

Case Study

Connecting in Nature: Moulsecomb Forest Garden

Background

Established as a charity in 2005, Moulsecomb Forest Garden and Wildlife Project is situated on the outskirts of Brighton located in an area of high deprivation with few community facilities.

They provide outdoor education and therapeutic support for school pupils in the local area as well as offering horticultural, carpentry, woodland management, cooking, educational and social opportunities to everyone.

The aims of the charity correspond with one of the priorities of the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) – to encourage all people to access the National Park and experience the health and well-being benefits of spending time in nature, thus a partnership was established.

During Autumn and Winter 2020 South Downs National Park, partnered with Moulsecomb Forest Garden, MIND in Brighton and Hove (MiBH) and local social prescribers to deliver a project called 'Connecting in Nature'.

This project was developed to provide local residents of Brighton and Hove the opportunity to connect with themselves, each other, and nature as a way of supporting their mental health and well-being.

The timing was especially pertinent as the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent government restrictions had placed additional pressure on people's mental health and resilience.



Firepit at Moulsecomb Forest Garden

The project

The aims of the project were to:

- Support individuals to access green spaces
- Support individuals to connect to nature and each other
- Support individual's mental health and well-being

Two courses were delivered in 2020 - one over autumn and one over winter . Each course comprised of a weekly group session held over six weeks. A maximum of six participants were allowed per course to allow for social distancing in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. The seasons, the autumn equinox and winter solstice, were used thematically to anchor the groups and support the wellbeing of participants.

Each group session ran for two hours. The structure of each session was flexible and participant led as much as possible. Every session began with a facilitated 'check in' and wellbeing discussion. This was held around the fire to enhance the grounding experience for participants and connection to nature.

The group's 'check in' included informal peer support and signposting to other groups and organisations in the city where participants could find further provision concerning their mental health and wellbeing.

Leading on from the check in, the second half of the sessions were focused around a range of outdoor therapeutic activities from wood carving and sanding to making twine from nettles.

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“Time in nature does me good, but I struggle with the motivation to do it on my own...the group gave me a much needed boost each week”

Attendee, Connecting in Nature group autumn series

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The outcome

The project was promoted to the local social prescribing service; however, most participant referrals came through the partnership with MIND.

Through carrying out post project evaluations the impact of the project was overwhelmingly positive.

- 100% of attendees across both courses rated their satisfaction of the sessions as “Excellent” 5/5 on a scale of 1-5.
- 100% of attendees across both courses rated their connection to nature as 4.8/5 on a scale of 1-5
- 100% of attendees noticed a positive impact on their wellbeing from attending these sessions and rated 4.8/5 with the winter series attendees all responding with a 5 “Yes definitely”

As a result of the courses, both groups have continued to stay in contact and provide each other with informal peer support. They have also been meeting up to take part in regular walks.

Participants were all provided information on accessible routes to access the South Downs National Park to help encourage and support the use of nature to enhance mental health and wellbeing after the sessions had finished.

The future

It is becoming increasingly evidenced that spending time in nature has a beneficial impact on mental health and personal wellbeing. As such, the demand for projects such as Connecting in Nature is growing across the National Park.

However, community projects are reliant on funding to sustain long-term delivery yet sourcing and securing funding takes time and resources. For the SDNPA to continue to support these projects, a sustainable funding model needs to be explored further.

The success of participants accessing community projects is through established connections that participants already have with an organisation. Building stronger relationships with our social prescribing providers should lead to an increase in the numbers of referrals and support for participants to access nature based projects.

For more information on Health & Wellbeing in the South Downs National Park, please contact:

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The South Downs National Park Partnership Management Plan (PMP)

2020–25 The Partnership Management Plan 2020-2025 brings together and coordinates the aspirations of many different partners who help contribute towards the purposes for which it was designated.

This project successfully achieved the following PMP outcomes:

Outcome 5: Encourage everyone to experience the National Park and widen participation for under-represented groups through targeted activities and promotion

Outcome 7: The South Downs National Park is a well-used and recognised asset for sustaining mental and physical health and wellbeing

<https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/partnership-management-plan/>

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