



Woodlands for Health

In association with



Mental Health
Ireland



Introduction

This document aims to provide background information of the inception of the “Woodlands for Health” programme. It provides a summary of the evidence to support the need for such programmes. It outlines the aims for the 2018 programme and provides support and guidance for local steering groups to assist in the planning and delivery of programmes. In this document we outline the proposed evaluation of the programme as well as options that can be implemented at a local level to ensure the sustainability of the programme can be achieved. Further information will be provided on evidence based practices you can adopt to ensure programme participants have the best experience on the programme as possible.



Background

The approach is based on the established “Woodlands for Health” programme based in Wicklow. The programme was developed in partnership with the HSE/Wicklow Mental Health Services, Wicklow Mental Health Association and Mental Health Ireland. This programme was adapted based on Branching out which was successfully applied by the Forestry Commission in Scotland.

Research has shown that engagement with nature through outdoor activities can have a significant positive impact on an individual’s health and wellbeing. Woodlands for Health is an innovative development initiated by Coillte setting out to utilise the health value that woodland activities can provide.

Aim of the Woodlands for Health Programme

The aim of this walking programme is to provide an opportunity for individuals who experience mental health challenges in their daily lives to walk in a nature-based environment. While an outcome of the programme is to improve participant wellbeing, this encompasses many factors including; improved quality of life, improved sleep, improved physical fitness, social functioning, personal confidence, improved awareness etc.

Improved wellbeing is mediated through the following;

- Time in a natural environment
- Time in a safe social environment
- Education and knowledge exchange pertaining to the natural environment
- Time completing physical activity
- Access to information on other existing services (through partner organisations)

Note: This programme adopts a recovery approach and aims to complement clinical interventions and /or recommendations from an individual’s health care team.

Woodlands for Health

Woodlands for Health 2018 has been supported through Dormant Account Funds. The Woodlands for Health 2018 National steering group comprises of representatives from Coillte, Mental Health Ireland and Get Ireland Walking with all partners providing support for the programme. This national steering group is responsible for providing structure, support and funding to chosen areas for Woodlands programmes. The Woodlands for Health national steering group, Get Ireland Walking, Mental Health Ireland and Coillte make key decisions about the funding, implementation and evaluation of the Woodlands for Health Programme

Dormant account funding was awarded to support a National Pilot of the Woodlands for Health Programme in 2018 and to further expand in 2019.

Programme Logistics

Organisation/Steering group at the local level; roles and responsibilities

At a local level we recommend that the local steering group responsible for the Woodlands for Health programme should include but not exclusively of the following;

- Local Sports Partnership,
- Mental Health Ireland Development Officer,
- Referral source (Such as HSE service),
- Coillte walk leader/educator (in a paid or voluntary capacity)

We recommend the local steering group to discuss roles and responsibilities at their first meeting. It is up to the steering group at a local level to decide and agree upon all roles and responsibilities. The following is a recommendation of roles and responsibilities for local level steering;

- **Local Sports Partnership**
 - Act as local level coordinator and host the steering group meeting
 - Liaise with Get Ireland walking with respect to funding (service agreement in the delivery of the programme)
 - Organise transport for the walks if required
 - Ensure adequate walk leaders (this may be in addition to the Coillte Walk Leader.)
 - Provide refreshments if agreed by other local steering group members.
- **Mental Health Ireland Development Officer**
 - Provide guidance on referral sources such as existing mental health services
 - Provide guidance to team on any mental health related needs within the programme
 - Provide support in the administration of pre and post evaluations.

- **Referral source (Such as HSE service)**
 - Recruit agreed number of participants (people who use the services, family members and staff).
 - Attend walks with participants and act as the mental health support of the group.

