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Wild at Heart: A mixed method evaluation of a wildlife-related intervention for older people

Sarah Barnes and Hannah Jordan

Introduction

Isolation and loneliness are increasing issues amongst older people in the UK. A growing evidence-base suggests that exposure to the natural environment can positively affect health and well-being. Wild at Heart is an intervention designed by Sheffield Wildlife Trust to engage older people with wildlife-related activities, with a view to improving well-being and reducing isolation. The activities delivered by the programme include nature walks, photography courses and group-based workshops in sheltered housing.

Aim and objectives

This study aims to evaluate whether the delivery of 'Wild at Heart', a wildlife-related intervention, improves the physical and mental well-being of older people and reduces feelings of isolation. The interwoven components of outdoor activity, mental challenge, social interaction and a broad range of participants generate a complex intervention in 'Wild at Heart': isolating the 'signal' of effects which can be attributed to the intervention from the 'noise' of baseline variations in participants physical and mental wellbeing and range of experiences poses a significant challenge.

Methods

A concurrent mixed method approach was taken. The quantitative component comprised a self-completed cross sectional questionnaire survey of recipients of the Wild at Heart programme to generate findings in relation to self-perceived physical health, mental well-being and improvements in social networks. Data on participants' degree of involvement with the programme (time since first starting a Wild at Heart activity, and number of sessions attended) were also collected. The qualitative component comprised semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of older people attending the wildlife related activities and the volunteers delivering the activities. Data were analysed using SPSS for the statistical findings and NVivo for the thematic analysis.

Results

Preliminary findings from the semi-structured interviews suggest that key drivers for attendance at the Wild at Heart activities are the provision of structure and intellectual challenge for people in retirement; increasing friendships and reducing isolation are also considered as important. Participants consider the physical health benefits as secondary to the improvements in mental health and well-being. The quantitative data, while necessarily brief, will provide an overall picture of the associations between engagement with Wild at Heart and mental and physical wellbeing, describe what participants' value in the intervention, and address the first stage of evaluating a complex intervention: that of whether the intervention is successful in normal use across the broad population who engage with it.