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**Qualitative Evaluation of The Great Outdoors
Project**

Final Report

13.5.16

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Executive Summary

Background and Introduction

This report presents a qualitative evaluation of The Great Outdoors (TGO) project that is run by the Kirklees-based mental health charity, Support to Recovery (S2R). The project seeks to provide opportunities for people with emotional problems (referred to as “volunteers”) to attend courses and take up activities related to nature and the outdoors.

The aims of the evaluation were as follows:

- 1) To explore the experiences of those staffing and managing TGO with regard to its effectiveness;
- 2) To examine how participating volunteers experienced the project and how they perceived its impact on their wellbeing;
- 3) To assess the views on the scheme of partner organisations hosting volunteers or otherwise supporting the project.

Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation followed an assets-based approach, that balances the traditional public health focus on health deficits with a focus on the assets for well-being available for individuals and communities. The methodology was qualitative, focusing on the experiences and perspectives of those involved with TGO.

Three groups of participants were recruited: current TGO staff and their manager (n=5); volunteers who have accessed a variety of activities through TGO (n=14); representatives of partner and stakeholder organisations who have worked with TGO (n=13).

Data collection comprised a focus group plus an individual interview with TGO staff and their manager, three focus groups with volunteers plus one individual interview and one written testimony, and e-mail interviews with partner/stakeholder representatives.

Volunteer focus group data were analysed using Template Analysis. The other data were analysed using a broad-brush thematic approach.

Findings

TGO STAFF/MANAGER

Staff saw their role as providing consistent, individualised support to volunteers, to help them access courses and activities that may improve their well-being. People they work with were not seen as “clients” or “service users” and staff avoided any kind of directive approach. They strongly saw nature and the outdoors as intrinsically beneficial for mental health and wellbeing. Equally, they saw the work of the volunteers they support as contributing to the local environment.

Staff reported excellent team dynamics, effective communication and good support from their manager. The project has already gone through significant changes in personnel and management, and there was a feeling they are well-focused now with a clear sense of direction. Productive relationships have been built with a wide range of partner organisations and the team were keen to broaden these still further. The sustainability of the project was a key concern.

VOLUNTEERS

Many of our participants had accessed other NHS services and/or 3rd Sector agencies in the past, and most came to TGO with an existing interest in nature and the outdoors. They came through a variety of routes - recommendations from other organisations, from other S2R activities, personal word-of-mouth, and active search for outdoor-related opportunities via the internet. All felt that participation in courses and activities through TGO had been beneficial to them. Some stated that it had helped them feel able to take time for themselves. Participation did not just help with existing emotional problems; for some, its importance lay in preventing potential problems. The chance to meet new, like-minded people in a pressure-free setting was valued by volunteers; many had gone on from an initial activity to try other things. There was widespread agreement that a crucial aspect of what made TGO helpful was that its courses and activities were not framed as “treatment” or as mental health services.

Three factors emerged particularly strongly as facilitating the positive experiences described above. TGO staff and tutors were seen as supportive, encouraging and empowering in the way they worked with volunteers. The relaxed, accepting atmosphere amongst those participating in courses and activities helped people feel safe and welcome, and encouraged learning from each other. Finally, the natural world as a setting for courses and activities was seen as intrinsically enhancing well-being, through a sense of freedom and release, reinforced by powerful sensory experiences.

Our participants had very few critical comments to make about the courses and activities in which they had taken part. Two had found the cold weather lessened their enjoyment of a particular course, and one was unhappy that some fellow volunteers did not take activities as seriously as he did. Some felt they would have liked more direction regarding how to continue and develop what they had learned. Issues of the timing of sessions were mentioned, in relation to the challenges for those with care or work commitments. Courses for parents and children – or parallel activities for each - were seen as a potentially worthwhile future development. There was a widely-shared view that it could be difficult finding out about TGO, and participants felt that improved outreach to those who might benefit from TGO was a priority.

PARTNER/STAKEHOLDER ORGANISATIONS

Representatives from partner organisations showed a good understanding of TGO and its aims, and reported very positive experiences of working with TGO staff and (where relevant) providing opportunities to volunteers. Some felt that the project had suffered some problem with the initial direction of TGO, but that a change in management had helped provide a better sense of direction and focus. There was consensus that participants would be keen to carry on working with TGO in the future.

