

OPEN MINDS ACTIVE

Annual Report

September 2021-2022



Table of Contents

01

Our Story so far

02

Purpose, vision
and mission

03

Connection with
Nature

04

Our Values

05

Our
Methodology

06

Our People

07

Programme
Theory

08

Our Impact

09

Our Reach

10

Outcomes

11

Bridging &
Bonding

12

Increase Access

13

Develop
Resilience

14

Knowledge & Skill
Aquisition

15

Impact of Green
Social Prescribing

16

Comments

17

Social Enterprise

18

Partners

Our story so far

Maggy Blagrove founded Open Minds Active just before the start of the pandemic in 2019. Her vision was to widen access to the outdoors, particularly wild swimming, for those who might not have the opportunity or means. Recognising the increasing body of research around the positive benefits on mental health and wellbeing, Maggy was also keen to engage people with long term mental and physical health conditions to see if outdoor swimming could have a positive impact. Building a fun, inclusive, social community, representational of the people it serves, remains at the heart of the organisation and its programmes.

Utilising 15 years experience in community development, running various sport for social change initiatives, Maggy forged links with key community partners and met Wafa Suliman, a former Sudanese professional swimmer. Together they embarked on a learn to swim programme to address access barriers for ethnically diverse communities with a longer term view to enabling more women of colour to try swimming outdoors. The impact of which is included in this report.

At the same time Maggy and a small team of open water coaches and lifeguards co-created a short course around cold water immersion, including breathing and mindfulness techniques. This developed into a fully fledged social prescribing offer, whereby health care professionals refer in patients with a range of mental and physical health conditions. The course runs twice a year and follows on into drop in sessions, in various locations around Bristol.

Participants are encouraged to lift share and swim regularly with the group to build confidence, social connections and create healthy habits.

As the organisation has grown the small team have engaged diverse groups in a range of outdoor activities including, outdoor yoga, stand up paddle boarding, walking groups, surfing, outdoor and indoor fitness activities. They have worked with young adults with learning difficulties, older socially isolated adults, asylum seekers, local people with long term health conditions, women from ethnically diverse backgrounds. Although our aim is to support as many people as possible, we work particularly with partners in socio economically challenged areas to reach those most in need.

In order to sustain the central costs of the business and to diversify income streams, Open Minds Active is also a social enterprise that offers a range of affordable activities in line with our organisational values. Over the last year the team has run various events including a Swim Hike challenge in North Devon, guided swims down the River Avon near Bath, cold water workshops, swim and yoga workshops and small group coaching courses focussing on open water skills and swim technique.

There have been many barriers to overcome but alongside the funders, community partners and indoor and outdoor venues, the team have been able to create, secure welcoming, safe spaces for our participants. These last 12 months have been particularly impactful and the team hope you enjoy reading the stories from some of the inspiring beneficiaries.

Our Purpose, Vision and Mission

1

Our purpose is to strengthen wellbeing within communities, widen access and create opportunities for excluded citizens.

2

Our Vision is a society where everyone can achieve positive wellbeing using our great outdoors.

3

Our mission contributes to this vision as we 'deliver physical activity led wellbeing services for Bristol and surrounding areas, promoting connection to the outdoors, improving mental health and social networks.

Connection with nature

Anecdotally many of us already know that connecting with nature and being physically active make us feel better. This is backed up by numerous research studies evidencing the mental and physical health benefits of being physically active in nature. But there are so many people who do not have the opportunity, support, knowledge or access to be active in the outdoors, particularly in water. Breaking down these access barriers is an important part of our work.

We believe in making physical activity in blue and green natural spaces more accessible for all communities. We run different types of physical activities based on what our communities have asked for, but we are focused on swimming in particular because it presents a set of complex, practical and historic barriers, tied up in negative stigmas and perceptions about many of the diverse communities the sport seeks to engage.

Research shows that:

“People who spend at least 2 hours a week in nature are significantly more likely to report being in good health and feeling satisfied with their lives than those who spend little or no time outside in green spaces.”

“Social connection and wellbeing benefits are direct outcomes of the nature-based activities we considered. Shared experiences instilled a greater sense of community as well as care for the environment.”

“Infrequent users of green and blue space are more likely to be “female, older, in poor health, of lower socioeconomic status, in the BAME population, live in relatively deprived areas with less neighbourhood green space and be further from the coast.”

