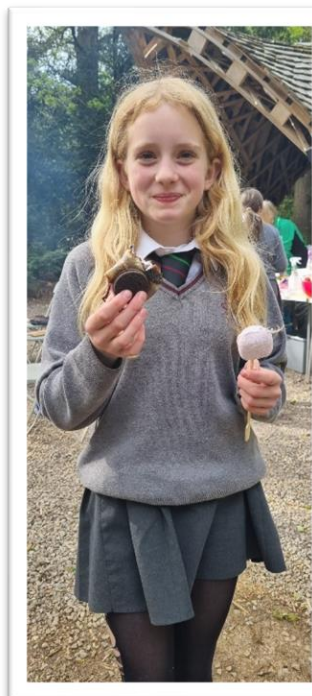
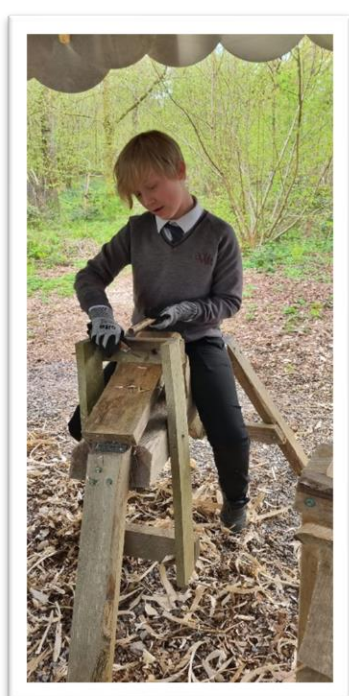
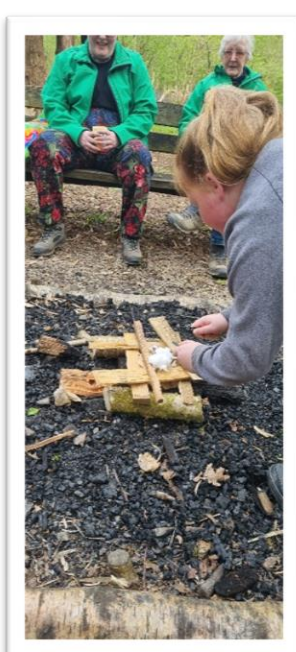




Evaluation of Wild Evenings at Westonbirt afterschool programme with Tetbury Area Youth and Community Trust



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Introduction

In spring 2023, Westonbirt, the National Arboretum and Bedgebury Arboretum, carried out the National Collections Insights research project.

The study asked young people about their aspirations and needs and how Forestry England's National Tree Collections at Westonbirt and Bedgebury might work with young people better, in the future, to meet these aspirations and needs.

As part of the project, we ran a workshop for 12 young people from Tetbury Youth Club. One of the themes that came out strongly was that young people recognize the benefits of being in green spaces for mental health and wellbeing (especially since Covid); so they suggested an afterschool club, at Westonbirt, to help them relax and unwind.

The eight-week programme was highly successful with 71% of participants rating it as 'Great' and 21% as 'Brilliant'.

Participants also reported positive changes in their self-reported wellbeing scores at the end of the programme compared to the beginning.

On the end of programme evaluation questionnaire:

- 87% of young people evaluated, agreed with the statement, 'The afterschool programme helped me relax and wind down after school',
- 87% agreed with 'I feel like I have connected with nature more during the sessions' and,
- 100% agreed with 'I learnt new skills during the programme.'

We had fantastic feedback from parents/carers who had noticed benefits of their young people attending the programme. And, one young person "*who had been largely absent from school for a number of years*", returned to school as a direct result of the programme.

Delivery partners

The programme was delivered by the Westonbirt Community team (consisting of the Community Co-ordinator and five Community Volunteers) in partnership with Tetbury Area Youth & Community Trust (two youth workers, funded by TAYCT, worked with the group each week). The same team of volunteers and staff supported the programme to ensure consistency for the young people, enabling them to build a relaxed and trusting atmosphere.

Sir William Romney school allowed their minibus to be used to transport the group.

We are grateful to Forestry England and the Friends of Westonbirt Arboretum for funding the Community programme. The TAYCT funding came from community donations.

