



# WILD MINDS

everything is better outdoors

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that socialising is OK  
and it doesn't have to  
be nerve wracking”

Recent participant

“  
Wild  
Minds  
proved  
to be a  
lifeline”

Parent of recent participant

March 2021

 [scambs.gov.uk/wildminds](https://scambs.gov.uk/wildminds)



Cambridgeshire  
County Council



South  
Cambridgeshire  
District Council



## What is Wild Minds?

Wild Minds is a group-based intervention project focusing on physical activity in an outdoor setting for young people aged 14 to 17 who are experiencing mild to moderate mental health problems.

The project has been developed by South Cambridgeshire District Council together with Cambridge Sport Lakes Trust. It aims to provide a supportive and therapeutic environment for young people to engage in structured outdoor physical activities. Sessions are run by skilled instructors and youth workers. The project has been supported in its development and evaluation by a Clinical Psychologist who continues to provide supervision for the Wild Minds team.

The Wild Minds project takes place at Milton Country Park where young people attend six weekly sessions (ranging from 1.5 to 2 hours). The sessions place particular emphasis on young people being in contact with nature and the outdoors, whilst engaging in a variety of structured activities. These include bush craft, yoga, survival skills and paddle boarding.

# An evaluation of the Wild Minds project 2020/2021

The aim of this report is to evaluate the Wild Minds project since it began in spring 2020 up until spring 2021. There have been two separate groups of young people attending the Wild Minds project to date (cohort 1 and cohort 2). This report will evaluate the outcomes for both of the cohorts in relation to two main areas:

- i) The experience of the young people who attended, and
- (ii) The young people's reports of emotional well-being and progress towards their personal goals through attending the group.

The report will also provide personal testimonies and outline next steps and further considerations for development of the project going forward.

Please don't hesitate to contact me with any questions regarding this report.

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# The context for Wild Minds

## Rationale for the project

Wild Minds has developed as a response to the current context around the mental health of young people within the UK. There is striking evidence that NHS mental health services have experienced greatly increased referrals over the last 10 years. Comparison of national monthly referrals to NHS children and young people's mental health services show marked increases. For example, referrals for the month of October 2016 were at 39,320, compared with 80,180 referrals in October 2019; over double the number of young people referred (NHS Digital). This has inevitably led to increased wait times for specialist support and increasing thresholds to gain access to these interventions.

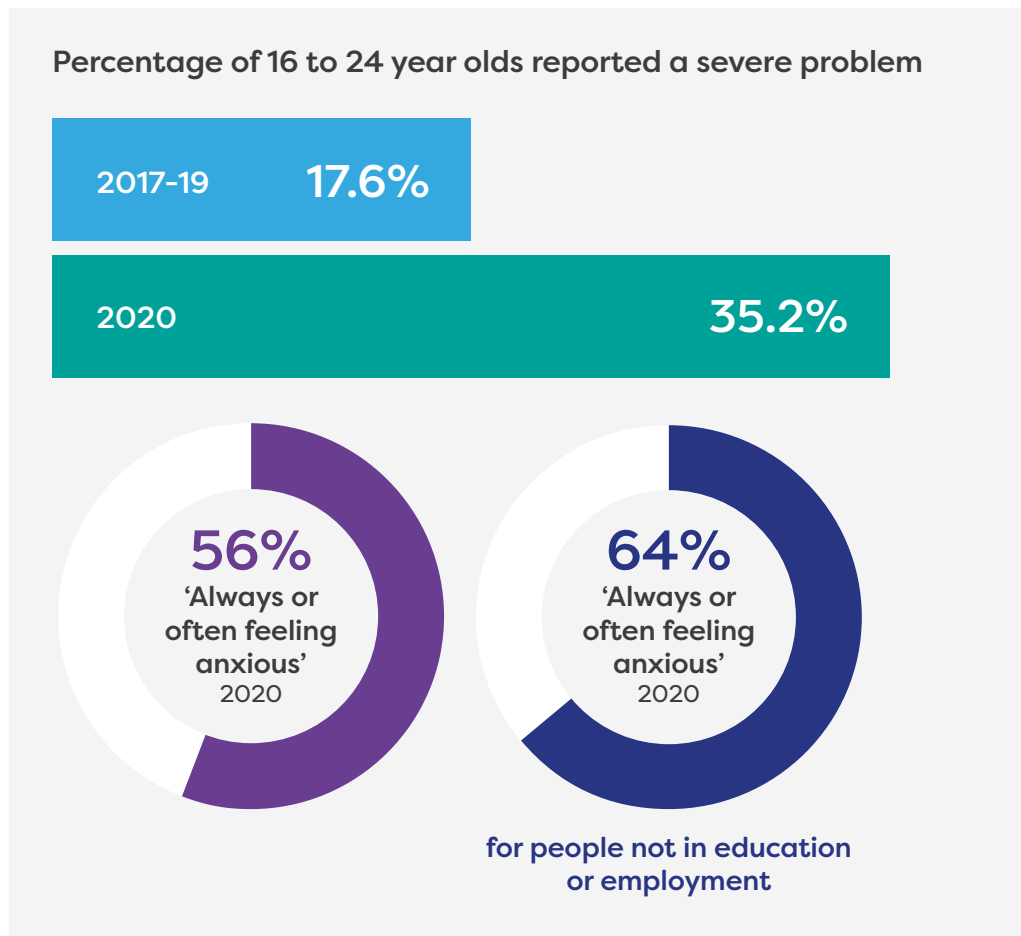
Supporting young people's mental health and wellbeing in our communities must involve a range of forms of help and approaches where there is shared learning and confidence in different sectors to support mental health (Wolpert et al 2019). The THRIVE model (a national approach working to transform and integrate children's mental health services) of system change for children and young people's mental health emphasises the need to develop mental health support that is accessible and driven by the needs and choices of young people and their families. Our intention is that the Wild Minds project will contribute a much needed new choice for young people in supporting mental health within their community.

