



Evaluation Report of the Work of Reconnect (Walk With Friends)

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1. INTRODUCTION TO THIS REPORT

This evaluation study was undertaken during Summer 2014 and looked at the work of Reconnect (formerly known as 'Walk With Friends') over the period September 2013 to July 2014.

The evaluation methodology included participant observation in a Reconnect 'Nature Awareness' session and one of their public presentations, interviews with participants and volunteers, and a desk based analysis of participant progress records and evaluation forms.

The evaluation was undertaken by a member of the Reconnect management team on a freelance basis.

2. BACKGROUND

Walk With Friends was established in 2009 and has developed from its beginnings as a walking group for people experiencing mental health problems. It now encompasses a wider range of outdoor activities and a wider group of participants, the isolated and lonely, long term unemployed and some of whom have experienced multiple disadvantages including, in addition to mental health issues, disability, drug and alcohol misuse.

This evaluation focuses on activities undertaken by Reconnect in the 'Nature Connections and Life Skills' courses it ran, funded by the Wales Council for Voluntary Action 'Engagement Gateway' programme, during the period September 2013 to July 2014.

These included:

- mindfulness in nature
- creativity skills such as Nature Art and Nature Writing
- walking
- wilderness skills, such as putting up a shelter, chopping wood, building a fire, overnight camping, camp fire cookery
- conservation skills, such as bramble clearance and tree management
- digital media- including photography, videoing, sound recording and editing
- communications and giving presentations to different audiences
- team and relationship building.

Reconnect is an inclusive social enterprise that supports those furthest from the employment market in developing the skills and confidence they need to participate more fully in society.

Using the principles of ecotherapy - "nature as a healing ally" - Reconnect takes participants on a journey of connection with nature, with each other and with themselves. Each individual is regarded and treated as a whole person, with a valuable contribution to make to the organisation and its activities.

By allowing each person to develop at their own pace, and in their own unique way, participants are empowered to take on more responsibility within the organisation, as and when they are ready. In this way, Reconnect offers unique occupational pathways that are entirely person-centred.

The activities on offer enable participants to develop a range of transferable skills, while increasing their confidence and sense of self-worth.



3. DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITIES AND OUTPUTS

During the period Sept 2013 to June 2014, Reconnect ran four 'Nature Connections and Life Skills' courses that were funded under the WCVA 'Engagement Gateway' programme. These courses were aimed at those furthest from the employment market, including people who had experienced multiple disadvantages, many of whom experienced mental health problems.

34 participants were registered on to the courses, 31 attended and 27 completed a course. The first three courses consisted of seven, one-day sessions and the fourth course comprised of an introductory day followed by a two and a half day residential and a final presentation day.

Activities included:

- mindfulness in Nature
- creativity skills such as Nature Art and Nature writing
- walking
- wilderness skills such as putting up a shelter, chopping wood, building a fire, camping, camp fire cookery
- conservation skills such as bramble clearing
- digital media- including photography, videoing, sound recording, editing
- communications and giving presentations to different audiences
- team and relationship building
- wilderness activities leading to the John Muir Award

Outputs included:

- the production of four videos that recorded participants' experiences ([links here](#))
- a newspaper 'Words in Nature' that included 13 participants' art work, writing and photos ([link here](#))
- and a book of participants art work, photographs and writing ([link here](#)).

4. OUTCOMES FOR PARTICIPANTS

The outcomes below are gathered from documented evidence in the form of: participant feedback forms, Richter scale (measuring changes in soft skills) ratings, follow-up emails from participants and other documented sources.

31 people attended the four 'Nature Connections and Life Skills' courses which Reconnect ran during the period. Although four of them didn't complete a course, they nevertheless achieved some recorded outcomes, having contributed to digital media production and produced art or writing about their experiences in nature.



