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Wild Skills, Wild Spaces – experiences of volunteering

Dr Paul Sellars, Professor Diane Crone, Dr Debbie Clayton, & Prof Jenny Mercer
(June 2025)



Executive Summary

A team from Centre for Health, Activity and Wellbeing Research (CAWR) at Cardiff Metropolitan University were commissioned to conduct an evaluation for Montgomeryshire Wildlife Trust (MWT) regarding their two-year Wild Skills, Wild Spaces volunteering programme (WSWS-V). The evaluation aimed to better understand the experiences of volunteers, their connection to nature, and reasons for their volunteering.

To achieve the aim, a mixed methods approach using a survey, focus groups, and interviews was adopted. The survey asked participants to respond to questions regarding their: demographic information, nature connection, reasons for volunteering, aspects they enjoyed the most aligning with the five ways to wellbeing, and volunteers' overall experience. Twelve volunteers took part in the survey and eleven in face-to-face interviews and/or focus groups to understand experiences of volunteering.

Currently, there are two volunteer groups and a total of 13 individuals in these. Each group is supported by a MWT individual in preparation for full self-sufficiency from August 2025.

Findings from the evaluation related to each of the five ways to wellbeing. For example, results showed the importance of WSWS-V in offering an opportunity for connecting with nature and the outdoors, with time in the outdoors being viewed as enjoyable. Further, participants discussed the physical nature and energy they expended during volunteering on the MWT sites often when completing conservation work (e.g., strimming, management of trees). Furthermore, participants highlighted that throughout volunteering on WSWS-V they learnt about plants and animals as well as developing practical conservation knowledge and skills. Finally, several barriers were described to continued engagement, such as: changes experienced within sessions, lack of transport to and from volunteering, and personal issues.

Recommendations

Based upon the project findings, recommendations are presented to support similar volunteering in nature roles which follow on from social prescribed nature activities.

Programme structural recommendations

- Consistency of volunteering opportunity
- Time for social interaction and enhancement of social skill development
- Opportunities for autonomy and formalised roles
- Develop individuals' skills and knowledge in nature and conservation work
- Promote enjoyment and community
- Reflect and celebrate the positive changes and advancements made as a result of the individuals' volunteering in nature
- Availability of volunteering in a similar capacity post a formalise support programme to promote the potential for longer term benefits

General recommendations

- Long-term funding opportunities to support longer term benefits for those involved
- Chance to re-refer into the structured programme
- Provision of transportation to access nature which is not possible for all



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RESEARCH TEAM

Montgomeryshire Wildlife Trust commissioned a team from the Centre of Health, Activity, and Wellbeing Research (CAWR) at Cardiff Metropolitan University to conduct the current research project. CAWR's vision is to be a world-leading transdisciplinary research centre working with a diverse range of communities that makes a difference to people's health and wellbeing across the lifespan.



The team from CAWR that conducted this current research project



Dr Paul Sellars | CAWR Research Associate

Role: Project Lead, overall operational management of the project including project design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, report writing.
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Professor Diane Crone | CAWR Director

Role: Project design, interpretation of findings, report writing.



Dr Debbie Clayton | Principal Lecturer in Psychology

Role: Project design, interpretation of findings, report writing.



Professor Jenny Mercer | Principal Lead Graduate Studies and Reader

Role: Project design, interpretation of findings, report writing.

The team would like to thank all those involved in this project with particular thanks to all those who shared their stories and gave up their time.

Thank you / Diolch

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INTRODUCTION



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INTRODUCTION

Research context

The 'Wild Skills, Wild Spaces – experiences of volunteering' (WSWS-V) project is led by Montgomeryshire Wildlife Trust (MWT) and is the second stage of the overall WSWS project¹. WSWS-V follows on from the ongoing WSWS project in which participants take part in a referred 12-week structured nature-based programme to support their physical and mental wellbeing. Specifically, WSWS-V, involves those participants who have completed the 12 weeks WSWS programme and then wish to continue their involvement in nature-based activities with MWT in a volunteer capacity (Figure 1).

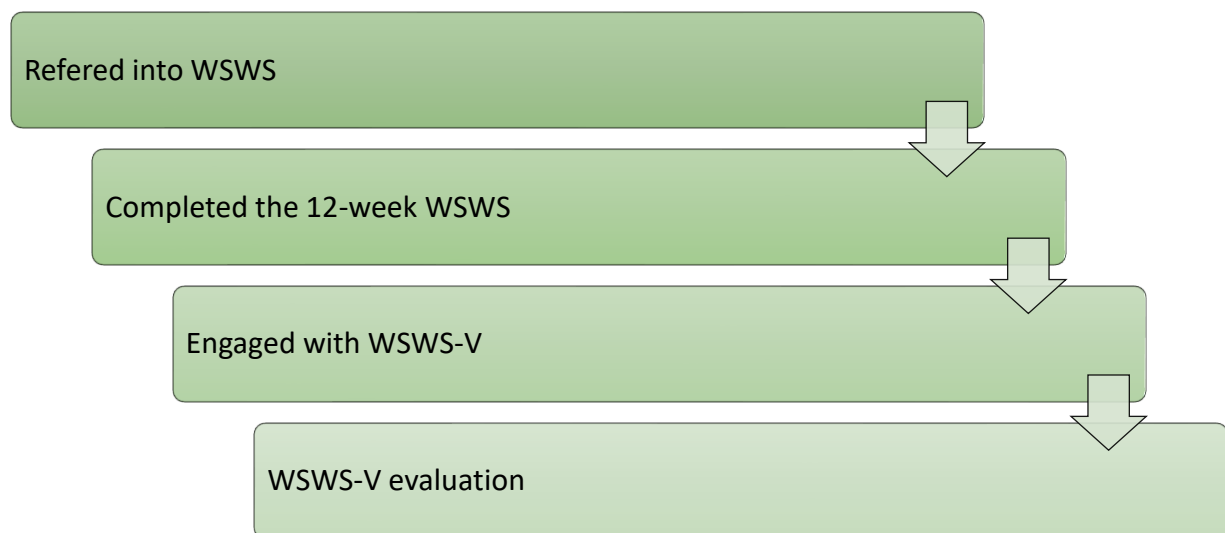


Figure 1: Flow diagram illustrating eligible participants for WSWS-V

¹ For WSWS1 report see here: <https://doi.org/10.25401/cardiffmet.25003607.v1>

Volunteering overview

The WSWS-V programme involves adult volunteering programmes across two MWT sites within Powys, Wales. During their volunteering, participants take part in weekly sessions to improve and maintain the MWT sites, with activities including: habitat management, conservation work, surveying and monitoring of wildlife, and making sustainable items to sell in the MWT shop. Throughout the volunteering process, participants are afforded autonomy to work together to support the conservation efforts at the MWT sites. The overall aim of the WSWS-V programme is to develop self-sufficient, sustainable volunteering groups which no-longer require the support of deliverers and will continue to support the sites beyond the duration of the WSWS-V project funding cycle.

CAWR Evaluation

As part of the overall two-year WSWS-V programme (funded through the National Lottery), MWT aim to better understand the experiences of volunteers who take part, their connection to nature, and reasons for their volunteering. To explore this, a team from CAWR at Cardiff Metropolitan University were commissioned to undertake a mixed methods evaluation of WSWS-V.

METHOD



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METHOD

Aim

The aim of the evaluation was to better understand the experiences of volunteers who take part in WSWS-V, their connection to nature, and their reasons for volunteering.

Approach and analysis

To achieve this aim, a mixed methods approach using quantitative and qualitative methods, (a survey, focus groups, and interviews) was adopted. Specifically, this included participants being invited to take part in a survey following at least four weeks of participating in WSWS-V.

Additionally, interviews and focus groups took place with participants (aged 18 or older) to better understand the experiences of volunteering on WSWS, reasons for volunteering and what volunteering means to them, in the context of WSWS-V. To support the development of the data collection process, the research team spent time with the participants discussing and preparing the data collection process (survey design, and interview schedule development).

During this process, pilot testing of the data collection tools was also run. The content of the survey and the qualitative focus groups and interviews are outlined below.

Survey

The survey asked participants to respond to questions regarding:

- demographic information: age, gender, ethnicity, nationality, employment/occupation
- nature connection, via an illustrated extension of the inclusion of nature in self-scale
- volunteering, informed by the Volunteer Functions Inventory
- aspects enjoyed the most aligning with the five ways to wellbeing
- overall experience, via open ended text responses to better understand:
 - potential positive impact of volunteering
 - aspects enjoyed the most
 - improvements to WSWS-V
 - future volunteering

Following completion of the surveys quantitative data was analysed via Microsoft Excel and SPSS. Open-ended text responses were analysed through content analysis.

Interviews and Focus groups

A sub-sample of volunteers (n=11) from the WSWS-V groups were invited to take part in one-to-one interviews and/or focus groups. A total of eight interviews and two focus groups took place at the two WSWS-V locations and were conducted in the natural surroundings. A flexible narrative approach was taken to understand the volunteers' experiences of volunteering with a topic interview guide to prevent a rigid approach. Additionally, the interviews were supported by an elicitation approach in which participants were asked about an item/object/structure (e.g., vegetable patch they had worked one, a conservation project) which was meaningful to them and then talked about it in terms of their experiences of volunteering at WSWS. Following interviews, the audio files were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. Results were organised into themes and sub-themes with quotations from the data presented. All names have been removed/replaced with pseudonyms to assure anonymity.

RESULTS



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RESULTS

Participants

A total of 12 participants engaged in the survey. A total of 11 participants took part in the focus group and/or interview.

Survey

Results for the survey were developed using Microsoft Excel and SPSS and include:

- Demographic details
- Nature connection
- Volunteering
- Overall experience

Demographic details

Below is a summary of the demographic details from the survey for which a total of twelve participants responded to².

Table 1: Volunteer demographic details

Demographic details	
Gender	Female = 1, Male = 11
Age (years)	$M=34$, $SD=10.87$
Nationality	British = 8, English = 1
Ethnicity	White English or Welsh = 12
Occupational status	No current employment = 7 Part-time employed = 1 Full-time employed = 1 Long term sick = 1 Full-time study = 1

² Please note that while 12 participants engaged in the survey not all participants responded to all questions.

Nature connection

To understand participants’ connection with nature, an illustrated extension of the inclusion of nature in self scale³ (see table below) was used. The illustrated question asked participants to select the image which best represented their connection to nature with scores ranging from A (low) to G (high).

Table 2: Connection to nature frequency count

Option	Frequency (N=12)
A 	n=0
B 	n=1
C 	n=1
D 	n=2
E 	n=3
F 	n=2
G 	n=3

³ Kleespies, M. W., Braun, T., Dierkes, P. W., & Wenzel, V. (2021). Measuring Connection to Nature—A Illustrated Extension of the Inclusion of Nature in Self Scale. Sustainability, 13(4), 1761. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13041761>

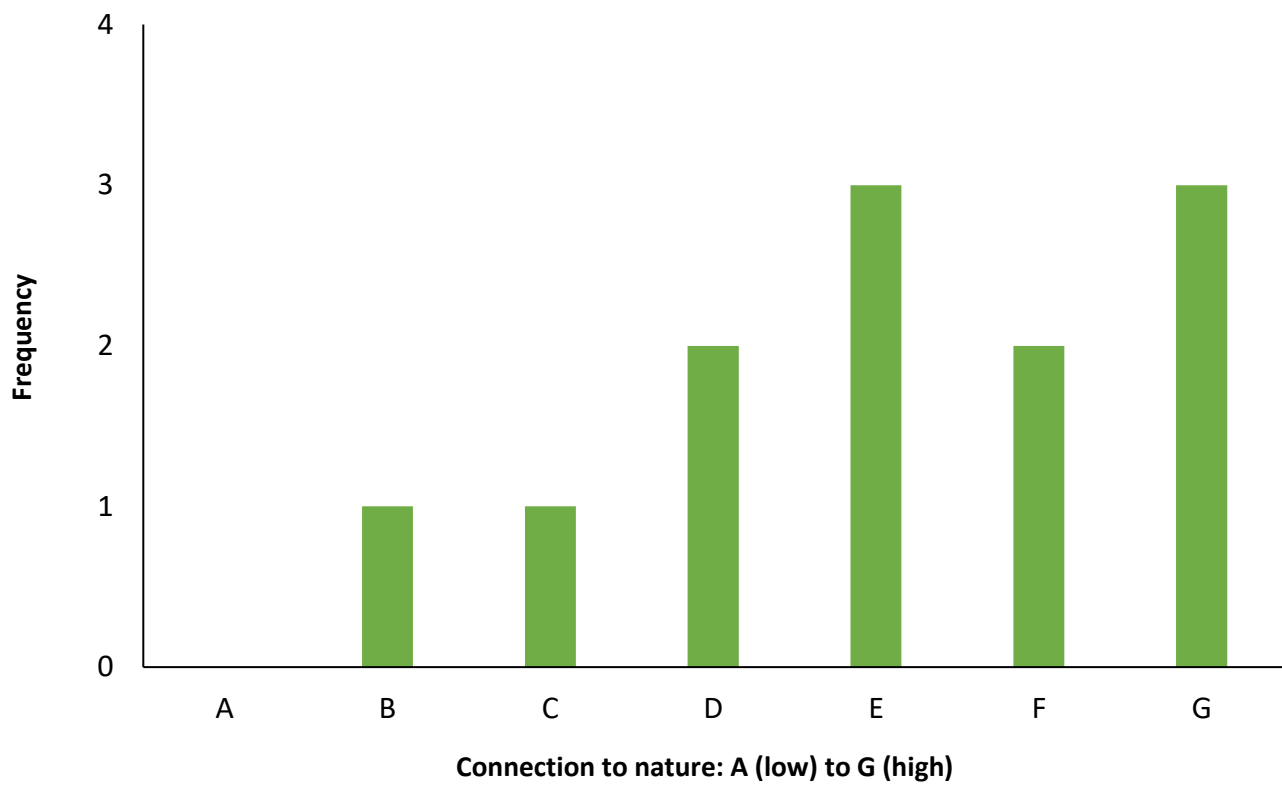


Figure 2: Connection to nature frequency count

Volunteering

Volunteering frequency

Nine participants responded to the question on frequency of volunteering, with n=7 volunteering once a week, and n=2 twice a week.

Volunteering motivations

To better understand reasons for taking part in WSW-S-V, participants (n=7) completed the Volunteer Functions Inventory⁴ (VFI). The VFI includes 30 questions about reasons for volunteering and results are present in six categories: protective motives, values, career, social, understanding, and enhancement. Scores for each category range between 7 (low agreement with this motivation) and 35 (high agreement with the motivation).

Table 3: Volunteer motivation

Motivations to volunteer	Mean score (7 lowest – 35 highest)	Standard deviation
Protective Motives – a way of protecting the ego from the difficulties of life	29.30	6.24
Values – a way to express ones altruistic and humanitarian values	28.30	6.17
Career – a way to improve career prospects	24.50	5.72
Social – a way to develop and strengthen social ties	25.40	6.35
Understanding – a way to gain knowledge, skills, and abilities	31.30	4.47
Enhancement – a way to help the ego grow and develop	30.00	3.74

⁴ Clary, E. G., Snyder, M., Ridge, R. D., Copeland, J., Stukas, A. A., Haugen, J., & Miene, P. (1998). Understanding and assessing the motivations of volunteers: A functional approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74(6), 1516–1530. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.74.6.1516>

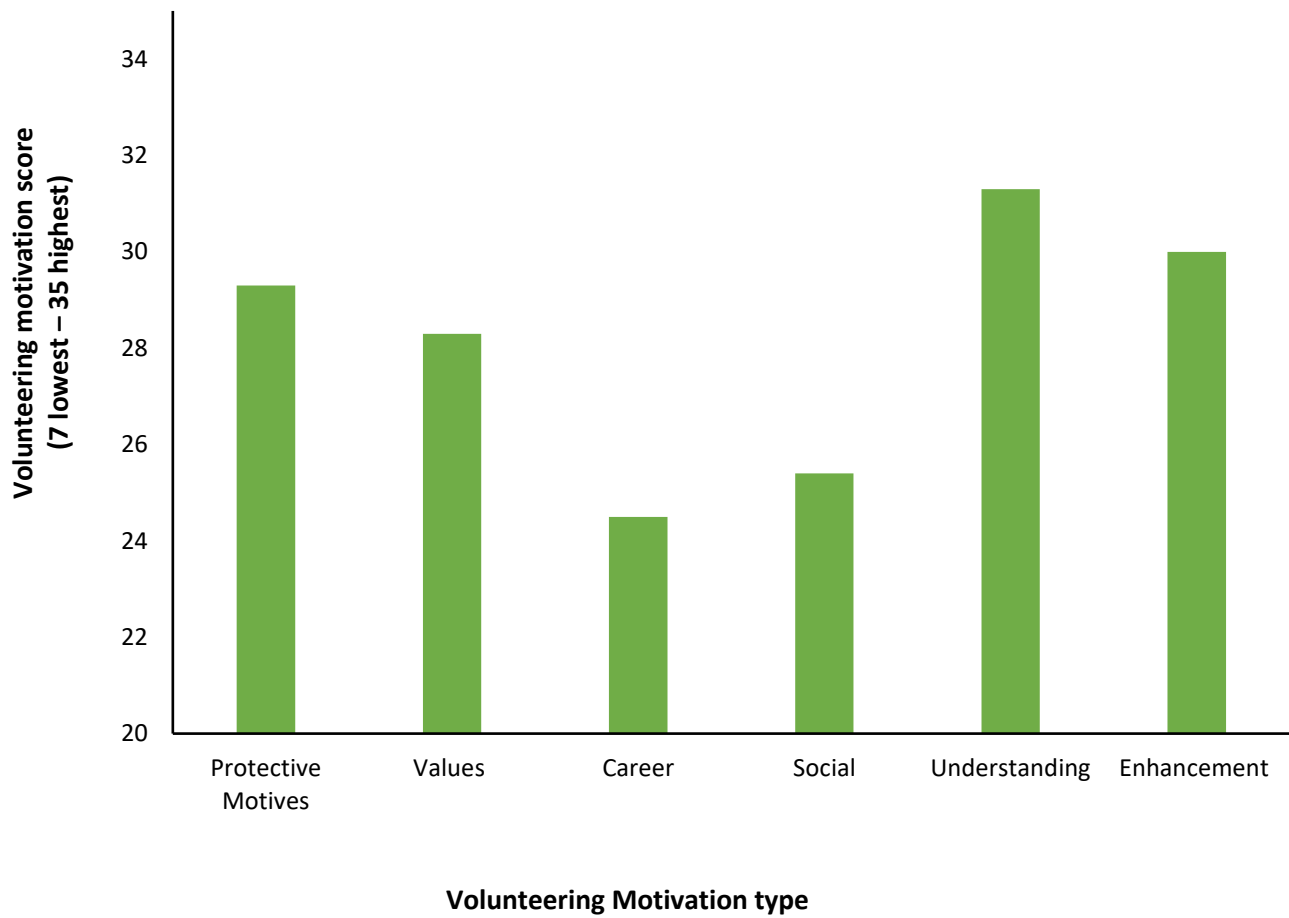


Figure 3: Graph demonstrating mean scores of motivations to volunteer on the WSWS programme

Overall experience

Enjoyment and five ways to wellbeing

Participants were asked to think about volunteering with the WSWs-V and to state their level of enjoyment regarding the below aspects of WSWs-V (scores ranged from 1= I have not enjoyed at all, to 5 = I have enjoyed a great deal). The questions were aligned with the five ways⁵ to wellbeing as seen below (Figure 4).

Five ways to wellbeing

A review of the most up-to-date evidence suggests that building the following five actions into our day-to-day lives is important for well-being:

Connect...

With the people around you. With family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. At home, work, school or in your local community. Think of these as the cornerstones of your life and invest time in developing them. Building these connections will support and enrich you every day.

Be active...

Go for a walk or run. Step outside. Cycle. Play a game. Garden. Dance. Exercising makes you feel good. Most importantly, discover a physical activity you enjoy and that suits your level of mobility and fitness.

Take notice...

Be curious. Catch sight of the beautiful. Remark on the unusual. Notice the changing seasons. Savour the moment, whether you are walking to work, eating lunch or talking to friends. Be aware of the world around you and what you are feeling. Reflecting on your experiences will help you appreciate what matters to you.

Keep learning...

Try something new. Rediscover an old interest. Sign up for that course. Take on a different responsibility at work. Fix a bike. Learn to play an instrument or how to cook your favourite food. Set a challenge you will enjoy achieving. Learning new things will make you more confident as well as being fun.

Give...

Do something nice for a friend, or a stranger. Thank someone. Smile. Volunteer your time. Join a community group. Look out, as well as in. Seeing yourself, and your happiness, linked to the wider community can be incredibly rewarding and creates connections with the people around you.

Figure 4: Five ways to wellbeing taken from New Economics Foundation (2008)

⁵ Aked, J. et al. (2008) Five Ways to Wellbeing: A Report Presented to the Foresight Project on Communicating the Evidence Base for Improving People's Well-being. New Economics Foundation.
<https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/five-ways-to-wellbeing-1.pdf>

Table 4: Level of enjoyment regarding the five ways to wellbeing and volunteering in nature

Thinking about volunteering with WSWs, please state how much you have enjoyed each of the below aspects of WSWs	Level of enjoyment regarding the statement (frequency count)					Mean level of enjoyment
	1 = have <i>not</i> enjoyed at all	2	3	4	5 = have enjoyed a great deal	Mean (SD)
Spending time in the outdoors, developing and nurturing relationships with the natural world and making/meeting new friends (Connect)	0	0	1	2	6	4.56 (0.73)
Keeping active during sessions, such as gardening, wildlife walks on our nature reserves, practical conservation such as dead hedging or habitat creation (Be active)	0	0	0	3	6	4.67 (0.50)
Learning about wildlife around us, new skills in green wood working, bushcraft (Keep learning)	0	0	1	1	7	4.67 (0.71)
Taking action for wildlife and the community through litter picks, supporting another person in the group (Give)	0	1	3	2	3	3.78 (1.09)
Being outside and noticing the changing seasons, connecting to the wildlife and being the moment (Take notice)	0	0	1	2	6	4.56 (0.73)

⁶ The five ways to wellbeing were not included in the participant survey

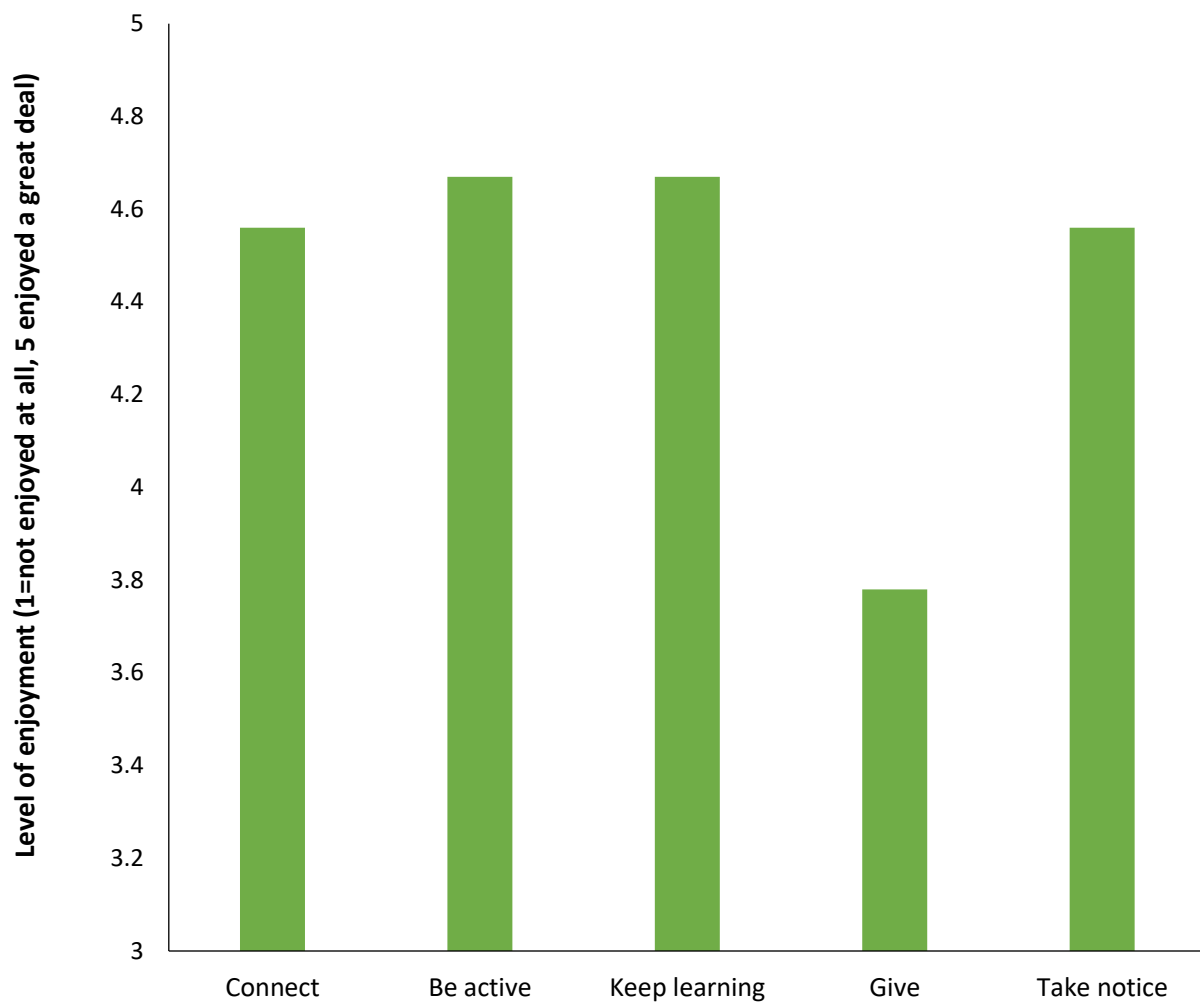


Figure 5: Mean scores showing the level of enjoyment for each of the five ways to wellbeing in relation to volunteering in nature

Table 5: Frequency count of the level of importance for the five ways to wellbeing and volunteering in nature

Statements (way to wellbeing)	Level of importance regarding the statement (frequency count)				
	<i>Least important</i>	<i>4th</i>	<i>3rd</i>	<i>2nd</i>	<i>Most important</i>
Spending time in the outdoors, developing and nurturing relationships with the natural world and making/meeting new friends (Connect)	5	2	1	1	0
Keeping active during sessions, such as gardening, wildlife walks on our nature reserves, practical conservation such as dead hedging or habitat creation (Be active)	3	2	2	1	0
Learning about wildlife around us, new skills in green wood working, bushcraft (Keep learning)	0	3	5	1	0
Taking action for wildlife and the community through litter picks, supporting another person in the group (Give)	0	0	0	2	7
Being outside and noticing the changing seasons, connecting to the wildlife and being the moment (Take notice)	1	1	1	4	2

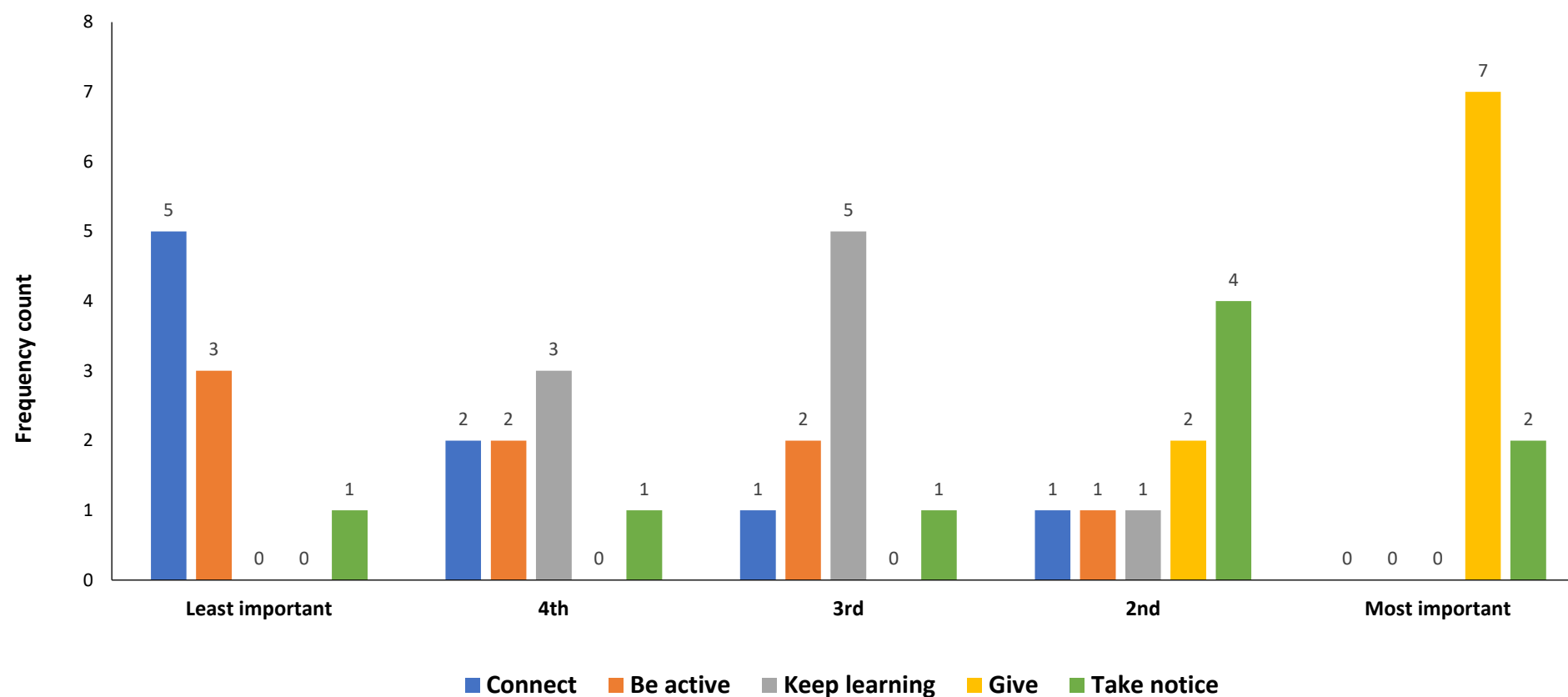


Figure 6: Bar chart demonstrating the frequency count of the level of importance for the five ways to wellbeing and volunteering in WSWS

Enjoyed the most

Participants were asked to describe, through an open text response, what they had enjoyed the most about volunteering with WSWS.



Figure 7: Open text responses from volunteers regarding what they enjoyed the most about volunteering

Skill development

Participants were asked to select any skills they felt they had improved during their time taking part in WSWs-V. Nine participants responded to the question and responses are present in the table below.

Table 6: Skills developed while volunteering with WSWs

Skill option	Frequency
Lighting a fire	4
Cooking outside	3
Growing vegetables	3
Gardening	5
Hedge laying	6
Habitat monitoring (e.g., nest boxes)	3
Dead hedging	5
Risk assessment	3
Safe tool use	5
Whittling, green wood working	8
Making sustainable craft items	5
Mindfulness activities that support positive mental health	4
<i>Other – open text responses</i>	
• Social skills	4
• Knowledge of wildlife and nature	1
• Sending emails	1
• Sustainable agriculture	1
• Problem solving	1

Qualifications

Participants were asked to identify qualifications, certificates, or course which they had achieved while taking part in WSWs-V. Five participants stated a response which are presented in the table below.

Table 7: Qualifications achieved while volunteering with WSWs

Qualification	Frequency
AQA Award scheme	0
John Muir Award Discovery	3
John Muir Awards Explorer	0
Mental Health First Aid	1
Hedge laying training	5
Volunteer Health and Safety	1

Positive influence

Participants were asked, “Has volunteering with WSWS positively influenced or impacted any aspects of your life away from WSWS?” for those that responded “Yes”, a follow up question was requested, “In what way(s) has WSWS volunteering positively influence or impacted you?”. Nine participants responded to the questions all stating “Yes”. The ways in which WSWS-V positively influenced the participants is presented below.

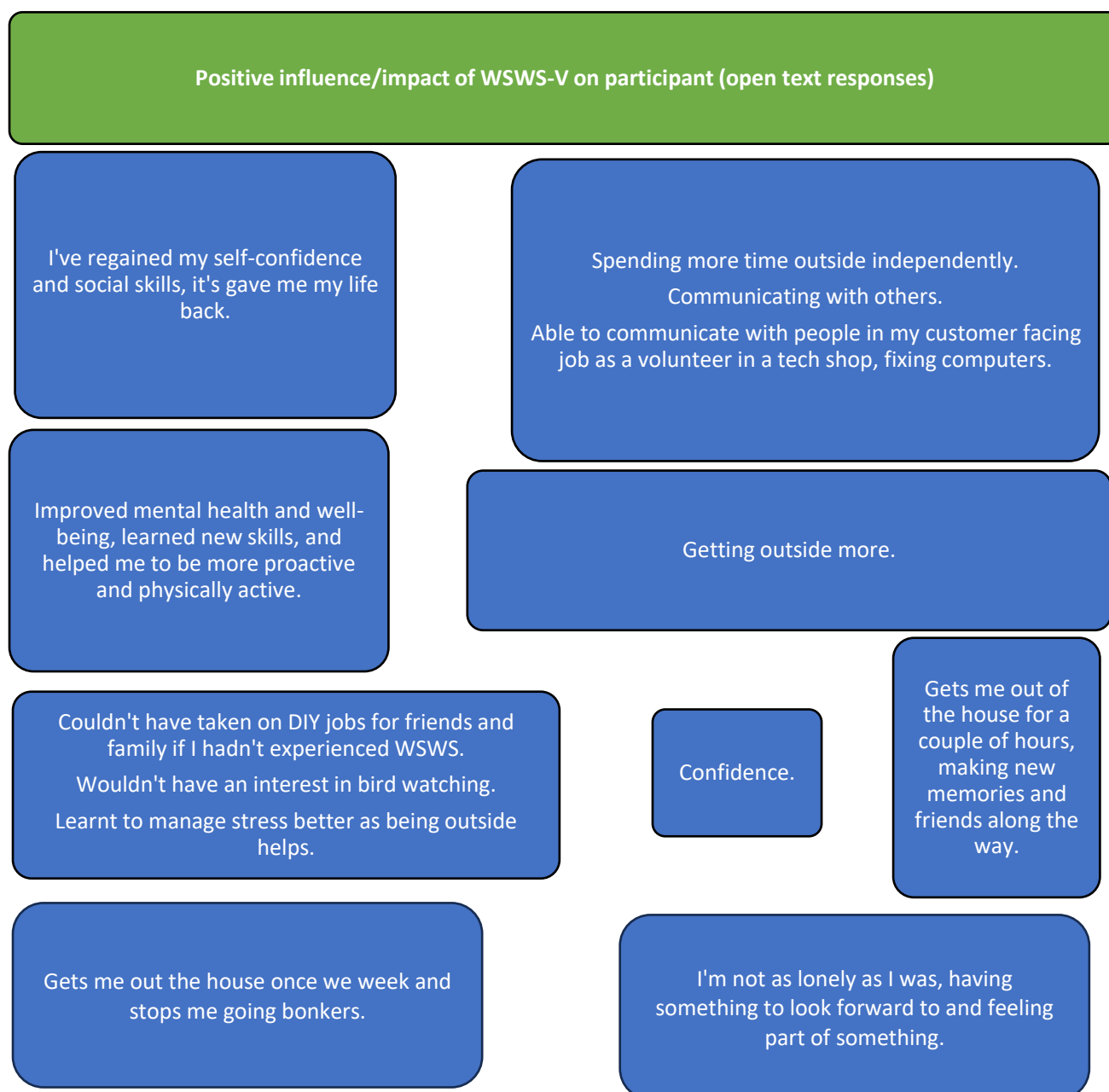


Figure 8: Open text responses demonstrating the ways in which volunteering with WSWS has had a positive impact upon volunteers

Continuation in volunteering

Participants were asked if they planned to continue to volunteer with WSW-S-V in the future. Of the nine respondents all stated “Yes”. These participants were subsequently asked, via an open-text response, what had led them to want to continue volunteering.

Reason for desired continuation with WSW-S-V

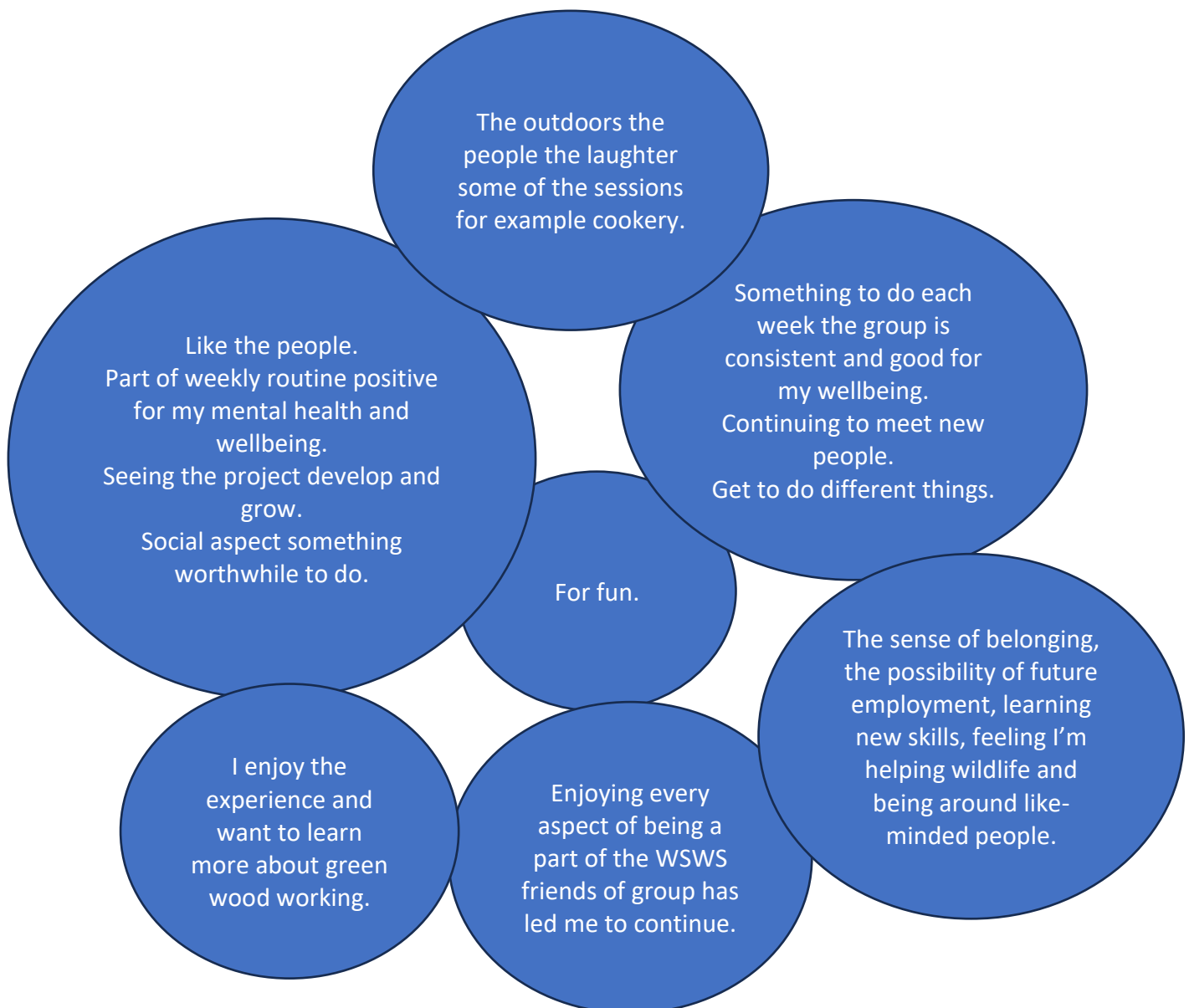


Figure 9: Open text responses demonstrating reasons for future desire to continue volunteering

Improvements

The final open-ended question sought understanding of any ways in which WSW-S-V could be improved (four participants responded).

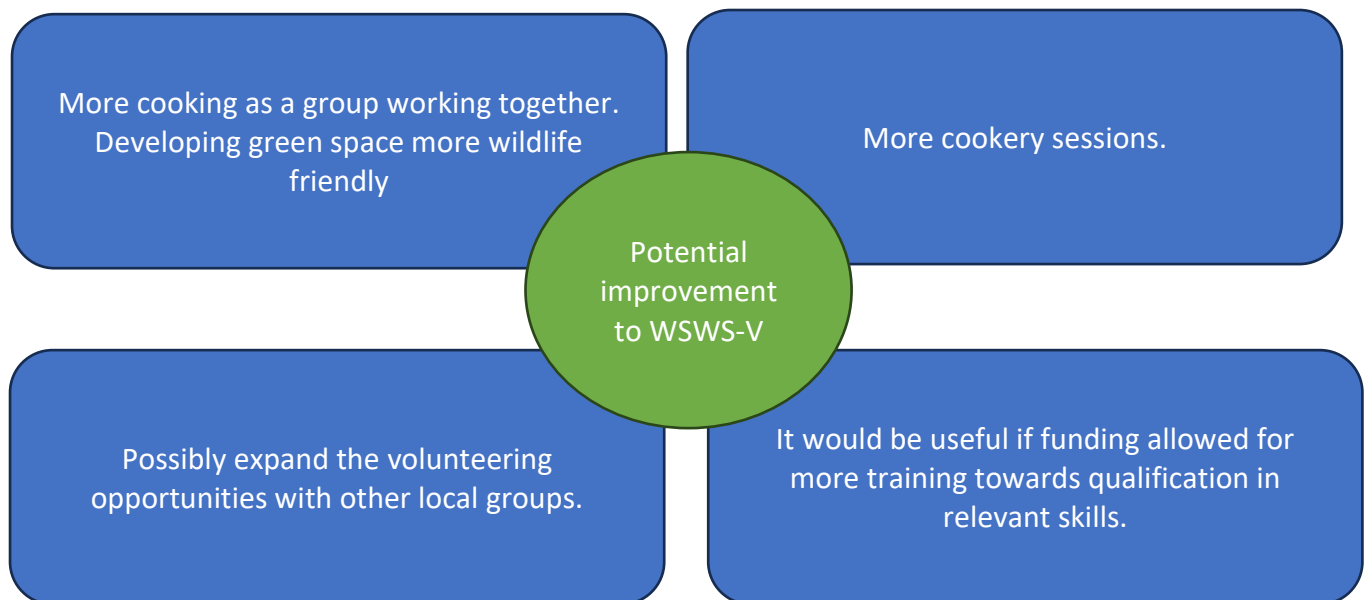


Figure 10: Potential improvements to the WSW-S-V programme suggested by volunteers

Interviews and focus groups

A total of 11 participants took part in one-to-one interviews and/or focus groups all of which were face-to-face. Specifically, two focus groups (with a total of 11 participants) and eight one-to-one interviews took place. Following interviews and focus groups, audio files were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis⁷. Analysis resulted in six themes, which are presented below with example quotes (Figure 11).

Theme and sub-themes	Example quotes
Opportunities not previously afforded <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opportunities to be in nature - Learn new skills and knowledge - New activities - Get out the house - Distraction from other problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Well for me, it's been life changing. Personally. The way I was going before, getting referred onto the 12 week program [WSWS], I think I would still pretty much be very isolated, closed off from people or the world and I would still be not want to leave the house. So for me it's been life changing in the fact that it's given me the opportunity to be out, interact with people who I definitely wouldn't have interacted with before and also have the space to create friends with people I wouldn't have become friends with outside the program or volunteering."
Motivations to engage and continue in volunteering <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consistency of the sessions - Enjoyment - Spend time with friends - Giving back - Take on roles and responsibilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I suppose it's just enjoying it, and I like the people here and stuff, so I suppose that's got me coming back. I get along with everyone and enjoy what we do... this is my first volunteering ever really. So yeah, I enjoy it. That's what keeps me coming back I suppose, because I'm enjoying it. I like learning about all the different stuff that I wouldn't before, like in the past, I wouldn't have thought of learning about new plants and stuff."

⁷ Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>

Developing a community at the natural sites

- Developed new friends through volunteering
- Spending time with friends at the sites
- Supporting others in the community to use the natural space
- Teamwork during volunteering

• "It's wonderful to see that development and that sharing of it all with the community now by having these facilities. I believe there are other reserves where they are putting facilities in it which must be great for people to come and participate in and share in."

Enhanced personal attributes / wellbeing from volunteering

- Personal confidence
- Provides purpose
- Feel valued

• "My confidence was pretty low at the time [when starting WSW-S-V] with stuff, and I think it's boosted my confidence massively, with talking to people and stuff. I was one of them people who wouldn't talk to anyone and stuff like that, just be awkward around people. But it's opened me up a bit, being here and stuff, which is a good thing."

Positive impact upon natural site

- Conservation work
- Developing sites for the future

• "The willow hedge round the corner was a pivotal moment for me when we saw it starting to sprout, starting to grow again, that was like a really high point for me. [And] getting to paint the shelter down there, that was a big one because. You can see the changes we make."

Barriers to accessing volunteering

- Change
- Lack of facilities
- Personal circumstance
- Transport

• "...[if transport wasn't provided] it would be difficult for them [other volunteers] to travel because there's either the trains which are thoroughly delayed, and the buses are running crap on time."
 • "It goes back to the change as well, for instance, when [deliverer] left, that was a big change. I know me personally, I can't speak for the others, but I don't deal well with change as it is. Change is quite a scary thought for me."

Figure 11: Themes, sub-themes, and example quotes

DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS



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DISCUSSION

The evaluation provides insights from WSW-S-V participants into the ways in which the volunteering programme have positively influenced people and communities within Powys and Wales.

Five ways to wellbeing

Findings from this WSW-S-V mixed methods evaluation enables the participant experiences of volunteering in nature to be compared to the five ways to wellbeing.

Connect - Spending time in the outdoors, developing and nurturing relationships with the natural world, and making/meeting new friends

Findings showed the importance of WSW-S-V in offering an opportunity for connecting with nature and the outdoors, with time in the outdoors being viewed as enjoyable. Qualitative and quantitative data illustrated the importance participants placed on the development of friendship and a sense of community with those they volunteered with. Interviews particularly showed how participants felt towards nature and the sense of connection they had with their nature environment. Connection to nature scores further support this as the majority of participants perceived they were connected with nature.

Be active - Keeping active during sessions, such as gardening, wildlife walks on nature reserves, practical conservation such as dead hedging or habitat creation.

Participants discussed the physical nature and energy they expended during volunteering on the MWT sites often when completing conservation work (e.g., strimming, management of trees). Additionally, for some, this was the main activity they participated in across the week and thus offered the opportunity to move while out in nature.

Take notice - Being outside and noticing the changing seasons, connecting to the wildlife and being the moment.

Participants explained how the natural environment in which they volunteered was important for them and they expressed taking notice of the surroundings (e.g., hearing bird songs, seeing

large space around them). Such an outdoor environment was viewed as beneficial over indoor environments.

Keep learning - Learning about wildlife, new skills in green wood working, bushcraft

Learning about plants and animals as well as developing practical conservation knowledge and skills were experienced throughout volunteering on WSWs-V. This was further demonstrated through specific skills being identified (e.g., camp fire lighting) and qualifications being attained.

Give - Taking action for wildlife and the community through litter picks, supporting another person in the group

Participants frequently expressed a desire to develop a community at the natural sites and give back to nature through their volunteering. The length of time which participants had engaged in their volunteering role (up to two years), highlighted the desire to 'give' as this has accumulating in a significant amount of personal time given to support the sites which they volunteer on. Finally, to 'give' was ranked as the most important motivation for volunteering.

Continued engagement in nature-based activities through volunteering

Levels of continued volunteering

WSWS-V followed on from the WSWS (2021-2023) programme in which people took part in a 12-week socially prescribed programme. Following the 12 weeks, participants were offered the opportunity to join the WSWS-V programme⁸. Currently there are two volunteer groups and a total of 13 individuals in these volunteer groups⁹. Each group is supported by a MWT individual in preparation for full self-sufficiency from 1st July 2025.

MWT conducted a time analysis for volunteers and found that between 1st July 2024 and 30th June 2025 (project period) a total of 1945 hours of volunteer time was provided through WSWS-V.¹⁰

Barriers

Several barriers were described to continued engagement during the evaluation with consideration to changes experienced within session, lack of transport, and personal issues.

Limitations

There are some limitations to this evaluation. First, there is a relatively low number of participants and therefore this limits the ability to conduct reliable statistical analysis and subsequent generalisability. Second, data collection was cross sectional and at a single point thus preventing opportunity for comparisons or to discuss findings from a longitudinal perspective.

⁸ In some cases, individuals were offered opportunities to re-refer into the 12-week formalised programme

⁹ Throughout the programme volunteer numbers reached n=16

¹⁰ This calculation was conducted by MWT and not CAWR

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based upon the WSW-S-V project findings, recommendations are presented to support similar volunteering in nature roles which follow on from social prescribed nature activities.

Programme structural recommendations

- Consistency of volunteering opportunity
- Time for social interaction and enhancement of social skill development
- Opportunities for autonomy and formalised roles
- Develop individuals skills and knowledge in nature and conservation work
- Promote enjoyment and community
- Reflect and celebrate the positive changes and advancements made as a result of the individuals volunteering in nature
- Availability of volunteering in a similar capacity post a formalise support programme to promote the potential for longer term benefits

General recommendations

- Long-term funding opportunities to support longer term benefits for those involved
- Chance to re-refer into the structured programme
- Provision of transportation to access nature which is not possible for all

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