- **Coillte Educator**
 - Identify walk location with input from the other steering group members.
 - Liaise with any other walk leaders provided by the LSP.
 - Liaise with steering group and referral source around the level of fitness/ability of the group.
 - Provide all educational components to the programme (ie-be responsible for imparting knowledge on the natural environment such as trees on the walks).
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Recommended Programme Outline

Time/date	Activities
<i>Woodlands introduction welcome session</i>	Participants and staff day, participants family or friends may come along. Welcome speech, info about the programme, answer question.
<i>Week 1 walk</i>	Complete any baseline evaluation forms. Meet at pick up location at 11am. Drive to walk location in bus, walk and eat lunch. Return to pick up location at 2pm.
<i>Week 2 walk</i>	Same as above
<i>Week 3 walk</i>	Same as above
<i>Week 4 walk</i>	Same as above
<i>Week 5 walk</i>	Same as above
<i>Week 6 walk</i>	Same as above. **Introduce discussion about establishing a peer led walking group**
<i>Week 7 walk</i>	Meet at pick up location at 11am. Drive to walk location in bus, walk and eat lunch. Return to pick up location at 2pm.
<i>Week 8 walk</i>	Same as above
<i>Week 9 walk</i>	Same as above

<i>Week 10 walk</i>	Same as above
<i>Final celebratory session</i>	Participants and staff programme completion celebration. Short walk and celebratory lunch.

Recruitment and inclusion criteria

Each local area may recruit participants differently based on the partners that are on board. We recommend that the programme cater for **20 participants**. You may wish to recruit greater numbers and that is fine if you have the capacity but important to note the potential need for greater walk leaders as numbers increase. We recommend the following simple inclusion criteria but local steering groups may alter this as required;

- Individuals choose to participate – people who use mental health services

Please note that the referral source may provide further information on inclusion criteria. If there are any specific requirements in terms of staff support exist and these can be met by the referral source this is acceptable. The core message is that this programme, aims to support those in recovery from mental illness or individuals who may benefit from walking in nature. It does not replace the support provided through the individual's mental health service.

For sites implementing the programme for a second or third time etc., we recommend that **50% of the participants are new referrals**. This will allow participants a max of a two-year cycle on a Woodlands for Health programme. We believe this is vitally important for supporting those who use the mental health services to avail of other physical activity based community events/programmes. We would recommend building in suggested alternatives to the programme in advance of week 12 to ensure participants can take the opportunity to scope out different options. One example could be to attend a Park walk/run as a group in advance of the final day.

We recommend having an intro/welcome day to the programme. This can be in a location that would allow for a brief discussion about the programme, allow for a short walk and refreshments. It may be suitable to offer that any interested participants bring a friend or family member to this introduction/welcome day if they would like.

Attrition/dropout

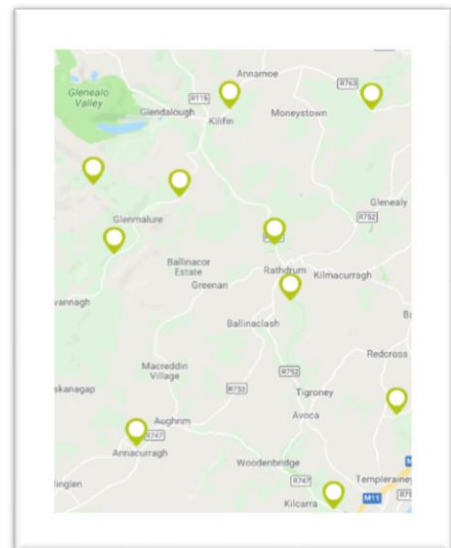
While we strive to ensure there are minimal dropouts or non-attendances this is always the nature of such programmes. We recommend a number of simple strategies to minimise nonattendance and attrition;

- If participants give permission, a weekly text reminder with the time and meeting location to be coordinated at a local level.
- If participants give permission to be telephoned, a phone call could be made following missed sessions. Often the individual may wish to return to the programme but feel too long has passed.

Walking Locations

The Coillte Educator/leader will take the lead on identification of suitable walking locations on Coillte land. Walk location and difficulty can be amended based on the needs of the group. It is recommended that walks start easier and if the group's ability allows that the level be progressed.

This image identifies a number of the Coillte forests available for recreational walking in a small section of Wicklow. Further information on the available spaces throughout Ireland can be found at www.coillte.ie.



