



Northumberland
Wildlife Trust

Better with Nature

Project report August-December 2024



Northumberland
County Council



North East
Combined
Authority



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Introduction

As part of the Northumberland Inclusive Economy Community Partnership, Northumberland Wildlife Trust led the Better With Nature Project between August - December 2024. This project was funded by the UK Government through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund with the North East Combined Authority as the Lead Authority.

Focusing on South East Northumberland, Better with Nature was a 5-month project to upskill, empower and connect people with poor health to nature. It aimed to support people's wellbeing through nature-based activities and green training opportunities, whilst gathering insights to increase future accessible green volunteering opportunities.

Project summary:

- **Nature and Wellbeing Courses:** Develop and deliver two 6-week green skills and nature connection programmes for people with poor health or who are not in work, working with a network of partners and contacts to recruit participants.
- **Green Wellbeing Opportunities Fairs:** To run 6 green social prescribing and volunteer opportunities "taster" events for public, social prescribing link workers and related health professions to attend with service users in local green spaces.

Better with Nature

"A lovely way to improve wellbeing and mental health
by noticing nature. Everyday."

course participant Oct24

400
people
engaged

through training and
public events

100% increased their time in
the outdoors and nature

100%

Positive impact on mood
and mental health

44% of participants from
the disability community

100%

Significantly increased Nature Connection

60 people trained
and upskilled

100% enjoyed the course

93% increased social
connection

93% felt supported and in a safe place

93%

increased their activity
and physical
health

100%
Developed
& learnt
new skills

19 local events

19 new volunteer
opportunities

79% participants more
confident to volunteer

4 resources and training
materials created

16

New
Volunteers

75 hours volunteered
during project

connected
Nature based
organisations & societies **22**



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I am agoraphobic and although it has been extremely difficult to get
here. I've needed it! To be able to spend time in nature again, share
experiences, work on all kinds of crafts and skills. So supportive.
It's been so good for me."



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Evaluation methods

Quantitative and qualitative mixed methods were used. We collected data from referral forms (digital and paper), paper registers for events and workshops, online bookings and analysis, clicker takers (people counter) at public events, referenced data sets from internal yearly reports, evaluation forms, case studies, recording quotes and creative means of feedback such as poetry, photography and art.

The key evaluation forms were loosely based on the Warwick-Edinburgh mental wellbeing scale but was adapted to a more approachable format that also interconnected the 5 Ways to Wellbeing (connect, be active, take notice, keep learning and give).

We used the same evaluation questions prior and post the course in paper and digital formats. Prior evaluation forms were framed from “in the last month have you?” and post evaluation was framed as “Since starting the course”. The scale options moved 1-4 from strongly agree, agree, disagree to strongly disagree. Questions included to the right of the page.

We also aim to check in with participants at 6months after finishing the course - using same the evaluation questions and scale.

To take forward - The adoption of a set scale for all activity going forward is needed for standardization that can be compared together and across global projects. Suggestions include Nature Connection index and ONS4 model.

Recruitment of Participants:

We made great efforts to reach local communities over a reduced timescale due to funding and recruitment delays. This included engaging with local support groups, networks, social prescriber websites and resources like Frontline. Posters were put up by hand in local venues and shops. We also created 2 new referral forms and updated internal processes for these events. Bookings were also promoted free via Eventbrite and responded in a person-centred way for access needs and support. However, due to the time they were also advertised on our wider networks and Trust events. They therefore attracted a number of participants from outside the allocated areas. In future we would build in more time to create deeper local relationships and perhaps run the project alongside local support providers such as Northumberland Recovery College.

About connection:

- I have felt socially connected
- I have supported other people
- I felt supported and in a safe space
- I learnt something new
- I developed existing skills

About Nature:

- I spent time in nature
- I have increased my knowledge about nature and wildlife
- I felt connected to nature
- I have given my time and energy to supporting a nature/wildlife cause or activity

About wellbeing and future

- My mood and wellbeing has been in a good place
- I have been physically active
- I feel confident to consider volunteering

Nature and Wellbeing Course flier



**Northumberland
Wildlife Trust**

photo by Zsuzsanna Bird

Nature and wellbeing

Northumberland Wildlife Trust are offering the exciting opportunity of free courses helping people to improve wellbeing and personal resilience through learning green skills together, empowering and connecting people with nature.

