

Brief research summary report

## Can a woodland activity programme benefit participant wellbeing and change the way they use woods?

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Lifestyle-related illnesses are a major cause of mortality and the health and wellbeing benefits of engagement with the natural environment are well documented. However, certain groups are under-represented in visitor figures, therefore this pathway to wellbeing is being received disproportionately. Nature-based interventions (NBIs) seek to extend benefits to wider, often otherwise marginalised social groups, but there is a lack of long term research meaning that the sustainability of effects is unknown. The primary aim of this PhD study was to develop an improved understanding of one such initiative on personal wellbeing and woodland use over time.

The research involved adults with a range of health and social care needs recruited from Actif Woods Wales, a pan-Wales woodland activity programme. A quantitative study assessed participants at baseline ( $n = 120$ ), end of course ( $n = 74$ ) and a three month follow up stage ( $n = 57$ ). A parallel qualitative study enabled an in-depth appreciation of processes of change with five end of course and four follow up focus groups.

End of course quantitative results demonstrated significant positive increase across all psychosocial measures, (mental wellbeing, social trust, self-reported health, self-efficacy, self-esteem and physical activity) with particularly marked gains for those who had reported mental health conditions. The study showed that these gains had held at the three month follow up stage providing critical evidence of maintained change. With regard to independent woodland visits, the frequency of visits had increased at course end and the indication at follow up was that this trend continued to rise.

Qualitative data showed positive shifts in self-perspective that had followed through to wider lifestyle changes which for some meant breaking out of a 'rut' of sedentariness and social isolation. These results were particularly important to understanding the importance of social processes and how confidence gained on the programme had led to increased interaction beyond it. Participant narratives showed how nature was experienced as a kind of 'balm' (the sensory experience, the positive impact on mood, feelings of escape) and played an important role in supporting the wellbeing benefits experienced. This altered perception of nature was maintained which had led to more and different use of woodlands (like spending longer there and 'making more of it'). Breaking down deeply

entrenched psychological, emotional and socio-cultural barriers, it was evident that the programme could act as an adult greenspace turning or *re*-turning point.

The study has helped to meet identified gaps for research that furthers understanding of how NBIs can support health, wellbeing and increased woodland use beyond the life of programmes. Findings thus hold implications regarding a need for sustainable funding and support for such projects to embed the role that they can play in delivering both therapeutic and preventative social care. They also point to a role for land managers looking to increase engagement for under-represented groups to consider the role that NBIs can play in broadening access to the benefits of the natural environment.

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