

# Summary Report from Good from Woods Partners

**The project:** Into The Woods

**The organisation:** Forest of Avon Trust

**The project researcher:** Nicola Ramsden and Rachel Tomlinson

**Participant group:** Adults with learning disabilities from ShireLink day centre

**Number taking part:** 10

**Activity:** Sensory activities e.g. listening, collecting colours, blindfold 'meet a tree'

Art/creative activities e.g. mud painting, making music, making clay creatures

Practical tasks e.g. coppicing, making a wind break

Fire lighting (using fire steels) and cooking (popcorn and chestnuts)

Feedback games

## **Top 3 messages:**

- 1.** Social relationships in the group were key to the wellbeing of the participants, especially in unfamiliar situations. Leaders and staff helped participants but also stood back, encouraging participants to try things independently. Staff were encouraged to take part in activities on an equal footing as participants, which allowed them to see participants in a new light. Participants were able to demonstrate their achievements to staff and peers, receive positive feedback and give support to others in the group.
- 2.** Sensory and creative activities were important as they both appeared to allow participants to access a fundamental source of wellbeing, which may be connected with flow and/or mindfulness.
- 3.** Having a sense of purpose and feelings of being competent were key outcomes of the sessions. These are most often associated with creative activities and practical tasks, which encouraged participants to learn new skills and to work towards and achieve a goal.

## **Background**

The Forest of Avon Trust (FoAT) believes that trees make a huge contribution to our quality of life now and in the future. FoAT plant trees, provide training and advice, and bring the benefits of trees to children, businesses and communities through tree planting, activity days and Forest School.

Into the Woods works with the FoAT to encourage people to go to local woodland, connect with nature and build the confidence to explore other woods in their own time. We use Forest School-type activities to introduce people to the woods in a safe and supportive atmosphere.

Into the Woods specialises in working with groups and individuals who may not normally visit woods, including adults with learning or physical disabilities, mental health service users and people from minority ethnic backgrounds.

## **Research focus**

To investigate the potential impacts on health and wellbeing from a range of woodland activities provided in Forest School style sessions and to understand what leads to these impacts.

FoAT believes that woods and trees have a beneficial impact on the quality of life and its Natural Connections project was set up to promote these benefits to everyone, in particular people who might find it hard to access woodland. Forest School is promoted nationally as playing a beneficial role in child development, but less attention has been given to its potential benefits for adults.

It's important for us, as an organisation and as individuals, to have access to evidence-based research that demonstrates there are wellbeing benefits from woodland activity. The research also helps us improve our practice by prioritising the activities and features that lead to wellbeing.

## **Context**

We worked with a group of adults with learning disabilities who attend a daycare centre in Bristol. The participants, comprising 2 women and 8 men aged between 21 and 64, were accompanied by 3-4 ShireLink support staff.

The programme ran 1 day per week for six weeks, during autumn 2011. The sessions took place in woodland within the Ashton Court Estate (where FoAT is based), which is open to the public. Participants arrived as usual at their daycare centre and travelled by minibus to Ashton Court. They parked nearby and walked into the woodland site. This had to be level and accessible, because a number of the participants used wheelchairs or walking aids.

Participants brought a packed lunch to eat in the woods, hot drinks were provided and a fire was made on several occasions. There were no toilet facilities in the wood, so some participants asked to be transported back to the Ashton Court centre when needed.

## **Expectations**

All the stakeholders interviewed believed that being in woods was a good thing for health and wellbeing. When questioned more closely about why or how this might be accessed, the most common expectation was through close contact with the natural world.

Another aspect which frequently occurred was gaining wellbeing through either physical or personal development. In most examples this was attributed to being in a new situation which would challenge or stretch participants, eg the unfamiliar environment, trying new activities or being with people they didn't know. In other responses, it was the natural setting that was felt to be the important factor. Connected to this was an expectation of wellbeing from achieving, feeling competent or learning a skill.

Stakeholders expected participants to benefit from being with other people in the wood, partly because they would be working together and learning as a group and sharing the experience. It also seemed to be important that when in new and unfamiliar situations, they would be supported by the rest of the group. Stakeholders expected participants to feel relaxed and peaceful, this was almost always attributed to the woodland itself.

Of the 10 most significant wellbeing indicators recorded amongst stakeholders, over half were coded with "where": it was the woodland or natural environment that was seen to be of most importance.

During the data analysis, it was difficult to accurately compare stakeholder expectations with our findings, because the findings were based on very small fragments of each session. For example, a two minute film of someone toasting popcorn or making a leaf picture would be broken down into perhaps ten or more wellbeing indicators. The discussion with stakeholders did not focus on anything as specific as a single activity but considered the broad experience of "being in the woods".

