

The WEA Women in the Highlands (WITH) Project was devised in May/June 2017 and began on July 1st 2017. The project was funded by Impact Funding Partners under the Promoting Equality and Cohesion Fund outcome “*people and communities are supported to participate in and engage with services and civic society; their contribution is recognised and community cohesion is increased*”. We have worked very hard to achieve this outcome and also to fulfil the Scottish Government National Equality Outcome: “*Women’s position in the economy and in employment is improved in the long term*”

Both outcomes were carefully considered and addressed at every stage of the project over the three years and the project has successfully achieved these outcomes by working hand in hand with the women, the tutors and our third sector partners to provide a quality service and a successful project. However, there were changes to the project over its lifetime, in particular to the project staff and the Outcomes initially agreed. We are now on the 3rd Project Organiser in the 3-year life of the project and we now have the 3 outcomes instead of the initial 4.

WITH is a grass roots project created to encourage, empower and develop women’s potential in the workplace, the community and at home. The project was designed to be flexible in order to allow the needs of women to direct the format and progress of the project. The ultimate project aim was to:

- Encourage and empower women and develop their personal and societal potential
- Support women in the Highlands to access development opportunities
- Create 4 self-sustaining women’s groups.

Our new Project Organiser joined us in July 2019 and has since then been busy organising new events and learning activities for the women which address each Outcome.

A variety of methods of engagement with women across the Highlands were provided. These ranged from conversation café drop-in style meetings to encourage informal group discussion to discover what was important to women; events at festivals such as Belladrum to raise awareness of the Project; residential weekends to promote a deeper level of engagement and conversation; a women’s choir set up to celebrate the centenary of the women’s vote; courses to develop the writing, art and creative skills of women as a means to promote discussion and find common themes; and a series of women’s group meetings.

It became clear over the life of the project that working creatively can have an empowering effect on women. The ethos of the WITH project is that if women can find a way to express themselves creatively, the confidence they gain can profoundly affect all areas of their lives. The creative activity can be a stepping-stone on their journey towards confidence and engagement.

Women's Wellbeing Works Course

Outcome 1 has been addressed by the creation of a course which will take us through to the end of the project period. The Women's Wellbeing Works Course (led by tutor Margot Henderson) takes place in the local community centre in Inverness. The course has run twice, once in late 2019 and again in the early part of 2020. The first course ran from 03/10/2019 – 28/11/2019 (8 sessions) and ran for 2 hours each week with 9 members. The second course runs from 23/01/2020 – 21/05/2020 (14 sessions) and currently has 16 members.

Throughout the life of the Project, Margot Henderson participated in events and residential courses, and delivered Mindfulness and Well-being sessions. These proved very popular, with women expressing real benefits from this engagement. One woman says that she has learned "To live in the present and be accepting of others. To be still and calm. [to acknowledge] the need to take care of [herself] as well as [her] daughter"

Further discussions with women confirmed continuing interest and prompted setting up a specific course. The reason we chose the face to face method of delivery was to be as flexible as possible, and to reach as wide a target group as we could. If women could come and meet with the tutor and each other, relationships and trust would develop more quickly – this connection was an essential part of the course and had a positive impact on the women. One participant said it was a "Lovely supportive inclusive teaching and a group of beautiful women sharing some precious time to grow together."

The smaller class sizes have allowed for one-to-one support and enabled the level of trust necessary for sharing amongst the women. While the main delivery method was face to face, the tutor also produced CDs of guided meditation to support learning outside the classroom. Through this medium, the women consider how they have the potential to influence well-being not just for themselves but also their families and in their wider communities. One participant said "I am practising some of the things with my husband who gets terrible migraines and is a poor sleeper." Another woman said "I have gained a great insight into mindfulness and I can pass this on to primary class groups and also use [with] my clients."

Due to the COVID -19 pandemic we are now offering the course on-line using Canvas for sharing materials and Zoom for face-to-face meetings.

Each session of the course offers the women a chance to participate in discussion, mindfulness and relaxation techniques. These include Qi-gong (an ancient Chinese exercise and healing technique that involves meditation, controlled breathing and movement exercises) and Tapping (a combination of Ancient Chinese Acupressure and Modern Psychology that works to physically alter your brain, energy system and body all at once) exercises. The latter practice consists of tapping with your fingertips on specific meridian points while talking through a wide range of emotions. The women are supported to engage as Margot carefully guides them through each technique at an appropriate pace while allowing time for reflection after each activity. The women have commented on the effectiveness of the techniques: "I have used Qi gong to centre and balance my energy. I feel the thoughts that Margot has passed

on have allowed me to continue on a nurturing mind-set. I have used mindfulness with some of my clients.”