Join our friendly supportive group in outdoor activities that may include - exploring local green spaces; mindful walking and grounding exercises; nature-based arts and crafts; wildlife gardening; green skills and learning to look after our local environment.

"It helped me to enjoy being outside again, something I had missed so much in the past and present, alongside being around people again, it helps so much with my wellbeing."

Participant 'Growing with Nature', 2022

Free 6 week courses

Dates and location:

- **Woodhorn Museum**
Wednesdays from
18th Sept-23rd Oct
11am-2pm
- **Hirst Park, Ashington**
Mondays from
23rd Sept-28th Oct
11am-2pm

Sign up or make a referral

Feel free to contact with any questions or accessibility needs

- Contact Jo Burke
Nature and Wellbeing Officer
Joanne.burke@northwt.org.uk
07474 332635





Nature & Wellbeing Course

Nature connection programmes

During September and October 2024 Northumberland Wildlife team successfully ran two 6 week Nature and Wellbeing courses based at Hirst Park, Ashington and Woodhorn Museum, Woodhorn, Northumberland. These were successful and engaging nature connection and skills programme for people facing health and social inequalities, with poor physical or mental health, carers, service users, and social prescribers.

These courses aimed to help people to improve wellbeing and personal resilience through learning green skills together, empowering and connecting people with nature.

They provided a social supportive way of accessing our wonderful outdoors and local spaces, spending time in nature, learning new skills, whilst meaningfully contributing and taking action for nature.

Across 13 sessions there was a total attendance of 88 people, with 24 unique individuals and with great person-centered support from 16 volunteers. The course was shaped by the participants' interests and choices. This project valued and encouraged peer learning and skill sharing which supported confidence and self-esteem whilst building trust and companionship.

Course Content

The course content was cocreated by participants discussing and choosing from a menu of workshops and activity that directly corresponded with the 5 ways to wellbeing (see example in appendix) .

The course looked at building resilience with reflective practice inspired by nature. This involved activities such as creating journals, grounding exercises, breathing techniques, mindful walks engaging senses and sound mapping techniques. Nature appreciation, exploration and compassion was supported by learning new skills in arts and crafts such as willow weaving, leather and faux leather work, clay and pottery techniques, printing, contact photography and use of natural chemistry with Anthrotypes and Phytography. These all also weaved in elements of learning about the science of nature, local information on wildlife and conservation.





We also explored green skills with: building wildlife-friendly hedging and tool use; basic joinery with birdbox making; creating hanging willow bird feeders; natural cordage making, knot work, and basic shelter building; intro into wildlife trail cameras and nature observation; as well as identifying plants, fungi and birds.

The group actively supported local nature spaces with visits to the Northumberlandia Nature reserve, Cramlington. In which they volunteered time to create wildlife friendly hedging. We also ran trips to Hauxley Nature Reserve to explore the volunteer-built Discovery Centre and their conservation activities. This involved mindful activity incorporating the landscape as well as learning more about the North East's spectacular bird life.

We held 1 extra workshop with the Woodhorn Weeders volunteer group at Woodhorn Museum in learning about wildlife trail cameras and how to observe and record wildlife in the area. As a result the group borrowed cameras from NWT to set up their own observations and to work towards mapping out an educational nature trail of the area.

As a direct influence of taking part in these courses four of our participants signed up and arranged first visits to local green volunteering opportunities including Full Circle Food Project, Woodhorn Weeders and Friends of Ashington Community Woods.

100% of attendees reported developing and learning new skills. 100% also reported a deeper connection to nature by taking part in the course, 64% with a significant change. 34% of participants prior had little to no regular activity with nature or green spaces.

