

Belfast Hills Partnership: Growing Up Healthy Impact Report



Belfast Hills Partnership: Growing Up Healthy Impact Report

ISBN 978-1-913643-36-2 Copyright 2025 the authors

Suggested citation:

O'Kane N, Cleland CL and Hunter RF (2025) Belfast Hills Partnership: Growing Up Healthy Impact Report Available at: groundswelluk.org/publications/

Photography

Courtesy of Elaine Armstrong and © Stephanie Wynne for GroundsWell

Funding

This work was supported by the UK Prevention Research Partnership (MR/V049704/1)



TABLE OF CONTENTS

01

Foreword

02

Belfast Hills Partnership and GroundsWell

03



05 The evaluation process

06

Survey findings

07

Impact on young people



Impact on friends, family, and the community



Impact on schools



Growing Up Healthy artwork

18

Conclusion



Learn more

FOREWORD

Research indicates that "active kids tend to become healthy active adults". Therefore this project aimed to start good habits at a young age, helping young people from deprived areas in Belfast to gain the tools and knowledge to maintain a healthy outdoor lifestyle and so help prevent chronic diseases in the future. The need for primary school-aged young people to get the opportunity to connect to nature and so improve their mental and physical health was identified by staff from the West Belfast Federation of GPs, who approached the Belfast Hills Partnership to see if a pilot project for local young people could be established. When the opportunity arose to work with the Groundswell team, benefiting from their expertise to measure impact as well as obtain financial support, we were delighted - hence 'Growing Up Healthy' was created.

LIZZY PINKERTON BELFAST HILLS PARTNERSHIP



GroundsWell launched the Innovation Fund to support projects contributing to research on improving the health and wellbeing of people and communities through the use of urban green and blue spaces. This report showcases the project led by Belfast Hills Partnership. Their project encouraged 356 primary school students to explore nature in the Belfast Hills over a 6-week programme. The programme involved connecting with nature, establishing healthy habits and improving health and wellbeing with schools within the most deprived communities in Belfast. The report highlights the health, mental wellbeing, and social benefits of the programme.



RUTH HUNTER QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST

BELFAST HILLS PARTNERSHIP

The Belfast Hills Partnership is an independent charity which seeks to **improve how the hills are managed**. We do this by working with our partners including local councils, government departments, community groups, nature conservation organisations and businesses committed to caring for the Belfast Hills and their people. All these groups have pledged to work together to solve problems and forge **new initiatives** to **benefit the Belfast Hills.**



GROUNDSWELL

The GroundsWell Consortium is a team of researchers, local communities, implementers and policymakers who aim to better understand and evidence the role of **green and blue spaces** within wider **social, economic, environmental, cultural and health systems**.

GroundsWell's research activity is based in Edinburgh, Liverpool and Belfast, where it is being led by researchers at Queen's University Belfast.

A key aim of GroundsWell is to encourage, enable, and collaborate on community-engagement and communityled research. To facilitate this, GroundsWell launched a **Community Innovation Fund** programme, where community organisations could be supported in implementing programmes and evaluating impact.



Learn more about the GroundsWell Community Innovation fund <u>here</u>











GROWING UP HEALTHY

The Belfast Hills Partnership was approached by the West Belfast GP Federation with an identified need for primary school aged young people within West Belfast to improve their health and wellbeing. It was suggested that a programme that encompassed **walking and nature connectedness** should be developed.

This fits with the findings of the 2024 Health Inequalities report for Northern Ireland which states that "preventable mortality in the most deprived areas was three times the rate in the least deprived areas". This means young people in deprived areas are likely to experience significantly poorer health outcomes over their lifetime; highlighting **the need to work with young people from deprived areas** to give them the tools to improve their wellbeing.

Funding was secured through the GroundsWell Innovation Fund, and the West Belfast GP Federation, to facilitate a pilot primary school project which called 'Growing Up Healthy', to enable the level of uptake and demand from local schools to be determined, along with assessing the impact of such a programme on the participants.

3

GROWING UP HEALTHY

'Growing Up Healthy' was a youth-focused health and wellbeing initiative using the Belfast Hills. The project provided exciting activities for children to get into their local urban green space to **connect with nature, establish healthy habits, and improve their health and wellness** as outlined by NHS 5 Steps to Wellbeing [1]. The project worked with **356 primary school students** across five schools doing a six-week nature programme; 98 Summer Scheme attendees; and approximately 98 family members within the **most deprived communities of Belfast**.

The aim was to provide positive outdoors experiences, learn new skills, collaborate together, and instil tools to start a life time of nature connectedness and healthy lifestyle choices to avoid chronic diseases. The focus was on Key Stage 2, and ties into 'The World Around us' part of the primary school curriculum. Activities included exploring various sites learning about nature, physical activity, walking, orienteering, art sessions, bush craft, conservation tasks and interactive classroom sessions. At the end of each term there was a celebration event where parents, grandparents, guardians, siblings were invited to take part in a nature activity, therefore encouraging a **health 'ripple effect' in their wider community**.

1 NHS 5 steps to mental wellbeing. Available at: https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/five-steps-to-mental-wellbeing/



THE EVALUATION PROCESS

EVALUATING THE IMPACT

The impact of the six-week programme was assessed quantitively and qualitatively. Surveys were undertaken at the beginning and end of the programme with the young people to assess changes in health and wellbeing outcomes, along with collecting feedback and anecdotes from the young people, their teachers and their parents, guardians and other family members.

The following sections address the different types of impact:

- Impact on the **young people**
- Impact on family, friends and the community
- Impact on the **school**

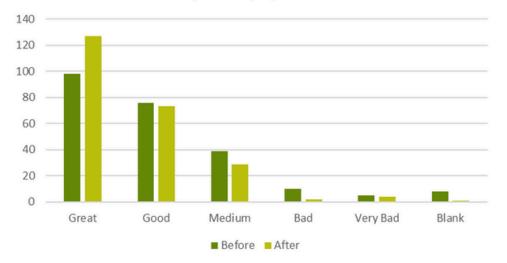
The quotes in the following section come from the young people themselves, their families, teachers, and the Belfast Hills Partnership facilitators.



SURVEY

PHYSICAL HEALTH

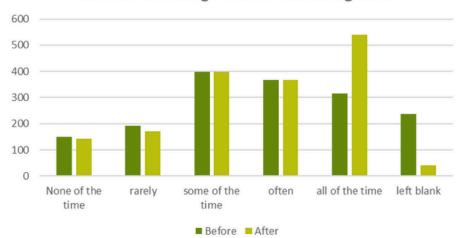
The young people were asked to rate their own physical health before and after the programme. Findings suggest that young people felt their physical health had improved over the 6-week programme, with many feeling great about their physical health.



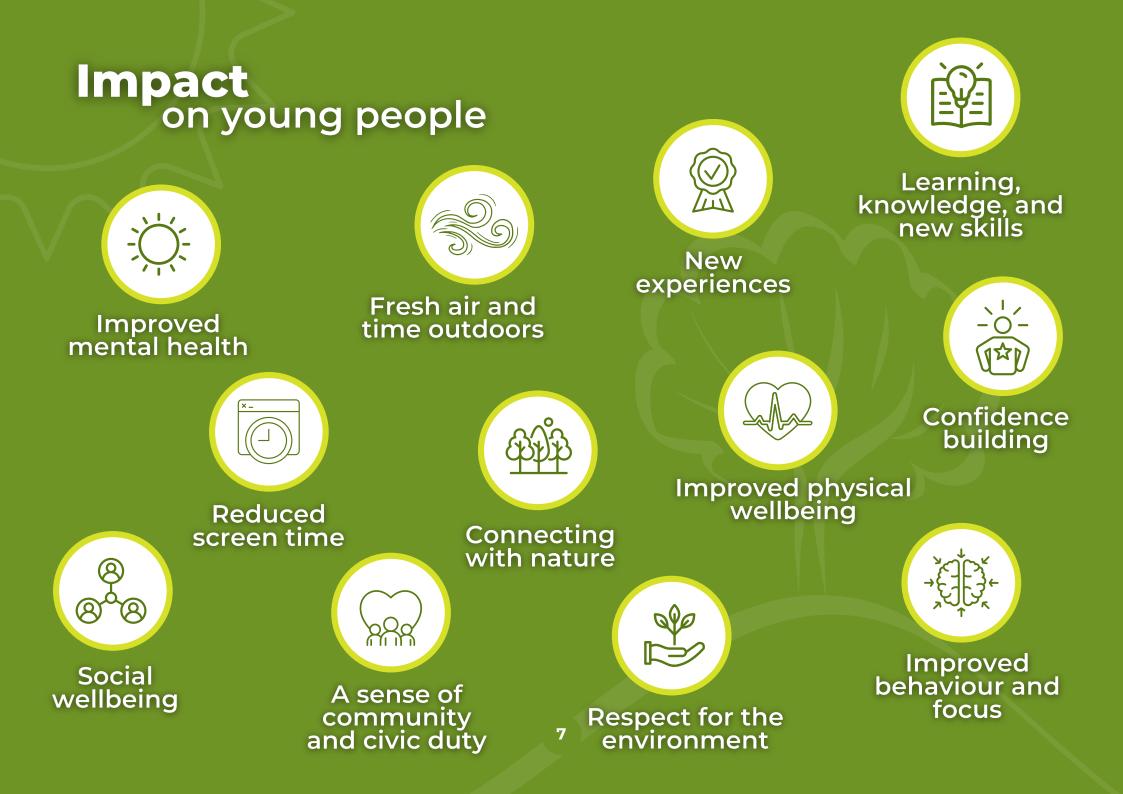
Self-reported physical health

MENTAL WELLBEING

The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) is a tool designed to measure mental wellbeing in the general population and evaluate projects aimed at improving mental health. It proposes statements such as "I've been feeling positive about the future", "I've been feeling useful", "I've been feeling relaxed", "I've been dealing with problems well" etc. There was an improvement in young people feeling positive about the mental health markers "all of the time", suggesting an overall improvement in mental health after the programme.



Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale



IMPACT ON YOUNG PEOPLE



Positive changes to young people's mental health were discussed in reflections from the facilitators, the teachers, and from the young people themselves, and was observed in the survey delivered to the children before and after the programme.

I felt really happy and relaxed, I hope to experience this again.

- young person



REDUCED SCREEN TIME

Many teachers discussed the benefits of young people stepping away from screens and playing outside, especially as they spend so much time indoors and using screens. One young person in particular agreed.

All I wanted to do was play my Xbox in my bedroom, but it made me so angry all the time... now you have taught me that I can go outside into nature and I feel better straight away.



SOCIAL WELLBEING

Teachers, when reflecting on the programme, highlighted the benefit of the young people getting out into fresh air, spending time with their friends. and working in groups.

 It was great to see everyone outside in the fresh air connecting with their friends in a lovely free manner.

— teacher

– teache



A SENSE OF COMMUNITY AND CIVIC DUTY

Teachers observed that the young people developed an interest and pride in looking after the community. Some young people volunteered to weed areas of the school grounds, while others were litter picking for a local shopkeeper who agreed to donate money to the school as thanks.

It helped remind the children to look after their community.

IMPACT ON YOUNG PEOPLE



Reflections from teachers, in particular, highlighted the act of spending time out in fresh air as a positive impact. They believed that the young people enjoyed spending time outdoors, and felt the benefit of it.





The young people enjoyed being out in nature and discovering and learning about various plants, flowers, and insects. The teachers believed that they developed a greater sense of interest in their environment and nature, and were keen to learn more.

The children had an increased interest in outside spaces and wildlife.

teacher



NEW EXPERIENCES

The young people themselves, and the teachers, remarked that the children enjoyed getting to do things they would not usually get a chance to, including visiting places they had never been, and planting trees.

66

I like discovering new things.

- young person

99



Beyond just learning more about nature and connecting with it, teachers believed that the young people developed an increased respect for the environment around them, including plants and animals.

I feel the programme has made a lot of the class think of nature a lot more - think before they litter or what they can do to help animals.
teacher

IMPACT ON YOUNG PEOPLE



The survey results from the young people suggested that they felt that their own physical health had improved over the programme. Teachers also reflected on a greater awareness of the impact of the outdoors on children's physical wellbeing.

⁶⁶ Hiking can help with fitness.

— young person

99



Teachers remarked that the programme improved the young people's knowledge of nature, the environment, and how it impacts their health.

It has increased their interest in certain topics. It has given them more knowledge and made them aware of things in nature."

