

**Hannah Barrett, MLWW Project Manager,
joins ARC CIC's Ecotherapy session at
Foundry Wood on a cold and sunny day in
January and reports back**

ARC CIC have been supported by Plunkett Foundation under the **Making Local Woods Work** programme, receiving advice on ecotherapy, health, woodland management and fundraising. MLWW produced this wellbeing [film](#).



If you are a community looking to buy or manage your local woodland then please do get in touch with [us](#).

What is ARC CIC?:

ARC CIC is based in Warwickshire and manages a two-acre urban woodland in Leamington Spa and also has access to a further six-acre private woodland around two miles from the town. ARC stands for 'Achieving Results in Communities', and true to their name they run two types of session for people struggling with their mental health, social isolation or in addiction recovery:

1. Ecotherapy@FoundryWood is a weekly drop in that operates throughout the year and supports participants to practice the Five Ways to Wellbeing through woodland maintenance, craft activities, mindfulness, socializing and cooking and eating together. It is an informal but very welcoming and sociable group.
2. Tallis Wood Wellbeing operates through courses of 10 weeks, where participants are asked to commit to the entire course and engage more fully in the activities on offer. Alongside similar activities to Ecotherapy, practical tools for managing and improving mental health are shared, participants set personal goals to work towards in between sessions, and the group members support one another through positive feedback and encouragement.

ARC also runs a number of gardening projects with the aim of improving peri-urban land and neglected areas of the town whilst also engaging with local people for health and social benefits. Most projects are grant-funded, some unrestricted income is earned through regular pizza making sessions for the general public, educational sessions and private parties.

Hannah's Report:

Hannah Barrett, Project Manager at Plunkett, as part of the Plunkett Foundation's 2019 centenary activities went to visit Foundry Wood and experience their ecotherapy activities. Here is her report from her visit:

"As I walked in to the woodland, I broke out into a huge smile, the sun was shining, birds singing and twigs snapping under my feet. The renovated railway carriage, which now serves as the group's shed, greets you as you enter. It tells the story of the site, letting those who venture in know about the woods; how it was

once the site of a foundry, and a huge local employer, and now a place for the people of Leamington and beyond. The site is located between two train lines; as haulage trains move slowly and noisily past, they add to the magic of the forest. You are in a special place, a gem nestled in the town.

Kath and Kristie greet each session member as a friend, the question, “welcome, would you like a hug?” is asked on arrival. Service users and volunteers are smiley, welcoming and request a hug if one is not offered! Initial shyness is swiftly broken and chat breaks out before we are taken on a tour of the site and then allocated our tasks for the morning. I am part of the woodland management team, clearing areas which are starting to encroach on the paths. I get to spend a very happy hour in the presence of volunteers, service users and their carers. This is followed by making a bird feeder at the centre of the site; a delightfully messy activity. Then we all ‘muck in’ to make lunch. Lunch shows collaboration between ARC and other local organisations - the heaving shopping bag is full of supermarket spoils, veg that is past its sell-by date and would have otherwise gone to waste. The food is a donation from the Salvation Army who have collected it from one of the local large chains. It makes for a delicious soup, cooked over an open fire which is stoked by those on site.

Elsbeth, volunteer, initially became involved in ARC CIC as she was asked to run a drum circle at an ecotherapy session. She found both the atmosphere and the people so welcoming that she asked to become a weekly volunteer, and she is now many months in! She found that the sessions in the woodland create a “good sense of community”.

Sarah, volunteer, “What keeps me coming back is the benefit it gives to people. It is simple, nothing clever; it is people spending time together outside. The outside bit is very important.” Sarah felt the open environment encouraged people to attend and the flexible nature of both the space and the sessions made it less intimidating than an indoor session. She explained that had we been sitting in a circle in a village hall chatter may have been stilted and people may have felt anxious crossing the threshold into a room full of strangers. Whereas the open nature of a woodland meant it felt less daunting. As Sarah told me, you are able to just come into the woodland and spend time wandering around, to participate in the session you don’t have to undertake an activity, you don’t even have to talk to anyone if you don’t want to. But people do get involved and do talk, the flexible, less prescribed nature of the session encourages it.”

Sammy, service user, started attending the ecotherapy sessions in November 2018 after being referred under the recovery and wellbeing programme she is undertaking. She enjoyed the first session so much that she keeps coming back, and on the day that I visited, her partner had also joined the session which demonstrated the collaborative and inclusive nature of ARC’s work. Sammy has taken part in activities such as wreath making, outside cooking and forest management. As we washed up the lunch crockery together, in the outside kitchen, she told me that she felt the sessions were a “good way to get outside and engage your creative side”.

As I left the site the, now well fed, the group were developing their plans for the next few months, ideas were being shared with different people being asked to lead the activities. Kath’s relaxed approach is very inclusive, allowing ideas to be vocalised and developed.”

Find out more about ARC CIC on their website - www.arccic.co.uk.

Kath at ARC CIC has been part of a body of researchers (Clarity CIC and Neroche Woodlanders, along with ARC CIC) who have written a report commissioned by MLWW - ‘Woodland Social Enterprises: Supporting people in need’.

The full report will be launched shortly but you can see a [preview article](#) in the Online Journal, ECOS.

Photo Gallery from ARC CIC's Foundry Wood