Our values

How we operate and our integrity is vital to OMA. We have developed 7 core values that articulate how we do things:

Core Values	What we do
Community.	Build a diverse and inclusive outdoor community that empowers and inspires. Create a space that encourages fun, laughter and friendship.
Equality.	Promote the right for everyBODY to enjoy the outdoors and participate in physical activities no matter their background, ability, or circumstance.
Environment.	Enjoy and respect our green spaces, lakes, rivers and seas.
Resilience.	Facilitate wellbeing and practices that develop positive mental health through movement in nature.
Adventure.	Rekindle a sense of excitement and exploration of wild spaces and the outdoors.
Self care and care of others.	Learn new skills to deal with the stresses of modern life, feel empowered to try new experiences and encourage others to do the same.

Our Methodology – A Community Empowerment Approach

We wanted to respond directly to local need on key issues, particularly inequity around adults who are not able to swim. We recognised this was a key barrier for people not accessing outdoor spaces. Our methodology around how the team engages local communities has evolved over the past three years. We defined 4 elements that were key to our approach:

1. Local

The approach of Open Minds Active is rooted in community empowerment by addressing local issues with local resource by local people. We wanted to make sure staff, volunteers and participants reflected the communities and issues we sought to address.

2. Targeted Outreach

In order to ensure that Open Minds Active provided activities that respond directly to need within local communities in Bristol. Staff worked with local partner organisations and community leaders across Bristol to identify underrepresented groups, particularly within the refugee and asylum seeker community. During this process we discovered a huge need locally for creating safe spaces for all women of colour to learn to swim.

3. Peer Led

Once engaged in activities, the participants regularly feedback about the programmes and are encouraged to involve others. When they feel ready, participants are encouraged to volunteer as peer mentors or session assistants to support newcomers. They are best placed to support others around expectations, accessing the venues, clothing, transportation and the style of coaching.

4. Lived experience

Across all our community work, time building relationships, reassurance and nurturing safe spaces is always time well spent. Ensuring staff and volunteers have their own lived experience to draw on is essential for the evolution and authenticity of the organisation.

