

Evaluation of *The UK Youth Eco-Health Project at Avon Tyrrell* Executive Summary April 26 2013

Summary assessment

The Avon Tyrrell Eco-Health project is a well-managed and appropriately staffed initiative which has run for 3 years (2009-12). The funding to establish the project came from a Big Lottery grant, ending in August 2012. The project has the required structures, policies and management procedures for effective governance, which borrow much from the host UK Youth charitable mission and its safeguarding standards. It operates in a beautiful New Forest location with country house, parkland and lake environment which are used extensively for activities and experiences to support and develop individuals and relationships. 36 participants experienced project activities in estate management and their impact on 'beautifying' the environment is immediately obvious. It has justifiably earned an excellent reputation for its beneficial effects on participants and the environment.

Project staff, referrers and participants rate the Eco-Health project experience very highly and would greatly regret its cessation. Participants are particularly positive about the impact of the project on their lives. The Eco-Health project is not high cost and in all likelihood saves money elsewhere in the system. It continues into 2013 in a much reduced form. A business plan and staff allocated to accessing funds from statutory sources, with other donations subsidising the provision, would see it become a stable part of the mental health services provision in the area in what national data suggest is a high cost and long-term challenge to health service providers. It is an excellent project, a model for other areas, benefiting hugely individuals, the community, the AT environment and reducing call on more expensive mental health services.

Introduction

Carl Parsons, Visiting Professor at the University of Greenwich, conducted an independent evaluation of the Avon Tyrrell (AT) Eco-Health project between September and December 2012. Much of the evaluation file material was supplied and assembled by AT staff for reasons of confidentiality. It was then processed and interpreted by Professor Parsons. File data were supplemented by observations during visits and interviews with the AT and Eco-Health project staff, three professionals who referred service users and six participants. The broader literature on mental health suffers, costs and available provision is also drawn on.

The Avon Tyrrell Eco-Health project

It was established in 2009 for three years with funding from the Big Lottery 'Changing Spaces' programme managed by the mental health charity MIND. It aimed to provide placements for cohorts of eight mental health service users for three months at a time, adding up to 96 participants over the full period. The project underwent some

staffing adjustments and amendments to the provision as the project evolved. Thirty-six participants took part in the programme and were supervised and organised by two staff in carrying out a wide range of estate management tasks. There was a very welcoming atmosphere, much team work and a very significant contribution was made to the AT environment as gardens were laid out, signs made and flower planters and hanging baskets produced. Therapy was not part of the plan and a good day's work in sympathetic company was about normalising lives and providing a structure. Monthly reunion days bring past participants back and over half are regular attenders.

Team perceptions

The team saw the project as 'stepping stones ... getting people back into the community ... giving them skills they could take away ... confidence and sense of self-worth'. They planned work carefully and built relationships, leading participants towards greater independence in the management of tasks. They estimated that the project made a huge difference to the lives of three quarters of them and they were convinced that none 'went back to where they were before'.

Professionals' perceptions

Three professionals from across the range of agencies gave very strong support to the project, which was at no cost to their organisations. They regarded it as a valuable resource and not having it as an option was 'unthinkable'.

Participants' perceptions

Participants felt they belonged, that it gave them a structure to their week. It was about physical activity and working and talking with others. It gave them a sense of normality as they built up the number of days they attended and the jobs they were able to do. They referred to it as 'wonderful', brilliant', 'a life-saver' and clearly enjoyed the reunion days which meant they continued to be part of this 'normalising' experience.

Costing the Eco-Health project

Crudely calculating the costs from the £150,000 grant suggests that for the 36 individuals the cost was £4,167 per case or £53 per person/day. This is not expensive by comparison with other mental health services.

There is much evidence that such interventions could produce savings to other agencies dealing with mental health service users. A highly speculative estimate suggests that nearly £7,000 of savings can result, over £13,000 if costs of avoided human misery are included.

Future potential

At its best, the Eco-health project had up to six participants, many picked up by minibus, working on real tasks, learning new skills, getting accreditation for some learning and having others recognised in portfolios and CVs. A sociable, welcoming environment drew participants in so that most would build up their attendance to four days a week. Vocational advice, one-to-ones and staff supervision were provided part-time by a professional with mental health expertise and with good links into the CMHT. A wide range of activities was planned and expertly managed by the project coordinator and the permanent volunteer. Those attending were treated as members of the AT community, eating with other staff and mixing in a near normal working environment.

The project scores highly from all stakeholders. The project has not built itself into the local or regional mental health professional network such that alternative forms of

funding would be provided. This is a valuable initiative recording considerable success and in all likelihood saving significant expenditure elsewhere in the system. As a social enterprise written into the AT five year plan, it has an institutional place and survival and growth potential if a business plan and personnel time target funds from NHS and other statutory social support sources, as well as complementary charitable and short-term funds.