The aim of the programme

The overall programme structure was codesigned by the TAYCT Head of Youth Services and the Westonbirt Community Coordinator. Based on what the young people told us during the Insights research project, the aim of the programme was:

To provide a safe, afterschool club where young people can wind down and begin to restore their mental health after a hectic day at school:

- A place to relax and work on their resilience, self-esteem, confidence and wellbeing

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- A place to connect with nature
 - A place to learn new skills

The young people

Initially, we planned to invite 15 young people from Sir William Romney school to the afterschool club. 13 young people, aged between 11-16, actually took part in the programme.

Youth workers from the youth club put together a list of young people who they identified might enjoy and benefit most from the programme. One of the TAYCT Youth workers who attended the group is funded to mentor young people at Sir William Romney School, this allowed her to encourage and support the young people to attend the project.

The programme

The programme consisted of seven weekly sessions which ran from 4pm - 6pm through April and May. All sessions were run with a Forest School, learner-led approach.

Week 1 was an introductory session, during which the young people talked about what they were interested in and what activities they'd like to try. We listened to their ideas to co-create a draft plan for the programme. Week by week we added to and adjusted the plan depending on what the young people were telling us they were interested in and enjoyed doing. There was never any pressure for the young people to do a particular activity, they self-selected the things they wanted to do. This included simply sitting by the fire, chatting, relaxing and eating, as well as trying whittling, discovering firelighting skills, finding out how to identify trees, campfire cooking and being creative through arts and crafts.

We also incorporated mindfulness techniques into the sessions to help the young people transition into each session, and as tools they could use to improve their mental health and wellbeing outside of the programme. These included: a focus on the Five Ways to Wellbeing; mindfulness activities using all of the senses; box breathing; and keeping a Gratitude Diary. Research shows that people who deliberately express gratitude have better mental health, have fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression and are more satisfied with their lives.¹

In **week 8**, the young people invited their families to a celebration event. During the two-hour session, the young people showed their families around the Community Shelter and served refreshments. The young people then shared what they had been doing. Following this, Andrew Smith (Arboretum Director) presented the participants with their Westonbirt Award certificates. We also created a gallery of photos taken over the course of the last seven weeks (mostly shot by one of the TAYCT youth workers), for the event participants to enjoy.

¹ 1 "How gratitude is good for mental health". Best For You NHS, 2024, [How gratitude is good for mental health - Best For You](#)

Actual programme plan for the Tetbury Youth Club Wild Evenings at Westonbirt afterschool programme - 9th April - 27th May 2024

Week & date	Activities available
Session 1 09/04/24, 4-6pm Introductions and getting to know the site	Meet, introductions and welcome at Welcome Building (WB) Walk to Community Shelter (CS) Crossing the threshold Explore site and refreshments Mindfulness moment Getting to know each other, interests, aims, hearing what young people would like to try etc Scavenger Hunt and Kelly Kettle Challenge Reflection and Circle Time Agree firelighters for next week Tidy up, transition out and walk back
Session 2 16/04/24, 4-6pm Ethos, safety, relaxing, eating and skills	Meet and welcome at WB - recap on last week. Introduction to Tricia and Ben (the Therapy dog) Walk to CS Crossing the threshold: Meeting the coast redwoods Firelighting (N and S) and refreshments Sound maps, squeaky birds, mindfulness moment and agreeing 'camp rules / ethos' Free choice - From interests shown last week -: squeaky toy birds, clay birds, binoculars and bird id, making toasting forks, charcoal making, chilling by the fire Snacks: Marshmallows, cinnamon apples, fruit, toast and variety of spreads Reflection - Introduce journals, and Circle Time Agree firelighters and snacks for next week Tidy up, transition out and walk back
Session 3 23/04/24, 4-6pm Relaxing, eating and skills	Meet and welcome at WB - recap on last week Walk to CS Crossing the threshold - Mindfulness moment under the redwoods Firelighting (P and A) and refreshments Free choice - From interests shown last week and first week - Lighting Kelly Kettle fires and toasting marshmallows, whittling toasting forks and butter knives, making cheese toasties, Hapa Zome, chilling by the fire Snacks: marshmallows, fruit, cheese toasties and toast with a variety of toppings Reflection (journals) and Circle Time Agree firelighters and snacks for next week Tidy up, transition out and walk back
Session 4 30/04/24, 4-6pm Relaxing, eating and skills	Meet and welcome at WB - recap on last week Walk to CS through Sand Earth to look at the bluebells. Take photos. Read bluebell and dandelion acrostic poems from the Lost Words book. Firelighting (O and J) and refreshments Mindfulness moment Free choice - From interests shown in first week and last week - Kelly kettle lighting and marshmallow toasting, whittling toasting forks and continuing butter knives, acrostic poems, charcoal tins and example pics, chilling by the fire, making toasted cheese sandwiches and cooking sausages and onions. Snacks: Marshmallow and S'moreos, fruit, toasted cheese sandwiches, sausages and toast with various toppings Reflection and Circle Time (only some did journals as we ran out of time) Agree firelighters and snacks for next week Tidy up, transition out and walk back

