



# Lost Peatlands Community Engagement, 2021-2024

## Evaluative Final Report

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# 1. Introduction

The Lost Peatlands project's goals were to restore areas of historic peatland between Neath Port Talbot and Rhondda Cynon Taff, creating habitats for rare and declining species, such as water voles and skylarks. It focused on almost 6,700 hectares of upland landscape, providing new opportunities for people to discover the wealth of natural and cultural heritage that the area has to offer.

Coed Lleol/Small Woods worked in partnership with Neath Port Talbot Council to deliver the health and wellbeing aims of the project, with funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Coed Lleol/Small Woods worked with local people and support agencies to provide activities in the outdoors that support and promote healthy lifestyles and positive wellbeing. The project also aimed to encourage local people to use the six community wild areas in areas of Glynccorrwg, Blaenrhondda, Cwmparc, Hendre Mynydd, Cymmer and Gwynfi.

This is the final report of the community engagement work that was carried out for the Lost Peatlands project. It summarises and evaluates the impact and effectiveness of the programmes that have run over the three years of project delivery, from 2021 to 2024.



## 2. Outputs

*The engagement targets for the three years of the Lost Peatlands project and whether they were achieved are given in Tables 3, 5 and 7. Six-week programmes and drop-in sessions are listed in Tables 3, 6 and 8.*

Table Each year, almost all targets were exceeded. Year 2's Agored training target fell short by six people; however, Year 3 more than made this up by 66 people more than the 12-person target for the year. Additionally, Coed Lleol/Small Woods engaged people at over 40 events hosted by other organisations, across the three years.

*Table 1 Total number of participants across all programmes throughout the three year project*

Programme	Total number of participants across all years
Adult and Family 6-week programme	174
Drop- in sessions	444
Agored accreditation	91
Health Walk leader	60
<b>Total participants</b>	<b>769</b>

*Table 2 Total number of events across all programmes throughout the three year project*

Programme	Total number of events across all years
Adult and Family 6-week programme	60
Drop- in sessions	45
Agored accreditation	48
Health Walk leader	6
Coed Lleol stakeholder events	3
External events	42
<b>Total Events</b>	<b>204</b>

*Table 3 Lost Peatlands Year 1 community engagement targets*

Programme	Target	Achieved	Exceeded?
Adult 6-week programme	16 adults	17 adults	✓
Family 6-week programme	16 adults and children	33 adults and children	✓
Drop-in sessions	12 adults	40 adults	✓
Agored accreditation	12 adults	19 adults	✓

Programme	Target	Achieved	Exceeded?
Stakeholder events	1 event	1 event held	Met
<b>Total participants</b>	<b>56 (including Agored)</b>	<b>109 (including Agored)</b>	✓

*Table 4 Lost Peatlands Year 1 community engagement events*

Output	Description	Attendees
Glyncorrwg family session	Six-week programme – Health and wellbeing	16
Cymer family session	Six-week programme – Health and wellbeing	21
Glyncorrwg adult session	Six-week programme – Health and wellbeing	17
Blaenrhondda adult session	Six-week programme – Health and wellbeing (photography)	11
Gwynfi adult session	Drop-in session – Making log reindeers	6
Gwynfi adult session	Drop-in session – Introduction to green woodworking	9
Agored online course	Six-week programme – Sustainable use of natural resources	19 (1 completed workbook)
Cwmparc adult session	Drop-in session – Guided walk and navigation	6
Gwynfi adult session	Drop-in session – Making mallets	8
Cwmparc adult session	Drop-in session – Introduction to green woodworking	10
Cwmparc adult session	Drop-in session – Making soap dishes and foragers' soap	9
Gwynfi adult session	Drop-in session – Spatulas and shave horses	4
Cwmparc adult session	Drop-in session – Willow weaving	12
Gwynfi adult session	Drop-in session – Making spoons	3
Cwmparc adult session	Drop-in session – Making spatulas	7

