

Wye Wood Project

Tackling rural social deprivation



The Wye Wood Project offers solutions to some of the social challenges of rurally disadvantaged communities. Based in rural Herefordshire and South Shropshire, where pockets of deprivation present problems of ill health, social exclusion, and unemployment, the project seeks to overcome these problems through the power of nature. By putting trees, communities and business at the heart of a sustainable partnership, the project has provided health opportunities, skills training, and conservation work, and given people quality time spent in the natural environment.

objectives

- To link organisations and locations to make the most of locally available resources and skills, and share best value from these limited resources.
- To work with 'hard-to-reach' individuals including the unemployed, ex-offenders, ethnic minorities, disabled, and people with no access to the countryside.
- To provide access to training and employment opportunities, and to develop a portfolio of regionally relevant Open College Network (OCN) qualifications.
- To increase awareness of local woodlands for recreation and to provide opportunities for local communities to improve their health in a natural setting.
- To increase levels of rehabilitation programme completion.
- To engage in good woodland management and enhance habitats for wildlife.

actions

- The appointment of a Health Development Worker (HDW) to liaise with local organisations to promote the health benefits of woodlands, and develop an audience-led programme of activities, including 'Walking for Health', coppice craft workshops, buggy walking, building benches, and exercise classes.
- Generating interest through press releases, events, leaflets, approaching local GP practices, health visitors and contacting existing community groups.
- Training 7 volunteers as walk leaders under the Walking the Way to Health scheme.

achievements

- 45 people attended one or more event, and 22 attended over four events. Surveys revealed that participants 'felt fitter', liked 'doing something constructive', felt more confident and relaxed, experienced improved sleep, and found that the social aspect motivated them to return each week.
- Between 10 and 150 people attended each event, totalling 300. The events were effective in raising awareness and networking. Most participants, within a 10 mile radius, were unaware of access to the woodlands prior to the Project.
- Participant success stories include:
- A man in his thirties who was unemployed for eight years, found that coppicing "[gave] structure to my life". His enthusiasm for outdoor work grew, he gained two qualifications and, with new-found confidence, secured a part time job working with young people.
- A 75 year-old widow, living in a village, expressed feelings of loneliness, negativity and physical stiffness. After attending a Gentle Exercise Group she reported feeling more active, enjoyed socialising, and has rekindled former relationships with other people in the village.

background

- The *Choosing Health* White Paper (DH, 2004) outlines a new approach to public health, with a focus on tackling health inequalities amongst those with poorer physical and mental health, usually at the lower end of the social scale.
- *Health and Well-being: Trees, Woodlands and Natural Spaces* (P Tabbush and L O'Brien, 2002) and *Trees and Woodlands: Nature's Health Service* (L O'Brien, 2005) show the positive impact forests have on health and well-being.
- Approximately 19% of people in the project area live in poverty in rural areas. The most common factor relating to rural disadvantage is access to services and facilities (such as health and education) and advice. South Wye is the most disadvantaged area of Hereford City. Average earnings are at least 12% less than the West Midlands average. 16.2% are lone parents.
- The Wye Wood Project comprises:
 - *Wye Wood – Newton Coppice (2003-04)* a £29,000 pre-project pilot to identify potential for skills development and employment opportunities through a local sustainable supply chain of timber, and improved health of the community.
 - *Wyrendee Wood (04-07)* first level training - coppicing and green wood-working (OCN level 1), survival skills, and the Basic Expedition Leaders Award
 - *Wider Wood (05-06)* emphasises health improvement.
- *Wye Wood IV* will look at progression routes and tighter integration between partners, and the development of social enterprise.
- The Wye Wood Project is a model that could be replicated throughout the UK.

quotes

"This has given me the ability to get out of the gym and do something I enjoy. I like being outside...I can walk much further now as my angina is better...I believe exercise is as important as pills." A member of Wye Wood Walking Group.

"This is a good example of partnership working...Health is everyone's business, not just the NHS's, and we have demonstrated how different agencies have an important contribution to make in health improvement." Dr. Frances Howie, Associate Director of Health Improvement, Herefordshire PCT.

"One of my main aims was to get people to realise that those great swathes of conifers on the top of the hill belonged to them and they could use them to walk or exercise as this was a public space." Elizabeth Parrott, Health Development Worker, Wye Wood.

partners

Diocese of Hereford
Forestry Commission
Herefordshire Council
Hereford PCT
Herefordshire Sustain Project

Learning & Skills Council
Shropshire PCT
The Green Wood Centre
The Probation Service

funding

Forestry Commission – West Midlands £20,000
Forestry Commission – National £15,000
PCT Herefordshire £4,000
PCT Shropshire £4,000
West Mercia Probation Service £6,000

Total: £49,000

lessons learnt

- Making contact with community members via existing groups was a slow process. One-off events, whilst successful, did not attract inactive people. A more tailored referral system worked far more successfully.
- Working in partnership with one very enthusiastic community worker and focusing on sign-posted individuals who represented the ultimate target audience was more fruitful than trying to target too many people at once.
- Overcoming practical challenges to developing activities for the user groups including lack of transport, the timing of activities and staffing.