This group has involved a cross-section of society and has included:

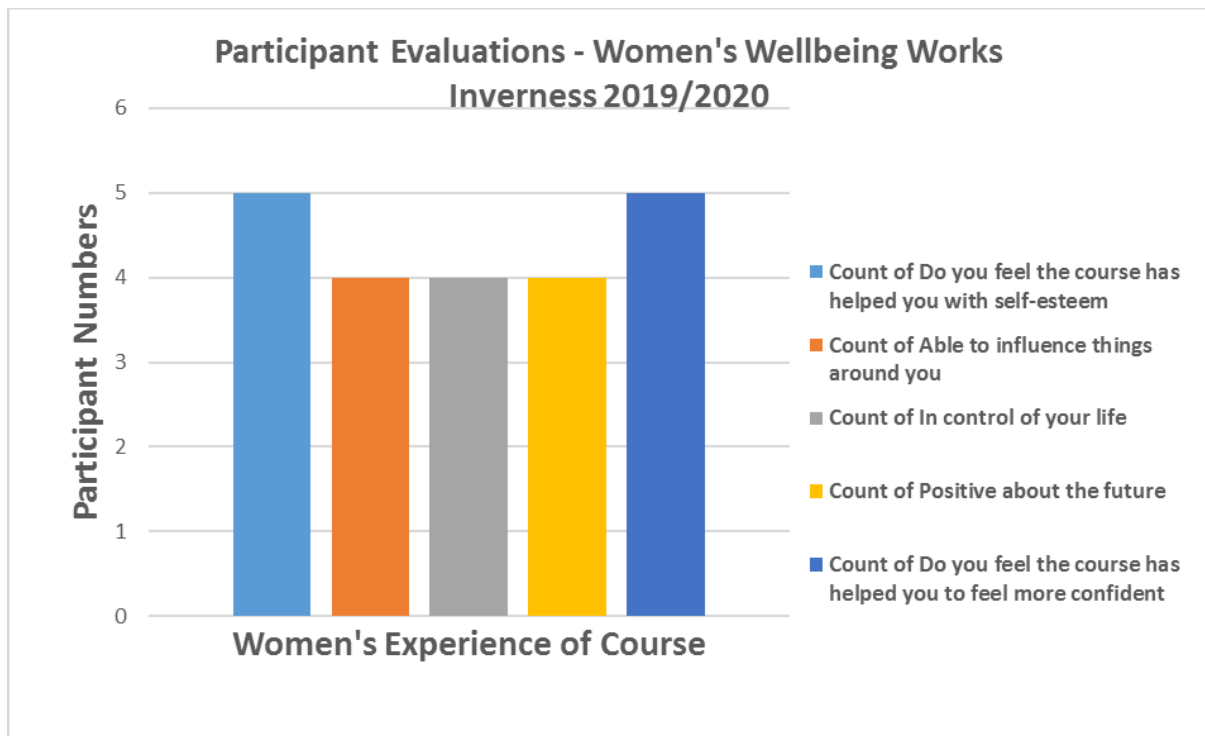
- Women with caring responsibilities for children under 16
- Retired women
- Self Employed women
- Employed women
- Women with other caring responsibilities

Some of the professions of the women are:

- Teacher
- Artist
- Homemaker
- Crofter
- Massage Therapist
- Nursing Health Visitor

