

Promoting psychological health and mental well-being

Branching Out: greenspace and conservation on referral

Introduction

Branching Out is a project that was developed as a result of a partnership between Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS), NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, Glasgow and Clyde Green Network Partnership, Glasgow Centre for Population Health and Glasgow City Council.

The referral service is run for clients who use mental health services within Greater Glasgow and Clyde. Each client undertakes approximately three hours of activities per week in a woodland setting. Clients work together in small groups of up to 15 for a 12-week period, participating in a variety of activities including health walks, bushcraft skills, nature conservation, environmental art and relaxation. The sessions are run by an experienced FCS Ranger and an Assistant Ranger, with input from sessional workers such as environmental artists and tai chi instructors. The programme is designed to develop trust and responsibility along with structure to the client's week.

On completion of the programme, there is a graduation ceremony for clients and their friends and family. Here, they receive certificates of completion, tool handling and achievement, e.g. The John Muir Award. Longer term volunteer and training opportunities are highlighted during the graduation ceremony and organisations like the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers attend the event to promote the volunteer opportunities they provide.

Objectives

The project aimed to:

- Improve the quality of life for adults experiencing severe and enduring mental health problems in Greater Glasgow and Clyde by engaging them in activities in a greenspace environment.
- Conduct a review of the evidence base for utilising greenspace to promote and maintain mental health.
- Develop a structured programme for Branching Out based on existing evidence.
- Develop an effective referral pathway, protocols, policies and procedures, risk assessments and safety management for clients who use secondary and tertiary care mental health services.

- Develop effective partnership working between FCS and health, social care and voluntary providers.
- Offer Branching Out on referral as an adjunct form of treatment to those in secondary and tertiary care.
- Evaluate the effects of participation in the Branching Out programme on those who use secondary and tertiary care mental health services.

Evaluation Method

An evaluation of the first year of the service was completed. For each client, pre- and post-measures of well-being, general health and physical activity were ascertained and compared using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS), the SF-12v2™ Health Survey and the Scottish Physical Activity Questionnaire (SPAQ), respectively.

These quantitative measures were accompanied and enriched by semi-structured interviews ($n=29$), focus groups ($n=8$) and observational journals ($n=2$) of clients and staff. Data gained were thematically analysed to determine the perceived benefits and limitations of the service.

Results

Five key themes were identified from the interviews and focus groups:

1. Improvement to mental well-being.
2. Improvement to physical health.
3. Provision of daily structure/routine.
4. Transferable skill acquisition.
5. Social networking/social skills development.

Results appear to show several positive outcomes of the Branching Out programme:

- Low attrition rates in a hard to reach population.
- Significant increases in physical activity.
- Strong trends towards improvement in SF-12v2™ physical component, SF-12v2™ mental component, and WEMWBS for high severity groups on each scale.
- Self-reported improvements in confidence and self-esteem from participating clients.
- Intergenerational appeal / appeal to both sexes

In addition, the following aspects of the programme were reported which identify the contribution it can make as part of a recovery-based approach to health care.

- The dynamics of the programme and its delivery in an outdoor environment / non-clinical setting, appeared to aid in redressing the patient and health professional power imbalance.
- The small group sizes facilitated team building and social inclusion. Clinicians and clients both reported improvements in social networking and social skills development.

- The opportunity to demonstrate competence in tasks, the contribution of the work to the community, the attainment of new skills and the acquisition of the John Muir Discovery Award (and other certificates) all appeared to provide clients with a sense of achievement/pride.
- Clients reported increased structure and routine within their day/week and the provision of something to focus on. As a result, many of the clients and clinicians viewed the programme as representing a halfway house between a self-imposed isolation and inactivity and a reintroduction to community engagement.

Conclusion

The evaluation did have limitations, due primarily to the relatively small number of clients passing through the service but the results indicate that greenspace on referral can be an effective additional form of treatment in a secondary and tertiary care mental health population. The positive outcomes of the programme demonstrate the benefits of the environmental and health sectors working together to deliver health outcomes for mental health service users.

As the programme did not require any additional premises (beyond the work-bases of the NHS and FCS staff), cost per head, per day, was under £50. The programme therefore appears to offer excellent value for money. It is recommended that mental health services providers and clinical practitioners give due consideration to adopting and supporting programmes like Branching Out as part of a wider menu of adjunct treatment options.

To this end, a resource guide has been produced to aid other organisations in setting up their own programmes similar to Branching Out. This is available at:
www.forestry.gov.uk/branchingout

Reference

This case study contains extended extracts from:

Forestry Commission Scotland (2009). Executive summary *.Branching Out: greenspace and conservation on referral*. <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/branchingout> accessed 07/02/10