Conclusions and recommendations

With due caution, given the nature of this type of evaluation research, we feel that there is good evidence that TGO has facilitated emotional well-being for the volunteers it supports. Looking to the future of TGO and/or similar initiatives, we would offer four recommendations:

1. The ethos of TGO is essential to its success and must be preserved. It entails: a non-medical, non-diagnostic view of psychological difficulties and emotional well-being; the creation of an inclusive, encouraging and non-competitive atmosphere in courses and activities; an emphasis on the distinctively beneficial aspects of contact with the natural world.

2. Measures should be taken where possible to broaden access to TGO, through the timing of courses and activities to open them to those with childcare and work commitments, including the provision of activities that young children can undertake with, or in parallel to, their parents.

3. Follow-up courses should be designed to support volunteers' skills and interests – for example, in mindfulness or gardening.

4. Dissemination of information about TGO should be strengthened to reach a wider range of potential beneficiaries – this will need a multi-stranded approach and could include channels such as primary care and workplaces.

1. Background and Introduction

Support to Recovery (S2R) is a mental health charity based in Kirklees that has, over twenty years, developed innovative and collaborative ways of working with people affected by emotional distress. The focus of the present evaluation study is one of S2R's projects – The Great Outdoors (TGO). Drawing on the widely-recognised benefits of outdoor activity on physical and mental wellbeing (e.g. Berman, Jonides & Kaplan, 2008), TGO provides opportunities for people to get involved with a range of nature-related initiatives. The project was designed to maximise access and participation in outdoor green spaces for people experiencing a range of mental health and emotional issues.

TGO receives funding from Kirklees Council (mental health; public health) and from the local NHS Trust (South West Yorkshire Mental Health Trust; Creative Minds). The project offers a range of activities to suit personal preference and abilities, including a Grow Your Own course at their own Council allotment space, Bee Happy (introduction to bee keeping), Eco-crafts, Mindfulness in the Outdoors courses, sessions helping to maintain local parks, and singing/ music sessions (e.g. Harmony in the Park). TGO also works in partnership with a range of local horticulture groups to identify volunteer opportunities. Aims here are: (i) to “upskill” host organisations with regards to mental health (e.g. raising awareness, reducing stigma); (ii) to benefit volunteers; (iii) to have a positive impact on the local community and local environment.

The aims of this evaluation were to assess the impact of TGO on volunteers and partner organisations, and to derive lessons for future projects. Specific objectives were:

- 4) To explore the experiences of those staffing and managing TGO with regard to its effectiveness;
- 5) To examine how participating volunteers experienced the project and how they perceived its impact on their wellbeing;
- 6) To assess the views on the scheme of partner organisations hosting volunteers or otherwise supporting the project.

2. Evaluation Methodology

2.1 OVERALL APPROACH

The evaluation team used an asset based approach (e.g. Foot & Hopkins, 2010; Morgan & Ziglio, 2007) drawing on principles of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider et al, 2008). An asset approach balances a traditional public health focus on health deficits with an equal focus on health assets. Assets are resources available to individuals and communities (e.g. capacity, skills, knowledge, and social connections) which can be drawn on to support health and wellbeing. Appreciative inquiry is a participative approach to research that values those involved as experts in their own lives and therefore as key actors in health improvement solutions. Using a variety of qualitative research methods, the researchers captured experiences TGO from a variety of different perspectives to assess the perceived impact and outcomes of TGO. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Huddersfield Human and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee. All participants provided written informed consent prior to taking part in the evaluation

2.2 SAMPLING AND RECRUITMENT

Participants were recruited from three groups:

- (i) TGO/ S2R staff (management and other staff) (N=5);
- (ii) TGO participants ('volunteers') (N=14);
- (iii) Representatives of partner and stakeholders organisations (N=16).

We approached all four staff who work directly for TGO and the senior manager responsible for the project – all agreed to participate.

We approached volunteers who had participated in a variety of TGO-supported courses and activities. TGO staff facilitated recruitment and to meet with ethical requirements were asked to exclude any individuals who they felt might be negatively affected by taking part in a focus group. The 14 TGO volunteers we recruited volunteers had participated in a range of courses and activities including Mindfulness in the Outdoors, Grow Your Own, Bee Happy, willow-weaving and paper-making craft groups.

We defined *partner* organisations as those which provided opportunities for TGO volunteers (or had done in the past) and *stakeholder* organisations as those involved in supporting TGO in other ways, such as through their role in commissioning. They were identified through the TGO/S2R staff focus group and interview and subsequent discussions to include a good range of such organisations. We approached 16 people to take part in this stage of the research; ten from partners and six from stakeholders. Organisations represented included Kirklees Wildlife and Landscape Partnership, Paddock Community Trust, Growing Works, South West Yorkshire NHS Foundation Trust and people in various roles within Kirklees Council such as mental health provision and parks and environment. Their roles within their respective organisations were also varied, for example Kirklees gardeners, managers within the Council and people in various positions within local charities and other initiatives.

