



## Sue Pitt, Wellbeing in the Woods Project Manager

### International Tree Foundation

#### Introduction

Wellbeing in the Woods is a new project developed by International Tree Foundation. A pilot of the project was run in Sheffield during 2019 and was made possible by a grant from Postcode Local Trust, a grant-giving charity funded entirely by players of People's Postcode Lottery. The project worked with people who had been homeless and took them out into local woodland for a variety of outdoor activities. The aims of the project were to improve their physical and mental wellbeing and to enhance their knowledge and understanding of woodland.

Twelve sessions were held on a monthly basis throughout 2019. Eleven of these took place outdoors in woodlands around Sheffield. These were Newfield Spring Wood (managed by Heather Hunt), Shire Brook Valley Nature Reserve (managed by Sheffield City Council) and Greno Woods (managed by Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust). Local partners included four organisations that support people who have experienced homelessness – Sheffield Foyer, Cherrytree Support Services, Roundabout and Crisis Skylight South Yorkshire. Support staff from these organisations brought together small groups to take part in the outdoor sessions. At the final session participants created an exhibition at Exchange Place Studios, run by Yorkshire ArtSpace in the centre of Sheffield.

#### Outdoor sessions

The outdoor sessions covered woodland conservation, green woodworking, making fire, art and photography.

At the woodland conservation sessions participants carried out important tasks in caring for the woodland such as thinning young trees and coppicing. As trees mature in woodland it is important to remove some of the small trees to allow more space for others to grow to full size. Coppicing is an



ancient technique in which a tree is cut down and the new shoots it produces are allowed to grow over a number of years before being cut again. This produces poles which have a variety of uses, but also prolongs the life of the tree and creates a more open habitat in which wildlife can thrive.



The green woodworking sessions allowed participants to understand how wood can be used. They made walking sticks and stools from coppiced hazel poles. They used a two-handed saw to cut larger timber and an axe to split it. They then worked on a shaving horse to round it off before using a pole-lathe to create a spurtle and other simple objects.

A central part of many of the sessions was making a fire and using it to cook food. Participants learnt how to light a fire with a variety of techniques using strikers, flint and steel, and bow and drill. Hot drinks were made using a Kelly Kettle. The fire was used to warm vegetable stews and to cook damper bread and pancakes. Participants were encouraged to try healthy, unprocessed food – which they really enjoyed.

Coming together to share food around a fire is a very special thing and many wonderful conversations took place ranging from politics, friendships, global warming and life in a city.

The art and photography sessions focused on looking closely at nature within the woodland setting and recognising its beauty. Leaves and other plants were used to make prints on fabric. Photography was used to tell the story of the sessions and also to capture the atmosphere of the wood – from grand vistas to tiny details. Participants took photos on single-use cameras and many of these were displayed in the exhibition at the end of the project.



### Wellbeing Assessment

Participants were asked to assess how they were feeling at the beginning and end of each session by placing a sticker on a scale from 0 (Rock bottom) to 10 (Fantastic). There was a significant improvement in their mood each time and some people put themselves off the scale at the end. The average score at the start of sessions was 5.7/10. At the end the average was 9.3/10. Importantly, this led to wide-ranging discussions about how getting outdoors and being active can be beneficial for our sense of wellbeing. This will help participants to manage their own wellbeing in a positive way in the future.

### The Exhibition

Photographs taken by participants during the outdoor sessions were displayed on the walls and the woodland scene was recreated with a mock fire, stools, leaves, timber and foliage from the wood. Practical demonstrations of the pole lathe and of fire-lighting techniques took place at the launch of the exhibition and it was then open to the public for two weeks. Yorkshire ArtSpace promotes widening





participation in the arts and they were thrilled to see the enthusiastic involvement of this marginalised group in the exhibition. It was a great boost to the self-confidence of participants to see their work on display and to appreciate the level of interest in the work they had been doing from the wider public. This included coverage on Radio Sheffield and two of the participants were confident enough to be interviewed for this.

