

Name: Blarbuie Woodland Enterprises

Place: Lochgilphead, Argyll

Headline:

Improving people's mental and physical health using a 5ha woodland adjacent to a psychiatric hospital to assist with learning, training, volunteering and assisted employment

Keywords: mindfulness, nature, health, stigma, peri-“urban”

What is the context?

1. **Historical context:** Blarbuie Woods are 5 hectares of Long Established Plantation Origin woodlands, created as a screen between Lochgilphead and a Victorian mental health institution. It was also used by the hospital as part of work programmes aimed at improving mental health. In the second half of 20th century this approach fell by the wayside, and the wood was abandoned. In the mid noughties a partnership was established which led to a revival of interest in both the amenity and health benefits that the wood could offer. By 2007 the first phase of rehabilitation was completed, leading to a Scotland's Finest Woods Award. Thereafter Blarbuie Woodland Enterprise grew out of the partnership, becoming a charitable social enterprise.
2. **Present** BWE maintains the woodlands, access network and health programmes, as well as developing income generation from off-site contracts and firewood and product sales. Woodland visitors were initially largely hospital users, along with a dedicated group of dog walkers (the first non-health service user group to use the woodlands). Since then a number of measures have sought to broaden the appeal. However, BWE is still getting feedback that people do not use the woods because they're next to the mental hospital. Other people's beliefs have an impact.

What was the initial aim?

To bring an abandoned woodland back into use, and thus to improve people's mental and physical health. Managing the natural environment to assist with learning, training, volunteering and assisted employment by

- Use of arts, music and crafts
- Improving the biodiversity of the woodlands (to make up for neglect, and because a biodiverse wood offers more to users).
- To create product from the woodland, because this can generate a real sense of purpose for users, and also some income.

What actually happened and what has been achieved?

The original business plan was written as the partnership developed, with extensive community consultation. It focused on improving access to the woodland for town and hospital, and on reducing dependency on alcohol and prescription drugs.

Paths were installed, and a walking programme for service users was developed. At this time NHS were open to developing new approaches to treatment, and Blarbuie was in a position to take advantage of this change, and also to drive the change in approach.

BWE was established and has now morphed into a range of activities, including the management of the woodlands and access network, running volunteer and training programmes, assisting health service users, doing external contracts, selling firewood and products, and developing a community garden.

Some of this has been driven by funding requirements (there is a constant need for re-invention). You may know what you are providing and that you are doing it well, but your core purpose is to come up with new projects! There is a real advantage in having an asset (the wood) to work on. It can be difficult persuading urban based funders of value of a programme for a small number of volunteers in a rural town, until they see the activities in the wood.

A really big benefit for users is that BWE is not a programme based project, so they can stay for as long as they want. People can reach a development stage which both parties are happy with, and then carry on at that level. However, funders tend to lose interest without new developments, and any withdrawal of support risks dealing a crushing blow to users. (e.g. one user who after two years of placement lost financial support, was unable to continue attending, and suffered a dramatic reversal).

The green prescription route (working in wood) has helped users reduce drug dependency, stabilise chaotic lifestyle, and it provides extra activity for individuals in the half-way house and entering care in community.

Evidence of outcomes

The feedback from users and volunteers on health benefit is the big success story. BWE is helping to turn people's lives around. There is a sense of ownership of the wood, the place, the organisation, and the work they do. (E.g. participants ask for BWE t shirts, and are proud to tell folk they work with BWE).

Other indicators include:

- 2008 study established that staff, service users and visitors were the main visitors, who most valued the chance to break out of the hospital and take a breather in the natural world. More groups now use the woodland.
- Anecdotal evidence from health professionals for health outcomes. NHS has recognised the value of BWE activities and it is now part of their prescription.
- Project has been financially sustainable.
- Project has developed from a partnership to a fully-fledged standalone charity, with strong volunteer board, including representatives from community, business, hospital workers and volunteers.
- 1.5 fte jobs created (3 part time staff)
- 4 regular volunteers (1.5 fte)
- 4-15 trainees at any one time on open ended basis (equivalent to 8-10 fte).

- External contract work undertaken worth £8k pa
- Firewood (decreasing) & wood and food products (increasing).
- 2 kms paths created and maintained.

What factors contributed to those outcomes?

- Continuity, luck of landing good supervisors with practical skills, attitude and experience to allow them to work with vulnerable people.
- Ethos of project, developing sense of belonging in volunteers and users.
- Support of NHS and a range of other funders who are prepared to fund more than once (even if there are hoops to jump through!)
- Having good people who can deliver (A strong board and strong individuals who believe in what BWE does)

How replicable is this experience; what is its potential as an element of a better approach to forestry?

- Very replicable, and is being done to some extent by e.g. Branching Out and other NHS and FC programmes and projects.
- Forest walks remain enduringly popular, with a core of people for whom that walk experience is a key part of their day.
- Edge of town woodlands are very important, and do not need to be large.
- Potentially a very strong element in better forestry.

Key messages

- The group turned a woodland from something of no public value into a public asset, and they did it with folk who were themselves not valued.
- It's been a slow burn project that has provided meaning for people in a remote rural area, where individuals with multiple problems can otherwise be hidden from support mechanisms.
- Difficulties can show the level of latent public support for the project (eg a negative phone call blaming BWE for dog waste problems was followed by a social media post seeking a solution and this resulted in an instant donation to cover the cost of 4 new dog bins).
- Small organisations have difficulty dealing with monoliths. BWE is a very small part of the NHS world, but NHS is very significant to BWE (as the NHS own the land, making their policies and procedures very influential).
- There is real power in showing people what BWE does: funders are inspired by being shown what goes on in the woods.
- Multiple activities can be run in a v small area, and they can be made to work together, with synergies.