

The Spring to Life Project



Evaluation Report June 2015

“This is a beautiful project”

Spring to Life participant

Introduction

In September 2015 the current funding cycle for the Spring to Life project at The Sharpham Trust will be completed. This report looks at the outcomes over the four years that the project has been running and attempts to build a picture of the project and the differences the project makes. There is compelling evidence that Spring to Life project be continued in line with the recommendations outlined in this report.



Background and context

The Sharpham Trust is an educational charity based on a stunning 550-acre estate on the River Dart in South Devon, UK. At the heart of the Sharpham Trust ethos is our desire to build a more mindful, compassionate and environmentally sustainable world.

"We connect people with nature and foster mindfulness and well-being through our programme of [retreats](#), [mindfulness courses](#), [outdoor learning](#) and [the arts](#)"

One of the key strands of our nature connection and wellbeing programme over the last four years has been the development of Spring to Life. Spring to Life is an emotional health and wellbeing project originally funded by Ecominds, that encourages young people to engage in a range of outdoor activities aimed at improving confidence, self esteem, and emotional and physical health and well being.

The project is targeted towards young adults aged between 16 and 25, however the benefits have been shown across a much broader age range and we have included all ages in our programmes.

Guided by trained facilitators and supported by volunteer mentors who have previously attended the programme, up to ten participants are taken at their own pace through an outdoor learning journey with the aim of stimulating recovery through access to the outdoors.

Activities include:

- teambuilding/trust games
- conservation activities
- rural skills/tool use/green woodwork
- organic vegetable gardening
- environmental art
- natural food foraging
- canoe trip around the estate
- final graduation and awards.



Each session starts with a group discussion/share of a topical theme around a central fire in our woodland shelter. These sessions are held in a non judgmental space and are a vital part of recovery and help develop trust within the closed group.

Each participant also takes part in the John Muir Discovery award, the introductory level to the John Muir Award. This environmental award encourages people of all backgrounds to connect, enjoy and care for wild places and is recognised within the conservation sector.

The overall aims for the project

1. To use active engagement in nature to develop outcomes related to government mental/emotional health and wellbeing framework: Learn skills, Build resilience, Develop communities, Integrate physical and mental health, Promote purpose and participation.
2. To give participants a chance to learn new skills and gain a formal qualification
3. To provide a chance for progression into some form of further training/education
4. To change the perception that participants have of nature, to promote environmental engagement

Table 1 - Public mental health framework and Spring to Life.

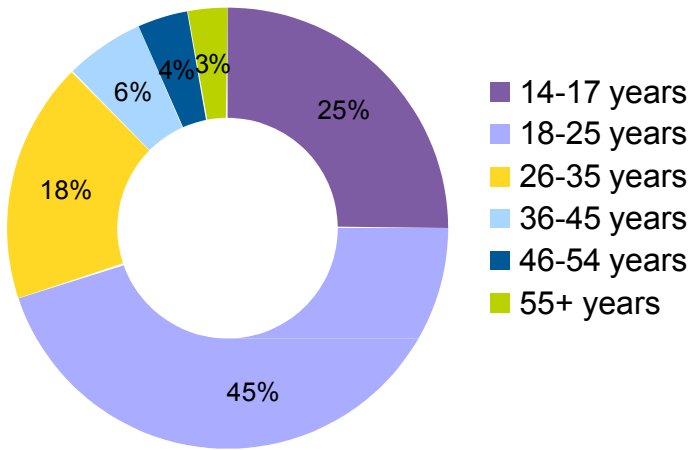
Five areas for action	What Spring to Life offers
<p>Use a life course approach to ensure a positive start in life and healthy adult and older years. With such an approach, people develop and share skills to continue learning and have positive social relationships throughout life.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourages learning and rural skills development. • Both younger and older participants included • John Muir award qualification gained during course
<p>Build strength, safety and resilience: address inequalities and ensure safety and security at individual, relationship, community and environmental levels.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Takes place in nurturing, safe, and non-judgmental environment. • Closed group builds trust and friendships over 12 week period • Facilitated by trained staff. • Benefits the local community through improving Sharpham delivery sites / green spaces.
<p>Develop sustainable, connected communities: create socially inclusive communities that promote social networks and environmental engagement.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduces social isolation and increases connections between people and across communities. • Challenges stigma and promotes inclusion. • Promotes the use of green practices and spaces.
<p>Integrate physical and mental health: develop a holistic view of wellbeing that encompasses both physical and mental health, reduce health-risk behaviour and promote physical activity.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every session includes physical work and space for emotional connection • Mentoring approach demonstrating healthy behaviours • Organic locally sourced food provided
<p>Promote purpose and participation to enhance positive wellbeing through a balance of physical and mental activity, relaxation, generating a positive outlook, creativity and purposeful community activity.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offers purposeful, meaningful activity that benefits the community and the individual. • Offers a space for relaxation to balance purposeful activity



