



# An Evaluation of Venture Trust's 'Next Steps' Programme

## Final Report

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## **Executive Summary and Recommendations**

In 2011, funding from Comic Relief's 'Sport for Change' programme enabled Venture Trust (VT) to launch its 'Next Steps' programme. The 'Next Steps' programme is designed to support women of all ages who have a history of offending, or who have been involved in the criminal justice system, to reduce their risk of re-offending and move towards a positive destination in employment, education, training or volunteering.

VT contracted the University of Edinburgh to evaluate the effectiveness of the 'Next Steps' programme. The following summarises the research approach taken and the main outcomes. Full details of these and a thorough literature review are presented in the main report.

Focus groups and individual interviews were carried out with women who have been involved in the criminal justice system who participated in the 'Next Steps' programme (throughout this report these women will be referred to as programme participants). The women were referred by partner agencies '218' in Glasgow and 'Connections' in Aberdeen. Additionally, qualitative data was collected from referral staff from the respective agencies. The study was carried out over a two-month period. The aim of the evaluation was to:

1. Understand the impact the "Next Steps" programme on the lives of the women taking part.
2. Understand how, why and to what extent, Venture Trust's wilderness activities, expeditions and environments have been effective mediums in enabling women to achieve positive life changes

Results from both participants and their referral agency keyworkers indicated that the 'Next-Steps' programme had a positive effect on participants' personal and social development.

## **Programme participant outcomes**

The findings of this report illustrate a relatively positive impact of VT's 'Next Steps' programme on a purposefully selected sample of women who have been involved in the criminal justice system. In relation to the first research question, there were three main themes identified:

- Self-confidence
- Re-discovering a sense of belonging and identity
- Time spent in the outdoors following the programme

The results indicated a reported increase in participants' confidence, sense of belonging and identity. In addition, for some participants, the rehabilitation process furthered an appreciation of more healthy lifestyles, including the proactive pursuit of outdoor activities.

The second research question revealed the following five themes:

- Effectiveness of Venture Trust's 'Next Steps' programme
- Positive life changes - Reduced substance use
- Positive life changes - Reduced re-offending
- Positive life changes - Learning the skills to make life changes
- Positive life changes - Employment status

The type of positive life changes the women have made since returning home from the programme include; abstaining from alcohol; desisting crime and taking up (or trying to find) volunteer or paid work. Also, women in this research found the female-only outdoor environment to be instrumental for in-depth contemplation about the complex issues surrounding their complex lives at home.

### **Referral agents' outcomes**

Overall, the agency staff felt that the programme was effective in helping the women to reach a more positive sense of self. They also confirmed the participants' reported increase in confidence. In addition, being part of a group was seen as an important factor for enhancing participants' personal growth. It was evident that the establishment of relationships both before and on the programme, coupled with the programme content, facilitated the participants' positive life changes.

### **Recommendations**

Participants and the referral agents felt that there should be more time spent with participants when they returned home. Thus, the programme could be improved by increasing the post-course follow-up (by VT and agencies) to enhance transfer. This would support and help participants' quest for positive life changes.

## **1.0 Introduction**

This report aims to evaluate the impact of Venture Trust's (VT) 'Next Steps' programme on programme participants. The following section will review the literature around 'outdoor education' (OE) programmes that address clientele who have been involved in the criminal justice system. Although there are varying definitions in the literature for OE, most simply, it refers to organized learning that takes place in the outdoors. This term is more commonly used as a general phrase in recent literature and so will be used throughout this report as an umbrella term for learning outdoors.

### **1.1 Outdoor Education programmes**

Over the last few decades, there has been a growing body of evidence claiming the benefits of OE programmes. Among the various domains that OE spans, outdoor adventure activities are often associated with promoting personal and/or interpersonal growth (PSD) among participants (Barrett & Greenaway, 1995; Hopkins & Putnam, 1993; Wurdinger, 1997). This has led practitioners to design programmes specifically for populations that may benefit from personal growth or development. For example, programmes have been designed for offender populations and those who are struggling with behavioural, substance abuse, and mental health issues. Characteristic of the field is a belief by many that outdoor programs can be an effective alternative to traditional incarceration for clients (Taylor *et al.*, 1999; Lebermann, 2007).

### **1.2 Outdoor Education programmes for offender populations**

Typically, adjudicated programmes tend to utilise a more highly disciplined and individualised approach than is usually the case in outdoor programmes with a personal development, educational or recreational emphasis (Home Office, 2007<sup>1</sup>; Scottish Executive, 2005; Russell & Hendee, 2000). While on a global scale, some of these programmes include month long expeditions, programme design in the UK tend to be of a shorter duration.

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<sup>1</sup> This report by Baroness Corston is a review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the criminal justice system and outlines the need for a distinct radically different, visibly-led, strategic, proportionate, holistic, woman-centred and integrated approach.

The use of outdoor activities for British probation services have been in operation for several decades (McCormack, 2003). OE programmes specifically designed for individuals from judicial authorities and social service agencies vary in terminology. This spans a plethora of terms such as: wilderness therapy (Davis, Berman & Berman, 1994), therapeutic wilderness camping (Loughmiller, 1965), adventure therapy (Gass, 1993), wilderness adventure therapy (Bandoroff, 1989), wilderness treatment programmes (Kimball, 1993), and wilderness experience programmes (Winterdyck & Griffiths, 1984). There is however a lack of clarity in the literature which may lead to confusion as to what distinguishes therapeutic from developmental, educational and recreational outdoor programmes (Russel & Hendee, 2000).