Transport

One of the positive supports for this programme is the availability of transport for people. We recommend one central location to meet each week and a bus will transport participants to the walk location. Some Local Sports Partnerships or referral sources may have access to a



bus for transport purposes. If so this will eliminate a substantial amount of the associated costs. Community development groups may have access to a bus. We recommend you explore feasible options here. Look to volunteer centres too for volunteer drivers.

Clothing

Warm comfortable clothing and comfortable shoes are recommended. If participants have durable runners or hiking boots these can be recommended but be sure to avoid adding any barriers to a participant choosing to take part. All Woodlands programmes will be supplied with a clothing pack for each participant. This includes a rain mac, a hoodie jumper and a t-shirt.

Weather

We hope that we can have nice weather for all of the walks but we are acutely aware of this potential barrier for individuals. We recommend that you agree to meet at pick-up location each week despite any bad weather. If the weather does not permit walking it is recommended to have an alternative option at hand. This may be a visit to a local cultural site or building.

Food/Refreshments

We recommend that if budget allows to provide small lunch/snack/water to all participants. We recommend you look to local sponsors to provide lunches but programme funding may cover this too. It may be suggested to offer individuals the opportunity to bring their own lunch or snacks. Healthy Ireland has put forward their recommendation for healthy meetings. These guidelines (as below) in relation to food and drink are proposed for the Woodlands for Health Programme.

FOOD AND DRINK			
	WATER FREELY AVAILABLE	FRUIT - EASY TO PEEL	HEALTHY LUNCH
LESS THAN 2 HOURS	✓	✓	
2 TO 4 HOURS	✓	✓	
ALL DAY	✓	✓	✓

- **Avoid foods high in fat, sugar and salt**, like pastries, biscuits and crisps.
- **Include healthy sandwich fillers**, a vegetarian option and low-fat dairy options.
- If you normally provide scones at breakfast-time meetings, **consider smaller wholemeal scones**.
- Avoid large portions, **serve food in easy-to-eat servings**.
- If using a caterer **specify your requirements** clearly

Staff and Volunteers

Each programme will be different, but we recommend that there be at least 3 walk leader/staff/volunteers on each walk. This should be the Coillte Educator, the service staff, and an additional walk leader. It is recommended that there is one staff/volunteer to every 6 participants. It is recommended to look to the volunteer centre if further volunteers are needed.

Walk supervision and group management

It is felt that groups will consist of different physical abilities with some participants being able to easily complete the walk while others may find it more of a challenge. It is recommended that the group remain together so it may be required to slow the pace of the walk down to cater for those who may struggle.



Financing the programme

We have allocated €4000 for each Woodland for Health Programme (to include programme implementation and if funding allows to build a sustainability component in- e.g. Walk leader training). This funding can be paid to the Local Sports Partnership with 70% in advance of programme commencement and the remaining 30% on completion. A service agreement will be made between the Local Sports Partnership and Get Ireland Walking, once this agreement is made the 70% funding will be paid within 28 days upon receipt of invoice. The remaining funding (30%) can be invoiced upon programme completion.

Health and Safety

It is best practice to ensure that there is a qualified first-aider on all walks. It is advised to have a number of Mental Health Ireland's literature available to give participants should any mental health specific issues be raised. This can be supplied in the planning phases and is available to order from contacts as identified on www.mentalhealthireland.ie.

Recommendations for sustainability of outcomes

While we see that the 12 week programme has the potential to enhance lives it is important to us that these benefits can be sustained. Through the partners at a local level we recommend you have a sustainability strategy and plan. Several recommendations are provided herein but important to access all available opportunities in your local area;

- Let the walk participants set up a **self-led walking group** following the completion of the Woodlands for Health. This group can avail of an **Active Community Walking group** structure in that a walk facilitator coordinates the group for a period of 8 weeks. This acts as a step down from the Woodlands for Health Programme, but requires further stepping down into self-led walking.
- The above-mentioned walking group might feed into an existing walking group that is specific to wellness or a regular community walking group. Further Woodlands for Health programmes then have the opportunity to feed into this walking group.
- The Local Sports Partnership may have other existing, sustainable programmes that they would like to share with the group. For many individuals this may be the first opportunity they have to join other groups in the community.
- The Mental Health Ireland Development Officer may be aware of other existing programmes or groups that could benefit the individual through participation. Some examples include photography groups, art groups etc.
- Parkruns are another community participation campaign being held all over Ireland on a Saturday morning. As part of this initiative there is some 'couch to parkrun'/'park walk groups set up that participants could attend together.