2.3 DATA COLLECTION

S2R/TGO staff

An individual interview was undertaken with S2R's senior manager covering the main purpose and aims of TGO and intended beneficiaries, her own role, perceived outcomes and lessons learned. The interview incorporated the Pictor technique (King et al, 2013), a visual research interview tool to facilitate reflection on how TGO works with both partner organisations and commissioners, to identify where this works well and to consider where there might be scope for alternative ways of working.

A focus group was undertaken with S2R staff (N=4) involved in delivering the TGO programme. In this session we reflected with the team on project activities, their perceptions as to who has benefitted from the project and how, lessons learned and potential developments in the future.

Volunteers

S2R staff identified and contacted potential volunteer participants to take part in the focus group sessions. Three focus groups were undertaken with a combined total of 12 participants (Group 1, N=4; Group 2, N=3; Group 3, N=5). Six of the participants were

female and 5 male, and their ages ranged from 20s to 60s. One participant identified as 'black african', the remainder as 'white british'. In the focus group sessions, the researchers reflected with participants on how they came to access the service; their expectations (and whether these have been met); what they have gained from their participation in TGO activities and how; any problems or negative experiences and how they think TGO activities could be developed in the future.

Two volunteers with learning disabilities did not feel comfortable taking part in focus groups – we therefore made alternative arrangements to enable them to contribute: one was interviewed individually (supported by a member of TGO staff) and one provided a written testimony.

Partner and Stakeholder organisations

Contact details for a range of TGO's partner organisations were provided by TGO/ StR staff, and selected to cover a wide range of organisations, informed by emerging findings from the TGO staff focus group and interview. Email interviews covered the following areas with participants:

- Their own organisation and role
- How their organisation works with TGO
- The remit and purpose of TGO
- Their experiences of working with TGO staff and TGO volunteers
- The extent to which TGO was felt to have achieved its aims
- Thoughts on working with TGO in the future

Participants were sent the first two questions together and then one question at a time, and were sent a reminder after seven days if no response had been received. Follow-up questions were used between main questions where clarification or further detail was required. We received full responses from 9 of the 16 people contacted, and a further four where the participant answered at least four of the six main questions. Table 1, below, shows the detail of responses by organisation type.

Table 1. Responses from partner and stakeholder organisations to e-mail interviews

	Partners	Stakeholders
Full response	7	2
Partial response	2	2
Non-response	1	2

2.4 DATA ANALYSIS

A broad-brush thematic analysis was undertaken on the qualitative data from S2R/TGO staff and from Partner and Stakeholder organisations to draw out key themes in relation to the aims of the evaluation. More detailed analysis using Template Analysis (King, 2012; Brooks et al, 2015) was undertaken on data from the volunteers. Template Analysis is a particular technique for thematically analysing, hierarchically organising and then summarising detailed qualitative data.

3. Findings

3.1 S2R/TGO STAFF

Whilst clear they provided an opt-in service, TGO staff were well aware of potential barriers to participation faced by clients. Staff's wide knowledge, in terms of both locally available resources and their particular client group, enabled them to provide tailored and individualised support. This could initially be quite intensive and personalised, but was important in enabling clients to support themselves in the longer term.

"I've been with [a client] the past four weeks, going to three different places already, just so he can, because otherwise he wouldn't leave the house. He's said, you know, this is so valuable to me because I'd just be sat at home, like just making those introductions and then he finds it hard to find bus routes and things, so give him a bit of a hand with

that, meet him at the station and then he's off, isn't he, he's just, attends it independently ... without that, he wouldn't have that freedom"

Staff did not see their role as directive. By providing consistency, a focused activity, and a safe space, volunteers were supported as they developed their social skills and confidence. TGO encompasses a range of activities to facilitate broad appeal to a wide variety of potential clients: benefits were seen as deriving broadly from social interaction in an accepting and welcoming outdoor space. The outdoors location provided acknowledged physical and mental health benefits and was perceived as inherently egalitarian. Projects contribute to local environment upkeep (e.g. council allotment plots, local parks) and staff were keen to further develop this work in consultation with local communities. Positive interactions between local community members and TGO clients were seen by staff as encouraging, especially given the social stigma often attached to mental health conditions. Having a task-focused activity was a *"really good framework to engage people"*: activities provided an obvious mutual focus for social interaction (otherwise potentially difficult for clients) and seen as *"much more socially acceptable to be attending a course than it is a service"*.