## Achievements

The project involved a total of 97 people from the local community in Sheffield. This included 28 participants aged between 16 and 53 years. Some attended several sessions, with one attending 8 sessions and two attending 5. This level of continuity of participation is rare in this client group because of the many difficulties in their lives, and indicates the degree to which they found it beneficial. Those 28 people were helped on their journey of recovery towards independent living and new opportunities. Support staff identified it as particularly beneficial for those with mental health problems as it increased their confidence and social skills. We are not always aware of the onward journey of participants, but we know that two of our regular participants are now living independently and another will soon be moving on (see case study). One member of staff said, “Residents that need time out, away from the pressure of the hostel environment have really appreciated the different pace and feel of our peaceful days in the woods. It’s notable that people with anxiety have joined in and benefited the most. Others have just enjoyed the challenge of new activities in an outdoor setting.”

Participants developed new skills through the project. The relaxed atmosphere of the outdoor sessions encouraged social interaction and communication with each other and with staff. They learned the specific conservation, woodworking and creative skills involved in the different activities. Many identified an increasing feeling of confidence. Above all, they developed a much greater appreciation of the value of woodland and the ways in which it can benefit us all. Several of the participants from Crisis Skylight South Yorkshire have achieved a John Muir Award through taking part in this project alongside other conservation activities.

Support staff also gained a great deal from the project, with 11 attending overall. They have a very stressful and challenging role and appreciated finding this new way to support their clients that is interesting, effective and benefits their own wellbeing too. One member of staff said with a smile “I am well out of my comfort zone here!” on a very wet day when she was fully engaged in coppicing alongside three participants. This indicates that this is an entirely new approach. Another said “I would be outdoors all the time if I could. I think it’s really good for people”. The project provided a relaxed atmosphere away from the office that enabled staff to build stronger relationships with their clients.

Nine local consultants aided delivery of the project, each bringing their particular skills to it. The project therefore provided additional employment opportunities for those working on a freelance basis. In addition, seven volunteers joined the outdoor sessions and 42 invited guests attended the launch of the exhibition. The project established good partnerships with the Sheffield City Council Ranger Service, with Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust and with the custodian of Newfield Spring Wood. Staff at the support organisations came to understand more about the conservation work being done locally by these partners and the ongoing volunteer opportunities that are available through them.

Three conservation sessions took place at Shire Brook Valley Nature Reserve, created on a former sewage works and managed by Sheffield City Council. Participants contributed to the ongoing sustainable management of these woodlands by opening up the canopy to allow a variety of plants and animals to thrive. The project enabled people from the local community to develop a better understanding of the importance of this work.



### Key challenges

The project aimed to engage young people aged 16 – 24 years who had been homeless. This is an exceptionally hard-to-reach group who may have suffered from abuse or neglect and who are often fighting mental health problems or addictions. We were also aware that by going into the woods we were taking them out of their normal environment, so we knew that engagement would be difficult. We knew that it would be the support staff who already had a relationship with the young people who would be crucial in engaging them. We worked with some exceptional support staff who really went the extra mile to bring young people out to sessions. Unfortunately we met with some additional challenges. One support organisation pulled out of the project having only attended one session because an enthusiastic member of staff left and wasn't immediately replaced. Some regular attenders stopped coming either because they had moved on positively into independent accommodation or because they had been evicted. The decision was made to extend the age of our participants beyond the original 24 years, which meant that an additional support organisation could join the project. Although these challenges reduced the total number of our participants to 28, feedback leaves us in no doubt that those that came found the sessions very valuable, especially when attending several times.

### Impact

The following case study tells the story of one participant who attended 8 sessions in his own words. He is 23 years old and came to live in sheltered accommodation in Sheffield in March 2019.

I was rock bottom at that point. I had been staying at friends and on the streets sometimes, but then I got a room here. [Support staff] suggested coming to the woods. I knew right away that I would like it – it's my sort of thing. I grew up in the country and

was always outside. It was a small town in the middle of nowhere. I also did six years in the cadets so I'd done orienteering and camouflage and concealment, as well as first aid and weapon training.

