

Mendip Hills National Landscape Mendip Nature Connections Project Evaluation Report



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May 2025

Meaningful Measures Ltd

Meaningful Measures Ltd is a company that provides innovative person-centred evaluation, audit and research solutions. Our mission is to enable people's own voices to shape the understanding and improvement of health and wellbeing services around the world.

Acknowledgements

Meaningful Measures Ltd and the Mendip Hills National Landscape Team would like to thank all the participants who agreed to take part in the evaluation, especially the people who took part in Mendip Nature Connections. Thank you also to the funders: Defra's Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) Programme and the West of England's Healthier with Nature Programme.



Farming in Protected Landscapes programme

Disclaimer:

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How to cite this report:

Polley M & Seers H (2025) Mendip Nature Connections, Evaluation report, Meaningful Measures Ltd, England, UK.

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Report commissioned by:



Mendip Hills
National
Landscape

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Mendip Nature Connections (MNC) project, delivered from April 2024 to April 2025 by the Mendip Hills National Landscape Team, built on the success of the Somerset Nature Connections initiative (2020–2023). MNC aimed to improve mental wellbeing and reduce social isolation through structured, nature-based courses and events. Participants were primarily adults referred via health and community services or self-referred, many of whom were living with mental health challenges, disabilities, or isolation.

The MNC programme offered structured 6-week nature-based courses, with opportunities to continue for up to 18 weeks, supported by volunteers with lived experience. In addition, 27 one-off events and wellbeing walks provided broader community access. MNC was delivered in collaboration with healthcare providers, community organisations, landowners, artists, and local volunteers. Key funders included Sirona Care & Health (via the Healthier with Nature Programme) and Defra's Farming in Protected Landscapes Programme.

Participant Demographics and Engagement:

- 20 MNC course participants
- 45% attended the full 18-week programme
- 40% identified as disabled; 40% were men; 60% white British
- Nearly half were self-referrals, others came via NHS and local charities
- 413 volunteer hours contributed—valued at £8,850
- 314 people attended the one-off events.

Wellbeing Outcomes:

20 course participants were evaluated across five blocks of activity. Participants completed outcome measures at the start and end of their involvement.

- ONS4 personal wellbeing questions showed positive changes
- ONS4 Happiness scores rose from 4.5 to 7.6 (from below to above national average)
- ONS4 Anxiety scores dropped from 6.3 to 4.9 (from double the national average to

just above national average)

- H-HAN scale measuring domains such as self-esteem, mood, relationships, and nature connection. Average scores in all 10 domains increased from baseline to follow-up. The improvement in esteem, mood and motivation corroborates with the ONS personal wellbeing questions. There were good improvements in the community, relationship, connected to nature and wider nature domains as well.

As a result of MNC 40% of participants felt they were better at taking care of themselves and 100% agreed the course was beneficial for their wellbeing.

Feedback from one-off events:

314 people attended additional at one-off events incorporating art, poetry, nature connection and wellbeing walks. Where possible feedback was gained - 95% of poetry walk attendees reported improved wellbeing and nature connection.

Participant Experiences

Participants described the Mendip Nature Connections (MNC) project as life-changing, with many reporting significant improvements in mental health, reduced anxiety and depression, and a renewed sense of purpose. The structured, supportive, and nature-based environment offered emotional safety and a sense of belonging, particularly valued by those experiencing isolation or crisis. Peer relationships, meaningful activities, and connection to the natural world fostered confidence, motivation, and new skills. Progression into volunteer roles allowed participants to continue their recovery journey while supporting others. Participants highlighted the importance of ongoing access to the programme and recommended wider outreach, particularly to underserved groups.

Staff Experiences

Staff observed transformational changes in participants, including improved wellbeing, increased social engagement, and pathways into volunteering or employment. The programme's success was attributed to its proven structure, compassionate facilitation, and the critical role of peer volunteers who provided emotional and practical support. Staff themselves reported high job satisfaction,

opportunities for professional growth, and strong collaboration within the wider Mendip Hills National Landscape team. Key challenges included managing transitions to volunteer roles, logistical demands of transport, and the undervaluing of specialist delivery roles by hosting systems—despite adequate funding being secured. Staff strongly advocated for long-term investment to sustain this impactful work.

Conclusions

MNC successfully improved wellbeing, reduced isolation, and built community. It demonstrated strong outcomes in mental health recovery, social prescribing impact, and community engagement.

Key enablers: proven course design, skilled facilitation, strong partnerships, and accessible delivery through transport and local sites.

Challenges: managing transitions to volunteering, short-term funding limitations, under-recognised staff expertise, and emotional impact to the participants when courses end.

Recommendations

- Secure minimum 5-year funding (ideally 10)
- Recognise and reward skilled delivery staff appropriately
- Explore commissioning via DWP/ICBs for social prescribing and employment outcomes
- Establish permanent NHS funding routes
- Reintroduce a longer gap before becoming a volunteer
- Co-design volunteer transitions with previous participants
- Involve landowners/farmers as co-beneficiaries
- Extend outreach to underserved groups (e.g., LGBTQ+)
- Continue creative partnerships (e.g., arts, poetry).

Contents

1.0 Introduction	8
1.1 Somerset Nature Connections	8
1.2 Outcomes of Somerset Nature Connections	10
1.3 Mendip Nature Connections (April 2024 – April 2025)	10
2.0 Methods	12
2.1 Quantitative data collection	12
2.2 Qualitative data collection	13
2.3 Data analysis	13
2.4 Data collection and analysis of one-off events and wellbeing walks	13
2.5 Data security and ethical considerations	14
3.0 Results	15
3.1 Participants characteristics and demographic data	15
3.2 Outcome measures used	18
3.2.1 ONS personal wellbeing - Happiness	18
3.2.2 ONS personal wellbeing - Anxiety	19
3.2.3 H-HAN scale	20
3.3 How good are you at taking care of yourself?	23
3.4 Has this course been helpful for your Wellbeing?	24
3.5 Experiences of MNC course participants and staff	25
3.5.1 MNC service users’ perspectives	25
3.5.1.1 How people feel coming to the course	25
3.5.1.2 How the course benefits people	26
3.5.1.3 The value and benefit of volunteers for peer support	29
3.5.1.4 Participant suggestions for future MNC courses	31
3.5.2 Staff perspectives	32
3.5.2.1 Benefit to MNC course participants	32
3.5.2.2 The value of volunteers	34
3.5.2.3 What makes MNC work so well?	36
3.5.2.4 Challenges	38
3.6 One-off events and wellbeing walks	43
4.0 Discussion	46
4.1 Recommendations	50
5.0 References	52
Appendix 1- Structure of the MNC courses	54

Appendix 2 - Outcome measures	58
Appendix 3 - Participation Information Sheet	62
Appendix 4 Questions used in the focus groups with volunteers and staff	64
Appendix 5 Breakdown of postcodes for MNC participants (n=20)	65
Appendix 6 Event Evaluation / Feedback Form example	66
Appendix 7 – Summary of Beth Calverley’s reflections from ‘Mendip Words of Connections’ series	67



Participants on course 1 – Coleridge Road Community Garden

1.0 Introduction

There is a range of evidence that shows positive associations between access to and connection to nature and physical and mental health for adults, children and young people¹⁻⁴.

It has also been shown that it is possible to support people to connect or reconnect with nature using ‘pathways to nature connectedness’ by noticing and feeling nature, recognising the beauty of nature, celebrating nature and caring for nature⁵. This was exemplified by the Wildlife Trusts 30 Days Wild campaign across the UK. Research showed that participants were not only more connected to nature, but more likely to have improved conservation behaviours and feel more motivated to protect wildlife^{6,7}.

Since 2018 in England, social prescribing has been available for healthcare professionals to refer to people to a link worker who can support people to take up nature-based activities to support their wellbeing⁸. There has been a growth in green and blue social prescribing, where people are referred to nature-based activities to harness the therapeutic effects of being in and connecting to nature^{9,10}.

1.1 Somerset Nature Connections

Somerset Nature Connections (SNC) was created based on previous knowledge gained by the Somerset National Landscapes (previously named Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty [AONBs]) between 2016-2019. Between Autumn 2020 – Autumn 2023 SNC was a collaboration between the Somerset Wildlife Trust and the Mendip Hills, Quantock Hills, and Blackdown Hills AONBs, and was funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, Hinkley Point C Community Impact Mitigation Fund and Somerset County Council. SNC aimed to:

- Support people experiencing mental health problems to access the natural environment to improve wellbeing.

- Reduce demand on statutory mental health provision by providing people experiencing mental health problems, the tools and environment to help self-manage their mental wellbeing.
- Support community groups working with people already experiencing or at higher risk of developing mental health problems to use natural environments to improve people's mental wellbeing.

SNC initially had 2 modes of delivery. The first mode was a weekly group model which delivered a block of three courses each 6 weeks long, where people were encouraged to work together in small groups, for mutual support and to enable longer-term relationships to develop.

Activities included wildlife walks, conservation tasks, and natural crafts. The programme also included a clear progression model where participants could train to become volunteers. These volunteers, who acted as peer supporters, session assistants, or skill sharers, received training in mental health awareness and peer support. This volunteer pathway enhanced sustainability and community empowerment.

The second delivery mode was a local community group engagement model where local community groups who were supporting people with, or at higher risk of developing mental health problems were able to work with the staff team at SNC. Community groups included those working with adults with learning disabilities, those with long-term health conditions, carers and isolated older people.

Further information about SNC and the structure can be found in the evaluation report written in 2023 by Meaningful Measures¹¹.



1.2 Outcomes of Somerset Nature Connections

Data from the evaluation carried out in 2022 showed that SNC was a well-run intervention that was sensitive to people's needs, creative and improved connection to nature. Most participants reported improved self-esteem, mood, motivation and felt more involved with a community on their outcome measure. Qualitative feedback from participants identified how their social connections, confidence, nature appreciation and mental health had improved. Participants also reported enjoying learning new skills. The participants came on SNC due to experiencing mental health issues and isolation. For some the opportunity was described as 'life changing' and 'life saving' although most participants were sad when the sessions ended. For some participants, learning new skills included becoming a volunteer and providing peer support to new participants joining the courses. The knowledge and skills also enabled participants to take action for nature once a course ended.

1.3 Mendip Nature Connections (April 2024 – April 2025)

To continue providing the Somerset Nature Connections programme, the Mendip Hills National Landscape Team, hosted by Somerset Council, received funding from Sirona Care & Health through the West of England's Healthier with Nature Programme and matched funding from Defra's Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme. FiPL required a focus on farms and landholdings across the Mendip Hills and the funding from Sirona Care & Health required the project to support North Somerset residents. Based on funding requirements and recommendations from the previous evaluation, the SNC programme was adapted to ensure the programme engendered an appreciation of the value of farmed and natural environments, as well as improving participants' wellbeing.

In the Mendip Nature Connections (MNC) project, the main 3 blocks of 6-week activities and use of volunteers with lived experience of mental health issues for peer support remained the same. There was, however, only 1 week between the blocks of courses, compared to 4 weeks previously. Additionally, a series of wellbeing walks and one-off sessions were developed and 27 of these were delivered during the year, running parallel with the courses. These aimed to support local people and

groups who were experiencing or were vulnerable to physical and mental health concerns to connect with nature.

