

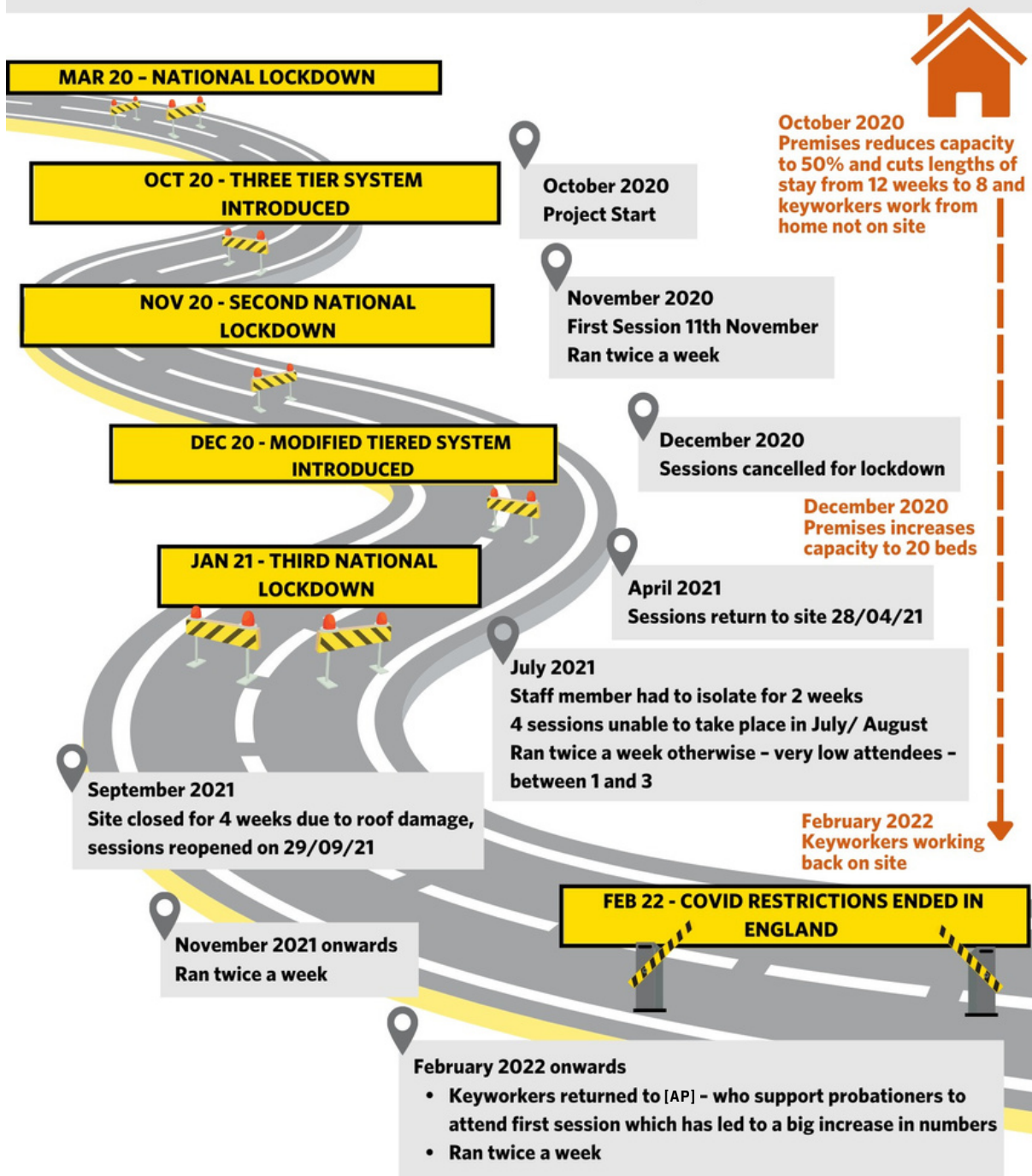
INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Myplace at [approved premises] is a project and garden which covers a number of activities: landscaping, gardening, growing food, working as a team, physical activity and learning around plants and growing. All This project is openly accessed every Wednesday and Friday by the probationers living on site.

This evaluation aims to answer the following questions: Does ecotherapy have an impact on probationer wellbeing? Can the activities help increase a connection to nature? What new skills have been learned and how does that make the probationers feel? Have staff noticed any changes in wider wellbeing? What does the project inspire in terms of probationer's future plans?

It should be noted first that there has been several challenges and external pressures on this project, illustrated below.

Timeline for MyPlace



The evaluation methodology included anonymous evaluation forms which were analysed, as well as qualitative interviews with participants, premises staff and keyworkers carried out on site.