Session 5 07/05/24, 4-6pm Relaxing, eating and skills	Meet and welcome at WB - recap on last week Walk to CS Crossing the threshold - connecting with the coast redwoods Firelighting and refreshments Mindfulness moment - box breathing Snacks: Marshmallows, S'moreos, fruit, toast and pizza Free choice - Kelly kettle lighting and marshmallow toasting, whittling / continuing butter knives, Hapa Zome, chilling by the fire, making and eating pizza Reflection (journals) and Circle Time Agree firelighters and snacks for next week Tidy up, transition out and walk back
Session 6 14/05/24, 4-6pm Relaxing, eating and skills	Meet and welcome at WB - recap on last week Walk to CS Crossing the threshold Firelighting (J and L) and refreshments Mindfulness moment Free choice - Kelly kettle lighting and marshmallow toasting, continuing butter knives, clay spirit faces, leaf id and printing, chilling by the fire, making cheese toasties and cooking burgers and onions Snacks: Marshmallows, popcorn, toast, cheese toasties, burgers, toast and a variety of toppings Reflection (journals) and Circle Time Agree firelighters and snacks for next week Tidy up, transition out and walk back
Session 7 21/05/24, 4-6pm Relaxing, eating and skills	Meet and welcome at WB - Intro to Matt and recap on last week Walk to CS Crossing the threshold and mindfulness moment Firelighting (Z and N) and refreshments Discussion about next week's celebration event. Free choice - Depends on interests shown in first week and last week - Kelly kettle lighting and marshmallow toasting, cooking, finishing butter knives and J making a wand, chilling by the fire, leaf printing and colour matches Snacks: Marshmallows, S'moreos, fruit, cheese toasties, sausages, toast and a variety of toppings Reflection (journals) and Circle Time Talk about the celebration event and ask young people to think about what they'd like to share with their families Tidy up, transition out and walk back
Session 8 29/05/24, 1-3pm Celebration event	Meet, introductions and welcome at Welcome Building (WB) Walk to Community Shelter (CS) Welcome to parents and carers Young people show family around and serve refreshments Gallery of pictures documenting activities over the programme Young people share what they have been doing over the last 7 weeks Westonbirt Award certificates to be presented by the Arboretum Director Young people to show their families their fire lighting skills, marshmallows toasting Young people and families free to explore the Arboretum for the rest of the afternoon

Monitoring and Evaluation

We used a number of methods to evaluate the programme, including:

- As part of my Forest School training, the Community Coordinator wrote up **observations** after each session. These were used to inform the content of the next session and to focus any participant support or encouragement that might be needed.
- **Wellbeing trees** form - filled in by young people pre and post programme.
- **Journals** - young people were given journals at the start of the programme. At the end of each session there was time for reflection. The young people could use this as a 'gratitude diary' and write down three things they were grateful for that week.
- **Questionnaire** - filled in by participants at the end of the programme.
- **Feedback from parents / carers** - staff and volunteers took note of comments made by parents or carers at the celebration event. The TAYCT also received comments via email during and after the programme finished.
- **Feedback from staff and volunteers.**