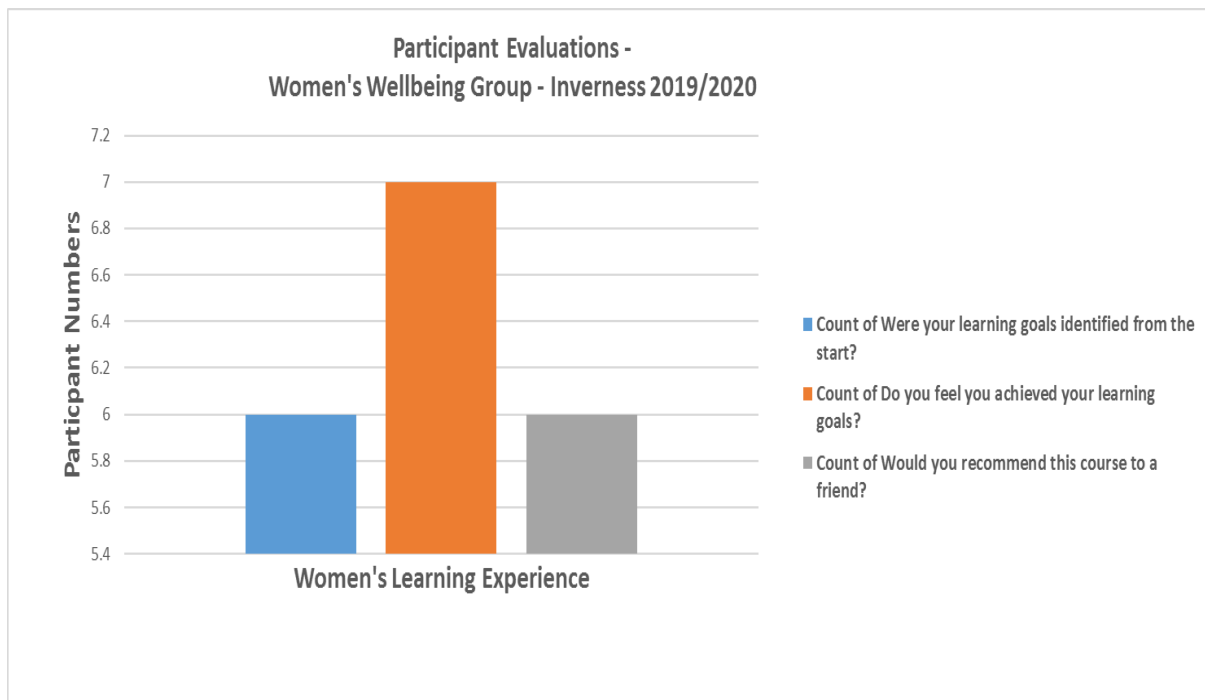
At the end of the first part of the course, participants were given evaluation forms for completion. These forms ask questions specifically related to the course and what it has offered them as a tool for changing their lives and promoting their further engagement. The information is gathered for statistical purposes and the data below shows the participants age groups and some evaluations gathered from their reflections on the coursework.

The first graph relates to a question that asks how the course made the women feel.



By offering the course we have given women an opportunity to connect, engage with and participate in their communities in a more resilient way. The women feel more in control of their lives, feel more confident and more able to influence things around them.

The chart below reflects feedback about learning goals. Question 1 asks “*Were your learning goals identified from the start?*”? Question 2 asks “*Do you feel you achieved your learning goals?*” And finally Question 3 asks “*Would you recommend the course to a friend?*”



Finally, we ask learners to “*Please tell us what being a learner on this course has meant to you*” and “*Are there any experiences you had on the course you would like to tell us about?*” Women have commented on how the course has had an impact on themselves, their families and their communities. We are not yet able to include information for the second course as it hasn’t been completed yet.

- “*It would be helpful to expand our knowledge/confidence and possibly each take a turn at conducting a session to give us the practice of running a group*”
- “*I am regularly taking moments to sit and relax and I am also trying to help my husband, teenage girls, sister and mum to try and do likewise*”

We had planned to have our Annual Conference in May this year and the tutor had intended to hold a workshop for participants. In the current situation with COVID-19 we have now abandoned that plan for this year but hope to hold a conference or gatherings of some sort again in 2021.

We have used digital media to provide evidence of the work of the group. The following link will give you access to the case studies and class exercises:

[Women's Wellbeing Group](#)

The women on this course have already expressed an interest in continuing the coursework and developing further. Two women have discussed that they would be interested in starting and facilitating a similar group in their home towns. From the very positive feedback we continue to receive from women on this course, we anticipate that it could prove a popular and beneficial way to engage with women elsewhere. We would anticipate that this type of course could be held in many other areas of the Highlands, it would reach women who have not had access to this type of learning and help them engage, develop and participate in their communities too. We're actively looking into developing this course online.

Outcome 2

Q1 & 2 - What you actually did and the difference you have made (1 July 2019-30 June 2020) – 3500 words

Outcome 2 - has been addressed by the creation of a course which will take us through to the end of the project period. The Nairn Out Loud Course (led by tutors Mairi Sutherland & Morag Smith) takes place in the local community centre in Nairn. The course has run twice. The first course 01/10/19 - 26/11/19 (8 sessions) had 7 members. The second course runs from 14/01/20 - 19/05/20 and has 5 members (but another 2 are in the process of joining). Both courses ran on a 2 hour slot from 10.00am until 12 noon.

