

## Branching Out case study

Interloch Community Transport has been supporting people across Cowal, Bute and Helensburgh to reconnect with their communities following Covid. We have done this by improving their access to essential medical care, local services, and social appointments – reducing the inequalities that rural living can impose on people with disabilities or living with other challenges.

A great example of how Interloch does this is by providing transport for Branching Out, an outdoor therapeutic programme delivered by Argyll and the Isles Coast and Countryside Trust (ACT) for adults who use mental health services. Over 10-12 weeks they participate in physical, social, environmental and skill-building activities, from outdoor cooking to green woodworking, environmental art and conservation tasks, all in a safe, respectful space where they can chat and share. After completing Branching Out, many return for Moving On, a progression programme that continues to strengthen skills and build independence.

In a rural setting, the logistics of bringing everyone together can be really challenging, and that's where Interloch steps in.

Mark Bamford, known as "Bambi", and his partner Nicola lead the sessions in Cowal and Bambi says "using Interloch is the only way we would be able to deliver Branching Out in this area". In collaboration with local community organisations and charities, they use rural woodland settings such as the Community Forests at Kilfinan and North Bute, and Benmore Botanic Gardens. Public transport links are very limited and lots of participants don't have access to a car. Many wouldn't feel able to use buses anyway – Bambi notes that after Covid, coming to Branching out was the first time some of the group had left the house in a year or more.



Of course, mental and physical health are intertwined, and Interloch's fleet of fully accessible vehicles extends Branching Out's reach to people with more complex health needs. This could involve extra support from the driver to get on and off the bus, or accommodating crutches or wheelchairs. Interloch driver Alex recalls one participant, David, who had both legs amputated, but with the vehicle wheelchair adaptations "I'd just drop the tail ramp and David would go trundling on".

It's more than the logistics of travel though, says Bambi. It's about the relationship that group members have with Alex, and his understanding of their individual needs. Alex will ring round the night before to remind people about the session, and he knows who needs the bus to be there exactly on time to avoid them becoming anxious. He will then help to get people chatting: "on the first day, they don't know each other, they don't know me – everyone's nervous. But by about the third week, it's turned into a social club on wheels". Bambi feels this has been key to making sure

people keep coming back on those first few weeks while the bonds form, resulting in fantastic retention rates. The way he describes it, Branching Out is about building a community, and "Alex has turned the bus into an extension of that community building".

This feeds into the running of the day: both Bambi and Alex mentioned that Alex will often stay for part of the session, and will let them know if anyone was a bit quiet or anxious on the way in and might need some extra support.

Evaluation of the programme is carried out by ACT's Manager Sara, and feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. In 2022-23, they've run Branching Out and Moving On courses on Bute and at Benmore Botanic Gardens. The Benmore group has just finished. Five of the group of twelve have completed feedback forms so far, with all agreeing that the aims "I gained life skills and feel more confident about managing my condition" and "I found social contact, felt less isolated, made friends" were met.

Sara believes that "the travel with Interloch provides part of the day's experience and extends the safe, supportive environment that's so important to people's wellbeing and recovery." these positive sentiments are also reflected in comments, from members of the groups:

"If it wasn't for the bus my Mum wouldn't be able to drop me off and pick me up and I wouldn't be able to come."

"It is the only day I go anywhere apart from shopping and to the doctors. I really look forward to coming."



"I get on the bus and when I get there all my problems are left on there and all I focus on is my day. I get to meet the people that make me feel so much better."

Alex tells me proudly that the bus is now adorned with various items the Branching Out groups have made for him during the sessions. One his favourites seems to sum up the experience well: a wooden plaque that reads



“Enter as strangers...

leave as friends”.