Results of the Evaluations

Wellbeing trees

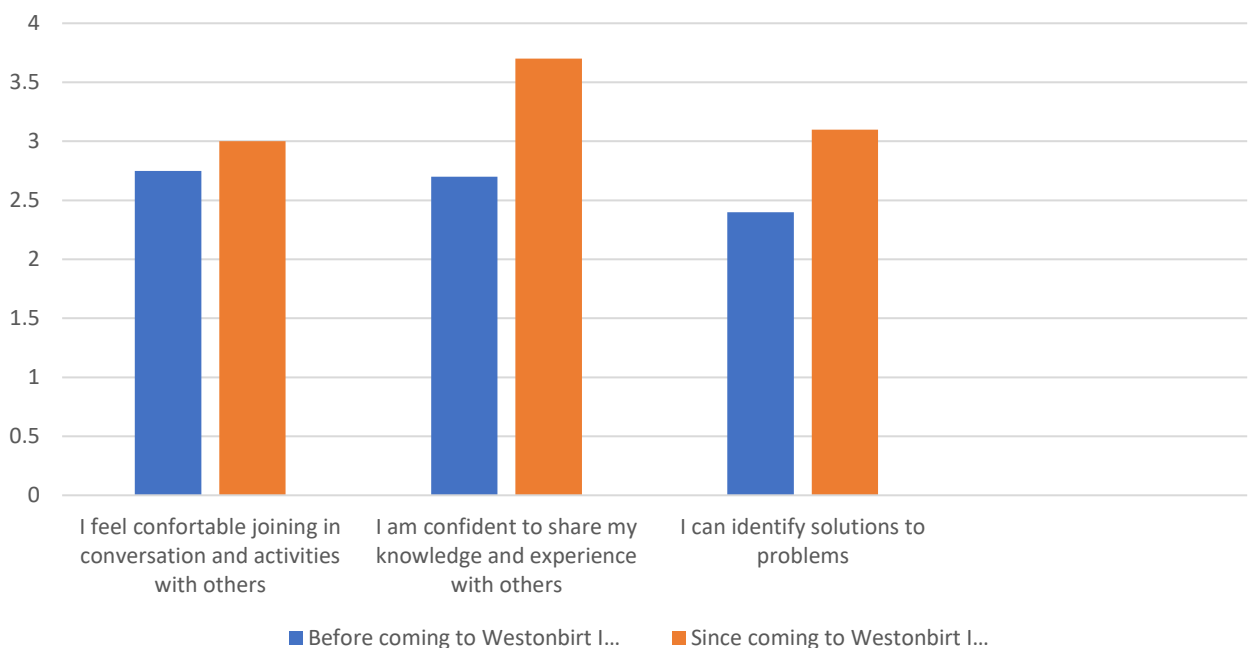
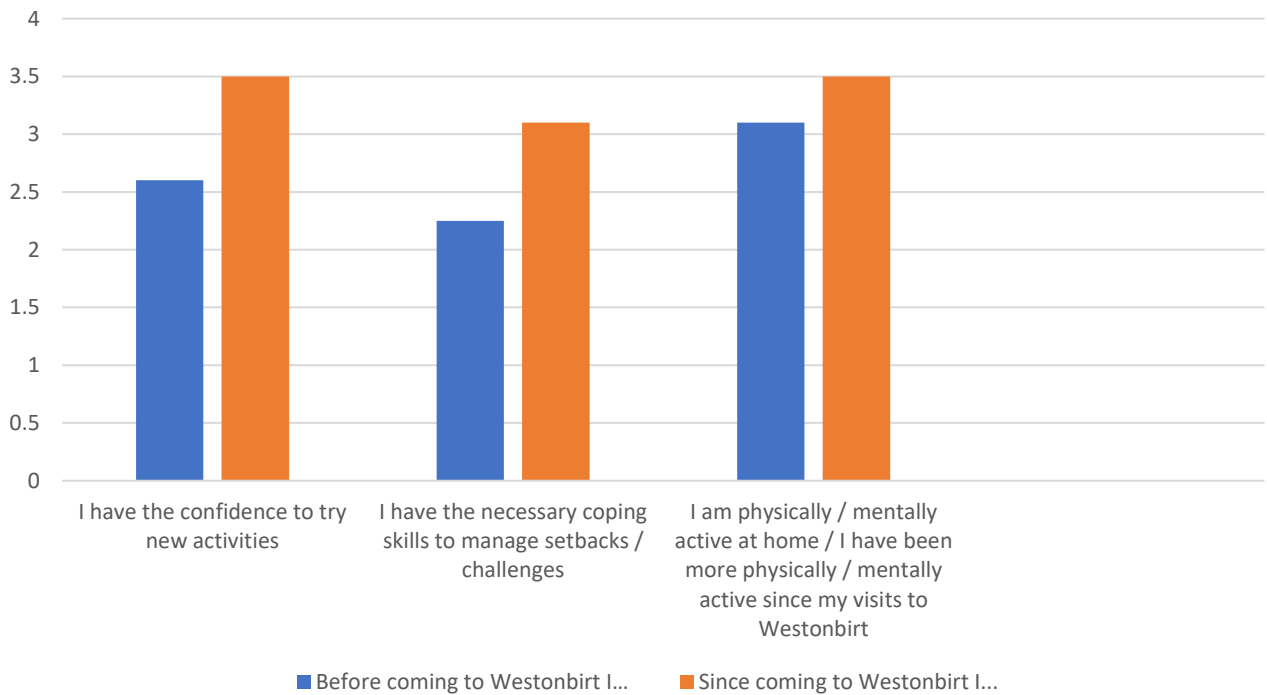
At the beginning of the programme, we asked the young people to fill in the 'Before coming to Westonbirt I...' side of 'Wellbeing tree' sheet. Below an outline of 10 trees are different wellbeing statements. The participant reads each statement and shades the tree to match how they feel on a scale of 1 (none of the time) to five (all of the time). Once completed, each sheet is then sealed in an individual envelope with the name of the participant on it.