### **1.3 Outdoor education programmes for women involved in the criminal justice system**

Much of the research on OE programmes with probation populations has focused mainly on adolescents or youths. On an international scale, comprehensive reviews of outdoor experiential programmes for young offenders have been published by Reddrop (1997) and Zampese (2002). The rise of youth crime on the backdrop of social adversity, disengagement from school, coupled with emotional problems and deficiency in psychological well-being has been linked with adult trajectories such as drug abuse and offending behaviour (McAra & McVie, 2010; Stuart, 2010; Collishaw *et al.*, 2010).

Compared to the work that has been done with youths, adventure-based learning for women involved in the criminal justice system is a relatively under-researched group (Home Office, 2007; Lebermann, 2007, Kendall, 1998). However, there is consensus in experiential learning literature that female-only programmes support gender-specific learning (Leberman, 2007), despite few commentators claiming that OE programs cannot be applied to female offenders (Reddrop, 1997). Taylor *et al.* (1999) advise that if such programmes are used with females, the content and process should be adjusted to participants' needs. The authors suggest that females may disengage from the "prevalent male-dominated image of the activities" and so programmes "must be delivered with sensitivity" (Taylor *et al.*, 1999, p. 5; see also Scottish Executive, 2005).

Accordingly, several sources in the literature argue the need for a ‘holistic’, women-centred approach. These should include constructive and humane responses to female offenders addressing relationship problems; accommodation difficulties; poor mental health; lack of self esteem; and drug or alcohol addictions (Koons *et al.*, 1997). The latter reverberates with correctional experts’ and contemporary feminists’ views, suggesting that women “develop themselves through attachment and affiliation with others and where connection and not separation is the basis for women ...” (Bloom, 1999, p. 23).

Thus, some of the main contributing factors characterising the benefits of female-only programmes have been associated with elements which focus on “cooperation, support, safety, and a non-competitive, inclusive atmosphere” (Hornibrook *et al.* 1997, p. 157). Lebermann (2007) suggests programmes for women should “focus on personal growth to improve [their] ... self-esteem and provide opportunities for expressing feelings in order to enhance the rehabilitation process of female offenders” (p. 115).

#### **1.4 Do female-only OE programmes reduce offending?**

Commentators of the field have questioned the effectiveness of programmes for enhancing participants’ personal development/growth. Typically, evidence of the effects of OE - be it educational, personal or therapeutic development - often have been in the form of testimonial support, anecdotal examples, and passionate rhetoric. In addition, a number of studies have provided evidence for the impact of OE programmes in promoting positive development growth for such ‘vulnerable’ populations. For example, Russel & Hendee (2000) revealed “positive results in treatment of drug and alcohol abuse, reduced recidivism, reduced frequency of deviant behaviours and fewer arrests” (p. 40). Similarly, Lebermann (2007) showed participants developed “personal skills, particularly increased confidence and self-awareness” which ultimately had a positive effect on “participants strive to re-integrate into society” (p. 127).

More specifically, research with offender populations has shown some positive findings for the efficacy for reducing offending behaviours. For example,

findings from Australasia on female offenders participating in outdoor activities (Lebermann, 2007; Mossmann, 1997) emphasised both the potential for “reducing the likelihood of re-offending, [and] increase [of] the facilitation of other programmes” ... equally reconviction rates suggested that “women may respond better than men” (Mossmann, 1997, p. 142). Commentators representative of the UK body of literature hold tentatively positive views towards the efficiency of programmes. For example, Home Office (2007) and Loucks *et al.* (2006) provide quantitative and qualitative data which indicate that outdoor related programmes prevented programme participants from entering custody, at least in the short-term.

In conclusion, although the female offender population is a rather under-researched group, there is some convincing evidence that OE can have a positive impact on programme participants’ lives. Nevertheless, studies of recidivism and impact on positive life changes remain an area for further investigation and criticism (McCormack, 2003, p. 168; Winterdick & Griffiths, 1984).

Whilst there are lot of diverse interpretations of the concept of OE, VT’s programmes can be described as a wilderness-based personal development programmes, where carefully designed activities and discussion sessions present participants with a range of personal, social and physical challenges. Thus when OE is referred to throughout the report, it is the VT definition that is being referred to.

This report aims to explore participants’ experiences of the ‘Next Steps’ programme. Further, it will investigate if and how the programme is effective for facilitating positive life changes.

## **2.0 The ‘Next Steps’ programme**

Venture Trust (VT) was originally set up at the request of the UK Government’s Home Office in 1982, to create and deliver wilderness-based personal development programmes which helped young people on probation desist from offending. Since then, VT has developed and delivered a wider range of programmes which offer support tailored to the needs of different groups of people including those struggling with homelessness, those leaving local authority care, those with caring responsibilities, men and women caught up in offending, and those struggling with a combination of these and other obstacles in their lives.

Venture Trust’s ‘Next Steps’ programme is designed to support women of all ages who have a history of offending, or who have been involved in the criminal justice system, to reduce their risk of re-offending and move towards a positive destination in employment, education, training or volunteering. The programme is intended to provide support at key transition points in their lives, such as leaving prison or coming to the end of a community sentence, and to complement the work of other agencies with whom the women are working. Specifically, the programme is designed as a “catalyst for change” which boosts participants’ confidence, motivation and core life-skills, using wilderness activities, expeditions and environments as the key mediums to do so.

The ‘Next Steps’ programme is primarily available to women across Scotland, with the majority from Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeenshire. The main partner agencies include the ‘218 Project’ (Glasgow & West of Scotland), the ‘Willow Programme’ (Edinburgh & The Lothians), the ‘Connections Programme’ (Aberdeenshire) and ‘Platform 51’ (England & Wales). Over a twelve month period, 43 women have benefited from the programme.

