programme's delivery to meet the specific needs and challenges of participants and keep everyone safe. This approach ensured that the project could effectively support a diverse range of individuals while enabling accurate monitoring and evaluation of its impact. While health questions were mandatory, other elements, such as gender and ethnicity, included a 'prefer not to say' option.

#### 3.2. Standardised tools for measuring health and wellbeing.

A pre-and post-survey method was utilised to measure changes in adult participants' physical health and mental wellbeing. Surveys were completed with an online link, on paper or over the phone, during the registration process and upon completion of courses.

The three validated measures that were used in the pre-and post-surveys were:

1. the Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS<sup>15</sup>), to measure the impact on wellbeing.
2. the International Physical Activity Questionnaire – Short Form (IPAQ-SF<sup>16</sup>), to measure changes in physical activity; and
3. the EQ-5D-5L health thermometer<sup>17</sup>, to measure self-perceived changes in overall health.

#### 3.3. Other measurement tools

A non-validated short measure on nature connection was used to collect pre- and post-course scores, as well as an evaluative questionnaire relating to the Five Ways to Wellbeing. A post-activity survey established the participants' views about the programme and gathered participant ideas on what improvements could be made.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/sci/med/research/platform/wemwbs>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3214824/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://euroqol.org/>



## 4. Results

In this section we present results from participants that registered on the courses. In addition, further sections use qualitative measures to describe the impact from participants and volunteers.

### 4.1. Referrals and Practitioners

In total, 4 adults were referred from another organisation within the programme, three from POBL, and one from a music therapist. The stakeholder launch invited health professionals to attend, which included those working as occupational therapists, community outreach officers, and health and wellbeing practitioners.

### 4.2. Registration and attendance

In total 167 adults and 20 children attended one or more events or sessions as part of the project, with a total of 365 adult engagements across all the events (see Table 4). A total of 119 individuals were officially registered through the registration form, with additional paper registers for one off events such as stakeholder engagement days. Of those that registered to attend, 20 were unable to attend sessions. Over 58% of the registered adult participants attended two or more events or sessions held by Coed Lleol/Small Woods over the project timeline.

*Table 4 Number of different events attended by adult participants that registered with Coed Lleol/ Small woods.*

Total number of different events attended by individual adults	Count of participants
1	42
2	21
3	7
4	6
5	3
6	7
7	2
8	2
10+	9
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>99</b>



## 4.3. Demographics

### 4.3.1. Gender, age, ethnicity

The statistics below reflect the participants who attended at least one session of any programme (n=99); those who registered but did not attend are not included. The majority of participants were female, making up 58% (n=57), while 37% (n=37) identified as male, and 5% (n=5) preferred not to disclose their gender (**Error! Reference source not found.a**). The age range of participants varied, with the largest age category being 40-49 (28%, n=27), followed by 30-39 (21%, n=21). Other age groups included under 19 (15%, n=14), 20-29 (15%, n=14), 50-59 (11%, n=10), 60-69 (7%, n=7), and 70-79 (3%, n=3) (**Error! Reference source not found.b**). The ethnicity of the project attendees was as follows: 80% (n=79) identified as White British/Welsh, 13% (n=13) preferred not to disclose their ethnicity, 4% (n=4) identified as Gypsy, 2% (n=2) as White European, and 1% (n=1) as Mixed Ethnic Origin.

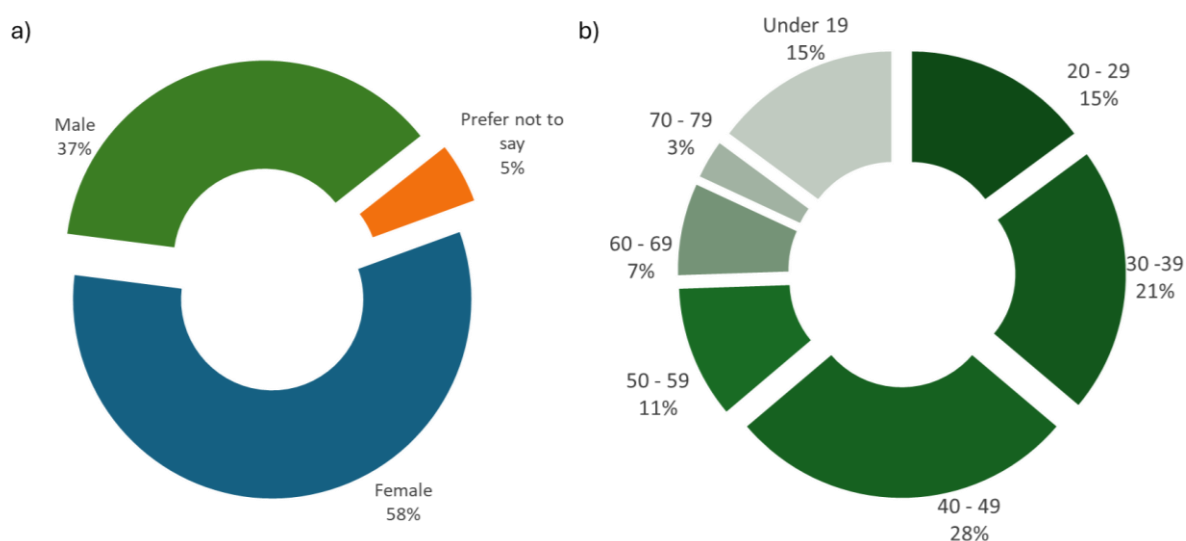


Figure 3 Pie charts showing the a) gender and b) age groups of registered participants.

