

What has our research and evaluation told us so far?

Background

There is a growing body of evidence that demonstrates that outdoor nature-based activity can improve mental health, increase lifespans, and reduce the incidence of chronic diseaseⁱ. Currently, it is estimated that only a quarter of the population in Wales participate regularly in outdoor recreation and 47% are active for fewer than 150 minutes per weekⁱⁱ. The NHS report that one in four people will experience mental health issues at some point in their livesⁱⁱⁱ. The rise in mental and physical health issues are putting additional stress on GPs and the NHS, with an estimated 20% of all GP appointments concerning social rather than medical health issues^{iv}. Social prescribing offers an alternative approach to treating mental, physical, and social wellbeing using a more holistic and/or preventative approach (social prescribing is a model whereby GPs, other health professionals, community connectors or link workers can refer people/patients to a variety of social groups running in their area). Outdoor nature-based activities, such as Coed Lleol (Small Woods Wales)'s Actif Woods Programme, offer one route to health and wellbeing via the social prescribing model, but there are many more outdoor providers in Wales who are not networked effectively with the health services.

In Wales, it is recognised that despite the first-class natural resources to hand many people are not accessing them regularly, and opportunities for social prescribing to outdoor health activities in some areas were minimal or uncoordinated. Moreover, although several independent agencies and charities offer outdoor health and wellbeing activities there was no joined-up network (or partnership) that could link them to healthcare providers to explore and ensure best practice across this sector and embed social prescribing more fully to encompass outdoor health and wellbeing. Furthermore, consultation with key stakeholders and through evaluation of Coed Lleol (Small Woods Wales)'s programmes has highlighted the need for improvements to access and infrastructure at specific sites to improve access for all user groups and facilities to promote usage across the population in all seasons. Moreover, it is recognised that optimising woodlands for health and wellbeing is one of the priorities in The Woodlands for Wales action plan 2015-2020 ([Woodlands for Wales Action Plan \(gov.wales\)](#)) and it is anticipated that this project could help to build on this aim.

Learning from our Pilot Projects

There were several successes and lessons learnt from the Trywydd Iach/Outdoor Health Project (Dyfi Valley) and the Green Health and Access West Wales Scoping Project (Pembrokeshire, Ceredigion and Carmarthen), both undertaken 2019-2020. Trywydd Iach set up a steering group of 19 people from the health and community sector (including 3 GP surgeries), outdoor health and wellbeing providers and representatives from the environmental/tourism sector. The steering groups aim was to streamline and promote social prescribing to outdoor activities. The project coordinated a series of outdoor health activities referred through the social prescribing model to trial a range of outdoor health and wellbeing activities to 25 participants (gardening, animal-assisted therapy, woodland

activities, and walking groups). The activities and follow-on direction of the pilot were determined by a series of two community consultation questionnaires, 'Making a Difference Survey' ($n= 264$) and 'Social Prescribing to outdoor health survey' ($n= 100$). These surveys highlighted the need to consider social anxiety and transport as a barrier to inclusion and uptake. Positive feedback was received from GPs and participants alike, but it was felt that a longer-bedding-in period to promote the activities would have resulted in greater uptake as would delivery through the warmer months; the pilot trialled activities in autumn and winter and a lack of shelter and warmth was a barrier to some. The Green Health and Access West Wales project scoped the potential to develop more outdoor activities across West Wales utilising suitable woodlands as locations. Additionally, the project consulted with over 30 community and health workers to assess the potential to further develop and streamline social prescribing in this area. Several benefits of social prescribing were cited by the health professionals these were: a way to build community resilience and long-term community-based solutions; an eventual reduction in GP appointments; less reliance on medication to cure social problems; and improved mental and physical health in the community. The main barriers were felt to be the lack of knowledge about what activities are available in the area and whether or not these are funded long-term to ensure enduring support for their clients/patients. There was also thought to be a lack of understanding of the benefits of outdoor health and wellbeing and a lack of confidence over the governance, cost-benefit and (health) training in the outdoor health and wellbeing sector. These two pilot projects informed the direction of this project with a focus on tackling and removing some of the barriers cited and taking on board the lessons learnt.

Both Pilot projects helped develop and trial a new system for assessing woodlands for the capacity to host health and wellbeing activities. This has resulted in a growing dataset of 20 woodlands across Wales. The dataset allows for centrally recording access routes, facilities available at the site, ownership, transport routes, suitability of pathways, health and safety risks and more. This knowledge will enable greater scrutiny and selection of suitable sites together with an estimate of cost for development at each site and monitoring of the improvements made. Additionally, training needs of outdoor health providers in each area was sought, forming the basis for planned training across the networks.

Learning from our consultations

In 2019-2020, consultations were undertaken by the Coed Lleol (Small Woods Wales) team in nine project areas across Wales focusing on exploring community need and how to better support people to use and access woodlands or the outdoors for their health and wellbeing. 129 stakeholders (participants, GPs, referral partners, council social services and outdoor health professionals) attended face to face sessions ($n=66$) or online Zoom consultation events ($n=63$). The stakeholders considered that Mental Health Issues, Social Isolation and Obesity and Poor Physical Health were the most pressing issues in their communities (with slight variations seen across some areas). The stakeholders suggested that a support or buddy-system to help vulnerable people to engage in local activities would help to initially engage people. They also felt that a wider range of activities offered locally would be effective in supporting peoples' mental wellbeing and social isolation. Additionally, a one-

stop place to access and advertise these activities was considered useful for promoting the range of options available, this would also be helpful to attract GPs and health professionals to use and act as a draw for outdoor providers. The stakeholders suggested that the central barriers to using the outdoors for health and wellbeing were the lack of accessible pathways and seating for those with low mobility or who were wheelchair-bound. A shortage of outdoor infrastructure to support all-round use (i.e., accessible shelters and toilets) was also cited. Transport to the sites was also considered a major issue, especially in more rural areas where public transport is not as well established. Central to increasing the use of the outdoors for health and wellbeing was regular, affordable public transport or suitable/sufficient parking at the site for drivers.