## **Methods used**

- Pre-session interviews with staff
- Pre-session card sorting – potential participants were shown photos of different woodland features or activities and chose those they liked or did not
- Pre-session slideshow & discussion
- Sticker sheets – one sticker labelled with each participant's name, any comments or significant events noted
- Blackboard – for anyone to draw or write on
- Scrapbooks – each participant was given a small notebook in which they could draw, write, stick in things they had collected or made

- Feedback games – such as woodland charades where one person would mime something we'd done that day and the others had to guess what it was
- Videos taken by researcher and watched by researcher later
- Videos taken by participant and watched by researcher later
- Researcher reflective diaries
- Feedback sheets filled in by ShireLink staff – questions about what participants had enjoyed or not and what they would like to do next time
- Post session discussion between researchers

The most useful or productive methods with this group were:

- Videos (taken by researcher and participants) as they gave us time to watch people more closely
- Reflective diaries and discussions as, again, we had the time to reflect more in what had happened, find out from each other what we had missed or discuss sessions in more depth
- Feedback sheets gave us good, immediate feedback on what had gone well/not so well in sessions so we could adapt plans accordingly
- Pre-session slideshow and discussion were useful for getting to know the group and gauging how they might react to different situations, but didn't generate a lot of research data
- Sticker sheets were useful as quick methods for recording during a busy woodland session but didn't provide substantial research data; however, they could be useful for researching change over time

## Results

### Safe and supported within and through social relationships

This indicator is frequently recorded when staff and carers are working alongside and giving positive feedback to participants during an activity or during everyday routines, such as making their way to the camp. It also occurs sometimes when the group are sharing an activity, such as sitting around the fire eating lunch. Many participants need practical help with tasks but support in the form of re-assurance and feedback is also valued. Some participants also check on or encourage each other from time to time. It is almost always associated with 'who'.

(shire05\_meetatree\_03) SS3 leads SP1, blindfolded, to a tree, gets him to feel the trunk, asks him if it's big, leads him away again, turns him around and takes off blindfold. SP1 heads straight to his tree and touches it. SS1 "How d'you know that, SP1?" SP1 smooths trunk and says "soft". F1 "Brilliant" SS3 "Well done mate" (video)

### Experiencing positive emotions & moods

Creative and sensory activities seemed to be most common factors in contributing to people experiencing positive emotions and moods, followed by the leaders and whole group. Cooking and fire were also significant. Many of the occurrences of this indicator were hard to code, perhaps mainly because we couldn't tell what was contributing to the experience.

[shire05\_feedbackquestionnaire] What did people enjoy? SP10: 'the fire, popcorn, lovely'

[shire06\_leafcrowns\_06] (SP7 is wearing his crown and smiling) SV1: 'how do you feel when you wear that?' SP7: 'happy', SV1: 'what do you think when you see everyone else wearing theirs?' SP7: 'happy' (video)

### Sensory Pleasure

This is quite a difficult indicator to record but we felt that it was an important aspect of wellbeing. It was hard to tell whether someone's pleasure was necessarily from a sensory experience, but there seemed to be times where eating, listening or touching something was a pleasurable experience in itself.

Not surprisingly, most instances of this indicator arose from organised sensory activities and eating and drinking. Creative activities such as music-making also led to the indicator being recorded.

(shire02\_feedbackquestionnaire) [what did people enjoy?] SP8 – (put hands to eyes like a blindfold) [meet a tree activity]

(shire05\_F2diary) SP10, who is so quiet and undemonstrative, absolutely loved the popcorn and ended up diving into the bowl with both hands.

### **Enjoyment of creative activity**

We added this indicator as a way of recording when people seemed to get pleasure or satisfaction from inventing, creating and imagining things as opposed to the physical experience. It was most often associated with doing and becoming absorbed in the creative activities themselves. In a few instances, it was associated with sensory activities or watching wildlife.

(shire02\_F2diary) The group got very absorbed in making the Blobsters (clay creatures), even though they didn't spend long making them – the activity seemed to really engage them.

(shire04\_music\_02) SP3 looks absorbed in hitting 2 sticks together

### **Purposeful**

We used this indicator when participants knew what they wanted to do and were doing it. They were actively pursuing a thought or activity, rather than simply responding to an instruction or watching passively. It was associated with motivation to do a job or to reach a goal, rather than the creative process itself.

The most significant way in which people accessed and experienced feeling purposeful seemed to be while they were engaged in creative activities. This may be because there is a clear end 'result' (in making something) or that the task is clear to them.

Practical tasks also seemed to be important as accessing this indicator. Sometimes it is difficult to separate practical tasks from creative ones, eg leaf bashing: to one person the task may be about imagination and another about the physicality of it.

[shire02\_F2diary] The group got very absorbed in making the Blobsters (clay creatures), even though they didn't spend long making them – the activity seemed to really engage them.

[Shirelink\_SP1\_stickers] Wanted to clear away his own rubbish into the right waste bag.

### **Feeling competent/being seen to be competent**

This wellbeing indicator was frequently accessed when people were participating in practical and creative activities and/or were able to demonstrate their skills and abilities to others in the group. It also was experienced when participants were undertaking an activity that was familiar to them (although it did occur once when they were encountering a new or unusual type of activity). It was sometimes brought about when participants could see that they had carried out a task according to instructions and were meeting the expectations of the leader.

The instances when people wanted to show each other how to do something, or that they had done something (e.g. 'look what I've done') were easier to record. Some participants are more demonstrative than others and therefore more likely to do this/be recorded under this indicator.