The evaluation questionnaire included the following measures: Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale, Nature Relatedness Scale or Inclusion in Nature Scale and the UCLA Loneliness Measurement Tool.

PROJECT MONITORING

Sample size: The Myplace project aims to work with 90 probationers during the project, although some Covid-19 disruption is likely to affect these numbers. [Approved premises] has reduced capacity to comply with Covid-restrictions and has changed from a 22-bed to a 16-bed back to a 20-bed set up at time of writing. Probationers are also staying for less time; 8 weeks as opposed to 12 and trying to condense all the necessary applications and life administration is proving a challenging situation.

The research project hopes to try and complete 30 full start and finish applications, which itself is a small sample size, even though it is the maximum size which can be accessed in the timeframe. So far, 37 questionnaires have been completed: 26 start forms and 11 end forms. Unfortunately, there were few people who had completed both the start and end forms. Three personal journeys have been completed for three individuals who had completed both. Rebecca Witcombe, Myplace Project Officer explained that, **"It was often difficult to get a second questionnaire completed by residents. There were a number of recalls (at least 12) and times when someone would be moved on at short notice. When the AP was closed due to roof damage, the Myplace participants were all moved to new accommodation before my return. Although staff were left exit questionnaires, these weren't always completed amongst all the other moving-on arrangements."**

Due to the reduction in time on site, the planned six-week programs were changed to one rolling program. This time change has meant that achieving John Muir Awards has been very challenging and the project has only achieved 7 of these. Pivoting to a new solution, the project has instead focussed on AQA accreditations (this is accredited learning, designed to give probationers a sense of attainment) and has achieved 79 qualifications to date. The Unit Award Scheme from AQA describes how **"The scheme boosts confidence, increases engagement and improves motivation, helping students to make progress on their lifelong learning journey."**

In total the project worked with 84 people out of a target of 90 (at time of writing, which is six weeks before project completion), and 30 of the 84 have completed at least one AQA course. That means 36% of participants - more than a third - gained an accreditation during their varied time-block at the approved premises.

PROJECT IMPACT

CONNECTION TO NATURE

Connection to nature was measured using the Nature Relatedness Scale (NR-6) which is a series of statements where participants answer how much they agree with each statement. At the start of the programme the participants had a mean score of 3.8 (out of a possible six) which is actually higher than a UK community study (they scored 3.4)¹. Scores around connection to nature did not change much during the project and where scores could be compared, they remained consistent. These high start scores could be indicative that participants who joined the project had an interest in nature, or that after being in disconnected from nature and the outdoors they may have wanted to feel much closer to nature after being isolated from it, appreciating nature more than most people.

WELLBEING

Wellbeing is captured by the Warwick Edinburgh Scale of Wellbeing (WEMWBS). The national England average is 52, and anything less than 41 is highly indicative of poor mental health. At the start of the programme the average wellbeing score for

¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3814587/>

the participants was 44.9, which is below the national average and close to being considered poor mental health. The average score for participants leaving the programme is 45.9 which is a positive small improvement.

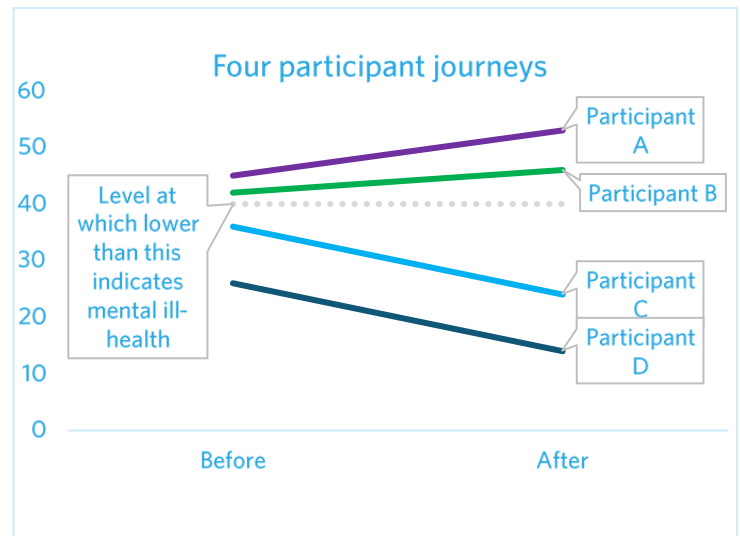
LONELINESS

How lonely the participants feel was measured using the UCLA 3 question loneliness scale which revealed an average start score for participants of 6.2 which is classed as 'lonely', but an average end score of 5.6 which is classed as 'not lonely'. The end sample was small, just 6 results, but this is an encouraging sign that participants are finding connection in the project, and it is having a positive impact on their inter-personal skills.

