

Good practice examples

“Branching Out” programme, Scotland

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Organisations involved

Forestry Commission Scotland, NHS Scotland, local authorities in Scotland.

Aim

To encourage the use and enjoyment of woodlands for mental health patients.

Target group

Adults accessing mental health services in Scotland.

What happens

Branching Out began in 2007 in the city of Glasgow as a pilot led by Forestry Commission Scotland, as part of its Woods for Health strategy to encourage the use of woodlands for physical and mental health. Since then, with the support of a number of health sector partners, the Forestry Commission has run nine groups per year in Greater Glasgow and the Clyde Valley, as well as expanding into new areas in Scotland. The programme caters to adults of both sexes, all ages, varying levels of physical fitness and capability. Branching Out addresses the issue of isolation and other problems suffered by those with mental health conditions by bringing clients together in the outdoors. A 12-week programme in woodlands is designed to increase mental well-being, physical activity, team building, and social skills. Programme groups of up to 12 clients meet once a week for 12 weeks, with each session running for about three hours. Participants are referred by healthcare professionals, and most groups are formed of clients from a single mental health service. Any woodland activity can be included in a Branching Out programme, with clients free to choose which activities they pursue. Activities on offer include: health walks; tai chi sessions; conservation activities; environmental art and photography; green woodworking/willow weaving; bushcraft; learning activities and social activities to give participants the chance to just relax in the woodlands and get to know other people. Branching Out has won a number of awards and there is a high demand for new projects to be established. The management team has developed a Branching Out training course to help support other environmental organisations interested in running a programme in their area, and they have also produced a resource guide to help other organisations learn from the project.

Results of the programme

An evaluation study found that participation in Branching Out tended to significantly increase the physical activity of those involved; and clients have reported improvements in areas such as self-esteem, motivation, sense of achievement and social skills. There were greater benefits for those with poorer mental health.

Reference

CJC Consulting, 2016. Branching Out economic study extension. Report to Forestry Commission Scotland. Oxford, CJC Consulting, 32p.

Website

www.scotland.forestry.gov.uk/supporting/strategy-policy-guidance/health-strategy/branching-out