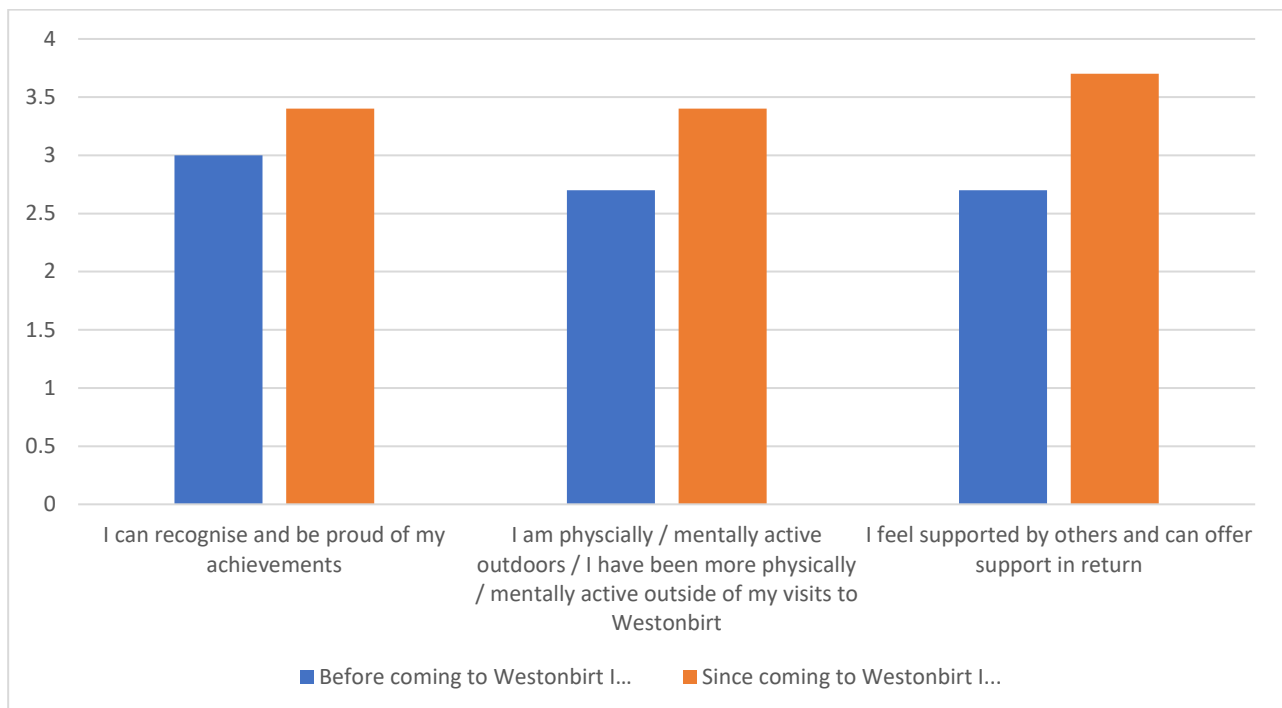
At the end of the programme, each young person was given their envelope back. They opened them and filled in the 'Since coming to Westonbirt I...' side of the sheet, folded up their evaluation sheet and placed it in a wallet. None of the sheets had names on them so that they were anonymous.

Eight of the participants filled in the Wellbeing trees. Five young people did not fill a form in at the end of the programme, so the sample size is very small (n = 8).