Each session of the course offers the women a chance to learn through creative writing, art and discussion in an informal environment. The women have an opportunity to discuss together what is important to them and their community while focusing on their potential as women to make things happen. The women are supported by the tutors to produce written work and art for themselves and their community.

We chose to deliver a creative arts-based course as previous events (conversation cafes, residential weekends and writing courses) had shown that these courses are popular with our learners. Tutors find that with creativity as the medium women are open to exploring their ideas. One woman said “I joined the group to make creative connections but engaging as part of a group in a small tribal way has been super and learning about our community and visiting the museum has been an education.”

Women are not only enjoy working together, but the opportunity to meet and to try new things has had a huge impact on their confidence and motivation. As one woman told us “The whole thing has been amazing. I suffer with mental health issues and I struggled so badly at the start but the groups have been fantastic at bringing me out of myself and I have come so far in my personal development. I have now been doing some studying and there is funding available out there and I hope to access it for our Bard in the Bog project.”

Additionally, women continued to express an interest in working together creatively. We wanted to offer a course which would engage women, support them to access development opportunities, improve their confidence and further their societal potential. One woman told us “I love the collaboration of the group and how one idea just grows with the input from the others. I adore the witch theme [project] and would love to take it forward for the conference.”

This group have been busy and are in constant development. The group started by women doing mind-maps of what interested them personally with regards to their home town and what they wanted to try to achieve. Some examples of their wider interests are

- painting murals on unused council buildings to improve the visual appearance of the centre of town,

- approaching the council to have a water fountain installed for public access,
- promoting beach clearance and additional recycling points and
- encouraging more visual art in the town such as poetry on public spaces.

As the initial meetings produced a huge variety of ideas and aspirations, through further discussion, the group chose some short-term achievable ideas to focus on. At the time of writing, the women were looking at the history of women's equality as well as raising their voices as women in the present. The topic they initially identified was

“The women of Fishertown who played a vital role in the herring industry. Their contributions were essential and equally as important as the men's, however the idea of women's equality was unheard of then.”

As they researched this topic through visits to the Highland Archive and local libraries, they discovered this was very much a gender issue. They learned about strong local women, the wives of fishermen, whose contribution to society went unrecognised and whose voices were largely unheard. A large portion of their work over the last year has been around this theme and the women have been fully engaged. As one participant said “The course was excellent at bringing us together to work on the history and hardship of the women of Nairn, particularly in Fishertown through art, writing and research.”

Evidence of some of their other personal and societal interests over the last year of the project are:

- Creation of a diary which shows the development and journey of the group. The journals shows where the group would like to take the project next, but they also hoped to present it to the Annual Conference in May
- They will now provide 2 submissions of their work to Nairn Museum where it will be part of the Strong Women Exhibition
- One of the members wishes to create the Bard in the Bog in Nairn and invite other people to contribute poetry for the project which aims to increase public access to poetry
- Investigations are being carried out locally using Nairn Library and Museum archives into the history of a witch who lived in Auldearn - an example of a woman who was, through ignorance and stigma, marginalised from society.
- Presentation of a written piece to the Annual Conference (in May and in Nairn) about the Witch of Auldearn (Isobel Gowdie) which will include visual displays
- Possible creation of a calendar on the witch theme to be sold at the conference to raise funds for the group going forward
- Contacting the council about getting a water fountain on the high street in Nairn

This group has involved a cross-section of society and has included:

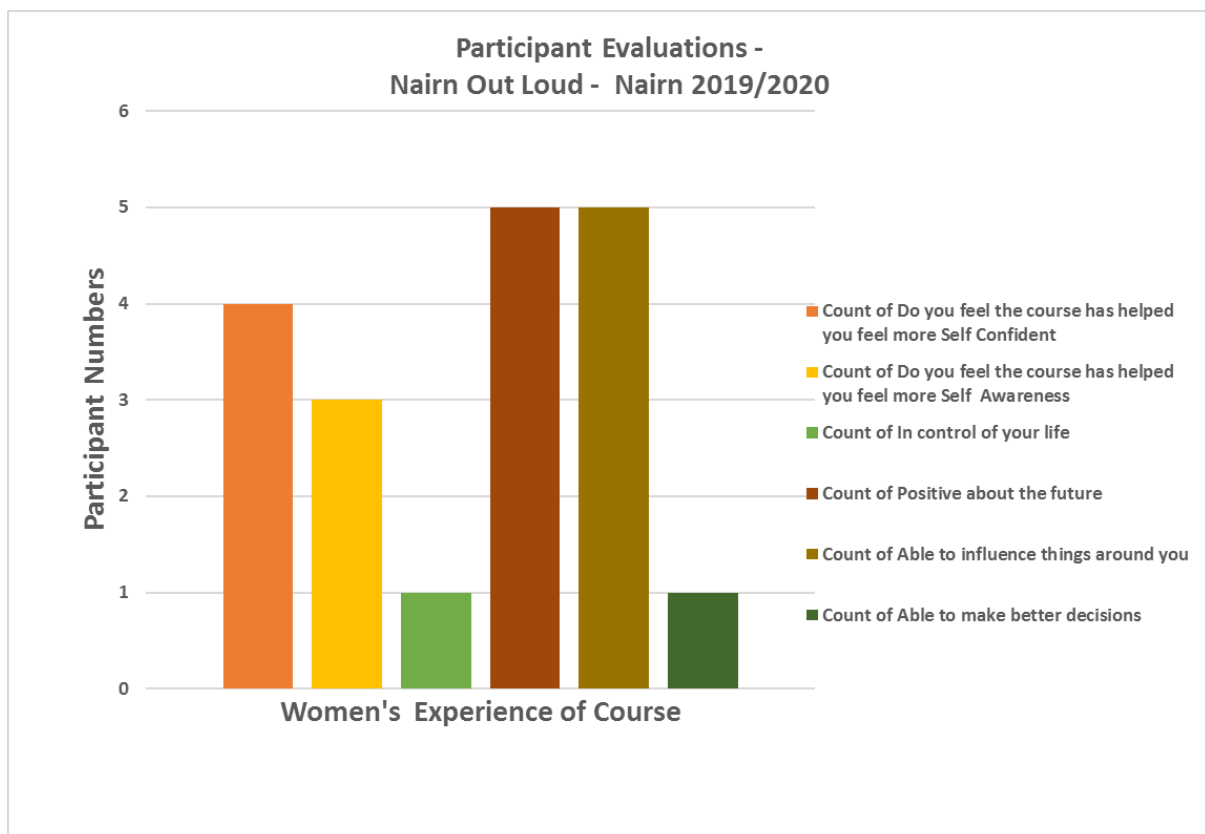
- Women with caring responsibilities for children under 16
- Retired women
- Self Employed women
- Employed women

- Women with other caring responsibilities
- Disabled women

Some of the professions of the women in this group are:

- Social Worker
- Reiki Master/Teacher
- Yoga Teacher
- Counsellor
- Artist

At the end of the first part of the course women were given evaluation forms for completion. These forms ask what the course has offered the women and asks them to reflect on how it has helped develop their personal and societal potential. Please note that we are unable to provide the evaluations from the second course as it is currently running. The first graph relates to how the course has made the women feel.



During this course, the women have not just developed personally but have developed as a group and are looking forward to going on to achieve more. They are more involved in society locally e.g. they are in discussion with the local museum about a joint project and an exhibition of their work on Fishertown.

- *“The course has been an amazing opportunity to work on something very different from my Master’s degree. The chance to do something worthwhile but be creative has been enlightening”*