*Table 5 Lost Peatlands Year 2 community engagement targets*

Programme	Target	Achieved	Exceeded?
Adult 6-week programme	16 adults	28 adults	✓
Family 6-week programme	16 adults and children	29 (7 adults and 22 children)	✓
Drop-in sessions	12 adults	46 adults	✓
Agored accreditation	12 adults	6 online	Not met
Health Walk leader training	10 adults	37 adults	✓
Stakeholder events	1 event	2 events (Rhondda Cynon Taf and Neath Port Talbot)	✓
Health referral partners (referring)	2 (new) health partners	7 health partners referred to the project (Flying Start, Mind, Community Mental Health Team (Tonna), Shelter, Social Prescribing Team, Adferiad and Local Area Coordination Team)	✓
<b>Total unique participants for sessions</b>	<b>66 (including Agored &amp; HWL training)</b>	<b>146* (including Agored &amp; HWL training) *134 excluding double-counted participants who attended more than one event</b>	✓

*Table 6 Lost Peatlands Year 2 community engagement events*

Year 2 Outputs	Description	Total number of attendees
Family open sessions Cwmparc	Six-week programme – Health and wellbeing	16
Family open sessions Gwynfi	Six-week programme – Health and wellbeing	12
Adult open sessions Cymmer	Six-week programme – Health and wellbeing	12
Adult open sessions Gwynfi	Six-week programme – Health and wellbeing	15
Blaenrhondda 8.12.22	Drop-in session – Introduction to whittling	12
Glyncorrwg 12.12.22	Drop-in session – Willow weaving and bath salts making	9
Glyncorrwg 14.1.22	Drop-in session – Talk on Welsh traditions and wassailing singalong, willow hearts and Mari Lwyds	11
Blaenrhondda 19.1.23	Drop-in session – Willow weaving	12
Glyncorrwg 1.2.23	Drop-in session – Imbolc traditions, weaving reeds, corn weaving and kids' crafts	4
Blaenrhondda 9.2.23	Drop-in session – Wet felting introduction and local sheep breeds, wool processing and felting	14
Blaenrhondda 2.3.23	Drop-in session – Pewter casting and mould making, campfire stew	14
Glyncorrwg 29.3.23	Drop-in session – Whittling jewellery	7
Glyncorrwg 05.4.23	Drop-in session – Making natural dyes and Easter crafts	6
Cwmparc 11.4.23	Drop-in session – Introduction to green woodworking, tools and materials, using a shave horse, making a butter knife, painting gnomes	18
Blaenrhondda 20.4.23	Drop-in session – Introduction to tool use and materials, making shrink pots, bird feeders and pop-up birds	20
Gwynfi 23.5.23	Drop-in session – Team building, assembling shave horses, tool use and demo-making phone/recipe stands	10

*Table 7 Lost Peatlands Year 3 community engagement targets*

Programme	Target	Achieved	Exceeded?
Adult 6-week programme	16 adults	47 adults	✓
Family 6-week programme	16 adults and children	20 (9 adults and 11 children)	✓
Drop-in sessions	12 adults	137 adults	✓
Agored accreditation	12 adults	66	✓
Health Walk leader training	10 adults	23	✓
Stakeholder events	1 event	46	
<b>Total participants for sessions</b>	<b>66 (including Agored &amp; HWL training)</b>	<b>283* (including Agored &amp; HWL training)</b>	✓

*Table 8 Lost Peatlands Year 3 community engagement events*

Year 3 Outputs	Description	Attendees
Family open programme Blaenrhondda 27.7.23	Six-week programme – Foraging painting, walks, firelighting, cooking and marshmallow toasting, den building, archery and litter picking	9 adults + 11 children
Agored course 02.05.23	Practical skills in the outdoors	8 (7 passed)
Cwmparc 5.10.23	Six-week Agored programme – Weaving and basketry	6
Gwynfi 5.10.23	Six-week Agored programme – Weaving and basketry	17
Agored course 05.10.23	Six week programme- Exploring craft resources	7
Agored course 05.10.23	Six week programme- Exploring craft	5
Glyncorrwg 10.4.24	Six-week Agored programme – Weaving and basketry	11
Treherbert 17.4.24	Six-week Agored programme – Weaving and basketry	13
Cymmer Summer 3, 9.8.23	Drop-in session – Breathing exercises and yoga, gratitude and mini-garden activity, foraging walk, campfire cooking	6
Glyncorrwg summer 4, 29.8.23	Drop-in session – Whittling owls	7