## Impact of the pandemic

During the pandemic there has been a necessary focus on the impact upon our mental health, and in particular on the mental health of young people. Whilst the national lockdowns will have led to some positive effects for some, cross-sectional samples of children and young people across the world indicate a widespread decrease in overall wellbeing (Gileard et al 2020).

From only the first week of confinement in Spain (Rodriguez-Rey et al 2020) to after the first two months of lockdown in the UK (Banks 2020), young people have consistently presented as vulnerable to the psychological impact of lockdown. Studies of young adults have shown that they are experiencing greater effects on their overall psychosocial wellbeing compared with older adults (Gileard et al 2020).

Data from the UK Household Longitudinal Study (a national approach working to transform and integrate children’s mental health services) highlighted that the proportion of 16 to 24-year olds reporting a “severe problem” on a questionnaire of general health doubled from 17.6% in 2017-19 to 35.2% in 2020. Recent research by The Prince’s Trust found that 56% of 16-25 year olds reported always or often feeling anxious during 2020. This increased to 64% of those who were not in education or employment.



Large studies have shown significant increases in anxiety and depression in young people (Pierce et al 2020), (Wang et al 2020) and there is emerging data linking pandemic related stressors to an increase in clinical levels of mental health problems in young people (Gileard et al 2020). Young people with pre-existing conditions such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and Eating Disorders have all reported worsening of symptoms during this period (Graell et al 2020, Zhang et al 2020, Tanir et al 2020).

Worryingly, the pandemic has exacerbated many of the risk factors for poor mental health in children and young people and there is building evidence of a disproportionate impact on those who already experience the most socio-economic disadvantages and those who are in minority groups within our society (Gileard et al 2020). For example, young people with poor-quality indoor living space had twice the chance of experiencing moderate-severe and severe depressive symptoms than those in better quality accommodation (Amerio et al 2020).

In a study of family resource centres in Ireland, 51% reported a rise in demand for mental health support for the most vulnerable members of the community during the pandemic. There have also been well documented rises in reported domestic violence against children and young people during the pandemic (Kooth survey).



## What can help?

In a recent review of the literature aimed at clarifying what might help children and young people's emotional wellbeing during the pandemic, Gileard et al identified some common themes from studies across varied parts of the world. These included:

- maintaining physical exercise
- access to outdoor time where possible
- accessing social, creative or cultural activities
- additional family support for vulnerable groups of young people.



**‘Real life practice’ in new situations, particularly social situations, is a crucial step in overcoming anxiety.**

In line with these findings there is emerging evidence that children in countries which have allowed greater amounts of outdoor access and/or physical activity throughout lockdown – for instance Italy – show lower levels of parent-reported emotional problems compared with countries which did not grant these permissions – for instance Spain (Orgilés et al 2020). This underlines the vital role that spending time outdoors and physical activity both play in supporting the mental health of children and young people. We believe these aspects of the Wild Minds project are even more pertinent in the current context of the pandemic.



# Evidence informing the Wild Minds approach

Wild Minds draws on theory and research that shows that helping people increase activity levels, build social connections and experience time in the outdoors are important aspects of improving emotional wellbeing and mental health.

There is compelling evidence that physical activity has a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing in adult populations (Rebar et al 2015). It seems that physical activity may act as a resilience factor against the development of emotional problems (Bell et al 2019) in teenagers, and that physical activity increases cognitive function and may partially lower levels of depression in young people (Biddle et al 2019).

There is now a developing research base which highlights there may be an additional positive impact of physical activity when carried out in outdoor environments. In one large sample population study, physical activity in natural environments was associated with a lower risk of poor mental health to a greater extent than physical activity in other environments (Mitchell 2013). In a systematic review of research with adults, physical activity outdoors and in nature, compared to indoors, was associated with greater feelings of revitalisation and positive engagement, decreases in tension, confusion, anger, and depression, and increased energy. Additionally, participants reported greater enjoyment and satisfaction with outdoor activity and declared a greater intent to repeat the activity at a later date (Coon et al 2011).

