

EVALUATION of GATEWAY TO NATURE (G2N): Oct 2010 – June 2014

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1. Introduction

This report provides an evaluation of the achievements of G2N from January 2011 to June 2014. G2N delivers real change in the lives of homeless and vulnerable people through opportunities to spend time in the natural world, drawing on the unique capacity of nature and green spaces to restore and improve mental and physical health. Working with homeless people and those with a history of mental ill health and substance abuse, G2N tackles damaging lifestyles and social exclusion by working with small groups in natural and green settings. The emphasis is on enjoyment and interest, building community around positive choices and a sense of belonging.

There is a varied programme of opportunities for beneficiaries to choose from, ranging from gardening on G2N's large allotment to walking in a variety of locations, wildlife spotting, cycling, conservation tasks in local reserves, arts and crafts, drumming and healthy cooking and eating. There are usually 2-3 activities per week and the programme of events is posted to each service user every 2 months. People can then ring in to book their place. All events are free although small voluntary donations are requested for events involving food.

It is an innovative and exceptional project that can evidence a significant and lasting impact on the lives of beneficiaries. The project tackles the issues and problems faced by homeless and vulnerable people including:

- social exclusion and isolation
- mental health problems, low self-esteem and low motivation
- physical health problems
- drug and alcohol dependency
- low aspirations and the deprived lifestyle of long term poverty

This report draws heavily on feedback and interviews with stakeholders, partners, referring agencies and crucially those people, our beneficiaries (also referred to as service users), who have taken part in G2N from January 2011 to June 2014.

It also includes as Appendix 1 a 'Summary of Evidence Report' (Individual Outcome Interviews) commissioned from and produced by Dr. Jonathon Coope, Research Fellow, University of Nottingham in February 2013.

2. Background

G2N is a service within Framework Housing Association, a charity which specialises in work with homeless and vulnerable people. G2N was funded by Access to Nature, (formerly part of Natural England) for a 3 year period from October 2010 to October 2013. The reach of G2N during the period covered by this report includes Nottingham city and the county of Nottinghamshire. During the Access to Nature funding, G2N had 2 full-time and 6 part time staff. After Access to Nature funding finished in October 2013, Framework wanted to retain the positive impact G2N had on people with mental health problems, especially considering the lack of similar services in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire. It therefore continued to fund a reduced service from its own reserves and charitable donations until longer term funding could be secured. Since November 2013 G2N has had a smaller team of 2 part time and 2 full time staff.

In 2012 G2N was chosen for a Best Team Talent Award by Framework's Service User Advisory Group.

3. Data Collection

Information is collected by G2N on the following:

- Beneficiaries

Service users are referred from professional agencies or can refer themselves. The referral form which is completed in all cases includes the person's contact details, emergency contact details, health and needs, interests and risk factors. Where the service user is self-referred, the risk assessment is carried out by staff.

From January 2011 to July 2014, **359** service users engaged with G2N.

Equalities information collected about G2N beneficiaries includes gender; employment status; if service user considers themselves to be disabled; age and ethnic origin:

70% of service users were male, with 30% female. 53% were unemployed and 37% in receipt of sickness or disability benefits. 49% considered themselves to be disabled.

4% were retired, 3% employed, 1% looking after home or family and 1% were students. 76% were aged over 35 years, with 24% under 35. In terms of ethnic origin, 92% identified as white, 4% as black, 3% as mixed race and 1% as Asian.

- Volunteers

G2N has worked with 40 volunteers since January 2011, contributing just under 5,000 hours to the project over the whole period. This equates to almost 3 full time posts for 1 year. G2N has also benefitted from teams of corporate volunteers who volunteer for the day, usually in groups of 20+ to carry out large scale tasks such as clearing and planting up uncultivated areas.

- Referrers

Contact details for referrers are added to the database and they are mailed the activities programme at the same time as beneficiaries. In the whole period to date G2N has taken referrals from 289 professionals from 31 organisations, including statutory bodies and voluntary and community organisations. In addition, 61 service users referred themselves.