Another change to the initial SNC structure was to work on a variety of landholdings across the protected landscape and its settings in Cheddar and Weston-super-Mare to provide a broader range of opportunities for farmers, local groups and residents. Stronger links were developed with NHS BNSSG Integrated Care Board NHS and the green social prescribing pilot to increase the number of referrals from healthcare professionals. Osprey Outdoors acted as a delivery partner, and the project was also supported by Super Culture, NHS MINT teams, the Healthier with Nature team (including Natural England), Alliance Homes and venues that hosted the courses, in particular the Mendip Activity Centre and Batch Farm. The project also partnered with organisations such as Cheddar Arts Quarter and Refugees Welcome North Somerset, and independent, skilled local providers such as Beth Calverley of The Poetry Machine.

Key recommendations were addressed from the previous evaluation report, particularly relating to transport. A budget was deliberately set aside to enable participants to be transported from Weston-super-Mare out to the different Mendip Nature Connection sites, therefore, ensuring that transport was not a limiting factor for those wanting to attend. This report details the evaluation outcomes for the Mendip Nature Connections (MNC) project run between April 2024 – April 2025. Meaningful Measures Ltd has focused on the evaluation of the impact of the courses on participants and staff. Additional data from the one-off events and wellbeing walks, collected and analysed by the Mendip Hills National Landscape Team has also been incorporated in this report for completeness of data reporting.



Participants on course 3 – Fernhill Farm

2.0 Methods

2.1 Quantitative data collection

Five MNC 6-week courses ran from 24th July 2024 – 28th August, 12th September – 17th October 2024, 7th November – 12th December 16th January 2025 – 20th February, and 6th March – 10th April. Venues included Coleridge Road Community Garden in Bournville, Weston-super-Mare, Mendip Activity Centre near Sandford, Batch Farm in Churchill and Fernhill Farm near Blagdon. The locations were sensitively chosen in a way that allowed for participants to make gradual steps into the Mendip Hills from the town after each course, rather than heading straight into a farmed / countryside environment, which could have been a more daunting, alien environment for some.

People could attend for 6 weeks, 12 weeks or 18 weeks. To measure if there was any impact on participants' health and wellbeing, participants were asked to complete the Holistic Health and Nature Scale (H-HAN) when they first began the course and at the end of the 6, 12, and 18 weeks (relative to how many blocks a participant completed). The H-HAN was developed in collaboration with Natural Academy¹, Avon Wildlife Trust and The Care Forum in April 2017² to capture feedback from participants attending weekly self-care course. At the first interaction and final interaction, two ONS wellbeing questions on happiness and anxiety were administered. The ONS4 personal wellbeing questions are part of a wider set of questions Measuring the wellbeing of the nation, developed by the Office for National Statistics in 2010³

Furthermore, at the first and last interaction, participants were asked to rate:

- How well they were at taking care of themselves and staying healthy
- Whether taking part in the programme has been good for their wellbeing

¹ <https://www.naturalacademy.org>

² Avon Wildlife Trust. Wellbeing with Nature: Improving People's Health and Wellbeing, Whilst Caring for the Natural Environment and Deepening Their Connection to Nature, Avon Wildlife Trust.; 2021.

³ [Surveys using our four personal well-being questions - Office for National Statistics](#)

Demographic data and exit comments were also collected for each person. Full details of the quantitative questions are in Appendix 2.

2.2 Qualitative data collection

Two focus groups were carried out in April 2025 by Meaningful Measures Ltd with volunteers who had taken part in the weekly MNC sessions and staff involved with managing and running of the MNC project. The aim of the focus groups was to understand in more depth, the benefits, wider impact, challenges, enablers and other key experiences. For each focus group, a participant information sheet was sent out in advance explaining what the participants could expect from the focus group and asking for a series of consent statements to complete. Participants were free to ask any questions before providing consent or taking part in the focus group. Details of the questions asked are in Appendix 4. The focus groups were carried out online, using Google Meet, recorded and automatically transcribed.

2.3 Data analysis

Anonymised quantitative data was uploaded to a shared folder by the Mendip Hills National Landscape Team. The frequency of responses was analysed and where applicable, the average score difference before and after blocks of MNC sessions was calculated. Due to the low numbers of participants, statistical analysis was not carried out. Transcripts from the focus groups were cleaned and anonymised to ensure no participants were identifiable. Researchers thoroughly familiarised themselves with the data then thematically analysed it according to Braun and Clark, to identify any themes and subthemes. Analysis was carried out using Quirkos software. Where short amounts of qualitative data were provided, this was analysed by content analysis to identify the main themes.

2.4 Data collection and analysis of one-off events and wellbeing walks

Whilst analysis of the one-off events and wellbeing walks was not in the scope of the evaluation brief for Meaningful Measures Ltd, the results of these are presented alongside the course data analysis for the completeness of this evaluation report. The data for these walks and sessions was collected and analysed by the Mendip Hills

National Landscape Team in conjunction with walk / session leaders. It was not deemed appropriate to ask participants at these events to complete the same level of monitoring, likewise it was felt that a one-off interaction would not lead to the same type of outcomes. As such H-HAN and ONS data was not collected, but participants were asked to complete an event evaluation / feedback form (see Appendix 6 for an example). This form asked people to anonymously rate their experience of the event and how engaging they felt it was on a 1-5 scale (1 being lowest, 5 highest). It also asked people if they felt the event had a positive impact on their wellbeing and whether they felt more connected to nature after attending, along with space for suggested improvements, other comments and for the first part of their postcode.

2.5 Data security and ethical considerations

All data collected by Meaningful Measures Ltd was stored in password protected, encrypted files in an agreed, secure, GDPR compliant cloud-based storage location. No data files were stored on individuals' laptops. Meaningful Measures Ltd staff are trained in GDPR compliant data processing procedures. Informed consent was gained for everyone who took part in the focus groups. The Mendip Hills National Landscape Team was part of the West of England's Healthier with Nature Programme which required some outcome measure data to be submitted as part of this project. This data was held securely on Council-encrypted computer servers and anonymised before submitting.



Farm tour on course 4 – Batch Farm

3.0 Results

Overall, the MNC project delivered 30 course sessions (over 5 courses) and 27 one-off events and wellbeing walks, engaging 20 participants and 314 attendees respectively. This met the planned output of 30 course sessions (with 20 participants) and exceeded the planned output of 20 one-off events and wellbeing walks with 100 attendees (as proposed to the main funder).

In this section the results from the demographic data, outcome measures, rated questions, exit information and focus groups will be presented.

3.1 Participants characteristics and demographic data

Overall data was collected from the 20 participants of the MNC courses. As shown in Figure 1, 9 people completed the first 6-week block of sessions only, but for the remaining participants, most completed the full 18 weeks of sessions. Nearly half the participants self-referred to MNC and the remaining referrals were from the NHS services and charities. According to postcodes, people came from a variety of areas (See Appendix 5 for full breakdown).

- ❖ 40% (8) Weston-super-Mare
- ❖ 30% (6) North Somerset or Bristol
- ❖ 15% (3) Cheddar
- ❖ 10% (2) Clevedon
- ❖ 5% (1) Taunton

Number Interactions	6 weeks	n=9, 45%
	12 weeks	n=2, 10%
	18 weeks	n=9, 45%
Referral sources	Self-referral	n=9, 45%
	MINT NHS practitioners	n=4, 20%
	Refugees Welcome North Somerset	n=4, 20%
	NHS Talking Therapist	n=1, 5%
	NHS Stroke Recovery Therapist	n=1, 5%
	Unseen anti-slavery charity	n=1, 5%

Figure 1- the number of interactions and referral sources for MNC participants (n=20)

As shown in Figure 2, there were a similar proportion of males to females attending MNC courses and the majority were aged between 18-65yrs old. The majority were white British (60%), heterosexual (70%) and 40% had a disability.

Gender	Male	n=8, 40%
	Female	n=11, 55%
	PNTS	n=1, 5%
Age	18-65	n=18, 90%
	>65	n=2, 10%
Ethnicity	White British	n=12, 60%
	Asian	n=4, 20%
	Other ethnicity	n=4, 20%
LGBTQ+	Yes	n=4, 20%
	No	n=14, 70%
	PNTS	n=2, 10%
Disability	Yes	n=8, 40%
	No	n=12, 60%

**Figure 2-
Demographic
breakdown for MNC
participants, n=20**

Volunteer hours given:

MNC participants are offered the opportunity to become peer volunteers when they have completed their MNC courses. The benefit of this approach is discussed in depth in section 3.5.2.2.

Volunteer time given to the project was recorded to be 413 hours (59 days) over the year from a total of eight volunteers. Using a recognised skilled volunteer day-rate of £150 per day, the in-kind contribution of volunteer time given to the project was equivalent to £8,850.

3.2 Outcome measures used

To see if there were measurable changes to participants' wellbeing, score changes in ONS questions and H-HAN scale were analysed.

3.2.1 ONS personal wellbeing - Happiness

The MNC course did improve happiness levels for the majority of participants. The mean happiness score for MNC participants was 4.5 at first contact and 7.6 at final contact. This shows that there was an increase in levels of happiness after doing the MNC course. The national average happiness score for the population is 7.4, demonstrating that when participants started the MNC course, their happiness levels were below average, and rose to just above the national average at the final data collection point. 85% of participants had improved happiness scores at follow-up, 15% of scores stayed the same and 0% score got worse.

Figure 3 below shows the proportion of participants with either very low, low, medium or high happiness scores. At baseline nearly half the participants have very low happiness scores, which reduces significantly at follow-up. Similarly, hardly any participants have very high happiness levels at baseline and this increases to at least a third of participants at follow up.

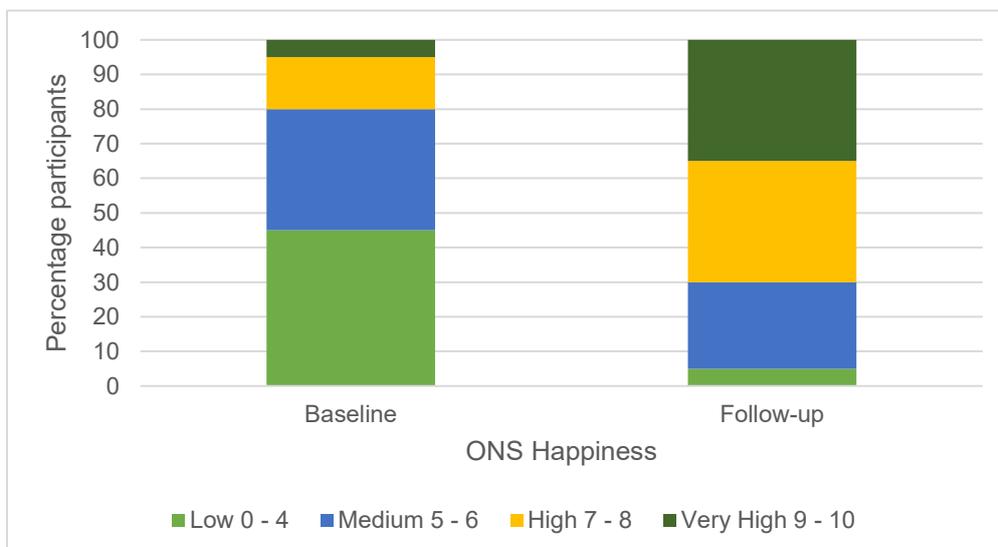


Figure 3 - breakdown of happiness levels from “very low” to “high” for MNC participants (n=20).