Table 5 Ethnicity of registered participants

Ethnicity	Number of registered participants
I prefer not to say	13
Mixed ethnic origin	1
White British/Welsh	79
White European	2
Other (Specified as Gypsy)	4

### 4.3.2. Socio economics

The largest group among participants stated that they were in paid employment or self-employed (26%, n=26, see Figure 4). Attendees were also diverse in their living and working situations: 19% (n=19) were not in paid employment and not looking for work, while 7% (n=7) were looking for work. A small number were retired (7%, n=7), and others had varying roles, such as full-time students (1%, n=1) and carers (2%, n=2). Home-schooling was reported by 10% (n=10) of participants, often within the traveller community, and 19% (n=19) preferred not to disclose their status.

The attendees who provided postcodes (n=99) lived in both urban and rural areas, with the majority of postcodes falling into urban classifications (82%, n=82) according to the UK Government Rural Urban Classification system. A smaller proportion lived in rural areas, with 5% (n=5) in D1 - Rural: Town and Fringe, and 3% (n=3) in E1 - Rural: Village. There were also 9 cases (9%) where postcodes were not available. Attendees' postcodes were situated within areas between the first and tenth deciles of the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation. Lower numbers represent higher levels of deprivation, with the first five deciles indicating the most deprived areas in Wales. Around 79% of attendees lived in the most deprived areas (1st to 5th deciles), while 12% of participants were in the least deprived areas (6th to 10th deciles) (See Figure 5b).