The programme involves several phases:

- 1) Outreach & referral - Partner agencies are responsible for identifying women who are approaching key transition points (approaching release

for prison, early in community sentences, or during early stages of substance misuse programmes) and who are in need of additional confidence, motivation and core life-skills to improve their prospects of avoiding re-offending and making positive, sustained life changes. Partner agencies refer candidates to Venture Trust, at which point VT's outreach workers meet with them to assess readiness for the wilderness phases, and to discuss the programme. For example, its aims and what each participant aims to achieve (their 'development goals') by taking part. The outreach worker helps participants identify their initial development goals, makes all logistical and practical arrangements to attend the wilderness phases, and helps women prepare emotionally and physically for the challenges ahead.

- 2) Five-day wilderness experience - Participants spend five days on wilderness journeys usually with VT. These journeys can incorporate 'mobile units' - specially converted vehicles which can transport participants, staff, kit and equipment before becoming self-contained 'base camps' that allow VT to take participants into wilderness areas close to their home environments, or can use VT's residential centre or other fixed base. On expeditions, women take part in outdoor activities (such as hiking, kayaking, camping, rock climbing, abseiling, cooking and 'games with aims') - with seasonal conditions and group members' individual development needs, interests and physical capabilities determining choice of activities. Every activity is front-loaded with discussion about the skills that each person hopes to gain from the experience (e.g. how to communicate effectively, how to deal with ones' fears, how to ask for help, how to keep time?). These activities are interspersed with discussion sessions throughout which the group are coached to reflect individually and jointly upon what they have learnt. There are then discussions as to how that learning can be applied in other settings, with the aim of ensuring that the focus is always on personal development in an outdoor setting rather than simply the enjoyment of outdoor activities.

- 3) Community links – After their wilderness experiences, women return to their communities, where they continue to be supported by their outreach worker alongside other local agencies with whom they are working, as they put their new skills into practise.

In common with other VT programmes, the overall approach is based upon a combination of experiential learning (“learning through reflection on doing”), choice theory/reality therapy (a framework by which participants are helped to distinguish between what they can and cannot control, and to learn to try to control only the controllable) and pro-social modelling (staff demonstrate pro-social (positive) behaviours, rather than just telling participants what they are doing wrong). The outdoor activities that Venture Trust offer are also an integral part of the ‘Next Steps’ programme. Therefore the combination of the activities and the overall approach are instrumental for positive life changes.

### **3.0 Methodology**

Qualitative research typically aims to understand the meaning of individual experience within their social context. Thus, generating qualitative accounts from women who were involved in the programme was the most effective way to do this.

#### **3.1 Participants**

According to Borg & Gall (1989) sampling is linked to the generalisability and validity of empirical data so an appropriate selection is vital to get the best possible understandings of the phenomena being studied. Thus, a sample of women with a history of offending who had participated in the 'Next Steps' programme were identified for the research. In addition, members of staff at the partner agencies were also selected to take part in the research.

Female participants who had attended the programme were recruited from two of the main agencies, '218' Glasgow and 'Connections' Aberdeen. The '218 centre' in Glasgow is a holistic service that aims to address root causes of women's offending (Loucks *et al.*, 2006). Similarly, 'Connections' Aberdeen programme works with women in the criminal justice system by delivering on a group and one-to-one basis. The programme participants ranged in age from mid 30's to mid 40's. Two were from greater Glasgow, and one was from a small village outside Aberdeen. Their crimes included breach of the peace, theft and domestic abuse (these were disclosed to the researchers during the focus group/interview).

When carrying out research with 'vulnerable populations', it can be challenging to make contact with and get the desired number of participants to take part. As the women had attended the two partner agencies and had built a relationship with the staff, agency managers were asked to recruit programme participants for the focus groups. The researchers asked the partner agencies to invite a broad sample of participants to the focus groups. This was to ensure the research did not only include 'well represented' women (i.e those with the most positive experiences). To allow for drop-out and other issues that may arise, it was important to over recruit. Thus, eight programme participants were asked to

attend each focus group in either the Glasgow or Aberdeen centre. Inviting women from the same agency ensured they would know or be familiar with each other and resulted in a more comfortable focus group environment. The researchers contacted the agencies a few days before the data-collection, to ensure an adequate number of participants would be attending the focus groups. At this stage, it became clear that there was a low response rate from the participants. One focus group was carried out in Glasgow with only two programme participants. Disappointingly, only one programme participant attended the Aberdeen focus group session. Thus, the focus group questions were adapted slightly to suit an individual interview. This low response rate may have been partly due to the lack of communication/lack of capacity and follow-up between staff at the agencies and partly due to the difficulty recruiting such 'vulnerable' populations.

The agency manager at 'Connections' Aberdeen was not available for an interview on the day of the Aberdeen data collection. Thus, two interviews were carried out with equivalent agency staff who had knowledge of the programme. An interview was also carried out with the agency manager at the '218' centre in Glasgow. In addition to the agency staff interviews, one focus group was undertaken with four agency staff who had participated in the 'Next Steps' programme (see table 1 below). This was essentially to gain more insight into the programme from the partner agencies' point of view.

Thus the evaluation consists of qualitative data collected from:

- Three women who participated in the 'Next Steps' programme (one focus group, one interview)
- Three agency managers individual interviews
- Four agency staff in focus group who had attended the 'Next Steps' programme

	Programme participants	Agency managers	Agency staff
Individual interview	Maggie <sup>2</sup> (Connections)	Jane, Anna (Connections) Mandy (218)	
Focus group	Roslyn, Donna (218)		Justine, Nicola, Alice, Christine. (218)

**Table 1: participant information.**

### **3.2 Data collection**

The participant focus group and interview were informal and conversational in nature and lasted approximately one hour. The interviews with the agency staff ranged from one to one and a half hours. Focus groups/interviews were carried out in a room supplied by the agency managers. The topics for discussion were based around the research questions and were substantiated from gaps in knowledge about programme participant experiences, which were identified from reviewing the literature. Questions were structured around four main areas; perceptions of the ‘Next Steps’ programme, effectiveness of the programme, impact of the programme on positive life changes and re-offending attitudes and behaviours. The focus groups/interviews were exploratory and so although questions and subject areas were identified, these were not adhered to in a strict order. The focus groups and interviews were facilitated by a female and male researcher. It was thought that the programme participants may respond better to questions asked by a women, thus the female researcher introduced the research and asked the questions while the male researcher set up the recording equipment and took notes.