During these courses we gave 19 opportunities for 2 volunteers to support each of our 13 training sessions with the Nature and Wellbeing sessions and 6 of our public taster events. In all we had 25 volunteer opportunity take-ups, accounting to 75 hours of volunteer time.

“ I believe each session has been meaningful and impactful to all participants. I have seen this course to not only be beneficial to the participants but also to me. The green skills Jo taught throughout the course have been great with a perfect combination of practicality and creativity. The participants all took a real interest in the course and approached the activities enthusiastically.

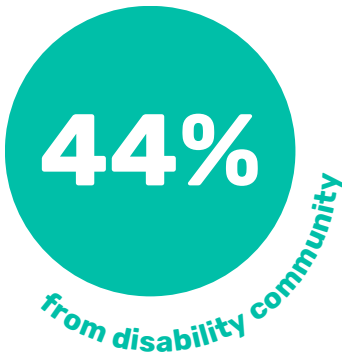
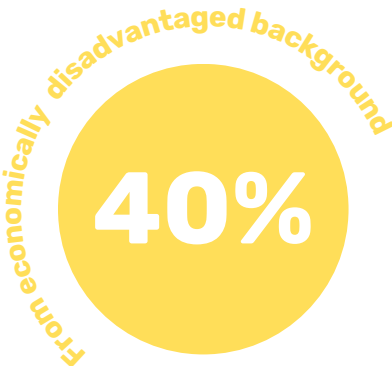
Jody, one of our Nature and Wellbeing Volunteers

“Learning new skills connected to nature. To be fair everything was amazing on the course.”

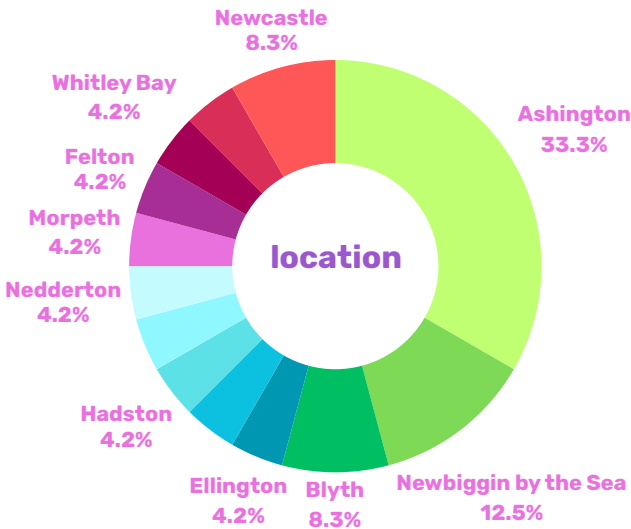
“ I enjoyed everything about being in nature, making friends and the wellbeing it gives me is amazing. Lifted my mood and something brilliant to look forward to”

“Keeps your brain and hands and even your feet active!”