Outcomes Monitoring

Four outcomes were agreed by Access to Nature for the period October 2010 to October 2013 and were continued by G2N after this funding ceased.

The four outcomes are:

- a) Enjoyment of the activity by service users
- b) Increased confidence of service users
- c) Increased skills of service users, both practical and social skills
- d) Partnership working with other agencies and green organisations

Feedback on the first 3 of the outcomes is collected by means of individual feedback sheets completed by service users after each activity they attend. Feedback is also gathered from service user meetings, discussions and focus groups. These results are covered in section 4 of this report. Partnership work is covered in section 5.

How stakeholder Feedback is collected

Stakeholders in G2N are the service users, the staff who deliver the project and management within Framework, referrers, volunteers and partners.

Service users

Other than the individual activity feedback sheets, service users contributed their views via:

- service user involvement meetings held bi-monthly and discussions after activities;
- Individual Outcome Interviews (28 in-depth interviews analysed independently, see App 1);
- Allotment group, Art Group and Drum Club feedback
- learner logs from G2N training events
- independently carried out telephone survey of beneficiaries who did not engage or attended only 1 session.

Staff

Team meetings are held weekly and include space for each member's reflections on the preceding week's activities, including what worked well and what didn't, how to improve on problem areas and any service user and volunteer issues.

Staff development days are held every 6 months and cover reflection over the last 6 months, future priorities and team training needs.

Individual supervision with the line manager is held 6-8 weekly and covers appraisal, individual training needs, relationships and work related issues.

Volunteers

Volunteers receive individual supervision face to face or by telephone every 6 weeks or more often if required, covering their training, level of support and working relationships with staff and service users.

Volunteers meet as a group every quarter for group discussion, training, input and feedback.

Partners

G2N worked with 27 partners during the period. A partnership may comprise several individuals from the same organisation meeting with G2N as a group e.g.

Nottingham University partnership, or individuals from the same organisation working with G2N at different times and on different tasks e.g. St Ann's Allotment Society. Partners attend G2N Open Days and public events; have taken part in Focus groups and participated in a telephone survey in 2013.

Specific feedback is collected during the planning meetings with the partner providing the venue or expertise for the activity. After the activity the staff member leading the activity with the partner will collect further feedback from the partner and any changes in working practices needed are discussed at team meetings. There is more information about how we work with partners in section 5.

Referrers

Referrers are counted as individuals as some organisations have multiple services that refer clients to G2N e.g. the NHS.

Referrers are formally consulted for their views on the effectiveness of G2N via annual online surveys (results are in section 4 below). Individual feedback from referrers is usually in relation to a particular service user and is recorded in the service user's file. There is frequent liaison between staff and referrers, for example where the service user appears to be at risk or deteriorating, requires support beyond the remit of G2N or referral on to another service.

4. The Difference G2N Makes

Monitoring of the 4 outcomes that G2N worked towards over the period shows that G2N has been extremely successful in achieving its objectives.

a) Enjoyment of the activity by service users

98% of service users reported enjoying the activity they engaged in and of these 71% indicated they enjoyed it 'very much'. Enjoyment is obviously a key determinant of what motivates service users to engage with the service and to continue using it. It is also an important factor in counteracting the effect of depression and anxiety.

'G2N gave me the opportunity to choose places I wanted to visit. I would not have gone to any of these places if it wasn't for G2N'

'I enjoyed being part of a group. I was really grateful to be given the opportunity to spend the day in such spectacular scenery. This benefits my mental and physical health'

b) Increased confidence of service users

91% of service users felt the activity increased their confidence and of these 36% felt it had increased 'very much'. Often this involved the successful overcoming of fear and isolation. One service user commented after rock climbing:

'I feel really proud of what I have achieved and I thought it was really great, even though it was very scary, but I did it'.

c) Increased skills of service users, both practical and social skills

98% of service users felt they had learned new skills on the activity, and of these 40% indicated their understanding or skill level had improved 'very much'. The growth of confidence and the development of skills are very much linked. Service users value improvement in their social skills and link this to overcoming painful levels of isolation. One person commented recently:

'This was the first time I had been on a proper walk after 18 months of depression. It was great for my confidence and I enjoyed talking to people and learnt something about nature'

d) Partnership working with other agencies and green organisations

Partnership working is covered fully in section 5.