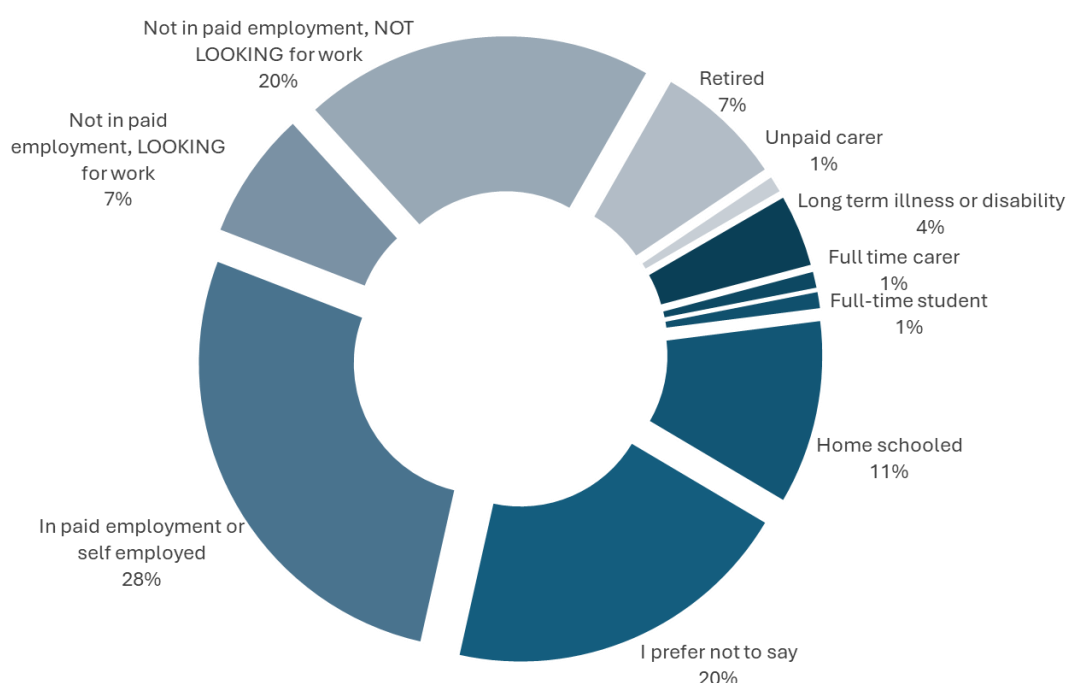


Figure 4. Employment status of registered participants as part of the project

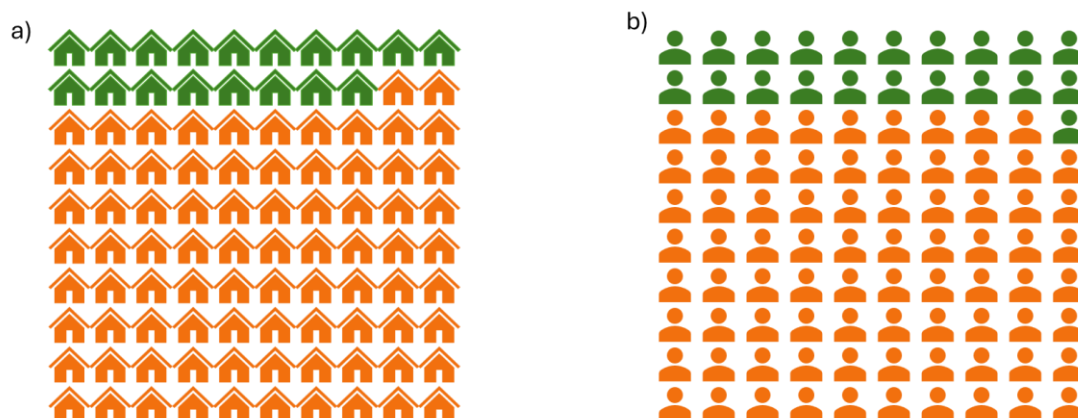


Figure 5 Showing a) Proportion of participants from both urban (red; 82%) and rural areas (green 18%), according to the UK Government Rural Urban Classification system and b) Showing proportion of participants living in the most deprived areas of the UK (red, 79%) based on the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (first to fifth deciles).

### 4.3.3. Health and wellbeing

Registrants were asked if they felt that their health and wellbeing was limiting their lives, and to list their issues or concerns. Of the 99 participants that responded to that question, 30% (n=30) stated their health was either limited 'a little' or 'a lot' day-to-day due to health concerns. Specifically, 20% (n=20) indicated that their health was "limited a little," and 10% (n=10) said it was "limited a lot." Meanwhile, 54% (n=54) of participants stated their health was not limiting, and 15% (n=15) chose not to disclose (Figure 6a).

Over three-quarters of attendees (60%, n=60) listed health and wellbeing issues or concerns during registration; in some cases, more than one concern was mentioned (Figure 6b). The key health concerns were broadly categorized into the following: 27% (n=27) of participants reported mental health conditions and symptoms, including anxiety, depression, and loneliness/isolation; 13% (n=13) mentioned neurodiversity, including conditions like autism and ADHD; 1% (n=1) cited issues related to activity levels, mobility, coordination, and joints; 1% (n=1) reported airway or fatigue-related conditions such as asthma, long COVID-19, and fibromyalgia; and 14% (n=14) noted long-term or chronic conditions, including those associated with the heart, kidneys, thyroid, neurological issues, high blood pressure, and cancer. Additionally, 19% (n=19) of participants expressed no health or wellbeing issues, and 40% (n=40) preferred not to disclose any concerns. Notably, 2% (n=2) specifically mentioned social isolation.

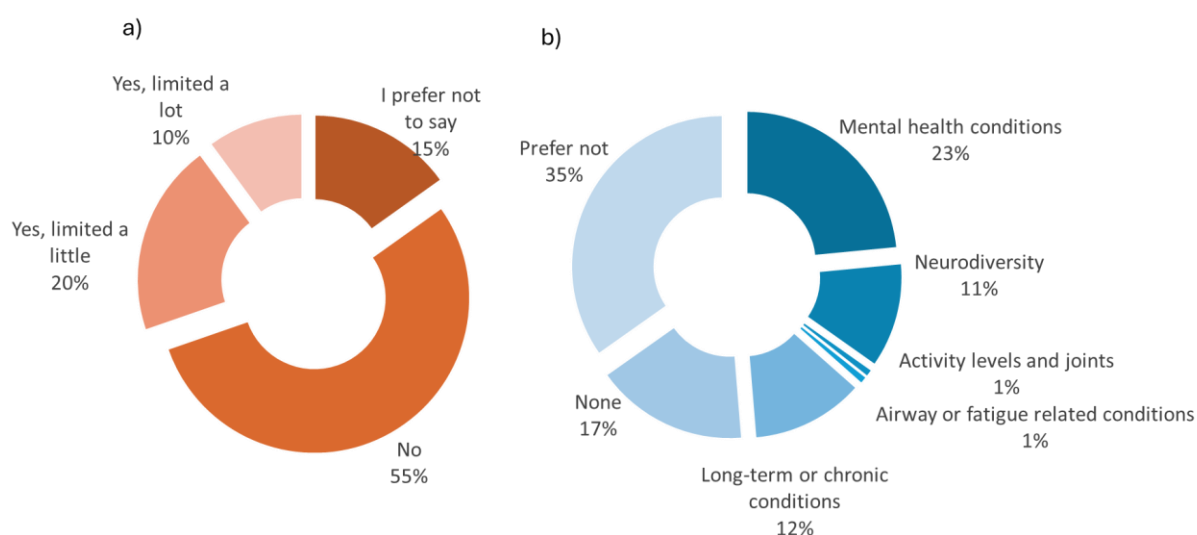


Figure 6 Showing a) How much participants felt their lives were limited because of health concerns, and b) What conditions were their key health concerns.