(Shirelink\_SP2\_stickers) I'm going to tell people what I did today – cutting trees down

(Shirelink\_SP8\_stickers) Made a boat-shaped Blobster "Look – I've done it!"

## **Reflections**

One of the most important research findings was the importance of social relationships in the group. These were especially significant when encountering new and unfamiliar situations. Group leaders and centre staff were always on hand to help participants but would also stand back and encourage participants to try things independently. Centre staff were encouraged to take part in activities on an equal footing as participants. In the follow-up (six months and one year later), it emerged that this had been important for staff, who had had an opportunity to learn new things about the participants and see them in a different light.

Sensory and creative activities were important as they both appeared to allow participants to access a fundamental source of wellbeing, which may be connected with flow and/or mindfulness.

Having a sense of purpose and feelings of being competent were also identified as key outcomes of the sessions. These are most often associated with creative activities, which encouraged participants to learn new skills and to work towards and achieve a goal. They were also accessed through participating in practical tasks. There is overlap between practical tasks and creative ones, eg leaf bashing: to one person the task may be about imagination and another about the physicality of it.

The importance of social relationships underlies all these types of activity. Participants would be given support and encouragement and were able to show they had followed instructions competently and met expectations. They had a chance to demonstrate their achievements to their peers, receive positive feedback and give support to others in the group.

In considering the most commonly occurring indicators of wellbeing, we felt that there were some strong parallels with the new economics foundation's "5 Steps to Mental Wellbeing" and that it might be useful to underline these, as they are being promoted widely in the NHS and other health and wellbeing agencies. The 5 steps have been added in brackets in the Action Points below.

## Action points

**Feel safe & supported (connect):** ensure there are enough staff to offer a sufficient level of support. Support staff and carers should be briefed and participate fully in all activities, as an equal member of the group. Also to support service users in trying things independently, giving help when necessary

**Sense/ mindfulness (notice):** incorporate lots of sensory activities, especially for groups who are unlikely to experience them independently

**Engagement & absorption (be active):** ensure that a range of creative activities is built into the programme and that time and space is given to allowing participants to explore their own creative urges.

**Have a purpose (be active/give):** give people tasks with clear outcomes or goals to work towards and give them responsibility for their completion. Repeating a routine activity, such as setting up the fire circle and involving people in helping can give participants the confidence to initiate the activity themselves

**Feel competent (be active/learn):** adapt activities so that all participants can achieve (for example provide suitable tools, make workspaces suitable for wheelchair users). Encourage peer learning and for participants to take control of sessions. Give opportunities for positive feedback, recognition and acknowledgement. Make sure quieter participants, who are less likely to come forward, also have these opportunities.

**Embed opportunities for future research:** Recent Forest School sessions led by Into the Woods have used post session feedback discussions, video, photos, feedback sheets and scrapbooks. It is anticipated that future sessions will use some of these as well as sticker sheets, reflective diaries and snapshot videos.

## Summary of findings

Rank (most reported)	Wellbeing outcome	Associated factors (who, what and where)
1	Safe and supported within and through social relationships (98)	Who - carers (30) Who - leaders and carers (19) Who - whole group (12) Who - leaders (11) Who - participants (11) What - creative activity (4) Who - small group (3) Who - home life (2) Where - camp circle (1)

2	Experiencing positive emotions and moods (79)	What - creative activities (10) What - sensory activities (10) Who - whole group (8) Who leaders (6) What - cooking (5) What - fire (5) What - games / 'play' (2) What - eating and drinking (2) What - practical tasks (2) What - being given something/to take home (2) Who - carers (2) What - unusual/different activities (2) What - watching/observing (2) Where - being amongst trees (2) Where - being in the woods (1) Where - being somewhere familiar) (1) Where - uneven ground/obstacles(1) What - routine (1) Who - participants (1) Who - small group (1)
3	Sensory pleasure* (64)	What - sensory activities (29) What - eating/drinking (15) What - creative activities (13) Where - being in the woods (2) Where - unusual/unfamiliar place (1) What - fire (1) What - practical tasks (1) What - weather (1) What - wildlife (1)
4	Confidence in and enjoyment of creative activity* (62)	What - creative activities (49) What - games (3) What - sensory activities (3) What - familiar activities (2) Who - carers (2) What - wildlife (1) Who - leaders and staff (1)
5	Purposeful (52)	What - creative activities (21) What - practical tasks (9) What - exploring/getting to know site (4) What - following instructions (3) What - tools (3) What - eating and drinking (1) What - being independent (1) What - routine (1) What - sensory activities (1) Where - camp circle (1) Where - being in the woods (1) Who - carers (1) Who - leaders (1)
6	Feelings of being competent (and seen by others to be competent) (51)	What - practical tasks (11) What - creative tasks (10) What - tools (7) What - following instructions (5) Who - group (5) What - familiar activities (3) What - sensory activities (2) What - cooking (2) What - getting around (1) What - understanding/communication (1) What - unusual/different activities (1)

		What - weather (1) Where - unusual/unfamiliar place (1)
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