Of the 27 people who completed a Reconnect course:

- 9 participants received assistance or support with their work-limiting health condition or disability
- 14 improved their communication skills
- 10 recorded that their confidence had increased
- 10 indicated that their mental or physical health or fitness levels had improved
- 19 increased their knowledge and skills in one or more of the following areas: art, mindfulness, nature awareness, cooking, listening and team work
- 17 contributed to digital media production and editing- photography, video recording and sound recording

- 6 people noted that they had developed skills in overcoming setbacks
- 13 developed writing skills and contributed to the Reconnect newspaper and/or book
- 4 people developed presentation skills and read their poetry or prose to the public at an end of course 'showcase'
- 13 participants achieved accreditation in the form of the John Muir Award. This is a nationally recognised environmental award scheme focused on wild places. It encourages awareness and responsibility for the natural environment in a spirit of fun, adventure and exploration. It requires participants to demonstrate completion of four challenges: **discover, explore, conserve and share**.

'I felt almost immediately better in myself after 1st session as it improved my confidence, got me away from my 'box' i.e. home'

After completion of their course, some participants progressed on to further learning, voluntary work, or employment:

- 11 participants went to Workways for advice and support about further occupational activity or work
- 4 participants moved into employment
- 6 participants progressed to take on a voluntary position with Reconnect. The roles were general outdoor assistant, cook, outdoor kitchen assistant, digital media assistant.
- 8 participants completed their Mental Health First Aid certificated training

'Thanks so much for the course, I really enjoyed it and will continue to get out and about in nature albeit at weekends now.' Participant who went on to employment

Following completion of the Engagement Gateway project, Reconnect activities have continued on an entirely voluntary and unfunded basis and included:

- running a camp site cafe for the public at the Seafair Haven boating festival at Lawrenny
- making a presentation to the public about the work of Reconnect at a dance festival at Little Wedlock .
- a social enterprise working group has been meeting weekly to explore options for selling foraged foods and teas to raise funds for Reconnect.
- leading a 3 day walk " journey of understanding" in partnership with the national mental health campaign "Time to Change Wales".



A significant proportion of course participants (almost a quarter) have returned to Reconnect activities time and again, because they enjoy and benefit from what is on offer. Typically, participants have taken on some responsibility for specific activities, or roles, quite quickly and progressed from being a 'participant' to 'volunteer'. A series of case studies included in this report below illustrate this participant journey.

Participants often say that what distinguishes Reconnect from other organisations or groups they have been involved with is that there is no focus on any particular condition, issue, or label, and each person is treated equally, as the whole person they are. In addition, friendships are made and participants enjoy being part of a group where they feel able to be themselves.

'I have benefited in a positive way from the sessions because I thoroughly enjoyed the activities and made new friends'

Some participants have also achieved accreditation of training and activities during their time with Reconnect, including the John Muir Award and a Mental Health First Aid certificate.

Partnership and collaboration with other agencies, meant that all participants were provided with opportunities to access other forms of support during their time with Reconnect, including employment advice and support from Workways.

Since participating in the Engagement Gateway project, some volunteers have come up with their own ideas for developing the organisation and generating income. This includes selling items such as foraged teas, photographs and a poetry book. All participants have been invited and encouraged to contribute their ideas and consulted in the organisation's decision-making processes, making Reconnect a truly user-led organisation.

'I am feeling more positive and looking to a better future'

5. CASE STUDIES

5.1 Case Study One- “Bob”

Before getting involved with Reconnect, Bob said that things were “not brilliant” and that he experienced a “lack of focus” and felt “directionless”.



He heard about Reconnect through his friend Adam, who he had met through a mutual interest in cycling.

Bob participated in four Reconnect courses over six months and moved from being a participant to a volunteer helper. During this time he helped out with sound recordings and interviewing other participants and also with art work, including a group mural and art activities on a beach.

Bob enjoyed the nature awareness and activities leading to the John Muir Award. But above all, he enjoyed the art work, of which he already had many years' experience.

What made the Reconnect approach to art so special for Bob were the aspects of creating art together, in a group setting, and also outdoors. This gave him a feeling of connection with others who were doing the same thing. He said he had been "fascinated by how people have interpreted the same subject so differently, using different styles and techniques", which he found “delightful”. He also found a meditative aspect to creating art in an outdoor setting.

