

Participant testimony about Actif Woods Wales – selected highlights from April-Sept 2014



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Highlights from participant testimony

This document offers some highlights from the qualitative data gathered in the Actif Woods Wales project during the period April-September 2014. To put this in context, following training in conducting semi-structured interviews in February 2014, staff and leaders have using this and other qualitative methods to find out about how participants' health and wellbeing is impacted by the project. They have been encouraged to be creative about this, choosing methods and approaches depending on their reading of what participants will enjoy or find interesting or find it comfortable to do.

Some participants have responded very well to being invited to simply tell their story in their own words, and we are now accumulating a small but interesting array of personal testimonies, stories, and creative outputs from some groups. In addition interviews have been carried out by the research officer and others; leaders are being encouraged to record their observations and any interesting comments after each session; and participants in two Aberystwyth groups had the opportunity to tell their stories in a video made by NRW.

This evidence is not yet systematic but building on it is a priority in the next 6 months. When we have we will be able to analyse it in a more sophisticated way, with guidance from experts in this field. Meanwhile the following comments are extracted from testimonies and oral accounts from approximately 15 participants, mostly in Aberystwyth and Treherbert.

I have focused on comments which seem to address the question ***'in what ways does AWW impact on participants' health and wellbeing?'*** – taking a broad view of health and wellbeing, and categorising the comments loosely under headings but otherwise not changing participants' own words. An obvious limitation is that participants tend (with a few exceptions) to highlight only the positive in their accounts rather than the negative, and therefore while this is a fair sample of the comments we have received this kind of data does not give us a very rounded picture of either the project's limitations or of participants' overall health and prospects for wellbeing. Still, being in participants' own words, this kind of testimony does give us really useful insight into some aspects of their experience of the project, and what it is that tends to matter most to participants with diverse health concerns.

Impact on various aspects of health:

- 'My general fitness improved, and also my emotional health.'
- 'My first walk was a disaster, I could hardly breathe, walking very slowly way behind the others. [The leader] inspired me, helping me to breathe and take in small amounts of water as I walked. [He] gave me praise, every step was a huge achievement on my behalf. I could not believe I made it to the top. I had done something good that day.'
- 'Mountain walking and being out in the fresh air with other people has helped me gain my confidence back, cleared my mind and a great stress relief. It's also helped me to lose over two and a half stone. My [hormone] levels went back to normal. My doctor could not believe how quickly they had come down in a short period of time.'
- 'I feel that it has made a tremendous, positive impact on my health in general, not just physically but mentally, socially and emotionally also.'
- 'The impact on mental health I believe is phenomenal. The 'feel good' factor makes a huge difference to my week and just knowing I am doing something that will contribute to my overall health is a great feeling.'
- 'Before I came to the group I felt my life was going nowhere, there were days when I didn't feel like facing the world; my friends were worried about my wellbeing. Now I feel more confident, get up early and feel ready to face the world. I try not to let day to day stresses get me down and I can talk to my friends about these problems.'
- 'Experience has shown that I should rest [my knee] for a couple of days [when it's bad] until the cycle of frustration, poor mood and restless nights has reduced. However on Thursday, after hesitating, I did go to the woods meeting and despite being limited in what I could do I thoroughly enjoyed the afternoon. As a result that night I slept much better than expected and awoke with my knee almost back to normal.'
- 'Before I came to the group I was quite isolated and depressed. I decided to try it in order to start socialising more. The group improved my confidence a lot by learning new skills and having the chance to socialise in a safe environment. I am now working part-time and I'm sure coming to the group has been an important factor in the improvement of my health and wellbeing. I am now more likely than I was to try new things and get active.'
- 'My doctor is also very positive about me doing these walks, so it comes with doctor's approval.'
- Taking part...has encouraged me to take part in outdoor exercise, which I thought I'd very much struggle to do. ... I believe I have benefited mostly through gaining confidence to get out of the house into a safe, quiet and natural environment without getting very anxious in a social situation. I have really enjoyed the exercises, even in the rain, and it has given me the motivation to start following a healthier lifestyle and the will to do more exercise.'