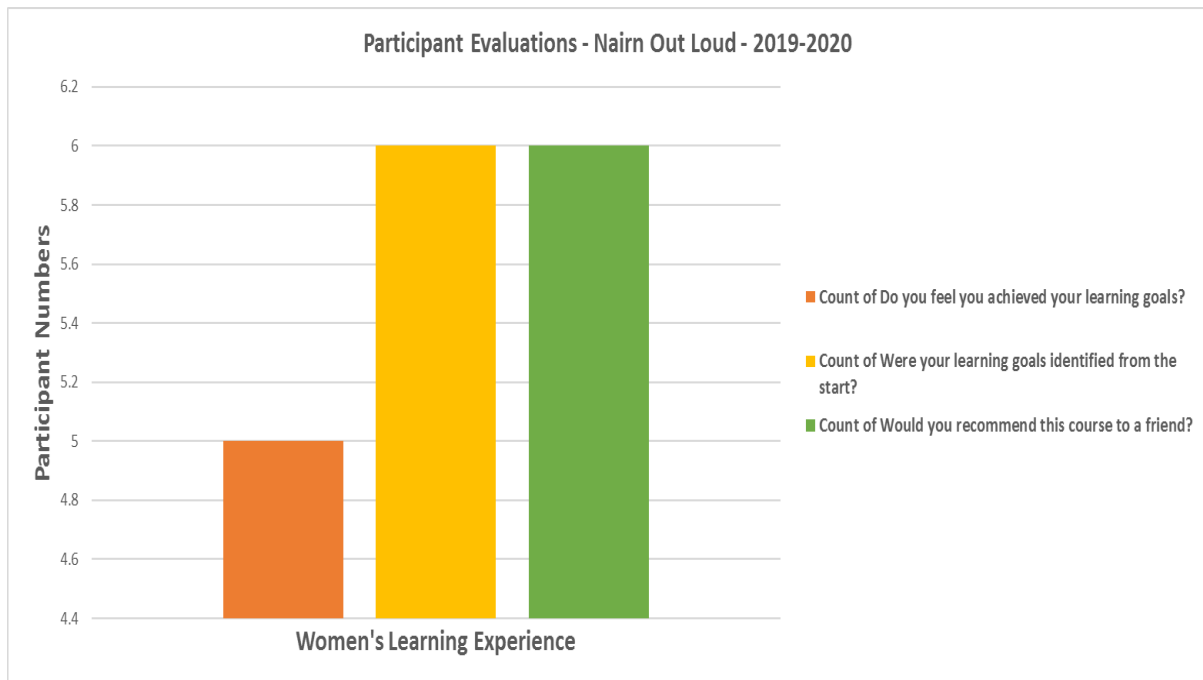
- *“The inspiration in this group is wonderful. I am an alternative practitioner and I now want to share this gift with others, I am not interested in making money I just want to give back to our community and volunteer my services to those who need”*
- *“The course has been an amazing opportunity to work together on such an empowering project and share knowledge with such a wonderful group of women. Their ideas, skills, experience and determination have made our work successful.”*

The women participating in this project have benefited from access to development opportunities which will further their personal and societal potential. The women also have plans for sustainability and self-government – one of the group is exploring new funding avenues, others are discussing what roles they will lead on going forward. This is a small group of women, but it has achieved a lot and they still have many things they wish to do. The smaller size of the group has promoted engagement of all the women, as all voices and ideas can be heard and there is time for all opinions. All of the women joined the group with ideas of what they were interested in already in mind and this meant they were able to make a positive start early on. We anticipate hearing more from the group in the future.

The Annual Conference would have taken place in May in Nairn and the group had intended to present a written piece to the conference about the Witch of Auldearn (Isobel Gowdie). The women had also sourced a mannequin which they intended to dress as a witch and bring along to the conference. They would also have discussed what their group has achieved and what they hoped to do going forward. COVID -19 has meant the cancellation of the conference for 2020.

The women on this course have already expressed an interest in continuing to learn with WEA and in developing further as a group. Some are meeting outside of normal sessions to discuss how they progress as a self-governing unit.

This group of women have been very engaged and we anticipate more work with them going forward.



One of the women from the group wrote a poem surrounding the theme of witches and the persecution of women who were suspected of being a witch. Through discussions the women established that the persecution of witches was a gender issue. Most people accused of being a witch were women, reflecting a targeting of women as the most vulnerable and powerless.

The link below takes you to a poem recital and the planning of the group, some of the artwork of the group and some case studies from the women:

[Nairn Out Loud - Case Studies](#)

Given the enthusiasm of the Nairn group and their community involvement we would hope that a course of this type would be successful elsewhere. The group has a broad and open format to invite women to discover more about their local towns and women’s history, and asks participants to consider what they as women want to change in their local communities. The topic would be relevant and interesting in more widespread areas of the Highlands and give other women the opportunity to develop and participate in their communities.

The Choir – This successful group formed in 2018 to celebrate the centenary of (some) women gaining the vote. There were a series of evening classes led by a choir leader and a highly successful Concert in Strathpeffer, a Highland town. The women involved were incredibly positive about their experience. One told us “It has been a fantastic experience from beginning to end. Feel proud to be part of it...To participate in the finale performance at Strathpeffer Pavilion was superb. The course surpassed my expectations.” Following this success and the obvious benefits to the individual women of meeting together to sing, the WEA WITH project offered the Women’s choir a series of sessions with a local singing tutor through the following year. They are still working together.

