

Case study: Idle Valley Ecominds

Creating a person-centred service and strengthening participant decision making



One of 130 projects funded by Mind through Ecominds; a £7.5m Big Lottery Fund grants scheme that used nature and green activities to improve physical and mental health.

Ecominds



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Summary

Idle Valley Ecominds Project is a social and therapeutic horticulture and conservation project for adults experiencing mental health problems. It is based at the Idle Valley Nature Reserve and supported by Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust.¹ The project helps people to build their confidence and social networks and encourages people to move on to volunteering, training or employment. The project, now called Recovery, received support from Bassetlaw CCG in 2014 for a year long pilot in partnership with Bassetlaw Mind.

¹ Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust manages over 70 nature reserves is part of a nationwide network of 47 local Wildlife Trusts working in partnership to protect natural heritage, for more information see: wildlifetrusts.org

What is it about?

A range of activities are offered such as woodland and meadow management, wetland restoration, maintaining wildlife gardens, beekeeping, willow weaving and green woodwork. Participants can get involved in an activity that suits their energy levels and personal interests. Groups are small and people attend for one day a week.

People can attend for as long as they wish and a few have been coming over a year. Most people come for about six months and then move on to training courses, employment or other volunteering. The project is keen to help people develop a social network and encourages progress on to other groups and activities.

Participants can take up training opportunities too, for example courses run in partnership with North Nottinghamshire College include emergency first aid and a 10-week introduction to horticulture. Taster sessions in conservation work are available and some participants have joined external courses and brought skills back to share with their group and others.

The participants

The project serves the Bassetlaw area which has high levels of poverty and deprivation, and 12 per cent of the population experience common mental health problems.² Participants are referred by community mental health teams, GPs and voluntary sector organisations and are living with or recovering from a range of mental health conditions from depression to more severe and enduring conditions such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, some people also have problems with alcohol or substance misuse.

Some participants have learning disabilities and one person was living with dementia, a significant number of people referred also have physical conditions or impairments. As long as participants are reasonably mobile their needs can be accommodated and there are plans to make the site wheelchair accessible.

² Bassetlaw Joint Strategic Needs Assessment 2012

About the participants

50 people took part over three years

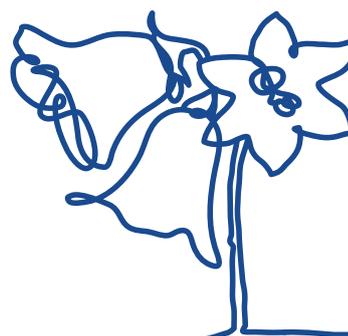
Most people attended for at least six months

40 were male and 20 female

50 people were mental health service users

Most people were aged between 26 and 55 years

59 people were White British



The difference it makes

“The Idle Valley project has a very therapeutic environment – it’s a great place for improving your mood as well as making you feel like you are contributing to the welfare of nature.”

Mental health therapist

A recent in depth evaluation with 32 participants showed that 88 per cent thought their mental health had improved as a result of attending the project, with 69 per cent saying they had experienced a major improvement in their mental health. Confidence improved too with 75 per cent of people noting this and 55 per cent said their physical health had

improved. All participants said the project had a supportive and positive atmosphere. Referral agencies have reported positively on the impact of the project saying that it has successfully got people who were previously isolated involved in regular activities they enjoy and are enthusiastic about. Referrers often commented on how the project offers something different and has an inclusive approach.

“Every time I ask him about the project his face lights up! It has made such a huge difference – he is so much more confident now.”

Professional from a mental health service

Project successes

Participants join a group of 10 that is staffed by the project officer and two support volunteers. New participants have extra support for their first six weeks – to introduce them to the project, the nature reserve, and other participants. This helps find out more about their needs and how best to meet them. They are offered one to one mentoring and support from another participant or support volunteer, plus the project worker regularly checks to see how they are doing and resolve any problems.

A formal six week review discusses how the project is meeting their needs, sets goals and identifies what further support they need. This approach encourages people to get to know others and helps them gradually build their engagement with the project so that they feel welcome and part of the group.

Staff and volunteers are trained and supported to work sensitively with people with mental health problems. Volunteer supporters with good people skills have been recruited for the groups, for example one volunteer is an ex GP; they are trained in mental health awareness by the Ecominds project officer. Staff at Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust also say they understand more about mental health and how to support people with mental health problems. Joint projects with other groups at the Trust has broken down barriers and supported many people to get involved in mainstream volunteering.

Idle Valley Ecominds inclusive approach encourages participants to get to know others in their group, find out more about the project, contribute to decisions about project activities and, if they can, to support other participants too.

An advisory group for the project was established, participants volunteer to be part of the group which is self-directed and gives anonymous feedback about participants’ views of the project. Following a consultation and trials with participants about monitoring and evaluation the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale was adopted plus a qualitative feedback form and informal testimonials to give a more rounded view of people’s experience of the project.

It helps just by being out-doors in a beautiful place surrounded by wildlife, but then I’m also able to contribute something and I feel like it’s being valued. I’m not treated like a social outcast, I am respected and encouraged in all that I do here, and I love working with all the different groups.

Participant

Five ways to wellbeing according to participants:

Five ways to wellbeing	What participants say happens for them
Connect with others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet new people and make friends • Benefit from peer support • Become a volunteer with other mainstream groups
Be more active	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do something physical every week • Helps people unwind and feel relaxed • Improves sleep
Take notice of the world	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have something to do and a sense of purpose • Builds routine into the week • Something to look forward to
Keep learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased confidence • Some take courses and go on to share skills with others • Get involved in planning the project
Give to others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do something worthwhile • Offer support to others • Some people have joined the project advisory group

More information: neueconomics.org/projects/entry/five-ways-to-well-being

Top tip

Be clear about the skills needed in the project leader. Experience of working in health or social care is useful to aid collaboration with referrers and commissioners. Personal experience of mental health issues or caring for someone with this experience is useful. This kind of project is all about working with people.

As I've got more involved I've got a lot more confident. I really like being able to help other people. Volunteers come and talk to me because they know I've been through the things they are going through."

Participant

Project details

Started on September 2010 with Ecominds funding. Now ongoing in partnership with Bassetlaw Mind with support from Bassetlaw Clinical Commissioning Group.

Staffed by a part time Ecominds Project Officer and a team of volunteer supporters.

web: nottinghamshirewildlife.org/Ecominds / bassetlawmind.org.uk/?p=776