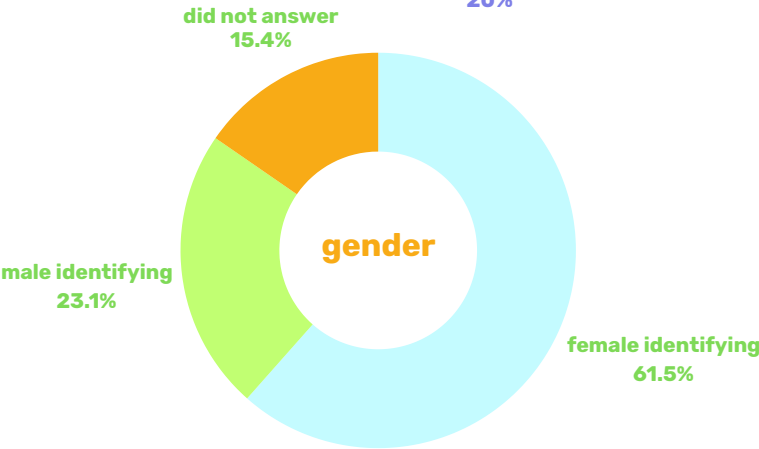
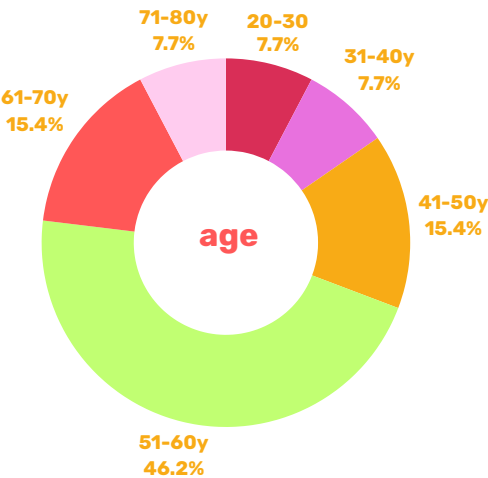
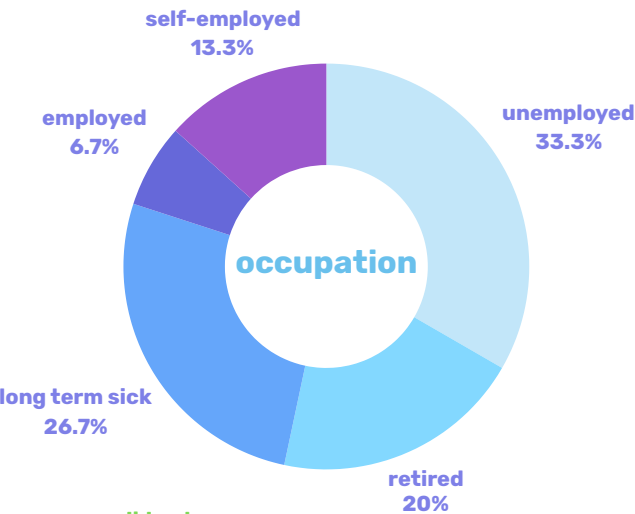
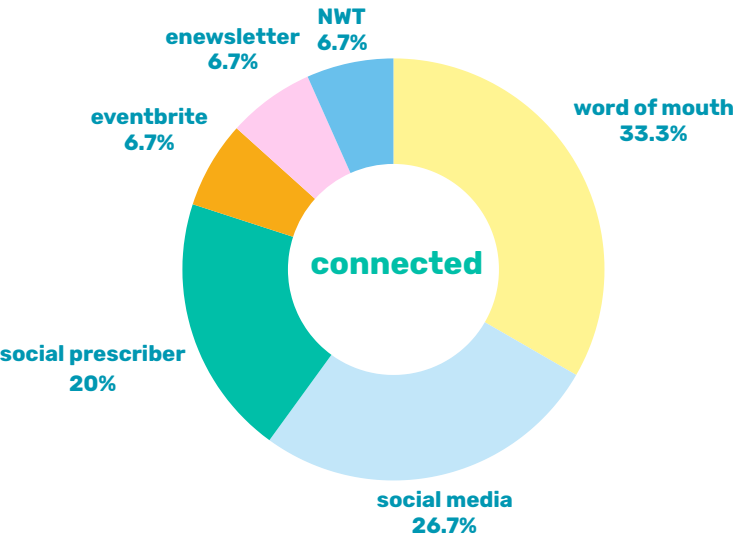
Nature and Wellbeing Course attendees demographics



Post codes - Areas of benefit



How participants connected to the opportunity



Poster for information sharing taster events



**Northumberland
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Contact: joanne.burke@northwt.org.uk 07474 332635

GREEN WELLBEING OPPORTUNITIES FAIRS



Small Information sharing events with
stalls from local groups and organisations.