The group consists of women who range in age from thirties to sixties led by Choir Leader Cath King. We have continued to recruit to the choir, and the flyer makes it clear that the Choir is open to all and no singing experience is necessary promoting involvement from women with a range of abilities. The inclusive nature of the choir has been an important part of engaging with women. One woman told us “The choir has helped me to form relationships with other women without the feeling of walking into a group and not feeling a sense of belonging.” The women have been naturally supportive of one another and the group they’ve created has had a huge impact on the women who have joined. “The Choir has meant a lot to me, being with a group of lovely supportive women and singing songs which are often empowering is a tonic for retired widow living on her own. I hope we keep going in the future.” Women come and go as their time permits.

One of the events the group took part in was the National Recovery Walk in Inverness in July last year. The choir initially set themselves up outside the Cathedral in Inverness where they offered information on joining the group (it currently has 28 members) and demonstrated the joy of singing. The WEA WITH choir worked with two other choirs: Highland Alcohol & Drugs Partnership funded “Alive and Singing: for wellbeing and recovery group” and Parkinson’s UK “Singing Hearts.” They opened the Recovery Walk event with *When You Were Born You Cried* and then sang *Love Call Me Home* by Peggy Seeger, and *This Love Will Carry* by Dougie Maclean. They rounded off the event with a rousing performance of *Lean on Me* by Bill Withers. Collaborating with and supporting the other groups was important, contributing to a ceremony that was clearly very emotionally important to attendees and had an impact on all the choir members. One woman told us “It was very empowering (I am going to be) playing a more active community role.”

The walk was attended by thousands – here is the official [Recovery Walk Scotland video](#)

A photo showing the choir at the Recovery Walk was published in the Inverness Courier newspaper on 24th September 2019 and a link to the photo is provided here:

[Choir Recovery Walk](#)

The choir consist of a group women who are:

- Women with caring responsibilities for children under 16
- Retired women
- Self Employed women
- Employed women
- Women with other caring responsibilities
- Registered Disabled (but doing volunteer work)

Some of the professions of the women are:

- Senior Research Fellow
- Driving Instructor
- Youth Worker
- Pilates Teacher
- HR Manager

- Sustainable Travel Development Officer
- Manager of a Drug & Alcohol Unit
- Director of a Prison Project
- Social Worker

The choir also took part in the “Word on the Street” Festival in Dingwall last year. As an awareness raising exercise they walked to different areas of Dingwall and sang around 10 songs. There was an evening performance and the choir sang an arrangement of songs they had chosen through a group exercise. They opened the concert with *Love Call Me Home* and then did a Bowie/Queen Mash Up of songs. They closed the concert with *Rolling in the Deep* by Adele, *Times Like These* by the Foo Fighters and *Lean on Me* by Bill Withers. Click here for a link to [the Evening Performance](#).

We had excellent feedback from the organisers of the event “[WEA WITH Choir] presence on the Thursday afternoon really helped raise awareness of the event and it was noticed that your singing transformed people’s faces when hearing you” Further feedback was that participants felt “we were the highlight of the finale and the audience loves us, they hoped there will be further opportunities for involvement.”