"Some people ... certainly wouldn't sit and talk, but get a lot from being on an allotment because you don't need to talk and actually when you're focused on a task and you're doing it, then you've got something to talk about... The focus isn't about socialising, but actually that's what she needs"

Mastering new skills and acquiring new knowledge were seen by staff to boost volunteers' confidence, and volunteers became increasingly able to support their own wellbeing independently (e.g. accessing other new activities; forming their own more informal user-led groupings; disseminating their learning to other community settings). Whilst some did re-engage with TGO regularly, this was not felt to be necessarily problematic. Indeed, staff suggested such "low level" intervention could represent

significant time and cost savings to other (statutory) services, potentially preventing crises whilst fulfilling an important and positive function for clients.

“Low level intervention can stop crisis from happening. Going onto an allotment for a couple of hours a week is not going to suddenly fix issues. But if it helps somebody to cope, to get through, to, because they know they’re not on their own, then that impact is massive.”

“There’s so little for people like that, until suddenly a crisis happens... as long as they’re not being a drain on our resources in needing a lot of time...If there was somewhere else to signpost them to, that’s okay, but often there isn’t.”

“When people go from using statutory services to just using us and using community groups, which we’ve seen...that is economically beneficial.”

Internally, staff reported excellent team dynamics, good communication and supportive line management. There was a perceived change in TGO’s remit since its inception from ‘conduit’ to directly providing services. Staff were keen to further develop beneficial partner working arrangements with other local organisations and reported supportive relationships with key local stakeholders (e.g. Local Authority). Sustainability was a key concern: building strong partnerships (and links between these) takes time, and it can also take time for initiatives to embed and for benefits to become apparent. Continuity and reliability are crucial in terms of client engagement.

3.2 VOLUNTEERS

The themes we identified in the volunteer focus group data were organised into six clusters, each comprised of one or more levels of subthemes. These were:

- Antecedents to engagement
- How volunteers came to TGO
- Personal impact of TGO
- How impacts happen

- Limitations and areas for improvement
- Looking to the future

We will highlight below for each cluster the themes and subthemes that most clearly relate to the aims of this evaluation.

Antecedents to engagement

This cluster relates to those aspects of volunteers' lives before they made contact with TGO which appeared to influence their engagement with the project. It includes three main themes: *prior health/wellbeing and service use history, existing interest in nature and the outdoors, and hopes and expectations regarding TGO*. We will summarise key findings regarding each in turn.

Prior health/wellbeing and service use history

Participants described a variety of mental and to a lesser extent physical health problems that led them to seek sources of support. Some referred to difficult life events such as bereavement or domestic violence. Where specific types of mental ill health were referred to these were most often forms of anxiety and depression. Worries about meeting new people could be both a reason for looking for help through TGO and a barrier to actually taking up new activities:

"I mean I admit I'm nervous about meeting lots of new people, but especially if it's a big group [...] But I'll push myself to do it, whereas you know, a lot of people won't." [FG2]

Many participants had had contact with NHS services and/or third sector organisations offering support for psychological and social difficulties. Sometimes, unhappiness about previous experiences with services or activities contributed to their interest in the kind of approach offered through TGO. Equally, good experiences with similar organisations made them feel open towards engaging with TGO.

"My doctor, he were quick to give me medication, which I didn't want to go on really, and that were it. I mean, he never told me anything about this." [FG3]

“...because they [previous 3rd sector organisation] understood, and having people around you who understand encouraged me to want to be involved in other projects where there would be people like that.” [FG1]

Existing interest in nature and the outdoors

The majority of focus group participants had an active interest in aspects of nature and the outdoors prior to coming to TGO. Interests included gardening/allotmenting, walking, bee-keeping and arts and craft activities related to nature. Many of these people were therefore looking for opportunities to act on these interests. In contrast, there were several participants for whom serious engagement with nature was a new thing.

“T: All my life [...] I was a walker and a climber and I just liked to be outside in the fresh air with the sun on me, I’ve never enjoyed being indoors.

L: I’m the opposite; I’ve been indoors all my life, worked in an office, you know.” [FG1]

Hopes and expectations regarding TGO

In the main, participants did not recall clear expectations about how engagement with TGO would benefit them. There was a sense of giving it a try, often as a result of a recommendation from a service, or personal contact (as we discuss further below). Rather than focusing on mental health outcomes, the volunteers more often talked about hopes and expectations in relation to supporting their interests in nature and the outdoors, or developing new interests.