Adolescence is a period of life in which developing social connections with peers is increasingly significant and friendships form an important part in the development of self-identity. This is an area which has clearly been impacted by the effects of the pandemic on the ability to socialise.

Furthermore, for people who face difficulty with anxiety (and social anxiety), exposure or ‘real life practice’ in new situations, particularly social situations, is a crucial step in overcoming anxiety. In addition to this there is strong evidence that working towards clearly defined goals (that a person has set themselves) improves outcomes across a range of types of difficulties and therapy approaches (Schrank et al 2012).

The Wild Minds project is influenced by the above research and principles. These underpin each of the group sessions by providing the following:

- Structured activities in the country park environment with a focus on physical activity and exercise, learning new skills, whilst being outdoors and in touch with nature
- A safe, supportive and compassionate environment where staff listen to, encourage, and help young people to problem solve and sign-post for further help when appropriate
- Explicit goal setting with young people around what they would like to achieve and regular monitoring with them on their progress towards these goals
- Fostering social connections with other young people, including set times to ‘come together’ around points in the group – such as ‘round the fire time’
- Opportunities to continue activities and connections with young people through the park after time in Wild Minds is over.

# Target population and referral criteria

Wild Minds aims to support young people who are seeking help for mild to moderate mental health difficulties, but who may not reach the threshold of severity to be referred to an NHS mental health service. We are not focusing on a specific category or diagnosed mental health problem, rather, we welcome a range of presenting mental health difficulties, which we expect will include anxiety, low mood and self-esteem, as features.

This is a pilot project and so we have not yet accessed multiple sources of referrals. For this phase, young people have been able to self-refer through some specific pathways.

We have used links with the Early Help team within the Cambridgeshire Local Authority. Young people engaged in this service and identified as having difficulties with mental health by their key worker have been told about the group and have been able to self-refer. We have begun making links with local secondary schools and their pastoral care teams and, in the same way, young people with an identified mental health need can self-refer to Wild Minds via introduction from their pastoral care team.

We have intended that young people can also self-refer following consultation with their GP. We hope that GPs would recommend and signpost people to Wild Minds when deemed appropriate. This referral stream has not yet started and we plan to work further with local GPs to build these links alongside opening more referral routes and increasing advertising of the service.

## Referral criteria

- Young people aged 14 to 17
- Currently experiencing mild to moderate mental health difficulties (such as anxiety, low mood, problems with confidence or self-esteem)
- Young people who have expressed interest or motivation in getting help for the above and who are open to attending a group with other young people
- Young people who can manage being in a group and taking part in outdoor activities

## Who Wild Minds is not suitable for

- Young people who are already receiving a specialist mental health service – for instance from CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services)
- Young people who have high risk behaviours or active suicidal thinking or behaviour
- Young people who have a severe mental health problem which needs to be prioritised first so that they are able to engage in physical activity-based group (e.g. severe eating disorder, substance abuse disorder)
- Young people where there are current safeguarding concerns that first need to be prioritised to support stability and safety.



## Aims of the project

For some young people, without support or intervention, mental health difficulties can become more severe over time. In some circumstances young people may subsequently require a higher level of support or referral to a specialist service. This is even more concerning in the context of the pandemic and the added impact on young people's mental health.



### The primary aim of the project is:

1. To prevent deterioration of mental health in young people attending Wild Minds.

### The secondary aims are:

2. To improve emotional wellbeing and young people's progress towards their personal goals as reported by young people, and,
3. To continue to shape and improve the project with the input and feedback of the young people who attend.



# Evaluating Wild Minds

We will evaluate the project using:

**(i) Measures of young people's emotional wellbeing and monitoring of their personal goals, and**

**(ii) Feedback from young people about their experience of attending Wild Minds.**

We also aim to follow up with young people at six months after attendance to assess whether they have required further mental health intervention (in particular whether they have required specialist mental health treatment).

## **(i) Measuring emotional wellbeing and young people's personal goals**

We used two questionnaires, described below, completed before young people started in Wild Minds and in the two weeks after they had finished the final group session. We also asked young people to describe and rate their personal goals in attending the project and their progress towards these, both before and after their time at Wild Minds.

The measures of emotional wellbeing are as follows (please see appendix for copies of the measures):

1. The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS): This was developed to enable monitoring of mental wellbeing in the general population and the evaluation of projects, programmes and policies which aim to improve mental wellbeing. The WEMWBS is a 14 item scale of positively worded statements covering feelings and functioning aspects of mental wellbeing. The 14 statements have five response categories from 'none of the time' to 'all of the time'. Children and young people are asked to describe their experiences over the past two weeks. Scores range from 14 to 70 and higher scores indicate greater positive mental wellbeing. (See page 18 for information about the questionnaire)
2. The Office of National Statistics' (ONS) wellbeing questions: These are four questions used by the ONS in nationwide surveys to capture aspects of life satisfaction and wellbeing. They allow large samples of data to be compared at a population level. Each question is scored on a scale from 0 to 10, with higher scores showing greater wellbeing, except the fourth question which asks 'How anxious did you feel yesterday?'. This uses a scale of 0 to 10 with higher scores denoting greater anxiety. (See page 18 for full questionnaire)
3. Young people's personal goals and ratings of progress towards these goals: We asked young people to tell us what they wanted to achieve from attending the group. We asked them to rate how far they felt they were towards achieving these goals on a scale of 0 to 5



(0 being not yet started, 5 being fully completed). Please note that cohort 2 was asked this question but using a scale of 0 to 10 to rate their goals.