PERSONAL JOURNEYS

Wellbeing has moved up and down for different participants. Some people have seen an increase in their wellbeing, but others have seen a decrease. Although overall the average has increased some participants have had challenges to overcome and all have had to deal with a lot of change and upheaval during their time in the approved premises.

It looks like participants whose mental wellbeing is above the level of mental-ill-health tend to see an improvement, and those whose mental health was already rather low seem to be struggling further. This does not necessarily indicate that the project has not helped them, as the qualitative data we have gathered has been overwhelmingly positive, but rather, participants may be feeling low about the fact they have finished with the project or have concerns about their future.



The three participant journeys below help tell this story in their own words.

SAM* DISCOVERED A LOVE OF NATURE AND NOW ENJOYS WALKING

Sam is a current resident in his 50s. His past experience outdoors has been from a work-based perspective laying patio. He had been working 16–20-hour days so he never had the opportunity to go outside for pleasure. **“I’d never been on a walk before – I’d never had time”.**

Since arriving at [approved premises], Sam has got stuck in with the project, working with Rebecca (Myplace project staff) from his first week and has really enjoyed the project, **“Its therapeutic, putting your hand into soil, knowing how deep to plant a seed.”** He has picked up lots of knowledge and skills, making stakes for plants, planting seeds and has even stroked a swan on one of his walks! **“There are loads of benefits. I feel healthier – I’ve accomplished something. I can look at it and think “I did that”.**

Going forward, Sam feels more likely to keep on making things, like woodwork or construction, seeing what he can make with the stuff around him, such as a spit for cooking on. He’s hoping eventually to have his own piece of land to continue gardening. His advice to others considering the project is, **“Come down here, have a laugh, have some banter – get it done”**

MAX* IS CALMER AND COPING BETTER WITH HOMELESSNESS

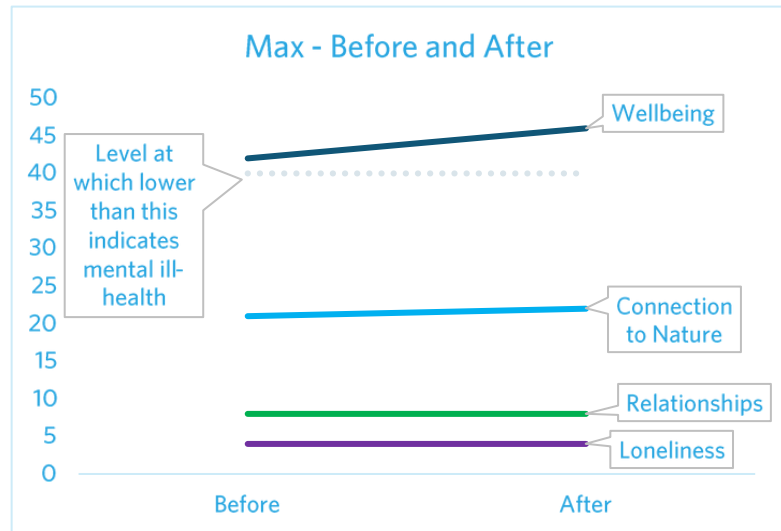
Max aged 32, is a former resident who has come back for the day to tell his story and take part in the evaluation. It is his first time back since he left in September. **“When I’m outside I feel calmer, relaxed, a bit more worthwhile.”** Max said.

He has always had an interest in nature and had a pond when he was younger. However, the activities at [approved premises] were different than he'd experienced before, "I'd not had opportunities to take part in anything like this before I came here."

After lockdown he truly feels the benefits of being outside and really enjoyed this element of the sessions, "Here I had somewhere I could go, a reason to be outside." The project activities helped him feel he could achieve. "I'd done weeding before but not on this scale! We built tables, did a bit of planting. I reluctantly enjoyed the weeding when I could see progress. Seeing a big, clear patch was good. Thinking "That's all me, I did that". And they were VERY dense weeds!" Max explained.

From the before-and-after surveys, Max has seen a definite improvement in his wellbeing score, going from a score of 42 to 46.

His connection to nature (which is measured by asking participants how close they feel to nature) has also increased which is brilliant take-away. Myplace gave Max a way to cope with difficult times. "I'm homeless, I've been homeless since leaving here so that takes priority." He explained, adding, "I still go out walking and noticing stuff - it still cheers me up. It's freedom."



ADAM* FOUND A DIFFERENT FREEDOM AND GAINED NEW SKILLS

Adam is a current resident in his 60s. He has benefited tremendously from the project and is sad at the prospect of leaving. Not long after joining [approved premises], he knew he wanted to get involved with the project "I always have liked gardening, so it gave me a purpose".