How volunteers came to TGO

Participants in our focus groups came to TGO through a variety of routes. Some were directed to it by other services – most often 3rd sector rather than NHS. Some had had prior contact with other S2R projects and heard about TGO through staff, people attending S2R activities or simply by seeing posters or fliers. Still other volunteers had come into contact through word of mouth recommendations from friends who had some kind of contact with the project. There was widespread agreement, though, that finding out about TGO was not simple or straightforward for those who could benefit from its activities:

“But how would I find out about these projects? They’re not through my GP and I found a poster by chance and then went and had a look at that.” [FG1]

“I mean the good thing about being in the S2R – in the room – you do get a lot of people passing who might see something on the wall that sparks an interest [...] But I suppose if you’re out in the allotment, you don’t get people wandering by. So people don’t find out about it, which I think is quite bad, really.” [FG3]

Personal impact of TGO

Volunteers in our focus groups talked at length about how participating in activities and courses through TGO impacted upon them. Words and phrases such as *“brilliant”, “really nice,* and *“inspirational”* were used in all three groups. More importantly, participants provided details of specifically how TGO had made a positive difference for them. There were numerous comments that people’s psychological well-being had improved through involvement. In groups 1 and 2, participants discussed how TGO activities had helped them feel able to take time for themselves:

“I think there’s something a little bit selfish about it, I don’t know if that’s nice or not, but I want to do things I want to do now. I spent all my life working and doing things for other people. Suddenly, I think ‘well I’ll do something I actually want to do’. The Great Outdoors thing has just given me that, because I didn’t realise I wanted to do it, but I did, so it’s good.” [FG1]

“It’s just that the people who are there [i.e. Mindfulness in the Outdoors course] were saying that its not a waste of time to look after yourself and I’ve tried to take that on board.” [FG2]

Another benefit to psychological well-being mentioned by several participants was that contact with nature through TGO courses helped them to gain a sense of acceptance about challenges and difficulties in their lives:

“...and part of The Great Outdoors is ‘No Choice’. You had to accept it’s raining, haven’t you, you can’t say ‘Go! Stop!’ You seek shelter, but you’ve got to accept things, haven’t you? And things grow and things are happening, and it was quite, quite an eye-opening experience for me.” [FG1]

In focus group 2 in particular, the volunteers talked about how TGO activities did not just help alleviate emotional problems, they also helped prevent them from happening or from worsening. They lamented that employers normally will not offer interventions to help with mental health until problems have occurred:

“Prevention is better than cure, isn’t it, but normally companies just push you over the edge before they’ll give you any [help], you know.” [FG1]

Other important benefits mentioned included TGO enabling them to meet new people in a safe and comfortable way, and helping people to get a break from care responsibilities. The majority of participants across the three groups had gone on from their initial TGO activity or course to get involved in other things – either through TGO or outside. Several had been proactive in setting up opportunities for themselves, such as taking on allotment plots.

In all three groups, several participants stated strongly that a key aspect of courses and activities supported by TGO was that they were not framed as “treatment” nor were participants framed as “patients” or “service-users”. Volunteers did not have to open up

about their problems if they did not want to, and were not subject to diagnostic categorisation.

“I didn’t ever feel like I was accessing a service, because there’s that thing – like pride or something – or that there’s got to be something really wrong with me to access the service.” [FG3]

“I mean, if you’ve ever been to a psychiatrist, they rake up everything, painful bits and other non-painful bits and all sorts of things. You don’t want that; you just want to get on with whatever it is you do.” [FG2]

“I think it will probably stop you getting to a point where you need the drugs. I think if you’re feeling a bit anxious – I mean I’m a bit anxious but not, I wouldn’t say I was ill with it or anything [...] and it would probably stop me getting to a point where I need any drugs.” [FG1]

How impacts happen

Participants’ discussions highlighted three broad factors that appeared to be important in enabling the kinds of positive impacts described above to occur: *the role of TGO staff and tutors, the nature of social interaction within courses and activities, and the perceived beneficial qualities intrinsic to nature and the outdoors.* We will look at each in turn.