Bob felt that his involvement with Reconnect had given him more of a sense of direction, so that he was able to consider the possibility of further occupational activity.

5.2 Case Study Two- John

Before coming to Reconnect, John had been involved in a number of mental health service user support groups that he felt were not supporting him as well as he would have liked, since he felt he was putting in more than he was getting back.



John has a background in occupational therapy and is interested in people and their emotional life and also has a great interest in art.

He heard about Reconnect through West Wales Action for Mental Health (WWAMH) and was attracted by the woodland aspect, which had been a thread throughout his life, and felt that it was just what he needed at that particular time in his life.

John attended his first Reconnect course in February 2014 and attended two more after that, in April and May 2014. He said he “was immediately made to feel welcome and safe” and he felt the same was true for others. He felt that the group “gelled quite quickly and in a short period of time had an outcome”. He referred here to the group presentation at a WWAMH Forum meeting in Narberth in April, when the group presented a video they had made and read some poetry, and other nature-inspired words they had written, to the audience.

John felt that the tangible outcomes of both the group presentations and the John Muir Award make the work of Reconnect unique and very effective, in contrast to some of his other experiences. He puts this down in large part to the nature aspect which “lowers barriers and gives permissions”. John also spoke highly of the leadership of the group- “it’s not prescriptive, it’s about what the group wants and that’s so important”.

During his three Reconnect courses, John particularly enjoyed the creation of art work and felt that it offered participants something that shifts them on an emotional level. He also enjoyed assisting the group with “anything creative” which he feels enables group members both to express themselves and to share their unique creative expressions with others.

For John, the progression from participant to volunteer, supporting other new group participants, has given him a more positive view of his life. He noted that he had lost weight, felt fitter and now wants to make the best of the time he has left, as a man in his mid-sixties.

John also commented that he now has a peer group that feels empowering, rather than restrictive, and that he has learned things he can take back to his other support group and share with them, particularly the nature aspect. He envisages the possibility of more collaborations between organisations in the future.

John enjoys being able to contribute his ideas for the development of Reconnect, one of which is connecting with the element of water through boats, fishing and gathering food from the waterside.

5.3 Case Study Three – “Joe”

Before coming to ‘Walk with Friends’ (now known as Reconnect), Joe felt that things were “pretty bad” for him. He had been out of work for several years, was suffering from depression and felt quite isolated.

He was involved with some other support services, which he found helpful, but they were based indoors and he had a background of working and being outdoors.



Joe found out about Walk with Friends almost three years ago when he saw a poster advertising ‘nature awareness’ in Haverfordwest library. He was curious to find out more about what ‘nature awareness’ was and liked the idea of it being outdoors.

Since that time, Joe has been involved in at least a dozen Walk with Friends nature awareness courses and also some longer, week-long journeys, which he found very beneficial as they “put you in a different space”.

Joe has participated in a wide range of different activities over this time, including setting up camp, building shelters and tending the camp fire (including cooking for the whole group). Joe’s role has developed from participant through volunteer to co-leader of recent groups. He has been able to mentor and pass on skills he has learned to others who now take care of things like setting up camp, making the fire and cooking.

Although Joe found it a big step to take on a leadership role, after six years of unemployment, he found it a very supportive environment in which he was able to gradually take on more responsibility without pressure. He felt that Andrew (and another mentor, Dave) were able to support him in this transition, since they had both been through some similar experiences and understood the need for Joe’s gentle progression, at his own pace.

Overall, Joe felt that his involvement with Walk with Friends and Reconnect had brought him closer to nature and over time he noticed a feeling of being more “tuned-in” with a sense of nature giving him something. Although not finding it easy to put into words, Joe felt that this “tuning-in” had made him more aware of details like the beauty of things around him. He also appreciates knowing a lot more about the natural world, such as the names of different trees and which plants are edible. He felt this enhances his ability to really connect with what is around him, to be more aware of it.