He saw the project as a true opportunity, not just for learning skills, but to change his mind set and himself as a person, "a new life for the garden, and a new life for me". He has wholeheartedly thrown himself into the project, spending 10-11-hour days weeding, power-washing and even built a barbeque from used bricks. "I get out in that garden and I forget what time it is." He has even gained some technical and analytical skills as he has downloaded a nature app which he uses to make observations and identify plants. "Rebecca left me a load of plants to plant, and I had no idea what any were - she didn't label them, so I used the app and worked it all out."

Adam is now looking to get involved in further Wildlife Trust activities. This project has truly had a lasting impact on him, "I can't bear thinking that I might have missed this opportunity if I'd have been sent to a different AP." He explained feeling lucky to have had chance to take part in the project. "Being outside makes me feel free, not in the sense of not being in prison, it's a different freedom."

* Names have been changed for privacy purposes.

CONCLUSIONS

Initially planned to foster a deeper understanding of how nature based, gardening and ecotherapy type activities can enhance wellbeing, create calmer environments and contribute to future plans for positive societal interactions, it is clear that Myplace is highly valued by the participants and staff who get to know it.

One participant told us about feeling calmer saying, "I've spent a lot of time behind doors so being outside is important. Through Covid I spent 23 hours a day in my cell. I just sit and watch the ducks and the trees – I see squirrels. It's brilliant... Not many people my age do that. It's quite therapeutic – it helps my mental health – I'm calmer."

The gardens and outside space at [approved premises] have been improved. "There has been quite a transformation in the site, especially the allotment. In Oct 2020 after lockdown ended, the beds were mostly 3ft high in weeds, a lot of the edging boards were broken and it wasn't somewhere inviting. We've now replaced all the timber and have vibrant growing areas, a wildlife area, a wooden seating circle to relax in and lots of signs and interpretation to encourage people in" explained Rebecca, who also mentioned how the probationers are currently harvesting lots of food grown by previous participants.

The MoJ Single Departmental Plan 2019-2022 has the objective to **Reduce rates of reoffending and improve life chances for offenders** by working with partners. This project aimed to support residents of [approved premises] to gain new skills, improve physical and mental wellbeing, and therefore encourage resilience to support a positive life outside prison. This is certainly something noticed by the staff as one explained, "They lift their heads higher and have a sense of accomplishment. They take pride in themselves" while another noticed, "Its great seeing the lads work hard. John* was really quiet, and she brought him out of his shell. You see them really progress." One resident discussed skills in detail stating that, "I feel a lot healthier, more energetic, I want to get involved. The knowledge you pick up and that."

Another aim of HMPPS is to **Support prisoners who want to change and play by the rules**. This has been a crucial part of the project as halfway through the project Rebecca introduced a jobs list, which means people can get more involved on the days she isn't on site. One staff member explained how this had had an impact. "Steve* gets his list of jobs from Rebecca and just gets on with it. She's introduced a noticeboard with a jobs list for days she's not here and its where everyone can see it. It gives them a sense of value." Another member of staff discussed how, "We see them being reluctant initially but then once they've done it they are eager to do more. They are learning so much – how to run an allotment, how to plant seeds. I know the former residents really miss it when they have gone." And another realised it was related to the trust that is put into the residents, "there is a lot of trust gets puts in individuals and they like that."

HMPPS wants to **Work with Community Partners to address health issues**. The Myplace project is clearly something which has made a positive contribution to wellbeing overall. "The guys come in so distressed- so angry and annoyed. All of a sudden they are going in the garden and its therapeutic." One member of staff explained, while a participant noticed this in himself. "The project is absolutely wonderful. It's the best thing that's being done for mental health and physical health – amazing. I've loved it."

Participants in this project have also had chance to **gain real work skills**. Participants have gained an AQA accreditation and the John Muir award and many discussed how this has helped them refine career plans. One described how "I like to learn little things, things I might need in the future" but others have seen larger changes with one participant saying "I wanted to keep coming back or do volunteering elsewhere". This is something the staff have identified too. "The change in some is unbelievable. Even doing the menial tasks like raking leaves, making compost- you see a change, especially when they are doing physical tasks."

To conclude, Myplace is an ideal first step for probationers, and it is clear that the residents and staff involved with Myplace value the project highly and wish to see it continue and grow and evolve as gardens do.

ABOUT THE EVALUATOR

The Evaluator is a creative evaluation company who specialises in visual evaluation, and is committed to making evaluation enjoyable for participants, easy for staff and professionals to take part in. All of the work of The Evaluator is underpinned by easy to read, visual reports. The Evaluator says, 'We'll figure it out for you!'

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