

WIAT Study: Community Summary

From 2013 – 2017 we carried out a research study across Scotland, looking at six communities living close to woodlands to see whether improvements made to them could improve people's mental health and wellbeing.

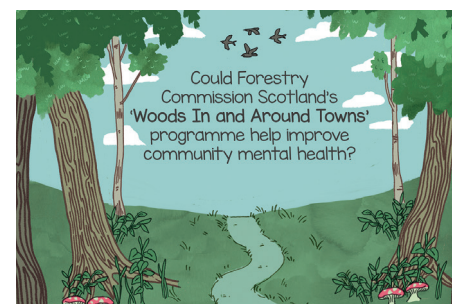
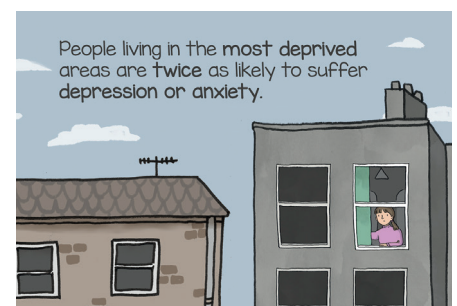
Poor mental health is a major public health problem. It affects around 1 in 4 adults. In Scotland, it's estimated that poor mental health costs the country £10.7 billion each year – that's nearly £2,000 per person.

Evidence suggests that natural environments like woodlands can support or improve mental health. Making improvements to woods, to encourage more people to use them, could potentially be a low cost way to improve mental health for many people living in a community.

Woods In and Around Towns (WIAT) is a Forestry Commission Scotland initiative to improve quality of life in Scotland's urban and post-industrial areas through community access to new or regenerated woodland. To date, WIAT has brought 11,000 hectares of neglected woodland back into active management, created 1,400 hectares of new urban woodland and created or upgraded over 300 miles of footpaths. From 2005 – 2015, over £70m was committed to WIAT – that may seem a lot but it's less than £15 per person. Currently 500,000 hectares of land near towns are eligible for WIAT funding. That's 6% of Scotland's total land mass.

Our study explored the health impacts of improvements that were made to woods and community events designed to increase people's use and enjoyment of woods in and around towns in Scotland.

We studied three woodlands that had received inputs from the Forestry Commission Scotland's Woods In and Around Towns (WIAT) programme for 2 years and three similar woodlands that had not (over the same timeframe). Our methods included doorstep surveys of community members, walks with local people to assess their woodland quality and other discussions with planners and local people.



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So, what changed? We found that the WIAT projects made a small difference to how often people visited natural environments and people in these communities who visited natural environments were also likely to be less stressed than those who didn't visit natural environments. People also said they were doing more exercise. We found that local people were more aware of their local woods and people found the woods restorative. People also told us that the quality of the woods in the communities improved but they had concerns about longer-term maintenance and antisocial behaviour.

Overall, across the communities as a whole, we found that the WIAT projects did not help reduce people's levels of stress; in fact, their stress levels went up. This is difficult to explain; factors outside those we studied are likely to have influenced stress levels. There was no change in people's general health and quality of life.

We think that 2 years of the programme were not enough to improve the mental health of the community as a whole. Nature can enhance wellbeing but more time and support is needed for communities to discover and enjoy natural environments, change behaviours, and improve health. More real-world studies are needed to find out how to help communities benefit from local woods and nature.

For more information about this study please visit
<http://www.openspace.eca.ed.ac.uk/>



MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit



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