

Promoting psychological health and mental well-being

Blarbuie Woodland: evaluating the benefits

Introduction

In 2003, discussions began about the possibility of bringing Blarbuie Woodland, the woods around Argyll and Bute Psychiatric Hospital, back into active management. Most of the woodland was around 150 years old, having been planted in the Victorian era when the hospital was built. However, it had fallen into neglect and become unwelcoming. Reforesting Scotland carried out a consultation and a partnership was formed between Reforesting Scotland, the NHS, Argyll Green Woodworkers Association, the Scottish Association for Mental Health, and Lochgilphead Community Council.

The Blarbuie project aimed to enhance the environmental, community and health benefits that the wood could offer, although a particular focus became the impact of working and walking in Blarbuie woodland on health and well-being. In 2004, work began on the ground and involved mental health services users, people with disabilities, young people, volunteers and contractors. In 2007, Blarbuie Woodland was opened as a public park with all-ability trails and interpretation. By 2008 the wood was attracting seven times more people to walk in it than it had in 2004.

Evaluation

In 2008, the Blarbuie partnership initiated an evaluation of the project to determine what benefits participants and users of the wood were gaining in relation to health, confidence and skills, and what ideas and aspirations people had for the future use and development of Blarbuie. The methodology employed involved interviewing over 50 woodland users including mental health service users, health professionals, hospital staff, visitors, woodland workers, volunteers, people with disabilities, dog walkers and other members of the general public.

Results

- All interviewees felt that coming to the wood improved their health and well-being in some way.
- A third of interviewees believed that coming to the wood improved their physical health and fitness.
- A large number (85%) of respondents stated that coming to the wood improved their mental health and well-being.

- Participants in the research were asked to describe how they felt their mental health and well-being was enhanced by the time they spent in the woodland. Some stated that the woods helped them to feel more active, stimulated and alert. Others suggested that the woods were rejuvenating, offering opportunities to relax, reflect, and find 'peace of mind'.
- Woodland workers enjoyed many of the same health benefits as visitors to the woodland and, in addition, their work gave them opportunities to develop skills, confidence and relationships with other workers.
- Project participants enjoyed 'being active in the open air, in a setting that is safe, and accessible in every sense. Being physically active improves their general sense of health. Interaction with other participants and workers, volunteers, contractors and woodland staff and members, enhances their sense of worth, confidence and happiness. Being involved in decision-making and learning new skills increase their confidence and motivation. Being in the woodland setting and involved in its development enhances their mental health and well-being' (Blarbuie Woodland Partnership, 2008:26).
- The health professionals interviewed recognised the mental health benefits of outdoor activity and recreation and contact with nature. In particular they observed that a state of 'mindfulness' was particularly achievable in the woodland setting, i.e. being very much aware of the present, without worries or concerns about the past or future. They also expressed beliefs that the proximity of the hospital to the woodland was highly beneficial for those patients undergoing ongoing treatment and that the woods provided a setting that may facilitate closer and better interactions between professionals and patients.
- The significance of the natural environment to both workers and visitors was clearly evident in interview responses because of the opportunities it offered for people to 'connect with nature'. The wide range of sensory experiences, the presence of wildlife and a range of flora and fauna were all cited as important in attracting people to the wood.
- Findings suggested that it was important to have different kinds of environment within the woodland to meet different users' needs. For example, some people enjoyed activity in heavily populated areas of the woodland while other users looked for solitude in quiet locations.
- Suggestions for woodland improvement were forthcoming, including developing new and more accessible paths, improving signage, and planting more shrubs, wild flowers, climbers and trees.
- However, some respondents stressed their feeling that it was important to not overdevelop the woods.

Conclusion

The Blarbuie Woodland project has vastly improved the woodland as a resource for a range of users, including users of mental health services. The woodland and the project itself have supplied many social and environmental benefits but their role in providing mental health and well-being benefits has been particularly significant. Although activities in and visits to the woods have increased dramatically since the inception of the project, the partnership are still identifying and addressing perceived gaps. For example, a Woodland Health Walk Steering Group was established in 2009 with the help of Paths to Health, a government-backed Scotland-wide initiative. Unlike other Paths to Health Walking Groups, however, the main target audience of the Blarbuie group are the users of mental health services since the aim is to ensure that as many people as possible on the wards of the hospital have the opportunity to experience the health benefits of the woodland.

Reference

Blarbuie Woodland Partnership (2008). The Impact of Working and Walking in Blarbuie Woodland at Argyll and Bute Hospital on mental Health and Wellbeing. Analysis of Health Research Interviews in 2008. Reforesting Scotland, Edinburgh