## **(ii) Feedback on the experience of attending Wild Minds**

Young people were asked to complete a weekly feedback questionnaire following each session. After their time with Wild Minds they were asked to complete a questionnaire enquiring about their overall experience. Learning was stored on a shared team 'learning log' and discussed regularly within the staff group in order to shape the project's development.

# Evaluation results

## Group composition

13 young people joined in total across both cohorts (four male and nine female), with an age range of 15 to 17 years. Of these, 10 young people completed the group and nine submitted completed feedback surveys.

## Emotional wellbeing feedback

### Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) scores before and after Wild Minds attendance

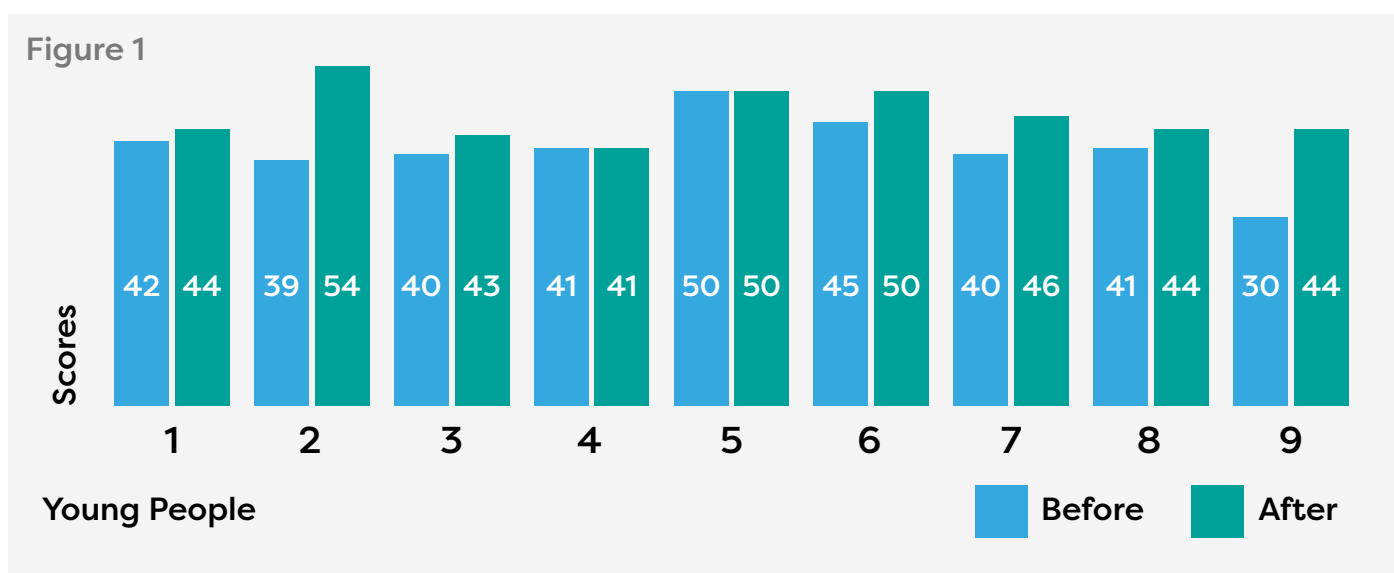


Figure 1 (above) highlights that of the nine young people who completed the Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) at both time points:

- Seven showed an improvement in their scores following the group
- Two stayed at the same point after the group.

Cut off points to help interpret the meaning of the scores vary across studies, however NHS digital research uses a cut off of ‘below 40’ to indicate ‘low emotional wellbeing’. There are two young people in particular (young people 2 and 9) who reported large changes after Wild Minds in their emotional wellbeing. Their scores moved from below the cut off of 40 to well above this cut off, with improvements of 15 and 14 points respectively.

Research using WEMWBS has defined changes of between 3 and 8 points as an ‘important level of change’ (Warwick Medical School). Six young people reported increases of 3 points or above.