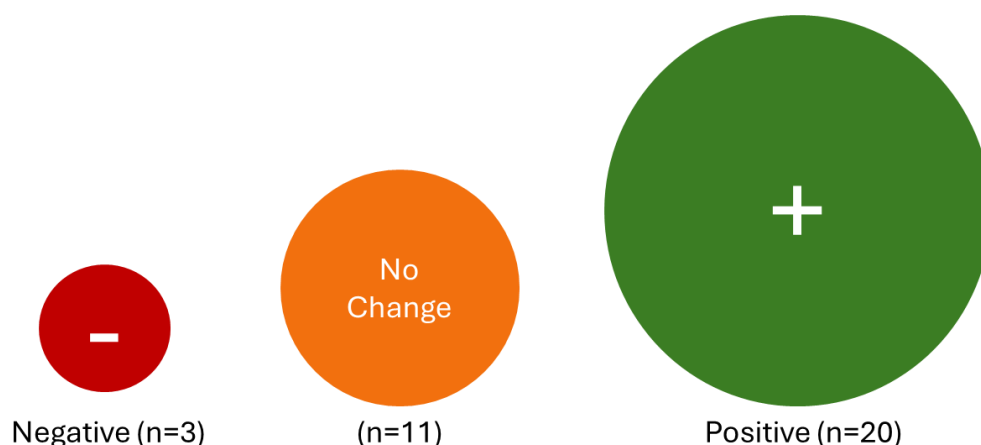
## 4.4. Evaluation responses

Of the 99 registered participants, 53% (n=53) completed the both the pre- and post-questionnaires online with a further 13 completing the specific Agored course feedback forms. The pre- and post-questionnaires included non-compulsory questions, which may result in fewer scores that can be compared across the time frames.

### 4.4.1. Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEWBMS)

Across the group that completed the pre-scores, (n=66), the mean SWEWBMS score was 23.4 while across the group the post scores, (n=48), the mean SWEWBMS score was 26.4, showing a significant increase in wellbeing across the groups (which requires an average of greater than a three-point rise).

At the individual level, 34 participants completed all 14 questions (7 before and 7 after). All questions are required to be answered to give a SWEWBMS score at the individual level. We found that 59% (n=20) showed a significant increase in wellbeing. Additionally, 32% showed no significant difference (n=11), and 9% (n=3) showed a decrease in wellbeing. Those that showed a positive increase, had an average increase of 7.9 points of wellbeing scores difference. See Figure 7 for an illustration of the change in wellbeing scores across the participants.

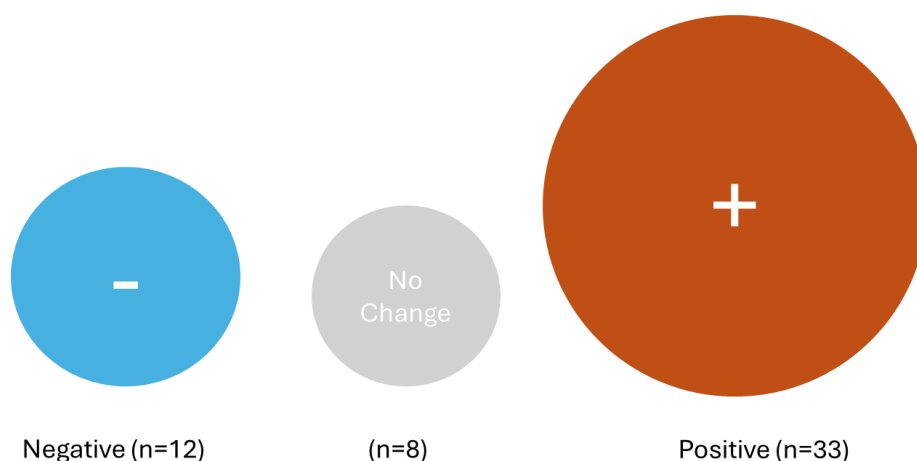


*Figure 7 At the individual level, the Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) was used to calculate the percentage reduction or increase in personal wellbeing, based on a sample size of 34 respondents that reported both before and after scores.*

#### 4.4.2. EQ-5D-5L Health Thermometer

The Health Thermometer responses were gathered from 99 participants in the pre-programme questionnaire and 53 in the post-programme questionnaire, with participants completing both pre- and post-course assessments. This allowed for a direct comparison of health perceptions before and after participation in the programme. The analysis of these scores is essential to evaluate the impact of the course on participants' health and well-being.