At the first session I learned how to make a fire with the bow and drill – although I didn't manage to do it at first. I got it the second time because I was absolutely determined to! [The] stew was rather fine, so that was one thing that kept bringing me back too. The photography was awesome and my photos turned out way better than I thought they would. At Greno Woods we made shelters, but the best thing was picking and eating bilberries. They would be really good in porridge – and of course I made a stirrer for that on the pole lathe. I got how that worked - I had used a machine one in school and college. I love carpentry. Every piece of wood is different so you're going to come across some different challenges each time. I like having to use my brain rather than doing something mindlessly.

All of the activities had a challenge in some way. I never made a walking stick before or that type of stool – nothing with green wood. You have to go by feel – not like machined wood where you can see the knots. I did feel a bit anxious about messing up. When I had to show other people how to do things- that was terrifying! I was nervous doing it at the exhibition – especially when I realised the room was full of people. I just focused on



what I was doing. Having something to do made it easier. The way I like to teach people is to tell them how to do it and then only stop them when they do it wrong. People learn by making mistakes. I just get more determined when it goes wrong.

It was cool meeting new people at the sessions. It's good to get different perspectives. It was good with the staff getting stuck in as well. It was a much more relaxed environment to be with staff. They have a doors open policy here, but it still seems sort of 'officey' with them sat at their desks. It's more of a professional environment here, but in the woods it was just like a nice thing to be doing together.

It made a massive difference to me – I was a depressed mess when I got here. I had so much anxiety I didn't really move from my room for a month. Going outside is easier now – going to events on my own in town. I used it as a way of getting out - a stepping stone to meeting people face on. Group therapy doesn't work for me – but this did. It made me feel like I've achieved something. I'm a workaholic and I get really hyper when



I'm at work. I'm not working at the moment, but doing therapy doesn't give me the same sense of achievement. I like to be doing something.

After the New Year I'm planning to move out. I want to get back into work to get some management experience. I want to have my own street food business. My advice to other people is that any struggle you're having you've got to get on and do something about it. Swallow your pride and ask for help. That held me back for years. It was stupid to think I could work it all out by myself. There is something special about being in the woods – people are happier the more they are in nature. We need sunlight for vitamin D. The bacteria in dirt stave off anxiety. It's necessary, not just something you could do. Your body needs it and your mind needs it too.

### Quotes from Participants

"Why does a charity for looking after trees organise an activity for cutting down trees?" – in reference to coppicing.

"It's amazing how well everyone is getting on."

"That's MAD!" – in reference to making fire in the 'bird's nest'.

"Wow that's wicked!" – in reference to making fire with flint and steel.

"This stick is like my personality – strong and straight and a bit rough about the edges!" – when making a walking stick.

"I grew up with fields all around but in the city you don't get to experience this kind of thing much."

"I felt very confident after."

"Good outdoors activity. Hard work, but worth it!"

"Enjoyed it. Had fun. Changed my mood from bad to good! 😊"

"I think you should come to Shire Brook Woods. It's amazing. Great scenery and wildlife's fantastic. Hard work chopping trees but all worthwhile. Hope to see you here."

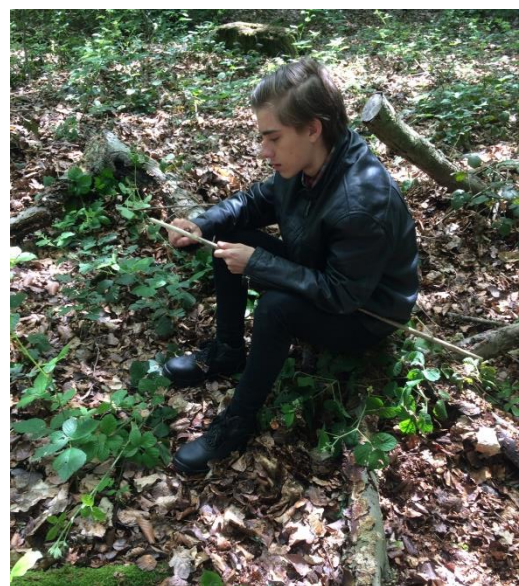
"I have learnt how to make bread by a fire. I really enjoyed it. I feel 10/10 :)"

"After the activity I felt good but tired."

