

Case Study

GROW - the benefits of contact with nature for physical and psychological well being.

Background

A trip to the park always makes a person feel relaxed, being surrounded by nature makes us feel alive and active. There is research evidence that supports the benefits of contact with nature for physical and psychological well being. A recent MIND report* found that contact with natural spaces such as parks and horticultural activity significantly improved participants' mental health and well being.

The GROW project has developed from an initial partnership with Brighton and Hove MIND and the National Trust to an independent charitable organisation run by people who've got personal experience of mental health issues; its aims are to give people experiencing psychological and emotional distress a chance to recover and feel better through structured and unstructured activities in nature, including nature walks, practical conservation work, helping on the farm, cooking wild food and a range of arts and crafts.

The project runs out of Saddlescombe Farm (near Devils Dyke, Brighton).

*Ecotherapy the green agenda for mental health MIND 2007.



The project

The South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) provides on-going support to the GROW project. The SDNPA Eastern area ranger team has supported the project by leading events and training sessions that have been held at Stanmer Park and guided walks in the wider countryside of the National Park e.g. at Southease and Birling Gap. The walks focus on connecting participants with nature and have either been general wanders or concentrated on a specific activity such as looking at tree identification or birds.

The ranger team also supported GROW in making an application to the Sustainable Communities Fund (SCF). The application was for funds to lease a mini bus. This would enable the project to collect participants from central points and transport them safely, and sustainably, to the activity site, whilst also allowing more freedom for project participants to visit a broader range of sites in the National Park and beyond. The project was supported by a £12,000 grant from SCF awarded in December 2013 to fund a minibus lease until August 2016.

Any partnership or other not for profit organisation can apply for SCF funding if they believe their project is bringing social, environmental, economic or cultural benefits to a community within the South Downs National Park; for further information please contact the External Funding Co-ordinator on 01730 819219 or grants@southdowns.gov.uk.

“Thank you for sponsoring the minibus. Although I can safely say it was never in my life plan to be minibussed to places, the bus is absolutely integral to what GROW does - getting people out into Nature and specifically the National Park.”

GROW project participant, 2016

The outcome

- 84 people have used the minibus to attend the closed group sessions
- 58 people have used the minibus to attend GROW social days

The minibus is also used to transport people to one-off ‘Wellbeing in Nature’ sessions, a new offering to organisations in Brighton and Hove. The first session took place at Saddlescombe Farm in October 2015 attended by clients from SpeakOut, a support group for adults with learning disabilities.

Moreover the minibus is seen as a shared community resource and is used regularly for up to 3 days a week by community groups such as Roots to Grow; renting to various community groups provides a valuable additional income source for the project.

Having the minibus to transport vulnerable people has meant that many more individuals have been able to personally experience the benefits of participating in the nature programme. Participant testimonials:

“I'm less isolated, more optimistic and connected to others. It's been so refreshing to learn how to focus on the beauty of the environment rather than my illness.”

“In an area which is often neglected – mental health – and where conventional treatment all too often tends to involve sitting in a room processing, GROW stands out for me as something radically different – and a little bit magic too.”



The future

The GROW project has just celebrated its 5th birthday; to date more than 230 participants have benefitted from participation in the project activities, exploring inspiring ways to benefit from nature-connection in the beautiful local countryside

The mixture of initial closed groups, followed by the moving on programme has helped many participants to reconnect with the environment, some have gone on to volunteer with other groups and local farms.

The benefits of contact with nature for physical and psychological well-being have been acknowledged by the government in their National parks: 8-point plan for England (2016 to 2020) stating that National Parks can make a central contribution to our national wellbeing and pledging to continue to support innovative schemes that promote well-being.

GROW are currently in the process of exploring funding options to continue to provide transport for the project.

For further information contact;
Info@GrowingWellbeing.org.uk

<http://www.growingwellbeing.org.uk/>