Learn more about voluntary opportunities in nature and green
based activity that can benefit our mental and physical wellbeing

- **SAT 2nd NOV 11am-2pm @ HAUXLEY Wildlife Discovery Centre**
- **MON 4TH NOV 11am-2pm @ Hirst Park Pavilion ASHINGTON**
- **MON 11TH NOV 11am-2pm @ Ridley Park Pavilion BLYTH**
- **WED 13TH NOV 11am-2pm @ NEWBIGGIN Sports & Community Hub**



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Green Wellbeing Opportunities Fairs

Taster Sessions

There were 6 Green Wellbeing Opportunities fairs held in November. These were structured as small information sharing events and pop-up stalls with opportunities to learn and try activities. These fairs celebrated and brought together a total of 22 local nature groups and organisations based across South East Northumberland. Event locations were based on the grounds of reserves, parks and local green spaces including Hauxley Nature Reserve Amble, Hirst Park Ashington, Ridley Park Blyth, Newbiggin by the Sea, Bedlington and Ellington.

These proved to be excellent networking opportunities that were also a way for local people, communities, social prescribers and clients to learn about the brilliant and vibrant voluntary opportunities in nature, training opportunities, conservation actions and activities. All these green activities championed the benefits to physical and mental wellbeing.

These events attracted 211 people. Through these fairs we estimate 36 from the area of benefit engaging with training and learning activities (at least 5 people at each event, 6 events in all). All events were locally advertised and main attendance numbers were via natural/walk by footfall. The more successful events tied in with current community events in the locality like the Northumberland Council tree gifting at Ridley Park, local football matches at Gallagher Park, singing for wellbeing and the development of the New Wild allotment site at Newbiggin Community Hub. This proved to increase attendance and meaningful engagement.

Organisations, charities and societies featured at these events included: **Alnwick Gardens** - Growing Together Northumberland project, **Groundwork** - Community Allotment & Open Doors Beyond Barriers project, **Full Circle Food Project** - projects around growing, cooking and eating nutritious food on a budget, **Bedlington and District Red Squirrel Group**, **Cramlington Red Squirrel group**, **Ashington Community Woods**, **Warkworth Green Matters**, **Coquet River Action Group**, **Northumberland Green Hub**, **Amble Women's Workshop**, **Climate Action Wansbeck**, **Bernicia** – One to one service and support, **EPNE** (Education Partnership North East is a dynamic partnership between Sunderland College, Hartlepool Sixth Form and Northumberland College) - Open Doors project and mindfulness activities, **Northumberland Communities Together**, **Northumberland County Council Employability Team**, **Thriving Together**, **Friends of Ridley Park** and **Isabella Heap Volunteers**.



Changes to original programme:

The taster session originally planned within the project had to change due to time constraints from the delay in funding and recruitment. “Tasters” were not going to work post the course dates (as the courses were initially a progression into activity from the tasters). We also met the issue of winter months approaching and affecting outdoor activity. We therefore looked at creating larger events at each location – Hirst, Blyth, Bedlington, Newbiggin by the Sea, Hauxley and Ellington which linked people to local, current and regular activities, volunteering and training opportunities.

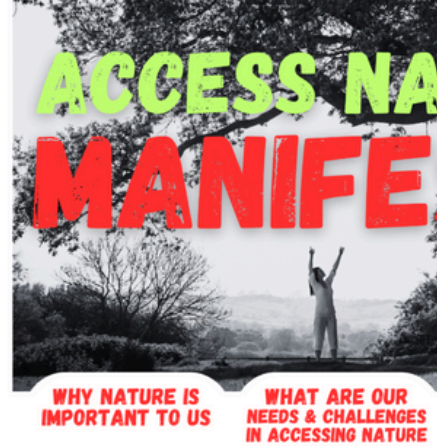
There were multiple points of information for public and participants to take away with green activities to try out in their daily lives, as well as contacts and information about local activities for future involvement.

Stall holders at these events were extremely positive in the importance of similar events been able to carry on in the future. That it was a **“unique and needed”** opportunity to gather green based volunteering opportunities together for the public in Northumberland.