Year 3 Outputs	Description	Attendees
Cymmer drop-in 1, 15.11.23	Drop-in session – Willow weaving wreaths, baskets and tension trays, talk on harvesting and growing own willow	7
Cymmer drop-in 2, 6.12.23	Drop-in session – Kokedama balls, terrariums	7
Glyncorrwg winter drop-in 6.12.23	Drop-in session – Willow wreaths, willow trees	9
Treherbert winter drop-in 13.12.23	Drop-in session – Willow wreaths, land art	11
Cwmparc winter drop-in 13.12.23	Drop-in session – Willow wreaths	8
Gwynfi winter drop-in 20.12.23	Drop-in session – Willow wreaths	8
Cymmer drop-in January 10.1.24	Drop-in session – Spring bulb planting, teacup spring planters, kokedama balls	5
Cymmer February 14.2.24	Drop-in session – Mindful whittling, whittling mushrooms	4
Cymmer March 14.3.24	Drop-in session – Whittling butter spreaders, making butter, introduction to food bank system, food pantry scheme and Olio scheme	8
Cymmer Easter Holiday 26.3.24	Drop-in session – Tree identification games, scavenger hunt, spring exploration, making explorer journals	12
Cwmparc Summer Holiday 5.8.24	Drop-in session – Wildlife walk, tree identification, making beaver dams, peatlands talk	14
Glyncorrwg Summer Holiday 16.8.24	Drop-in session – Wildlife walk, tree identification, willow weaving, straw weaving	7
Nature sounds recording 19.7.24	Drop-in session – Nature sounds and documentary recording session with Bulldogs Community, Marauders Men's Health, University of Gloucester and Liberty Films	15
Afan Valley willow 19.8.24	Drop-in session – Exploring public rights of way in the Afan Valley and making resources for community groups to explore themselves (co-production session)	7
Welcome to our woods (WTOW) willow lanterns 19.9.24	Drop-in session – Making willow lanterns, campfire cooking (stew), meal together	24



Year 3 Outputs	Description	Attendees
Cymmer peat-free gardening 28.10.24	Drop-in session – Talk on composting, planting bog beast gardens, kokedama bals, talk by Gig Buddies	9
Rhondda peat-free gardening 16.10.24	Drop-in session – Talk on composting, planting bog beast gardens, exploring sphagnum with experiments	10
Willow weaving community training event 27.11.24	Drop-in session – Talk on sourcing and preparing willow for sessions, introduction to small willow projects, tool safety, talk about accessibility	8
Afan festive event 6.12.24	Drop-in session – Making willow wreaths, decorating wreaths	12
Rhondda festive event 12.12.24	Drop-in session – Making willow wreaths, decorating wreaths	20
Willow weaving peer support session Rhondda 12.12.24	Drop-in session – Talk on willow sourcing and processing, making willow bin loops, talks on rope (knots, splicing and Sea Trust work), assembling bin bag holders	15

### 3. Activities

Coed Lleol/Small Woods's Lost Peatlands engagement project offered participants an opportunity to take part in a range of outdoor activities or indoor activities (if the weather was poor) that celebrate the local area and its natural resources. Participants had the opportunity to cook over an open fire, learn bushcraft skills, make spoons, and soap dishes, and create things out of green wood and willow. Guided walks and foraging activities were also undertaken.

The family groups offered an opportunity for adults and children to learn about and become more connected to nature with a range of family-focused nature activities, learning opportunities and games. The 6-week mindfulness in nature photography course was also delivered in partnership with Welcome to our Woods. This focused on developing nature photography skills and exploring the project area.

There was also the opportunity to attend accredited courses.

A set of photographs taken across the three years of participants taking part in the various activities can be seen overleaf, in Figure 1.



Figure 1 Photograph selection from three years of community engagement on the Lost Peatlands project



## 4. Methods

The process of registration involved the collection of demographic data, including gender, age, ethnicity, employment status, and health and socioeconomic information. For multi-session programmes, health and wellbeing data were also collected at this point.

A post-activity survey established the participants' views about the programme and gathered participant ideas on what improvements could be made. Multi-session programme evaluation forms included questions from standardised and other tools for measuring self-reported impacts. A shorter feedback form was designed for drop-in sessions. Children who attended the family sessions completed shorter pre- and post- evaluation forms that focused on measuring healthy lifestyle measures like physical activity outside and healthy eating.

### 4.1. 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:

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

### 4.2. 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 NHS's 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>1</sup> <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/sci/med/research/platform/wemwbs>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3214824/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://euroqol.org/>

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Data collection

776 adults and 33 children registered on the project, engaging between one and forty times each across the three years. At least some demographic data were collected from 240 of these adults and all children.