Joe also really appreciates being part of something, having a role and a sense of purpose. He said this is “massive” and really important and supportive for him. He feels a lot of difficulties people struggle with, including mental health issues, stem from not being part of something, part of a group that is non-judgemental and supportive. He believes that Reconnect offers something that goes beyond what is available elsewhere and that sense of belonging to a mutually supportive group is one of its keys.

5.4 Case Study Four- Gavin

Gavin was already in a recovery process before he came to Reconnect. He used to have a drug and alcohol problem which he had stopped eight months previously with the support of several groups and approaches, including a peer mentoring group, where he first heard about Reconnect.



Gavin feels that Reconnect has added another element to his recovery in which he can go outside and switch off from the more intense cognitive behavioural approaches he has experienced elsewhere.

When Gavin first heard about Reconnect he “wasn’t all that interested” but thought he would give it a go and to his surprise he found he was hooked from the first day. He found Andrew’s presence and voice very calming and likewise the woodland setting. He liked the aspect of “switching off and escaping” which he used to find through using substances but has since found he can do this through being in tune with nature.

Although Gavin had learned mindfulness before and found it helpful he found something “more real” about being in the woods, having always liked nature as a child.

After attending his first nature awareness course as a participant, Gavin has returned to two further courses as a volunteer and supported the groups by cooking and also as a buddy to new participants with a history of substance misuse. Gavin also brought in some new participants to the Reconnect courses through some of the other organisations he is involved with.

Like many other participants, Gavin enjoyed the art work, making pictures out of things he found in nature, like mud and sticks and also spending time alone, drawing which he found “brilliant” because, he said: “I completely lost myself for about two hours”. He also really enjoyed getting involved with the digital media aspect of the project, using good camera and video equipment to record the group’s activities.

Since being involved with Reconnect, together with his other support groups, Gavin has noticed that he feels more relaxed with people and that he is generally less stressed and anxious about things. He feels that Reconnect has given him a kind of natural remedy, or therapy, as part of a package with the other approaches he is involved with, although he considers Reconnect to be a big part of the whole package. He believes the unique thing about what Reconnect offers is a “kind of holiday of the mind”, being outside and away from things and not having to think about the pressures of everyday life.

Gavin hopes that Reconnect will get more funding to continue as he would like to see a lot more people benefit from what it has to offer, especially in the substance misuse field. He believes people need to be reached in so many different ways and that while a meeting or classroom situation might work for some people, being outdoors could be the only approach that might work for others.

During the time of being involved with Reconnect, Gavin has been given custody of his three-year old daughter and he attributes this in part to the Reconnect process, helping him to be calm.

5.5 Case Study Five- Mair

Mair felt that things had been “pretty awful and dark” for her before her involvement with Reconnect, when she was recovering from a problem with alcohol. She had been receiving support from Cyswilt and a SMART recovery group for about a year when she first heard about Reconnect.



Although these support groups had helped her a lot, Mair felt that Reconnect “completely changed my life round” as it had given her “something to aim for”- a “path” she had been unable to see before, as she had felt she had been “going round and round in circles”.

From the outset, Mair’s feeling about Reconnect was “I love doing this kind of thing, this is me, this is what has been lacking in my life”. It was the adventure element and being outdoors that she loved, as well as being with others of a similar mind-set. Mair had been brought up around woodlands and beaches and had become lonely when she moved to Milford, finding it really difficult to make friends.

Mair was amazed at how easy, relaxed and open everyone with Reconnect seemed to be. She felt this was something to do with the way the project takes people “out of the norm” and doesn’t focus on the problem, i.e. the addiction, as is often the case in other support groups. With Reconnect, Mair noticed that “the problem” is put aside and everyone is sitting together as the whole human being they are and not because they have some kind of problem, or label. She said that there is a strong sense of a group of peers, without a hierarchy and without a list of rules about what you can and can’t do.