Focus groups were initially chosen for the participants as they can be used to access group norms and give facilitators the chance to observe how individuals within groups react to the views of others and defend their own views. They also minimise the control the researcher has during the data gathering process by

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<sup>2</sup> All names have been changed for the research in order to retain anonymity.

decreasing the power of the researcher over research participants. It was important when working with a vulnerable population that they felt their voice was heard. Thus, focus groups were chosen as they are an effective way to allow the women the power to speak their voice as honestly and as openly as possible.

Individual interviews were chosen for the agency managers as they allow for more in-depth information to be gathered about an individuals opinions and experiences. The interviews with agency managers also covered four main areas; background and role within the 'Next Steps' programme, perceptions of the programme, impact of the programme and partnership working.

VT also provided the researchers with documents and reports that have been read and cited in this report if appropriate. These included individual participant information forms and a feedback form.<sup>3</sup>In recognising there are limitations to each data collection method, undertaking focus groups, individual interviews and drawing on documentation allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the women's experiences and impact of the programme.

### **3.3 Data analysis**

Focus groups and interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed. The data were initially sorted by thematic and content analysis, otherwise known as 'open coding' (Thomas & Nelson, 1996). The transcripts were then read through again and notes were made, before returning to the data. Categories were then refined when required. This was a continuous iterative process of re-reading transcripts and re-coding which allowed themes to emerge and categories to move from abstract terms to more refined themes. Two overarching themes were identified to address each of the research questions; impact of the programme on the womens' lives and the effectiveness of outdoor education programmes for promoting positive life changes. Within the first overarching theme (the efficiency of the 'Next Steps' programme for participants' positive life changes), the data was refined to three sub-themes including:

- Self-confidence

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<sup>3</sup> This form was written by Laura (Connections)

- Re-discovering a sense of belonging and identity
- Time spent in the outdoors following the programme

Within the second overarching theme (the effectiveness of the 'Next Steps' programme for participants' positive life changes) five sub-themes were identified:

- Effectiveness of female only outdoor education programmes
- Reduced substance use
- Reduced re-offending
- Learning life skills to make life changes
- Employment status

When analysing the data, a prior research driven approach, or deductive method, to code the data was used. Therefore, after reviewing the literature, this provided insight into the development of the thematic codes. This approach is similar to Miller & Crabtree's (1992) 'editing style of analysis' and what Strauss & Corbin (1990) call 'axial coding' in clustering or reconfiguring categories identified and developed by others. Due to the interpretive and subjective nature of qualitative research, it is understood that those involved in the research may have had some influence over the data collected. Therefore, in order to ensure 'trustworthiness' of the data, Lincoln & Guba's (1985) guidelines on data collection and analysis were followed. For example, member checking was employed to ensure validity of themes. This involved both researchers looking at the data and identifying themes separately. In addition, credibility and dependability were enhanced by comparing the feedback from the agency managers with what the programme participants said about their experiences and life changes. Utilising the different methods of data collection across participants and agency staff also allows for triangulation of the data across sources.

### **3. 4 Ethical considerations**

As some of the questions may have been sensitive due to the area of research, the researchers ensured their manner and approach was informal and supportive. The researchers also informed the women that they did not have to answer any questions that they did not want to answer. All of the participants were also assured that the data would be confidential and pseudonyms would be given to protect their identity. All transcripts and audio files have been stored on a password protected computer system, and therefore were only accessible to the researchers. These files have now been destroyed.

## **4.0 Discussion of results**

The following section highlights the key themes that emerged for the programme participants and the agency staff from both ‘218’ in Glasgow and ‘Connections’ in Aberdeen. The themes are structured around the research questions. Therefore this report aims to:

1. Understand the impact the ‘Next Steps’ programme on the lives of the women taking part
2. Understand how, why and to what extent, Venture Trust’s wilderness activities, expeditions and environments have been effective mediums in enabling women to achieve positive life changes

The first part of the results section (4.1) will focus on addressing research question 1, whereas the second part (4.2) will focus on research question 2.

### **4.1 Impact of the programme on the womens’ lives**

The focus group and interview data indicates that the programme impacted on the programme participants’ rehabilitation process. The most evident impact in this respect was the reported increase in their confidence. The second clear theme to emerge was the impact the programme had on the participants’ identity formation. The final theme presented in this section reflects programme participants’ desires to spend more time in the outdoors, following the programme.

#### **4.1.1 Self-confidence**

There is an extensive body of research which shows women who are involved in offending often experience greater financial inequities, poor mental health, substance abuse problems and low self-esteem (Gelsthorpe & Loucks, 1997; Scottish Office, 1998; McClellan, 2006). Thus one of the most important findings from this research is the increase in confidence reported by all the women. This reported confidence was also evident in the participants’ manner and physical appearance. The participants came across as articulate and well

mannered. In particular, Maggie was trying to maintain eye contact in the interview, something she confided she struggled with before going on the 'Next Steps' programme.

I've got a problem, I can't look people in the eye for very long ... 'cause I get paranoid that they are looking at my face. I get paranoid that way. So it [programme] built up my confidence more to be able to do that.

Maggie did not tend to interact with many people. It was evident that sharing a room and participating in the team-building tasks improved her social skills significantly.

It really made me interact more with other people. I want to carry on doing that. I am not a people person so when it comes to doing games with other people I struggle. So it really opened my eyes to a whole new different aspect, how to build up my confidence and get on with others.

