

Tom Mack, Programme Manager, Active Devon.

TOM MACK, Programmes Manager for Active Devon, leads the Active Ageing programme [Connecting Actively to Nature](#) (CAN), as well as other projects supporting over 55's to be more active. These include supporting [Walking for Health](#) in Devon, seated exercise and sheltered housing projects, and Naturally Healthy work including the successful [Naturally Healthy May](#) campaign. Prior to Active Devon, Tom has worked extensively in the Youth and Community sector, with a focus on using outdoor adventure for personal development, spending time on expeditions in Africa, Asia and South America with charity Raleigh International. Tom is particularly passionate about the power of nature to improve our mental and physical wellbeing. On a Saturday morning you will find Tom at any one of Devon's great parkrun events.

'Connecting Actively to Nature'.

At Active Devon, I lead on a programme called Connecting Actively to Nature (CAN), my main focus over the next few minutes. My joint themes are joy, because we all need a bit of joy, and connection. I chose this photo especially

because it sums up both themes, this is from one of our projects in Torbay. Alongside that photo is a quote from local GP, Dr James Szymankiewicz in North Devon. He is also chair of the CAN programme board,

Marshmallows....

"It is not a pill or potion, but we should consider connecting with nature as a prescription. Simply being in the natural environment is clinically proven to improve your health and wellbeing"

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I am really pleased to say that here in Devon we've got a huge amount of backing from the health and SP sector in the work that we're doing. In a way it is a shame that we now need to prescribe nature and physical activity. The fact is, as we have been hearing, some of the populations are disconnected with nature and physical activity as a normal, everyday part of life, perhaps more than ever. We can look to inequalities in society; and they play a great role in this disparity. Poorer communities, ethnically diverse communities, people living with disability, those with long term health conditions, all of these group are more likely to be less active, and less likely to connect to nature. Of course, many of those same groups have been affected disproportionately

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by COVID19 as well. I would flag up a great report which has come out this week from Groundwork UK, [Out of Bounds: Equity in Access to Urban Nature](#) (2021) This is all about access to urban green spaces and well worth a read.

We do need to prescribe it, and actually we need to do a lot more than just prescribe it to help people overcome some of the barriers they're facing. We need to enable people to change their behaviour in a more permanent way, to create new habits and to normalise it, in order for people to reap all the benefits that we've been hearing about. It is only by making things regular and habitual that we really see the transformative change that we are looking for. We also need to remember that we cannot just prescribe solely, we need to support the provider, and the sector that provides these activities. That is a big part of my role; and joining those two things together is so important.

I am sure you've been hearing all about health and wellbeing benefits. The benefits are almost infinite and well proven these days. There seems to be ongoing research in so many different areas, all on a spectrum from prevention, through to managing conditions such as dementia, improving wellbeing, tackling obesity, mental health, anxiety and depression. Preventing or managing pain, long term conditions or social isolation, improving sleep, all of those things are happening. They are all linked in a lot of ways.

CAN is an example of one approach we are using in Devon to try and address some of those inequalities, particularly when it comes to people accessing nature and being more active. We're trying, specifically, to increase the numbers and frequency of over 55's connecting actively to nature. Our particular focus is on inactive people, those from lower socioeconomic groups, those with long term health conditions, experiencing poor mental health or those who are socially isolated as well.

What is CAN?

- A 5-year programme 2018 - 2023
- Targets 3000 inactive and potentially isolated over 55's
- Supports existing and develops new projects in Devon
- Cross sector partnership approach
- Based on audience and local insight
- Focus on sustainability
- Longitudinal evaluation of wellbeing, physical activity levels and connection to Nature
- Projects range from walking groups to yoga, tai chi, cycling, beach activities, water sports, sea swimming

It is five-year programme, supporting new initiatives across Devon. It is a cross-sector partnership approach. There are dozens of partners involved in delivering CAN, right from the bottom up, to a strategic level in Devon, and that is a real strength of the programmes. It is all based on local insight, and there is a big focus on sustainability, because without that it just stops, and that is no good. We measure wellbeing

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using the [Short Warwick Edinburgh Scale](#), we measure actively levels and we measure people's connection to nature at baseline, three, six and twelve months across the programme. Here are some examples of the activities, all in the outdoors obviously. Projects range from walking groups, to yoga, tai chi, cycling, beach activities, sea swimming, water sports etc. That list can be really huge.

Joy and connection. Connection is massive. When I was writing this I just thought, it is all about connection. It is obviously about connection to nature, there are proven benefits to just spending time in nature, let alone being active. It also demonstrates that it increases people's willingness, and the joy they derive from caring for their environment

The power of connecting to..

- Nature
- People
- Body
- Mind

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as well. There is a double benefit there. Connecting to people, this should be top of the list. Social connection is important right now, but it has always been important.

The feedback from people

who take part in our projects is that it is the number one thing that keeps them turning up, motivates them, gives them the joy. It is such an integral part of what we deliver. It is massive in sustainability. People make new friends, join new groups, and so it rolls on.

Next is connecting to your body. We are increasing the awareness of your body, and what its capable of, as well as the other physical benefits, which is huge. Connecting to the mind. Perhaps particularly pertinent to this conference. Then I started thinking well, where does the body become the mind, and vice versa. There are loads of benefits for brain health, cognitive development, mental health, anxiety and depression and so on. I don't think we can separate any of these elements anyway. Sometimes we need to separate things to make sense of them, but they're all part of what it is to be a human being. As Craig said, being in nature should be an integral part of being a human being.

So, blue, green and grey.
Blue for water, green for forests, moors, countryside, fields and grey, well it could be for grey hair, because we're target over 55's. It could be grey matter, in relation to brain health.

Blue, green and grey!



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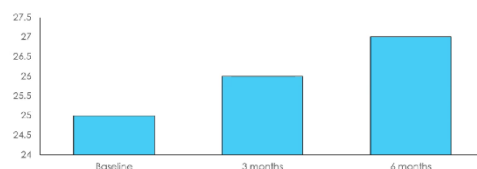
But actually, I've put it as an example of urban green spaces, so it's really important that we allow people to access the nature they're closest to.

I've got three really quick project examples I'm going to talk you through. We have the Chill Project, initially this was a lifeguard in North Devon with a good idea to enable more people to benefit from cold water immersion, or sea swimming. We connected with him, and the project [Chill](#) was born. It was funded for over 55s, and we linked it to the local SP teams, so each participant was directly signposted. They had a focus on mild to moderate mental health issues. The impact has been huge, independent research from the University of Plymouth is soon to be released. The sustainability of that project is great, because there are these informal groups that have developed, and people just exit straight into these community groups and swim together. There is some research which link inflammation in the body to depression, and Chill have been carrying out tests on their participants, and that has shown that a lot of those participants came along with high levels of inflammation along with their mental health issues, and they have found that those inflammation results have massively lowered, along with the reported instances of wellbeing across the programme.

The green example, we work with [Forestry England](#), we've got a suite of activities that repeat all through the years to engage over 55's in the forest. Really successfully, and really well sustained through informal ongoing social activity groups. I met a lovely lady with Parkinson's, who said it was just incredible for her symptoms, and how she manages them.

Finally, a grey example in Plymouth, in Devonport Park, right in the city. We worked with a local yoga instructor, who also trained to become a walk leader. She led a walk and stretch programme in the local park which was really successful. The people who lead these are really important, she was embedded in that local community and knew a lot of the people already.

Data & Stories



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It is really important that we measure the data, and we have started to be able to show through the CAN programme that people's wellbeing scores go up over the months of people being engaged. We always have

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to collect data, but we love collecting stories as well, blogs, videos and inspiring stories work really well for inspiring new participants and also attracting new investment and funding.

I'm just going to finish on our joyous open water swimming programmes, and a quote from one of the participants, who said,

My endorphins are having a party in my body, and I love this feeling. It makes me happy, something my depression was getting in the way of. My mood is high, my back pain doesn't feel so bad, and I have found another coping mechanism.

That is it from me. Thanks for listening.

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