Our people



Simangele, Director



Maggy, Founder & Director



Dr Faye, Director



Jo, Director



Wafa, Community Engagement Manager



Sara, Surf Coordinator



Debs, Admin and Yoga Instructor



Melzina, Finance Manager

Our delivery staff team and volunteers



Kiki



Sarah



Liz



Alice



Hannah



Alison



Vix



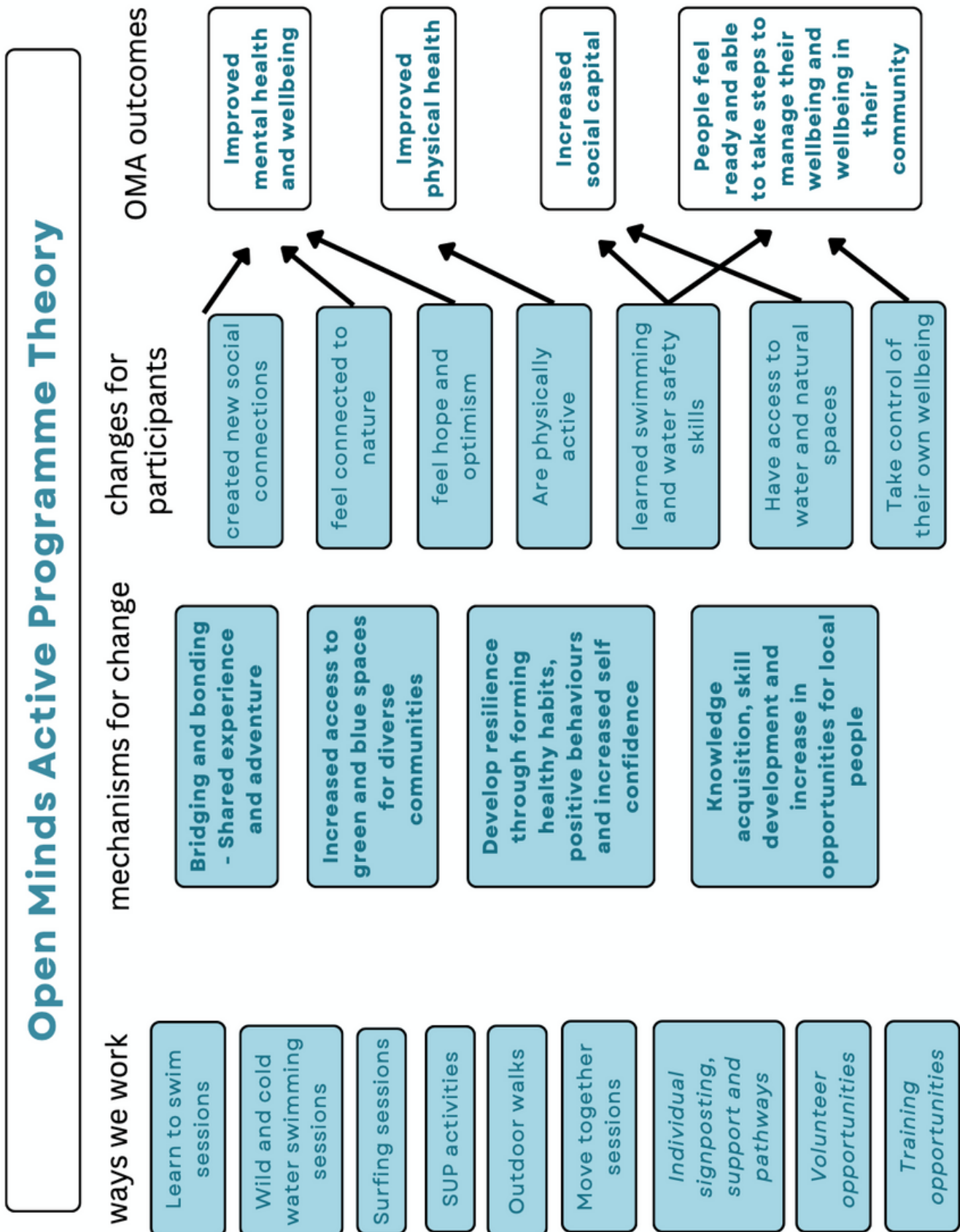
Muna



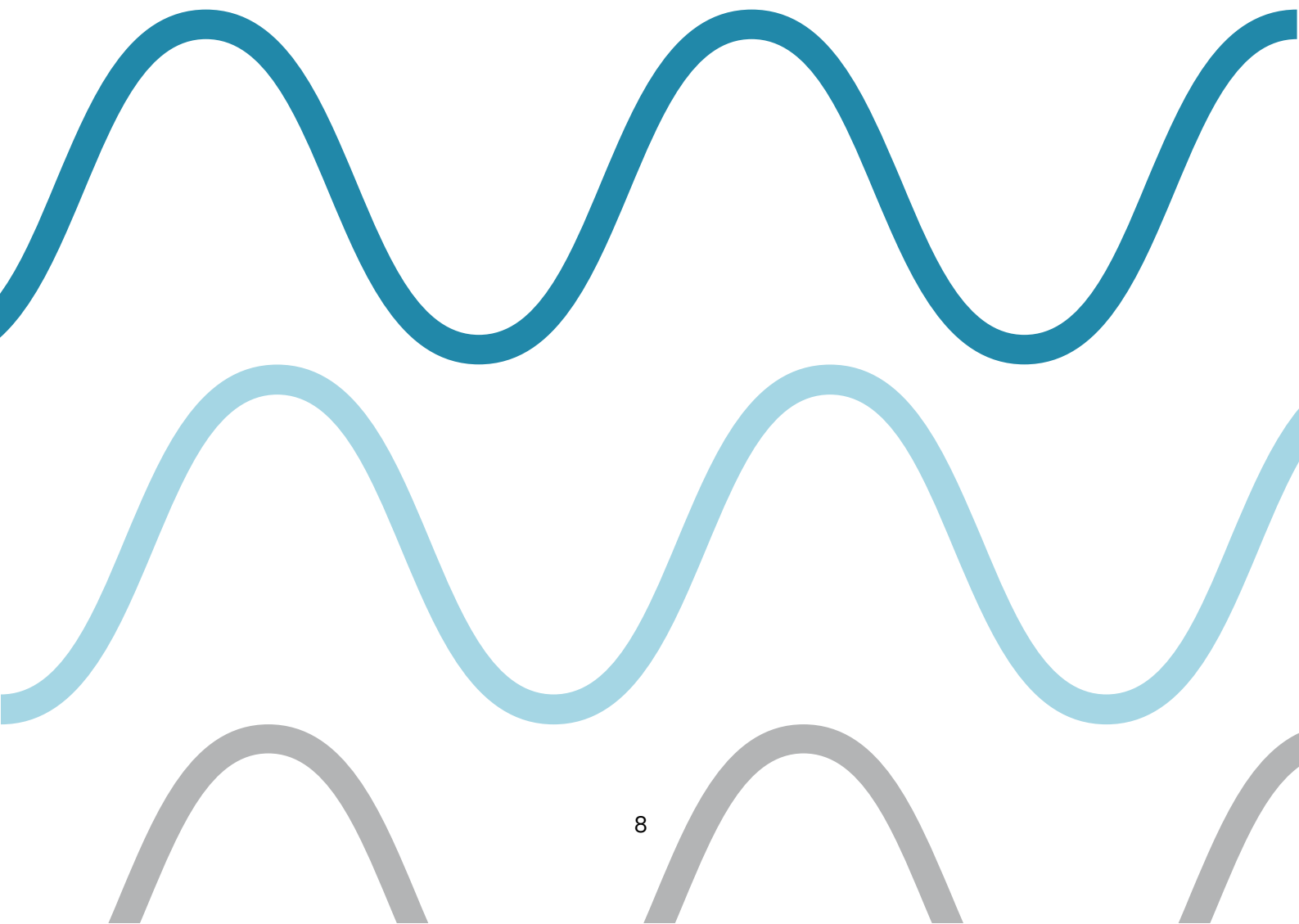
Lou

Programme Theory

Below this chart depicts our Theory of Change. This is essentially what we do, how we do it and the positive changes for participants that we wish to see. The final column shows the overall outcomes we hope will be the final result such as 'improved mental health and wellbeing'.



Our Impact 2021/22



People we have reached in the last 12 months

In our community programmes alone we hosted 9 different activities that were exclusively for women, both water/blue space activities (swim, surf, SUP) and green space activities (walking, yoga)

We engaged 131 women in these activities, more than 75 % were women from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

51 women from diverse ethnic backgrounds have learned to swim with us in the last 12 months alone.

At least 20% of all the women who have come to our activities have long term health conditions.

We know that at least 16% of the women who have come to our activities are refugees, there may be more who did not feel comfortable sharing their status.

131

We engaged 131 women

75%

more than 75 % were women from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

67

women from diverse ethnic backgrounds have learned to swim with us

22

We have worked with women from 22 different nationalities

Mechanisms for change



Long-term outcomes

These are the areas in which we have seen change happening and in the following pages we will show that through data collected from September 2021 – September 2022.

