

# Reconnecting people, health and woodlands in Wales



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

Actif Woods is improving health and wellbeing by connecting people to woodlands.



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## Overview

This story shows how Coed Lleol, a Wales-wide partnership project, through its Actif Woods Wales programme is working with local support organisations and the National Exercise Referral Scheme (NERS), to use national managed woodlands to tackle chronic mental and physical health conditions and social inclusion agendas.

## Background

Actif Woods is a project run by Coed Lleol and hosted by the Small Woods Association. The project operates with a steering group consisting of representatives from Natural Resources Wales, the Woodland Trust, the Wildlife Trusts, Tir Coed, the Health Service in Wales, and representatives of community woodland groups. Coed Lleol aims to help more people enjoy and care for woodlands in Wales.

### Results

Identify outcomes that increase the wellbeing of Wales

### Evidence

Make decisions using better information

### Collaboration

Work with others across boundaries

### Long term

Fix the causes rather than the symptoms

### Connect

Focus on the economic, social and environmental benefits

### Transparency

Measure and report on the difference you make

This is one of a series of SD stories that can be found on the Welsh Government website at <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/sustainabledevelopment/>



Actif Woods sessions involve a range of different activities, such as Nordic Walking, green gym, woodland management, green woodworking, bush craft, plant and animal identification, and simply going for a walk in the woods.

### Why

The Actif Woods Wales project has been driven by the opportunity to use the 286,000 hectares of woodlands in Wales. Coed Lleol and Forestry Commission Wales (now NRW) have a long history of partnership working, and both recognise that improving health and wellbeing are hugely important issues for Wales, especially for communities in the most deprived areas.

With this mind, Actif Woods was designed in response to Welsh Governments' 2009 revised Woodland for Wales strategy, with a key outcome for more people to live healthier lives as a result of their use and enjoyment of woodlands.

A primary target for the project therefore was to demonstrate the benefits of outdoor woodland based activity in addressing mental, physical and social ill health issues, with additional aims of exploring the potential for the programme to impact on other Welsh Government strategic aims related to health, such as getting people back to work.

**“ Research over many years has shown that spending time and exercising outside in green spaces can have a positive impact on health and wellbeing, as well as being a real stress buster.”**

Amie Andrews,  
Project Coordinator, Actif Woods Wales

### What they did

In 2010 Katy Harris and Zena Wilmot of Coed Lleol started work on programme development with FCW's Woodlands for people team. Two areas, Aberystwyth and Treherbert were chosen for the initial 5-week trials of the programme in order to focus on areas of deprivation where chronic ill health was a real issue. Both were Welsh Government designated Regeneration Areas, identified through the Wales Index of Multiple Deprivation.

The Treherbert and Aberystwyth pilots of Actif Woods Wales took considerable planning and development before the first participants were recruited. There was an initial phase of training and capacity building for staff that included mental health first aid training, first aid in the outdoors, walk leader training, and bushcraft skills.

To deliver the Actif Woods Wales programme, Coed Lleol works closely with local organisations involved in the health sector, community development, and outdoor activities, encouraging adoption of the programme as part of their core services, giving Actif Woods a greater chance of sustainability in the long term.

In Aberystwyth the programme is managed and co-designed in partnership with NERS, MIND Aberystwyth, Cyswilt (drug and alcohol rehabilitation), the Visually Impaired Group, ME Support Group, and others. In Treherbert they are working with NERS, Valleys Kids, the Pinewood Care Home, Rhondda Housing (many of whose clients experience alcohol issues) and the Probation Service.

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The process itself works through self-referral, GP referral, and partner organisations embedding activities in what they'd like to offer their clients. In some instances a GP NERS referral coordinator in each area refers patients to Actif Woods following on from the 16-week standard programme. All activities are specially tailored to meet the needs of participants with chronic health conditions and are suitable for people at all levels of ability and health and follow participant interests and ideas about what they would like to do in the local woodlands.

