

Branching Out – Greenspace on referral



Overview

Green environments are good for us, they facilitate physically active recreation, and help treat a range of mental health problems. Recognising this potential, Forestry Commission Scotland is working to explore the influence that exposure to woodlands and greenspace has on flourishing mental health. It appears that people who use or live near green environments, including woodlands, are in general healthier and more active than those who do not. A correlation has also been found between people's happiness and the presence of accessible, green, safe, pleasant places in which to walk and relax (Equally Well 2008). This has led to those in health improvement asking "can green environments be used to help treat a range of health problems?"

Background

Branching Out was piloted by Forestry Commission Scotland as part of its efforts to use woodland areas to benefit the health and wellbeing of people living in urban areas.

Research has shown that high quality green spaces boost people's wellbeing and self esteem. They also act as a natural stress reliever by offering a calming and restorative environment.

A recent Mind report (2007) advocated 'ecotherapy' as a clinically valid treatment option for people using mental health services. However, there is a lack of schemes available for patients to be directly referred onto.

The Scottish Government Equally Well Report on Health Inequalities 2008 recommends the Government and NHS Boards should encourage and increase the prescription of "greenspace use" by GPs and clinical practitioners.

The 12-month project provided conservation and greenspace on referral for adults with mental health problems in the Greater Glasgow area.

Forestry Commission Scotland hopes to use the findings to develop a longer-term project for the region and to provide guidance for other organisations setting up similar schemes.



Objectives

- Improve the quality of life for adults experiencing long term mental health problems and common mental health issues in Greater Glasgow and Clyde.
- Offer greenspace on referral as an option to patients and users of mental health services.
- Increase and strengthen the evidence base for mental health benefits attributable to woodland activities.
- Encourage the development of effective partnership working between forestry and health, social care and voluntary service providers.

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- Develop effective referral protocols, risk assessment tools, safety management and user involvement processes.
- To support the health sector to use the outdoors more in public health policy and highlight the potential for green environments to make a significant contribution towards health improvement.

Actions

- A partnership was formed including Glasgow & Clyde Valley Green Network Partnership, Greater Glasgow & Clyde NHS Board, Glasgow Centre for Population Health, Glasgow City Council and Forestry Commission Scotland.
- Cathkin Braes Country Park and Carmunnock willow coppice site were identified as the most suitable woodland areas in which to develop the project. Both sites were on the outskirts of Glasgow, and offered a variety of environments for the project to utilise.
- A 12-week programme of activities was developed to include physical activity, relaxation, environmental art, bushcraft skills, conservation and tool handling.

Achievements

- Twelve Branching Out groups have run with 77 people completing the course overall.
- Services engaged have ranged from inpatient forensic services and recreational therapy, to mental health resource centres and mental health employment services.
- A display of environmental art was created by participants and shown as part of the Scottish Mental Health Arts and Film Festival at the National Museum of Rural Life.

Evaluation Results

- Low attrition rates in a hard to reach population.
- Significant increase in physical activity levels.

Quotes

“Branching Out has been a huge success for the service users and me.”

Steph Muir, Occupational Therapist.

“Branching out can’t come soon enough for me. I get away out and forget all my troubles.”

Branching Out participant.

“I wasn’t an outdoor person. I’d decided I’d go give it a week or so and the first week I absolutely loved it. And then the rest of it, I absolutely adored the course.” Branching Out participant.

- Self-reported improvements in confidence and self-esteem from participating clients.
- Strong trends towards improvement in health and wellbeing measures for high severity groups.
- Cost effective intervention with a range of health care benefits for users.

The recommendation from the evaluation report is that mental health service providers and clinical practitioners should give due consideration to adopting and supporting ecotherapy programmes as part of a wider menu of adjunct treatment options.

Partners

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Forestry Commission Scotland
Glasgow and Clyde Valley Green Network Partnership
NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde
Glasgow Centre for Population Health

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