3.2.2 ONS personal wellbeing - Anxiety

The MNC course had a positive impact on anxiety levels for the majority of participants. The mean anxiety score for MNC participants was 6.3 at baseline and 4.9 at follow-up. Levels of anxiety, therefore, reduced after doing the MNC course. The average anxiety score for the population is 3.2. This shows that when participants started the MNC course, their anxiety levels were at least double the national average and decreased to be much closer to the national average at follow-up. 70% of participants had reduced anxiety scores at follow-up, 15% of scores stayed the same and 15% score got worse.

Figure 4 shows the breakdown of the anxiety levels from very low - high for the MNC participants. At baseline 60% of participants have very high levels of anxiety, which reduced to 45% at follow-up. Participants with very low or low levels of anxiety increased from 10% to 25% at follow-up.

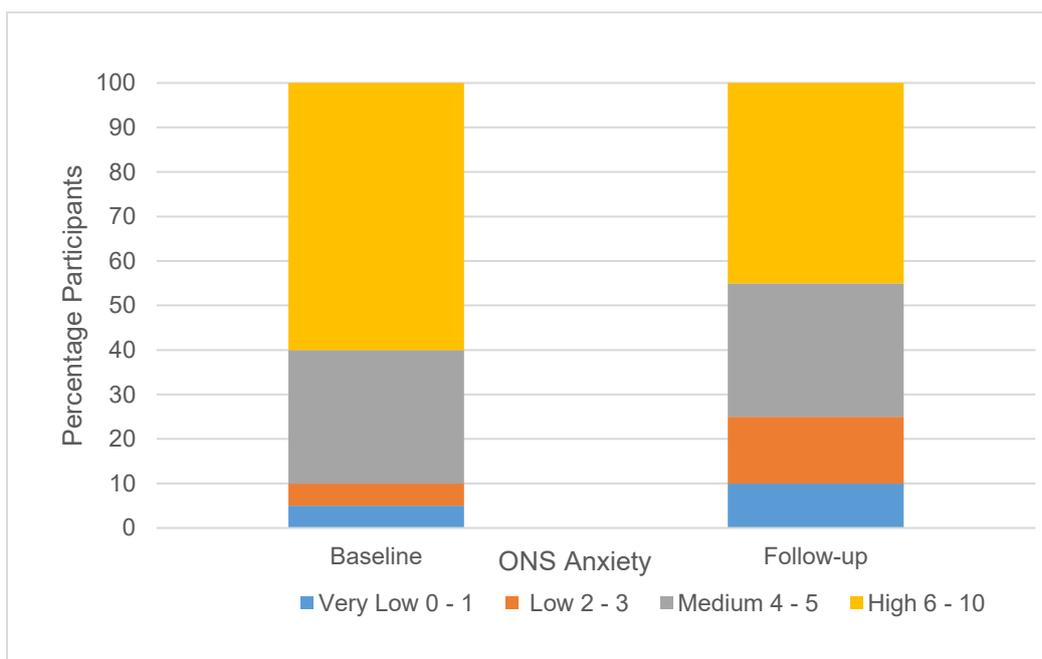


Figure 4 - Breakdown of the anxiety levels from very low - high for the MNC participants (n=20), comparing baseline to follow up scores.

3.2.3 H-HAN scale

The H-HAN scale is split up into 10 domains and each domain can be scored between 0-10. The scores are split into categories ranging from poor to excellent. For this data collection, there were 18 participants at baseline, 16 at the 6-week follow-up and then 6 and 7 at the 12- and 18-week follow-ups respectively. Given the low numbers at 12 and 18 weeks, it is important to focus on the 6 week follow up data only. Score changes in Figure 5 for 12 and 18 weeks are included for completeness only. Score changes in Figure 5 for 12 and 18 weeks are included for completeness only.

The average of all the scores was calculated for each time point and showed an increase from baseline (n=18, 4.2/10) to 6 weeks (n=16, 6.7/10) and a continued increase up to week 12 (n=6, 8.3/10) - See Figure 5 below:

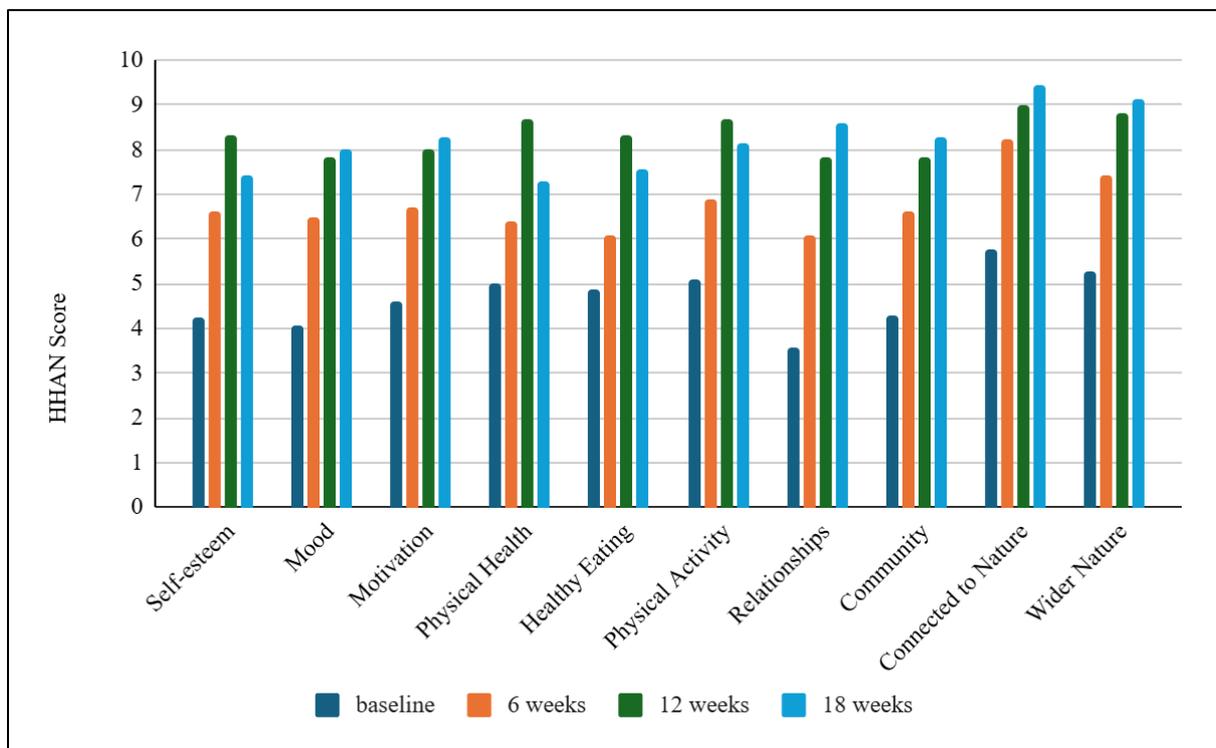
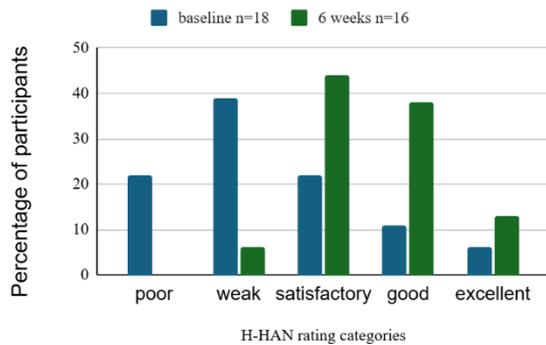


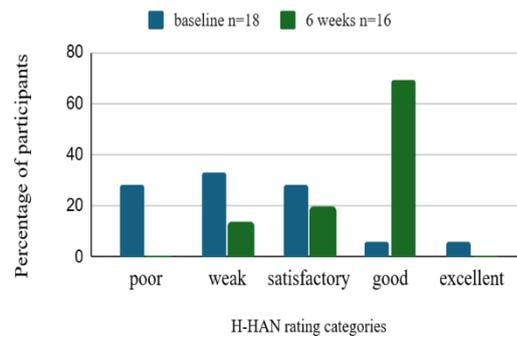
Figure 5 - H-HAN score changes from baseline to 6-, 12- and 18-weeks follow-up. N = 18 at baseline, 16 at 6 weeks, 6 at 12 weeks and 7 at 18 weeks.

To further understand the changes in each H-HAN domain after 6 weeks, scores were converted into the rating categories of poor, weak, satisfactory, good and excellent. Understanding the amount of change in these categories for each domain can help to identify if some domains are more impacted by MNC course than other. Figure 6 below shows a series of graphs for the different H-HAN dimensions.

