The Branch Out Project

An interim report by East Lancs Community Restart Service & Pennine Lancashire Community Farm

on

A partnership approach providing Ecotherapy across Pennine Lancashire

January 2012
**Forward**

This is an interim report about the Branch Out project, which is a partnership between Third Sector environmental organisations and statutory mental health services. The partnership, which is led by Pennine Lancashire Community Farm, represents a highly effective approach in delivery of Ecotherapy sessions and Social Inclusion opportunities to people accessing mental health support services in East Lancashire. The close working between PLCF, as the coordinating partner and the East Lancashire Community Restart Service, has enabled very detailed evidence to be collated regarding the outcomes and outputs of the Branch Out project.

The report also provides an overview of the rationale behind the development of the Branch Out project, as a partnership based on the Social Prescribing model, and through which the E L Community Restart service has been able to promote the natural environment and Ecotherapy as a ‘domain’ where social connections and a sense of community are fostered through shared activity and experience, where stress is reduced and intrinsic feelings of connection to the natural world are restored and whereby Recovery is aided.

Rather than being just a ‘woolly’ concept, Branch Out has enabled the project partners to directly demonstrate the very real benefits in terms of mental and physical Wellbeing that Ecotherapy can offer.

The English poet, John Clare (1793 – 1864), certainly understood this natural ‘healing power’ when he wrote:

**Wood Rides**

Who hath not felt the influence that so calms The weary mind in summers sultry hours When wandering thickest woods beneath the arms Of ancient oaks and brushing nameless flowers That verge the little ride who hath not made A minutes waste of time and sat him down Upon a pleasant swell to gaze awhile

On crowding ferns bluebells and hazel leaves And showers of lady smocks so called by toil When boys sprote gathering sit on stulps and weave Garlands while barkmen pill the fallen tree - Then mid the green variety to start Who hath (not) met that mood from turmoil free And felt a placid joy refreshed at heart

Andy Wild  
East Lancs Community Restart Service  
Lancashire Care NHS Foundation Trust

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Pennine Lancashire Community Farm
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History

Prior to the setting up of the Branch Out project, the East Lancs Community Restart Service and Pennine Lancashire Community Farm worked in partnership on delivery of the Care Farm project. This pilot project, funded by East Lancs PCT, established a new way of working for both organisations which enabled service users supported by the E L Community Restart to experience farming and rural activities as part of their personal Recovery journeys. The focus was around introducing people to socially inclusive activities in the natural environment and thereby providing direct experience of the holistic health benefits to be gained from such nature-based interventions.

This local pilot provided some early indicators of the benefits of ‘Ecotherapy’ in terms of improved Wellbeing and created a foundation on which the Branch Out concept was based.

Branch Out

The Branch Out Project, which is led by Pennine Lancashire Community Farm, established a consortium approach, encompassing a variety of environmental provider organisations into the established partnership between PLCF and E L Community Restart Service, thereby providing a richer mix of knowledge, experience and opportunity for individuals identifying Ecotherapy as a Recovery focused intervention.

Based around the Social Prescribing model, the Project offers individual choice, within the field of Ecotherapy and the Project coordinator links service users up to appropriate environmental providers, based on their referral form choices.

Following the funded Ecotherapy sessions, ongoing volunteering opportunities are available to service users within the partner organisations and the Project also operates a Peer to Peer employment model, providing paid work to a small number of services users on twelve month contracts with PLCF. These roles are supported by the Community Restart Employment Support team.

Community Restart works across all steps of the Stepped Care model and can provide ongoing, goal-focused social inclusion support as appropriate to service user needs.

Branch Out, launched in March 2010 runs until March 2012 and is currently funded through MIND Ecominds Big Lottery funding stream. The Project is established as one of only five national flagship-funded projects.

Project outcomes are captured using a variety of means.
Qualitative outcomes are gathered through:
- Personal stories
- Volunteering
- Moves towards open employment through the Peer to Peer scheme

Quantative outcomes are measured using the seven-item Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS), which is discussed in more detail later in the report.
Partner Organisations

Branch Out project consortium partners include:

Pennine Lancashire Community Farm
Local charity promoting community cohesion and sustainable living
Lead organisation for the Branch Out project

Offshoots Permaculture Project
Internationally acclaimed local environmental project founded on principles of earth care, people care and fair shares.

Lancashire Wildlife Trust
Conservation charity – part of the national Wildlife Trust movement

Forest of Burnley Project
Local Borough Council facilitated woodland management project

GardenAble
Horticultural CIC providing social gardening opportunities

Lancashire Woodlands Project
LCC facilitated woodland project and advisory service

East Lancs Community Restart - Social Inclusion Service
Statutory NHS Mental Health service
Introduction

What is mental health?

The World Health Organisation defines mental health as not just the absence of mental disorder but a 'state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community. (WHO, 2001)

There is now considerable evidence available to suggest that access to and utilisation of, the natural environment can promote and maintain mental health.

This concept of the ‘healing power’ of Nature and its use in promoting mental health predates almost all current treatment modalities; however the wide use of green spaces as a therapeutic tool declined throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries.

Part of the reason behind this may be that demand for evidence-based practice has concentrated on quantitative studies. Traditionally, studies examining the links between green space and health have been qualitative.

There has, however, been recent growth in the area of ‘Ecotherapy’ which have been accompanied by the emergence of quantitative studies demonstrating positive findings in terms not only of mental health but also of physical health and social functioning. These findings indicate that utilisation of the natural environment as a therapeutic tool may bring forth much more holistic health benefits.

Such a holistic approach to health may be of particular benefit to those in Mental Health services, as secondary problems such as physical and social limitations are frequently associated with poor mental health.

A number of current projects aim to increase the health benefits of activities in the outdoor environment through organised schemes to promote walking and using conservation work to increase levels of physical activity. A wider range of other schemes aim to promote health and wellbeing, but not necessarily or exclusively by promoting physical activity. In these schemes people are encouraged to enjoy the psychological benefits that can be afforded by ‘green spaces’ or communities enabled to thrive through projects that take a holistic rather than a medical approach to people and health by promoting participation in art and learning in ways that often focus on the value of local environmental amenities, spaces and landscapes. (Health Development Agency, 2003)
Background

"Ecotherapy may be described as the use of Nature for the enhancement of people's psychological and physical well-being. It is about being outdoors and being active" – MIND. (MIND, 2007)

The 2007 MIND report ‘Ecotherapy – the green agenda for mental health’ sets the case for wider acknowledgment of the benefits of Ecotherapy and greater provision of interventions based around the natural environment.

Their studies found that:

- 90% of people surveyed after taking part in green exercise activities said that the combination of nature and exercise was most important in determining how they felt.
- 94% of people surveyed commented that green exercise activities had benefitted their mental health.

Indeed, a report by the Chief Medical Officer states: "physical activity is effective in the treatment of clinical depression and can be as successful as psychotherapy and medication, especially in the longer term" (Department of Health, 2004).

MIND’s report also points to research done by others, which highlights that: "93% of GP's have prescribed antidepressants because of a lack of alternative treatment options" (MIND, 2007).

The Ecotherapy approach taps into the fundamental connections that we all have to Nature and seeks to demonstrate the positive healing effects that natural environments can have on Wellbeing, both physical and mental.

Ecotherapy is also a great way for people to connect: with others and with their local environments.

Evidence shows that people feel better about themselves if they value the environments in which they live and if they feel included in their communities.

A recent Government White Paper recognizes the links between a healthy population and healthy local environments: "A good-quality environment is associated with a decrease in problems such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol. It is also linked with better mental health, reduced stress and more physical activity." (HMSO, 2011).
The East Lancs Community Restart Service acts as the link between Steps 2/3, Step 4 and Step 5 services.

Specialist mental health workers within the service provide a support and enablement function to service users referred to Branch Out and act as a point of contact for the Project coordinator.

The close working between East Lancs Community Restart and Pennine Lancs Community Farm has enabled the Project to gather and collate clear and measured outcomes.
Outcomes Data

The following outcomes data is collated from 181 service users referred to the Project, so far (December 2011), via the E L Community Restart service pathway.

This number is seen as sufficiently large enough to be representative of the overall cohort of referrals to Branch Out to date.

The Project duration is 7/8 complete, with 3 months still remaining.

As of December 2011:

The total number of referrals to the Branch Out project to date has been 272 of which 181 (66.5%) have been referred from East Lancs Community Restart teams.