1. Bridging and bonding – Shared experience and adventure
2. Increased access to green and blue spaces for diverse communities
3. Develop resilience through forming healthy habits, positive behaviours and increased self confidence
4. Knowledge acquisition, skill development and increase in opportunities for local people

Through the changes we observe based on our mechanisms for change, we ultimately want to achieve the following long-term outcomes in our community:

Improved mental health and wellbeing

Improved physical health

Increased social capital

People feel ready and able to take steps to manage their own wellbeing and wellbeing of their community



1. Bridging and Bonding

Participants who have felt lonely or isolated are building relationships with other people who come to the activities.

“I felt very lonely, depressed and angry – not myself. I didn't know what to do or what to try to feel better.

It surprised me that it was actually nice because of the people. All of us in the same boat but with our own reasons for being here. It was nice to meet new people, especially Lydia and Gina, who are older than me but we get on and we have become good friends. We also share lifts.

I also realised when I stopped coming for a bit some of those bad feelings came back. I missed the natural high you get after the swim and the tea and chat with everyone after.”

Mitzie, GSP Wild Swimming participant



2. Increased access to green and blue spaces for diverse communities

"The most valuable thing about Wild swimming is that it makes you feel like you are a part of nature, it is so soothing. I am now swimming twice a week whereas I was doing nothing before. I really want to try and swim all winter now! Cold water has helped me to manage my Fibromyalgia as I experience severe body aches. It is very debilitating, but on the days I cold water swim I feel better and I am more energetic."