The role of TGO staff and tutors

Participants were universally highly positive about the TGO staff they contacted and worked with, and about others involved in leading or assisting with courses and activities. TGO staff were praised for their friendliness, expertise and enthusiasm, and for their accepting attitudes towards volunteers. One participant said *“I go through S2R and try to work with people that understand my ways and thoughts, and in the bigger*

world they do not do that.” Our focus group members particularly emphasised how the staff empowered them to get the most from the courses and activities in which they participated: *“...S2R and The Great Outdoors – you know that they believe in you and they understand; that they know that you’ve got those needs” [FG2].* There is a sense that staff are seen as part of the group, rather than in a separate, more didactic role: *“I think it’s the guidance you get from the tutor and their knowledge, and they pass it on in a lovely way, it’s not like ‘you will do this’, it’s ‘shall we do this together?’” [FG1].*

The nature of social interaction within courses and activities

Alongside the positive effects of the staff/tutors on TGO volunteers, the nature of social interaction within groups was significant in facilitating benefits to psychological wellbeing. Many participants stressed how important it was to them to work alongside people who shared interests and experiences with them. Without exception, they described the atmosphere in courses and activity groups as welcoming and supportive, and above all participants appreciated the lack of any feeling of pressure or competitiveness.

“It’s a lifeline to try and mix in with a community, rather than see house walls. It also helps me meet people who want me there, and recognise me for who and what I know.”
[Individual testimony]

“Ptp1: ...there isn’t a real pressure to...you could almost just sit and be in your own space and watch, but just be there and not feel remotely bad, and not embarrassed, just actually fine if that’s what you want to do.

Ptp2: That’s what you need.

Ptp3: [leader’s name] used to say, if people just want to come along and have a cup of tea and then, you know, just be there and go home again, that’s fine.” [FG3]

This relaxed atmosphere amongst people attending courses and activities allowed participants to become comfortable and trusting in groups, which could enable more personal discussions to happen. One participant contrasted her experiences in a TGO group with one run by a different agency:

“It was so intense, there wasn’t any like beforehand, just sitting and just people chatting [...] I had to leave, it was far too much [...] this group [TGO] isn’t like that, like it’s super chilled-out, you can sit and not talk if you don’t want to talk.” [FG3]

Other people were important not only in terms of creating a comfortable and supportive atmosphere; they could also contribute to learning for fellow volunteers.

“It’s that group activity, I think that’s good, because like [name] knows an awful lot about plants. I knew nothing really, so I’m learning from [name] as well as learning from the tutor.” [FG1]

Beneficial qualities intrinsic to nature and the outdoors.

Participants shared a strong sense that contact with nature and being outdoors were intrinsically beneficial, and were essential elements of what was effective about TGO courses and activities. This was true for those who had not previously had close involvement with the natural world as much as it was for those who had held a long-term interest and saw themselves as “outdoorsy” people. We probed participants for their understandings of what made engagement with nature good for them. Commonly, they spoke about a sense of freedom, space and release.

“It’s just the actual being outside and the release of almost a claustrophobic...I don’t know, it just feels like you’re being OK, I’ve got space now, I can clear my head, I can think’ you know.” [FG3]

“So I feel with that fresh air sometimes you don’t have to think about what worries you, because you’re concentrating on other things. It’s sort of like your mind is more, more relaxed, and your self relaxed and there’s no pressure.” [FG2]

“From my bit of anxiety that I had, I felt a bit hemmed in, so I felt I needed to be out, so it helped me a lot being outside.” [FG1]

There were many examples given of strong sensory experiences related to the natural world. In some instances, these anecdotes were used to illustrate the effectiveness of

the Mindfulness in the Outdoors course. For example one participant described how the course enabled him to appreciate a sunrise with his daughter: *“we sort of stood there watching big rays of sunshine, it was like a theatre for us”*. However, such experiences were not restricted to the Mindfulness course; another participant starts her description of the Grow Your Own course as follows: *“the very first one was magical, it was a stunning frosty day, blue blue sky...”* Nor were such powerful experiences always focused on the visual sense, as the examples below show:

“I like to plant things for myself and I feel always that outdoors is very good, because it’s fresh air. I mean, you could hear the birds singing, you could hear the dogs barking, you could hear the horses.” [FG2]

“Well I was at some meeting, there were some flowers there and I took the time to smell them and I wouldn’t have done this before. They were lovely and I rubbed them on my chin, you know, they were really soft.” [FG1]

Limitations and areas for improvement

There were almost no negative comments about the content of courses and activities, or about the way they were run by tutors/leaders. One participant complained that some other volunteers did not take activities as seriously as he did. A few would have liked certain courses to have lasted longer – particularly Meditation in the Outdoors and Grow Your Own. Some also felt they would have liked more guidance on how to continue and develop what they had learned outside and after the course. In the second and third groups especially, issues around the timing of courses and activities came up quite frequently. Several participants had faced difficulties themselves because of work or childcare commitments. Two participants commented that cold weather had limited their enjoyment of a course.