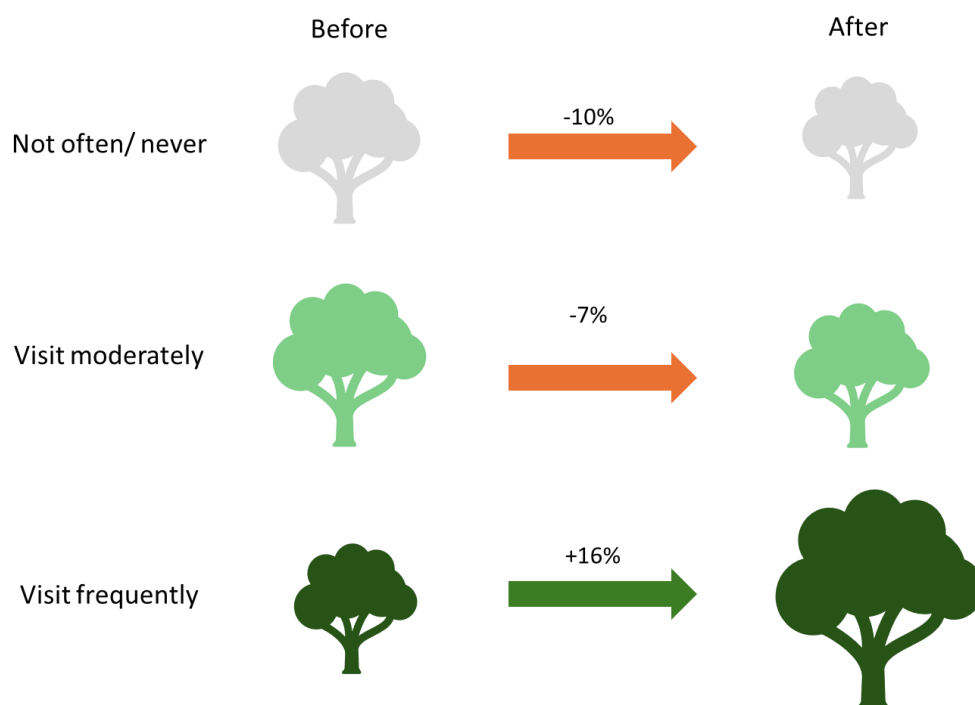
In total, 62% (n=33) noted a positive change in health overall, 15% (n=8) indicated no change, and 22% (n=12) showed negative health changes between before and after the programmes. Variability in how individuals respond to the course also suggests that while the programme had a generally positive impact on health for many, others may have faced challenges that affected their overall health perception during this time.



*Figure 8 Showing changes in the Health Thermometer Scores across participants.*

### 4.4.3. Nature Connection

In total 43 responses were collected to the nature connection questionnaire with both a pre- and post- response from the same participant (See Figure 9) Participants were asked how much contact they had with woodlands before the course, and how much contact afterwards.



*Figure 9 Showing frequency of visits to woodland before and after the project, as a percentage.*

Before the programme, 35% of respondents said they visited woodlands “never” or rarely, which fell to 25% after the programme. Those that went often fell from 35% to 28% which those that visited frequently (weekly or more) increased from 30% to 47% of participants. This highlights a shift to more frequent visits to woodlands, showing lasting impact of the project in Blaenau Gwent.

Additionally, the evaluative questionnaire included three questions about connection to woodlands:

1. Do you think that you will continue to use woodlands or green spaces to improve your health and well-being in the future?
2. Do you feel that green spaces and woodlands are more accessible to you than they were before you started this programme?
3. Please tell us how the green spaces or woodlands are more accessible to you than they were before?

Seventy one percent of respondents indicated that they plan to continue using woodlands and green spaces to improve their health and well-being in the future (See Figure 10). Additionally, 64% of respondents reported that green spaces and woodlands are more

accessible to them than before they started the programme. Twelve participants provided open-text responses, detailing how these spaces have become more accessible, offering insights into their personal experiences and increased engagement with nature (see Figure 11).

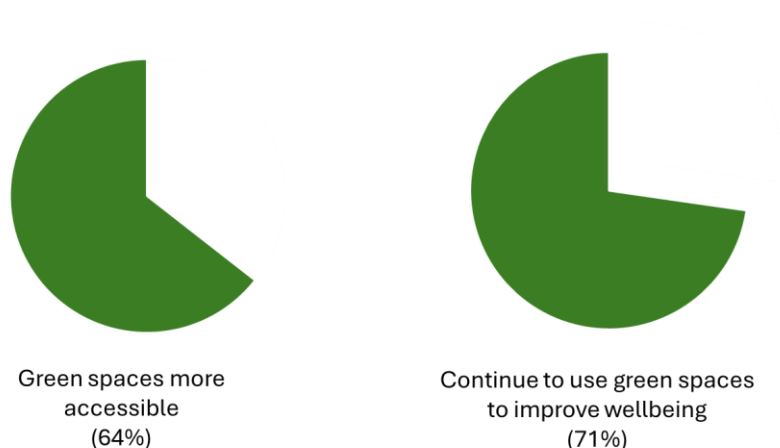


Figure 10 Percentage of respondents that felt green spaces were more accessible after the course, and percentage of those continuing to use green spaces to improve wellbeing.