Individual Outcomes Interviews with service users

The analysis of 28 in-depth interviews that were reviewed independently by Dr Jonathan Coope is in Appendix 1 (attached). It shows significant improvements to mental and physical health by 93% of participants. 85% felt they had improved life chances through gaining skills and opportunities for voluntary and paid work. All 28 rated their experience with G2N highly with 27 participants saying they had enjoyed G2N 'very much'.

Feedback from Referrers about G2N

Support and appreciation from referrers for work of G2N is overwhelmingly positive. In January 2013 the first referrers' on-line questionnaire was conducted, with 135 referrers contacted giving 37 replies.

Q: Has people's confidence increased very much? **A:** Yes - 82.4%

'For one particular service user I have referred it was the first group she had ever attended and managed very well with the support from the team. Prior to this she had presented as very anxious- she now attends a college course and attends other groups independently'.

'She developed an interest in nature and animal care from attending G2N and has gone on to Further Education'.

Q: Have people accessed another project independently? **A:** Yes - 35.3 %

Q: Have people gained skills for volunteering in natural environments? **A:** Yes - 58.1%

'Service users are quite keen to work in the hostel garden and use the skills they have acquired with G2N'.

'A few of them now want to work in the natural environment'.

Q: Have there been any improvements in the psychological and physical well-being of people? **A:** Yes - 82.4%

'definite psychological improvements regarding mood and recognising own abilities. Also, positive social experience for some who find social situations difficult at times'

Q: Have there been any improvements in social skills? **A:** Yes - 80.0%

'I have noticed that clients who have been attending G2N have more confidence and are able to tell their story and share their feelings within group settings'.

Q: Has G2N changed anyone's life? **A:** Yes – the 37 referrers identified 19 people whose lives were significantly changed

'At least 3 service users in the sense of giving direction and meaning to their lives. Interesting and practical workshops have taught them new skills'.

'All service users that attend G2N activities from my service enjoy them and get a lot from them, they are meaningfully occupying their time and thus preventing themselves from dangerous or harmful behaviour and triggers. G2N is invaluable for the service users who are trying to remain abstinent from alcohol/substances during the course of rehabilitation. In addition to this they learn new skills and spend social time with others in a safe and supported environment'.

The second on-line survey in Jan 2014 to 36 referrers in mental health services was carried out to gather views about the proposed new service for which funding is currently being sought. Just over 97% (35 out of 36) responses were strongly in support of the new service proposal and believed it would be of great benefit to their client group. Some typical comments were:

'I have referred people who are in secondary care mental health. All the people I have referred have said they enjoyed the activities. It has helped them to add structure to their day enabling them to access activities they would not have done on their own. It gives them an opportunity to get outdoors which is beneficial to their mental and physical

health and their recovery. I have seen it improve peoples' self-confidence and they have often moved onto do voluntary work in gardening or conservation.'

'I'm a Support Broker helping people with mental health difficulties look at options for support. Lack of meaningful activity and isolation are common problems. Gateway to Nature is an excellent option for some people. '

'In the light of severe cut backs in the services, this project for people with mental health issues, such a project would be extremely valuable in promoting well-being and recovery'

When asked if they would personally refer their clients to the proposed new service, over 94% (34 out of 36) of respondents said they would. Typical comments were:

'Yes. I believe people benefit from some gentle social interaction and physical activity in a supportive group outdoors. There needs to be more of these sort of opportunities. '

'I think as activities are done in small groups it enables clients to have a taster of an activity in a safe and supported environment. The latter is important when a person with mental health difficulties is trying to re-build their lives. '

5. Partnership Working

Partnership working is a key feature of G2N and enables a very wide range of nature activities to be offered in locations across the City and County with specialist input and expertise to complement the G2N team. Partnerships are managed within the context of both sides being clear about how co-operation can further the shared aim of bringing the benefits of nature to more people, particularly those with complex mental health histories.

