

Natural Resources Wales and WHIASU Draft Health Impact Assessment Screening Tool

Pilot Case Study 2: Actif Woods Wales June 2015

Background to the development of the HIA Screening Tool for the Environment Sector

As part of an internal review in 2006, the former Countryside Council for Wales¹ (CCW) commissioned the Institute of Rural Health to conduct a 12 month study into the impact of the natural environment on health and wellbeing². During this review, it became clear that this was an area of policy and practice that needed to be embedded into the mainstream work of CCW. The IRH were asked to develop an appropriate tool to estimate, quantify and communicate the contribution of CCW's activities to the wellbeing of the people of Wales.

A tool was produced by IRH with input from the Welsh Health Impact Assessment Support Unit (WHIASU). The tool that was produced was suitable for internal use, and was intended to be used by CCW staff on new green space programmes and projects that were in the process of being developed and implemented. The intention was for this tool to also be of benefit to others involved in the development and implementation of green space or green space related plans, programmes and projects. A pilot was carried out on a CCW grant funded project delivered in the third sector and this highlighted the need for an adapted tool to be developed for wider external projects.

Work began in partnership with WHIASU and with input from grant and project/programme leads, a new version of the tool has been developed (which is currently still in draft form) which aims to be useable by anyone working on projects/programmes with health and wellbeing outcomes based in the environment sector.

This will be the first time that a HIA screening tool has been developed specifically for use within the Environment sector

Case Study Background

Actif Woods Wales is a project run by Coed Lleol since 2010. It aims to improve health and well-being in people suffering from chronic health conditions, by facilitating the exploration of local woodlands. This approach to treating a variety of mental and physical illnesses is based on the natural environment's well-documented ability to improve health and well-being by reducing stress and providing opportunities for exercise and social interaction. People are encouraged to revisit and continue to be involved in the woodland after the end of the health project. It is funded by the Big

¹ Countryside Council for Wales has now become part of Natural Resources Wales

²Institute of Rural Health 2008 Natural Heritage : A Pathway to Health, CCW Policy Research paper no: 07/20
<http://www.planethealthcymru.org/sitesplus/documents/886/Natural%20Heritage%20-%20a%20pathway%20to%20health.pdf>

Lottery Fund, Natural Resources Wales, the Pfizer Foundation, Anglesey Sustainable Development Fund, Communities First, Sports Wales, Neath Port Talbot Council (ROWIP and Mynydd y Betws Wind Farm Fund).

The approach of the programme is:

- To work closely with a range of local organisations (health, outdoor and community sectors)
- To support those partner organisations to integrate woodland-based health programmes into their core services.
- To deliver environmental improvements in local woodlands
- To be participant-led – in offering a range of options and let participants shape the programme according to what works best for them.

The context of the NRW HIA Screening pilot was that Actif Woods were reviewing their approach and considering changing the focus of the project to a preventative approach rather than targeting people with existing long term conditions. They were also preparing future funding bids and reviewing their approach to evaluation.

Aims of the HIA Screening

The Wales Health Impact Assessment Support Unit (WHIASU) was approached by the Actif Woods project team to support application of Health Impact Assessment (HIA) methodology to assess whether:

- HIA methodology could contribute to the evaluation of the current project
- HIA methodology has a role in informing future developments within Active Woods
- HIA methodology could support/contribute to developing a wider understanding within the delivery team of health and wellbeing in order to strengthen both the project delivery and future evaluation.

Methods

WHIASU worked closely with the research and evaluation lead from Actif Woods to plan the Screening session. As one of the objectives of using the NRW HIA Screening tool was to develop a wider understanding within the delivery team of health and wellbeing in the context of the Actif Woods project, a short workshop was planned to coincide with a team meeting bringing regional leads for the project together.