- teacher



There were multiple stories from facilitators and teachers about children that typically struggled with behavioural issues and focus who really benefitted from the programme. Teachers and carers observed that children were more focused and got into less trouble.

66 He is like a new child, he has not been getting into bother in school and has asked to go for walks and help in the garden at home.

— grandmother



CONFIDENCE BUILDING

Facilitators and teachers believed that the programme improved the confidence of many of the young people. One particular child, who has a disability, thrived in the outside environment and began encouraging their classmates.

Some children who were already familiar with this topic were able to contribute greatly which improved their confidence and self-belief.





99

Impact on friends, family, and the community



IMPACT ON FRIENDS, FAMILY, AND THE COMMUNITY



FAMILY PARTICIPATION

There was good turnout from families and parents at assemblies and family-focused events as part of the programme, indicating a positive response from a large number of families.

Students' families attending the celebration event was very positive.

— teacher



Activities in the programme included litter-picking and planting bulbs and trees, which are activities the whole community can benefit from.

It will affect local residents as we have litter picked and found things in the community that will benefit them

— teacher



One of the schools had the idea to ask their local shop to display their anti-litter posters and, not only did they agree to display the posters on their windows, they offered to make regular donations to the school if they continued their litter picking.

6

Not only were the children outside, they were also looking after the community.

— teacher



IMPACT ON FRIENDS, FAMILY, AND THE COMMUNITY



Programme facilitators received positive feedback from families, specifically sharing how proud they were of their children. The programme had encouraged a lot of the young people to be more confident, have a more positive outlook, and improve behaviour in school, all of which was noticed and appreciated by their families.

[Child's] granny came to me to thank me and said their enthusiasm recently coming home with stories was amazing

- facilitator





Many of the teachers referenced "pester power", that is, that young people will go home and pester their family to get out into nature and share what they have learned. Young people remarked that they would be bringing their family to the places that they visited and teachers received feedback from families on the encouragement they'd received from the children.

I feel from this programme the children will go home and tell parents/carers what they have learned

- teacher



Impact on schools



Teachers inspired for outdoor learning



Improvement of school grounds



New experiences for teachers



Resources and ideas for teachers



School staff supported in delivery of activities

14

IMPACT ON SCHOOLS



Many of the teachers reported that they saw the benefits of outdoor learning among the children, and said it was something they hoped to implement more of in the future.

More outdoor learning with the class as it helps them learn in a new environment and for wider opportunities

- teacher



Teachers believed a lot of the topics and materials were resources which they could use again in future, particularly upon seeing how interested the young people were.

Strategies and ideas to appreciate and use easily in the future

— teacher



As the programme involved planting trees, planting bulbs, and litter picking, the school grounds were improved, which benefits the school community as a whole.

Tree planting, planting bulbs, litter picking

— teacher



IMPACT ON SCHOOLS



The young people were not the only group to enjoy new experiences as part of the programme. Some of the teachers enjoyed new experiences and exploring their local area more.

As I don't live locally, it also educated me on local places of interest, and associated features/nature

- teacher



Teachers appreciated that the Belfast Hills Partnership facilitators were hands on and able to support them in the delivery of lessons and activities.

Support from facilitators — teacher





99

GROWING UP HEALTHY ARTWORK

The young people created lots of artwork during the programme, see some examples below



CONCLUSION

Spending time in outdoor spaces can provide us with a multitude of benefits, from our physical health, to our social life, and our mental health and wellbeing. However, inequalities exist in access of these spaces, particularly among those living in areas of higher deprivation.

The Growing Up Healthy programme engaged with 356 primary school students and almost 100 family members in the most deprived areas of Belfast. The programme was evaluated via before-and-after surveys with the students, through teacher and school feedback, and by speaking to the young people and the facilitators of the programme from Belfast Hills Partnership.

The programme had a positive impact on the young people, their friends, family, and the community, and on the school communities as a whole. Growing Up Healthy succeeded in its aim to build capacity and resilience among those living in areas of high deprivation. Young people who participated in the programme have been equipped with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to access the outdoor spaces on their doorstep to the benefit of their physical and mental health.





LEARN MORE



Learn more about the programme and hear from the young people themselves in our video. View now.



belfasthills.org

X @BelfastHills

⋈ info@belfasthills.org



groundswelluk.org