It has been proposed that, rather than condensing 6 events in such a short period across different localities, a larger central event may work more positively for numbers – with local travel support and promotion built in.

Another key focus of these events was to gather feedback to understand barriers to people taking part in green volunteering and improvements that can be made. We invited social prescribers and link workers, Clinical networking groups, Occupational therapist and other connections through the Frontline resource to enhance these discussions and knowledge sharing during the events. These were conducted in a more informal way and through our optional activity “Access nature manifesto”.





Access Nature Manifesto

This activity was initiated to create confidence and empowerment in the group and individuals – to be able to discuss, explore and communicate issues and needs of their communities and personal circumstances openly. A step to change and taking action.

This was an optional activity on a notice board at all the Nature and Wellbeing course sessions and Green Wellbeing opportunities fairs. The nature of the questions meant often reflecting on difficult experiences, hence we did not approach this as a focused activity in the Nature and Wellbeing courses – as this conflicted with the course aims to create a relaxed environment to improve our wellbeing. However, the topics still arose in conversation through the 12 sessions and the facilitator asked if they could take notes to be added to the board. Notes were also added at The green Wellbeing events by individuals but due to capacity we could not dedicate a staff/volunteer to support this activity. As a result there was less engagement.

Why is Nature important to us?

- As a retreat, so important
- It's our human right!
- Nature is very important because it is a home to wildlife
- We have a responsibility to look after it
- It's my calm space

What are our needs & challenges in accessing nature?

- Energy Levels, I have to be careful to conserve them
- Access
- There's little to no info about how accessible sites are
- Worry about finding a toilet
- I struggle to get out
- Transport issues especially Northumberland
- It's the transport. You can only get a certain way then have to walk. I can't walk that far.
- Northumberland transport is bad. An hour between buses often no direct way without having to walk a distance along road sides.
- I'm too anxious to take public transport
- Loneliness
- It's hard alone. I need confidence and company to visit places and sometimes to just get out
- I'd like to volunteer more but find public events difficult – amount of people and pressure.
- I never have time to go outside

How we want equity!

(Things that could be improved)

- Always try and do good for nature
- We need to know things like: distance, terrain, whether its wheelchair friendly, if there are lighted areas, times likely to be busy or noisy, how much I need to concentrate to understand and take part, understanding routes, different reading formats
- Have quieter times with less people, smaller groups
- Better transport!

Impact



Short term impacts:

- 100% of attendees of the courses increased green skills
- 100% Increased awareness of the natural world and environmental literacy
- 1 new job created with our new role within the Trust as Nature and Wellbeing Officer which is now secure until March 2026.
- New social connections built - Through our Green Wellbeing Opportunities Fairs we directly connected 22 local organisations, charities and societies networking, and working together to promote the importance of accessing green spaces and nature for our wellbeing. Closer working relationships were built with the courses at Hirst Park and Woodhorn Museum.



Medium

- Wellbeing increases in participants. 100% reported a positive impact on their mood and mental health, with 79% reporting a significant change. 93% reported feeling more physically active since the course, with 50% reporting a significant change.
- Quotes from participants included: "I was honestly surprised by how much I got from the wellness/grounding exercises.", "I am agoraphobic and although it has been extremely difficult to get myself here. I've needed it! To be able to spend time in nature again and share experiences, working on all kinds of crafts and skills. So supportive. It's been so good for me." - Nature and wellbeing course participant Oct 24.
- Upskilled local residents - 100% of participants reported developing current skills and learning new skills through the course.
- Increased community volunteering opportunities. 16 new volunteers and new roles created. 79% of the course participants said they would like to volunteer in the future and felt more confident as a result of the course. 4 participants went on to volunteer as a result of the activities and connections made to local organisations.



Longer Term

- Empowered, vibrant and thriving communities
- Increased community pride
- Increased access to green volunteering opportunities, through learnings shared. We have created a guide to Green social prescribing and data-base of green and nature opportunities within South East Northumberland. Also created learning resources that we will further test and share between sectors. See Appendix for a number of these resources.
- People taking meaningful action for nature in their communities, leading to reduced biodiversity loss and supporting action against climate change.
- Lowered health inequalities
- Long term new connections and partners of NWT.