WHIASU facilitated a discussion within the staff group to work through the screening tool and to consider the impact of the current delivery on vulnerable groups and determinants of health

Summary of Findings

1. Positive Impacts

Lifestyle – physical activity, diet

Social and community influences on health - reducing social isolation, increasing social contact, positive feelings about the local area, intergenerational relationships

Mental wellbeing - providing a sense of control regarding activities in woods, emotional resilience – major impact on developing social relationships, arts and crafts, learning opportunities, taking notice of nature and species, opportunities to participate in a range of shared activities and increased pride in local area.

Living conditions - improvements made to local green spaces and increased access to green spaces

Economic conditions - formal and informal learning, volunteering opportunities, increased confidence and social skills = return to part time employment.

It was noted during discussion that many of the key impact areas related to the “Five ways to wellbeing” and that this might create a useful framework for evaluating the project:

1. Give – volunteering, taking care of the woodland
2. Connect – building social relationships, meeting new people
3. Keep learning – informal and formal, learning about nature, learning new skills, learning about your local area, arts and crafts
4. Be Active – increases in physical activity
5. Take notice – being in the natural environment taking notice of nature, observing seasons, species identification

2. Negatives Impacts

No major negative impacts identified except:

- Fear of raising expectations if project is not sustainable
- Increase in human impact on woodland due to increased use in some woodland has potential to damage natural environment if overused.

3. Impacts on Vulnerable groups

No negatives identified. Positive impacts identified on a range of vulnerable groups:

- People with long term conditions and disabilities
- People with mental health problems including Alzheimers
- People with drug and alcohol problems
- People who are unemployed
- Recently bereaved
- Middle aged men (a target group for suicide prevention)
- People living in areas known to exhibit poor economic and/or health indicators

Potential Actions as a result of the Screening

- Review approach to healthy snacks
- Increase opportunities to share skills and good practice across the project areas
- Currently not reaching those in work, which if the project want to have a preventative focus they might need to consider including sessions in eve/weekends
- Consider role of gender in project delivery.

Possible options for future evaluation of the project

- Complete a more in depth HIA
- Consider using the Five Ways to Wellbeing to help structure future evaluation
- Consider how to measure the benefits of an intergenerational approach
- Consider how employment, volunteering and learning outcomes are captured

Outputs

A HIA screening report and a summary report for stakeholders.

Outcomes

The feedback from the process was positive and the research and evaluation lead felt that it achieved "*the main job of getting us to share and think together*". Staff felt that having the opportunity to have an open discussion and sharing perspectives in this way was helpful.

The Screening had the following key outcomes areas (quotes from participants in italics):

1. Project development and delivery

The screening session enabled a *“greater shared understanding across the team”*. This was useful at a point in time where the project was reviewing its approach to target groups. The research and evaluation lead felt that *“having a deeper perspective on potential target groups is useful more because it gives us better ways to explain and understand what we do”*. Another comment relating to target groups was *“Identification of groups, needs, hurdles. Some things I had never thought of before”*. The process identified that the “Five Ways to Wellbeing” could be used as a framework for *“designing and planning programmes of activity”*.

2. Identified how the project relates to key public health agendas and frameworks

The team became more aware of the *“the breadth of the social determinants of health that our project impacts on”*. The discussion highlighted key concepts such as the “life stage” approach which many public health programmes and frameworks now focus on. It also enabled the team to develop an understanding of how their programme relates to concepts such as “proportionate universalism” and key public health agendas such as suicide prevention and supporting people to sustain or obtain employment. This understanding should support the project to link their activity to local health agendas and potentially build new partnerships such as Job Centre Plus via introduction to the Workplace Health lead within PHW.

3. Evaluation

The process identified some possible ways forward for evaluating the project in future, including using the “Five Ways to Wellbeing” as a framework to report on the project and to express impacts. The HIA Screening could be built on to complete a full HIA by adding a more in depth participant profile, a literature review and engaging participants and wider stakeholders.

Authors: Lee Parry Williams and Nerys Edmonds with thanks to Kate Hamilton and the Actif Woods team

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