### 5.1. Demographics

Across the life of the project, 67% of adult participants were female (n=226), almost half of participants were between the ages of 20 and 39, inclusive (n=223), and 86% identified as ethnically White (n=226; Figure 2). In terms of work status, 44% stated that they were employed or self-employed, with the next largest group not in paid employment and not looking for work, at 20% of participants (n=228). When asked whether their health issues were limiting their day-to-day activities, 30% stated that they were, either a little or a lot, with 56% answering 'no' and the rest preferring not to say.

For those who shared their post code (n=230), 81% of participants lived in areas 1 to 5, which are the most deprived areas of Wales, according to the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (Figure 3). The majority of participants (66%) lived in the UK Government Rural-Urban category, C1 – Urban: City and Town, with the second largest group being D1 - Rural: Town and Fringe, at 24% (Figure 4).

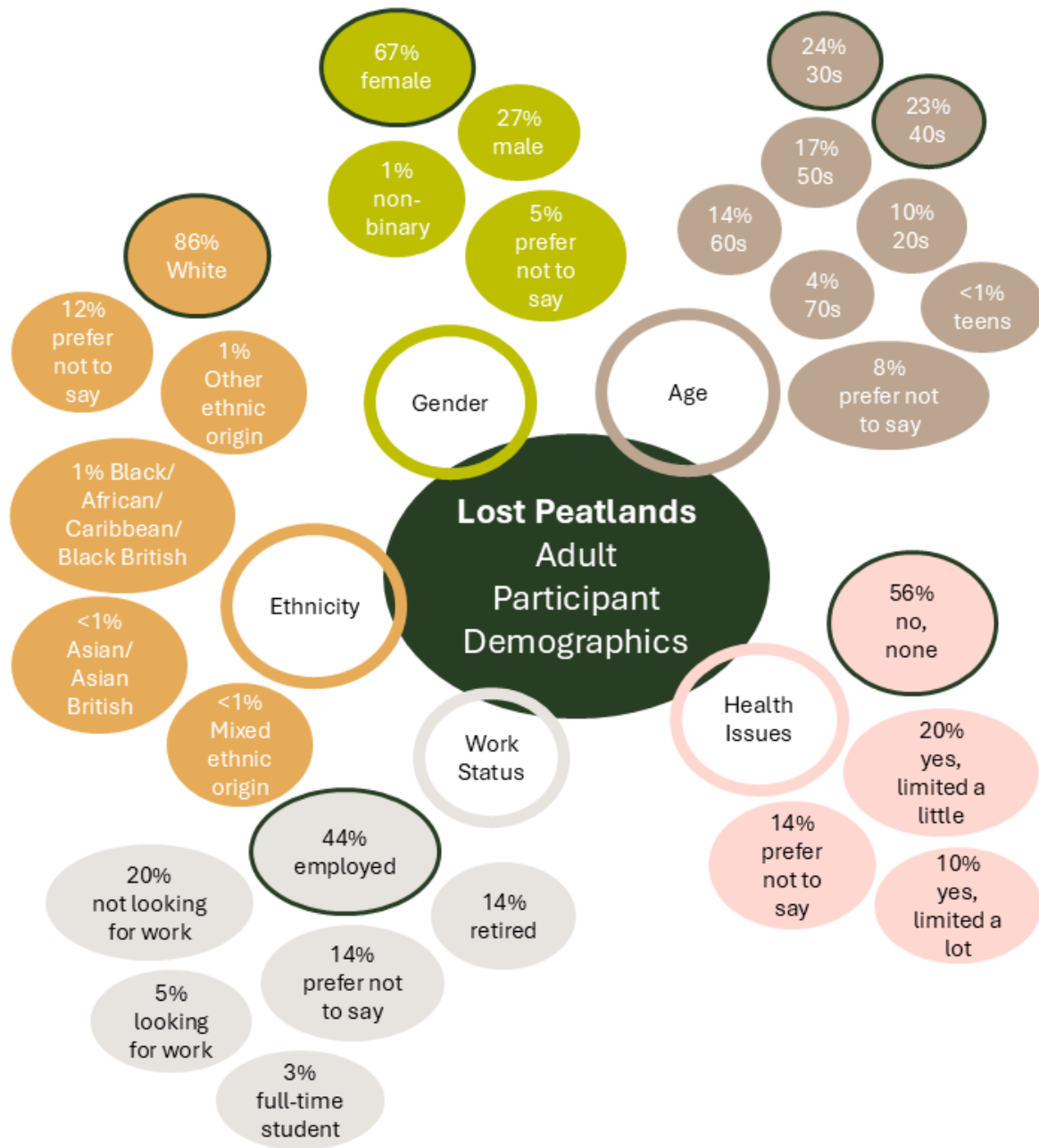


Figure 2 Bubble diagram of key demographic information for Lost Peatlands community engagement

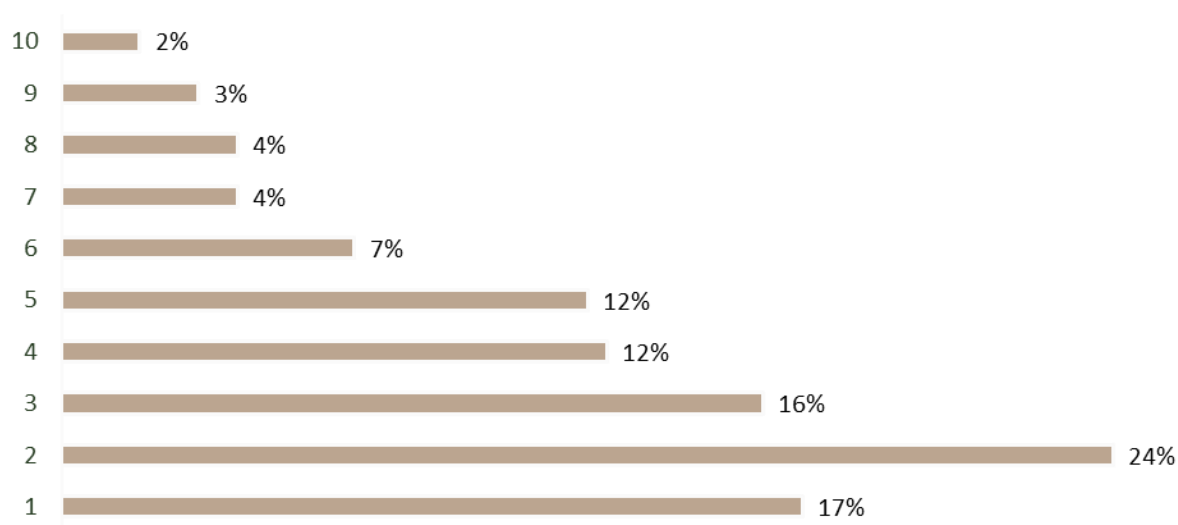


Figure 3 Distribution of participants by post code, according to the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, with 81% living in the most deprived areas of Wales (categories 1 to 5) (n=230)

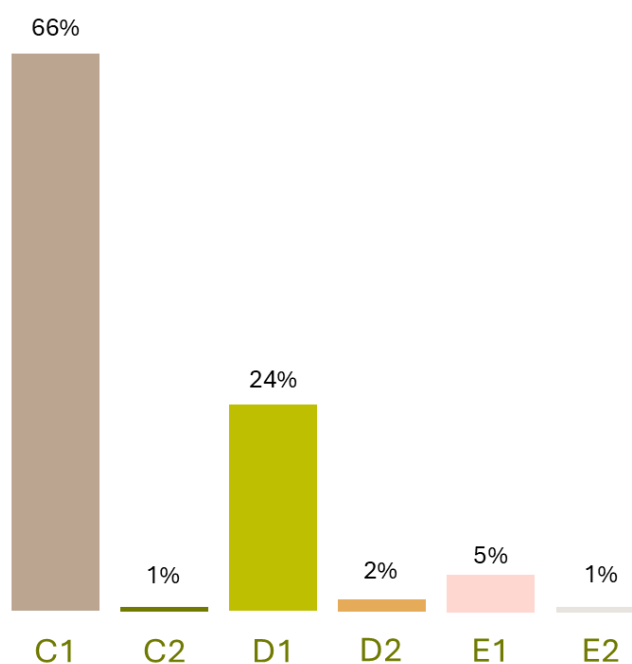


Figure 4 Distribution of participants by post code, according to the UK Government Rural-Urban categories, showing that 66% lived in the most urban category (C1 – Urban: City and Town) (n=230)

## 6. Evaluation

### 6.1. Five Ways to Wellbeing

The evaluation asked participants whether they agreed or disagreed with each of a set of ten statements about how the programme had affected them, based on the NHS's Five Ways to Wellbeing. They could choose between options on a five-point Likert scale, from strongly agree to strongly disagree.