Changing perspective:

- 'Coming here gives your problems, your life perspective because you can see a thing outside of yourself. You can realise that you are part of the natural world. You're not just stuck in your own head. There's all this out here which you're part of and that can be pretty amazing!'
- 'I've been so enthused that I have utilised this project by taking young people that I work with who are suffering from low self esteem, lack of confidence, social isolation or other emotional, physical health conditions. ... On a scale of 1-10 [on] enjoying his day [my client] went from 3 to 8 and looked forward to attending. His social skills improved, his weight dropped and his general self-esteem and confidence improved.'
- 'Taking in the fresh air cleared my mind, and made me feel good about myself. I had forgotten I was a person, that once I was a working single mother to four beautiful children. I simply needed to get better and healthier.'

- ‘Before...I was isolated a lot and this has helped me get out a bit. Nothing else has changed really and I can’t see much helping me in the future. It is a very worthwhile distraction from the normal day to day life.’

Sense of purpose, achievement and capacity:

- ‘When creating a path through the woodland I felt really powerful because I could move great big trees to the side. I enjoyed how we reused the wood for the sides of the path and how we are restoring something old. We’re bringing something old back to life.’
- ‘I feel the woodlands has taught me a lot of new skills and developed my people skills and interaction with people.’
- ‘Things are on the up. Feeling more at home in woodland home. Concentration better, more enthusiastic and pleased with the results of [my] creative woodwork, paintings and writing. A future – more confident in the ability to make things, more belief in self ability. Being in company important, more confident in contributing to talk – having some input in conversation – not so shy and lacking in confidence as before.’
- ‘I would go down [to the pub] and they would assume I couldn’t do much, being blind, but I’d say ‘I’ve just been walking in this or that place’. They wouldn’t change their lives for mine but sometimes I got the feeling they were a bit envious of me in a way. They wouldn’t say anything but I thought I could hear it in their voices. Like a little triumph for me!’
- ‘It probably sounds strange but sitting down at the end with a cuppa and thinking ‘I did that’ – it’s a bit of a boost. Sometimes the walks are quite effortful so it’s an achievement.’
- ‘Blossoming is what each of us can see – and yes it’s made a big difference, a belonging I feel. I’m actually of worth, part of something and it shows. I can do things, they matter to me and also others. I’m a somebody – [would] I ever have thought at one time that part of nature which is being explored, has meant so much in improving my life! Look and you’ll see.’

Being part of a group:

- ‘This is a very mutually supportive group. So no one gets left out or forced to do anything they don’t want to do either and no one judges anyone else.’
- ‘I’ve met people who have supported me and helped me by talking on the mountain. ... I look forward to going on the walks and talking to the people who went. I have made many new friends and feel that these walks are such a valuable part of the community. It encourages people to get out in the fresh air... it is free and you get to meet lots of different people who enhance your life and can become real friends.’
- I have met many positive, enthusiastic people on these walks and even those who are not so outgoing to start with soon drop their inhibitions and join in the banter with the best of us. Socially, it is a wonderful way to meet interesting individuals of all ages and backgrounds.’
- ‘This past 3 months have brought me close to the group. New members have joined in. Now we are a jolly group of woodlanders. I feel much more comfortable with everyone, thus able to relax more.’
- ‘I have never been a particularly sociable person but the last few years with depression and [reduced] ability to work as I would like (the effect of age) has made difficulties that produce a downward spiral to my mood and sociability. It has not been possible to instantly change the social habits of a lifetime [but] going to the Thursday woods meetings has proved an excellent way for me to meet and interact with others who understand my situation.’

Accessing the outdoors and being inspired by nature:

- 'The views on the mountain were astounding and couldn't believe that they were there all the time, on my doorstep. ... I enjoyed it so much and felt invigorated and instantly uplifted.'
- 'Neither [my client] nor her son had ever accessed local mountains as a way of getting fit and healthy both physically and emotionally. They appreciated and understood the value of the walks and that they could sustain this when I was no longer working with them, as the project is free and open to anyone.'
- 'I like being out in the fresh air, mostly. Like getting a bit tired out.'
- 'I like to think that nature will survive whatever mankind does, it will regenerate. That's pretty inspiring.'
- 'It's very special being out in the woods, not just being in a room looking at the walls. The sheer greatness of it all...is being outside!'
- 'I never thought I'd have opportunities like making a wooden spoon from a tree trunk or attempt to build a shelter in the woods. ... Also the woodland is a wonderful and relaxing place to be away from the noise.'