In our experience partners working in environmental and green organisations are very keen to extend their reach to new and different communities and welcome the opportunity to work collaboratively so they can do this more effectively. For example, a senior officer at the Notts Wildlife Trust commented recently in a meeting that their membership was predominantly white and middle class, and without G2N they would struggle to involve more socially excluded groups in their work.

Partners contribute specialist skills that augment what G2N can offer by itself. For example, the University of Nottingham Partnership Group has offered expertise on evaluation methodology, independent mental health assessment, access to wildlife specialists and OPAL (Open Air Laboratories). G2N assists the University to fulfil its aim of contributing to the wider community. The Forestry Commission offers forest skills and bushcraft workshops. G2N pays a small fee for this expertise which helps them to maintain this service. Park Rangers offer free sessions such as wild food

foraging and habitat construction and G2N supplies a willing workforce. Hill Holt Woods offers wood carving and whittling and is able to work with a wider range of people, and City Arts provides artists who work voluntarily with G2N's Art Group which in turn provides them with more varied experience of teaching.

Other partners may be services that work with similar client groups to G2N and benefit from joint working arrangements. Below are quotes from 2 such services:

'A BIG THANK YOU from both staff and residents to all who helped get our communal garden back on track to look much tidier. We look forward to being able to get in the garden to enjoy planting and growing things soon. Your help is hugely appreciated which has hopefully given residents inspiration and motivation to enjoy outdoors more in a positive way'. Chatsworth House Sutton in Ashfield, March 2013.

'It's been a very productive relationship. The work in Clifton has helped link local people in to a lot more opportunities'. Dual Diagnosis Forum May 2012.

6. What we learned: what works well, what could be improved and how

What works well?

a. Treating people as individuals and not as problems

Many service users comment on how inclusive and welcoming G2N is and how relaxed they feel when out on activities with G2N. In service user groups a typical comment is:

'Great staff – all really helpful & understanding.'

'There's always someone who will listen to you.'

'Everybody has been so supportive and helpful.'

(quotes from Individual Outcome Interviews)

'Of all the activities and schemes that (he) has taken part in, I think you guys have been the best at 'embracing' rather than tolerating which is the impression I get from a lot of places. There is a genuine feeling of care and consideration from everyone I have had contact with and for that I thank all of you'

(from a recent email sent by the mother of a service user with learning disability)

One reason we believe that G2N works so well with people who often do not relate or engage well with services, is that there is a focus on the

service user's perspective and offering solutions for unfulfilled lives, rather than focusing on their problems. By treating people as individuals with normal needs for community connection, stimulation, enjoyment and varied opportunities for meaningful activity, we gain their co-operation, participation and trust.

b. Service user participation

Service users' views are actively sought and acted upon in many different ways. The important feature is to be approachable and open to hearing what they have to say, however they wish to express it. This may very well not be in the context of a formal meeting (see below for more on this). All decisions about activities are made with the involvement of service users. For example, the ground rules for behaviour were devised and agreed at the service user involvement meetings. Ideas for new initiatives such as the healthy cooking courses often come from suggestions by service users and are then followed up and developed by staff. If staff have ideas they discuss them first with service users. This means a more tailored service results and service users have a real sense of ownership and belonging.

c. Offering a wide range of opportunities

G2N succeeds in attracting and retaining service users because there is a wide variety of well-planned and interesting activities to choose from. People do not need to have high fitness levels to participate in most activities and there are indoor activities in cold and wet weather, such as art and cooking that mean there is something on offer all year round. In addition, there is a range of waterproof, warm clothing and boots as many service users do not own suitable outdoor gear.

d. Thorough advance planning and organisation

Events outdoors with groups of up to 14 vulnerable adults require meticulous advance research and planning to work successfully. Routes, safety and risk factors, parking, access to toilets and refreshments, equipment and service users' phone numbers (when they have a mobile) are examples. If this preparation is not carried out staff are pre-occupied and stretched on the day and thus less able to concentrate on the group and service users' quality of experience. Often new routes have to be checked in advance to ensure they are navigable and accessible for the variety of fitness levels. If partners are involved they need to be properly briefed in advance and clear about the tasks. Weather can also be changeable and alternative arrangements need to be identified in advance in case weather becomes

inhospitable. A great deal of attention is paid to these factors in G2N which ensures most trips are enjoyable and run smoothly.