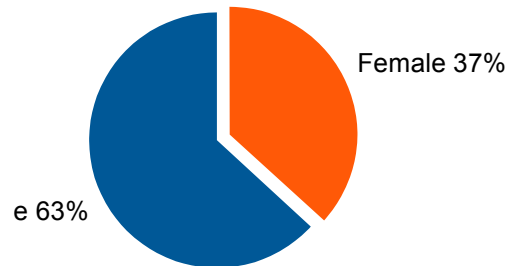
Profile of participants

136 people from across Devon used Spring to Life as part of their mental and physical recovery programme over the four year period between 2011 and April 2015

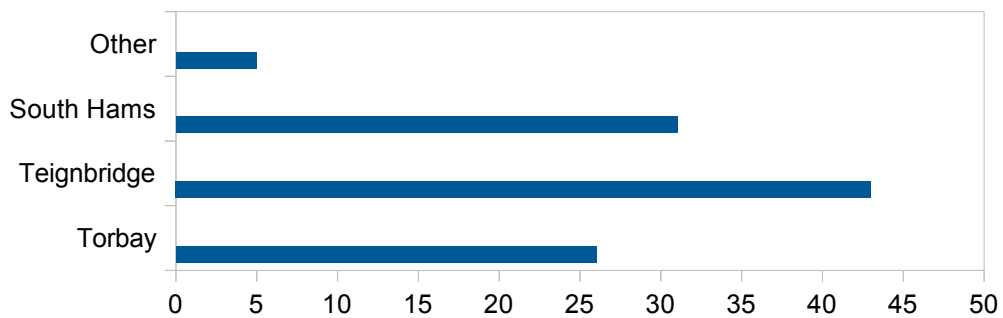
Ages of Spring to Life participants



Gender of participants



Participant location



Referral agencies involved - Most participants have been referred from:

- STEP Team
- Job Centre
- Westward Housing
- CAMHS
- Youth Services
- Previous participant recommended
- Family & friends

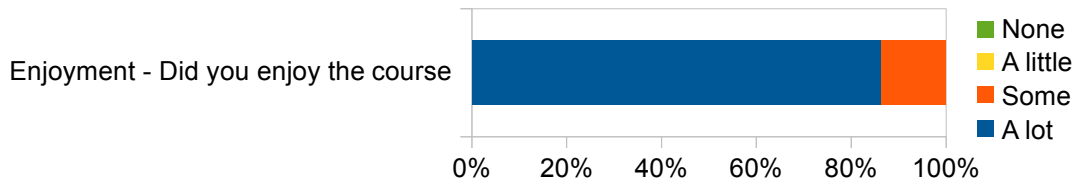
Evaluation methodology and approach

- Outcome questionnaires for participants
- Post project one to one interviews
- Video interviews

Outcomes

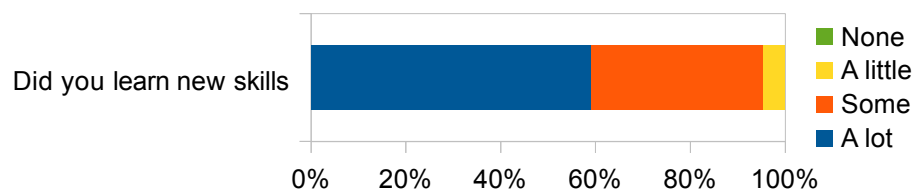
The following data is from a sample of questionnaires from 22 participants across 5 separate cohorts

- **100% of participants enjoyed the course**



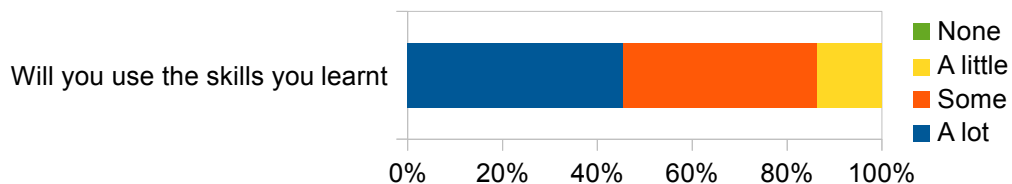
“Thank you so much for this opportunity, it has been amazing”