Analysis of the sheets showed the following:

Comparison of self-reported wellbeing levels at the beginning of the programme and at the end (n=8)





The columns show an average of the self-reported scores for each statement at the beginning and end of the programme. Participants reported positive changes in how they felt in response to all statements. The statements with the biggest average change from beginning to end of the programme are:

- ‘I have the confidence to try new things’
- ‘I can identify solutions to problems’, and
- ‘I feel supported by others and can offer support in return’

The statement that participants felt the programme had made least impact on, was:
‘I can recognise and proud of my achievements’

Discussion

It should be noted that the sample size for this evaluation is exceedingly small as only eight of the 13 participants filled in the Wellbeing tree form. Overall, some participants were only here to fill the forms in at the beginning but not at the end of the programme. Others only attended a few sessions. A couple (who weren’t there at the celebration event) put their forms into the sealed envelope without filling it in at the beginning of the programme.

For those that placed a blank form into their envelope, was that because they needed more support to understand what to do? Did they need support to read the statements, or maybe they simply didn’t want to participate?

Two forms were filled in at level 5 for all of the statements on both the before and after side. Do these young people feel confident and sorted or did they need more support to understand the task?

Because some of these forms were filled in at level 5 for all questions and the sample size is so small, these factors will have skewed the results and hide the fact that for some young people the programme had a big impact on them.





Journals

Some young people chose not to fill in their journals at all and others didn't attend every week. The gratitude diaries were intended to be personal and private but those that did verbally share tended to say that the things they were most grateful for were: family, friends, pets, playing sport, Ben the therapy dog, nice food and being at Westonbirt.
















Questionnaire

Five of the 13 participants were not able to make the celebration and sharing event. Seven of the eight attendees filled in the end of programme evaluation questionnaire, so the sample size is very small (n= 7). The responses were as follows:

Tell us you what you thought of the programme... (circle the face that is correct for you):

	Not good	OK	Great	Brilliant!
Overall, what did you think of the afterschool programme at Westonbirt?				
Percentage of cohort circling each face.	0%	0%	71 %	29%

Please read each statement and colour in the hand that is correct for you:

	I don't agree		I'm not sure		I agree	
The afterschool programme helped me relax and wind down after school		0%		14%		86%
I had a good time with my friends		0%		14%		86%
I feel more confident in my abilities after the sessions		0%		43%		57%
I feel like I have connected with nature more during the sessions		0%		14%		86%
I learnt new skills during the programme		0%		0%		100%

What did you enjoying doing the most?

"Cooking" x 3

"I enjoyed doing fires and connecting with my friends and make (sic) new ones"

"Making a fire"

"Whittling"

"Making marshmallows" (sic)

If we ran the afterschool club again, how could we make it better?

"It's fine the way it is"

"More pizza (I missed it)"

"I'm not sure"

"No idea"

"N/A"

"Maybe to do lots of different activitys (sic) everyday"

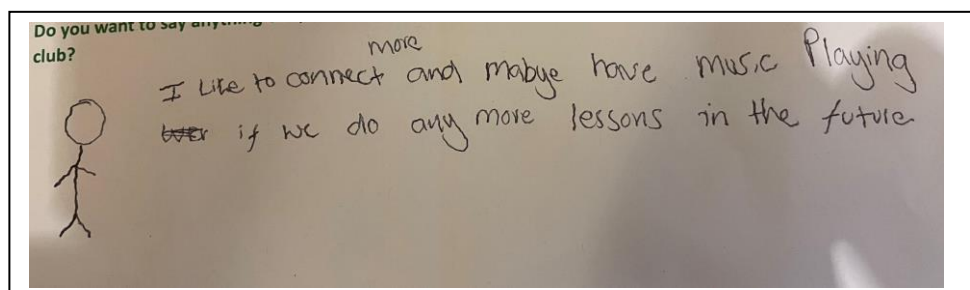
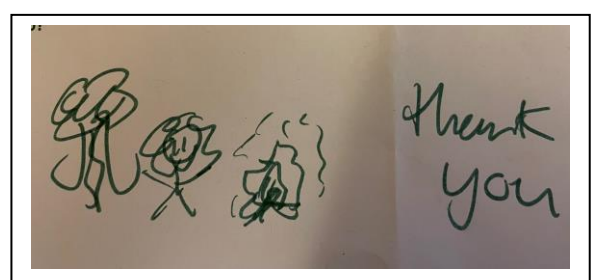
"More activities"

Do you want to say anything else, or draw a picture, that sums up what you thought of the afterschool club?

"It's really fun would do it again"

"It was fun I loved learning new things"

"It was nice"



Feedback from parents / carers

"Normally I ask him what he's been up to, and I get nothing, it's like getting blood out of a stone. After this he came back and told me all about it. We're having a BBQ and he's said he's going to cook, after doing all the cooking here".