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**Fig 1:** Gender demographics

- 76% of referrals were male
- 24% were female

**Fig 2:** Age demographics

- 64 (35%): 16 - 19 yrs
- 43 (24%): 20 - 29 yrs
- 30 (16%): 30 - 39 yrs
- 28 (15%): 40 - 49 yrs
- 3 (2%): 50 - 59 yrs
- 14 (8%): 60 - 69 yrs
- 2 (1%): 70 yrs and above
Fig 3: Referrals by locality

Referrals - by Community Restart team

- Burnley: 28 (15%)
- Hyndburn: 44 (24%)
- Pendle: 70 (39%)
- Rossendale: 17 (9%)
- Hub Development Workers: 23 (13%)

Fig 4: Analysis of referrals by individual diagnosis

Referrals - by Diagnosis

- Schizoaffective Disorder: 7 (4%)
- Personality Disorder: 7 (4%)
- Chronic Psychotic Disorder: 6 (3%)
- Generalised Anxiety Disorder: 9 (5%)
- Depression & Anxiety: 15 (8%)
- Depressive Episode: 29 (16%)
- Bipolar: 14 (8%)
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder: 2 (1%)
- Mental Disorders - not otherwise specified: 58 (31%)
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: 3 (2%)
- Unknown: 1 (1%)
- Mental Disorder due to Alcohol use: 1 (1%)
- Persistent Delusional Disorder: 2 (1%)
**Fig 5:** Referrals by Mental Health classifications

Note:
Classification ‘other’ relates to people whose primary diagnosis lies within
- Autistic Spectrum Disorder
- OCD
- Eating Disorders
- MH Disorder due to Alcohol misuse

Analysis of referrals was also considered by step, based on the Stepped Care Model for Mental Health services as below.

- **Step 1**: Recognition
- **Step 2**: Treatment for mild disorders
- **Step 3**: Treatment for moderate disorders
- **Step 4/5**: Treatment for complex disorders
Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)

The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) was used to assess service users’ mental state at the point of referral to Branch Out and after Ecotherapy sessions were completed. *The WEMWBS is a valid and reliable tool in this respect. (Tennant et al, 2007)*

The seven-item WEMWBS was used in a recent North West Population Wellbeing study (NWPHO, 2009) and allows the Branch Out project to align its findings with local and regional general population data.

The Project measures changes in Mental Wellbeing using a baseline WEMWBS (at referral) and follow-up (after 12 sessions).

"What differentiates WEMWBS from all existing measures of mental health is that it has been developed specifically to measure positive mental health - all the items represent positive thoughts or feelings. Its positive focus offers a vision of future population mental health and enables others to see where mental health promotion programmes might be headed." (Parkinson, 2006)
Below are some statements about feelings and thoughts.

Please tick the box that best describes your experience of each over the last 2 weeks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATEMENTS</th>
<th>None of the time</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Some of the time</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>All of the time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I’ve been feeling optimistic about the future</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve been feeling useful</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve been feeling relaxed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve been dealing with problems well</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve been thinking clearly</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve been feeling close to other people</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve been able to make up my own mind about things</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using the seven-item WEMWBS, the lowest score possible is 7 whilst the highest is 35

A mean General Population WEMWBS score for the East Lancs PCT area has been established at 26.85 (Deacon et al, 2009)

As can be seen from the following charts, Ecotherapy is effective in increasing Mental Wellbeing across the whole spectrum of mental illness.

These increases are significant enough to move people from low towards moderate wellbeing, as defined by the North West Mental Wellbeing Survey, and are clear evidence of the potential of Ecotherapy as part of a Recovery approach, to move people towards the General Population score.
Figs 8 & 9 detail the individual WEMWBS scores of service users who have completed 12 sessions with the Project.
(The results are given for the same reporting period of Yr1 and Yr2 of the project)

**Fig 8**

**WEMWBS scores June-October 2010**

**Fig 9**

**WEMWBS scores June-October 2011**
WEMWBS scores have also been analysed by Diagnosis and by Step, to demonstrate the improvements shown across a broad range of diagnosed conditions.

The outcomes data presented are gathered from the WEMWBS responses of 80 Service Users who were referred by East Lancs Community Restart. The number of responses will increase as the Project nears completion and more people complete sessions.

The mean General Population score line for the East Lancs PCT area (North West Mental Wellbeing Survey, 2009) has been included to give context to the findings.

Fig 10: Average baseline and follow-up WEMWBS scores across diagnosis classifications
Overall, of the 272 people that Branch Out has worked with to date (December 2011):

156 people (57.4%) completed the twelve sessions Ecotherapy programme.

65 of those (41.7%) have continued to volunteer with provider organisations.

- 69 people (25.4%) are still actively attending sessions with the Project.
- 19 people (7.0%) are awaiting their sessions to start.
- 28 people (10.3%) failed to engage after referral or withdrew after one session.