Figure 11 Showing quotes from participants in response to whether they will continue to use woodlands or green spaces to improve their health and well-being in the future.

#### 4.4.4. Five Ways to Wellbeing

In total, 52 responses were collected to the post-programme evaluation questionnaire, which included eight questions related to the NHS's Five Ways to Wellbeing. These questions asked respondents to agree or disagree about how much the course had: been enjoyable; improved [their] confidence; helped [them] make new friends; taught [them] new skills and knowledge; connected [them] to local nature; helped [them] to feel part of the local community; helped [them] to do more exercise than [they] did before; and motivated [them] to get involved in volunteering (See Figure 12).

In terms of social connections, 34 out of 50 (68%) agreed or strongly agreed that the programme helped them make new friends. The course also motivated some participants to exercise more (66%) agreeing that they were more active since the course. Participants also agreed that they had gained new skills (96%) and 57% were motivated to volunteer more since participating. Regarding enjoyment, 50 out of 52 participants (96%) agreed or strongly agreed that the course was enjoyable. For connection to local nature, 50 out of 52 participants (96%) agreed or strongly agreed, showing a positive impact in this area. Forty seven out of 52 (90%) agreed and or strongly agreed that their confidence was improved. Similarly, 43 out of 52 (82%) agreed or strongly agreed that the course helped them feel part of the local community.

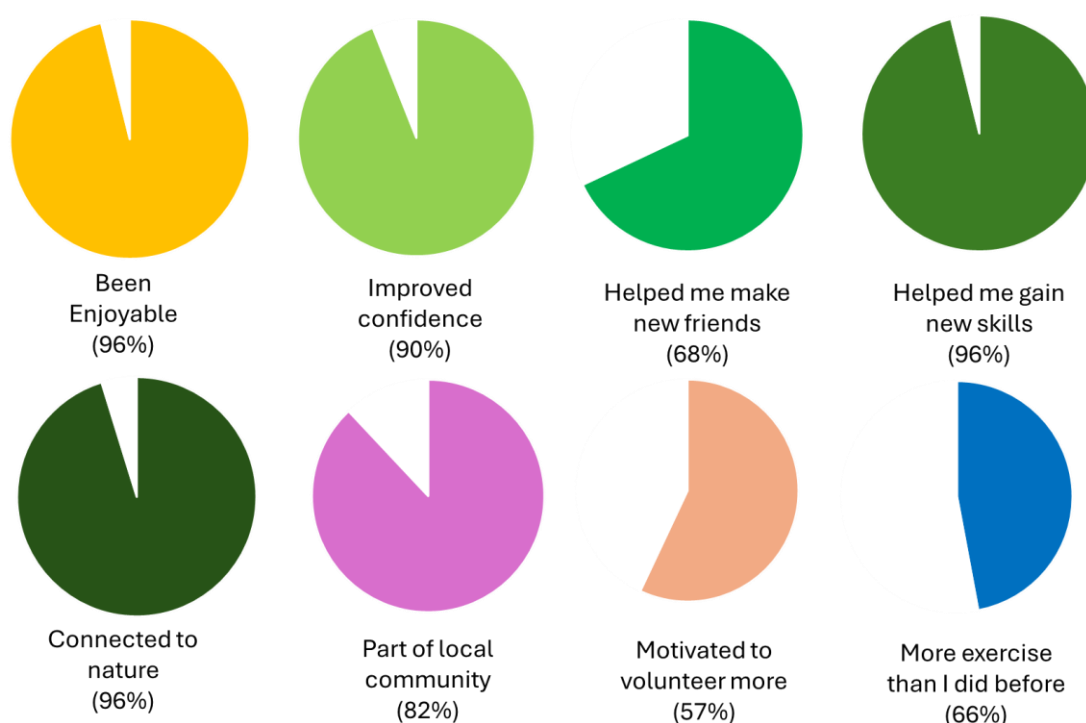


Figure 12 Percentage of responses to the Five Ways to Wellbeing-based questions, showing participants that either "Agreed" or "strongly Agreed" to the series of statements about the programme.