As we saw earlier, some participants noted that it had not been easy for them to find out about TGO, and in all three focus groups volunteers said that effective dissemination of information about the project was an area for improvement:

“The other thing is getting the information out there, isn’t it? I mean The Great Outdoors Project and S2R are quite merged, you know, it’s all the same project. But even – I’m quite involved with it, but even I don’t see all the things that are going on.”
[FG2]

Several participants suggested that putting posters and/or fliers in GP surgeries or Health Centres might be one way to get information out to a wider population with potential interest in the kinds of activities TGO supports.

Looking to the future

Participants were keen to see TGO continue, and many expressed interest in future involvement themselves. Given the comments above about timing, not surprisingly one suggestion was for courses to be run at different times – especially at the weekend and in the evening. Some also suggested activities that parents and children could take part in together, or parallel activities for both. One participant describes how this would have helped her in the past:

“The littlest one [i.e. youngest child] wasn’t yet in school and that was, you know, that kept me in that situation all the time, I couldn’t ever sort of get away, just to sort of try and get me head straight. It was full-on, all the time, sort of thing, and it would have been helpful at that point [...]if I’d have been offered something like ‘here’s the mindfulness thing’ and ‘here’s something for your pre-schooler to dig around and do’, and just sort of, just take a break and just breathe, you know.” [FG2]

Some participants suggested new activities that they would like TGO to support, including dance and physical exercise classes, bush craft, and more advanced gardening courses. One said he would like to see the foundation of an outdoor resource centre in Kirklees, that could be accessed by a range of individuals and groups including TGO/S2R.

3.3 PARTNER AND STAKEHOLDER ORGANISATIONS

Respondents showed a good understanding of the aim of TGO and the range of activities it offers. They saw TGO's aim as fostering mental and physical wellbeing through connection with the outdoors in a variety of ways, in a safe and socially supportive environment.

Partners and stakeholders all reported very positive experiences of working with TGO, with regard to both its staff and the volunteers it helps. They found TGO staff to be professional, and committed and passionate about their work. One participant wrote "*I was involved in the early discussions about the formation of the project and was impressed with the vision for partnership working.*" They were additionally described by another participant as "*empathetic, enthusiastic and knowledgeable*" and a third wrote "*Great Outdoors staff are very friendly and encouraging to the volunteers and communicate well with our staff.*" One stakeholder who liaised with TGO management had experienced some early problems in getting the contract running smoothly, but reported that these had been resolved since changes in managerial arrangements and TGO management were now "*positive, forward thinking and innovative.*"

Those who worked alongside TGO staff and volunteers on the various outdoors projects also highly valued its work. The sessions were described as well thought-out, with TGO staff taking an inclusive approach and making all feel welcome and comfortable. They also, importantly, remarked upon the visible benefits to the volunteers taking part:

"TGO volunteers have gone above and beyond helping clients. I recently worked with one TGO client and I have noticed a massive change in his behaviour" and "It is always pleasant to work alongside people who so obviously enjoy being there...The real achievements, though, are seen in the increased confidence of the volunteers. Or in the fact that one chap has avoided being hospitalised for the last three Christmases."

Some participants were unable to give full answers to the question about benefits for volunteers, as they personally had had minimal involvement with the project. However, where they felt able to make a judgement participants felt that TGO had indeed fulfilled its aims. These judgements were often based on first-hand experience of benefits to both themselves and to the volunteers:

“From a personal perspective it has improved my wellbeing - personally and professionally”; “Yes, I am positive about TGO as I have seen at first hand the difference it has made to the lives of a number of people and ‘extremely successful in achieving its aims. Through their support individuals are on the road to recovery and continuing to stay on that road by using their outdoor spaces for wellbeing... I have seen individuals bloom.”

It was acknowledged that initiatives of this kind need time to become established and can suffer teething problems, but several respondents commented that TGO had now “bedded in” and become a recognised element of Kirklees’ mental health provision. One of the stakeholders again pointed to early difficulties in getting the contract running as planned and felt that the projected figures for people accessing the service had been, in retrospect, too “ambitious” and that there had not been the expected transition of people from one service to another. But, they added:

“Since the new S2R manager has come into post there has been better leadership for the project and consequently a better direction understood by all. This has resulted in a more stable service that is beginning to find its niche and is being seen much more as a part of the Kirklees offer for people with mental health problems.”

A further participant described TGO as “a positive example of partnership working”. Despite the sometimes low attendance rate among those who initially signed up for one

particular project, attributable to the challenges that volunteers face, another participant reported:

“From talking to other people in my work and home communities I really think the TGO message is getting out there. It takes time for these services/opportunities to 'bed in' and for public awareness to grow so I think TGO needs more time to build on the excellent foundations they've created.”