"I really appreciate this project and my daughter being able to be part of it. I really worry about her mental health and knowing she could go somewhere quiet and have some time and space was really important."

"My daughter came back after the first meeting saying she didn't want to go again. However, I persuaded her and after that she loved coming and her confidence has improved. Probably Ben (therapy dog) had something to do with that!"

"Thank you so much for letting my son have this opportunity, he has come back telling us all about it and he can't wait for the next one"

"Our granddaughter has been coming home really excited to tell us about everything she has done on the project. She really enjoyed the Westonbirt experiences and when we went there as a family she talked us through one of the well-being activities, leaning against the redwood trees"

Feedback from staff and volunteers

Lisa Hoult (Head of Youth Services at TAYCT) summed up the value of the programme for a participant, *"one student who has been largely absent from school for a number of years with low to no attendance has been actively encouraged to attend school on a Tuesday afternoon by attending the Wild Westonbirt group as he looked forward to catching the mini bus straight after to join the project."*

Nia Crouch (Engagement Manager at Westonbirt) commented, *"From talking to the young people and their families you can see how much they have gained from the programme. They're happy to tell you about all their new fire lighting and cooking skills but when you delve a bit deeper, they tell you how they developed practical outdoor skills, like knife whittling, or built new confidence in trying outdoor experiences. What's great about this programme is that the young people asked for it and they have been given choices throughout to feel a sense of ownership."*

Sue (Community Team volunteer), said, *"It was great to see the children blossoming in confidence as the time went on and able to choose to do whatever they wished. The relaxed atmosphere allowed them to do this rather than being directed to do specific activities. I can't think how you can improve on this!"*

Jill (Community Team volunteer), wrote, *"It was a privilege and pleasure to be involved. I would not change anything as I think you offered a perfect balance of activities. You gave them time to relax but also provided enough to keep them occupied. The variety of activities ensured that everyone found something they wanted to do each week. Talking to the young people made me realise how much some of them have to cope with at home. This project provided them with a safe place to relax, an opportunity to talk (if they wanted to). Although I feel some of them found the mindfulness a challenge, others engaged with it by the end."*

It was amazing to see them blossom over the sessions. Initially they seem very reluctant to try new things and we constantly seem to hear "I can't do that". Then by week 3 and 4 they were running in and talking excitedly about what they were going to do. By the end they were taking ownership of tasks (filling the tippy tap, loading the mule, clearing away the food utensils). The feedback from the parents was overwhelmingly positive. Everyone that I spoke to, said how much their young person had enjoyed it and benefitted from it."

Becky (Youth Worker) *"The Westonbirt Team and volunteers were amazing with the young people, it was really nice to see the same faces each week. The young people got so much out of it and I really saw some of the young people come out of themselves in that setting. I loved my time there too!"*

What went well

- The Forest School, learner-led, collaborative planning approach seemed to be perfect for an afterschool programme and this group.
- We had a great team of adults supporting the programme. This gave us the ability to offer a range of activities, giving plenty of choice to young people to try new things in a safe, supportive atmosphere.
- Having the same familiar adult faces each week allowed it to feel a safe place for the young people where they knew what to expect as the weeks progressed.
- The volunteers have loved the cross-generational aspect as well. One young person said that they wished volunteer Tricia (with Ben the therapy dog), was her granny.
- We had a well-chosen set of young people who were great to work with. It was fantastic that the youth workers knew the young people well enough to identify who would benefit most from the project.
- As one participant had missed a lot of school, it was great that he was able to join the group and that he's started to go back to school as a direct result of the programme. He seemed to have really enjoy the sessions and interacting with two other participants in particular and also found a passion for cooking.
- Ben (the therapy dog) was a real hit, and it was lovely to see how excited some of the young people were to see him at the start of the sessions. One participant almost flew off of the minibus to greet him. In all sessions, young people would spend time sitting and stroking Ben and chatting with their friends - hopefully this canine and human connection time helped their wellbeing.
- Anecdotally, there was an observable difference in the young people over the programme. In the first week their body language was so closed, the majority of them didn't really speak and they didn't eat anything. Over the seven weeks, they grew in confidence, the group gelled brilliantly, and they certainly got the hang of campfire cooking (and eating!). It was a joy to see everyone 'just getting on with it'. The whole programme has been a real pleasure.
- Transport to Westonbirt has been a barrier to this group coming to Westonbirt in the past and nearly proved to be a stumbling block this time. The Head of Youth Services at TAYCT had tried a number of different avenues to borrow a minibus but none had come to fruition. The solution was that one of the TAYCT youth workers trained as a MIDAS minibus driver and was able to use and drive the Sir William Romney school minibus.
- The food was very popular. We quickly realised that some young people needed more than toast and toppings and marshmallows, as they hadn't eaten any lunch (some hadn't eaten

all day). They seemed to appreciate the choice of food and being able to choose what they ate the following week.

- After running out of time in the initial sessions, we set a timer to ensure we finished activities in time for recording reflections at the end of the session.
- As part of her Forest School training, the Community Coordinator wrote up observations after each session. Unless done immediately, it's tricky to remember how everyone's got on, what they'd like to eat and do next session, who might need some extra support. These observations helped to plan and shape the session plans each week.

What didn't go so well

- The sessions seemed to fly by, and for the first few sessions, the Community Coordinator didn't leave enough time for the young people to write their weekly reflections in their journals. This meant that we over-ran which was a challenge for the youth workers who had parents waiting to pick up children from the mini bus stop.
- Not all young people wrote in their journals or completed the evaluations. Did they need extra support with this? Youth workers also noticed that this group of young people were not motivated to write in their journals, it may be that they wanted to avoid anything written/work/ book-based after being in school all day and they perhaps couldn't see the benefit for themselves in doing it.

What we can do better next time

- We were incredibly lucky that every session had good weather but we need to make sure young people wear trousers and appropriate footwear to each session. Folks with long hair must tie it back during the session. Despite TAYCT repeatedly asking parents / carers and young people to bring the clothing they don't always remember so we need to bring spare clothing / hair bands along to sessions in case young people forget.
- Run the programme for a longer period. It really felt like we were just getting to know everyone and the programme has come to an end. For more meaningful change, a longer period would be better. By week six and seven, the group had gelled brilliantly, everyone knew what they were doing and it was a joy to see everyone 'just getting on with it'.
- Identify young people who need support with writing early on. Once we spotted that some of the young people were reluctant to write, some of the volunteers scribed whilst the young people spoke. Explain the benefits on wellbeing of keeping a wellbeing journal better.
- The young people who came to every session got some much out of the programme. For some young people home circumstances meant that they only attended a couple of sessions. Perhaps we would talk to them and find out why they didn't come more. Was it just not their thing? Was something about the programme not working for them and put them off? Or, do they have any suggestions about what we could do to support individuals who might struggle to come in future programmes?
- Look at ways evaluative work and reflections could be captured through observations and verbally by young people and recorded by adults for those young people who shy away from journals.
- Whilst we did mention our Wild Westonbirt monthly youth club, at the end of the programme we should more explicitly signpost young people to the opportunities they can follow onto next at the Arboretum, if they are interested.

Summary and recommendations

In Summary

This programme has been very successful, showing some real, tangible benefits for most of the young people who came regularly. In the first week their body language was so closed, the majority of them didn't really speak and they didn't eat anything. Over the course of the programme, they grew in confidence, the group gelled brilliantly, they certainly got the hang of campfire cooking (and eating!) and it was a joy to see everyone 'just getting on with it'. The whole programme has been a real pleasure and our volunteers have loved the cross-generational aspect as well.

Through the Wellbeing tree evaluation, the majority of young people reported that their wellbeing levels had increased over the course of the programme. The statements with the biggest average change from beginning to end of the programme were: 'I have the confidence to try new things', 'I can identify solutions to problems', and 'I feel supported by others and can offer support in return'.

The end of programme questionnaire showed that 71% of respondents rated the programme as 'Great' and 21% as 'Excellent'. The young people also indicated that the original programme objectives had been met, with the majority of participants agreeing that the programme had helped them to relax and wind down after school; that they'd had a good time with their friends and that they felt they had connected with nature. All respondents agreed that they'd learnt new skills.

Parents / carers, staff and volunteers also commented on the value of the programme and the changes they had seen in the young people. As a direct result of the programme, one young person *"who had been largely absent from school for a number of years"*, returned to school.

Our partnership with Tetbury Area Youth and Community Trust has been fantastic. We therefore recommend that (if all the necessary funding is secured), we run the programme again in 2025, for a longer period of time, so that we can have deeper impact. Programmes like these certainly help us work towards our mission of enabling people to 'connect with trees to improve quality of life'.

