

Write to Freedom

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RISE: NEW HORIZONS PILOT EVALUATION REPORT

May 2016



“It’s been the most powerful thing that I’ve ever done. I’ve had some challenges in life, as we all have in addiction, but this will stand out as a pivoting moment for me.”

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Project Context

The New Horizons project is a pilot partnership between **RISE Recovery & Integration Service** and **Write to Freedom** (W2F). RISE is a recovery orientated drug and alcohol service delivered across Devon by a partnership between Addaction and EDP Drug & Alcohol Services. Write to Freedom supports people in changing their lives through mentoring, self-empowerment, wilderness experiences and the power of personal stories.

The New Horizons pilot took place over one weekend in May 2016, as a small group residential course in a remote location in the Dartmoor National Park.

The course was planned, funded and delivered by W2F. The intention was to showcase our way of working, with the view to setting up a longer term partnership programme.

Participants

The weekend was offered to RISE peer mentors; RISE Recovery Devon clients, engaging in treatment, who are committed to their recovery journey and are able to lead by example. Peer mentors have a vital role in co-delivering RISE services. Six people took up the opportunity to take part in the residential weekend.

As part of the demonstration pilot, the invitation to take part was also extended to paid RISE staff, and two people took up this offer. Both worked in back office, rather than frontline, roles.

Facilitators

The course was led by W2F founder and facilitator Caspar Walsh with support from bushcraft facilitator John Elsworthy and four experienced W2F volunteers (2 of whom are in recovery themselves). RISE staff attended as participants, experiencing the course in exactly the same way as other participants.

Aims & objectives

This pilot project set out to:

- Increase participant's connection with nature, as a source of wellbeing
- Deepen group communication and trust
- Help participants to identify and address barriers to their recovery
- Highlight and celebrate participants' strengths and skills
- Provide a positive, powerful and memorable experience that will continue to inspire participants in the future.

Evaluation methodology

W2F facilitators gathered feedback in a range of ways. Participants were invited to complete short evaluation forms at the start and end of the weekend. RISE staff were invited to complete a different questionnaire, after the course. Five participants and one member of RISE staff took part in filmed interviews at the end of the weekend. All participants also agreed to take part in a telephone interview three months after the course, to reflect on any lasting impact.

Questions on the evaluation forms invited reflection on:

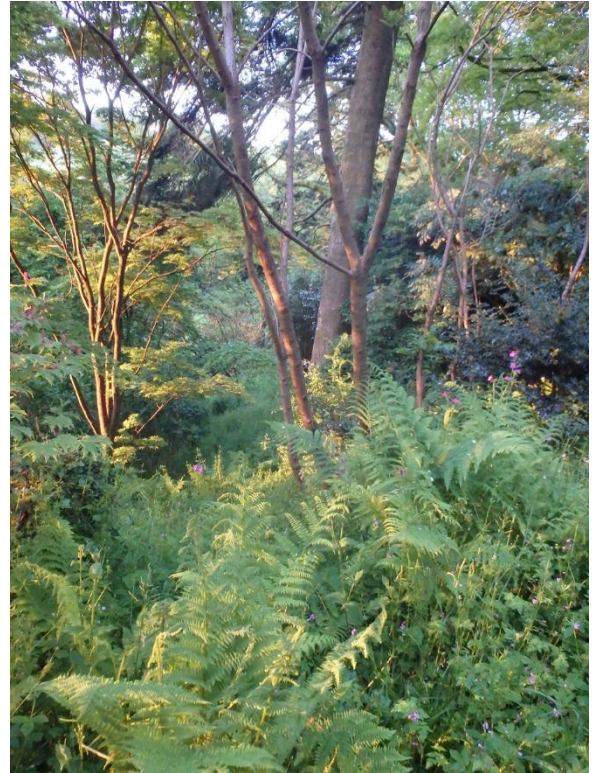
- spending time in nature
- sharing experiences and feelings as part of a group
- setting and working towards personal goals
- any other experiences, and practical issues

All six participants chose to complete both questionnaires, although facilitators were clear that this was not a requirement of the course.

The filmed interviews invited each individual to briefly comment on:

- their experience of the weekend
- any highs or lows
- W2F staff and volunteers
- the “Tribe Warrior” story, as it was used over the weekend
- how, if at all, the experience might aid their recovery
- What they would say to future potential participants about the course

Each interview lasted between two and six minutes. The conversations were transcribed. The footage will also be edited into a single short film to promote the work of W2F.



“I don't get to spend as much time in nature as I would like - I am relishing the thought of having no responsibilities other than to myself and to the group so that I can touch base with nature.”



Data analysis

This project set out to:

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These aims are examined individually below, all quotes in the following sections (without a credit) are from peer-mentor participants.

Increase participants' connection with nature as a source of wellbeing

Written comments show that each participant was looking forward to the opportunity to connect with nature at the start of the course. Subsequent comments suggest that all the mentor-participants found time in nature to be an even deeper source of wellbeing than they were hoping for at the start.

The peace and tranquillity of the site, on Dartmoor, also comes up repeatedly in the film footage. Two people comment on going barefoot as part of the experience. Most of the participants make a direct link between being in nature and making progress with their recovery, using phrases which include:

[The highlight was] today in the river wanting to cleanse myself...

Doing the activities outside, especially the activities in bare feet, I thought was marvellous.

I think the major thing that has come through for me has been the serenity of the place, the chance to be quiet, and to have space, peace and quiet. And to let the negative stuff from my everyday life filter out, and just be open to good stuff.

For me there isn't a better classroom than outside, in nature, living with nature. That to begin with grounds, will ground me. It got my feet firmly on the floor and that's not a pun, because I was shoeless. It was wonderful.

When we were up on the top of the moor it's just like you're walking on a carpet, it was so soft. There was nothing scary about the ground we were walking on, you did not feel frightened out there at all, it felt like it was a very safe place and I think some of that was down to the staff around us helping us, and the rest down to Mother Nature [smiles] giving us all this wonderful ground to walk on.

So for me the water is a very powerful thing and it's a place I would always go to whenever I'm feeling sad or very happy. It'll help me through my journey, whatever I'm feeling.

Deepen group communication and trust

The mentor-participants and RISE staff did not know each other before the course. Four out of six mentor-participants were 'a bit nervous' or 'apprehensive' about group communication at the start. Comments at the end of the weekend suggest much more ease for all, and for some even delight, at the quality of sharing which took place.

I've also got issues with trust, massive issues with trust, and I'll come away from this weekend having known that I've put a lot of trust in people and it's been upheld, it's been rewarded. And hopefully I'll take that on. I'll have a new outlook on trust, a new desire for trust and a bit more faith in people.



A wonderful group of boys and girls each with their own special gift. I couldn't have asked for a better band.

The course enabled non-hierarchical communication between participants, RISE staff and W2F facilitators:

What I really liked was I didn't feel there was a staff team and ourselves, but I knew they were there for support. I felt that they were an integral part of the weekend, were there for guidance and to lead us, which they did brilliantly. But I also felt the connection with them, which was wonderful.

The magic dynamics of the group and how everyone has gotten that little bit closer, well, a lot closer to be honest... I've felt really part of the group and I appreciate that I've been very fortunate in life and I've not had to face some challenges that other people have had to face but I've been accepted into the group and I feel like I've contributed but I feel like I've got stuff out of it as well, which is great.

[RISE staff member]

Help participants to identify and address barriers to their recovery

At the start of the weekend the mentor-participant group expressed a wide range of attitudes towards the opportunity to set and work towards personal goals. These ranged from "*Be interesting just how I manage this*" to "*I feel my goals are set and I am working towards them*".

By the end of the weekend all six people described specific goals to address barriers to their continued recovery. The 'after' comments overall reveal a moving and sometimes unexpected journey of discovery into people's own strengths, individually and as a community.

A RISE staff member bears witness to this:

Everyone's come from a slightly different place. I've come from a totally different place and I've not had some of the life experiences that some people here have had, but that book has been opened

up to me a little bit and I've been able to see people's journeys. And as a staff member I feel proud and privileged that we have peer supporters and volunteers like we do.

On film most people use down to earth, physical language as a metaphor to express the experience of deep changes within their body, rather than just thoughts, for example:

The overall experience was absolutely amazing. It really was. It touched places in me that I haven't touched for a long time, a long, long time.

I'm a lot clearer in the path that I want to take.

Fear, safety and trust are recurring themes in this embodied change:

The senses just come alive and there's that faith and trust that you're gonna be ok, you're in a safe environment. The terrain's not flat and even, but it was taking comfort in the fact that I'm gonna be alright. And to feel that grow inside as well, and for that security to grow. and for the comfort to grow within that.

Self-belief comes and goes with me like slow tides, but the more I engage, the more I believe in myself.

[The weekend] *Opened my eyes to some of the stuff that I can change myself. I get quite stressed out a lot and I want to be calm and one of the exercises made me realize myself that only I can do that. ...And it was through that process that I realized that trust was a big thing, trusting other people with stuff... I've got to trust other people to be able to do things that I can't. So letting go and trusting people is going to help me a lot in my recovery.*

"I was frightened to leave the water because I know the water would never hurt me, so I was frightened of leaving there and going back to the land... But I think that's one thing that really happened: it's got a whole chunk of things out that I thought I'd already talked through with people, but there was more to be said and the water listened."

"I came here not knowing what to expect because, I think quite rightly, you kept it a secret. To me it was like being in a story that unfolded every day with a grand finale, with a wonderful culmination; very, very touching."



Provide a positive, powerful and memorable experience that will continue to inspire participants in the future.

The end of course feedback, as a whole, sparkles with positive, expressive words including:

incredible, amazing, stunning scenery, wonderful group, exhilarated, above and beyond, serenity, fearless, surpassed every expectation, rejuvenated...

It is a paradise, and I don't say that lightly. It is a paradise. Absolutely beautiful part of the world.

It's not what I thought it was going to be, but it was much better. And in going away I feel tired, but I feel like I've achieved a lot and it was fun! Discovering myself and it was fun at the same time, so I'd recommend it to anyone

Words which are repeated across a range of comments include *amazing, powerful, connect[ion], wonderful, trust and safe*. One participant sums this up:

The feeling that I've got from this course I can't describe. It's been the most powerful thing that I've ever done. I've had some challenges in life, as we all have in addiction, but this will stand out as a pivoting moment for me. Don't let your fears stop you from coming because you'll just be amazed by what unfolds over the few days.

"It's slowed me down in here, in my head. When I came here there was a lot of screaming going on in my head, a lot of screaming. A lot of bad vibration. And as soon as I got to this place it just all went, it's gone. I feel calm and serene and I have found an inner peace, I have. And it's wonderful."

At the end of the last activity we did - I won't say what happens because I don't want to spoil it for anyone else who might hear this - because it is a big, huge thing to get hold of that gift that's in the water.

The Write to Freedom methodology

Write to Freedom courses are held and unfold through narrative, process, sharing, nature and ceremony. Caspar Walsh's novel 'Tribe Warrior' is used to frame many Write to Freedom courses. Participants connected readily with the story:

The story really moved me and I was very eager to find out what was happening next. I got very drawn into it... So it did bring up a lot for me and that was powerful, but it all kind of made sense in the process I was going through as an individual.

A very powerful story... it was very much, like going through, coming out of addiction, very much like that. The demon was chasing you all the time, and it keeps catching you unawares and knocking you over.

As you were telling the story, each time you told it, it made me feel as if I was there, I was him... It felt like I was part of the story and it unfolded every day... It actually made me feel very emotional [patting his heart as he speaks], very emotional.

For RISE staff, the depth of involvement and sharing invited was surprising. It also provided opportunities:

I got to reflect on my own decision making and how it impacts on others.

and

I'm surprised how open I was with my life experiences.

A Rise staff member actively recommends that his colleagues take part in any future W2F course:

I'd say jump at it! Definitely, without a shadow of a doubt. What happens here you can't necessarily put into words... But I think that you won't regret it... it's been great to see people the other side of that computer screen and I would suggest it to all members of staff, not necessarily just ones with client-facing roles.

Recommendations for future programmes

W2F have an unusual way of working, rather different from many organisational cultures. There is potential for all to be challenged and reinvigorated as boundaries and edges are explored. Staff energy can be reignited or nourished as they witness clients open-up and connect, and involve themselves in different dynamics to their usual everyday.

The W2F way of working rests on a delicate balance between subtle pre-planned structure and the emergent live theatre as the course takes flow. For this to work the participants are not told what to expect in any detail. Entering this space requires a degree of trust and surrender.

There is clear evidence of both expected and unanticipated benefits experienced by mentor-participants.

Time spent in nature is frequently referred to as healing. There is strong qualitative evidence for the power of an embodied and 'beyond - words' experience, expressed in everyday, down-to-earth language. There is also an interesting thread around how men (in particular) feel the requirement to take responsibility, or be in control. An embodied experience of handing this over comes as a relief. And, most powerfully, the comments and transcriptions as a whole indicate that all the participants carry a deep-seated need to feel safe and secure in the presence of others, a need which may never have been truly met on their challenging life journeys.

"I honestly came here with no expectations. I had some mental imagery of the landscape etc. but the entire experience was a mystery and a hugely rewarding revelation. I wouldn't have had it any other way either."

We suggest there is much fruitful potential for future partnership working.

	Was a bit dubious at the beginning but now feel at ease	Enjoyed the group sharing, participation. It's been a pleasure to be part of other peoples trust and to hear their experiences.	I can be extremely nervous/anxious about group sharing - for me, the environment, being outdoors, hearing the birds all enabled me to let go of my fears and fully immerse myself and participate.	Towards the end of the weekend I found these easier but I felt easier in the mixed group.	At times emotional but very rewarding.	A wonderful group of boys and girls each with their own special gift. I couldn't have asked for a better band.
How do you feel about...	Be interesting just how I manage this.	Bring it on!! I'm hoping to find some sense of clear direction, and believe the time and space away from 'normal' living will afford me that.	I thought a bit about this before I came, not the goals themselves, but taking this opportunity to explore. Big changes for me in Sept.... What will I do with them.	Not confident about what I want to achieve.	I feel my goals are set and I am working towards them.	I am working slowly towards chilling myself out. I can get really niggly at home. Especially if I need a fag!
setting and working towards personal goals?	↑ <i>before</i> ↓ <i>after</i>	↑ <i>before</i> ↓ <i>after</i>	↑ <i>before</i> ↓ <i>after</i>	↑ <i>before</i> ↓ <i>after</i>	↑ <i>before</i> ↓ <i>after</i>	↑ <i>before</i> ↓ <i>after</i>
	Have achieved what I came here to do.	Reinforcement of what "we/I" can achieve. Self-belief comes and goes with me like slow tides, but the more I engage, the more I believe in myself.	My goals were to give this weekend 100% and I really feel that I have. Because of this I have had the most incredible thought provoking, mindful experience. I thank you each and every one.	I set myself 4 personal goals and I have achieved 3 of these which is an amazing feat for me.	I have found out that I have issues with trust and this has shown me that I can trust people and I will be working on this in the future.	My own goals were serenity, inner peace and generally to have a good time and all of these have been met in a very kind and spiritual way.

Is there anything else that you are expecting to gain from the weekend?	To find out more about myself	No. At this moment in time, my expectations are minimal, which I feel is the best place to be.	I'm always open to suggestion, don't like to have to fixed ideas.	Some confidence	Time to slow down	Just peace and tranquillity really as well as learning new skills.
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If you had any expectations of the weekend, how have these been met?	To learn more about myself.	I honestly came here with no expectations. I had some mental imagery of the landscape etc. but the entire experience was a mystery and a hugely rewarding revelation. I wouldn't have had it any other way either.	I expected to be challenged, to think, to be curious, to be fearless - these have all been met, and more. I have been surprised, and excited, exhilarated and moved to the point I was in tears coming back from my cleansing in the river. I haven't been able to release tears for some time.	I expected to spend 2 days in serenity without thinking too much but this didn't happen and I find I am glad of that. I have had to do much thinking and soul searching and I believe that this has taken me further along my road to recovery.	This weekend has surpassed every expectation I had.	Above and beyond far better than I could have hoped.