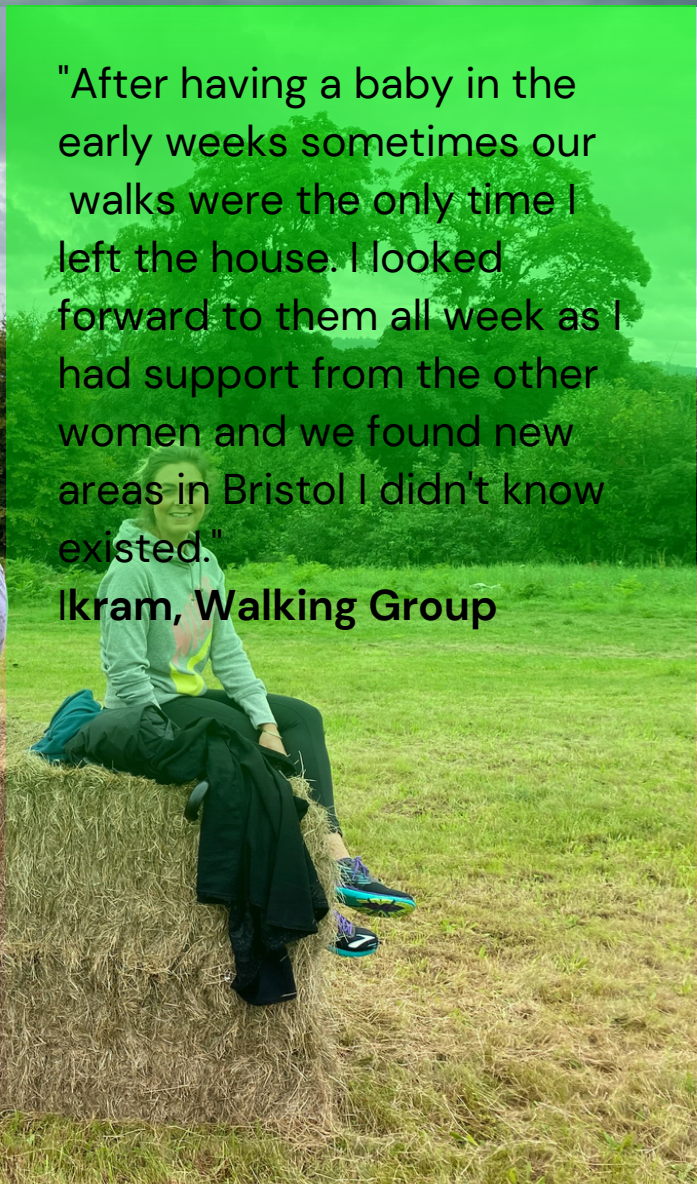
Mehbooba, Wild Swimming participant



Activities in blue space:
Wild Swimming
Learn to swim
SUP
Surfing



Activities in green space:
Move together
Walking
Wild Yoga



"After having a baby in the early weeks sometimes our walks were the only time I left the house. I looked forward to them all week as I had support from the other women and we found new areas in Bristol I didn't know existed."

Ikram, Walking Group

3. Increased resilience through forming healthy habits, positive behaviours and increased self confidence

Participants engaged in activities are feeling happier and less anxious. Joining Open Minds Active activities is giving them new experience from which they can form healthy habits.



"After the first session it was quite odd to feel ok and calm and to get my first decent night sleep in a while. The sessions have introduced me to wild swimming (something I never would try) and taught me how to wild swim safely, which gave me the confidence to go wild swimming outside of the sessions too. Wild swimming is now my favourite and most effective coping strategy, it stops my mind from racing, reduces anxiety levels and helps me reset. I don't think I would have tried wild swimming if I wasn't referred for these sessions."

GSP Wild Swimming participant

4. Knowledge acquisition, skill development and increase in opportunities for local people

Learning to swim and attending wild swim, SUP and surf activities are helping local people gain access to pools and blue spaces around Bristol and learn new skills in the water.

- 109 people from local communities have attended one or more of our sessions learning new skills in water
- 91 are women
- 58 are women from diverse ethnic backgrounds
- 51 women from diverse ethnic backgrounds and local Bristol communities have attended our Learn to Swim sessions in the last 12 months.