Across the entirety of the project, of 40 responding participants attending the 4-6-week programmes:

- 95% agreed or strongly agreed that the sessions had been enjoyable;
- 95% agreed or strongly agreed that the sessions had taught them new knowledge;
- 94% agreed or strongly agreed that the sessions had made them feel happy (contributed to their overall wellbeing);
- 92% agreed or strongly agreed that the sessions had taught them new skills;
- 87% agreed or strongly agreed that the sessions had motivated them to get more involved in environmental activities and programmes in the future.
- 86% agreed or strongly agreed that the sessions had helped them feel more connected to local greenspaces/nature;
- 76% agreed or strongly agreed that the sessions had helped them to make new friends;
- 70% agreed or strongly agreed that the sessions had helped them feel more part of the local community;
- 55% agreed or strongly agreed that the sessions had contributed to making their local greenspace better/more accessible; and
- 49% agreed or strongly agreed that the sessions had led to them doing more physical exercise than I did before;



Those attending one-off or drop-in events were asked a shorter set of six questions pertaining to the Five Ways to Wellbeing. Of 42 respondents:

- 97% agreed or strongly agreed that the sessions had been enjoyable;
- 97% agreed or strongly agreed that the sessions had taught them new skills and/or knowledge;
- 95% agreed or strongly agreed that the sessions had made them feel happy (contributed to their overall wellbeing);
- 87% agreed or strongly agreed that the sessions had helped them feel more connected to local greenspaces/nature;
- 87% agreed or strongly agreed that the sessions had motivated them to get more involved in environmental activities and programmes in the future; and
- 86% agreed or strongly agreed that the sessions had helped them to make new friends.

## 6.2. Connecting to Lost Peatlands' natural spaces


After completing a programme, there was a 38% increase in the number of participants visiting the project area frequently (on a weekly basis or more). 88% stated they would continue to use these spaces for their recreation or health and wellbeing in the future. The remaining 13% stated that maybe they would.

32 participants completed pre- and post- questionnaires.

19% had never visited the areas before, 41% were infrequent users (2-3 times per year or less), 28% were moderate users (every two weeks to every month) and 13% used the spaces weekly or more.

Following the sessions, 50% were frequent users, 25% moderate users, 16% infrequent users and 9% stated that they have never visited the area since their programme ended (Table 2).

*Table 2 Change in visits to the project area, before and after engagement (n=32)*



Visiting frequency	Before	After	Increase
Never	19%	9%	-9%
Infrequent	41%	16%	-25%
Moderate	28%	25%	-3%
Frequent	13%	50%	38%

### 6.3. Wellbeing

64% of adults (n=22) showed an increase in their WEMWBS wellbeing scores after their programme, with **55% showing an increase of over three points, indicating a significant increase**. 5% of adults showed no change and 32% showed a slight decrease in wellbeing.

55% reported a statistically significant increase in their wellbeing (n=22)

### 6.4. Physical health

20% reported an increase in overall health (n=21)

There was, on average, a five-point increase in the scoring of participant's self-reported overall health through the 'health thermometer' after completion of a programme (n=21). **20% of participants showed an increase in health**, 12% stayed the same and 10% showed a decrease.

46% of participants (n=24) increased their self-reported physical activity levels, via the IPAQ measure, after completing a programme, 4% stayed the same and 50% decreased their levels of activity.

### 6.1. Children's evaluation



Thirty-three children took part in the 6-week family sessions or drop-in sessions over the three years of the project. The ages of the children were 1 to 4 years old (9%), 5 to 9 years (79%) and 10 to 14 years old (12%). The motivations for getting involved were principally to get outdoors, have fun, make new friends and have a positive family experience.

Children attending the sessions identified as male (42%), female (36%) or gender was unknown/not specified (21%). Across all years, 14 children completed evaluation forms following the family sessions (in most cases the adult

completed the form on behalf of their child). All respondents said they had enjoyed sessions, learned new skills and knowledge and gained confidence (Figure 5).