So, Mair loved what she found as a participant, wanted more of it and decided to continue with Reconnect as a volunteer. She has helped with digital media and also “everything else”, being part of a team where she feels drawn to help out with whatever is needed- cooking, making a fire without matches, or building a shelter. Mair has also been keen to help ensure that others are learning these skills, getting involved and feeling that they are part of the group.

This experience has inspired Mair to the point where she and her husband are thinking of buying some woodland and offering something similar to what Reconnect does, further afield, for people living in a city who hardly ever get out into nature. Mair said she would “never in a million years” have considered this if it hadn’t been for Reconnect and, at the age of 54, feels she has “found herself” and her niche so that she now has something to look forward to. She has also noticed a huge increase in her self-confidence, having found something she loves and is good at.

Mair said she felt very sad that the current project was coming to an end and that others may not be able to benefit in the way that she has. She would recommend the experience to anyone as she feels there is so much freedom in being outdoors, away from technology and with such a supportive group of peers. She feels that the people who run Reconnect are “very special” and she “can’t thank them enough” for the changes she has experienced in just three months.

Following completion of this case study Mair has secured employment as a mental health support worker.

5.6 Case Study Six- Alan

Before coming to Walk with Friends some 14 years ago, Alan had been an alcoholic whose wife had died and this had exacerbated his drink problem and led to him going in and out of mental hospitals for a while.



Alan received some help from his local church and this had led him to meeting Andrew and participating in Walk with Friends' activities over many years.

More recently, Alan has been helping out as a volunteer with Reconnect and in particular has developed his skills as a photographer, recording the groups' experiences. He has also helped with the general setting up of group spaces and welcoming new participants.

Like others, Alan noted that no one involved with Reconnect is labelled, saying "we are all the same" which he thinks is "brilliant" as he has experienced being labelled in other settings.

Since his involvement with Reconnect, Alan has rediscovered interests that he had before he experienced health issues, such as building model railways. His time spent out in nature has enabled him to model the landscape that he sees and has also rekindled his interest in art.

Alan commented that being outside with Reconnect has been "fantastic" and made him feel "peaceful and calm". He found he experienced less anger than he used to, even when at home, so the calmness he felt in nature was carried back to the house and remained with him most of the time.

He also noted that he was more self-confident and assertive than he used to be and found it easier to say no to things he doesn't want to do.

Alan said that the Reconnect programme is "absolutely amazing" and would recommend it to anyone. He particularly enjoyed making art on the beach with others and was very involved with the photography and video recording. His confidence as a photographer had grown and he was considering selling some of his photos.

Alan also commented that Andrew is a brilliant leader who understands what members of Reconnect groups have been through and that he knows how to create a supportive environment in which everyone reconnects with one another.

6. CONCLUSION

Reconnect offers something unique to people who have been out of work long term. This includes people who have experienced serious mental health problems, who are recovering from drug and alcohol abuse, or who are experiencing multiple disadvantages.

The social enterprise has an inclusive, user-led and supportive approach to its activities and organisational development. It also has a person-centred ethos, where everyone is valued as an individual who has something to contribute to the group, in their own time and in their own unique way.

The organisation empowers people through providing activities that enable a sense of 'reconnection' with the natural world, with themselves and with others. Many participants benefit in a wide range of ways, including: increased confidence; interpersonal skills (team work, communication and presentation skills); creative expression skills (art, writing, digital media); nature awareness and wilderness skills and improved mental and physical wellbeing. The organisation offers participants a 'journey', enabling each person to progress at their own pace and in their own way, whether that be into further learning activities, voluntary work, or employment.

The videos, newspaper and book that Reconnect participants have produced in a very short time are testament to the success of the organisation in engaging, inspiring and supporting participants in their developmental journeys. These media speak volumes about the benefits to participants and their enjoyment of their experiences with Reconnect.

It is vital that the organisation now secures further funding so that it can continue to offer this invaluable and highly successful model so that others can benefit, while continuing to support and develop its core group of regular volunteers.

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