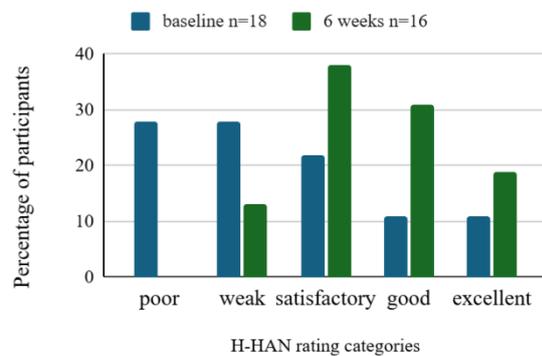
Self esteem



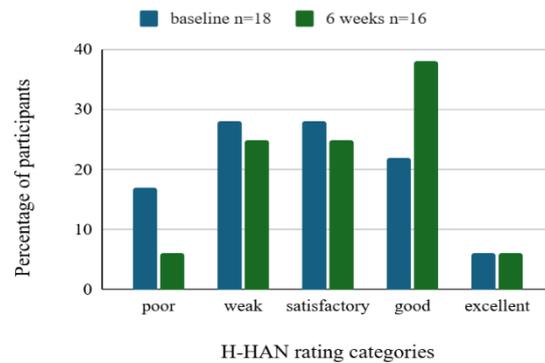
Mood



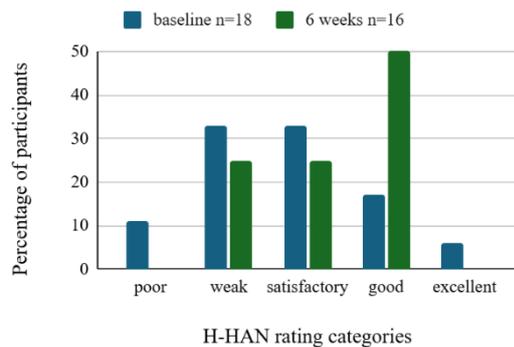
Motivation



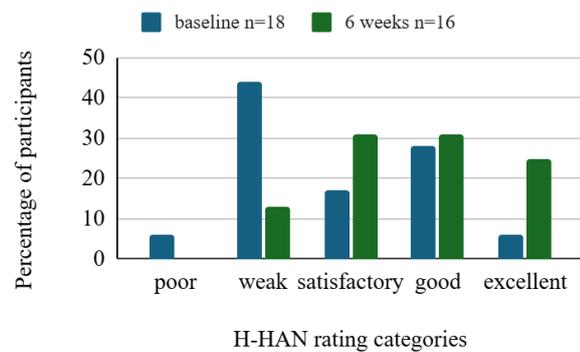
Physical health



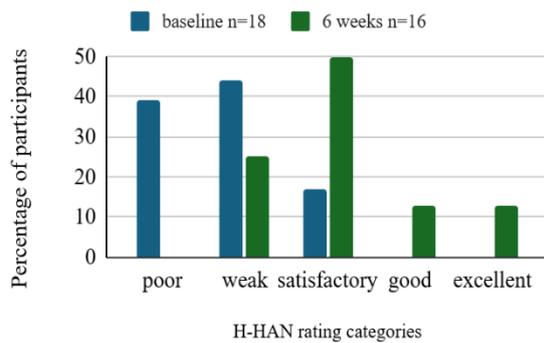
Healthy Eating



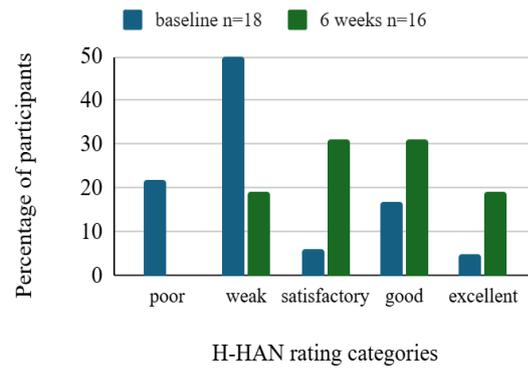
Physical Activity



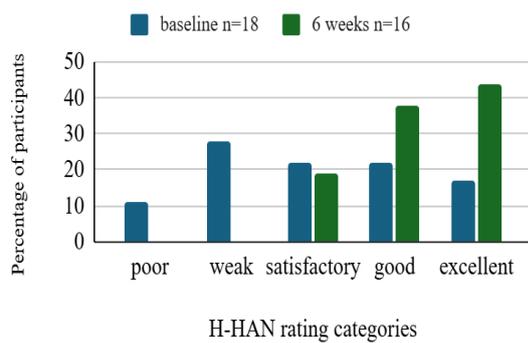
Relationships



Community



Connected to Nature



Wider nature

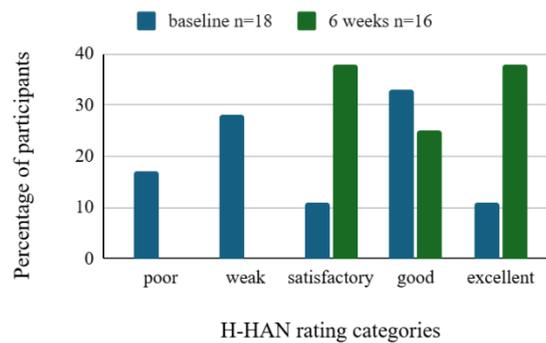


Figure 6 -The change in the percentage of participants rating their domains of wellbeing at baseline and 6 weeks, using the H-HAN scale

Figure 6 shows that many of the dimensions show clear progress and at the 6-week follow-up participants are not scoring in the lowest category (poor) except for 'physical health'. For 'connection to nature' and 'wider nature' domains, participants moved out of the lowest two categories at follow-up, which would be expected for a course that is promoting nature connection.

In most domains, there is reciprocal improvement in the percentage of participants scoring in the higher categories of good and excellent. The improvement in 'self-esteem', 'mood' and 'motivation' corroborates with the improvement in happiness and reduction of anxiety on the ONS personal wellbeing questions.



‘Arty Adder’ making on course 4 for a conservation comms campaign with the Mendip National Nature Reserve.

3.3 How good are you at taking care of yourself?

Participants were asked to rate how good they were at taking care of themselves from “not very” to “very” at baseline and follow-up. When analysing the individual score changes for this question, 40% of people improved their rating - mainly by one category, 55% had the same rating at follow-up and only 5% had a worse rating at follow-up.

Figure 7 shows overall improvements as there is a 15% reduction in participants rating ‘not very’ and ‘fairly’ and increase in ratings in ‘mostly’. There was no overall change in the proportion of participants rating ‘very’.

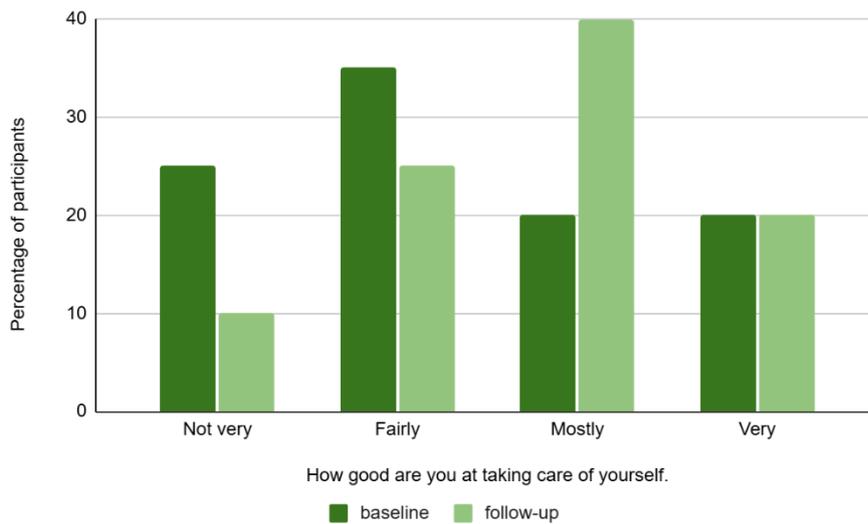


Figure 7 - Comparison of how good participants felt they were at taking care of themselves at baseline and 6 weeks follow-up (n=20)

3.4 Has this course been helpful for your Wellbeing?

At the follow-up participants were asked to rate if MNC course had been good for their wellbeing. 100% (n=20) strongly agreed that taking part in the MNC course had been helpful for their wellbeing. This outcome correlated with the vast majority of feedback received from the one-off events and wellbeing walks.



Brush making on course 5 – Batch Farm

3.5 Experiences of MNC course participants and staff

In this section the experiences of staff and MNC service users are explored. Two focus groups were carried out to understand the perspectives and experience of three staff members and four service users, who all went on to become volunteers.

3.5.1 MNC service users' perspectives

There were four themes that emerged from the analysis of 2 focus groups, which included: How people were feeling coming to the course; How the MNC course benefits people; The value and benefit of volunteers for peer support; Suggestions for future MNC courses.

These themes will be described in more detail below, starting with the experience of course participants who all went on to become volunteers.

3.5.1.1 How people feel coming to the course

When the participants arrived for the first time at MNC, they described how they were struggling with their mental health, sometimes experiencing crisis. For some people their work and family roles had changed, leaving participants feeling unanchored and lacking meaning or purpose in their lives. The participants were all very reluctant to engage in new environments due to feeling isolated, lacking confidence, and feeling uncomfortable and extremely anxious at the idea of meeting new people in unfamiliar environments.

“I came along for the first session, and it was really hard to come to, really nervous, yeah not in a great place. So, it took quite a lot to come...” – P1

“But when I first started with this, I was at the point of suicide...” – P2

“When I first started, I'd recently retired, stopped working and had basically lost a purpose of getting out of bed in the morning. There was no real structure to my days, and I spent about nine months sort of tumbling from one day to the next without any goals or expectations and it was difficult for me to actually go on the first course because I don't like new people or new things” – P3

It didn't take long, however, for participants to know that they had made a good choice, as they talked about feeling welcomed as soon as they arrived and able to be themselves very quickly.

“Everybody makes you so welcome when you first start that you're sort of instantly put at ease. And then it becomes people all there for similar reasons with similar issues and it's almost become like a little family.” -P3

“I felt at home and comfortable with everybody and everyone was so nice, and it was just really great.” - P1

3.5.1.2 How the course benefits people

One of the key benefits to the participants was their mental health. In different ways, all the participants expressed how their anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation reduced, and overall mood and confidence improved.

“My mental health improved. My mental health improved massively, but I also think it had a knock-on effect to my physical health because it got me out into the fresh air.” -P2

“It was definitely a benefit for me mentally and I could see how it affected the people around me too. Yeah. It was just likeminded people. It was gentle. It was kind.” -P4

“Confidence, meeting different people, and obviously being able to do volunteering, and just enjoying doing different things, different places, different things.” P1

There were several reasons that contributed to why the participants felt their mental health improved. Firstly, all the participants expressed how MNC gave them a reason to leave their house and get out of their own thoughts. It was also a regular weekly engagement which provided a sense of structure. This was coupled with going into a nature-based environment that they all enjoyed.

“It became something to look forward to every week... it's changed my life.” – P3

“It helped me massively almost instantly, because it got me out of my house. It got me out of my own head. It was everything that I enjoy. It was outside, it was nature based” -P2

The participants also noticed how much they valued being in a group with other people with mutual understanding and a shared vulnerability relating to mental health issues. This created a place to bond and provide peer-support. For some people they felt that MNC saved their life and rated this more highly than having talking-based therapies especially where there are long waiting lists.

“So, I've got a wider net of people that I can talk to because that's one thing I've struggled with is talking to people. So, it's just changed my life almost.” -P3

“I think that's what helped me as much as anything else is it's almost like somebody saying it it's okay to heal yourself...I'm seeing a therapist now, but I've had to wait 13 months from the point of suicide to the point of seeing a therapist. And if it hadn't have been for this coursethis specific thing, I wouldn't have been here in that 13 months.” -P2

Underpinning the elements of peer support, increased social interaction and being in nature was the safe and empowering approach of the course leaders. This was critical to establishing a safe and empowering environment and allowing participants to go at their own pace. Coupled with this was the tried and tested structure to the course which had a clear flow between sessions.

“She's very calm. She's all embracing. It's structured but doesn't feel as though there are structured rules. It smoothly runs from one thing into another, even though if you wrote it down, you would see the plan.” -P4

“She is very good at making you feel like you can talk about anything at any time, but you absolutely do not have to. And just having that,...it's almost like taking a deep breath and going, okay, so these people will understand”-P3

Participants also appreciated being part of sharing group expectations and practice collaboratively and learning new hobbies.

“I mean, right at the beginning of the six-week course, she sits down with all of us and writes out a group guide and everybody takes part in that. Everybody is saying, this is what we want. This is how we will feel safe. and she makes it. It's not just a list of rules. It's not a list of dos and...don'ts because she's created it with you.” – P2

“I've got hobbies now that six months ago I never knew I could do, and they're all the heritage crafts and...making things that, I've always looked at and thought that maybe one day I might have a go, but it's given me the opportunity.” -P3

The final aspect that emerged from the data was the experience of being more connected to nature and in a way that the participants hadn't experienced previously when outdoors.

“So, what it's done for me is I see when I go for a walk now on my own or with a friend or whatever from the experience here is I see things in a different way altogether. I hear the bird song in a different way than I would before, it's a more detailed more focused. It's all those things. It's just brought another dimension to things. it's a real plus.” - P4

“I've always been, like I said, outside, but it's been in a sport kind of thing. So, I'd be at the beach, but I'd be surfing, or I'd be going kayaking or something. I've just been back down to Cornwall this weekend and it felt so much different. It was amazing. I was sat outside the caravan listening to the birds and identifying them and I went for a walk in the woods, and I was looking at trees, so it was a really different experience was amazing” - P1

3.5.1.3 The value and benefit of volunteers for peer support

All of the course participants completed a total of 18 weeks of MNC and went on to become volunteers. Volunteering allowed participants to stay connected, continue their emotional recovery and give something back to MNC. Participants continued to grow in confidence in their ability to contribute meaningfully to a group setting.