When asked their views on working with TGO again in the future, the respondents were again wholly positive, for example; *“That's an easy one - yes! I'd love to work with the project again in the future”*. They valued the benefits that they clearly saw in the volunteers who took part in the various projects and looked forward to continuing their working relationships with TGO. Many again emphasised the benefits to the volunteers:

“To continue working with TGO in the future would be fantastic. To carry on helping nurturing individuals in the way they do is inspirational and they inspire others to help and get involved. I think the continuation is a must, as they believe in individuals at their lowest and offer continued support.”

One partner, whose service is now due to be replaced by an external contractor due to financial cuts, saw this as representing a loss to TGO volunteers:

“It is difficult to quantify the wellbeing factor compared with the accountant's factor. I believe horticultural therapy is a cost effective way of improving people's lives compared to medical and social care costs.”

The participants not only placed great value on the benefits of TGO to the lives of the volunteers in terms of health and wellbeing but also valued the work they did in improving parks and green spaces and fostering biodiversity; *“What they do is appreciated. Long may it continue.”*

Additionally, some participants were already helping to build on TGO's work, for example *"I am in the process of trying to direct them to pieces of land that they can develop other community growing schemes on. Possibly community orchards"* or hopefully anticipated a widening of the scheme: *"I look forward to doing so [working with TGO in the future] and hope that S2R as the wider organisation is open to working in co-operative and synergistic ways with partners."*

4. Conclusions and recommendations

This qualitative evaluation has produced a strongly positive view of The Great Outdoors project, from the perspectives of TGO staff, volunteers supported by TGO, and partner organisations. The volunteers themselves felt they had experienced benefits to their well-being through the support and effective, participatory leadership of TGO staff, the relaxed, uncompetitive character of courses and activities and the distinctive features of an outdoors setting in contact with the natural world. This concurs with the accounts of TGO staff and partner organisation representatives in terms of the project's way of working and the perceived benefits for those involved with it. At least from the perspectives of those volunteers we gathered data from, engagement with one TGO activity often leads to further involvement in other opportunities, and the effects spill over into participants' lives outside of specific courses.

The content of the courses and activities accessed by volunteers was viewed very favourably – other than “more of the same” there were no suggestions that it needed to change. Where there does appear to be a need for change is in the timing of activities, in order to make opportunities open to a wider population, especially those with caring and paid work responsibilities. The other main area for improvement that emerged from our analysis was in the dissemination of information about TGO to those who could benefit from it. While staff and partner organisation data suggest this has strengthened over the course of the TGO project, more could be done to maximise potential.

A qualitative evaluation such as this seeks to describe in depth the experiences of those involved in (or with a stake in) a project, and to provide an understanding of how it works – or fails to work. As such, we cannot make definitive judgements about how representative our findings are of all those involved with TGO. While we collected data from all the staff working directly for the project, the volunteers were inevitably self-selecting. Furthermore, because it was ethically required that we avoided recruiting volunteers who might have found the focus groups distressing or highly anxiety-

provoking, TGO staff had to play a part in the recruitment process. This context must be borne in mind when interpreting the findings; however, we feel there are good reasons to be confident that our conclusions are transferable to the project more widely. Firstly, our volunteer participants had experienced a wide range of courses and activities, and included a good balance of men and women, of differing ages (though limited ethnic diversity). Secondly, as experienced qualitative researchers we ensured that the focus groups elicited detailed accounts with plenty of concrete examples – such data are more persuasive than generalised evaluative comments. Thirdly, the concurrence between findings from TGO staff and partner organisation contacts with those from our volunteers’ findings makes it unlikely that the latter are highly atypical of volunteers as a whole.

On the basis of our evaluation, we make the following four recommendations for the development of TGO and/or similar initiatives in future:

1. The ethos of TGO is essential to its success and must be preserved. It entails: a non-medical, non-diagnostic view of psychological difficulties and emotional well-being; the creation of an inclusive, encouraging and non-competitive atmosphere in courses and activities; an emphasis on the distinctively beneficial aspects of contact with the natural world.
2. Measures should be taken where possible to broaden access to TGO, through the timing of courses and activities to open them to those with childcare and work commitments, including the provision of activities that young children can undertake with, or in parallel to, their parents.
3. Follow-up courses should be designed to support volunteers’ skills and interests – for example, in mindfulness or gardening.

4. Dissemination of information about TGO should be strengthened to reach a wider range of potential beneficiaries – this will need a multi-stranded approach and could include channels such as primary care and workplaces.

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