

Branching Out

Summary of Economic Study

Branching Out is a programme run by Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) that aims to improve the Health-Related Quality of Life of adults experiencing severe and enduring mental health problems. First established in 2007, it is based on a 12-week programme of woodland activities, which are used as a vehicle to help participants learn strategies that can maintain positive mental health. It runs as an adjunct treatment for those in secondary and tertiary care.

The programme has been evaluated through two survey-based studies, one for 2011-2012 and one for 2014-2015. The studies used 12-point short form surveys, completed by participants both before and immediately after the scheme, with a follow-up survey three months after completion of the programme.

The 2011-2012 survey showed benefits in Quality-Adjusted Life Years (QALYs), a standard measure used to assess the cost-effectiveness of treatments across the health care sector, but these were not statistically significant. It also showed that the programme was cost-effective when compared with the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines. The aim of the 2014-2015 survey was to increase the amount of data available, to see whether a larger sample would show statistically significant effects for QALYs, and to extend the analysis of the programme's cost-effectiveness.

The results of both surveys show small but significant improvements in participants' mental health, social participation and general vitality. Perhaps because of a relatively low response rate to the full survey, the benefits for QALYs in the 2014-2015¹ survey are also not statistically significant.

Improvements in mental health and vitality as a result of the scheme are particularly marked for participants with more severe mental health problems before they entered the programme.

The programme has a high retention rate. Participants were more likely to maintain contact with Branching Out than with comparable schemes, which indicates their satisfaction with it.

The cost of one QALY delivered through Branching Out is just over £17,000. This compares favourably with the NICE benchmark of £30,000 for an intervention to deliver one QALY. Although it was not possible to collect reliable data on how long its benefits last, this indicates that Branching Out is a cost-effective way to improve mental health.

Details of the programme are available at www.forestry.gov.uk/branchingout

¹ CJC Consulting, 2016. Branching Out Economic Extension: Final Report to Forestry Commission Scotland. Available at: www.forestry.gov.uk/branchingout.

In partnership with