“It had such a huge positive benefit on my mental health from that very first session. So, I felt so different going home from that session to how I had felt before. And I just wanted to be able to give somebody just a tiny fraction of that back... And I am thankful every day for ... the fact that I've been able to volunteer has not only improved that part of my mental health but ... [my] self-esteem and your confidence. And just being able to walk out of the house and not feel terrified, massive thing. So, to volunteer and be able to give something back to others and perhaps help them in some tiny way to feel accepted and to feel valid and important. I don't think you can quantify that.”-P2

“it's just means so much to me really to be able to feel like I can be here and...maybe just make a tiny bit of difference to someone else, but then it's also helping me heal as well. So, it's slowly starting to help my confidence and things and confidence to do other volunteering.” -P1

Furthermore, participants acknowledged the skills they gained through volunteering, such as first aid training and sharing their nature knowledge with course participants. Their volunteering has also enabled them to go into other volunteering situations and increase their confidence in social situations and have more social connections.

“The volunteering has got me feeling a lot more confident than I was. I still have massive moments, but it's also helped me... So, I've been volunteering in other places in similar sort of group situations, and it's helped me with that because they're also vulnerable people for various different reasons...So yeah it's really helped me to sort of feel like I can be a volunteer for that.” -P1

“I've met other people that have helped out with different activities that have then led me on to doing different volunteering and different things. So, I now know a lot more people, but it's also encouraged me to go out and join the nature recovery team

and...I'm out working with them every week now as well. So, I've got a wider net of people that I can talk to" -P3

The participants also reflected on their experience of seeing volunteers when they were on MNC and the importance of this peer-support element to MNC. This also spurred them on to volunteer to help other people feel safe and accepted at MNC.

"I was a participant right at the beginning. The people who were volunteers then helped me in such a way that you just remember how you felt. So, when a new person comes into the group, they're looking to feel safe and secure. And so, when you've been there before, the experience of it is vital, I think. Yeah. and the more that you experience as a participant, the more comfortable you are with all the things that go on within the group"-P4

"being here as a volunteer...we're happy to help and to listen and to make their journey as easy as possible. And volunteers being people who've done the course, I think it builds an instant trust and confidence with the participants because they know that we've done the course. So, they understand that we understand how they're feeling. It's really for all of us to come on that first day, but to know that the people that are here have also had that first day. - P3



View from the Mendip Hills National Landscape (photo by Paul Box)

3.5.1.4 Participant suggestions for future MNC courses

Participants were unanimous in wanting the course to continue and expand and shared how it felt when you found a course that was so helpful and then it ends. They advocated for MNC to be available on a permanent basis and for more nature-based alternatives to medication usage for mental health in the NHS. One participant also highlighted the mental health needs in the LGBTQ+ community and felt that better outreach could be put in place to support this underserved group.

“You do all this good stuff, and participants feel safe and secure and they come to the last week and they're bereft at leaving...We're volunteers, and we've come to terms with it a little bit, but many of them didn't. And they're going back to the life they were...however many weeks before, and the problems they had. It [MNC] doesn't cure things. It makes them feel safe. This is something that should be ongoing for whoever needs it, not just for the lucky few who came across it.” P4

“I think the problem with mental health is we don't talk about it enough and people are almost locked away in their own heads and there isn't the people. You can't get counselling because counselling costs too much money and there aren't enough therapists and it's almost like nobody wants to help but there isn't a place to go for help because they're inundated. Whereas coming here, you've got people that have already been through what you're going through, who've come out the other side to a certain degree and will help you purely for helping your sake. Not for any financial gain...If the NHS stopped prescribing so many drugs, there would be enough money in the pot to run courses like this that would do more good than the amount of drugs that they're giving out.” -P3

“An area where I would put this out more, is into the LGBT community because, poor mental health in the LGBT community. It's massive and I think there are an awful lot of people who would benefit from this but just have no idea that it exists. So maybe a bit more targeted advertising, marketing” - P2

3.5.2 Staff perspectives

The next section details the experiences of the staff who manage and run MNC. There were four themes that were identified in the data, several of which overlapped with the themes from participants, but often provided additional perspective. The themes included i) the benefit to MNC course participants; ii) the value of volunteers, iii) what makes the MNC course work so well; iv) challenges. These are reported in more detail below.

3.5.2.1 Benefit to MNC course participants

As with the previous section, the staff noticed a range of benefits as people journeyed through the MNC courses. These included improved mental health, reduction in social isolation, a new sense of belonging, social connections and peer support.

“So, one of the main things this time has been a sense of community, and I think people making new friends, new connections and I think a lot of people have fed back reducing their feelings of social isolation” P-5

“I think improved sense of belonging, I think feeling accepted and valued as part of a group and lots of people say I can actually feel like I can be myself quite a lot of people have said that” - P6

“I think improved mental health in loads of different aspects. Lots of people said on the final session or in the celebration that they wouldn't have coped or wouldn't be here without the project” P5

The structure of the course was designed to specifically support people to feel safe and welcomed when they arrive. A fundamental part of the course design was to help participants connect with nature - which staff could definitely see was happening.

“Mental health as well, the majority of participants, they turn up, they're very anxious, and the way that the first few sessions are structured, even after the first session, the kind of ice breakers that we do, the settings within the groups, I think it builds safety and boundaries. Very quickly people kind of remove their shields. I don't know how

else to describe it, but kind of come out of their shells, and really start to settle and engage.” - P6

“More awareness of nature and what's around I think also lots of people feedback that they now look at stuff so if they go out for a walk they're not just in their head or chatting they actually notice what's around them.” - P5

As well as the course participants benefitting whilst on the course, staff noted how course participants go on to meet up outside of the MNC course, take up different volunteering opportunities and look for employment.

“Loads of people have joined other activities, gone on to do volunteering, joined other mental health groups just going out for walks. Two people are trying to gain employment in the same similar sector.”- P5

There were several other benefits that the staff noted about the MNC course. Firstly, they had job satisfaction from being able to support people and work in the beautiful outdoor environment of the Mendip Hills.

“I absolutely love working with groups of people. So, I'm all about wellbeing, working outdoors, and this particular program and structure is very unique to anything I worked on previously. there's a real magic from it... it's a day at work, but it's a day at the most beautiful office you can imagine. I'm in the fresh air all day, working with people who are actually really grateful to be there” - P6

“...delivering the actual sessions, yeah, is huge job satisfaction and I think ...being outside in the community did give me a big sense of belonging. Especially in a job that I really love, and feel is kind of in line with my values and beliefs I guess, and it feels good to be able to make change even if it's in a really small way”- p5

The staff team also learnt different skills from each other. Furthermore, as MNC was run by the Mendip Hills National Landscape Team, this provided the delivery staff with a wider team of people to interact with and there was reciprocal learning.

“I also learned when P6's done bits of facilitation when we've had guest facilitators in tutors, I've also learned loads from them and how they deliver and pick little tips up here and there.” - P5

“I think as a team P1's kind of brought a lot to the team - making sure the team know more about mental health and inclusion, diversity. There were maybe a couple of people in the team that I think are a lot more open to what we do now and understand that better and it's rubbed off on another colleague who's is really keen on nature connectedness more now.”-P7

Finally, the staff were pleased to be able to support local farmers as well as providers of skills and services and ensure that MNC was accessible to people who would be excluded from attending if transport wasn't provided. Overall, it was felt that the overall profile and name of the Mendip Hills National Landscape was raised.

“One of the ideas was to connect with some of those farmers that I mean, it's a whole other project really, is how you look at isolation and poor mental health within the farming community. But we have supported them financially by booking their rooms and I know [xxxxx] seem to have gained a lot ...from having us there.” - P7

“Taxis - that has been incredible because it's meant that people who couldn't come out to the sessions, people that don't have transport can't leave the house, so the fact that there was funding for transport was incredible.” P5

3.5.2.2 The value of volunteers

Another theme that overlapped with the MNC participant views was the value of having volunteers in a peer support role due to their lived experience with mental health. The staff, however, identified several other roles that volunteers served, that were essential to ensuring MNC ran smoothly. These included helping with setting up and tidying up, having first aid training, and being another set of ears and eyes to identify which participants may need more support. Volunteers were given Enhanced DBS Checks at the same level of staff. In fact, the staff felt that it would be impossible to run MNC in its current form without the volunteers as *‘they are doing the job of another member of staff aren't they?’* so offer real value for money from a funding perspective, whilst also benefitting themselves.

“...it is really important to have volunteers from a practical perspective as well as emotional one on these kind of projects. I think practically they arrive early, and they help me set everything up and they know what the plan is for the day. They know the kind of risk assessments. They know where to go to get an ambulance. They're all first aid trained. I need that support, especially if you're in a remote location. You need to know that there's people there if something's going to go wrong and they know what to do.”-P5

“But also, on an emotional and mental health side of things. If it's kind of a minor level, volunteers are very good at showing that peer -to -peer support. But also, just being comforting and being friendly, going for a cup of tea, which means that it doesn't take [the leaders] away from the group. Even with two of us, it can be very difficult sometimes depending on what the kind of energy and feeling of the group is on that day. So yeah volunteers are just really great.”-P6

“So, they [volunteer] might have been sat next to somebody during a session that we wouldn't have necessarily been speaking to, So, then they are able to feedback information to me that I might need to follow up on. So, they're also more ears and eyes to make sure everyone's really well supported and looked after” - P5



Wellbeing Walk with Refugees Welcome North Somerset – January 2025

3.5.2.3 What makes MNC work so well?

Staff reflected on what contributes to making the MNC course so successful in supporting people with mental health issues and identified three main layers.

Firstly, course specific ingredients were seen as a course that has been carefully developed then tried and tested over several years to get the content and structure honed.

“I just think the structure as, niche as it is, we've proven that it works now. I don't think we need to do any more pilot years. We've done it. And if this work is to be sustainable, then please make it sustainable. - P6

“We haven't run out of transport budget, have we? So, I think we budgeted right with everything...that's the learning from the last three four years. - P7

This was married with calm and soft course leadership which enables participants to feel safe and able to be themselves. This is complemented by a highly skilled delivery team with a lot of experience in this area.

“Her kind of soft leadership, how she really beautifully holds the calm in the group, it's just something that I've seen no other and it's sought after...” -P6

“I've been like [leader 2] can we have a little chat ... and getting another perspective has been really good especially because [leader 2] is so skilled and has loads of experience.-P5

The next layer identified the wider support for the MNC courses. Staff reflected on the value of the good partnerships that the National Landscapes teams have, the good managerial support for the delivery team and the clinical supervision from an Eco therapist for the delivery team.

“I think what I found really helpful is partnership working, which I think the National Landscape team is really good at being part of the community ... with loads of different partners from health organisations in Weston and North Somerset...”-P5

“I think equally having support from my manager and having support from an external supervisor. She does once every six weeks I see her and she's an Eco therapist. She does clinical supervision. She's been absolutely incredible. So, I think having all that support around has been really good.”- P5

The final layer identified aspects related to the wider stakeholders. For example, the continuity that comes with being established in the community over a number of years and being well known by other professionals who may refer people to MNC.