Donna also agreed that the time away and the skills she learned on the programme increased her confidence levels and she reported that: "It was amazing for me and my confidence". In addition to the reported confidence levels, the women also noticed the change in the other participants who were on the programme. For example Roslyn said:

We were all from different backgrounds ... but I just seen everyone in a total different light and everyone has really come out their shells since we have been away.

Likewise, the agency staff also commented on the increase in participants' confidence. They also elaborated on events associated with being outdoors that can be transferred into lessons of everyday life. For example, Jane perceived that there was an increase in participants' confidence levels for practical skills, such as cooking:

I think things like confidence. One of the girls, a 19 year old ... she has got two young children ... I think she'd never cooked anything before ... she came in and made *macaroni* ... like 'I made this'! ... but also confidence how to cook ... she has done it all on a stove with nothing so it was like I can do this ... yeah! I think it gave [them] ... because a lot of them haven't left Aberdeen ... a chance to see that there is a little bit more [to life].

Thus, the participants identified their increase in self-confidence as a key benefit of the programme. This reverberates with previous research, which shows increased self-confidence to be a main outcome of participation in female-only OE programmes (Hornibrook *et al.*, 1997; Miranda & Yerks, 1983; Mitten, 1992; Pohl *et al.*, 2001; Liberman, 2007).

#### **4.1.2 Re-discovering a sense of belonging and identity**

The importance of having a sense of belonging is well established in the psychology literature. Belonging, or having a social context is seen to be a requisite for the development of self-esteem and self-confidence (Maslow, 1970). All of the women talked about being 'lost' and 'not knowing who they were' before the programme. For Maggie, the peace and calm of the countryside location was important:

Confidence. How to stay calm in difficult situations. I've found a sense of who I am now ... 'cause I was really really bad. It was just the fact that it was so quiet out there. You don't hear any traffic. The strangest thing when I was out there you never heard any birds. At night especially. It was total, total silence. You could sit outside and lose yourself in the darkness. It calmed me down 'cause I've got a bit of a temper on me.

The time away and skills she learned also helped her to reflect on her life at home and make positive changes to her relationship:

Ever since I've come back, me and my partner have been getting on great ... we were constantly around each other; we were not working; watching

TV 24/7; getting in each others way. It was just that little time away for me to find who I am and calm down a bit. And it really did help.

Donna also felt that being part of the programme helped her to find herself again and have a fresh start:

I was in prison, I was remanded for three weeks then got bailed here [218 Glasgow] for three months. And now I have got nothing to go up [to court] for ... a new year, a fresh start and I've got everything. I've got my boy. But most importantly I've got myself. I was pure lost. So Venture Trust was really good for me.

Agency manager Mandy also felt that the programme was effective in helping the women to reach a more positive sense of self:

Every woman staying up at VT, has had a very positive experience and almost dramatic life-changes ... it taps into their sense of self they forgot they had ... and care for each other, team-working stuff ... the women in here [in the past] would be very quick to talk about negatives, the bad side of things and yet [now] they describe things ... about them helping somebody up the hill and [this] really gets them back in touch with that side ... the kind [of side] that they had forgotten about.

The literature suggests that girls and women develop a sense of self and belonging through their relationships with others (Gilligan, 1982). This recurring theme of responses in the findings corroborates Bloom's (1999) and other correctional experts suggestions in relation to the notion of attachment and affiliation with others. Similarly, agency worker Mandy suggested the participants had an increased sense of self and belonging, following the programme:

Confidence. I think self-confidence has increased a hundred times ... I also think a sense of belonging. I think its being part of something which is really crucial. I suppose the women we would work with are ... very

much, nine times out of ten ... estranged from their own families. Lots of them have left school early ... All the other things we have central to us is not their problem. Family ties, friends ... I think there is a real sense of belonging from not being part of a group for a long time.

Along with bringing participants together, Anna felt the experience taught the women to be less materialistic and think in a deeper sense about what was important to them in their lives. She felt the programme was an effective way in helping the women achieve this personal growth:

The women don't all need these things, stuff and money to be able actually to be happy ... and assure them like what is worth, not to have pressures on you all the time. Just to get away from things ... and close the doors and [question] ... what is this about me? Because a lot of the women don't have a clue who they are. Because they are constantly fitting into roles and identities for other people. So being on VT, that made a big difference ...

Being part of a group was an important part of the experience for the women. New friendships were reported with some of the women still meeting up and 'texting' regularly following the programme. The agency staff also picked up on the importance of being part of a group. Laura at 'Connections' [Aberdeen] stated in her feedback report:

They [women on the programme] especially enjoyed the outdoor activities and seemed to have developed closer bonds with one another.

The literature on OE programmes also emphasises the importance of personal growth for rehabilitating participants (Marcus-Mendoza *et al.*, 1998; Leberman, 2007). The data here indicates that these participants felt a sense of belonging on the 'Next Steps' programme. This enabled them to have the space, time and help to develop this sense of self and personal growth.

#### **4.1.3 Time spent in the outdoors following the programme**

This section illustrates the VT programme's influence on the women to spend more time in the outdoors. In particular, changes towards more healthy lifestyles and a sustained desire to pursue outdoor activities were evident. One woman in particular, Roslyn, felt the programme unleashed her passion for being in the outdoors. In the focus group, Roslyn talked enthusiastically about what exercise she had been doing outside since the programme and told us about her plans to walk the 'West Highland Way'.<sup>4</sup>

I've always wanted to do the 'West Highland Way' which I'll be doing this year and I think that's from when we climbed 'Beinn Glass'. It ['Next Steps' programme] has enhanced me for going outdoors and it's lifted my mood. So see, if I'm feeling down that's what I do; I get myself out.