What could be improved and how we can (or have) improved

a. Take up by ethnic minority groups

G2N has a low take up amongst BME groups – 8%. The efforts we have made to publicise the project to ethnic minority groups – sending out information followed by telephone calls, offers to provide talks or a tailored service - have not greatly increased the self-referral level, nor do referrers appear to be referring ethnic minority clients to G2N in proportion to the population of the City (34.7%). Feedback from referrers has not suggested that the service is seen as inappropriate or irrelevant to ethnic minority groups. However, 83% of referrers are agencies other than Framework and it may be that some of these have a low take up by ethnic minority groups.

To address this issue more effectively we will create more specific publicity materials in a variety of formats and make more use of ‘Green Champions’ recruited specifically from ethnic minority groups. Hopefully they will be able to use their personal contacts and standing in their communities to break down barriers that may exist around lack of information, cultural perceptions or stigma relating to mental health.

b. Referral criteria

Up to now, G2N has operated with open referral criteria i.e. the only criterion for accessing the project has been that the person experiences barriers to accessing nature. This was so as to remove as many barriers to access as possible, for example, avoiding the need for a medical diagnosis as a prerequisite for access. As a result, G2N’s client group is very varied, including people with a learning disability, undiagnosed people and those who struggle to cope but have ‘fallen through the net’ for various reasons. Whilst the result of this is in many ways positive, inclusive, accessible and allows for easy self-referral, it can make it harder to prove the specific case on improvements to mental health to potential funders.

c. Initial assessment and longer term follow up

Up to now G2N has not carried out its own assessment of service user needs at the point of take up of the service. Assessment is currently only done for specific courses and learning events so that learning progression can be measured via learner logs, with an assessment on completion of the course. There is no assessment at the end of the period of a service user’s involvement as there is no defined end point. Service

users decide for themselves when to move on (unless they have completed 20+ programme events after which they can only access a more limited range of opportunities – see below for more on this).

On a purely practical level, G2N has never had the staff resources to undertake detailed follow up of the hundreds of people we work with. However, this can make it difficult to prove that improvement has been sustained over a period of time as a result of G2N's intervention. The 28 in depth interviews analysed in Appendix 1 was an attempt to remedy this by providing more information on longer term change.

The mechanism for assessing improvement at present is the service user's own opinion of their improvement, supplemented by their referrer's views and staff observations. Whereas this may be evidence enough for face to face practitioners, it tends not to suffice as 'robust data' to prove the case for some potential funders. The University of Nottingham Partnership Group have offered to assist with the implementation of more rigorous assessment and follow up methods which will help to address this issue in the future.

d. Flexible methods of service user participation

Service user participation is high but we have found that many of our client group do not respond best to the format of the organised discussion group, focused on concepts, plans and possibilities discussed in the abstract. Responding to the preference of service users for less formal ways of being involved, we find that what works best are the spontaneous discussions that arise during and after events. As a result, staff now record service users' views as they arise and who was present, to ensure a range of views are taken into account. This is also supplemented with brief records of the many one to one conversations that occur between staff and service users, as a large number of service users do not like or do not choose to speak out in groups.

e. Retaining community

Due to the progressive build-up of referrals it is not practically possible to continue to work with everyone referred over longer periods of time. To address this issue, (particularly as G2N's staffing level was halved after the Access to Nature funding ceased) we decided that after 20 attendances on activities, service users would only be able access a limited range of opportunities. This made it possible to ensure that newly referred people could get places on events. The downside of this is that the longer term service users who have greatly benefitted from social inclusion in a community could suffer as a result. To address this we kept a number of activities

open to all, namely the weekly allotment sessions, Art Group, Drum Club and healthy eating courses and this appears to meet this need.