Achieving our aims

- Provided a range of impactful events, training and volunteering opportunities, improving health, wellbeing, boosting learning and green skills.
- Increased knowledge of the natural world and local natural heritage in participants, to improve local pride, identity and belonging.
- Reduced isolation and loneliness, supporting a connection with both nature and communities. 93% felt the course made them feel socially connected with 36% significant change from feeling very socially isolated to feeling socially connected.
- Better understand barriers to people with poor health in accessing nature, green volunteering and green social prescribing activities, and methods to overcome these barriers. Results from discussions can be read in our “Access to Nature Manifesto” document.
- Reduce health inequalities in the target areas by supporting those with poor health to connect to nature and gain new skills.
- Develop and strengthen relationships with partners and local organisations, such as Museums Northumberland, Full Circle Food Project, Green hub Network, Carers Northumberland, Ridley Park and social prescribing link workers, sharing knowledge, expertise and laying the path for future collaboration.
- Built evidence, feedback and case studies to show the power of nature and green volunteering to boost wellbeing, enabling future work.
- Supported participants to identify potential routes of progression to further volunteering or opportunities with Northumberland Wildlife Trust and other local organisations.

Learning and Legacy

Building in Flexibility:

- Adaptability is needed with time constraints due to funding changes or delays.
- Reaching the right audience - Work locally and make time for onsite face to face meetings. Work with local support groups, organisations, befriending services, link and social prescribers, health and wellbeing networks, and wider health sector.
- Nature takes over - Weather implications and site safety for participants with multiple complex issues and needs.
- Build in time for communication needs. To make a meaningful and trusting engagement and to improve transparency and clarity of arrangements with participants. 73% reported having mental or physical poor health yet only 20% reported support from link or support workers. For participants with complex needs a person centered approach is needed. This would include simple pre-activity phone calls to confirm meeting times and locations to providing a quiet space to debrief any worries or conflict arising in session discussions.

Proposal to create a supporting framework:

Through this project we structured and provided support closely in line with trauma informed practice. Using guiding principles to work in a meaningful way that empowers participants and encourages a peer-led ethos.

1. Safety: The physical, psychological and emotional safety
2. Trustworthiness and Transparency
3. Peer support
4. Collaboration and Mutuality
5. Empowerment, Voice and Choice
6. Cultural, Historical and Gender considerate

Trauma-informed practice adopted in practice is a means for reducing the negative impact of trauma experiences and supporting mental and physical health outcomes, whilst reducing stigma. This could influence how we plan and conduct activity in creating supportive and safe spaces where individuals/groups/communities feel empowered and respected.

It is important to also emphasize that Northumberland Wildlife Trust facilitators are generally not specialist in this area, we are not treating or curing, but we can seek to address the barriers that people affected by trauma can experience.

Adopting a trauma informed practise is empowering, ethical and simply a nice way to work with people. Giving us key principles of working with more vulnerable groups outdoors. This could be developed further, in a lighter way, to provide "guiding principles to inclusive activity".

See appendix for table briefly expanding on how we approached this through the project.

Long Term Ambition

Our long-term ambition from the Better With Nature project is to

- Expand nature-based health and wellbeing projects within the trust and the North East.
- Continue to share learnings and collaboratively develop best practice.
- Develop training opportunities to further grow, champion and emphasize the importance of nature's role in our health and wellbeing.
- To offer more accessible and diverse green volunteering opportunities.
- To enable and empower more people across the diversity of society to access, appreciate and act for nature.

The project supported us to run an important pilot in different activities and work with a range of people, gathering feedback and learnings to develop a longer-term approach.

We see this work as a catalyst to working with groups in need in our community and we will seek to build on this following completion of the project and sourcing additional funding to continue.

“ The natural world is the foundation of our health, wellbeing and prosperity ”