Much of the work that has been carried out with offenders indicates a correlation between offending behaviour and psychosocial problems, such as depression and low self-esteem (Scottish Executive, 2005). This was an issue for Roslyn who reported she had suffered from depression for many years. However, the programme helped Roslyn realise that being active outside prevented the depressive spells she was accustomed to.

Because I had isolated myself a lot ... I used to just shut myself out 'cause I was very depressed and I was very dependent on alcohol ... so I used to think what will I do? I'll go and get wine and go back home. But now I've discovered how it makes me feel being outdoors.

Although Maggie was not in the outdoors as much as she would like to be, she was keen to go away on the next outdoor programme that was on offer. She also talked about one of her friends from the 'Next Steps' programme who was now regularly active outdoors.

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<sup>4</sup> The 'West Highland Way' is a 96 mile walk in Scotland ranging from Milngavie to Fort William.

Like Barbara, she's going about more outdoorsy now. I hear from her now and again ... like she's away canoeing and away camping. I'm just back to the same old routine. But Jane she's putting my name forward for ... another outdoors things.

Overall, the women were very positive about the impact of the programme on their lives. The only negative comment about the programme was that participants would have preferred it to be longer.<sup>5</sup> This clearly illustrates the value and impact the programme had on the women's lives.

## **4.2 The effectiveness of OE programmes for participants positive life changes**

The themes which relate to the second research question will now be discussed. Firstly, the data on the effectiveness of the female-only<sup>6</sup> outdoors programme will be presented. Following this, the data will be presented which illustrates reported positive life changes after the programme.

### **4.2.1 Effectiveness of female-only OE programmes**

All of the participants talked about the benefits of spending time in the outdoors. For Roslyn, this was a chance to rediscover the adventurous side of herself:

I don't know if it would work for everybody. But [it did] for me, where I was at and ... it's just my kind of thing ... It was just so much fun and it totally inspired me. It was absolute enjoyment for me.

Donna also found the experience of climbing a mountain to be something incredible and indescribable:

Climbing 'Beinn Glass', I can't explain it ... its just the feeling, it was just whoaa.

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<sup>5</sup> This seems to be a recurring theme in the practice of Venture Trust. Although participants are offered a choice about the duration of the programme, many don't feel able to commit to a longer expedition before they've actually experienced one.

<sup>6</sup> Although only females participated in the 'Next Steps' programme, there were both male and female members of staff, typically led by a woman.

Mandy also felt that carrying out challenges in the outdoors forced the women to confront their fears and work together as a team:

I think one of the things is that the activities are geared up towards these things: teamwork and responsibility for each other ... But the challenges the individual faces ... then they are forced to rely on one another. It's new, it's different and it's challenging ... The camp-fire, they have to rely on each other. They are out of their comfort-zone

She also felt that there was an emotional side to being in the outdoors:

Often the women can show emotional reactions to it ... we have seen really emotional reactions to peace and quiet ... to the landscape. Things they have never seen before ... all darkness, the stars, see the sun rise, see a sunset they never paid attention to ... and that kind of scenery is really perfect.

The findings here support the body of literature that suggests “women need ‘time-out’ from their normal and often stressful and chaotic lifestyles, rather than ‘time-in’ custody” (Home Office, 2007, p. 60). Jane also commented that coping with the basics in the outdoor environment helped reduce the stress and pressures of the women's lives at home. It also made them realise they could have a good time without the possessions they readily relied on.

We had really basic equipment ... we had basic food ... it was so much fun. It changes your image ... being outside. You are so much more basic ... we didn't have a TV... and nobody was bored ... you didn't feel that you had to contact [people] and it took a lot of pressure off the women ... in the end they loved it ... they felt so much more peaceful ... [despite] the stress of being in Aberdeen all the time ... but all the women definitely loved it.

In addition to the physical setting, the women felt that components of the programme itself were particularly effective.

The staff on the programme (including outdoor instructors and ‘one-to-one case workers’) were identified as one of the key strengths of the programme. They were seen to be friendly, supportive, encouraging and knowledgeable:

Everybody was so nice and so I felt comfortable. If the people weren’t nice it wouldn’t have been nice for us.

Dan [instructor] was absolutely fantastic. I felt actually very safe. They were all nice.

The Instructors were great, they wouldn’t let you not participate, you had to participate. I can’t really say what it was about them but they were great.

In addition, the participants valued being treated as equals to the male and female members of staff and were empowered to do things for themselves:

I thought the staff would do everything for us, but they didn’t. They were amazing.

This approach involved the staff being ‘non-directive’ and ‘beside’ the participants taps into what is generally referred to in the literature as a ‘person-centred’ approach (Rogers, 1951). This gave the women ownership and responsibility to make decisions whilst on the programme. This resulted in increased self-belief that they were capable of such tasks, which served to enhance their self-worth. This was clearly appreciated as the participants and agency staff concurred that VT staff worked hard to make it a safe, active and rewarding experience. Roslyn acknowledged that the staff and the timetable were also critical for keeping your mind active and focussed on the present:

The hard work that everyone put in ... [the] safety measures that were put in place for us ... like putting the canoes together ... they [instructors] worked really hard for us to have a good time. It was an action-planned few days. And I think we all needed that because your mind would have

wandered off. As soon as you got in, there was something to do. You only had a sleeping bag and a bunk but it was really comfortable, especially after being out all day. I think it was just a variety of everything that worked really well. We all supported each other and you could approach the staff.

The introduction highlighted the importance of the outdoor environment and the practitioners on OE programmes, and these factors are also important in this research. Lebermann's (2007) work has been identified as important as she highlights the role of the instructor and the course environment, both physical and social, as key key-factors in facilitating learning opportunities for participants. Similarly, the Scottish Executive (2005) states the importance of practitioners need to "develop strong communication, counselling and interpersonal skills" in order to convey "accurate empathy, respect, warmth, and therapeutic genuine to establish a 'working alliance' (p. 33).