## ONS wellbeing scores before and after Wild Minds attendance

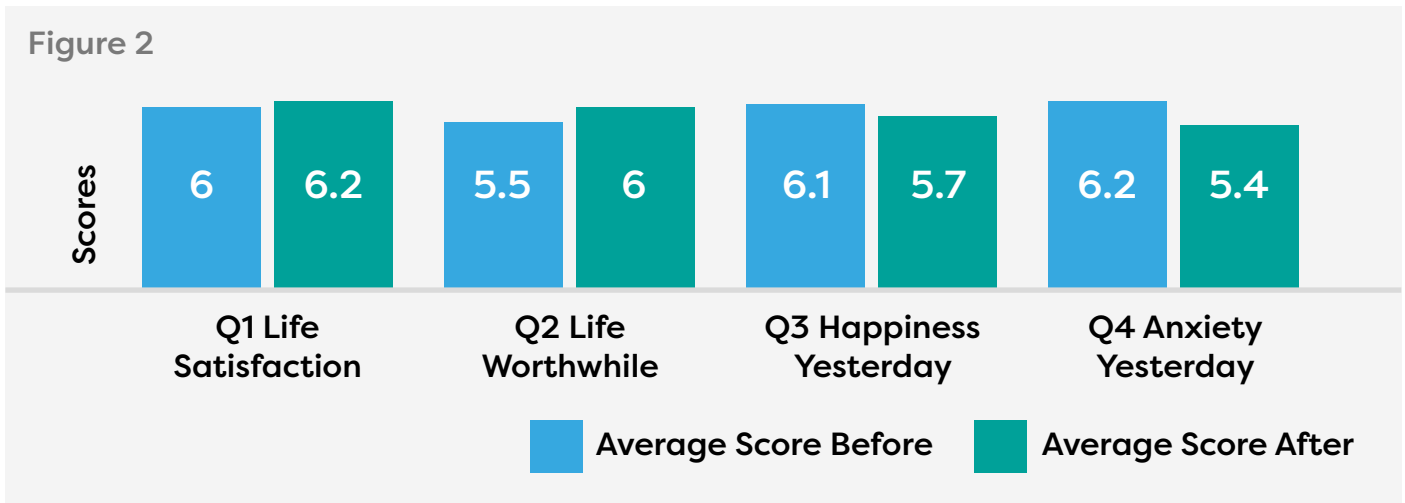
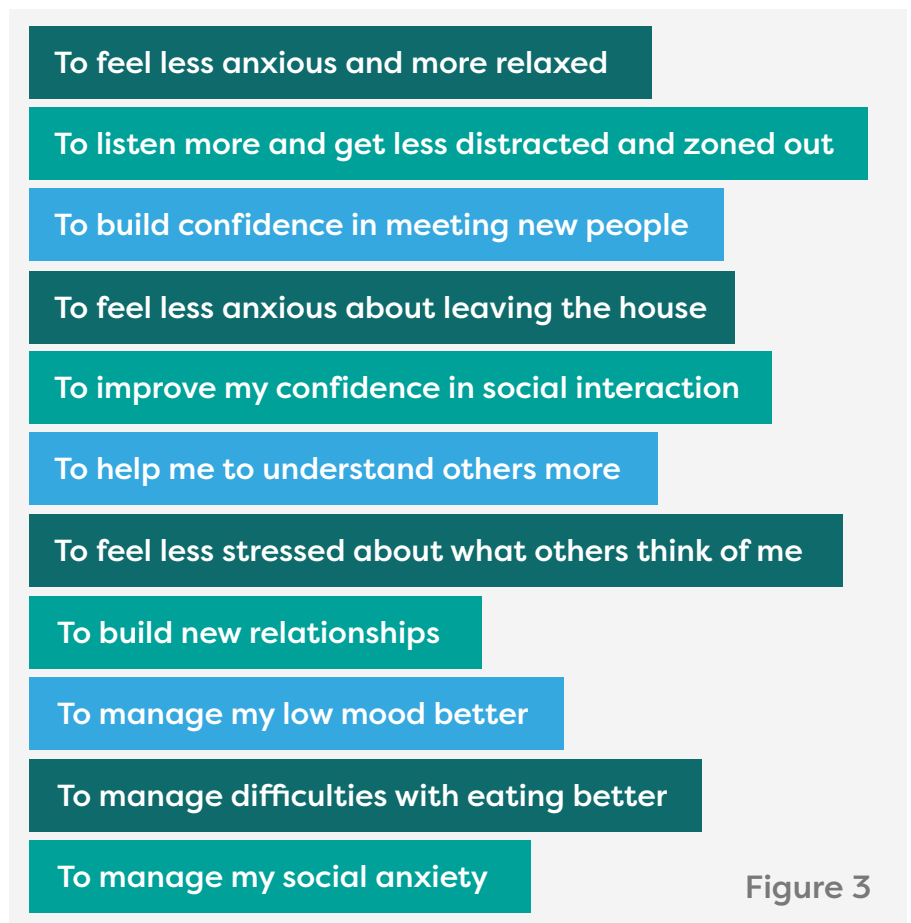


Figure 2 above shows average scores across the nine young people on each of the ONS questions both before and after attending Wild Minds. These indicate an overall trend towards improved scores after Wild Minds except for the question asking for a rating of ‘your happiness yesterday’ (note lower scores on anxiety indicate improvement).

## Young people’s personal goals

Figure 3 (right) shows a summary of young people’s personal goals in response to the question ‘What would you hope to improve through joining the group?’.

Of the young people who rated their goals at the start and finish, six out of nine reported an improvement on at least one of their personal goals at the end of the project.