It is recommended to introduce the potential of starting other walking groups or joining other groups from week 6 of the Woodlands for Health programme. It is recommended not to leave it until the last walk. Feedback on existing programmes suggests that participants would like to hear this information from mid-way through the programme.

Recommendations for adding value to the programme for participants

There are some things that the existing evidence tells us about adding value to a programme such as this for participants. The below serve merely as suggestions, we also recommend you explore the literature and your own experience to identify additional pieces that may add value to those participating in the programme.

- **Picture taking:** The evidence tells us of the benefits of looking at a nature based picture. Why not build this into part of one of the walks. You could suggest that individuals use their smartphone and take a picture of the surrounding nature. You may even suggest Woodlands for Health participants use the picture as their screensaver to connect with nature throughout their day.



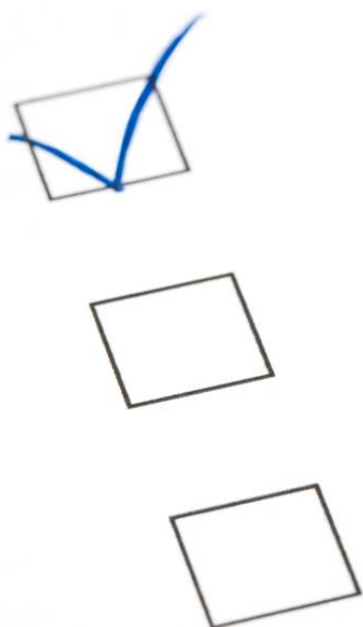
- Observing nature (sounds, smells, touch)/Mindful moment.

Evaluation of Woodlands for Health

There is an established need for building evidence to support public health wellbeing and physical activity interventions across Ireland. While we may feel a programme is a good idea, evidence needs to be gathered through evaluations to inform the future delivery of such programmes and indeed if a programme has value or is worthwhile. As a result, evaluations can inform future funding of programmes. Evaluations include many components from showing if the programme has achieved its aims (does the programme do what is said it was going to do?), to whether people adhere or stick with the programme for the full duration and if there was enjoyment in participating in the programme. Evaluations can be composed of many elements including questionnaires, interviews or group interviews known as focus groups.

This programme will be evaluated using a number of these methods.

- Baseline information will be gathered through questionnaires. Post programme, participants will be asked to complete another questionnaire. Focus groups may also take place after the programme.



Aim of the Woodlands for Health Evaluation

Woodlands for Health has been successfully implemented in Wicklow and in Dun Laoghaire Rathdown. Funding was awarded to pilot this programme to other areas nationally. Therefore, the aim of the programme evaluation is to assess the programme; a) efficacy and b) feasibility of implementing the programme in other areas.

Put simply we want to be able to answer the following questions about the programme;

- Can the programme be implemented in other areas of Ireland than the initial Wicklow and Dun Laoghaire Rathdown areas?
- Do meaningful partnerships between organisations help the implementation?
- Do staff find it a worthwhile programme to deliver?
- Do participants remain engaged with the programme for the full duration?
- Does the programme aid in the wellness of its participants?
- Do the participants find the programme useful for their wellbeing?
- What aspects of the programme could be changed to optimise its functionality?



Sample template to aid programme planning

Activity	Date	Location	Bus/transport arranged	Lunch arranged	Staff/volunteer support
Introductory session	<i>Eg. 30/04/18</i>	<i>Eg. Larch Hill Scout Centre</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes, Amy to collect</i>	<i>Tom-Coillte Amy-LSP Vicky-HSE</i>
Week 1 walk					
Week 2 walk					
Week 3 walk					
Week 4 walk					
Week 5 walk					
Week 6 walk					
Week 7 walk					
Week 8 walk					
Week 9 walk					
Week 10 walk					
Final celebratory session					