The data with agency staff also echoed these findings, confirming that the instructors and case workers were instrumental to the participants' positive experiences on the programme:

They [staff on programme] were fantastic ... and I think they are the sort of people who have always got energy ... and you think how? [emphasis] it was the way that they were doing things ... they would pick up on everything ... They were fantastic ... they were listening.

In order to understand more about how and why female-only offender programmes might be effective, the women were asked how they felt about the single-sex element. The consensus was that the female-only environment was considered important in helping them to make positive life changes. Similarly, many commentators of the field suggest the outdoors can offer unique learning environments with a potential for women to "feel more relaxed, more supported and experience better communication than mixed-courses" (Leberman, 2007, p. 114; see also Hornibrook *et al.*, 1997; Miranda, & Yerkes, 1983; Mitten, 1992; Warren, 1990). Also a mixed gender environment may have been detrimental to

the outcome of the course. For example, Donna talked about the potential distraction of having men present, in terms of developing relationships:

I think, where I was, 'cause I was residential, I wouldn't have been good at all for me if there were guys there 'cause I would've probably got in a relationship, and it was too early. So it was really good for me that it was women only.

For Maggie, the female-only environment allowed her to open up to the women, particularly those who were younger. She felt she wouldn't have coped well if there had also been male participants.

The other women in the group, I really opened up to them. The ones that were here, the Tuesday group, we knew each other but we'd never really spoken about stuff and we would stay up talking and writing our diaries and stuff. For me it was important it was all-women. I was the oldest out of the group, so it was good for me interacting with younger people. If there were men I think I would have walked away. I don't really interact with young boys or young men.

Overall, the data and the literature show the importance of the outdoor environment and the female-only design of the programme for facilitating positive life changes.

#### **4.2.2 Positive life changes - Reduced substance use**

Much of the research that has identified common characteristics of offenders generally shows a correlation with offending and substance abuse or dependency. For example, Harper *et al.* (2004) found that around a third of offenders had problems with alcohol misuse. It is not surprising that two of the three women revealed they had alcohol addictions in the past. However, the time away without access to any substances seemed to give Roslyn and Donna a clearer outlook:

And I can relate totally to what she [Donna] was saying as we had the same problem with alcohol. I actually had a complaint about me from my

neighbours ... and I got the letter when I was in Venture Trust and I could deal with it all better 'cause I hadn't had a drink, everything was a lot clearer.

Every day was a temptation ... Now my boys face comes into my head and that's enough. Just now its [my son] getting me through it. It's [VT programme] helped more not just with my drinking but also listening to him. He 15, he's a good boy but he's a boy. Its [VT programme] taught me to sit and listen to him, not just shout at him.

They both confided that the programme helped with their alcohol dependence because they realised they could have a good time without it.

... to be a child again and have the laughter, just silly things, and without the alcohol: You realise you can have fun without the alcohol.

Both participants felt that the 'Next Steps' programme reminded them they could enjoy themselves without alcohol. It also showed them how they could improve their lives if they continued without it.

#### **4.2.3 Positive life changes - Reduced re-offending**

The programme appeared to have a positive impact on the women's offending behaviours, thus meeting the programme objective. Both Roslyn and Donna described how their previous encounters with the criminal justice system were alcohol related. As the programme had helped them address their alcohol dependency issues, they both confirmed that they had not committed any offences or drunk enough to allow such behaviours. Maggie did not talk about substance misuse related to criminal activity however she felt the programme helped to open her eyes about her previous convictions:

It's [programme] made me open my eyes up and think, well I'm 39 now, I need to calm down. Well as [the] judge said to me I don't want to see you again or you will get locked up.

Maggie talked about her struggle with temper and often physically lashed out at her partner. Such incidents resulted in her getting in trouble with the police and the criminal justice system. She felt the programme was effective in helping her deal with her anger issues, something she had never had help with before.

... 'cause no-body really explained before how to deal with anger and stuff before. But the instructors and my key worker helped me with that. Some of the other girls helped too. Now I'm sort of saying to myself: stop! ... and think about it first and take myself totally away from the situation, go for a walk or something.

A significant proportion of the literature on female offending has identified relationships as the pathway into offending. For example, Dalziel (2009) discusses the negative attachments women form with dominant and often abusive partners. This is the case with Maggie who implied that she had formed a negative attachment with her partner in the past. This appears to have been the basis for her abusive relationship. However time away from the relationship and being taught how to cope with her temper appeared to have a significant impact on her life back home.

#### **4.2.4 Positive life changes- learning the skills to make life changes**

All of the women felt they had learned skills from the programme which they could use to address the problems in their lives. As discussed above, Maggie felt the programme helped to control her temper. Donna realised she was capable and could deal with a problem if she set her mind to it:

I wouldn't say there were any challenges, but now I know I'm capable of it. I know I can do it, if I put my mind to it. I felt I wasn't good enough or what I had to say wasn't good enough. I thought, I thought about other people and put them first, but I realised when we were away that I didn't ... Just like with my boy, saying no to him, having time for myself. And knowing when to just say no to stuff and have time to myself.

Roslyn felt the programme taught her to be more assertive and not to isolate herself from others:

I had to learn to be assertive, which is something I've never been able to do. Also, confidence and not isolating myself. I just wanted to prove I could do it and I wanted to mix with people because I was isolated. I had a dog at home and that's what was holding me back. I wouldn't leave her with anybody. I enjoyed every minute of it [VT programme]. Its inspired me to see more.

She also felt that the programme helped her to understand her own issues and how to control her behaviour:

What helped me was I understand a lot of issues about myself now. I had a lot of problems with my neighbours round about me and when I had a drink and they said things to me, I used to get quite explosive ... but since I've been back they've been asking about my grandson now and they even sent me a Christmas card. I can deal with things now. I look into things now. I can think before I act and it's what I learned from the programme.