The family respondents felt that the sessions had encouraged them to use the Lost Peatlands Green Spaces more often following the sessions with 71% saying that they will use them frequently (weekly or more) and 29% saying that they will use these spaces often (between every two weeks and a month).



Figure 5 Responses to the children's evaluation

## 6.2. Walk leader training

Walk leader training was developed and delivered by Coed Lleol/Small Woods. The training was offered through the Lost Peatlands programme to facilitate and promote local walking groups in and around the Lost Peatlands area. Sixty people were trained in the second two years of the project (Table 3).



Table 3 Dates of delivery of the health walk leader training, with numbers attending

Project Year	Course	Number attending
2	Walk Leader Online 12 <sup>th</sup> -15 <sup>th</sup> September 2022	6
2	Walk Leader In Person (Dare Valley Country Park) 18 <sup>th</sup> October 2022	7
2	Walk Leader Online 18-20 <sup>th</sup> April 2023	15
2	Walk Leader In Person (Dare Valley Country Park) 4 <sup>th</sup> May 2023	9
3	Walk Leader 7 <sup>th</sup> November 2023	12
3	Walk Leader 13 <sup>th</sup> March 2024	11
<b>Total</b>		<b>60</b>

### 6.3. Improvements

While many people said there was no way to further improve upon what was offered – **61% of respondents did not answer this question or specifically answered that no improvements could be made, as they had enjoyed it so much already** – those suggestions that were made included:

- better advertising of programmes;
- more of them, longer-term options and evening/weekend options;
- transport or venues closer to home;
- a permanent structure/venue; and
- improved toilet facilities.

Feedback was also provided on the health walk leader training in Year 2, which was taken into consideration for delivery in Year 4. Some of these suggestions were:

- opportunity for more practical tasks outside whilst training (including trailing being a walk leader via role-play);
- Development of accredited HWL option
- longer sessions (across two days) to accommodate increased learning and confidence-building; and
- more networking and signposting opportunities during the sessions.

## 6.4. Star rating

Across the duration of the project, no one gave fewer than four stars in their overall rating.

The mean score from adults was **4.8 stars out of 5** (n=33 for those on a 4-to-6-week programme; n=29 for those attending a drop-in session).



All children participating and completing an evaluation (n=18) gave the project **5 stars out of 5**.



## 6.5. Testimonials

Below is a selection of responses from across the project years, from participants asked how the 4-to-6-week programmes had inspired changes in their lives.

### 6.5.1. Adults

*'It has reminded me of the importance of community spaces and how learning new skills together can connect you to people who you might not have much shared experience with.'*

*'Learning ancient traditional skills and crafts connects us to the land, to our heritage... It's practical, it's cognitively engaging, it's communal. It's been an absolute joy, and I'm excited to spend more time in these held spaces :).'*

*'Made me realise that I can do things that I would never have thought possible in the past. Has given me confidence to try new things.'*

*'I appreciate nature more, I take more exercise, I feel part of a friendly group of lovely people. When doing an event, I forget all my stresses and relax and have fun.'*

*'I've become a lot more comfortable being with other people.'*

*'It helped me to go out. Learning skills and being with people boosted my confidence and made me feel better about myself.'*

*'It has made me aware of different locations nearby that I can access for walks, etc. and also made me appreciate the benefits of being outside and connecting with nature. I have also acquired new skills, which I learned about on the sessions, which I will put into practice and will give me more opportunity to enjoy my outdoor surroundings in other ways.'*

*'It is helping to improve my confidence, which I need to make day to day living bearable.'*

*'It is hard sometimes but you just got to try and push yourself and I have never done it until now; I pushed myself to get up every day and try and do something to pass the time and then this mind photography course has got me out of the house and walking up mountains and looking at waterfalls and just breathing in the fresh air.'*

### **6.5.2. Children and families**

*'We go outside as a family more in all weather. The kids now love the rain.'*

*'My children have learnt to interact with nature and their surroundings. They are now able to play outdoors and actually request this, rather than computer games!!!'*

*'I liked playing outside and making fires and dens. My sister was annoying before but I like playing with her outside now.'*

*'He's Autistic and it's been nice to see him getting involved with the activities.'*

*'She takes more interest in the plants and flowers that grow around the local area.'*

*'She gained confidence and was more open to chatting to others. She was disappointed when they ended.'*

*'She wants to volunteer and today helped remove some unwanted plants with the team.'*

*'He has gained a lot of confidence socially and really loved all the activities.'*

## **6.6. Case studies**

Two case studies were undertaken in the second year to illustrate the impact of the Lost Peatlands Project activities on participants, in their own words. Coed Lleol/Small Woods conducted participant stories over the telephone. All conversations were transcribed, and the participants' own words were used. The participant could read and edit the story so that it reflected their sentiments and direction. The stories were 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?'.