Coed Lleol are now running two continuous weekly programmes in each area. In Aberystwyth an Actif Woods Wales group meet up weekly in different woodlands for walks, nature observation, bushcraft skills, art and craft and very simply a hot drink made on the Kelly Kettle, for the minimal cost of £1.50 per person. In Treherbert there are two active woodland gym groups and an environmental group.

"We all know that exercise is good for us, but going to the gym to get fit isn't for everyone. This project has shown that walking or being active in woodlands really can improve health and reduce stress at the same time as building interests, developing skills and having lots of fun."

Zena Wilmot,  
Research Officer Actif Woods Wales

### What changed

So far the project has benefited approximately 300 people and the results have been conclusive enough to secure £249,000 from the Big Lottery to run the programme for three extra years as well as funding from Natural Resources Wales and the Pfizer Foundation. The schemes will now reach 5 target areas; Neath Port Talbot, Wrexham, Anglesey and continue in Aberystwyth and Treherbert. All beneficiaries in the two current locations want the activities to continue and the new project phase aims to reach 1660 participants across 5 areas in Wales.

The benefits from Actif Woods are many and varied. It gives people an opportunity to relax from stress and mental health issues. It creates the chance for people to be physically active, boosting both physical and mental health, and provides a space for people socialise in a relaxed setting and be part of a group. Evaluations have shown increased feelings of wellbeing and rising levels of physical activity undertaken.

Actif Woods has also created valuable links across organisations in Wales ranging from the NHS to NRW, community groups, woodland organisations to mental health charities. As a result of the programme these organisations have been able to work together for mutual benefit improving health, woodlands, and communities at the same time.

"I have gained much benefit in having a regular outdoor activity arranged on a weekly basis. It has now become part of my weekly routine and does not depend on the weather as sheltering in the woods on a rainy day with company is all part of the fun."

Mair Jones,  
Aberystwyth ME sufferer

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## What obstacles existed

Actif Woods has found it a challenge to obtain accurate quantitative feedback and demonstrate hard evidence of change in the participants. There is a resistance to feedback forms among participants and group leaders because it can alter the nature of the sessions, making it feel like a treatment session with medical forms instead of a relaxing outdoor environment. The complexity of chronic health issues and the diversity of participants on the programme also mean that feedback forms often don't reveal whether or not Actif Woods is making a real difference. However, the qualitative feedback shows there is substantial evidence to indicate that the woodland programmes are having a big impact on health, wellbeing, and returning to work. Actif Woods Wales has developed its monitoring and evaluation system and is trying out new ideas to tackle this, with a new system to be launched in November 2013.

Whilst working in partnership has been a key benefit of the Actif Woods approach, working with others to deliver project aims is not always straightforward. Not all NERS instructors for instance view the programme as a high priority tending to favour traditional referrals rather than outdoor woodland activities, and working with the NHS at a time of public sector budget cuts has also been a challenge.

## What they learned

Coed Lleol learnt a lot from the initial pilots. It recognised that working in collaboration and creating sustainability is essential. Partnership Development Plans are being written to encourage and build strong connections with partner organisations, working out training needs so that activities can continue beyond the life of the project by becoming 'business as usual'.

Woodland information packs are being developed so that woodland owners and stewards can better understand the purpose of the Actif Woods project and what it would mean for them. Finally they are working more effectively with the public health sector through becoming registered on the Good Practice Scheme that supports organisations and sectors involved with health promotion and improvement, as well as giving presentations about the project at Public Health Wales and other events. Going forward, and due to the early successes, Actif Woods Wales will be running in Aberystwyth, Treherbert, Anglesey, Wrexham and Neath Port Talbot between 2013 and 2016.

## Contact and Links

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Coed Lleol

Actif Woods phase five report

First hand account of one of the participants

2005 Report – Trees and Woodlands, Nature's Health Service

ITV News – Getting fit in the fresh air

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