“We've been in the community for what is it, four years now. We're really familiar faces. I'm aware that participants share their experience through word of mouth and people come along to these programs because they hear our names on the program. We are now known in the area for the work that we do. So, I think that's something that's really important”-P6

“Having been doing the work for so long I think I've got really good local connections. I've either worked for them or I've been to sessions or know the facilitators. So that's been really good, and it's also meant that we've got loads of referrals or self-referrals. Most of the [MNC] courses have a waiting list now.”-P5

Other stakeholders identified were the landowners who were so enthusiastic about MNC and wanted to help make it a success when they hosted the course. Finally, it was noted that it was easy to engage people in the Mendip Hills due the historic environment that is beautiful and full of wildlife.

“I think also working with wonderful landowners... They've been so enthusiastic about the project and have often come along like staff or come along to sessions and made an effort to meet everybody to learn their names to know what's going on.”

“I guess that leads on to the Mendip Hills. The wildlife and landscapes are so beautiful and in a way when we've been out it's been so easy to engage people because there's so much wildlife and interesting history...” -P5

3.5.2.4 Challenges

The final theme that emerged from the staff focus group was about the challenges in leading and running MNC. The challenges related to different aspects included moving venues, how to select volunteers, ensuring people with accessibility needs could access the sites, being hosted by a larger organisation and staff feeling fully valued for the work they do.

The Mendip Hills National Landscape Team was keen to try out having different venues to run the MNC courses at. Partly to fulfil funding requirements to include farms this time around, partly to give people a stepping stone from Weston into the Mendip Hills environment. This approach came with some challenges such as finding and scoping out suitable locations which was additional preparation time. Furthermore, at the beginning of each course, it was more pressure for the leaders to run sessions in an unfamiliar outdoor environment with new people who are experiencing mental health issues.

“Although we had them in mind beforehand, but then to go and actually have a look at them, see how they're going to work accessibility wise has been challenging. More time consuming but it met the model we had, we wanted to kind of ...bring people out slowly from Weston. And the funding required it because it was Farming in Protected Landscapes [FiPL] money, so we needed to look at working on farms” -P7

“Changing sites every six weeks, it has had its good sides like making connections with loads of different sites and land owners and giving people experiences of different places but also it's been really challenging from a delivery like a facilitation perspective because usually I'd only visited the sites once or twice before taking a whole group there that I'm in charge of. It was quite daunting as the session as the weeks went on I got more used to being there, but it was quite like, right on the first session I'm meeting a load of new people I'm at a new site it was quite a lot and then to do it all again the next six weeks. Yeah. So that was I guess, quite difficult and a bit draining” -P5

Having budget for transport enabled many people to attend MNC that otherwise wouldn't have been able to; however, it did require a lot of managing and

coordinating. Another challenge with getting people to the remote locations was that they could only use taxis. For instance, taxi drivers needed to support participants with their accessibility needs, by knocking on their doors, or texting them they had arrived. Due to having different drivers each week accessibility needs were not guaranteed to be met.

For a very small number of participants, moving the provision out of Weston where they lived, made them feel uncomfortable. This highlighted the discomfort they felt at only being able to leave this new environment if someone booked them taxis.

“...actually, booking them [taxis], getting them to come to farms that are in quite remote locations down farm tracks and also getting them to meet people's accessibility needs. I'd call them every week and say, "You need to knock on this person's door because they're visually impaired. You need to text this person when you're outside because they're hearing impaired. You need to open this door for this person." every week they would forget because it'd be a different driver often. And there were a few drivers that were fantastic and absolutely incredible. But yeah, if it was a new driver, really difficult for participants sometimes to have their needs met to be able to come”

“...there were a couple of people who really struggled with that because they were living in Weston, and it was really uncomfortable for them to leave. It was quite a big step for them to come out in a taxi where they were on a nature reserve. They had no way of leaving if they were feeling stressed or anxious without me booking them another taxi to come and pick them up....So there were two people that dropped out because I think it was too much for them which is totally understand and also may be unavoidable.” - P5

In the previous SNC delivery structure, participants would have a 6 week break before becoming a volunteer. This enabled the participants to determine whether they were ready to volunteer, and get the required training and checks put in place. For Mendip Nature Connections, there was only a one-week break, out of necessity to offer as much as possible within the confines of a 1-year project. The experience led the staff to reflect on the challenges this posed.

“...we could have left a six week break I guess between volunteers if we wanted to but then we wouldn't have given anywhere near as many opportunities for people. We could have done that but that's the problem with the 12-month projects” - P7

“...that six-week break of the volunteers that P5 mentioned. I think not having that transition from participant to buddy/volunteer...the boundaries can be a little bit blurred...So that can be a challenge, and I do feel like that six-week break is almost like a readiness to practice period. So, it's like training will go out, be able to kind of set boundaries of what's expected and that person really gets a chance to feel... whether this role feels right for them or not. And I remember in the last 3 years of delivery, people would go - I don't think I'm ready for it at this stage, but I'd love to come back at a later date, and I think that worked really well.”-P6

Staff also reflected on another challenge associated with how course participants were selected or invited to become volunteers. Because course participants were all experiencing mental health issues, it was felt that for some people who weren't invited, this could play into previous issues and trauma with rejection. On the other hand, the responsibility of being a volunteer meant that invitees needed to be able to fulfil the role.

“I think it has been really incredible for some people then to move on to being volunteers, but I think the model does need a lot of improvement... I think some people have experienced it as coming across as selective because only some people become volunteers which is true. It's not very good in that sense but I don't know how to fix that and because we need volunteers so it's quite hard to come across like you're selecting people....Yeah even if I explain in a practical way I need someone who can do a first a course and drive to go and get an ambulance if they need to. I don't think that's even felt enough.”-P5

Finding things for course participants and volunteers to go on and do as the project funding came to an end was also noted as a challenge. Whilst people were given lots of information about other volunteering opportunities and groups to join, it still felt very difficult for people to have to stop coming to something they really benefited from and looked forward to attending.

“P5's done a fantastic job of signposting the participants to other organisations where they can kind of continue in some sort of nature connection activity within the community. But there was real anxiety and fear for some about where they would go next because Thursdays have been so important for them” -P6

The final challenge for Mendip Nature Connections related to the practical issues around getting a short-term project set up and live when hosted by a large organisation and local authority with less agility to process core paperwork. Time taken to process core paperwork affected how quickly the project could go live.

“I found some of the infrastructure and systems perhaps not set up to run a one-year project. So, for example, how long it takes to create a job role even a volunteer role. Some of the volunteers only just got registered recently [end of project] because it takes so long to get them through - which would be fine if the project was longer but for one year it's quite difficult.”

Similarly, recognising the specialist roles for the delivery staff within the existing host organisation's structure was an unresolved challenge. Whilst a new role for this project was created well in advance of the start date, the Council took much longer to assess and grade it than anticipated. This is partly due to a council restructuring process being underway. Both members of delivery staff were paid less than they had been paid anywhere else to do the same work, and less than the money that was ringfenced in the grant funding for their roles. This highlights the challenges in valuing the role of programmes such as Mendip Nature Connections and the specialist nature of the engagement and support being delivered.

“...the amount that I was being paid, but again that's less than I'm used to being paid for this work. It does feel like this work is being undervalued. It's specialist work. We're working with vulnerable members of the community; it's a very niche area. We're skilled with what we come with, and I really feel like that needs to be recognised by funders, by the organisations that we're working” -P5

“I think just to be clear, it's not because of a lack of budget, that they weren't paid at the level we felt was appropriate. We budgeted (and were funded) correctly for it on the amount that we thought both P5 and P6 should be and therefore there is that

remaining bit of budget that we couldn't use for that purpose because the council graded the role on a lower amount that we feel it should have been.” -P7



Plant ID on course 2 – Mendip Activity Centre

3.6 One-off events and wellbeing walks

27 events and wellbeing walks were delivered during the year from 11th June 2024 through to 26th April 2025, running alongside the courses. In total there were 314 attendees – some of these were course participants, which provided them with additional activities and connection to the project; others, however, were not course participants meaning the project was able to reach a wider audience.

Events included nature connectedness sessions at the Arts and Health Take Five Festival on Weston-super-Mare seafront, six sessions with Refugees Welcome North Somerset (65 attendees via transport arranged through the project from the hotel where the refugees were staying), eight wellbeing walks and follow up creative sessions with Cheddar Arts Quarter (to complement a Mendip Hills Fund grant they had received), three forest bathing walks led by a trained MNC volunteer, and a series of four wellbeing and poetry walks with local poet Beth Calverley of The Poetry Machine. This series was titled ‘Mendip Words of Connection’ and attracted 27 participants across four different North Somerset locations, stepping out from Weston (Grove Park and Coleridge Road Community Garden), into the Mendip Hills (Mendip Activity Centre and Burrington Ham) over time.

Participants were asked to rate their overall experience of the four Mendip Words of Connection sessions and how engaging they thought they were. An average of 4.9 out of 5 was achieved showing how well these sessions were received.

Out of 21 feedback forms:

- 20/21 (95.2%), said they had thought the event had a positive impact on their wellbeing (with the other stating ‘not sure’)
- 19 out of 21 (95.0%), said they felt more connected to nature after the event (with two stating ‘not sure’).
- Comments received were overwhelmingly positive about the session leader(s) and attendees stated they felt “inspired”, they had enjoyed the setting, support, sharing with other people and learning new things.

Evaluation forms completed after other events and wellbeing walks had very similar responses and levels of satisfaction.



Poet Beth Calverley leading poetry walk as part of ‘Mendip Words of Connection’ series (Photo by Paul Blakemore)



Poetry in the landscape as part of ‘Mendip Words of Connection’ walk (Photo by Paul Blakemore)

Participant poems from the Mendip Words sessions.

Hazel Dormouse

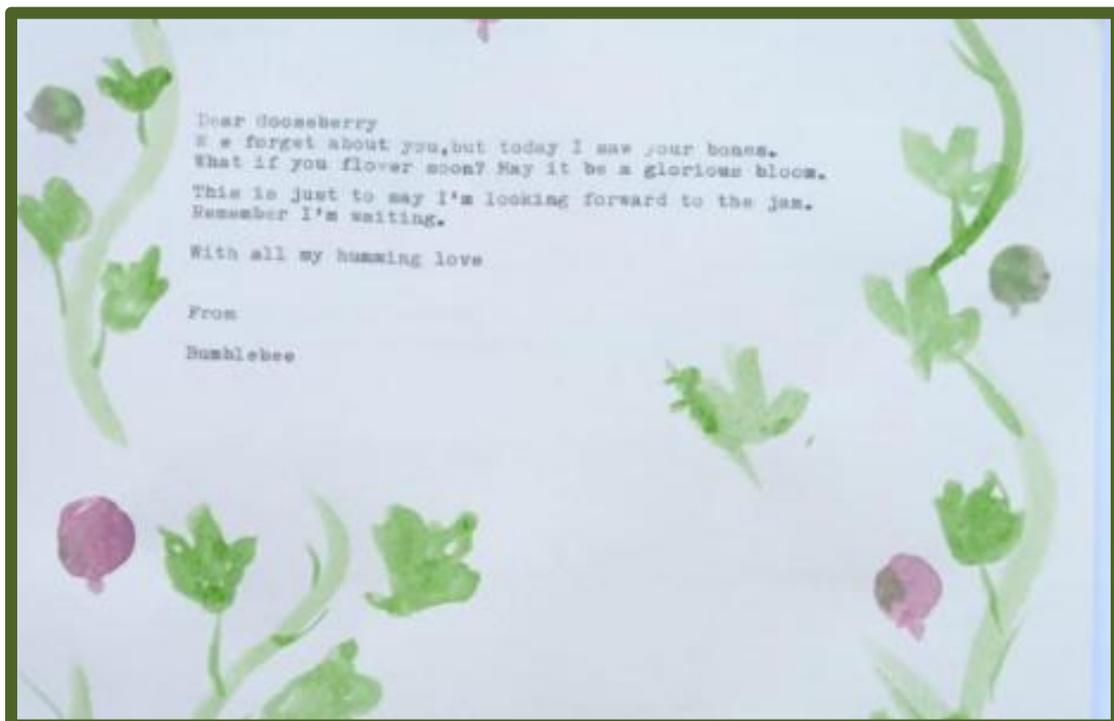
I breathe in ancient woodland before rain
and lean into the coppiced hazel

A sky-rich canopy frames leaf tipped branches
and in a wood-centered atrium, light touches my face

The dormouse
in
stillness
waits
for me
to leave

The world retreats and
the woodland embraces us

Hazel Dormouse, by Beverley Mutch



Dear Gooseberry, by Mhairi Cornish

4.0 Discussion

The data from this evaluation has demonstrated that the Mendip Nature Connections course has met its aim of supporting local people and groups who were experiencing or were vulnerable to physical and mental health concerns, to connect with nature.