f. Moving longer term service users on

Related to the above is the issue of service users moving on to other nature and green activities. This has posed more difficulties than anticipated, partly because service users who have found a sense of belonging within G2N are reluctant to start again somewhere else, and partly because funding pressures across the board have affected the capacity of the sector to absorb and support vulnerable adults. Many community organisations have closed down in the last few years and others are now obliged to charge for their services, reducing access for low income groups. Others have lost funding for support staff such as volunteer co-ordinators or outreach staff who have a vital role in providing support for vulnerable adults. Some of the nature based community organisations that depend wholly on volunteers to maintain their project are unable to cope with vulnerable participants who require significantly more attention and support.

G2N's partial solution to this problem is to keep some open access as stated above, though how sustainable this will be in the future remains something of a balancing act. We are however reluctant to withdraw all access as this may undermine the progress achieved.

g. Sign posting to other services or projects

This issue is related to the above. Few of our service users feel confident enough to go to completely new projects by themselves. Relationships are a key factor. Whenever possible via partnership working we introduce service users gradually to other projects and their staff. Another method that works well is to link them up with other service users and a volunteer to ease the transition.

h. Volunteer retention

G2N is a popular service and has no difficulty attracting high numbers of volunteers. However, those that are regularly available and remain with us for long enough to build up solid experience, expertise and trust are in a minority. Particularly difficult to find are those able to commit themselves to long term befriending, as needed by the most isolated and vulnerable individuals. Most volunteers need to be free to take up paid employment at some point and this is particularly the case with younger volunteers, many of whom enter volunteering, quite validly, as way of gaining work related experience. However, on the plus side volunteers make an

enormous and valuable contribution and without them G2N would have significant difficulty in maintaining its high level of service delivery.

i. Service user progression into volunteering

G2N is a progression route for a significant number of service users to go into volunteering and many have done with successful outcomes, some leading to employment. However, sometimes problems arise around appropriate boundaries when service users are thinking about becoming a volunteer and are in the process of gaining experience by helping staff with practical matters. Existing personal relationships and prior sharing of confidential information between service users which is then inappropriately disclosed can lead to confusion about roles and expectations. Learning from this, we are now making the distinctions between the roles of service user helper and volunteer very clear and emphasising to all participants that people are only in the role of volunteer once they are assessed, DBS checked and trained by Framework's volunteer service.

7. Future Development and Sustainability

It is clear from the evidence collected from service users, referrers and partners that G2N provides a valuable and innovative service that is highly effective in helping vulnerable adults to recover their health and rebuild their lives.

The positive impact on mental and physical health would indicate that long term core funding for future sustainability should be sought from Health Services. The greatest cost savings undoubtedly benefit the health sector the most, which is currently facing a steep rise in all mental health conditions and their associated costs.

If core funding could be secured, additional targeted fundraising could be undertaken to supplement and augment the service and provide a means for innovations and tailored responses geared to particular communities or areas.

Some further income generation is possible through marketing G2N services to support brokers and individuals with personal budgets. This idea was successfully piloted with the Person to Person support service in EVE Trades in June this year. Social inclusion hours in personal budgets were pooled by Person to Person to pay for group activities delivered by G2N, resulting in an enriched service for clients, improved social inclusion outcomes and savings to the provider.

If G2N's new project is successful in gaining funding, the specialist mental health post will be able to work closely with GPs to encourage take up of the service by a

larger number of people and thus achieve a greater impact. As these service users will be a cross section of GP patients with mental health issues, the level of ongoing support needed is likely to be lower overall than the client group worked with up to now, who have in most cases had a combination of long term and highly complex mental health, substance misuse and homelessness issues. This should help to achieve both the quantity as well as the quality of robust evidence of health benefits G2N needs to support approaches to Health Services for future core funding.