

Background to project

The **North Devon Coast Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Natures Tonic** project was established prior to COVID and was about encouraging local groups and organisations to actively engage in nature, this project was put on hold due to COVID. Following a conversation with Jenny Carey-Wood at the AONB and the Live Well Community Connector during the summer of 2020, the idea was generated about connecting individuals to nature via a buddy scheme, which could reduce isolation and improve physical and mental health, this idea was incorporated into the revised Natures Tonic project and called Braunton Buddies and later renamed Companion Walks.

Vista well-being were successful in getting the tender for running the Natures Tonic Project with the Braunton Buddies being a small part of the much larger project, Vista Well-being wanted to run the training for Braunton Buddies having assumed it was a group that was already up and running. The Live Well in Braunton Community Connector now needed to set up the pilot, and worked with Braunton Caen Rotary to provide the volunteers. Working with Braunton Caen Rotary members meant there were trusted members of the community, who were already insured who could work with individuals quickly.

What slowed the project down was establishing and agreeing the terms of the training and implementing it, this was due to co-ordinating the diaries of: the volunteers, the Live Well Community Connector and Vista Well-being. The pilot was also slowed down due to the number of hours the Live Well co-ordinator could spend on it. In September 2021, The Natures Tonic project agreed to fund Live Well's time to deliver the project and this allowed momentum to build and the pilot to start.

The aim of the Companion walks is to start clients/walkers on a journey to happier more active lives in nature, which we hope will positively impact their physical and mental health.

The Companion walk involves a person being referred into the scheme via the medical centre Social Prescriber. The client will be matched to a volunteer, who will accompany the client on a series of walks, up to a maximum of 6. If the walker is able, it is hoped the walker will be accompanied on one final additional walk with Walking for Health or accompanied to another activity group, the hope is they can carry on an activity in nature with a group of people or be connected to something that is meaningful for them.

The Live Well Community Connector will work with each client, to collect baseline data, look at what each client hopes to gain from the pilot and to review this and make recommendations. Where the client gives permission the Live Well Community Connector will also complete a case study.

Depending on the outcome of the pilot it is hoped the Live Well community connector will be able to make robust recommendations and if appropriate, look to roll out Companion walks in the community during the first 6 months of 2022.

Based on our experience working with people in the community, we think people having a pathway to another group or activity will be key to the long-term benefit for the client following the companion walk, but we do not have this data yet and will have to follow up with clients after 6 months to start to understand the long-term impact of the Companion walks and the outcome of any on-ward referrals.

Although the pilot has not been done in conjunction with Active Devon, we have based our outcome measures around their CAN project evaluation scores (Connecting Actively to Nature), the hope is we will be able to show the performance of the project against their criteria so we can share our learnings with them and that could be a possible avenue for funding applications in the future.