

Woodlands For Health

SUMMARY REPORT



Introduction

Research has shown that engagement with nature through outdoor activities can have a significant positive impact on peoples mental health and well-being. **Woodlands For Health** is an innovative development initiated by **Coillte (The Irish Forestry Board)** which set out to identify the health value that woodland activities can provide to participants and to demonstrate its value to health professionals.

The programme was developed in partnership with the **HSE/Wicklow Mental Health Services, Wicklow Mental Health Association** and **Mental Health Ireland**. The programme was adapted based on **Branching Out** which was successfully applied by the **Forestry Commission in Scotland**.

The concept of using woodlands in other European countries has grown rapidly over the last twenty years as a form of Eco Therapy. Research has shown that exposure to the natural environment reduces stress and anxiety. When people are in natural surroundings, physical activity releases endorphins which in turn help fight depression.

Woodlands For Health complements the development of Community Mental Health Services and a 'recovery' approach, one of the fundamental principles in Ireland's mental health policy *A Vision for Change* (2006-2016). The concept of recovery moves the primary focus from the professional as expert to the person as expert-by-experience. The view that a person *can live a productive and meaningful life despite vulnerabilities that may persist* informs a personal and social recovery approach to mental health services. In this context, the Woodlands For Health project supports the recovery and social inclusion of people who experience mental health difficulties within their local communities.

The programme

The programme was launched in March 2012 and the first 12 week programme commenced from October – December 2012. To date 7 twelve week programmes have been held.

Each week a group of up to 22 participants led by an experienced member of the Coillte Recreation team supported by health care staff from the referring services and project volunteers take part in approximately 3 hours of activities in a woodland setting.

The course included elements of gentle exercise, healthy walks, a talk on the environment, environmental art and relaxation. On completion of each programme participants attend a meal and receive a certificate to celebrate their achievements.

All participants were mental health service users from the Wicklow area.

Pilot

A pilot study was conducted on a programme between January – April in 2014 and was evaluated by the HSE and UCD.

The focus of the study was to examine the improvement in mental well-being, improved social skills and physical health in the participants during their engagement in the programme. The programme encourages participants to move

on to other community based environmental and green exercise programmes with regular exercise.

The results of the pilot study show that this form of Eco Therapy on referral can be effectively used as an additional form of treatment and care for the mental health population.

Objectives

Overall Aim:

The primary objective of the programme was to improve the quality of life for adults experiencing and enduring mental-ill health in the Wicklow area by engaging in activities in a woodland environment.

- To conduct a review of the evidence base for utilising woodlands to promote and maintain mental health.

- Develop a structured programme for Woodland For Health based on existing evidence.

- Develop an effective referral pathway, protocols, policies and procedures, risk assessments and safety management for clients who use mental health services.

- Develop effective partnership working between Coillte and health, social care and voluntary providers.

- Offer Woodlands For Health on referral as an adjunct form of treatment.

- Evaluate the effects of participation in the Woodlands for Health programme on those who use mental health services.

Evaluation

An evaluation was conducted and reports have been prepared by **University College Dublin** and **Wicklow Mental Health Service**

Evaluation of the programme was undertaken using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. For each participant, pre and post measures of well-being, general health and physical activity were ascertained and compared using the mood Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) test. The Hamilton Depression Rating Scale (HAMD) and Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) were applied in order to find out if there was any evidence that the participants had gained any physiological and/or psychological benefits after the 12 weeks of regular forest walks. Semi-structured interviews with participants were also conducted to determine the perceived benefits.

Key themes were identified from the interviews

- 1.Improvement to mental well-being;
- 2.Improvement to physical health;
- 3.Provision of daily structure/routine;
- 4.Social networking/social skills development.

Findings

From the HSE and UCD evaluation it appears that there were several positive outcomes of the Woodland for Health programme. These were:

- Low attrition rates in a hard to reach population.
- Significant increases in physical activity.
- Intergenerational appeal / appeal to both sexes.
- Significant improvements in mood immediately after spending time in a forest
- Strong trends towards improvement in the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) test.
 - * Average mood improvement 75%
 - * Reduction in thoughts of suicide 82%
 - * Global improvement of sleep disturbance 66%
 - * Significant reduction in thoughts of guilt, hopelessness and low self esteem
- Additional Health related improvements were reported include
 - * Reduced agitation and anxiety symptoms in participants
 - * Reduction in medication/medical costs
 - * Reduced drug dosage
 - * Reduced number of clinical appointments/residential care in hospitals
 - * Return to work/education

A number of other aspects of the Woodlands for Health programme were reported which identify the contribution it can make as part of a recovery based approach to health care. These were:

The dynamics of the programme and its delivery in an outdoor environment / non-clinical setting, appeared to facilitate peer support and reduced reliance on the leadership of the health professionals.

Additionally, the small group sizes facilitated team building and social inclusion. All participants, clients and clinicians, reported improvements in social networking and social skills development

The most positive outcome of the programme has been the formation and development of **Well-A-Head** a peer lead social club based in Wicklow formed in early 2014. They now meet twice a week for a range of outdoor social activities which include walking, running, rowing and a wider range of outdoor activities.

Conclusions

Woodlands For Health offers a recovery focussed programme which compliments traditional mental health treatment. Mental health service providers and clinical practitioners should consider the benefit of adopting and supporting such programmes as part of a wider menu of adjunct treatment options.

It suggests from the results of the evaluation that Woodlands For Health can be effectively used as an additional support of treatment, delivering benefits that usual does not deliver, leading to a greater recovery.

Several additional lines of evidence from other studies and settings are now converging to confirm the value of such programmes and there is solid scientific evidence beginning to elucidate the mechanisms of how these programmes are effective.

Recovery from mental health difficulties is not assured for anyone so any additional but especially achievable new recovery avenues are not only welcome but important for this community and even the population.

These positive outcomes demonstrate the benefits of the environment and health sectors working together to deliver health outcomes for mental health service users. Woodlands For Health is also a cost effective adjunctive treatment option.

Mental health service providers and clinical practitioners should consider the benefit of adopting and supporting such programmes as part of a wider menu of adjunct treatment options.

The programme needs to continue , develop and be further evaluated to confirm its therapeutic usefulness. It is already self-evident that it is a feasible and sustainable model of mental health recovery enhancement by a partnership approach in local settings.

Future

Woodlands For Health has the potential to complement Community Mental Health Services nationally.

The success of the Woodlands For Health pilot programme has resulted in a commitment by the partner organisations, the HSE/Wicklow Mental Health Services, Coillte, Wicklow Mental Health Association and Mental Health Ireland to promote the programme nationally. A communications plan is being developed to secure future support and funding in order to develop the programme in Wicklow and beyond.

Future evaluations of and research into programmes, like Woodlands for Health could examine the effect of programme length, frequency and duration on the primary outcomes used here. Additional investigation of the effects on other parameters, such as social and interpersonal skills, levels of social activity, routine and structure, anxiety, depression, self-esteem, confidence and pride should also be taken forward.

Follow-up measurements and a record of clients' further participation in voluntary projects / work / other activities, should also be recorded in an effort to establish what the long-term benefits of these programmes are. It is recommended that both qualitative and quantitative methods be used to establish both, outcomes and the causal mechanisms behind these outcomes

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Woodlands For Health Programme

CONDUCTED BY



Coillte Forest - Recreation Team

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



PILOT STUDY

Woodlands For Health

The effects of activity in forests for the benefit of persons with significant mental ill-health

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