

Executive Summary

Branching Out

Greenspace and Conservation on Referral



“When I'm out here it's like a sense of freedom”



Abstract

Branching Out is an innovative development for clients who use mental health services within Greater Glasgow and Clyde. For each client, the service consists of approximately three hours of activities per week in a woodland setting. Clients work together in small groups of up to fifteen for a twelve-week period. The course includes elements of bushcraft, nature conservation, environmental art, green exercise and relaxation.

On completion of the course there is a graduation ceremony where clients receive certificates of completion, tool handling and achievement (e.g. The John Muir Award). The service was developed as a result of a partnership between Forestry Commission Scotland, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, Glasgow & Clyde Valley Green Network Partnership, Glasgow Centre for Population Health and Glasgow City Council.

Evaluation of this service was undertaken using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. For each client, pre and post measures of well-being, general health and physical activity were ascertained and compared using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS), the SF-12v2™ Health Survey and the Scottish Physical Activity Questionnaire (SPAQ).

These quantitative measures were accompanied and enriched by a more explorative qualitative component. Therein, data gained through semi-structured interviews (n=29), focus groups (n=8) and observational journals (n=2) of clients and staff were thematically analysed to determine the perceived benefits and limitations of the service.

The attrition rates of those referred was very low. Number of patients starting =110 and completing =77, therefore a 70% completion rate. The uptake of the service was very high with almost 95% of available places taken up. The number of males referred was disproportionately high at 80%. This was due in part to a male only service making up three of the groups. Despite this, once females were engaged by the service they were more likely to complete, 80% completion rate. From the measures recorded, pre and post intervention, there was a significant increase in self reported weekly physical activity levels.

Five key themes were identified from the interviews and focus groups:

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

It appears from the results of this evaluation that Greenspace on referral can be effectively used as an additional form of treatment in a secondary and tertiary care mental health population.





On a cold day out, our team takes a walk to Cathkin Braes to explore the Greenspace on our doorstep. Sometimes this helps put our lives into perspective.



Learning new skills. The course includes elements of bushcraft, nature conservation, environmental art, green exercise and relaxation.



Introduction

The concept of utilising Greenspace to promote and maintain mental health predates the development of almost all other mental health treatments. Although the use of Greenspace as a therapeutic tool decreased throughout the 20th century, research in this area has grown rapidly over the last twenty years.

A literature review examining the evidence base of the impact of Greenspace on the promotion and maintenance of mental health was conducted. This revealed that engagement with Greenspace appears to have psychological, social, and physical benefits resulting in an impact on general health. In addition, those who use secondary and tertiary care mental health services typically experience reduced levels of social and physical activity and therefore the health benefits of interaction with Greenspace make this approach particularly appropriate for such a population.

During the 12-week programme, clients take part in a variety of activities including health walks, environmental art, conservation, bushcraft skills and relaxation. The sessions are run by an experienced Forestry Commission Ranger and an Assistant Ranger, with input from sessional workers such as an environmental artist and tai chi instructor. The programme is designed to develop trust and responsibility along with structure to the client's week.

At the end of the programme, groups are brought together along with friends and family for a joint graduation ceremony. In addition to certificates of completion and tool handling, the majority of clients also gain the John Muir discovery level award. Longer term volunteer and training opportunities are highlighted during the graduation ceremony and organisations like the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers attend the event to promote the volunteer opportunities they provide.

An evaluation of the programme's first year has been completed using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. For each client, pre and post measures of well-being, general health and physical activity were ascertained and compared using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS), the SF-12v2™ Health Survey and the Scottish Physical Activity Questionnaire (SPAQ), respectively. These quantitative measures were accompanied and enriched by a more explorative qualitative component. Data gained through observational journals, focus groups and semi-structured interviews with clients and staff, were thematically analysed to determine the perceived benefits and limitations of the service. A summary of the findings from this evaluation are included within this document.





Sessions led by a fully qualified staff.
Working in a group helps develop social skills and creates a sense of unity.



Green exercise increases your heart rate helping to improve health and fitness.

Objectives

Overall Aim:

- To improve the quality of life for adults experiencing severe and enduring mental health problems in Greater Glasgow and Clyde by engaging them in activities set in a Greenspace environment.
- To conduct a review of the evidence base for utilising Greenspace to promote and maintain mental health.
- Develop a structured programme for Branching Out based on existing evidence.
- Develop an effective referral pathway, protocols, policies and procedures, risk assessments and safety management for clients who use secondary and tertiary care mental health services.
- Develop effective partnership working between Forestry Commission Scotland and health, social care and voluntary providers.
- Offer Branching Out on referral as an adjunct form of treatment to those in secondary and tertiary care
- Evaluate the effects of participation in the Branching Out programme on those who use secondary and tertiary care mental health services.

Evaluation

Findings

From the service evaluation, it appears that there were several positive outcomes of the Branching Out programme. These were:

- Low attrition rates in a hard to reach population.
- Significant increases in physical activity.
- Strong trends towards improvement in the SF-12v2™ (PCS), SF-12v2™ (MCS), and WEMWBS for high severity groups on each scale.
- Self-reported improvements in confidence and self-esteem from participating clients.
- Intergenerational appeal / appeal to both sexes.

Additionally, several aspects of the Branching Out 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 aid in redressing the patient and health professional power imbalance.

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



Evaluation (continued)

The opportunity to demonstrate competence in tasks, the contribution of the work to the community, the attainment of new skills, and the acquisition of the John Muir Discovery Award (and other certificates), appeared to provide clients with a sense of achievement/pride.

Clients reported increased structure and routine within their day/week and the provision of something to focus on. As a result, many of the clients and clinicians viewed the programme as representing a halfway house between a self-imposed isolation and inactivity and a reintroduction to community engagement.

The evaluation did have limitations, due primarily, to the number of clients passing through the service.

Conclusions

It appears from the results of this evaluation that Branching Out can be effectively used as an additional form of treatment in a secondary and tertiary care mental health population. These positive outcomes demonstrate the benefits of the environmental and health sectors working together to deliver health outcomes for mental health service users.

As the programme did not require any additional premises, beyond the work-bases of the NHS and FCS staff, cost per head per day was under fifty pounds. The programme therefore appears to offer excellent value for money. Mental health services providers and clinical practitioners should give due consideration to adopting and supporting programmes like Branching Out as part of a wider menu of adjunct treatment options.

"It's helped me immensely; it's just unbelievable"

- All the different sights and sounds and smells are very different from the hospital environment that I am used to.





Getting arty in the woods helps redirect people's focus and gives a sense of achievement.

Future

Directions

A multi-disciplinary, multi-agency team should be established to develop a communications plan, secure future funding and further develop the Branching Out programme. To this end a resource guide has been produced to aid other organisations in setting up their own programmes similar to Branching Out.

Future evaluations of and research into programmes, like Branching Out should 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.



Output

A full report of the evaluation is available at www.forestry.gov.uk/branchingout

Two articles are to be submitted for peer review. The first article was published in the Journal of Public Mental Health Vol. 7, Issue 3, A review of ecotherapy as an adjunct form of treatment for those who use mental health services, p23-35.

A resource guide has been produced to aid other organisations in setting up their own Branching Out programmes. This is available at www.forestry.gov.uk/branchingout

A DVD was created to promote the project.

A display of environmental art was created by clients and staff for the Scottish Mental Health Arts and Film Festival 2008 at the National Museum of Rural Life.

The evaluation results were presented at the Annual Public Health Scotland Conference, 2008.

Articles on the project have been published in Scottish Primary Care Issue 79, November 2008 and on the Well Scotland website. www.wellscotland.info/news/item.php?id=271