The consultations were an opportunity to have a wider discussion around creating social prescribing clusters and developing woodland hubs. Stakeholders were receptive to the idea of the social prescribing clusters for outdoor health but highlighted the need to get more GPs on board and the need to provide outdoor opportunities for all ages and abilities. As evidenced in the Green Health and Access project, a greater amount of evidence behind the cost-benefit of activities was felt to strengthen the uptake further across the health sector. Evidence of need around social prescribing has also been informed by attending meetings and reading literature published by the All-Wales Social Prescribing Network (University of South Wales) and the Social Prescribing Network (University of Westminster).

Initial brainstorming surrounding woodland hubs proved fruitful with stakeholders challenged to think first about community need rather than design. The stakeholders felt that a good woodland hub should be a place for social activity which is safe and provides opportunities to get involved with a range of outdoor activities (from Yoga to Mindfulness, arts and music, crafts and skills, cooking and physical activities and community education). It was also felt that a place to connect children to nature was important and that the woodland held a range of opportunities to encourage children to 'play', 'explore' and 'learn' using the natural environment as a space to do this.

Stakeholders agreed that a good woodland hub should be designed (and/or constructed) by the local community, be a flexible (open and closed spaces) and a multi-user space so that all community groups can use with ease. It was also felt that being fully accessible with good pathways, toilets and shelter and be easy to access via public transport would help to increase the number of people, of all abilities and needs, to use the site. The Hubs should focus on being multi-sensory experiences with a social focus (areas for meeting, sitting and learning together). Crucially, it was felt that any design for a woodland hub should blend into the natural environment and take into consideration the impact on biodiversity. Stakeholders also felt that consideration needed to be made for long-term maintenance of any structures/sites, mitigating vandalism and of key importance was selecting a site that is accessible by foot or by public transport or where transport can be arranged.

Additional consultation has begun with a group of designers and architects who specialise in outdoor structures (Tir Coed, Crafted Space, Free-range designs, Down 2 Earth, Glais y Goedwig and The Woodland Skills Centre). This group was able to offer practical advice and guidance on woodland hub design and considerations.

Learning from our Research and Evaluation

Coed Lleol has been active in undertaking and supporting research over several years as well as undertaking an evaluation of their programmes and holding annual consultations with stakeholders ([Research \(smallwoods.org.uk\)](https://www.smallwoods.org.uk)). There is a growing body of evaluative evidence, using pre- and post-evaluation forms, that suggests that the Actif Woods programme can impact positively on people's wellbeing, with between 63%-71% of participants evidencing increased wellbeing using the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale as a measure ($n=115$). Just under 50% of our participants can evidence increased physical activity following the sessions using the Short International Physical Activity Questionnaire (IPAQ) as a measure. These findings have been consistent over several years. Additionally, 97% of the participants stated that they enjoyed the sessions, 95% felt that they had learnt new skills, 77% felt more connected to their community and 84% felt more connected to their local green spaces. The sessions have also been found to reconnect or connect individuals or families with nature as a place to value and use longer-term. Coed Lleol (Small Woods Wales) are keen to build on these results and provide long-running evidence of impact to build further confidence within the health sector. A recent Social Return on Investment (SROI) study (in publication) found that for every £1 spent on Coed Lleol (Small Woods Wales) £2-£4 was returned. Analysis of attendance revealed a drop in the number of participants attending through the winter months and often improvements suggested by our participants focused on 'improving the weather!'

What's Next?

The pilot projects, stakeholder consultations, research and evaluation and monitoring of Coed Lleol (Small Woods Wales)'s Programmes have helped to guide the future direction of the organisation and framed a new funding bid (Outdoor Health and Social Prescribing – EnRaW). This aims to professionalise and network outdoor health providers by providing training, create and support social prescribing to outdoor health clusters and develop four woodland hubs with greater access and year-round facilities to support health and wellbeing activities in the community. Watch this space!

ⁱ Brag, Wood & Barton, 2013 Health and the natural environment: A review of evidence, policy, practice and opportunities for the future, Exeter University, 2018 and Cervinka, Renate, Holtge et al, 2014. Green public Health – Benefits of Woodlands on Human Health and Well-being. Austrian Research Centre for Forests, Pretty J, Peacock J, Sellens, M and Griffin, M. 2005. The Mental and Physical Health Outcomes of Green Exercise' International Journal of Environmental Health , 2005 15 (5) 319-337. Park, B et al. 2010. The Physiological effects of Shinrin-yoku: evidence from field experiments in 24 forests across Japan. In Environmental Health Prev Med 2010 15 (1) 18-26) to name a few

ⁱⁱ Natural Resources Wales survey 2014, 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ Health in Wales, NHS. <http://www.wales.nhs.uk/healthtopics/conditions/mentalhealth>

^{iv} [Torjesen, I \(2016\) Social prescribing could help alleviate pressure on GP's, BMJ 352; 143](#)