- **95% of participants learned some or more new skills**



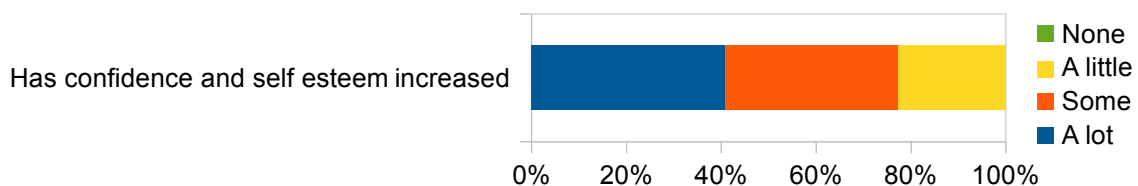
“Yes, Giving me confidence in trying new things – reminded I can do new things and take out into the outside world”

- **86% of participants will use some or more of those skills**



“After the course, I loved the outdoors so much that I attended an employability and personal development course in Adventure International”

- **77% of participants experienced some or more increase in self esteem and confidence as a result of the course**

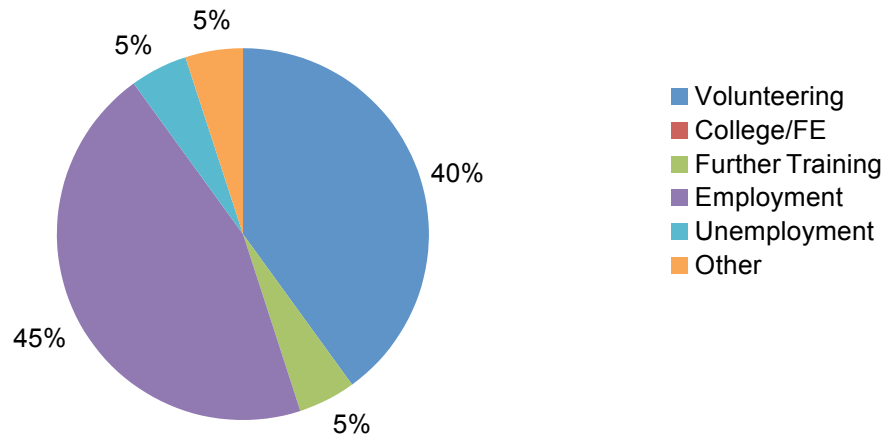


“This programme has really helped me regain my confidence. I now feel more able to reconnect with my friends and much more positive about my future”

The following data is from a short survey conducted with 16 ex-participants to establish progression since attending the course

- **90% of participants had progressed to either employment, volunteering, college and further training since attending Spring to Life**

What have you been doing since completing the Spring to Life Course?



A few more participant comments:

“I strongly recommend [Spring to Life]”

“I thought this course was awesome!”

“I do feel lot more confident”

“This is a beautiful project”

“It's helped me express myself”

“I'm more in touch with nature”



Key findings and some recommendations

Strengths

- **Positive outcomes** – evaluation and feedback from participants has been overwhelmingly positive
- **The model works** – The combination of meaningful activities and group mentoring, all held within an emotionally supportive setting in beautiful natural surroundings, serve to create a space which is safe enough for participants to emerge from stuck patterns of behaviour and try new, more healthy ones. The model is effective and reproducible.
- **Sharpham grounds** – Set in 550 acres of stunning, cared for but not over manicured grounds, the Sharpham site provides the perfect inspiration for a better way of living
- **Progression** – There are plenty of opportunities for participants to volunteer at Sharpham after attending Spring to Life.

Areas for development

- **Commitment** – Some 12 week cohorts experienced a drop out rate of up to 50%. The remaining 5 or 6 participants receive a high level of support but this stops the project realising its full potential and may be due to the selection process not being adequately defined.
- **Evaluation** – for this project going forward needs to more directly support the stated aims with easier to extract data.

Recommendations

- **Age range** – Explicitly recruiting older as well as younger people provides a more healthy mix of levels of maturity within the groups and can help both young and old to work through prejudices and expands the range of social networking.
- **Referral process** – Despite the successes of this project, recruitment still remains a pull process. Future groups could benefit from better relationships with referral partners and Gps
- **Volunteers** – the project benefits in many ways from ex participants coming back to assist. This provides some progression for the suitable people and also helps to keep staffing costs down. This practice to be continued.
- **Potential** - The project has the potential to develop as a publicly commissioned service.

For further information

- Visit our Facebook page for photos and comments from ex participants <https://www.facebook.com/springtolifeecootherapy>
- Contact us by email: springtolife@sharphamtrust.org