Benefits

The course was very similar to previous years, with a few adjustments predominantly to suit funding requirements. The one difference that may be worth considering is that transport was available to reach people who would not have otherwise been able to attend. When comparing this data to the previous evaluation of Somerset Nature Connections, the only constant measure was the H-HAN scale. H-HAN data showed many similarities, but it is worth noting the people on the Mendip Nature Connections course had a lower baseline score for their 'healthy eating', 'relationships', 'connection to nature' and 'wider nature' compared to those attending the Somerset Nature Connections courses. The improvement in scores was also twice as large for the current dataset for the 'relationships', 'connection to nature' and 'wider nature' elements. Whilst the number of datapoints is low, it could be postulated that providing transport has enabled a higher proportion of people to access a natural environment who are often underserved. This may, therefore, indicate that providing transport has widened the reach of Mendip Nature Connections.

When reviewing all the evaluation results, there are clear parallels between the changes to ONS happiness and anxiety levels, the H-HAN scores and themes on how people benefitted from the Mendip Nature Connections courses. Overall people felt happier and less anxious, had improved self-esteem and confidence and felt more connected socially and to nature. For some participants, Mendip Nature Connections was even a lifesaver. Several focus group participants had a preference for this approach to supporting mental health as opposed to having prescribed medication. This ties in with the growth of Green Social Prescribing⁹⁻¹⁰ and this project has widened the referral routes and relationships with NHS services. Furthermore, the use of medications has recently been shown to be lower when people visit nature, which again corroborates with the participants views of Mendip

Nature Connections¹². It is also worth noting that some participants progressed to the point that they were able to volunteer in other groups or be paid to provide their own skills in workshops. This highlights that Mendip Nature Connections in contributing to getting people ready for work, which is now a key government agenda. This is an important point to consider in future funding applications¹³.

Farmers were a new stakeholder group in the Mendip Nature Connections courses. It is well reported that mental health in farmers is poor and they are at high risk of suicide themselves¹⁴⁻¹⁵ and it has been suggested that community-based interventions should be developed to support farmers mental health¹⁴. The observations for the staff team were that the farmers who took part in this project enjoyed and valued having the participants at their farms, they made them feel welcomed and enjoyed interacting with the group. This approach to involving farmers may, therefore, be a community-based approach that Cox et al¹⁴ suggest, extending the benefit of Mendip Nature Connections to a new stakeholder group and increasing the potential return on investment.

The project engaged a range of self-employed practitioners and workshop leads, which aimed to support local providers and provide a wider range of activities and skills to course participants and event attendees. The project had enough underspend to enable a series of poetry wellbeing walks to be planned and delivered by Beth Calverley of The Poetry Machine, the Poet in Residence for the University Hospitals Bristol & Weston NHS Foundation Trust. This was an unexpected additional outcome of the project, which enabled MNC to offer a series of inspiring, creative workshops in North Somerset using a similar 'stepping out' model to that of the courses. It also enabled a positive relationship to be formed with an inspiring local poet with significant experience of working in a range of healthcare settings and who was passionate about bringing nature connection to the heart of their practice. Nature. It also further strengthening the Mendip Hills National Landscape Team's links and future potential initiatives with the arts sector and provided valuable learning and skills for both parties. See Appendix 7 for a summary of Beth Calverley's reflections.

Challenges

One area that was challenging was demonstrating the value and skill required for staff to run a nature-based intervention with people living with mental health issues, whilst managing volunteers, in remote locations. Whilst the pay scale for the delivery team was determined and covered in the grant funding, the hosting Council would not allow this salary level to be paid despite requests from the Mendip Hills National Landscape Team's management. This is a very unusual situation where people without expertise in the specific intervention are dictating the salary levels, more so because funding was already in place. This highlights a need for further education on why it is important to recognise the skills needed to provide mental health interventions for vulnerable adults.

Another area that has emerged to be considered for future Mendip Nature Connection courses, is how participants move to becoming a volunteer. There were two learnings this time around. Firstly, that only having a one-week gap between finishing as a participant and starting as a volunteer is not long enough. Previously there was a bigger gap and staff felt that this was more appropriate to get training in place and allow participants to fully consider if they were ready to be a volunteer. Secondly, staff highlighted the tension around wanting to have volunteers who could cope with all elements of the role whilst not wanting to appear selective in who they chose to become volunteers. This was especially important, as some participants are already managing trauma from rejection in other aspects of their life and the last thing staff want to do is appear to reject them again.

The final challenge for discussion was for participants when the course ended and particularly when the funding came to an end. For the participants, and potentially for some of the landowners involved, these courses provide a purpose and something to look forward to, which supports their mental health. Participants expressed how they desperately wished that provision would always be there, to provide continued support and time to develop themselves. A continued provision is no different to a prescribed medication for a long-term condition that is often taken for a much longer period of time i.e. years, as opposed to 6-18 weeks. For the MNC project an additional 3 months more funding was secured with a view to a further 1 year's funding. The fact still remains, however, that this isn't long-term funding and project

staff - particularly skilled and experienced ones that are being underpaid - are inevitably going to move on without long-term funding. Whilst short-term funding isn't sustainable, securing long-term funding is extremely challenging and requires vision. It is important, therefore, that as the green provision to support mental health is expanded, that it is viewed as a long-term support mechanism which as much data now shows delivers incredible results which are often much broader than prescribed medication can achieve.

Limitations

The data from the Mendip Nature Connections was from a small sample size of 20 people, so all conclusions drawn would normally need more data to confirm them. This is, however, the second evaluation report based on a Nature Connections approach and when reviewing data from the previous report¹¹, there are clear corroborations with improvements in wellbeing and in the elements of the course that participants found beneficial. That said, in this report we did not carry out statistical analysis of the score changes due to the low numbers. Furthermore, there was only one outcome measure that was the same between both evaluations, so more consistency in outcome measure use would provide stronger data. As the MNC project was part of the Healthier with Nature programme the use the ONS scores was required and data from MNC is contributing with other providers in the Healthier with Nature programme. This aims to provide a wider and more dataset.

4.1 Recommendations

Listed below are several recommendations to inform future course design and funding.

Funding

1. Funding should be sort for a minimum of 5 years and ideally 10 years to provide stability and maximum benefit for participants, staff and landowners.
2. Staff delivering an extremely successful intervention in remote locations to vulnerable adults with mental health issues should be recognised and fully rewarded by hosting organisations.
3. Continue to explore the sources of government funding (DWP) for supporting people who are out of work to become ready for work and find employment. This is based on findings that many participants are able to be more social, have improved self-esteem and confidence, reduced anxiety and gain skills via volunteering. These are all elements needed to help people to become more ready for work.
4. Continue to develop the connections with health providers and the green social prescribing sector and explore being commissioned by the ICB as green social prescribing provider.

Course design

5. Continue to involve landowners and farmers in the Mendip Nature Connections programme and monitor their wellbeing and experiences in future evaluations as a beneficiary stakeholder.
6. Return to having a longer duration between participants becoming volunteers.
7. Work with previous volunteers and participants to co-design a more acceptable approach to developing participants into volunteers.
8. Expand reach to other underserved groups of people where mental health is known to be poor such as the LGBTQ+ community.



Making cyanotypes from plants on course 2

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Appendix 1- Structure of the MNC courses

Course no.	Venue
1.1	Coleridge Road Community Garden
1.2	Coleridge Road Community Garden
1.3	Coleridge Road Community Garden
1.4	Coleridge Road Community Garden
1.5	Coleridge Road Community Garden
1.6	Coleridge Road Community Garden
2.1	Mendip Activity Centre
2.2	Mendip Activity Centre
2.3	Mendip Activity Centre
2.4	Mendip Activity Centre
2.5	Mendip Activity Centre
2.6	Mendip Activity Centre
3.1	Fernhill Farm
3.2	Fernhill Farm
3.3	Fernhill Farm
3.4	Fernhill Farm
3.5	Fernhill Farm
3.6	Fernhill Farm
4.1	Batch Farm
4.2	Batch Farm
4.3	Batch Farm
4.4	Batch Farm
4.5	Batch Farm
4.6	Batch Farm
5.1	Batch Farm
5.2	Batch Farm
5.3	Batch Farm
5.4	Batch Farm
5.5	Batch Farm
5.6	Batch Farm

Session no.	Nature Connectedness Pathway	Example Activity
1	CONTACT	Tour of site, introduce course and the groundings, what sense did you connect with most?
2	BEAUTY	Pewter casting, charcoal making, leaf ID, what have you noticed in nature that's beautiful?
3	EMOTION	Poetry, yarn spinning, mindful activity: tai chi / forest bathing, what is your weather?
4	COMPASSION	Cloud gazing, wreath making, species, have you done something compassionate?
5	MEANING	Creation of art conservation signs, weaving, what has today meant to you / favourite place?
6	Celebration and a taster	For participants to reflect, celebrate and for new participants to have a taster of the next course

Example MNC Course Session Plan:

Session Title: 5 – Meaning Date: Time: 10am – 2.30pm				
Time	Who?	Activity	Activity Notes/Instructions	Resources
9.30-10am		Prep	Set up chairs/tables Boil kettles/fill flasks Run through session plan, H&S info and participant info with volunteers Meet participants at the entrance gate	
10am – 10.10am		Welcome and introduction	Hot drinks and chat Introduce todays pathway – Meaning	Tea kit Biscuits Milk Group guide First aid kit Bin bag Bell 5 pathways on cardboard 5 pathway postcards
10.10-10.15am		Grounding	Grounding	
10.15-10.25am		Check-in	Do you have a favourite place that you visit in nature? Share if you did the take home activity –	
10.25-12.30			Activity	
12.30 – 1		Lunch		
1-2.15pm			Activity	

2.10-2.0		Reflection	What did you find meaningful today?	
2.20-2.30		Take Home Activity	Select a new activity from bag	Bag of activities