(Reasons for non-engagement are not fully clear but appear to be influenced by other events happening in people’s lives which made engagement more difficult for them, rather than being an inappropriate referral in the first place. This figure seems to be in line with similar projects trying to engage with mental health service users)
Conclusion

Partnership approach

A key factor in the success of the Branch Out project has been the consortium approach to delivery of Ecotherapy sessions. This not only provides a broad range of activities for people to choose from, but has enabled the project to respond to the needs of service users, through development of a network of sites for Ecotherapy across the East Lancs area.

Service users sit on the steering group which oversees the Project, and theirs and other’s feedback at forum events, has guided decisions about how the project has developed.

One of the early outcomes for Branch Out was delivery of Mental Health First Aid training to partner organisations as part of awareness raising about mental health. This development of practitioner knowledge and understanding is part of the Project’s wider drive to tackle issues of stigma and discrimination around mental health through its direct work with people.

Equally, by using the outdoors and its natural stress-reducing qualities, Ecotherapy sessions, promote social inclusion by ensuring that activities are mainstream and open to the community. People work shoulder to shoulder with each other.

A prime motivation for the Project is that it does not segregate people by illness, but rather, focuses on the positive contributions that everyone can make.

Value

The outcomes demonstrated by the Project so far point to the efficacy of the Ecotherapy approach in enabling people to bring meaningful change into their lives. The evidence suggests that positive and lasting improvements in mental and physical wellbeing are possible for people with a wide range of conditions. The pathology of mental illness is complex; however it appears that complementary interventions such as Ecotherapy, which take a more holistic view of Recovery, can be very effective.

The Biophilia hypothesis (Wilson, 1984) suggests an innate affinity of all human beings to the natural world. Ecotherapy can be a way for people to experience this connection.
Case Study 1

B was referred to the Branch Out project by in March 2010. Prior to this he said "I was stuck in the house, doing nothing."

B was supported by Community Restart to explore opportunities for outdoor volunteering, as he wished to use his previous experience in landscaping as part of his Social Inclusion and Recovery focus. Whilst with the Branch Out project, B undertook a variety of sessions such as woodland skills, dry stone walling and creating growing areas from unused land.

He said the project - “Really helped me to start getting out of the house and into something that I enjoy doing. My confidence has returned and I have met lots of new people”

B continued as a formal volunteer with Pennine Lancashire Community Farm at their March Street Community Garden site, where he was offered a paid role under the Peer to Peer support scheme within Branch Out, supporting others coming onto the Project.

B was supported by the Community Restart Employment Support team throughout this period.

B has now moved into full-time employment with PLCF.

Case Study 2

P was referred to the Branch Out project in October 2010 to undertake a Rustic Furniture making course at the Offshoots site.

He said – "I enjoyed working with wood, I have a good imagination and he (the tutor) allowed me to use this and it was great to learn how to use the specialist tools.”

P is very proud of the small stool he made on the course – “when I am feeling negative I look at what I made and it reminds me of what I can achieve”

P still has good and bad days, but has continued to volunteer when he feels able, at both Offshoots and March Street Community Garden. He is now taking small steps back towards employment with the support of the Community Restart Employment Support team.
Case Study 3

P was referred to the Branch Out project in March 2010. He was being supported by the Community Restart service after losing his job and becoming unwell.

P was interested in gardening and did horticulture sessions with Branch Out, moving onto the Peer to Peer scheme after demonstrating commitment through volunteering and an aptitude to engage well with people.

P enjoyed his time with the Project, using it to take stock of his life and re-focus on his future.

P has since moved in to open employment again in health sector.

Case Study 4

A group of service users from Sandy Lane gardening group, Accrington were signposted to the Branch Out project via Community Restart. The group wished to learn some woodworking skills to enable them to build rustic furniture for their garden.

Following a rustic furniture course at Offshoots, the group have gone from strength to strength, producing items for their own garden, and also making items to sell, which generates income for the garden group.

A couple of the group have continued as volunteers at Offshoots.

Quotes

Client P – “Doing the rustic furniture making has been something really different for me and the tutor has given me confidence doing this course.”

Client F – (woodland skills) “I have been able to make some new friends on this project and feel useful to the work that Keith and the team do and will continue as a volunteer after my Branch Out sessions have finished.”

Client B – “Working with the farm has been great for me and it feels like a comfort zone. Everyone gets on and I get treated like a human being.”
References:


