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# **WRITING TREE PROJECT EVALUATION & HANDBOOK**

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# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Writing Tree project was funded by Literature Wales and Natural Resources Wales to deliver the following objectives:

- Improve the well-being of new parents;
- Help families develop a life-long, closer connection to nature;
- Show participants how creative writing can be used to reflect on their relationships with nature;
- Develop the evidence-base for using forest bathing and creative writing to improve well-being in Wales; and
- Provide a model that can be replicated elsewhere.

Section 10 highlights how these objectives have been met.

The project has been an important pilot, exploring how forest bathing and creative writing can complement each other in improving the well-being of new parents and help develop their, and their new baby's, relationship to nature.

Section 5 details the outcomes measures used and the data collected. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected and both tell a complementary story of a successful project, enjoyed by participants.

An important element of the project was the trialling of an approach and considering how it could be delivered more widely in future. Section 8 brings together the lessons learned which are highlighted throughout the evaluation. Section 9 includes the project team's thought on future project delivery. Appendix 1 includes a brief handbook which, along with the evaluation, shows how the project could be delivered elsewhere. However, it was recognised that passion for nature and creative writing are important pre-requisites for replicating the success of Writing Tree. It is important therefore that the right people be identified for delivering the project elsewhere. The project team is also considering ways it could support delivery elsewhere through training.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

### **PROJECT OBJECTIVES**

The first objectives has been amended to reflect the changes made to the scope of the project (see Section 3, Project Development and Planning). The aims of the Writing Tree project are to:

- Improve the well-being of new parents;
- Help families develop a life-long, closer connection to nature;
- Show participants how creative writing can be used to reflect on their relationships with nature;
- Develop the evidence-base for using forest bathing and creative writing to improve well-being in Wales; and
- Provide a model that can be replicated elsewhere.

### **THE SPECIALIST PERINATAL MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE**

The project was hosted by the Anuerin Bevan University Health Board (ABUHB). The Specialist Perinatal Mental Health Service works with expectant mothers (from booking scan) and postnatal mothers (up until the baby's first birthday), who are experiencing or have previously experienced significant mental health difficulties and are at risk of relapsing during the perinatal period. The service is staffed by a multidisciplinary team which includes community psychiatric nurses, psychiatrists, psychologists, an occupational therapist, a specialist mental health midwife, a nursery nurse and peer mentors. The aim of the service is to improve the mental health of the mother, to support the parent infant relationship and consider the needs of the wider family unit. Prior to the Writing Tree project there was no specific intervention for fathers or couples offered by the perinatal service, although the service can now offer couples therapy to a small number of the families they support.

The service is guided by evidence based practice to determine the interventions on offer. However, as a relatively new specialty in mental health it is important to innovate to develop new practices to meet the needs of new parents. As an under resourced service with high demands it is very difficult within the current service to develop and

fund new approaches. Therefore, the development of this project would not have been possible without the funding provided by the grant.

### **FOREST BATHING**

Shinrin-yoku, or forest bathing, is an immersive nature experience developed in Japan. With increasing evidence for the benefits of shinrin-yoku, the Japanese government now includes it as a treatment within its health system. The Writing Tree nature sessions were based on this approach.

Spending time in nature is beneficial for both physical and mental health – research has shown the benefits of nature in health outcomes, recovery and general wellbeing.

Studies have shown that nature-based activities can reduce blood pressure, lower cortisol (stress hormone) levels and improve concentration and memory. Certain trees also release chemicals, called phytoncides, which have been found to boost the immune system.

### **CREATIVE WRITING**

Creative writing and reading were used by the project to help parents reflect on their families' relationship to nature and to maintain the experience of nature beyond the forest. A major output of the project was a collection of participants' writing. A printed book containing the writing done during the project was presented to participants. The intention is that having a physical book in their homes will help parents remember and reflect on their immersive time in nature. Furthermore, parents will be able to read the stories to their babies as they grow, sharing with the next generation their nature experiences and hopes.

### 3. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING

#### ELIGIBILITY

The project was initially developed as an activity for fathers to develop their relationship with nature and to care for their well-being. Despite the positive response from fathers and mothers when told about the project, actual sign-up was very low. It was decided that a different approach was needed to get fathers to come to the sessions. One of the pieces of feedback received was that while it was useful that the project was delivered on a Saturday morning, this conflicted with the time fathers had with their babies. Based on feedback and experience of running other groups, it was decided that opening up the project to both parents, attending with their babies, would encourage greater sign-up.

**Lesson learned:** It was important that time with the project complemented rather than competed with family time.

This adjustment resulted in the project reaching the number of people needed to make it feasible. In the end the project was delivered to twelve parents and seven babies. Despite the project having to be changed from a sole focus on fathers, we found there to be tremendous value in engaging with families. Much of the feedback received highlighted the opportunity to spend nurturing time together as a family in nature as a major benefit of the project. It was also felt that including the whole family led to better nature connection, as families subsequently spent more time in nature following the sessions.

Due to the nature of the sessions developed, it was not possible to include older children and therefore this did exclude some families from the project. All families who attended were first time parents. It was felt that parents would not have had the relaxing benefit of the group, or the same opportunities for writing had older children been present, and a very different group programme would have needed to have been developed to engage older children in the sessions. Having a group of first time parents also promoted group cohesion as they were all at a similar family life stage.

**Lesson learned:** Including whole families brought additional benefits to the project that a focus solely on fathers may have missed.

**Lesson learned:** It is important to think about who attends to promote group cohesion and ensure the activities are suitable for all. Different projects could be developed for antenatal couples and couples with a baby and older children.

## LOCATION

The project was developed in partnership with ABUHB and therefore needed to be delivered in a location central within the health board's area. Locations under consideration needed to be accessible by car and with paths that were pushchair friendly. Furthermore, the forest bathing sessions needed to be located close to a venue suitable to conduct the creative writing sessions.

A number of locations were identified using Natural Resources Wales' and the Woodland Trust's websites. Sites were visited to check for their appropriateness. Some were found to be too busy to allow for a quiet forest bathing experience while others did not contain the right kind of forest for an immersive experience (e.g. a dense pine forest with little ground level growth).

**Lesson learned:** Locations need to contain a variety of tree and plant growth, including ferns and moss, to allow for a variety of sensory experiences.

A visit to Wentwood forest was promising and a subsequent re-visit on a Saturday morning (at the time the sessions would be held) confirmed it as a quiet woodland. The forest contained beech, pine and a variety of other trees. There were also a variety of ferns, moss, and bluebells in spring. We were concerned about the lack of facilities in the car park (no toilets) but found a nearby cafe that could be used after the session. The Glade Tearooms provided an ideal location for the creative writing sessions. Outdoor covered seating amongst trees meant the writing sessions could continue the sense of being in nature.

## SESSION PLANNING

Session activities were based on clinical practice and researching a variety of approaches to forest bathing. The project team also undertook a forest bathing session themselves to understand the experience from the participants point of view. The planning of individual sessions was carried out over a number of visits to the project location, trying different paths and experiencing what the forest had to offer. A trial run was carried out by the project team to check timings. In the end the first session had to be changed last minute (see Section 4, Overview of Sessions - Session One).

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Delivering the project required a lot of preparation, including: visiting and developing familiarisation with the site; reading up on forest bathing and nature; preparing pamphlets for recruiting participants; identifying readings; putting together handouts; and planning the forest bathing activities and creative sessions. The project team's enthusiasm and commitment to forest bathing, creative writing, nature and helping the participants was important to the project's success.

**Lesson learned:** The project team need to be knowledgeable and passionate about nature and creative writing. Communicating this to participants was an important part of the project achieving its objectives.



## 4. OVERVIEW OF SESSIONS

The following provides an overview of the individual sessions. The overview of session one is also included in Appendix 1: Project Delivery Handbook as an example session.

In total, five couples and their babies had the opportunity to experience eight and a half hours of forest bathing and creative writing. Additionally, three hours of creative writing support time was offered, but not taken up. Through the mop-up session, an additional two mothers and their babies and a staff member interested in developing a similar project experienced two hours of forest bathing and creative writing.

Leading the sessions was a fulfilling and enjoyable experience for the project team. Despite project delivery requiring the team to give up some of their free time to work on a Saturday morning, the experience felt restorative and beneficial to their own well-being.

As a creative practitioner, the experience of delivering the Writing Tree has had an effect on Gwyn's practice as an educator and writer. As an educator, he has taken some of the practices developed during the project and used them in his teaching of university undergraduates. As a writer, the sessions have had an impact on his approach to nature. Previously, nature had been a setting for his writing, but he has now developed a greater appreciation for how he depicts and engages with nature. He is interested in giving nature a voice, seeing it as something that should not only be represented as a setting or metaphor, but as something of interest and importance in of itself.

All sessions were held in Wentwood Forest on a Saturday morning. Feedback from participants highlighted that it would have been difficult to attend, especially for the fathers, had it not been held during the weekend.

**Lesson learned:** Sessions should be held during the weekend to enable both parents to attend.

### SESSION ONE

The first session was attended by four couples and their babies and lasted three hours in total. This session was delivered by a Principle Clinical Psychologist, a Creative Writer and an Assistant Psychologist.

When the project team visited the site on the morning of the first session they found that there had been fly-tipping along the planned route. It was felt that seeing the fly-tipped waste would be very detrimental to the experience and would prevent participants from feeling they were immersed in nature. However, because the project team had spent time exploring options throughout the forest in preparation, they were able to quickly plan an alternative route and amend activities accordingly.

**Lesson learned:** The project team should develop a high level of familiarity with the site, develop a 'plan B' and be on-site at least half an hour ahead of the session.

The weather during the first session was wet and the project team were concerned that participants would not turn up. However, everybody who was due to attend made it. Discussing the experience with participants, there was a sense of achievement for having gone outside in the rain and also an appreciation for the experience of being in the woods during the rain.

**Lesson learned:** Weather should not be seen as an impediment to participation and it is worth warning participants that they should be prepared/dressed appropriately for different weather.

### *Forest bathing*

Activities included:

- Introducing participants to the idea of forest bathing;
- Outlining the order of the day;
- Noting exercise: one parent describing that they could see, hear and smell. The other parent wrote what they described. Swap so that both had chance to describe;
- Split into two groups: Mothers and baby - learning about fractal patterns in nature and identifying and describing shapes to baby, fathers - listening exercise; and
- Back together: outlined benefits of awe before couples shared awe view followed by sharing of nature memories;

### *Creative writing*

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Activities included:

- Moving to a cafe based in the woods nearby;
- Refreshments and time for couples to socialise;
- Outlined plan for hardcopy book and publishing writing online;
- Brief overview of history and form of the haiku followed by using words gathered during the earlier noting exercise to write haiku;
- Participants read out some of their haikus;
- Participants used the nature memories they shared earlier to start writing a story or poem to read to their babies as they grow. This activity was to be completed outside the forest sessions; and
- Giving out a handout of examples of nature writing for participants to read in their own time.

## SESSION TWO

The second session was attended by five couples and their babies and lasted three hours in total. This session was delivered by a Principle Clinical Psychologist, a Creative Writer and an Assistant Psychologist.

The second session was held during a heat wave. Experiencing very different weather conditions allowed participants to experience a different side to the forest, which was also reflected in their creative writing. Forest bathing was additionally pleasurable for participants during the second session as the temperature amongst the trees was a lot cooler.

### *Forest bathing*

Activities included:

- Giving an overview of what had been learned about forest bathing at the previous session;

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- Walking slowly through the woods noticing light through the leaves;
- Barefoot walking;
- Forest breathing and experiencing the scents of the forest, including crushing pine needles between hands to release their aroma; and paced breathing (slow breaths in and out, with a longer out breath), breathing in the smells of the forest.
- Shared an awe inspiring view; and
- Split into two groups: Mothers and baby - listening exercise, fathers - learning about fractal patterns in nature and identifying and describing shapes to baby.

### *Creative writing*

Activities included:

- Moving to a cafe based in the woods nearby;
- Refreshments and time for couples to socialise;
- Outlined plan for hardcopy book and publishing writing online;
- Brief reminder of the form of the haiku followed by writing a haiku;
- Participants read out some of their haiku;
- Invited participants to share the stories they have been working on in their own time;
- Pairs discussion, thinking about ways in which they are already creative, e.g. do they knit, or play an instrument, photography. Thinking about how those skills can help their writing;
- Talked about ways they could keep their nature experience going, including a handout on different levels of nature experience (from a walk in a local park, to camping in the wild); and



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- Couples worked together to compose a letter to their babies on what nature means to them and their hope for the baby's future relationship with nature. Couples also encouraged to write what they will do to help their babies develop a relationship with nature.

**Lesson learned:** Writing haikus was much more challenging for participants without the earlier noting exercise (as was done in session one). Haiku writing should be accompanied by the noting activity.

## SESSION THREE

The third session was attended by four couples and lasted two and a half hours. This session was delivered by a Principle Clinical Psychologist and a Creative Writer.

The third session was a celebration event to share the book with the couples. The session was held at the Glade Tearoom, where the creative writing part of sessions one and two were held. The session consisted of forest bathing in the trees close to the cafe, reading participant work and the opportunity to do some further haiku writing.

**Lesson learned:** A celebration event, held between one and three months after the second session, helped keep the nature experience going and allowed participants to share how they had engaged with nature since the previous session. It also gave participants the opportunity time to reconnect as a group.

## ADDITIONAL SESSIONS

### *Online writing sessions*

Three one-hour online writing sessions were provided to support participants in writing their nature memory stories or poems. However, nobody attended these sessions. Feedback indicated that the group were comfortable that they could e-mail if they needed help with their writing.

### *Mop-up session*

A two hour mop-up session was arranged for couples who were unable to make the main sessions provided, or for mothers whose partners could not make it. The session was attended by two mothers and their babies and a member of staff from the Primary Care Mental Health Support Service who has an interest in developing nature-based approaches to mental health support.

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The mop-up session focused on the activities that had been the most popular and most easily delivered in a shortened time slot. Activities included: noting and haiku writing, awe view, listening and scents of the forest exercise.

This session was delivered during a weekday by a Principle Clinical Psychologist.

## 5. OUTCOME MEASURES

### WELL-BEING - QUANTITATIVE DATA

Data was collected ahead of the first session and after the second session using the 14 item Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS). The WEMWBS produces individual scores ranging from 14 to 70, with a higher score indicating higher well-being. Participants were sent a link to self-complete the questionnaire on-line. Six individuals completed the questionnaire ahead of the sessions and six completed after the sessions.

#### Overall Data Comparison

The average score for the group ahead of project participation was 40.5. This increased to 48.7 following participation. This represents an increase of over 20 per cent in wellbeing between before attending the first Writing Tree session and after attending the second session. The UK mean score is 51.0.<sup>1</sup> The average participant score went from well below the UK mean score to being only 2.3 points lower.

All six responses before the first session were below the UK mean score. However, following the second session, half of the six responses were above the UK mean score.

The greatest change in response to an individual question was to 'I've been feeling good about myself.' The average score for this question ahead of the first session was 2.3. Following the second session, the average score was 3.3, an almost 43 per cent increase in score.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/sci/med/research/platform/wemwbs/using/howto/>

### Individual Data Comparison

The following table focuses on the data gathered from four participants that could be matched across both questionnaires.

Individual	WEMWBS score before first session	WEMWBS score after second session	Change in score	Percentage change
#1	28	45	17	61%
#2	50	52	2	4%
#3	43	48	5	12%
#4	43	52	9	21%

It is evident from the overall and individual data comparison that there was an improvement in well-being between prior to the first Writing Tree session and after the second Writing Tree session. Caution should be taken in interpreting these results as individuals will have received other support. However, the positive change seen is supported by the qualitative data and feedback response below.

## WELL-BEING - QUALITATIVE DATA

### Three Words

Ahead of the first session, participants were asked to use three words to describe their baby and three words to describe themselves as parents. This was repeated following the second session. The results are presented below as word clouds, where the size of a word reflects its comparative frequency.

#### *Words to describe your baby*

There is little difference to note in the words to describe baby in relation to mood or well-being, but it is interesting that the words used after the sessions are more active words. This may be something to collect further data on in future projects as well as further considering the implication of parents using more active words to describe their babies.



Before:

funny **happy** inquisitive observant perfect playful  
sensitive **smiley** sociable

After:

active alert cheerful communicative **curious**  
happy inquisitive loving mobile persistent playful

*Words to describe you as a parent*

The change in words used by participants to describe themselves can be seen in the replacement of 'anxious' as the word most used by 'loving' after the sessions. The less frequently used word also show a difference in how participants viewed themselves after the Writing Tree sessions. Each word used after the sessions showed participants with positive views of themselves as parents.

Before:

**anxious** attentive caring cheerful  
comforting depressed encouraging loving neurotic patient

After:

attentive caring climbing-frame dedicated encouraging enthusiastic  
fun grounded **loving** organised supportive

**Single Words**

Immediately before and after sessions one and two, participants were asked to use one word to describe how they felt. This data was collected in the car park ahead of the session and in the cafe following the session.

The words have been grouped according to whether they were positive or negative descriptors.

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### Session One

I feel...

	<b>Positive descriptor</b>	<b>Negative descriptor</b>
<b>Before</b>	Awake, Excited, Ready to walk, Calm	Pressurised, Anxious, Tired, Anxious
<b>After</b>	Content, Relaxed, Creative, Revitalised, Re-charged, Relaxed and loving, Relaxed	Sad

Ahead of the first session, the number of positive and negative descriptors used by participants to describe how they felt was the same. However, following the session, the majority were positive descriptors and only one negative descriptor (sad) was used.

### Session Two

I feel...

	<b>Positive descriptor</b>	<b>Negative descriptor</b>
<b>Before</b>	Happy, Happy, Relaxed, Positive, Optimistic, chilled	Headachy, Tired x 2, Rushed, Flustered, Rushed
<b>After</b>	Happy/content, Relaxed/grateful, Super happy and chilled, Calmer, Relaxed, Pleased, Bright, Calm, Happy, Full of ideas/Relaxed	

Again, the number of positive and negative descriptors goes from being almost even to being overwhelmingly positive. This data shows the positive impact on the mood of participants from spending time in nature and taking part in the Writing Tree project.

## NATURE CONNECTION

In addition to measuring well-being, the project also monitored how connected to nature participants felt. The Nature Connection Index (NCI) was used. A weighted questionnaire consisting of six questions is used to produce a score ranging from 0 to 100, showing a person’s connection to nature (the higher the score the more connected). Data was collected ahead of the first session and again after the second session through an on-line form. There were six responses to each questionnaire.

Ahead of the first session, the mean score for the group was 48.2. This is lower than the UK mean score for adults (16 and over), which is 61.6.<sup>2</sup> Within the group the scores varied from 32 to 90. Excluding the lowest (32) and highest score (90) the other scores were in the range 34 to 53.

Following the second session, the mean score for the group was 64.5. This is higher than the UK mean score for adults (16 and over). However, with the Writing Tree respondents there was a great deal of variability, with the lowest score being 28 and the highest being 100. Excluding the lowest (28) and highest score (100) the other scores were in the range 43 to 86.

Of the six responses, we were able to match four responses across both questionnaires. These anonymised individual results can be seen below.

Individual	NCI score before first session	NCI score after second session	Change in score	Percentage change
#1	90	100	10	11%
#2	41	71	30	73%
#3	39	86	47	121%
#4	53	59	6	11%

**Lesson learned:** To gather better well-being and nature connection data, in-person collection methods should have been considered. Options could have include using tablets on site or using staff to gather data in person.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/11/12/3250>



## FEEDBACK RESPONSE

### Feedback Questionnaire

Participants were asked to complete an open-ended feedback questionnaire after the second session. They provided a score (out of five) rating their Writing Tree experience (5=Excellent, 4=Good, 3=Neutral, 2=Not very good, 1=Awful). The average rating provided was 4.5.

Below are summaries of responses to the open-ended questions:

*What was helpful/useful/enjoyable about the Writing Tree Group?*

Responses to this question have been grouped thematically.

*Positive Experience:*

'Amazing experience'

'Felt good'

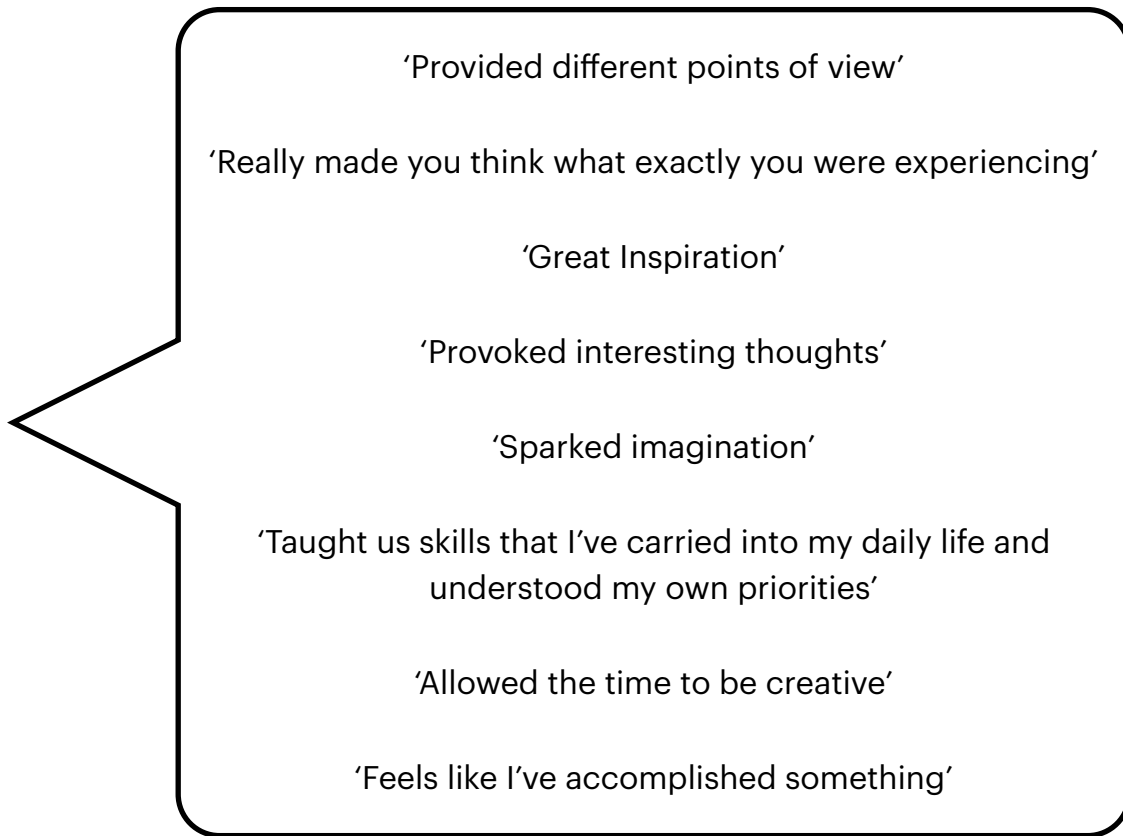
'Excited to have a creative piece of work to give to my daughter'

'Time to reflect, relax and appreciate nature'

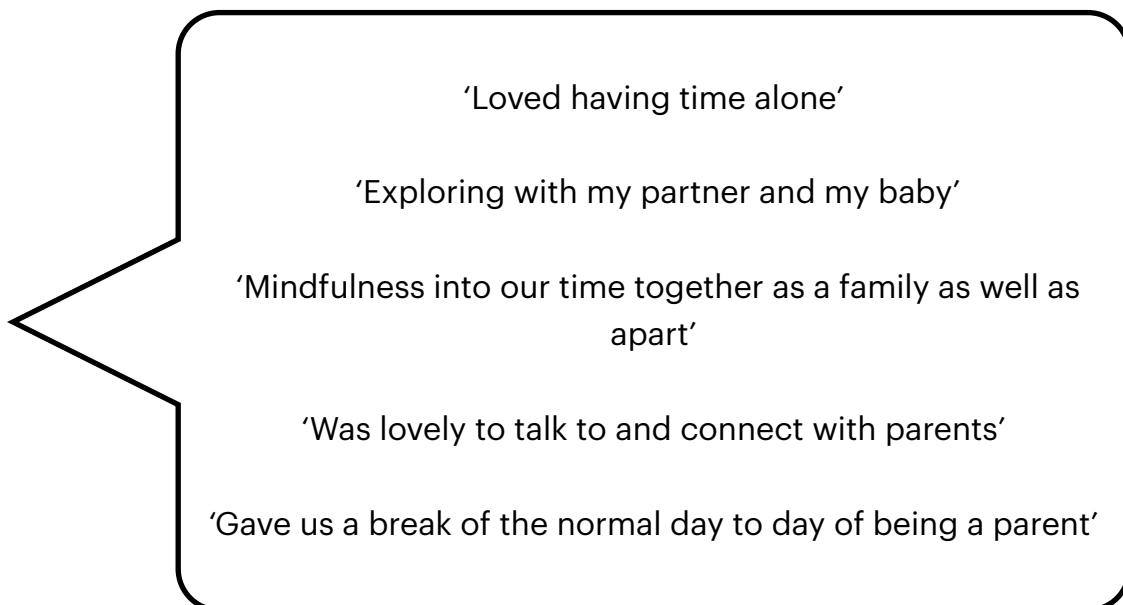
'Fantastic way to build mindfulness'

'I enjoyed the barefoot and walking and meditation too'

*Thought Provoking:*



*Strengthening Relationships (with self, baby, partner and peers):*



*What was unhelpful/not useful/ not enjoyable about the Writing Tree Group?*

'I struggled with attending the virtual writing groups as they were at a time in the evening which didn't work with our routine. However I knew that if I needed help or support with the writing that I could email'

'Weather (out of our control)'

'Another session was needed, with one more walk and a chance to focus on getting started with writing'

*What, if anything, would help improve the Writing Tree Group?*

'Perhaps 3 forest sessions would be good as the first one is sort of brand new experience/ people/ feelings. Then the second session you know more of what to expect and can relax more into the experience. Then a third session would be good to finish off and solidify the concept of the forest bathing and more support with the writing'

'More sessions'

'Perhaps one visit to a natural site by water, even if a tiny creek'

'I didn't have the time to write/finish writing the story'

*Any other comments?*

'I loved the entire experience. Forest bathing is absolutely amazing and something we will be taking forward to do as a family'

'This was great and I'd love to do it again'

'The cafe choice was great too, keep up the good work'

**Lesson learned:** Based on feedback we added a third session, which was a celebration event including some of the most popular activities from the previous sessions. We also used the opportunity to do an activity next to flowing water.

### **Additional Feedback**

Feedback was also received from participants by e-mail and communicated through Specialist Perinatal Mental Health staff.

#### *E-mail*

'We've absolutely loved experiencing forest bathing...We've felt so calm and happy while being out in the forest with our baby and it's something we will definitely be continuing to do as a family.

'The creative writing aspect of it has been surprisingly enjoyable, allowing us to access that part of ourselves which often gets overlooked or pushed to the bottom of the list. It's been a great tool for processing what we experienced along the walk and also for tapping into past memories, the concept of awe and how we can pass these along to our child.'

'The experience has allowed me to reconnect with nature and let out my creative side! Highlights were walking barefoot, forest breathing and the poetry. It acted as an important reminder for us, as new parents, to take our time and actually enjoy life as it is now.'

*Communicated from staff*

Staff in the perinatal service have passed on praise and gratitude for the project. One participant shared with her community psychiatric nurse that the experience had helped her become more confident about going out with her baby. The same participant also reported that her husband had been supporting her by looking after the baby so that she could spend calm time in nature by herself.

## 6. CREATIVE OUTPUT

The creative output was gathered together in a book for participants to keep. The book contained: the haiku written as part of the first and second sessions; the stories and poems to read to their babies as they grow based on nature memories; and, letters to their babies expressing their hopes for their future relationship with nature. The haiku and stories and poems have also been shared on the Writing Tree website ([writingtree.cymru](http://writingtree.cymru)).

The hardcopy book was enthusiastically received by participants, with some requesting an additional copy for their baby as a keepsake.

A worksheet of the writing exercises was prepared and provided to the couple who had been unable to attend the first session.

In addition to trying some creative writing, participants were read nature writing and poems during the forest bathing and creative writing sessions. A handout of nature writing was also prepared for participants to take home at the end of the first session.

Writing read or handed out included:

The poems 'beech' and 'oak' from *The Lost Spells* by Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris.

Haikus by Matsuo Bashō and Katsushike Kokusai.

The short story 'That Colour' by Jon McGregor.

The non-fiction piece 'Untamed' by Shamshad Khan.

The poem 'The Peace of Wild Things' from *The Peace of Wild Things* by Wendell Berry.

An extract from 'The Snail and the Whale' by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler.

An extract from *Marzahn, Mon Amour* by Katja Oskamp.

## **7. WORKING WITH PARTNERS**

The project team presented the project and its outcomes to the perinatal community of practice, a pan-Wales forum for sharing with perinatal service providers. The response to the project was very positive.

We were interviewed and filmed for a video Natural Resources Wales is producing to showcase its arts projects.

Sarah provided the Specialist Perinatal Mental Health Team with a taster session to develop their awareness of forest bathing.

A member of staff from the primary care mental health support service attended the mop-up session to gain an understanding of our project.

Sarah presented the project at the ABUHB adult psychology leads group.



## 8. LESSONS LEARNED

The following lessons were identified throughout the evaluation:

- It was important that time with the project complemented rather than competed with family time.
- Including whole families brought additional benefits to the project that a focus solely on fathers may have missed.
- It is important to think about who attends to promote group cohesion and ensure the activities are suitable for all. Different projects could be developed for antenatal couples and couples with a baby and older children.
- Locations need to contain a variety of tree and plant growth, including ferns and moss, to allow for a variety of sensory experiences.
- The project team need to be knowledgeable and passionate about nature and creative writing. Communicating this to participants was an important part of the project achieving its objectives.
- Sessions should be held during the weekend to enable both parents to attend.
- Weather should not be seen as an impediment to participation and it is worth warning participants that they should be prepared/dressed appropriately for different weather.
- The project team should develop a high level of familiarity with the site, develop a 'plan B' and be on-site at least half an hour ahead of the session.
- Writing haikus was much more challenging for participants without the earlier noting exercise (as was done in session one). Haiku writing should be accompanied by the noting activity.
- A celebration event, held between one and three months after the second session, helped keep the nature experience going and allowed participants to share how they had engaged with nature since the previous session. It also gave participants the opportunity time to reconnect as a group.

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- To gather better well-being and nature connection data, in-person collection methods should have been considered. Options could have include using tablets on site or using staff to gather data in person.
- Based on feedback we added a third session, which was a celebration event including some of the most popular activities from the previous sessions. We also used the opportunity to do an activity next to flowing water.

## 9. FUTURE PROJECT DELIVERY

There is enthusiasm within the perinatal community to continue this project, however additional funding would be required to run the project as outlined here, to pay for a writer and to provide refreshments for couples in the Glade Tea Rooms. Ideally NHS staff should be paid overtime to run the project so it does not compete with other clinical commitments and financially compensates them for giving up time at the weekend. Although the project could be run at lower cost during the week and without the involvement of a writer, it would limit involvement of fathers, be harder for clinicians to support the writing tasks, and the NHS would struggle to pay for the tea room which provided a fantastic creative and nurturing space for writing. The mop up session has demonstrated that it is possible to run single writing tree sessions for mums in the perinatal period, and the feedback we received indicated some positive benefits which suggests it would be worth repeating.

We would be keen to consider how we could have a greater reach with this project. We feel the model developed would be of great benefit to staff wellbeing, particularly in the current climate where the NHS is experiencing difficulties in recruitment and retention and there are higher levels of staff stress in the NHS than any other UK employer.<sup>3</sup> We feel this model could be offered to whole staff teams and could provide a way to support wellbeing, whilst also enhancing nature connection. By inspiring whole staff teams to spend more time connecting with nature we would hope they would be more likely to talk to the service users they work with about the benefits of nature connection, and may be inspired to develop their own nature connection projects.

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<sup>3</sup> *Compassionate Leadership* by Michael A West

## 10. CONCLUSION

Having overcome initial problems with recruitment the project has successfully delivered its objectives. Not only has the project delivered its objectives but it is felt that it has enjoyed additional benefits, including contributing to the well-being of the project team and deepened their already established interest in nature. Section 8 shows that the project has been an opportunity for learning that would contribute to the delivery of the project in future. Section 10 highlights the project team's hopes for the future and its ambition for delivering forest bathing and creative writing to more people.

The following shows the way that the objectives set out in Section 2 have been delivered:

### **Improve the well-being of new parents**

The outcome data and feedback response has shown that the well-being of project participants has improved. WEMWBS data, measuring well-being, showed an improvement, with an increase of over 20 per cent in the average score.

### **Help families develop a life-long, closer connection to nature**

Participants have reported making a greater effort to spend time in nature as a family after taking part in the project. The letters parents wrote to their babies showed their commitment to raising a child who enjoyed a positive relationship with nature. NCI data showed an increase in mean score before and after participation. Before the project, the mean score was lower than the UK average, whereas following participation it was higher than the UK average.

### **Show participants how creative writing can be used to reflect on their relationships with nature**

The creative writing element of the project was an aspect that the team were apprehensive about, knowing that it may be unfamiliar to participants. However, by integrating the creative writing with the forest bathing activities and by adopting a supportive approach, engagement with the creative writing was high. Participants fed back how much they enjoyed the creative writing element and how it had allowed them to reflect on their time in the forest. Participants also felt that it allowed them to

enjoy an activity that they felt they had not had time for since becoming parents. We received creative writing done in their own time, outside of the project, from six participants. We were very happy to receive so many, which shows the high level of engagement with creative writing.

### **Develop the evidence-base for using forest bathing and creative writing to improve well-being in Wales**

The project collected quantitative and qualitative data on the project's outcomes. This is the first time, as far as we are aware, that data had been collected on using forest bathing and creative writing together to support well-being. Hopefully, future project delivery can build on this, working to improve response rate and working with greater sample sizes.

### **Provide a model that can be replicated elsewhere**

This evaluation and its appendices provide an outline of how a similar project could be delivered in future. The evaluation has also highlighted lessons learned in the process of delivering the Writing Tree project. Hopefully, these lessons will help inform future approaches. The project team is also considering ways it could support delivery elsewhere through training. It was recognised that passion for nature and creative writing are important pre-requisites for replicating the success of Writing Tree. It is important therefore that the right people be identified for delivering the project elsewhere.

# APPENDIX 1: PROJECT DELIVERY HANDBOOK

## Project planning

As with any project, it is important to begin with clear objectives. The objectives used for the Writing Tree can be adapted to use with a different target audience (see Section 2).

The project team should be familiar with mindfulness and forest bathing approaches (Appendix 2 contains some suggested reading, but the project team should be trained or experienced). Likewise, the project team should include a creative practitioner who is trained or experienced in teaching creative writing.

The project team should take time to identify an appropriate wooded location. The location should:

- be quiet enough to enjoy some calm and limited privacy during activities;
- be remote enough that participants feel they are in nature. A large city park may do as long as it is quiet enough;
- be close enough to a venue that can support creative writing; and
- include paths that are suitable for the client group (e.g. for new parents that path should be appropriate for buggies).

Having identified a suitable location the project team should spend time familiarising themselves with the woods. This time should be used to consider what activities best suit specific spots in the forest. Thought should also be given to the time it would take the target client group to slowly follow the trail they choose. A timed practice run will help the project team refine the forest bathing experience.

The venue used for the creative writing session should include amenities participants may need after two and a half hours in the woods. Ideally, the venue should be able to provide refreshments. Providing tea/coffee and cake during the Writing Tree project helped participants to feel cared for and nurtured.

## **Project Delivery**

Readings should be used to inspire participants and help them reflect on nature (see Appendix 2 for a suggested reading list). The following is an example session plan, based on the first session of the Writing Tree project. However, activities should be chosen based on the client group and the forest itself.

The project team should be on site early to check the path and to collect any litter that may disrupt the immersive nature experience. We would also advise that the project team have a backup plan in case of fly-tipping, fallen trees and adverse weather.

## **Example Session Plan**

### *Forest bathing*

- Introduction to forest bathing.
- Outline order of the day.
- Noting exercise: in partners, one person describes what they see, hear and smell. The other partner writes what they described. Swap so that both have a chance to describe.
- Learn about fractal patterns in nature followed by identifying and describing shapes.
- Listening exercise - time spent with eyes closed listening to the sounds of the forest, trying to distinguish sounds that are nearby and far away.
- Learn about benefits of awe and enjoy an awe view followed by the sharing of nature memories.

### *Creative writing*

- Refreshments and some time to socialise.
- Brief overview of history and form of the haiku followed by using words gathered during the earlier noting exercise to write haiku.



## **WRITING TREE**

- Participants read out some of their haiku.
- Participants use the nature memories they shared earlier to start planning/writing a story or poem. This activity should be completed outside the forest sessions

### **Project monitoring**

The Writing Tree project used the WEMWBS to measure well-being and the NCI to measure nature connection. We recommend complimenting quantitative data collection with a qualitative approach. This will give a more nuanced understanding of participants experience.

## **APPENDIX 2: RECOMMENDED READING**

### **Forest bathing and related reading**

*Into the Forest* by Dr Qing Li

*Your Guide to Forest Bathing* by M. Amos Clifford

*The Nature Fix* by Florence Williams

*The Wild Remedy* by Emma Mitchell

### **Nature**

*Finding the Mother Tree* by Suzanna Simard

*The Wild Isles* edited by Patrick Barkham

*Entangled Life* by Merlin Sheldrake

*Islands of Abandonment* by Cal Flyn

*What a Plant Knows* by Daniel Chamovitz

*Underland* by Robert Macfarlane

*Rewild Yourself* by Simon Barnes

### **Fiction and Poetry**

*The Lost Spells* by Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris

Haikus by Matsuo Bashō and Katsushike Kokusai

*The Peace of Wild Things* by Wendell Berry

*The Island of Missing Trees* by Elif Shafak

## WRITING TREE

*When I Sing, Mountains Dance* by Irene Solà

### **Children's Books**

*The Snail and the Whale* by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler

*The Borrowers* by Mary Norton

*Blueberries for Sal* by Robert McCloskey

*Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak

*The Last Wild* by Piers Torday

*My Neighbour Totoro* by Hayo Miyazaki and Tsugiko Kubo

*Diary of a Young Naturalist* by Dara McAnulty

*The House Without Windows* by Barbara Newhall Follett

*The Lost Words* by Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris