



Woodlands for Health  
**Implementation Guide**





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This Implementation Guide  
has been developed to ensure  
consistency and fidelity across all  
Woodlands for Health programmes.



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## Introduction

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**Woodlands for Health is a 12 week woodland-based walking programme for adults availing of mental health services or supports.**

The programmes are organised and delivered by Local Steering Groups. Usually between 15 and 20 participants take part in each programme, along with Walk Leaders and facilitators. Transport and refreshments are

provided. **Woodlands for Health is coproduced with participants' mental health in mind. This can act as an access point to other nature-based and physical activities.**



Woodlands for Health is an accessible and sustainable way for people to engage with nature, as part of a toolkit for support their mental health and well-being.

## Governance

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The Woodlands and Nature for Health and Well-being National Steering Group is made up of members of partner organisations, Coillte, Get Ireland Walking, Mental Health Ireland and Maynooth University.

This group provides structure, support and advice to Woodlands for Health programmes across the country, which are implemented by Local Steering Groups. **National working groups focus on specific areas:**

Evaluation

Communications & Marketing

Programmes

These working groups include representatives from national and local partner organisations

As of 2022, the national partner organisations have co-funded a **National Woodlands and Nature Project Lead** to coordinate and oversee existing and newly developing programmes.

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## Woodlands for Health Implementation Guide

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**This Implementation Guide has been developed to ensure consistency and fidelity across all Woodlands for Health programmes.**

The document offers guidelines and recommendations as well as links to further resources. This will help you to plan, deliver, evaluate and sustain your Woodlands for

Health programme. This information is based on experience and feedback from previous Woodlands for Health programmes over the past ten years.

## Background

Almost four decades of evidence, literature and research demonstrate the effectiveness of nature-based programmes, like Woodlands for Health.

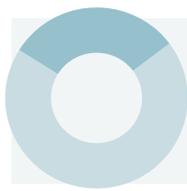
This programme began as a pilot project in Wicklow in 2012, based on the award-winning “Branching Out” programme in Scotland. The idea was adapted by Coillte’s Charlie Burke, with partner organisations Get Ireland Walking and Mental Health Ireland.

The programme was implemented by local organisations; Wicklow HSE Mental Health Services, Wicklow Mental Health Association and Wicklow Sports Partnership. This evidence was used to support funding applications to upscale the programme and in 2018, Dormant Accounts supported programmes across six counties. National partners continue to invest in and support further expansion of Woodlands for Health.

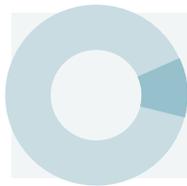


The programmes are continually being evaluated so that they can be improved and expanded, as well as contributing to the evidence base showing the benefits of nature for mental health, well-being and recovery.

A 2020 report by Dr. Tadhg MacIntyre evaluated Woodlands for Health groups in six counties, gathering information from 150 participants. **The research found:**



A **31%** improvement in self-reported well-being.



A **10.8%** increase in (already high) nature connectedness, which can encourage pro-environmental behaviours and, in turn, aid environmental sustainability.

A study was completed by the HSE and University College Dublin in 2014. **Results showed:**



**75%** improvement in mood



**66%** improvement in sleep



**82%** decline in suicidal thoughts

In the same 2014 study, **interviews found benefits including:**



**Reduced** medication dosage and cost



**Decreased** numbers of clinical appointments



Some participants **returned** to work or education



**Participants went on to form a peer-led social club** who meet weekly to complete various outdoor activities.

## Woodlands for Health Landscape 2022

**As of December 2022, there are 31 programmes running across 21 counties with 10 new programmes and 5 new counties due to come on board in early 2023.**

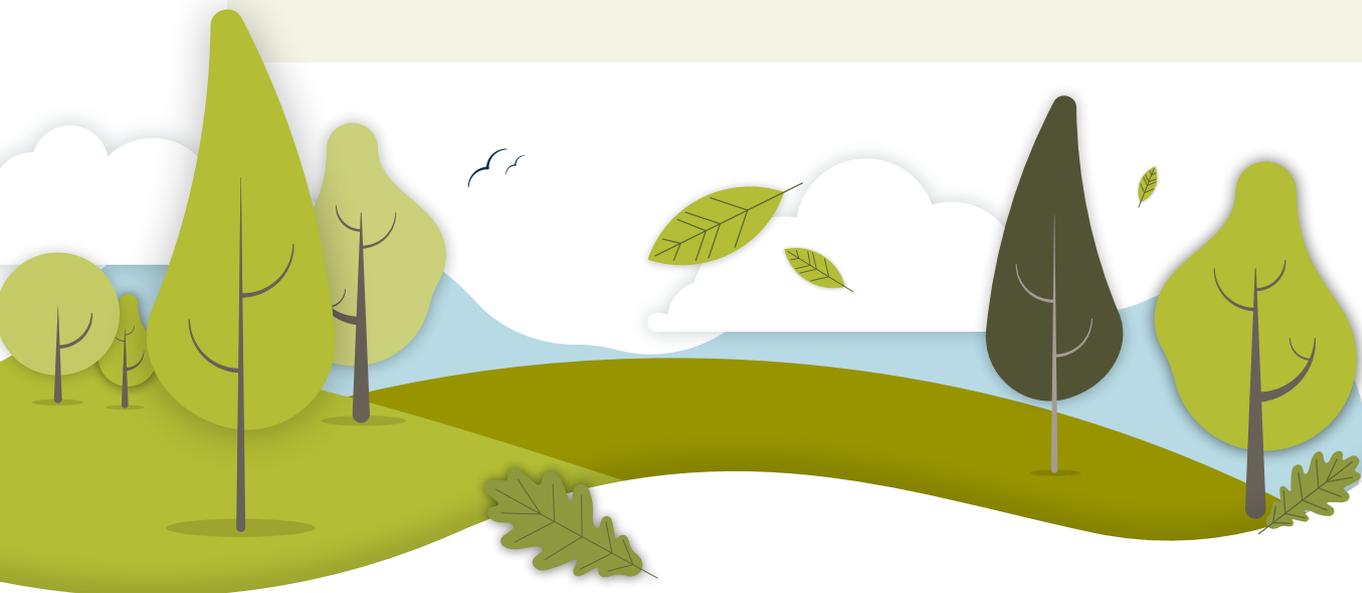
Participant numbers average at about 15 people per programme. Feedback from participants and facilitators has been hugely positive. All Local Steering Groups have gone on to run subsequent Woodlands for Health programmes in their areas.

Feedback indicates that facilitators find this to be a particularly effective use of time and resources, as well as benefitting their own health and well-being.

The National Steering group have recently developed a Woodlands for Health webpage: [www.mentalhealthireland.ie/woodlandsforhealth](http://www.mentalhealthireland.ie/woodlandsforhealth) as well as this guidance document and appendices. There is a limited amount of branded merchandise for participants of the programme distributed through Mental Health Ireland's Development Officers.

**Sandra took part in the Waterford's first Woodlands for Health programme this year (2022) and this was what she had to say about her experience:**

“ I so look forward to Wednesday morning, a walk in the woods, something I wouldn't just get up and do myself on a Wednesday morning! Or any morning! But being part of this group gave me the motivation and opportunity to get out and explore the beautiful places we have around us. I have become so much more mindful of nature and found these walks improved my mood.”





**Note:** This map will be updated biannually to include new locations.

## Woodlands for Health Programme Locations 2022:

- |                   |                        |                           |                      |
|-------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Cavan          | 9. Kerry               | 16. Wicklow               | 23. Galway, Tuam     |
| 2. Donegal        | 10. Carlow             | 17. Kildare, Donadea      | 24. Galway, Clonbur  |
| 3. Donegal, Lower | 11. Wexford, South     | 18. Kildare, Monasterevin | 25. Clare, West      |
| 4. Monaghan       | 12. Wexford, North     | 19. Westmeath             | 26. Clare, Ennis     |
| 5. Sligo          | 13. Wexford, New Haven | 20. Longford              | 27. Tipperary, North |
| 6. Mayo           | 14. Dublin City        | 21. Laois                 | 28. Cork, North      |
| 7. Roscommon      | 15. Dublin, South      | 22. Galway City           | 29. Cork City        |
| 8. Limerick       |                        |                           | 30. Cork, West       |
|                   |                        |                           | 31. Waterford        |

# Programme Process

The following steps outline how to develop a Woodlands for Health programme.



# Essential Elements

## Essential Elements of the Woodlands for Health Programme



Local Steering Group



Walk Leaders and Facilitators



Participants



The Programme




Session Outline



Health and Safety



Refreshments



Progression



Communication



Clothing



Weather



Nature Calls



Additional Ideas




Evaluation



Finances



Transport

# Local Steering Group



**This group will plan, implement, evaluate and sustain your Woodlands for Health programme.**

## ▶ Responsibilities

**Each of these responsibilities should be allocated to a member of the Local Steering Group**

- Source referrals/participants from local mental health services and supports
- Advertise the programme within service/s in your area
- Communicate with potential participants about programme (what to expect, etc.)
- Attend walks to provide support and guidance
- Arrange transport
- Explore funding opportunities
- Arrange/provide refreshments
- Signpost to services and support participants, as required
- Complete programme evaluation
- Identify walk locations<sup>1</sup>
- During the walks, share knowledge about the natural environment such as location, trees, creatures
- Consider accessibility, grading, terrain and needs of group including baseline fitness levels

## ▶ Members

**Local Steering Groups should include representatives from the following organisations:**

Coillte (local Coillte guide<sup>2</sup>), Sport Ireland (Local Sports Partnership) and Mental Health Ireland (Development Officer), someone with lived experience or representative of participants.

**Other possible members include but are not limited to:**

- HSE practitioners e.g. Occupational Therapist, Social Prescriber, Community Nurse
- Healthy Communities Coordinator
- Member of Local Community Development Committees
- Family Resource Centre Representative
- Walk Leader if different from above
- Anyone else you feel may add to the development and implementation of your Woodlands for Health programme

- Local Steering Group members will vary depending on services in each area and their capacity.
- The National Woodlands and Nature Project Lead will not sit on individual Local Steering Groups but will call in when possible or needed to provide support and guidance.



<sup>1</sup> Coillte sites are ideal but may be some distance from your area. To ensure easy accessibility of walking locations during and after the programme, we recommend utilising local woodland areas and maybe bookending the programme with visits to Coillte forests.

<sup>2</sup> Please contact Charlie Burke, from the Coillte Recreation Team on: **087 2623874** or **charles.burke@coillte.ie** to find a guide in your area.

## Walk Leaders and Facilitators

There should be one designated Walk Leader for your walks. As above, there may be a Coillte guide in your area. This Walk Leader should be supported by a Walk Facilitator (either members of the Local Steering Group or additional volunteers). It is advised that there is

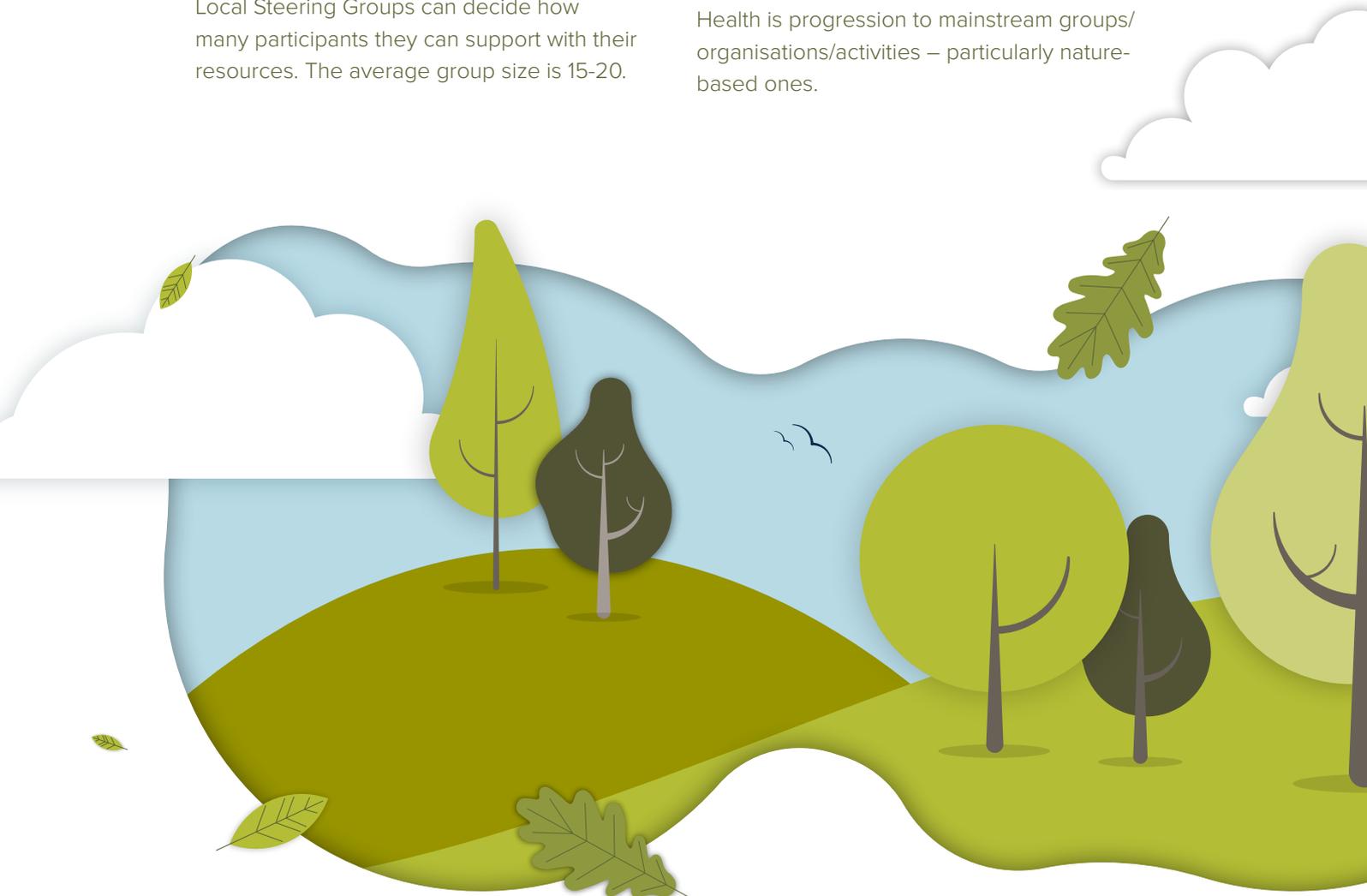
at least one Facilitator to every six participants, with no less than four Facilitators per walk. This will vary depending on the needs and abilities of the group. If you need additional support, it is recommended that you recruit local volunteers.

## Participants

Participants can be recruited/referred through any mental health services and supports including Integrated Exercise Practitioners, General Practitioners and Social Prescribers. There is a suggested referral form included in the Appendices (**Appendix B**).

Local Steering Groups can decide how many participants they can support with their resources. The average group size is 15-20.

**Woodlands for Health does not replace any individual's mental health interventions or treatments but should be part of a toolkit for supporting mental health.** It is recommended that participants take part in no more than two Woodlands for Health programmes. One of the main aims of Woodlands for Health is progression to mainstream groups/organisations/activities – particularly nature-based ones.



# The Programme

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## Session Outline

- Participants, Walk Leaders and Facilitators **meet at a prearranged location.** Transport provided.
- Walk Leader **outlines route.**
- **Depending on the group, walkers may walk alone,** in pairs or in larger groups. This could vary throughout the walk. Facilitators should check in with walkers, particularly those walking alone.
- **Possible topics of discussion during walk:** walking history, local walking opportunities, progression following programme.
- **Walk Leader will bring attention to nature** and surroundings as well as guiding route.
- Possible **creative outlet** (see below – additional ideas).
- **After walk, Facilitators provide refreshments.** Group chat and reflection on the walk. Facilitators gather information for process evaluation – see Evaluation section.
- **Transport will bring everybody back** to original meeting point.



## Health and Safety

It is best practice to ensure that there is a **qualified first-aider on all walks.**

It is recommended that Walk Leaders **hold a Walk Leader qualification or similar.**

**Groups will consist of different physical abilities.** It may be necessary to slow down the overall pace of the group in order to stay together. Depending on the needs of participants, some may require individualised support.

**Risk assessment must** be completed by Local Steering Group prior to walks.

All facilitators and participants should **follow these public health guidelines to avoid spread of germs and infectious diseases:**

- Practice good hand hygiene, particularly when handling refreshments.
- Cover coughs and sneezes.
- Respect other people's personal space and choices to wear face coverings.
- Stay at home if unwell.



### Food/Refreshments

**It is recommended to provide a snack and a drink for participants.** As well as providing energy and enjoyment, this gives an opportunity to chat and share experiences. Based on previous programmes, tea/coffee/hot chocolate and fresh fruit are popular choices. Local businesses may be happy to sponsor refreshments. Participants could also bring their own or bring change for a café/shop. Check out Leave no Trace for guidelines on maintaining a clean environment while out with a group. Take a look at Healthy Ireland for helpful eating guidelines.



### Communication

**You could ask participants if they would like to receive reminder emails or messages** each week and whether they consent to follow up messages if they miss a walk.



### Clothing

**Warm comfortable clothing with easily removable layers and comfortable shoes are recommended.** If participants already have durable runners or hiking boots, these can be worn but be sure to avoid adding any barriers to people choosing to take part.



### Weather

**It is suggested that groups meet at the agreed location each week, regardless of weather.** If weather does not permit walking, a back up plan is recommended e.g. a visit to a local cultural site or going for a tea/coffee.



### Nature Calls

Check out [www.pee.ie](http://www.pee.ie) to find toilet facilities near your walk location.



### Additional Ideas

These are suggested elements which could be added to your programme. You may have different ideas depending on local resources.

- **Photography** Evidence has proven mental benefits of looking at nature, even while indoors. You could suggest that participants take photographs of nature during their walks and maybe use one as a screensaver.
- **Nature Therapy**
- **Mindfulness** of nature, sounds, smells, sensations, and movement
- **Forest Bathing**

## Progression

We recommend that people take part in no more than two programmes and then focus on progression to mainstream activities, ideally ones that are nature-based.

From week 6 (or earlier), introduce discussions about other physical/social/nature-based activities in their communities. This will vary depending on local offerings and should be discussed by the Local Steering Group.

This could include:



## Transport

Most Woodlands for Health programmes provide transport for participants.

### Bus

**A central pickup location is recommended.** Some services may have access to a bus, which will eliminate a substantial cost for the programme. Explore options such as Local Link and volunteer services.

### Public transport

**Support could be provided** to access public transport.

### Carpooling

**Carpooling is a cost effective option,** particularly if participants know or as they get to know other members of the group.

### Own transport

It may be an option for participants to **arrange their own transport.**

## Finances

Costs for the programme include transport, refreshments and possibly Walk Leaders. This cost is often shared between Local Steering Group partner organisations. Consider local and national funding opportunities and applications to cover these costs.

Local organisations may also be happy to sponsor or contribute goods or services to support the programme. Cost to run programmes will vary depending on local resources, distance to walk locations and the size of the group.

### Some suggested avenues for funding are listed here:

- National Lottery (through Mental Health Associations or similar)
- Local Authorities
- Healthy Communities
- Rethink Ireland

# Evaluation

Evaluation is an important element of the Woodlands for Health programme.

This allows us to:

- o **Adapt and improve** Woodlands for Health programmes
- o **Learn even more** about the relationship between being active in nature and mental health and well-being.
- o **Contribute to a growing body of evidence** and will hopefully inspire similar programmes in Ireland and maybe even worldwide!

Woodlands for Health is evaluated in several different ways.

1

## Facilitator Process Evaluation

A process evaluation is completed by facilitators by filling in a spreadsheet each week. This allows us to measure factors like how many participants attended.

2

## Programme Participant Outcome Evaluation

Outcomes are measured via participant questionnaires.

You can find all of these documents, as well as instructions, on the Woodlands for Health webpage

[www.mentalhealthireland.ie/woodlandsforhealth](http://www.mentalhealthireland.ie/woodlandsforhealth)

# Insurance

Each Local Steering Group needs to arrange insurance for their programme. You may be covered by one of your local partner organisations. If not, you can register your

programme with Get Ireland Walking for free insurance cover for group leaders and coordinators. All details can be found here: [www.getirelandwalking.ie/registergroup](http://www.getirelandwalking.ie/registergroup)

## Social Media and Promotion

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If uploading photographs and information about Woodlands for Health on local partners' social media, make sure that participants have consented to photographs being taken (this

is included in the referral form - **Appendix B**).  
**Pictures of people walking in the distance, feet and scenery always go down well!**

### Tag national partners



#### Facebook:

Coillte, Get Ireland Walking, Mental Health Ireland, Maynooth University



#### Instagram:

@coillte\_outdoors / @coilltenews, @get\_ireland\_walking,  
@mentalhealthireland, @maynoothuni



#### LinkedIn:

Coillte, Get Ireland Walking, Mental Health Ireland, Maynooth University



#### Twitter:

@CoillteOutdoors / @coilltenews @GetIreWalking @MentalHealthIrl @MaynoothUni

And use the hashtag **#WoodlandsForHealth** (be sure to use capital letters so that screen readers can make sense of it).

If you are creating your own documents, such as posters, the official Woodlands for Health and national partner logos must be used. Contact [niamh.nic@mentalhealthireland.ie](mailto:niamh.nic@mentalhealthireland.ie) to access partner logos.

The Woodlands for Health live webpage can be found at:

[mentalhealthireland.ie/woodlandsforhealth](http://mentalhealthireland.ie/woodlandsforhealth)

There are also static pages on all of our partner websites:

[coillte.ie/woodlandsforhealth](http://coillte.ie/woodlandsforhealth)

[getirelandwalking.ie/woodlandsforhealth](http://getirelandwalking.ie/woodlandsforhealth)

[maynoothuniversity.ie/woodlandsforhealth](http://maynoothuniversity.ie/woodlandsforhealth)

## Merchandise

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A limited amount of branded “Woodlands for Health” merchandise is provided by Mental Health Ireland Development Officers. Items may include hats, bags, snoods and water bottles.



## Conclusion

We hope that this document has given you the tools, guidance and contacts to set up your own Woodlands for Health programme.

If you require any other information or have any feedback about the programme or this document, **please contact National Woodlands and Nature Project Lead:**

**Niamh Ní Chonghaile**

niamh.nic@mentalhealthireland.ie

**087 7654399**

[www.mentalhealthireland.ie/woodlandsforhealth](http://www.mentalhealthireland.ie/woodlandsforhealth)

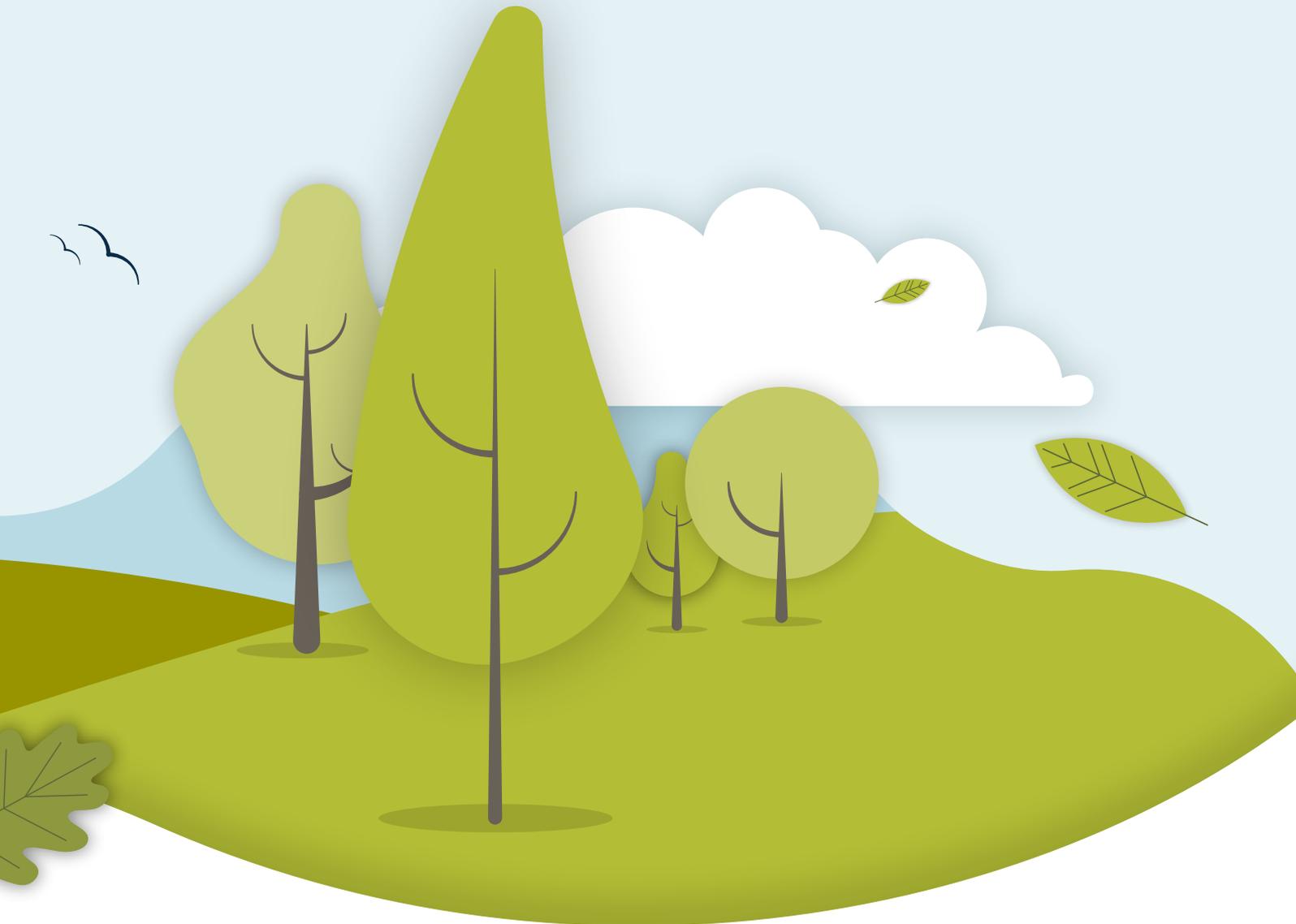


## Appendices

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# Weekly Planning Template



Week	Date	Location	Transport	Refreshments	Facilitators	To-do
1 Introductory session						Pre-Programme Evaluation (can also be completed beforehand)
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						Introduce discussions about ongoing involvement in activity / nature programmes
7						
8						
9						
10						
11						
12 Celebration						Post-Programme Evaluation. Celebratory lunch / snacks / presentation of certificates of completion.





# Referral Form



Name:	
Access Needs:	<input type="checkbox"/> Physical <input type="checkbox"/> Sensory <input type="checkbox"/> Learning
Access Needs Description	

Relevant Health Information:

Walking Ability/History:

Contact Details

Phone:

Email address:

Transport preference:	<input type="checkbox"/> Group Bus <input type="checkbox"/> Car Pool <input type="checkbox"/> Own Transport
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Emergency contact:

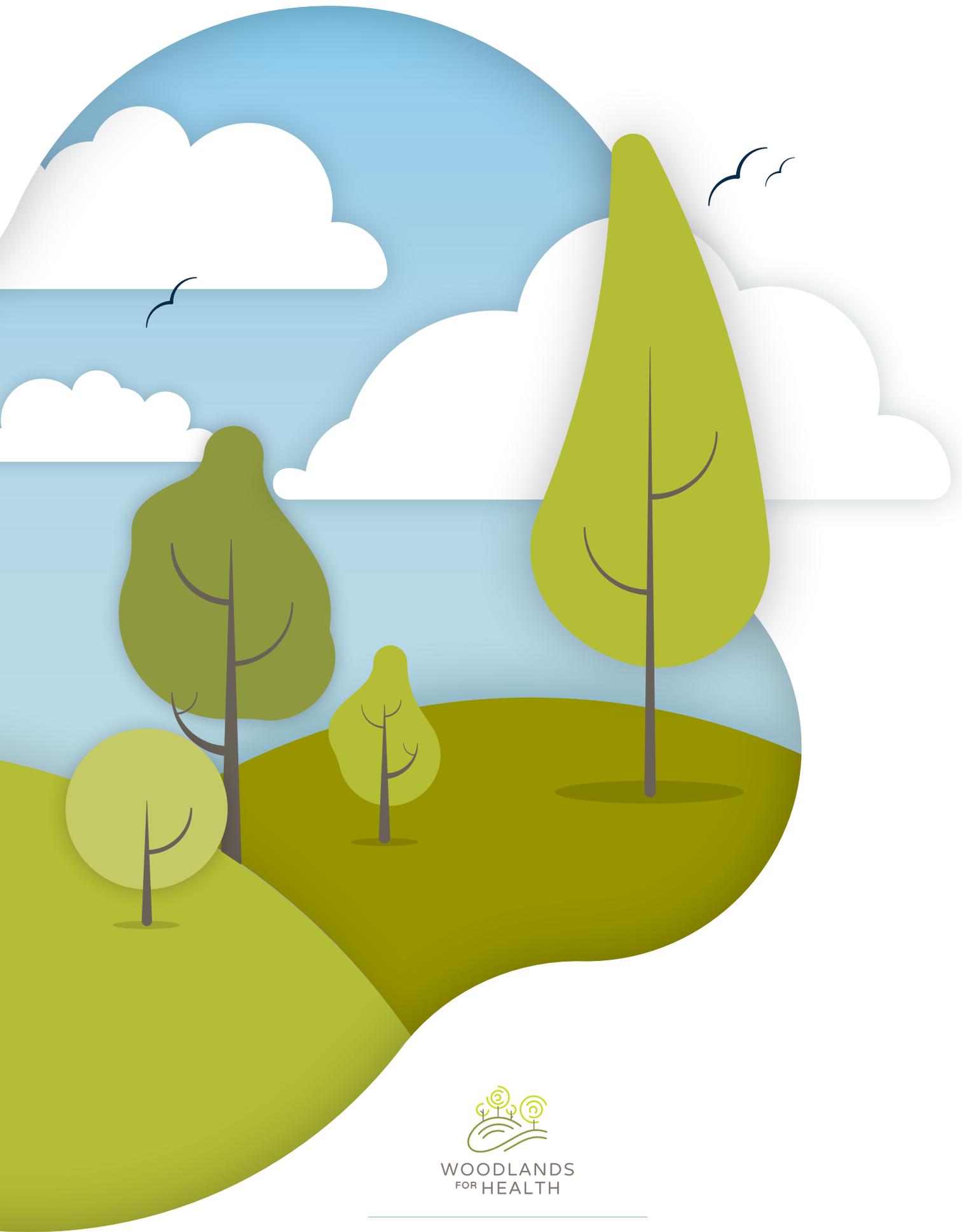
Media Consent (Tick Box):

Photos and videos can be used to promote Woodlands for Health programme.

Evaluation Consent (Tick Box):

Consent to participate in evaluation of Woodlands for Health programme.





WOODLANDS  
FOR HEALTH

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[niamh.nic@mentalhealthireland.ie](mailto:niamh.nic@mentalhealthireland.ie)

087 7654399