"The best thing was making fire with flint and steel."

"I've found a butterfly."

"I enjoyed the whole day and learning new skills like making a walking stick, especially as I can use them when out and about and can teach them to my kids."



“One thing I really enjoyed is seeing how you can make things out of wood and I really loved it :)”

“I’m going to put myself off the scale!” – putting her wellbeing score at 10.5 at the end of the session.

“That was good to see the place where the squirrel had been having a picnic - I will look out for that next time I'm out.”

“I just really like being outdoors with the trees around me”.

“I’m looking forward to the vegetable stew – I could eat the whole pan!”

“I’m going to use my stool as a bedside table in my room.”

“I can’t believe I’ve set a fire – twice!”

“That stew is dead nice. Will you come and make it for me at Cherrytree?”

“I’m going to have such muscles by the end of this. I’m sweating like a man!”

“Look at the bat I’ve made – it’s amazing. No-one is going to give me any trouble now.”

“I took a picture of a fly on a leaf and you could see the light coming through its wings. It was beautiful.”

“I’ve made a giant pencil. I’m going to paint it when I get home.”

“I feel very connected to nature today.”

“It was good to use the lathe. I’ve used the electric kind at school before, but this is much more complicated. You have to remember that it’s going forwards and back so you can’t just zoom along.”

“I’ve done quite a bit of this kind of thing because I went to bad boy school”

“Boredom is your enemy when you are fighting addiction. So it’s good to be busy doing this.”

### Quotes from Staff

“Residents that need time out, away from the pressure of the hostel environment have really appreciated the different pace and feel of our peaceful days in the woods. It’s notable that people with anxiety have joined in and benefited the most. Others have just enjoyed the challenge of new activities in an outdoor setting. Staff are not immune to the benefits and we have no shortage of people wanting to work on a Sunday so that they can facilitate the workshops!” Karen Shimwell, Senior Project Worker at Sheffield Foyer

“Residents enjoyed the experience and looked forward to the next session. It gave them the opportunity to be out in the fresh air and learn new skills as well as the social side of it as they met new people. The sessions were very calm and the staff were very patient.” Michelle Gibson, Cherrytree Support Services.



“I was pleased to see the residents actively engaged and enjoying themselves. I thought the skills we learnt were great as it is something that the residents can use and show to others.” Joe Gabbert, Support Officer at Sheffield Foyer.

“I would be outdoors all the time if I could. I think it’s really good for people.” Delton Taylor, Sheffield Foyer.

“Several people from Cherrytree have taken part in the Wellbeing in the Woods programme, with some attending several sessions. The sessions have been well advertised with clear instructions for each session. Feedback from people from Cherrytree has been that it has been really enjoyable learning new skills, meeting new people and spending time in various woods around Sheffield. From an organisation’s point of view, we feel the sessions were beneficial to people, in particular around mental health.” Jo McKinney, CEO, Cherrytree Support Services.

“A really fabulous exhibition that brings a fantastic flavour of our brilliant days in the woodlands in a multi-sensory way! Working the lathe was a particular highlight today and the project has been amazing for staff and members of Crisis alike. Thanks so much ITF and friends for a brilliant experience!” Kellie Gamble, Crisis Skylight South Yorkshire.

“Lovely to see all the hard work pay off. The young people involved are now showing others how to use the skills they have learnt. Wonderful!” Sam Mobbs, Manager of Sheffield Foyer.

### Plans for the Future

International Tree Foundation hopes to carry out similar projects in other areas of the UK. Wellbeing in the Woods has proved to be an effective way to engage vulnerable people in outdoor activities that are beneficial for them and also for their local woodland. We have learned a great deal from the experience of running the project in Sheffield. It is clear that this approach helps people of all ages to cope better with the challenges they are facing in life – both participants and staff. It is important to keep the size of the group small so that participants can be fully engaged in activities in a safe and meaningful way. The greatest benefit comes from creating a relaxed atmosphere in which people feel confident to explore new experiences within the wonderful woodland environment.