### 6.6.1. Carley, Wellbeing Group



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.

### 6.6.2. Siân and Toby, Family Wellbeing Group



I moved to Wales three years ago because I 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.

## 7. Conclusion



Across the three years of the project, 769 adults and 33 children registered and engaged with activities, between one and forty times.

Results from the Five Ways to Wellbeing-based questions illustrated a positive experience for many participants on the 4-6-week programmes and the drop-in sessions. What was especially notable was that there was over 90% agreement from adult and child participants that they had been enjoyable, had taught new skills and knowledge, and had made them feel happy. Over 85% also said they felt more connection to local green spaces and nature and were motivated to get more involved in environmental activities and programmes in the future.

While 41% of adult participants identified as infrequent users of green space before the activities, 50% said they were *frequent* users afterwards. The number of frequent users increased by 38% after engagement, which is considered to be a huge achievement. In the family groups, 71% children agreed that they will use green spaces frequently going forwards.

64% of adults showed an increase in self-reported wellbeing after engagement with the project, and for 55%, this was a statistically significant increase. While only 20% of participants reported an increase in health, with 46% noting an increase in physical activity levels – although 50% reported a decrease here – these lower numbers could be explained by the activities being chosen for not being too physically demanding, to avoid physical stressors in the isolated rural environments often used for sessions. However, a statistically

significant increase in wellbeing for more than half of attendees is considered a successful outcome.

Sixty adults were trained in the health walk leader programme, which brings great potential for engaging further members of the public in outdoor activities in future years and also in supporting those who are accessing green spaces more now, as their confidence continues to improve, also offering a social element to getting out into nature.

There was some helpful, practical feedback for improvements, including better advertising, more activities, transport solutions, permanent venues and better toilet facilities. However, the majority of people were so happy with their experience, they said that no improvements could be made. This is further evidenced by overall star ratings of 4.8 and 5 out of 5 for satisfaction, from adults and children, respectively.

We received many grateful testimonials in the evaluation forms and have shared two case studies of people for whom the impact of being involved in the Lost Peatlands community engagement work was profound. People said that they felt connected to each other, they learned about the history of the land and acquired new skills, and they had a deepened appreciation for nature. Children became engaged in the activities, more confident and enjoyed spending more time outside.

In line with Coed Lleol/Small Woods' other social forestry work, we have seen huge positive benefits for individuals and communities engaging with nature-based activities, and this trend is also shown in the research. We know that, not only does spending time in nature improve wellbeing, reduce stress-related markers<sup>4</sup> and improve mental health outlooks – especially in deprived communities<sup>5</sup>, but an improvement in feeling connected to nature has been shown to increase pro-environmental and pro-conservation behaviours<sup>6</sup>. At this time of climate and biodiversity crisis, this two-fold benefit to people and the natural environment should not be underestimated.

We look forward to extending the availability of community engagement activities for the Lost Peatlands Project into a fourth year.

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<sup>4</sup> Twohig-Bennett, C. and Jones, A., 2018. The health benefits of the great outdoors: a systematic review and meta-analysis of greenspace exposure and health outcomes. 166, 628-637. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0013935118303323>

<sup>5</sup> Geary, R. S., Thompson, D., Mizen, A., Akbari, A., Garrett, J. K., Rowney, F. M., Watkins, A., Lyons, R. A., Stratton, G., Lovell, R., Nieuwenhuijsen, M., Parker, S. C., Song, J., Tsimpida, D., White, J., White, M. P., Williams, S., Wheeler, B. W., Fry, R. and Rodgers, S. E., 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, 7(10) E809-E818. 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)

<sup>6</sup> Seers, H., Mughal, R. and Chatterjee, H., 2022. Connection to nature, Natural England Evidence Information Note EIN068. Available at: <https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/5777215462834176>