## Average ratings of progress towards goals before and after Wild Minds



After Wild Minds

5

Before Wild Minds

3.9

Figure 4

Figure 4 above shows the average rating across all goals set by young people before and after attending Wild Minds. This shows that overall ratings of progress are higher after participating in the project. Higher scores show further progress towards achieving a personal goal. We have to interpret this result with caution as young people used two different scales to rate their progress towards their goals (cohort 1 used a scale of 0 to 5 and cohort 2 used a scale of 0 to 10).



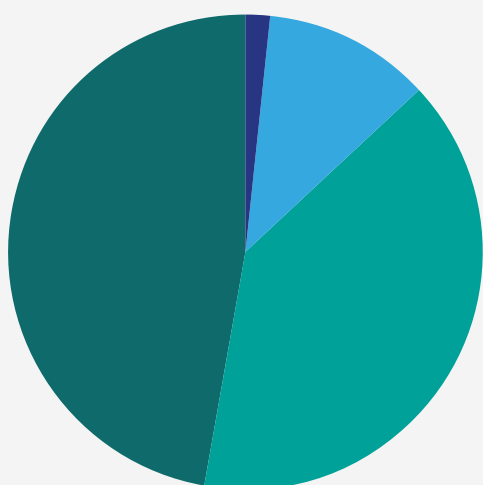
# Feedback on the Wild Minds experience

The pie charts below show young people's responses to the Wild Minds experience, with answers on a gradient between 1 and 5, where 1 would mean 'Not at all' and 5 would mean 'Very much'.

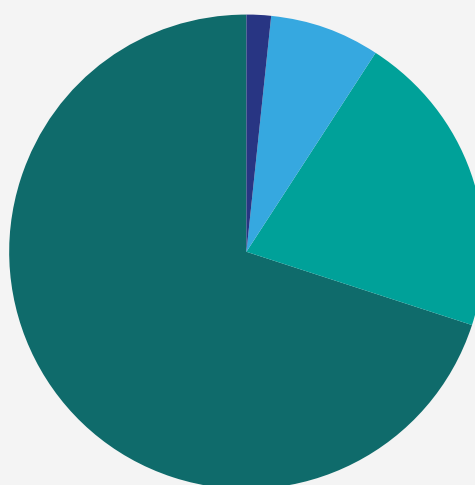


Based on a total of 53 responses

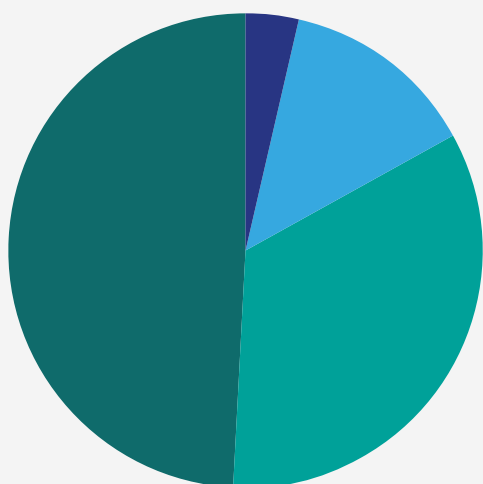
### I enjoyed today's session



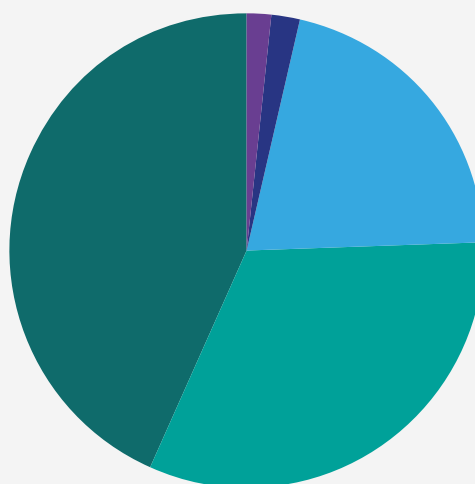
### I felt able to take part in today's sessions



### I felt supported in today's session (or I felt it possible to ask for support if needed)



### I learned something new in the session today





## One positive thing

We asked participants:

Can you tell us one positive thing you've taken from the session?

### Calming and managing feelings

- Learning to breathe and relax
- I learned that yoga is very calming
- I enjoyed the yoga and I'm going to do it more often
- Calmness
- Relaxation
- More confidence
- Being able to ignore most of the anxiety

### Learning new skills

- How to make a fire
- That it is very fun to get outside and do things during this situation
- I learnt something new and it was fun
- Going canoeing
- Learning to make wreaths
- The lake adventure
- Bush craft

### Connection with others

- Friendship and making a new friend
- I had some good chats and a hot chocolate
- I felt okay with new people
- Interesting discussions
- Getting away from home and meeting new people

### Being outdoors and in touch with nature

- Admiration for lakes
- There is a lot of life in ponds
- That I was able to learn about insects
- I feel positive because I'm outside
- Cutting wood and learning about wood
- Being in the trees
- Learning to go outdoors more

Feedback is aggregated across sessions and grouped under key themes. There were a number of similar responses so we have not repeated these.