Learning basic swimming skills gives people confidence in the water, and Open Minds Active also helps facilitate opportunities for them to try other water activities like surfing:

“It was my first time ever surfing, I hadn't experienced any sport like this before and I had only just learned to swim, but I really wanted to try it. The opportunity to learn surfing itself was valuable and I would never normally have been able to afford it as I have so many other things to prioritise having a family. Having an offer to try surfing for free with amazing people was a very special experience and one I will always cherish. I made new friends, we shared stories and laughed a lot. ”

- Luna, Learn to Swim and Learn to Surf participant



Impact of Green Social Prescribing

We participate in Green Social Prescribing (GSP) through three activities: Wild Swimming, Learn to Swim and Move Together.

Everyone who has joined these activities has a long-term health condition, the most common are:

Depression, anxiety, menopausal symptoms, high blood pressure, Fibromyalgia, MS, ME/Chronic Fatigue, Post cancer recovery

People who come to Open Minds Active GSP activities are happier and less anxious.

- 82% of participants in Green Social Prescribing activities said they felt happier after participating in the activity
- 80% said they felt less anxious
- 84% of the women who participated in the GSP activities said they felt happier after participating
- 82% said they felt less anxious*

Photo Credit: Charlie Pinder



Comments from our wild swim participants

We receive so much positive feedback from people every week, but these are some of the most impactful quotes we have collated.

Wild swimming is like my medicine. I hate it when I miss a week, some weeks its the only time I leave the house.

I'm so pleased I met you all. This project has saved my life.

You have created such an amazing, welcoming community that people want to be a part of, thank you.

I was having suicidal thoughts and although they haven't gone away completely, after 6 months of swimming with you twice a week, I don't feel as alone and I'm feeling more positive about life.

Open Minds Active have been so helpful with developing my confidence in open water swimming which has had a very positive impact on my overall wellbeing. The team are so knowledgeable, friendly and helpful and I've met some really lovely people too! It was exactly what I needed and I'm so grateful for the guidance I've received. Thank you very much, I would highly recommend to anyone.

I never thought as a muslim woman and someone who hates the cold, I would be swimming all winter outside in a lake, I love it!

I didn't know spaces like this existed in Bristol for women of colour. I feel welcome and safe, thank you.

I was worried about wearing a swimsuit in public, but I didn't have to worry, everyone was so friendly I felt immediately relaxed.

I didn't know I needed this until I went. When I'm in the water its the only time my mind is quiet.

I feel so brave, I can't believe I swim in cold water and that I'm weirdly addicted to it.

Each week I feel I get a mental and physical reset and I'm able to cope with the rest of the week.

The breathing exercises have really helped. I feel less anxious now and I'm able to manage my panic attacks.

I'm happier now and I feel listened to.

Social Enterprise

Engaging the wider community in non competitive outdoor activities and events

To reach a wider mainstream audience and to diversify our income, over the last 12 months we have offered a range of affordable activities that promote social connections and general wellbeing in a fun non competitive environment. We have engaged an additional 108 people in these activities. Our plan is to increase our offer in 2023 to extend our reach and help with our sustainability as an organisation.



We ran affordable cold water workshops, group swim technique sessions and 1to1s up at West Country Water Park throughout the year. Our plan is to increase our offer and extend this to corporate organisations in the area to help maintain a healthy workforce.

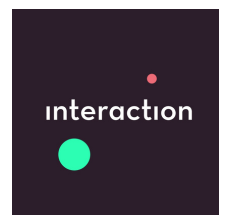


During Spring and Summer we ran guided swims for small groups down the River Avon. We are careful not to run too many of these in order to safeguard the wildlife and river's biodiversity.



Our annual non competitive Swim Hike event sponsored by Orca, in North Devon this July took 22 people across stunning coastal paths and 2 challenging technical, sea swims for intermediate swimmers. We will run this again on 15th July 23.

Acknowledging our partners and supporters



We thank you for your ongoing support of our programme

Acknowledgements

Thank you to **Debs Newth** and **Wafa Suliman** for their help in aggregating the content of this report and to **Alison Carney** for helping shape our monitoring and evaluation systems and making sense of all the data.

Thank you to all our partners, funders, staff team and volunteers without whom none of this work would be possible.

Finally, thank you to our participants who have been brave enough to share their stories and continue to inspire us and those around them every day.



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