

CASE STUDIES

Benefits to Health and Wellbeing of Trees and Green Spaces

Community forestry organisations:

Forest of Avon Trust - Into the Woods Project (Natural Connections Programme)

The Mersey Forest - Natural Choices for Health and Wellbeing

These two case studies are both working with ways of benefitting the health and wellbeing of their communities but they are using different approaches. The Forest of Avon project is concentrating on a group with specific learning needs, developing ways of engaging them whilst teaching them about woodland and allowing them to experience the environment outside the confines of a building. At the same time they are working with partners to find ways to measure and evaluate the success of short term programmes.

The Mersey Forest project in Liverpool is a wider community based approach. The aim is to get people involved in the design of their Greenspace, encouraging them to step outside and take ownership of the space. They help to maintain it, benefitting their health through the physical work, developing social skills and improving mental health and breaking the cycle of fear and isolation in their homes. As a partner in the project Liverpool PCT has developed an evaluation tool to be used by the communities to measure their wellbeing outcomes, alongside their engagement with local greenspace.

CASE STUDY ONE

Location: Forest of Avon Trust - Into the Woods : Bristol

Partners: Silvanus Trust, Shirelink Daycare centre, City of Bristol College Horizons Course



Background: The Forest of Avon Trust became fully active in November 2009 taking forward the work of the Forest of Avon Community Forest, with a strong focus on community based activity. Natural Connections is a three year Big Lottery funded project which commenced in March 2010 through Natural England's Access to Nature programme. Into the Woods launched in September 2011 as part of this programme and explores the benefits of woodland activities for diverse groups with mental health needs. A partnership with Silvanus Trust's Good From Woods project has enabled the Forest of Avon Trust to extend their work with adults with learning disabilities, applying the principles of the successful Forest School model and undertaking a more detailed evaluation of the range of experiences and potential benefits to those involved. The evaluation looks at five categories of wellbeing: psychological, emotional, physical, social and biophilic. These are further broken down into a number of indicators developed by the Silvanus Trust and the University of Plymouth.

Forest of Avon Trust - Into the Woods : Bristol

Objectives:

- To engage 2 groups of adults and young people with learning disabilities in a six week Forest School programme in public woodland
- To involve all stakeholders in exploring the experiences and potential benefits of those involved during and up to a year after the practical activities
- To explore the potential range of experiences and benefits for those involved in woodland activities
- To establish an evaluation framework to record participants' experiences in the woods and present the findings to a wider audience.

Actions:

- 12 day-long sessions run on a public woodland site
- 18 adults and young people with learning disabilities undertaking Forest School activities, including practical woodland management tasks, making fires and cooking, sensory activities, discovering nature
- A range of research methods were employed to gather data, including observations, interviews, photographs and videos, to feedback activities
- Evaluation and presentation sessions were completed with groups at their bases.

Achievements:

- Participants becoming more confident and relaxed in natural settings, experiencing feelings of peace and calm, with positive group experiences
- Participants developing new practical skills and knowledge of the woodland environment
- High levels of engagement and interest of adults with learning disabilities in woodland activities
- New partnerships with groups that do not normally engage with woodland or nature based activities.

Lessons Learnt:

- The Forest School approach is very adaptable and works extremely well with groups with different needs
- Staff working with the young people reported levels of calm and engagement that were rarely observed in the college environment
- Collecting high levels of observation data whilst trying to lead sessions is very challenging.

Quotes:

Co-ordinator for Bristol City College Horizons groups: *'I noticed calmness, and contentment within the group who were really interested in what was going on. They really benefit from this sort of experience as they generally don't ever experience anything like this outdoors.'*

Student A: *'is quite quiet, but he's watching and he's right by you practically, taking it all in. I was concerned it might be too much overload for his triggers but it hasn't been at all, almost the opposite really.'*

Shirelink Group - staff member:

'The group is more in the present, aware of their sensory involvement in activity. Fresh air, calming environment, in touch with nature, lighting fires, going at their own pace, building confidence.'

Critical Success Factors to take forward:

- Use the natural environment to create therapeutic and positive outcomes for those with learning difficulties
- Keep to fully developed and established training methods when working with participants with particular learning needs.
- Provide staff time or additional support to gather data and evaluation material.



CASE STUDY TWO

Location: The Mersey Forest - Natural Choices for Health and Wellbeing : Liverpool

Partners: Natural Choices for Health and Wellbeing : Liverpool Primary Care Trust, Liverpool City Council



Background: Natural Choices for Health and Wellbeing in Liverpool was developed in 2011 as part of the Decade of Health and Wellbeing. It grew from the Liverpool Green Infrastructure Strategy, an audit of all the green assets in the city. Public health transition funding through the Primary Care Trust (PCT) has enabled community groups and charities to improve health and wellbeing by enhancing or using green space in their area. The initiative is a partnership between communities and the public, private and voluntary sectors to make Liverpool more equal well and green.

Objectives:

- Encourage and support community groups in the design and implementation of their projects
- Encourage participation with the “Five Ways to Wellbeing” (*Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning, Give*)
- Develop wider community engagement, capacity building and understanding through collaborative working
- Develop an evaluation tool for the community groups to monitor and articulate the wellbeing outcomes and their relationship with the GI Strategy
- Create a legacy for the community with training, a business plan, and a maintenance plan.

Actions:

- Small grants (up to £7,500) were made available for vulnerable communities to help them use local green space to improve people’s health and wellbeing
- Funding covered all aspects of project delivery, including training, recruitment of participants and volunteers, evaluation and employment of specialist experts (e.g. horticulturalists)
- Expressions of interest were requested and then full applications were invited
- A panel of PCT, Mersey Forest and Liverpool City Council parks colleagues assessed applications against the objectives.

Achievements:

- The programme has awarded £296,000 in grants to 38 groups across the city
- Projects have been helped to grow food on community allotments, create new community gardens and orchards, sports facilities and wildlife areas
- The response has been huge and very high quality
- Many projects sought to develop community assets so some additional funding has been allocated to expand the programme.

The Mersey Forest - Natural Choices for Health and Wellbeing : Liverpool

- Lessons Learnt:**
- Bringing successful applicants together at launch of project to engender enthusiasm and links with other projects
 - For good project outcomes a high level of support and input from experienced external organisations was essential
 - Use of social media to connect groups together across the city and share ideas.

Quotes:

Community co-ordinator Donna Williamson:

“With this money we’ll be (able) to clear a derelict area of land which is the site of a demolished school and put in raised beds which will be accessible to disabled people. Local residents of all ages will be able to get involved, sharing knowledge and experience and learning together about the benefits of home grown produce.”

“Connecting people with the earth, getting out in the fresh air, and the physical exercise involved in gardening will bring significant health and wellbeing benefits to the residents of Kirkdale.”

Critical Success Factors to take forward:

- A well consulted Green Infrastructure Strategy enabled the project to be developed and funded showing that a direct link to a locally based strategy provides impetus for projects
- When working with different community groups, utilise opportunities to bring them together to find common ground and share experiences
- Use the experience and advice of partners and external organisations to provide support and add value
- Communities and participants understand and use social media so we should utilise it to spread the word and link them to a wider network.

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