## Rating the overall experience

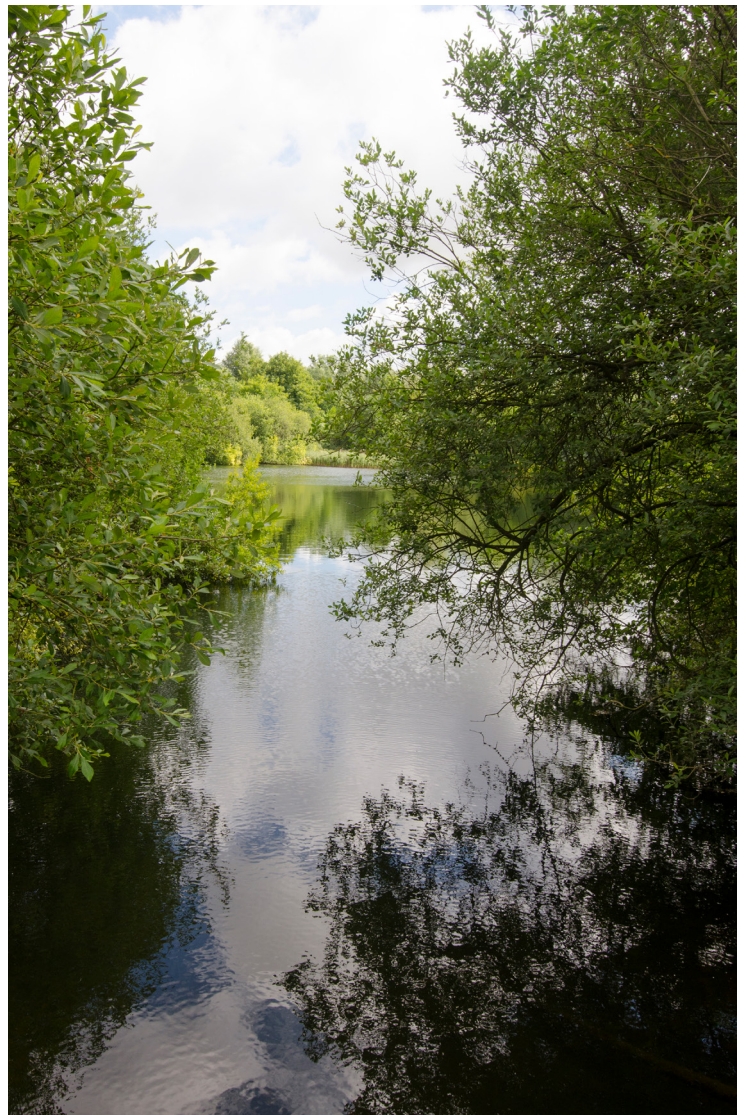
When rating the overall experience of Wild Minds on a scale of 0 to 5 (where 0 is 'not at all' and 5 is 'very much'):

- All young people rated as 5 the workers' approach as 'being kind and non-judgemental'
- All rated their sense of feeling safe in the group as either a 4 or 5
- When asked if they would recommend Wild Minds to other young people with similar challenges one young person rated a 3 and all others rated a 4 or 5
- When asked if Wild Minds had given 'ideas or plans for things I'd like to do more of in the future to help me', five young people rated this as either 2 or 3 (this point is discussed in the recommendations section that follows).

## Constructive feedback

Constructive feedback was given by young people across each of the sessions and in the overall feedback questionnaire at the end. We asked 'What could we improve/what didn't you like?'

- Having more time on the water
- The group was a bit quiet at times
- We could have some more active things to help 'break the ice' and more 'warm up activities'
- I got sea sick!
- It was cold
- More yoga
- Some of the things that young people talked about were difficult
- I wasn't as keen on the feathers activity
- Canoeing was hard





## Personal testimonies

Alongside the data analysis it is pertinent to share personal testimonies to bring to life some individual experiences of the group.

One young person told us:

“During my time at Wild Minds I have had an easy time learning that socialising is OK and it doesn’t have to be nerve wracking. During the first session I made a friend which is an

improvement. I noticed that my confidence had improved and I felt that I could express myself a bit more than usual. At one point I was really struggling but that became easier as the staff are really supportive and trustworthy. Every session that I attended I always noticed a positive difference.”

**“at Wild Minds I have had an easy time learning that socialising is OK and it doesn’t have to be nerve wracking”**

One parent told us:

“We were really pleased S managed to see the Wild Minds programme through. Wild Minds proved to be a lifeline at a time when we were on waiting lists for professional support.

We are only just now gaining access to additional services. I don’t think S managed to get the most from each session because they were in such dire need that simply being present was emotionally and physically draining enough. Wild Minds became S’s only form of social interaction as S further isolated. We hope now to focus on CBT and/or talking therapy to enable S to process these emotions that they have been overwhelmed by.