## 4.5. Post-activity survey

As part of the evaluation form, participants were asked to feedback in five ways:

1. If the project has helped you to gain new life skills or practical skills, how have these skills improved or been used in your everyday life? (think about both practical and life skills)
2. How are you going to use the skills and knowledge you learnt to progress to further learning, courses, volunteering or employment?
3. Overall, please tell us if, or how, being part of this programme has inspired any changes in you (for your physical or your mental well-being, or anything else!)
4. Tell us what we could improve on
5. Overall, how would you rate your Coed Lleol/Small Woods experience? (1 star = poor, 5 stars = excellent)

### 4.5.1. Life skills

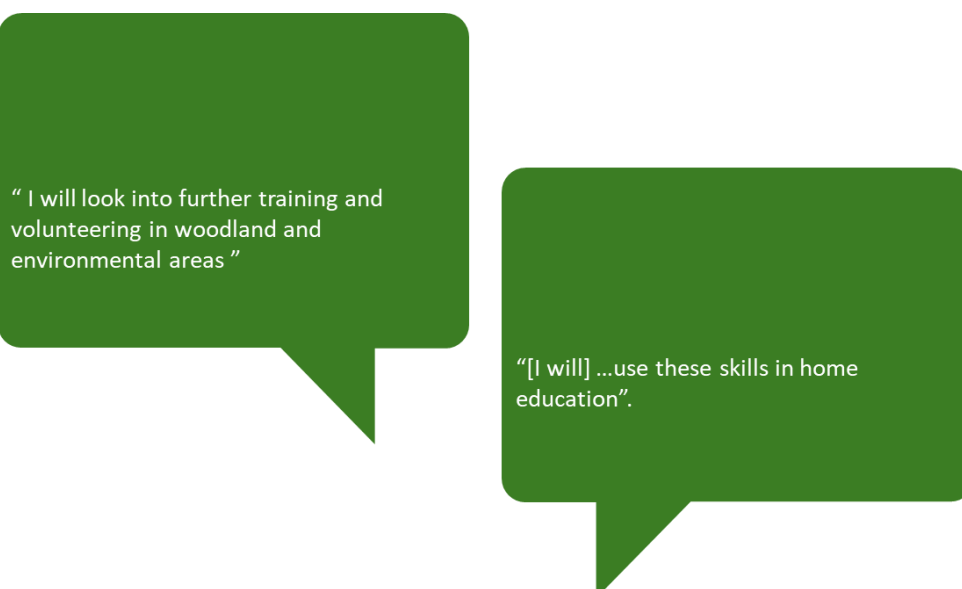
Out of 46 responses to this question, participants shared a diverse range of practical and life skills gained through the project, many of which have been integrated into their everyday lives (Figure 13). Participants learned various nature-based skills, such as identifying fungi, butterflies, and trees, and gained hands-on experience in bushcraft, including fire lighting, whittling, and woodworking. These skills were not only useful for personal enjoyment but were also shared with others, particularly children, during outdoor walks or activities. Many participants also highlighted the positive impact the project had on their mental health, with several noting reduced anxiety, improved confidence, and a sense of relaxation through activities like outdoor cooking and crafting. The social aspect was also important, as participants built new friendships, enhanced their communication skills and felt more comfortable engaging in group settings. For some, the skills learned have opened up new opportunities, such as using woodworking techniques to create products for sale or applying newfound knowledge in nature-based careers. Overall, the experience provided a blend of personal growth, creativity, and a deeper appreciation for nature, all of which contributed to participants' overall wellbeing.



*Figure 13 Quotes from participants on the project responding to the open-ended question: “If the project has helped you to gain new life skills or practical skills, how have these skills improved or been used in your everyday life?”*

#### 4.5.2. Further development

Participants shared various ways they plan to use the skills and knowledge gained to further their learning, volunteering, or employment opportunities. Many expressed an interest in continuing their education in nature identification, bushcraft, and woodwork, with some looking to pursue qualifications such as a forest school course or expand their skills for personal or professional use. Several participants mentioned their ongoing volunteering at Sirhowy woodlands, with a desire to contribute by leading sessions or teaching others, such as running woodland wellbeing sessions or offering nature walks. Others plan to apply their skills to community projects, like using green woodworking skills to create products for sale or supporting eco-building initiatives. Many also expressed the intention to incorporate their new knowledge into their daily lives, including foraging, outdoor cooking, and sharing skills with family or in home education settings. Overall, the responses highlight a clear commitment to further learning, teaching others, and using newly acquired skills in both personal and professional development.



*Figure 14 Quotes from participants in response to the question: "How are you going to use the skills and knowledge you learnt to progress to further learning, courses, volunteering or employment?"*

### 4.5.3. Inspired changes

The programme has inspired a range of positive changes in participants, particularly in their physical and mental wellbeing. Many participants reported feeling more connected to nature, with several noting how spending time outdoors helped reduce anxiety, increase confidence, and improve their overall mental health. For some, reconnecting with nature created a sense of nostalgia and rekindled their passion for outdoor activities, while others appreciated the mindfulness aspects of the programme, such as the "sit-spot" exercises, which helped ground them and alleviate stress.