Appendix 2 - Outcome measures

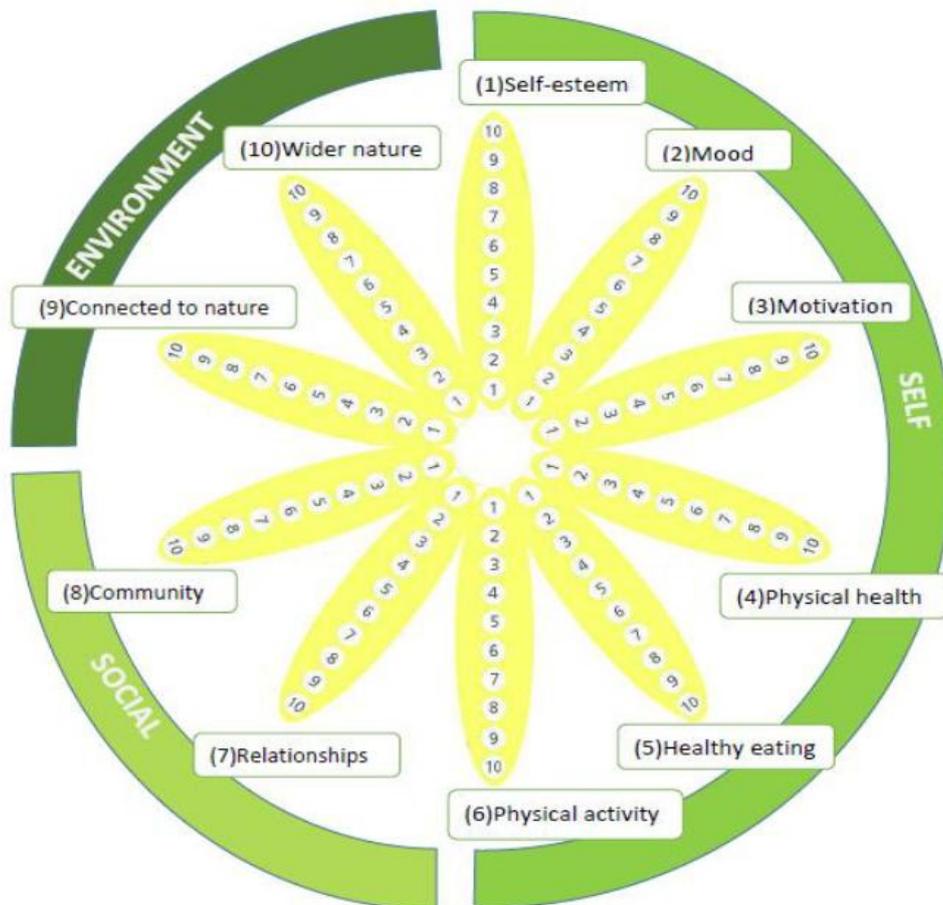
The Holistic Health and Nature Scale (H-HAN)

We will use your feedback to evaluate and improve the service. All answers are anonymous.

Today's Date: _____ ID: _____

Rate the following questions on the Wellbeing Outcome Wheel by marking the number that corresponds to the scale below.

1-2 is poor, 3-4 weak, 5-6 satisfactory, 7-8 good, 9-10 excellent



Healthier with Nature Evaluation Questions

Week 1

Name: _____

	Not very	Fairly	Mostly	Very
How good are you at taking care of yourself and staying healthy?				

0-low, 10 High

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Anxiety										
Happiness										

Healthier with Nature Evaluation Questions

Final week ____

Name: _____

	Not very	Fairly	Mostly	Very
How good are you at taking care of yourself and staying healthy?				

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Anxiety										
Happiness										

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor	Disagree	Strongly disagree

			disagree		
I feel like taking part in this programme has been helpful for my wellbeing.					

Appendix 3 - Participation Information Sheet

Evaluation of the 'Mendip Nature Connections' project

Researcher: Dr Marie Polley, Meaningful Measures Ltd.

You are being invited to take part in an evaluation to explore your experience of the 'Mendip Nature Connections' project.

This is an evaluation which is being carried out by Meaningful Measures Ltd. This evaluation will explore your role in the nature connections project and understand how the course provides benefits to the participants as well as challenges and enablers experienced.

The evaluation will involve you:

Taking part in a small focus group online which will last between 45 - 60 mins. The focus group will be recorded and transcribed and then anonymised before being analysed for themes. The themes will be reported alongside other themes from analysis of course participant feedback.

Please note:

- Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary.
- You have the right to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.
- Withdrawal from the research will not affect any involvement or relationship you have with Meaningful Measures Ltd.
- You have the right to ask for your data to be withdrawn, as long as this is practical and for personal information to be destroyed.
- You do not have to answer particular questions if you do not wish to do so.
- Your responses will be made anonymous and will be kept confidential unless you provide explicit consent to do otherwise. No individuals should be identifiable from any collated data, written report of the evaluation, or any publications arising from it.
- All computer data files will be password protected. The researcher will keep files in a secure place and will comply with the requirements of the UK GDPR regulations tailored by the Data Protection Act (2018).
- Any hard copy documents, e.g., consent forms, will be scanned and kept securely in a digital form in a password protected file. The hard copies will then be destroyed.
- If you wish, can receive information on the results of this evaluation. Please indicate on the consent form if you would like to receive this information.
- The researchers can be contacted during and after participation using the following contact details,
 - Dr Marie Polley via marie@meaningfulmeasures.co.uk

Evaluation of Mendip Nature Connections Project

Consent Form

Please delete yes or no as applicable

- I have been given the Participation Information Sheet and/or had its contents explained to me. Yes No
- I have had an opportunity to ask any questions, and I am satisfied with the answers given. Yes No
- I understand I have a right to withdraw from the research at any time, and I do not have to provide a reason. Yes No
- I understand that if I withdraw from the research any data included in the results will be removed if that is practicable (I understand that once anonymised data has been collated into other datasets it may not be possible to remove that data). Yes No
- I would like to receive information relating to the results from this study. Yes No
- I wish to receive a copy of this Consent form. Yes No
- I confirm I am willing to be a participant in the above evaluation. Yes No
- I note the data collected may be retained in an archive and I am happy for my data to be reused as part of future research activities. I note my data will be fully anonymised (if applicable). Yes No

Participant's Name: _____

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

This consent form will be stored separately from any data you provide so that your responses remain anonymous.

Admin use only

I confirm I have provided a copy of the Participant Information Sheet and have given the participant an opportunity to ask questions, which have been answered.

Researcher's Name: _____

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Appendix 4 Questions used in the focus groups with volunteers and staff

Focus Group Mendip Nature Connections - service users

Here are the questions I will ask on Thursday at the focus group,

Q1. How did you find out about the Nature Connections sessions and what made you want to attend?

Q2. Are there any ways in which you feel you have benefitted from the Nature connection sessions? This could be to do with aspects of your health or about being in nature, learning about nature, feeling more connected to nature or having social interaction - perhaps there are other benefits you have experienced?

Q3 If you had a magic wand, is there anything about the Nature Connection sessions you would like to change / add to / adapt - feel free to answer as a service user or a volunteer.

Q4. Is there anything else you want to tell me about your experience of attending the Nature Connections sessions

Focus Group Mendip Nature Connections - staff

Q1. Please can you describe your roles in the Nature Connections project?

Q2. Have you changed any structure of the course from when it was run previously? Somerset? If so, perhaps you can tell me what has changed.

Q3. Thinking about the participants and the volunteers, I wondered how you have seen them benefit from doing the course? It could be benefit in any sort of area or dimension.

Q4. Are there any other ways that you feel that you've benefited directly from running the Nature Connections Course?

Q5. I'm really interested to understand more about moving people from participants to volunteers and the value of the volunteers and what they bring. What is the ethos behind that? And how do you see the value of those volunteers now?

Q6. What challenges have there been whether that's with the funding or running the course, or anything else.

Q7. Have there been anything that was particularly enabling or helpful that you think that absolutely needs to stay in the Nature Connections course?

Q8. Is there just anything else that you wanted to mention just share that we haven't touched on?

Appendix 5 Breakdown of postcodes for MNC participants (n=20)

Postcode			
	BS23	25%	Weston SM
	BS24	10%	Weston SM
	BS27	15%	Cheddar
	BS40	15%	Bristol
	BS21	10%	Clevedon
	BS22	5%	Weston SM
	BS41	5%	Bristol
	BS49	5%	Bristol
	BS4	5%	Bristol
	TA8	5%	Taunton

Appendix 6 Event Evaluation / Feedback Form example

Name and Date of Event:

How would you rate your overall experience of the event?

(please circle, 1= very poor, 5= excellent)

1 2 3 4 5

What did you enjoy the most about the event?

How engaging were the activities?

(please circle, 1= not at all engaging, 5= very engaging)

1 2 3 4 5

Has this event had a positive impact on your wellbeing?

Yes No Not sure

Do you feel more connected to nature after attending the event? (please circle)

Yes No Not sure

Do you have any suggestions for improving future events?

Any other comments or feedback?

Please provide the first part of your postcode (not all of it) _____

Thank you for your attendance and feedback.

Appendix 7 – Summary of Beth Calverley’s reflections from ‘Mendip Words of Connections’ series

What worked well:

Practitioner Development - Gained specialist knowledge and training (e.g. outdoor first aid, risk assessments). Empowered to pursue further nature connection work.

Facilitation Support - Importance of having two facilitators for safety and continuity.

Promotion and Outreach - Effective use of social media, posters, and local networks. Most sessions fully booked with strong community interest.

Participant Feedback - High satisfaction ratings (mostly 5/5). Appreciation for the blend of nature education and creative writing.

Venue Diversity - Range of locations supported varied nature connection experiences. Facilities like toilets, shelter, and parking enhanced accessibility and comfort.

Meaningful Connections - Workshops fostered intergenerational and interpersonal engagement. Participants expressed personal growth and emotional resonance through poetry.

Learnings for future contracted sessions:

Administrative Support - Need for upfront provision of templates and resources (risk assessments, safety briefings, etc.). Clearer guidance on insurance, venue contacts, and safeguarding.

Promotion Expectations - Clarify roles and responsibilities for outreach. More support from MNC staff for reaching existing networks.

Budgeting and Admin Time - Underestimated planning and admin workload. Future quotes to include more time for logistics and coordination.

Managing Attendance - High dropout rates; consider deposit system to increase commitment. Adjust participant numbers to account for no-shows.

Accessibility Considerations - Need for better route information and transport links. Importance of flexibility to accommodate diverse needs.

Inclusivity - Address lack of diversity among participants. Partner with other organisations and provide language support.

Session Duration - Participants desired longer workshops. Balance needed between depth of experience and logistical constraints.

Proposed future opportunities:

Workshop Series for Existing Community Groups - Reuse developed materials to reduce planning time.

Volunteer and Youth Engagement - Create collective poems to foster team bonding and promote the Mendip Hills National Landscape.

Poetry Anthology - Invite local writers to respond to the Mendip Hills walks and the landscape.

Poetry Machine at Events - Offer interactive poetry experiences at outreach events.

Hospital and Care Home Workshops – Make the most of the artist’s experience in healthcare settings for nature-based sessions.

Support for Funding Bid - Contribute to community engagement aspects of future funding applications.

Podcast Proposal - Host a Mendip Hills National Landscape wellbeing podcast featuring interviews and spontaneous poetry.

REPORT ENDS