



Branching Out

Positive Mental Health Through Nature

One in four of us will experience a mental health problem at some stage in our life. In Scotland, one in seven people are prescribed anti-depressants, and the number being treated has risen by 5% in the past year. We need to re-think how we respond and treat common mental health problems. Branching Out is an innovative project that offers a holistic, person-centred approach promoting **'five ways to better mental health'**. It brings together mental healthcare workers and outdoor staff like countryside rangers to help people recover from long-term mental health problems. Through a **12-week programme** of woodland activities, Branching Out teaches participants about **coping strategies** to maintain positive mental health. It offers participants a chance to increase their **self-confidence**, explore new places and activities, and **feel engaged** with their community.



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Positive Mental Health Through Nature

A long history

In many ways, Branching Out is a return to 19th century ideals that linked positive mental health to exercise and contact with nature. They were based on the principle that spending time in fresh air and sunlight is vital to the healing process.

Numerous modern studies and reviews support that pioneering work. **They show how outdoor and greenspace activities can be an effective supplementary therapy** for people with a range of mental and physical disorders. Mental health benefits include better attention and cognitive abilities, as well as improved mood and self-esteem.

Branching Out was informed by those studies. It was developed in 2007 by Forestry Commission Scotland in partnership with NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde, Glasgow Centre for Population Health, and Glasgow and Clyde Valley Green Network. In the first year, four groups, with a total of 19 participants, were run in the NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde area.

The scheme has grown substantially, with 2000 people completing the programme to date and up to 300 people taking part across Scotland each year. Programmes run in ten of Scotland's 14 NHS health board areas and are delivered by 22 partner organisations, whose staff are trained and supported centrally by Scottish Forestry.



Top: A collage of environmental art.

Centre: Working in a group helps develop social skills and creates a sense of unity.

Bottom: Environmental art.

What's involved?

A Branching Out programme lasts for **12 weeks**, and is designed for a group of **up to 12 participants**. The group **visit woodland sites once a week**, usually for about **three hours at a time**, for activities led by a qualified Branching Out leader and an assistant. Each group **includes a mental health worker** who is fully involved as an active participant.

The programme promotes the “Five Ways to Wellbeing” developed by the New Economics Foundation and endorsed by The Scottish Association for Mental Health: Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning and Give. Branching Out works towards these goals through the core elements of:

- **physical activity**
- **bushcraft**
- **practical conservation**
- **creative activity and environmental art**
- **personal development or learning.**

Every Branching Out programme delivers these core elements in a different way, because it's tailored to the groups' needs, the leaders' skills, and the places involved. The project tries to include a wide variety of activities that will appeal to women and men, and to a large age range. Examples include **health walks, photography, building simple wooden furniture, campfire cooking, environmental art, willow weaving, and conservation activities** such as building bird boxes, planting seedlings or clearing rhododendron. Mindfulness is an important element in the programme: the activities allow participants to focus on a concrete task, become engrossed in the moment and the natural setting, and notice their own reactions and moods.



Outdoor and greenspace activities can be an effective supplementary therapy.

At the end of the twelve-week programme, participants **celebrate their journey** in an awards ceremony. It can include a slide show of their experiences, poetry and talks, and it's an opportunity to invite friends and family to celebrate their success. Participants receive certificates for their participation and for any skills they have acquired, such as safe tool use, and have the opportunity to work towards achieving the **John Muir Discovery Award**. They're also given useful information on how they can take their new interests and skills further, perhaps through joining a walking, conservation or photography group, or doing the next level of the John Muir Award.



Shelter building is one of the many woodland activities which helps maintain positive mental health.

What are the results?

The programme has been evaluated through two survey-based studies, one for 2011-2012 and one for 2014-2015¹. Completed both before and after the scheme, the surveys show clear benefits for participants. **Improvements in mental health and vitality are particularly marked for participants with more severe mental health problems before they entered the programme.** Participants were more likely to maintain contact with Branching Out than with comparable schemes, which indicates their satisfaction with it.

The evaluation also measured the programme's outcomes in **Quality-Adjusted Life Years (QALYs)**, a standard measure used to assess the cost-effectiveness of treatments across the health care sector. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) has a benchmark cost of £30,000 for an intervention to deliver one QALY. For Branching Out, **the cost is just over £17,000**. Although it was not possible to collect reliable data on how long its benefits last, this is in indication that Branching Out is a cost-effective way to improve mental health.

Participants value the project's **clear routine, structure and non-clinical setting**, as well as the **chance to gain transferable skills** and the **networking opportunities** offered by the project.

¹ CJC Consulting, 2016. Branching Out Economic Extension: Final Report to Scottish Forestry. Available at: www.forestry.gov.scot/branchingout.

I feel in myself I've achieved something, like see when I gae home after leaving here I'm puffed oot and I feel as if I've achieved something. I'm knackered and I'm quite proud of myself cause I've done it.

-Participant

Branching Out has an **impressive completion rate: 78%** of all those starting complete the scheme, compared to around 50% in other mental health support programmes. The programme ensures **consistent delivery** through core policies and procedures that cover all aspects of the scheme, from staffing, referrals and evaluation to publicity. Within this model each programme can be designed flexibly, so it meets its clients' needs.

How are staff trained?

Environmental staff, such as countryside rangers, who would like to act as leaders for the programme need to complete a **3-day training course** that covers the programme's core criteria, policies and background. It gives them valuable understanding of how to work with mental health patients. **Leaders must also have completed mental health first aid training, an outdoor first aid course, and a minimum of two days' shadowing with a qualified Branching Out leader.**

The leaders' course has helped to increase the number and location of Branching Out groups across Scotland, while ensuring that all groups are delivered to a set standard. It's **accredited by the Institute for Outdoor Learning**, a national body representing the outdoor learning sector that aims to recognise, improve and increase participation in outdoor learning in the UK. **As of March 2016, almost 100 people have completed the Branching Out leaders' training.**

Health care staff, such as psychiatric nurses and occupational therapists, can follow an optional two-day course in bushcraft and leadership skills, which helps them participate more fully in the programme. This training develops their confidence and competence in leading outdoor and woodland activities, encouraging them to use the outdoors regularly with their patients.

They've noticed that they're capable of things and they have now moved on to volunteering and they're doing that reasonably independently. That's a big, big step

Healthcare worker





Things I could spend ten weeks trying to do with a group came immediately with this, I think just because it was so motivating. We clinicians are all saying that the team part of the programme is probably one of the most important bits for benefiting people.

— Healthcare worker



All the different sights and sounds and smells are very different from the hospital environment that I'm used to, and I've really enjoyed being out in the countryside.

— Participant



I'm interested. What's next?

Branching Out can help you find leaders who work in your area. If you'd like to set up a new programme, we provide training, support in getting started, and help with publicity materials. Working with a recognised, effective, well-established programme can be an important asset in encouraging managers to adopt the scheme.

In some circumstances we can also provide financial support for items such as transport, equipment, or fees for specialist outdoor instructors.



Above – Removal of invasive species.
Right – Exercise for body and mind.



Awards

The UKPHA Michael Varnam Health, Humanity and Environment Award 2010

"Best Green Healthcare Provider", Scottish Green Awards 2010

RSPB Nature of Scotland "Innovation" Award 2012

Get in touch.

More details, including copies of the programme's evaluation, are on our website www.forestry.gov.scot/branchingout

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The Physical Activity & Health Alliance Awards (PAHA) 2014, NHS Scotland category

The Scottish Green Apple Award 2014 for Environmental Best Practice