“We would definitely consider attending Wild Minds again in the future but hope S will be further down the path of recovery so they can participate fully and feel confident to share experiences with others. As a parent, I am hugely grateful for the opportunity to speak with the Youth Support Worker running the sessions to gain advice and support as we sat on waiting lists.

“For S, I think just the realisation that they weren’t the only one dealing with difficult emotions helped. It helped them to open up more to us at home which has been very helpful. S’s favourite session was the Canadian canoeing because it kept their mind busy and being on the water had a calming effect. S also loved getting to meet the Mini Donks. Big thanks to you and the entire team for all your time and effort put into Wild Minds.”

**“I think just the realisation that they weren’t the only one dealing with difficult emotions helped”**



## Summary and interpretation of results

This is a small sample size (nine young people completed the feedback surveys) so we cannot draw definitive conclusions, however the results are very encouraging for this first pilot. The WEMWEBS scores and feedback strongly suggest that young people experienced the group in very helpful ways and that the aims of the group were met;

**(i) That young people who attended the group did not experience a worsening of mental health. In fact,**

**(ii) Seven of the nine who gave feedback reported improvements in emotional wellbeing on the WEMWEBS and two reported the same scores afterwards**

Two young people reported large positive changes in emotional wellbeing after Wild Minds as measured by the WEMWEBS.

WEMWEBS results were supported by the young person feedback. Young people frequently expressed how the group had a calming and relaxing effect on them. They also rated the approach of the staff very highly, in particular the supportive and safe environment that was provided. A number of young people expressed how they had made friends and that this had been an important factor for them. We heard also from young people about the positive impact of being outdoors and the activities.

The goal analysis suggests that there was a positive progression for six of the young people towards at least one of their goals.

The results are particularly encouraging in the context of the pandemic and the impact on the mental health of young people reported in the research literature. The results here suggest that Wild Minds may provide an important ‘buffering’ effect against the negative impact of lockdown on young people who are already vulnerable to mental health difficulties.

The ONS wellbeing questions showed a general trend towards more positive responses after attending the Wild Minds sessions – for instance, average scores of anxiety were lower. However, when we analysed the raw data on this measure, individual responses to each question were not always more positive after the group.

One question about ‘Your happiness yesterday’ showed poorer average scores after attending the sessions. These differences may reflect the way that questions are asked in the ONS survey, for example, how ‘things were yesterday’. The four ONS questions are used in large scale population studies. It is not a questionnaire that is sensitive to pick up changes in small groups of people over time. In order to detect reliable and significant differences we would require a much larger group of young people to evaluate change. This is also the case for all of the measures used.



## Learning points, recommendations and next steps

We aim to continue involving young people in the development of the project. We would like more feedback about how we could improve Wild Minds. One way to invite this would be a final focus group, run separately from the project staff, rather than the weekly session questionnaires (which we learned can take up valuable group time and provided lower amounts of constructive feedback).

Young people told us they were less aware after the group about ideas for future support or help. We are developing a satellite club at the park as an option for young people afterwards to continue activity/involvement. We are also providing training for staff on signposting and resources around further support for young people.

In line with the above we recommend that future recruitment of Wild Minds staff aims to include young people who have progressed through the group. A young person who has the appropriate skills and who is also able to help develop the project from a 'young person perspective' would be a valuable resource.

We have continued to meet as a team to discuss learning and record this as we encounter new situations and developments. The staff team has asked for further mental health training which will be provided by the Clinical Psychologist.

The group was six sessions long. This was partly due to difficulties in starting due to the pandemic. An eight to 10-session model is likely to give extra capacity for change for young people.

A larger group size (of six to 10 young people) may also be helpful in order to further facilitate chances for social connections and social interaction.

Continuing to build feedback data will be very important to enable us to evaluate the project in more robust ways. It will be useful to include a measure of parent/carer perspective for the evaluation going forward.

We will review – and potentially stop the use of – the ONS measure, as it is unclear whether this will provide enough data to be used in a meaningful way.

As a future measure at six months after the group, we will investigate whether young people have gone on to require more specialist mental health treatment (which will provide an indication of subsequent deterioration in mental health).

Key next steps include further advertising of the project and developing new referral routes, in particular through GPs.

## Appendix

# The Office of National Statistics' (ONS) wellbeing questions

Source: Office for National Statistics

I would like to ask you four questions about your feelings on aspects of your life. There are no right or wrong answers. For each of these questions I'd like you to give an answer on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is "not at all" and 10 is "completely".

**Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?**

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

**Overall, to what extent do you feel that the things you do in your life are worthwhile?**

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

**Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?**

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

**On a scale where 0 is "not at all anxious" and 10 is "completely anxious", overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?**

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

## Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWEBS)

View the Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWEBS) online at: [www.corc.uk.net/media/1537/wemwbs.pdf](http://www.corc.uk.net/media/1537/wemwbs.pdf)

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“  
Every  
session that  
I attended I  
always noticed  
a positive  
difference”

Recent participant



# WILD MINDS

everything is better outdoors



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