

Cohere Arts & Green Light Trust present

Woodland Voices

An exhibition of audio artworks inspired by spending time in the woodland environment

- Poetry
- Music
- Audio drama
- 3D soundscapes
- Stories
- Diaries

created by members of High Spirits, a creative audio company of visually impaired artists living in East Anglia

Christchurch Mansion,
Ipswich
on Friday 28th October
10:00-16:00

Free admission, no booking required

COHERE



Colchester + Ipswich
Museums

**Woodland Voices
Evaluation
November 2022**

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Executive Summary

3 artists, 11 visually impaired participants, 7 volunteers & 4 Green Light Trust practitioners took part in 4 visits to Castan Woods and 4 creative workshops at Gallery Studio between August and October 2022

Supported by artists, participants created 15 audio artworks (totalling 53 minutes) inspired by time spent in the woodland environment

An audio exhibition **Woodland Voices** was held at Christchurch Mansion on 28th October 2022, showcasing participant work to 72 audience members via silent disco headsets

Through facilitation of an organic and adaptable creative process, participants developed their knowledge of nature, artistic skills and confidence as individual artists, as well as a collaborative collective

At the end of the project, the group experienced an average of a 14% improvement in subjective physical and mental wellbeing since the start

Evaluative data suggests that spending time in the woodland environment has restorative qualities that can be reproduced via immersive audio experiences

A wholistic and responsive approach to access was a vital factor in the success of the project

The *Woodland Voices* project was innovative on many levels, being the first collaboration for Cohere Arts and Green Light Trust, and the first exploration of the individual artistic talents of members of the High Spirits creative audio company.

An evaluation approach was designed to capture the experiences of participants, artists, audiences and other stakeholders via a mixed method approach with accessibility as a priority element.

Evaluative findings indicate that the project was a unique opportunity for visually impaired adults to experience the positive wellbeing impacts of spending time in GLT's carefully curated woodland environment. In addition, each participant felt empowered to respond and develop creatively in a very individual way, resulting in a high quality audio exhibition, increased confidence and soaring aspirations for the group.

The project was a learning experience for both organisations, for whom although access and inclusion are very much part of their ethos, continued to evolve and respond to the needs of this particular community.

Next steps are for Cohere Arts to seek funding to establish High Spirits as a regular entity beyond a 'project funding' model, to ensure that the significant wellbeing impacts of this work are available to participants on an ongoing basis.

Introduction

Cohere Arts CIC

Cohere Arts is a community interest company providing opportunities for communities to engage with arts, culture and heritage through:

- Original performance works
- Participation in creative and cultural activities
- Education, training and professional development rooted in the creative arts

In particular, our projects enable marginalised communities to work alongside professional artists in creative projects designed to develop their artistic skills and confidence whilst improving health & wellbeing.

Green Light Trust

The charity Green Light Trust (GLT) exists to support people from all backgrounds and experiences to rebuild, reawaken or refocus their lives through the power of nature. The charity is founded on the belief that the environment is a useful and advantageous tool in the care of us all in society. We are delighted to be working in partnership with Cohere Arts and Ipswich Museum Service on this project as it builds upon our aims to engage marginalised areas of the community with the natural environment.

High Spirits

In 2021, Cohere Arts established High Spirits; a creative audio company for adults living with visual impairment in the East of England. The group's first endeavour was an audio drama project funded by East Suffolk Council's Boost Fund. Participants attended 10 weekly workshops at Woodbridge Library in which participants explored local ghost stories (old and new), audio drama, creative writing skills, character development and sound design and effects. Guided by artist facilitators, the group produced an audio drama *A Hoodingeroo at Otley Bottoms*, which was later aired on BBC Radio Suffolk, and Rendlesham Local Radio.

Feedback from this project highlighted an appetite for further creative exploration and skill development using audio as a medium.

“Audio is the perfect medium for us, it takes the stress out of the physicality of performing and enables us to be more creative,” - Group member Carolyn Allum.

This evaluative report documents their second project *Woodland Voices*; a three month initiative in collaboration with the Green light Trust and Ipswich Museums. This project was funded through a project grant from the Postcode Places Trust.

Evaluative approach

Methodology

As inclusivity and accessibility are core values of the organisation, we wanted to ensure that barriers to engagement with evaluation activities were minimised. As such, data was recorded in written, aural and creative formats via a range of methods which included:

- Attendance data
- Stakeholder interviews and testimonials (email and audio recorded)
- Subjective wellbeing questionnaires
- Social media feedback
- Creative outputs

Engagement and sampling

	Engaged	Sampled	Methods
Creative team & volunteers	10	10	Email testimonials Audio interviews
Community participants	11	10	Email testimonials Focus groups Wellbeing questionnaires
Public audiences & other stakeholders	72	15	Attendance data Visitor book Vox pops Social media posts

Data bias

All findings should be subject to consideration of bias in that data was collected and analysed by members of the company. The wellbeing questionnaire is a tool devised by Green Light Trust designed to meet their strategic aims around the impact of their work, and they have never worked with visually impaired participants before.

Amy Mallett was responsible for data analysis and report writing. Evaluation was embedded within all stages of the project, and there was good engagement in evaluative activities.

Project Activities & Outcomes

Preparation and planning

- *Project development*
Ideas for the project were formulated during the evaluation process for High Spirits' previous audio drama initiative, and developed during a series of scoping meetings with partners GLT and Ipswich Museum.
- *Recruitment*
Participants included some who had taken part in the previous High Spirits project, and also additional people recruited through social media call outs and networking with local visual impaired groups such as Unscene Suffolk, Suffolk Sight and Sensing Change. In total, 11 visually impaired adults took part in the project.
- *Project team*
Artistic Director - Amy Mallett
Director - Emma Bernard
Sound Designer - Simon Keep
Community Producer - Philippa Storey
Volunteers - Imogen Hayward, Marianna Milford, Stephanie Mallett Board Member
Volunteers - Matthew Moseley, Penny Rooney
- *Access*
All project participants are living with levels of visual impairment, with four members being guide dog users. Some group members also have additional mobility and health challenges. In order to ensure safety and inclusivity, prior to commencing activities the Artistic Director and Community Producer made site visits to Castan Wood and Christchurch Mansion to assess accessibility aspects and health safety measures. Individual project participants were accommodated to make site visits to the woodland camp to familiarise with the site and assess their individual access needs. A full health & safety assessment was produced and shared with project partners. Priorities were:
 - Provision of appropriate transport to and from project venues
 - Adequate volunteer support
 - Thorough assessment of needs through consultation with participants and their carers
 - Flexibility of schedule and activities to suit needs and aspirations of participants
 - Regular consultation and 'checking in' with participants regarding comfort and needs

Woodland workshops

Throughout August 2022, project participants, artists and volunteers made 4 weekly visits to GLT's Castan Wood site in Martlesham, Suffolk. Transport to and from the venue was provided for those who requested it. During woodland visits Cohere artists and volunteers were supported by two members of the GLT team. Each visit ran from 10:00 - 15:00 and included:

- Woodland orientation, walking and exploration

- Campfire cookery (we cooked and ate lunch at the campfire each day)
- Contemplation time within the woodland environment
- Hammocks, rope swing, rope bridge activities
- Woodcraft and wood-cutting
- Creative exercises and exploration (group and individual)
- Group discussions and reflection
- Capture of audio material

Lead artists Amy, Emma and Simon led a series of creative tasks aimed at using aspects of the natural environment as the stimulus for individual and group creativity. As well as field recordings, outputs included initial ideas for songs, poetry, music and stories, as well as a radio drama scene incorporating the whole group.





Creative workshops

In September and October participants attended 4 creative workshops at Gallery Studio, Ipswich. Supported by lead artists, Amy, Emma and Simon, group members were encouraged to develop their initial ideas into full 'exhibits' for an audio exhibition. Each participant made audio recordings of their individual artworks which included poems, songs, stories and music. We also recorded a short group drama piece in which most of the group participated as a collective.

One additional 1-to-1 session was provided to enable participant Andy to have individual support to make an electronic music piece with sound artist Simon.



Creative development and curation

In a 3-week period of artistic development, lead artists Amy and Simon added additional sound design and music to individual creative responses. This was done in consultation with relevant group members to ensure they took an active role in creative decision-making. During this time, some participants continued to create additional pieces which were recorded via Zoom.

Audio Exhibition

The project culminated in *Woodland Voices*; an audio exhibition held at [Christchurch Mansion](#), Ipswich on Friday 28th October 2022. The event invited public audiences to drop in to Christchurch Mansion and borrow 'silent disco' wireless headphone sets to listen to the audio artworks the group created.

The exhibition included 15 artworks and had a running time of 53 minutes. Our installation included a display of photographs of woodland activities, paper programmes and QR codes to enable listeners to access an audio version of the programme. We interviewed audience members as they returned their headsets and some wrote feedback in a visitors' book. Artworks in the exhibition were:

1. I Went to the Woods - All

What would the trees say if they could talk to us? A poem created by the group.

2. A Tall Story - Gill Cook

2022 was a bumper year for acorns. A short story about the acorn, a small symbol of great strength and endurance.

3. Diary - Marilyn Marvin

Marilyn shares her poetic diary reflecting on time spent in Castan Wood.

4. Bark - Wayne Witney

A cinematic guitar piece inspired by the protective qualities and varying textures of bark.

5. In the woods - Paul Nugent

Paul's spontaneous response to time spent in Castan Wood, reflecting on the restorative qualities of the natural environment.

6. Chestnut Girl - Carolyn Allum

A short story of a strange woodland encounter, as told by Carolyn's guide dog, Lea.

7. The Hanging Tree - Clare Burman

A song inspired by our region's witchfinding heritage; the relationship between a tree and a woman who is hanged accused of witchcraft.

8. Underground Networks - Andy Girling

Featuring field recordings made at Castan Wood, a 3D soundscape imagines how communities of trees might communicate under the earth.

9. Olly the Owl - Paul Nugent

A bit of a hoot.

10. The Weeping Willow - Marilyn Marvin

Told in rhyme, the story of two lovers who once met in the woods.

11. My Best Friend - Dave Appleton

Dave sings one of his favourite songs from the Captain Beaky collection by Jeremy Lloyd.

12. Saffy's Gift – Saffy the Guide Dog (Clare Burman)

A short story inspired by the mystical qualities of the wood and those who walked there before us.

13. Trees v Humans - All

A short courtroom drama devised during an improvisation workshop. The case of Trees v Humans.

14. Imagine - Carolyn Allum

A poem imagining the consequences of humanity's continued decimation of forests, woodlands and green spaces.

15. Bringer of Life - Clare Burman

A final poem.

The exhibition is now live on the Cohere Arts website and can be accessed here: <https://coherearts.org/woodland-voices-programme/>

The majority of group participants attended the exhibition to listen to their creations and take part in a recorded feedback discussion.

72 members of the public borrowed headsets to listen to the exhibition.

Post-project

The audio exhibition is now accessible via the Cohere Arts website, and GLT are planning to add media from the project to their own website. In addition to planned outcomes, [a short film](#) was produced incorporating video footage of the project and selected audio excerpts from the exhibition.



BBC Radio Suffolk have invited the High Spirits group to host a 'Tuesday Night Takeover'; which will involve presenting a two hour radio show including discussion and sharing of the audio exhibits. The group is keen to submit the exhibition to other festivals and platforms in the future.

Accessibility was integrated into many areas of the project, and was viewed as responsive and appropriate to individual needs, without being 'patronising'. For example:

- Site visits were made to each venue to make a full assessment of access needs prior to our first visits.
- Participants were all offered transport to and from venues, which resulted in some using taxis and some taking advantage of lifts from volunteers. The woodland site was situated adjacent to a park and ride, which was ideal for those who preferred to travel by bus. The Gallery Studio was a building most had previously visited for other projects which meant it was familiar.
- The first woodland session highlighted some access needs which we were able to meet in subsequent sessions:
 - Camping chairs were provided for those less able to sit on rugs/logs
 - Green Light Trust made a wooden table for eating lunch around
 - Additional volunteers were brought on board to boost mobility in the woodland environment
 - One participant was offered breakfast as well as lunch to support his health/personal care needs
- One group member had health challenges that meant he could not take part in woodland visits. We recorded group conversations/messages and put them on a CD to ensure he could participate and felt included.
- Printed materials were designed using a font especially designed for visual impairment.
- An additional 1-to-1 session was facilitated for one of the project participants who wanted to develop his electronic music and audio editing skills with our sound artist Simon.
- A digital version of the exhibition programme was produced with audio recorded credits, accessible via a QR code.

Many participants were able to do things they had never done in their lives before, for example Marilyn who had never been in a hammock; Clare who had never chopped wood with an axe; and Caroline who 'feathered' a stick using sharp tools into a flower shape.

As an artistic outcome, the audio exhibition offered the opportunity for audiences to 'access' the woodland environment and its benefits without physically having to go there.

"I felt like I was in the woods even though I hadn't been there."

- Audience member



Wellbeing

At the start and end of the project, participants were asked to rate their wellbeing according to the following factors (scored out of 10):

1. How positive do you feel generally
2. How would you rate your physical health today
3. How would you rate your mental health today

And to rate their level of agreement with the following statements (scored out of 5):

1. I feel I have good qualities
2. I feel I have good self esteem
3. I feel useful
4. I have a positive attitude towards myself

1 to 1 interviews were conducted with 4 participants, and group discussions were held. Data gathered indicated that being in the woods for extended periods of time offered a unique wellbeing opportunity for all involved. All project participants remarked on a perceived slowing of time and pace, and the restorative qualities of the sensory environment of woodland and nature.

“I found being here has been a respite from my daily life. I've found it to be very meditative and its allowed me to be myself without the stresses and strains of life. Being in the woods allows your brain to subside and your mind to engage.”
-participant

“I've been able to do things at my own pace. I feel a lot better and it helps me start the week off feeling more positive.”
-participant

“I feel physically and mentally a lot more healthy. It's been so peaceful and such a lot of fun. I feel lighter and more relaxed, and I still feel the effects of being here throughout the week. I hardly ever put the TV on now. You feel peaceful in yourself, and you see things in a different way.”
-participant

7 participants completed wellbeing surveys both at the start and end. Over this respondent group as a whole there was **a collective increase in wellbeing of 14%**, with the greatest increase in a participant being 26%. Interestingly, these impacts were viewed to be long-lasting, and meditative qualities renewable through listening to the immersive recordings made within the wood.

“I was checking my heartrate on my watch and it was going down as I was listening. I felt like I was in the woods even though I hadn’t been there.”

-exhibition audience member

Artistic development

Woodland Voices was Cohere Arts’ first collaboration with Green Light Trust, and GLT’s first creative arts-based project, as well as their first experience working with visually impaired people. It proved to be a very complementary partnership with much learning gained on both sides, and opportunities for further development/collaboration/exploration identified.

The woodland camps provided by GLT offered a practical and comfortable base from which to explore the natural environment both as a group, and individuals. With the first session left purely for orientation and familiarisation, creative tasks were gradually introduced over the following 3 weeks, and participants could work individually or as a group to create and nurture ideas for artworks.

Having previously mainly only worked on group projects, this was the first time group members had been given the opportunity to develop individual creative skills and artworks, according to their own interests and aspirations.



“The thing I liked most about the whole thing was that we all had our own views about what we were experiencing, personal views, and then somehow we were able to voice it in different ways, and come up with a complete picture at the end, and I thought that was quite clever.”

-participant

For example, two participants brought guitars to some of the sessions and disappeared into the woods to work on musical ideas on their own. Artist Emma worked with people individually to tease out creative ideas, and campfire lunches were a great opportunity to share and work on group pieces such as a courtroom scene audio drama.

The autonomy and agency provided within this flexible and co-productive approach resulted in the nurturing of individual artistic skills and increase in confidence. Participants expressed their appreciation for the joy and sense of empowerment this offered.

***“It was lovely to be given the opportunity for all of us to do such different things within the same concept. Everybody’s piece of work was so different.”
-participant***

***“I wish I’d started writing sooner, because when I finally came to it I didn’t want to stop, I wanted to write more and more things. I was inspired later and wished I’d started earlier.”
-participant***

This increase in confidence also promoted two participants to express an interest in returning to the woods as part of a separate GLT initiative, and one is now on a waiting list to return in January 2023.



Conclusion

Successes

- A wholistic and responsive approach to access not only provided a unique opportunity for a group of visually impaired people to safely access the woodland environment but for both collaborating organisations to expand their knowledge and practice in this area.
- GLT's woodland camp environment and inclusive ethos contributed to participants' comfort and positive experience.
- Lead artists implemented an organic and participant-centred creative process which promoted the development of individual artistic skill, confidence and self-esteem.
- Spending time in the woodland environment improved the physical and mental wellbeing of those involved to the extent that they have been inspired to actively seek further opportunities to engage with nature.
- A vibrant, diverse and high quality audio exhibition was produced that transported listeners into the woods, combining the individual voices and artistic interpretations of the High Spirits group into one, cohesive artistic experience.
- The project generated substantial local interest including from BBC Radio Suffolk, who want to feature the full exhibition on its own Tuesday night radio show.
- As a creative medium, immersive audio offers opportunities not only to transport listeners to other environments but experience their wellbeing properties.

Learning

- 'Access' is best facilitated as an ongoing conversation between collaborating provider organisations and participants, and the provision of multiple modes of participation. Cohere's Community Producer played a vital role in the successful application and adaptation of accessibility elements in this project.
- Working with this group in a new and unfamiliar environment, all activities took longer than planned. It was vital to slow pace and expectations to accommodate this. Similarly, creative workshops in the studio would have benefitted from being increased from 2 to 3 hours in length to fully accommodate all individual creative aspirations.
- Our High Spirits group, given the opportunity to develop as individual artists, surpassed expectations and were prolific in their creative outputs and ideas. It is important to keep momentum in this creative development in future projects that nurture not only group endeavour but individual skills, talents and aspirations.

Next Steps

- To showcase the project on a bespoke BBC Radio Suffolk radio show, and seek additional opportunities to showcase the Woodland Voices audio exhibition at festivals, events and other platforms.
- High Spirits have been invited to produce a new audio drama for performance at the 2023 Ink Festival which will enable us to engage additional visually impaired participants in the Halesworth area.
- Cohere Arts will seek funding to establish High Spirits as a regular entity beyond a 'project funding' model, to ensure that the significant wellbeing impacts of this work are available to participants on an ongoing basis.