Agency worker Mandy also felt that the programme was effective as both the agency and VT were able to relate the skills an abilities needed for certain outdoor tasks to those that would be needed for their lives back home.

I think that is what [they] VT do: They make reference to what happened out there this afternoon. To how that relates to the skills and ability you need to live a life? The group stuff ... the working together. That's why we [agency and VT] link so well together because that's what we do like ... 'look at the determination you showed when coming up this hill'. You then have to feed that back into the life of the participants ... 'How come you did that at the waterfall?' Well because one guy underneath the waterfall said you could do it ... so somebody gave her the encouragement.

Overall, it appears the 'Next Steps' programme was effective in teaching the women how they could make positive life changes. The transfer of learning from the programme back to their lives at home also seems to have been effective as many of the women talked about how they had applied the learning in other situations. Although some authors are critical about the possible extent of transfer of learning (Brookes, 2003a, 2003b), there is some evidence to suggest that transfer of learning from different contexts, can take place among adult learners (Leberman, 2007). This research corroborates this, suggesting that in the right context, with the right support, this can occur.

#### **4.2.5 Positive life changes - Employment status**

Changes in employment status, volunteering, training or education since returning show the longer term impact of the programme. The women were in different stages of making such changes, for example, Roslyn had taken positive steps towards getting herself fit to work again and also in thinking about what kind of work she might do.

I will be looking for work and I've been for an assessment and I've told I'm fit it's just what I'm going to do now. I've done nursing before but my disclosure would hold me back now. I don't know what I'm going to do but if I could get volunteering then some kind of work from that. I've got two wee grandsons so that's keeping me busy too.

Donna had clearly made positive changes in her life by finding and regularly undertaking volunteer work:

I've got voluntary work just down the road as a receptionist. I was going to the classes and me and one of the workers told me there was voluntary work and so I gave it a go. I like it. I still don't feel comfortable answering the phones yet.

For Maggie, there didn't appear to be positive changes in her employment status although she did say she wanted to find a job in the housekeeping and cleaning

industry. She saw working as a good way to occupy her time, to give her and her partner space from each other.

I want to get a job and settle down with my man and that. I need time to myself. I need something to occupy my time.

She also felt that the confidence she gained from the programme helped her with job interviews:

Because I've got more confidence now, I can do more [job] interviews.

Thus the data indicates that the women made positive live changes following the 'Next Steps' programme.

## 5.0 Conclusions

The findings of this report illustrate a relatively positive impact of VT's 'Next Steps' programme on a purposefully selected sample of women who have been involved in the criminal justice system. Firstly, there was a reported increase in participants' confidence, sense of belonging and identity. In addition, for some participants, the rehabilitation process furthered an appreciation of more healthy lifestyles, including the pro-active pursuit of outdoor activities.

The agency staff also felt that the programme was effective in helping the women to reach a more positive sense of self. They confirmed the participants' reported increase in confidence. In addition, being part of a group was seen as an important factor for enhancing participants' personal growth.

Despite criticisms in the literature about the 'therapeutic effectiveness' of OE programmes (Taylor *et al.*, 1999; Brookes, 2003a; Brookes 2003b), this research has demonstrated that OE programme can have a positive impact on individuals' lives (see Leberman, 2007; Home Office, 2007). The women in this research found the female-only outdoor environment to be instrumental for in-depth contemplation about the complex issues surrounding their complex lives at home. This report has also shown evidence of positive life changes the women have made since returning home from the programme; including abstaining from alcohol; desisting crime and taking up (or trying to find) volunteer or paid work.

Although, it is generally acknowledged that physical activities in the outdoors do not by themselves reduce offending - rather the approach, environment and activities together can bring about positive changes in individuals. This was evident in both the programme participants and referral agents' data. Along with the programme approach, the literature indicates that the relationship between the staff and the participants is also extremely important for promoting personal development (Peel, 2003). In fact Peel (2003) stipulates that no matter how well a course is designed; if a productive, comfortable and empathetic *rapport* cannot be established the processes will not succeed. Similarly, the Scottish Executive (2005) suggest that "little can be achieved within any method of intervention

unless practitioners establish the right kinds of relationships with offenders” (p. 34).

In a similar vein, the data has given some insight into how and why the programme was effective for these women. Firstly, it is evident the establishment of relationships both before and on the programme, in addition to the programme content, were vital in facilitating positive life changes. Building relationships with others helped the women to develop their communication and interpersonal skills, re-discover their identity and to feel a sense of belonging. This was due to the effectiveness of the ‘person-centred approach’, the instructors and being in the outdoors. The challenging activities and the team/trust building components of the programme were also key in helping the women make these changes as they realised they could apply what they did in the outdoors to life at home. Thus, the relationships build in combination with the outdoor programme were also effective components for positive life changes.

Overall, this research supports VT’s ‘Next Steps’ programme approach to be in accord with findings from the literature suggesting that course content, approach, environment and instructor-participant relationships are important elements of effective OE programmes (Lebermann, 2007; Scottish Executive, 2005).

### **5.1 Limitations**

Although this research provides a unique interpretation of womens’ experiences (Seng, 1998; Leberman, 2007) it is acknowledged that it reflects the views and experiences of a small sample in Scotland. Although there were generally positive outcomes and experiences from the women who participated in the research, it should be noted that the remainder of the women who did not take part in the research may have had other experiences.

In addition, this evaluation was rather limited, in terms of time, participants, data collection and recourses available. Based on these barriers, it was not possible to speak to the VT practitioners delivering the programme. Therefore the results do not explore the content of the programme in any depth. This is by no means a comprehensive evaluation of the ‘Next Steps’ programme, rather it shows a

representative sample of participants' experiences of the programme and the impact it had on their lives.

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