Several individuals mentioned that the programme had a positive impact on their daily lives, motivating them to adopt healthier routines, spend more time outdoors and develop a more balanced lifestyle. Participants also expressed a greater sense of confidence, with many noting improvements in social interactions and a desire to explore new opportunities, such as volunteering or pursuing work in nature-based fields, like forest school leadership. Additionally, the hands-on activities, like green woodworking, were highlighted as both enjoyable and mentally beneficial, encouraging focus and relaxation. Overall, the programme has not only deepened participants' appreciation for nature but also helped inspire healthier, more mindful approaches to life and a renewed sense of personal growth.

"Mental wellbeing has definitely improved after being back with Mother Nature..."

"I want to connect with nature more with my family, and use skills learnt to my education and process this into employment as a forest school leader".

*Figure 15 Quotes from participants in response to "Overall, please tell us if, or how, being part of this programme has inspired any changes in you (for your physical or your mental well-being, or anything else)"*

#### 4.5.4. Delivery improvements

Participants provided several suggestions for improvement, most of which focused on increasing accessibility and resources. There were requests for more funding to continue the sessions and for additional events or groups to be created. Some participants highlighted the need for more staff or volunteers to support the growing demand. A few suggested specific partnerships with disability organizations or more research-based initiatives. Additionally, some expressed a desire for more flexible scheduling, such as after-school options for children, and even car sharing options for convenience. Overall, the main request was for more sessions, continued funding, and more opportunities for involvement.

These responses highlight the value of maintaining the programme while considering small refinements to enhance accessibility. In total, out of five stars, respondents gave on average 4.96 stars.



*Figure 16. Participants gave the project an average of 4.9 stars out of five.*

### 4.1. Volunteering

In 2024, 4 volunteers supported the project by contributing to over 60 sessions. They helped with various activities, gaining practical experience and assisting in the delivery of the programmes. Their support was valuable to the success of the project.

*"I have found myself again. I had honestly forgotten what it is like to be outside and just stop and look around. It's so good to be back in nature. I feel I have come back to my roots. I've stopped worrying about money and other stuff, I have focused on my future and fingers crossed I will be delivering my own sessions next year".*

A quote from a volunteer on the Connecting People, Nature, and Place Through Skills and Training project, 2025.

## 4.2. Agored Feedback

In total, of the 17 participants attending Agored courses, 13 participants provided feedback as part of their Agored Level 1 coppicing products course or practical skills course in Blaenau Gwent. Overall, students showed overwhelmingly positive responses, with some suggestions to increase the accessibility and increase the length of the course. Participants highlighted how the course boosted their confidence, deepened their connection to nature, and sparked interest in further outdoor and forestry training. Many expressed a desire to teach others in the future and suggested making the course longer to enhance learning, with skills gained enabling them to run groups and share knowledge in settings like Forest Schools.

"I have thoroughly enjoyed this course, meeting new people, making the products and feeling like part of the team".

"it will help me be able to run groups with young people"

"Helped me to pass on these skills now in my forest school and build on confidence"

Figure 17. Agored accredited course feedback in Blaenau Gwent.



## 4.1. Project photographs



Figure 18 Photographs from the Connecting People, Nature, and Place Through Skills and Training project, Blaenau Gwent between 2023 and 2024.

## 5. Conclusions

The *Connecting People, Nature, and Place Through Skills and Training* project has demonstrated great success in promoting community wellbeing, mental health, and a deeper connection with nature. With 167 adults and 20 children engaging in the programme, the project exceeded its targets, impacting a diverse group, including those from urban areas and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Participants reported significant improvements in their health and wellbeing, with a notable increase in wellbeing scores and a shift towards more frequent outdoor activity. The project also helped to create new social connections, with 68% of participants making new friends and many gaining new skills that contributed to their personal growth and confidence.

However, the demand for this type of programme far outweighs the current capacity. Feedback from participants has shown overwhelming enthusiasm, with many eager to pursue further education or use their new skills in community or professional roles. The high satisfaction rate and positive impact on wellbeing and confidence underscore the necessity of continuing and expanding this initiative. Participants have expressed a clear desire for more sessions, with requests for longer courses, more flexible scheduling, and additional resources to reach more people. There is a strong case for further investment in this programme to meet the growing demand and to ensure that more individuals can benefit from the life-changing opportunities it provides.

The success of the initiative shows the profound impact it has on individuals, particularly those facing health and social challenges. With continued support, the programme can reach even more people, both in urban and rural areas, providing long-term benefits for both community wellbeing and environmental sustainability. The positive feedback and clear demand for expansion demonstrate that with adequate investment, this project can continue to change lives and increase connections between people, nature, and their communities.

## 6. Acknowledgements

This project was made possible by the UK government. We would also like to acknowledge the participants who gave their time to respond to questionnaires, so we could evaluate the impact this project has had on their lives.



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