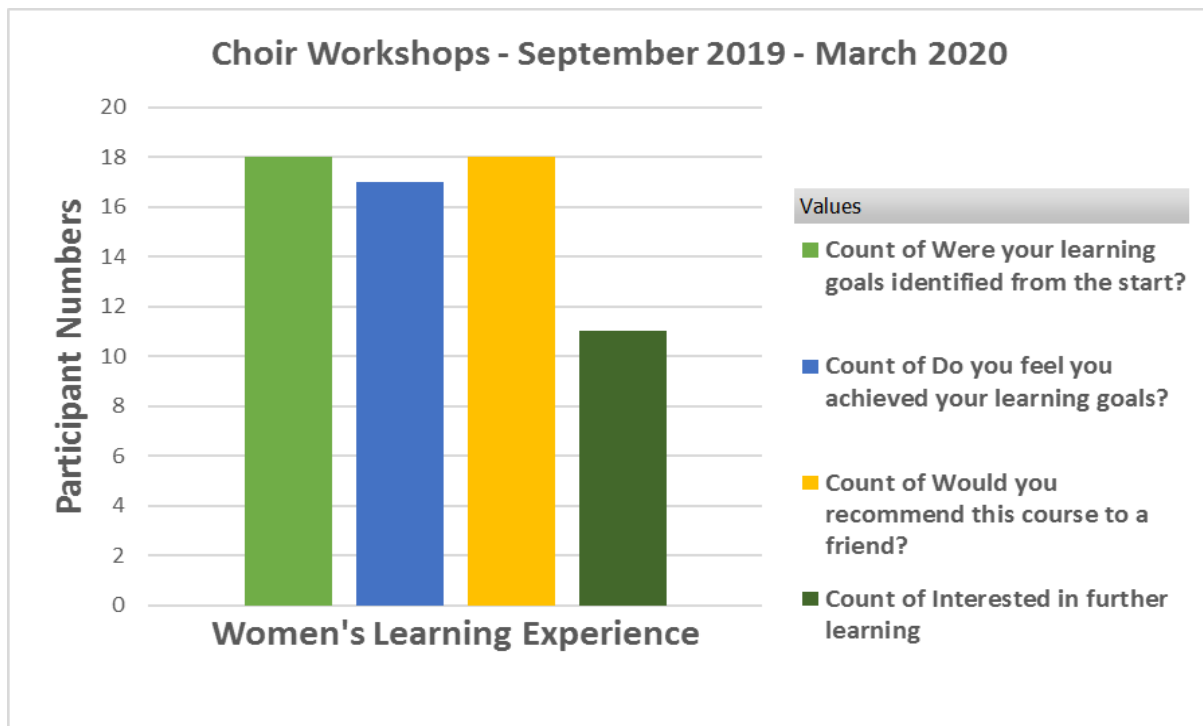
A link to the flyer for the event and other supporting evidence such as videos, photographs and a case study is provided here: [Choir - Case Studies](#)

The choir has made a huge difference to the lives of women in the Highlands. Many have expressed the personal benefits of simply meeting together and singing as a source of support and strength, a time that is just for them away from the pressures of daily life. Below are some of the comments from the women involved:

- *“Being part of the choir has been exactly what I hoped for. Being part of a backing choir for an experienced band was a different experience for me and the songs we performed were well chosen for the occasions”*
- *“Great to see you both the other days, so excited with my new job but also looking forward to potentially what is next for “the choir” thank you both so much for the opportunity, I firmly believe the writing, singing, and leadership workshops I have done have been significant in giving me my confidence back in being me”*

The choir has become a wonderful strong group of women who gather together to sing but also to connect, engage and share with their own communities. Almost all of their work over the year has been at community events and we anticipate this will continue. The women supported the opening event of a shop owned by one of the choir members in their local town of Strathpeffer. The Choir had a planning meeting in August 2019, where they began to discuss their potential for becoming self-governed and self-sustaining. It was clear that there is a strong desire to continue, and there was a focus on deciding their identity and the need for members to undertake some specific roles. They are starting to identify as a feminist/community choir. There was a lengthy discussion on their potential to contribute to more community events in the Highlands.

The chart below illustrates the women's evaluation of the workshops they attended.



The choir are now planning for the coming year and the activities they will take part in. Initial discussions are under way with one of the lead singers of The Bevvv Sisters - one of the support acts at the centenary concert. The singer led a workshop in February that started with an hour of discussion and advice from the lead singer, Heather, about becoming a self-sustaining and self-governed group. The choir members commented that they found this discussion very relevant and informative. The WEA WITH choir hopes to support other new singing groups get established in other areas and possibly work on a joint project if possible. They also discussed the potential for holding fund raising events for their Choir.

Outcome 3 - Q1 & 2 – What you actually did and difference made (1 July 2019 – 30 June 2020) – 3500 words allowed

The aim for Outcome 3 was to establish and support 4 self-governing and self-sustaining women's groups in the Highlands. We have worked hard to achieve as much as possible with this outcome and we have 2 groups making real progress towards this (Nairn Out Loud and The Choir) and 2 groups who are not quite ready to be unsupported (The Women's Well-being Group and The Writing for Purpose Group) but are making progress in that direction.

Our intention had been to have a woman from each group as part of the WEA WITH Highland Satellite Cluster Group (HI-SAT) of the Women's Equality Steering Group.

The project has identified someone from each group, and possibly more than one. We have begun to establish the HI-SAT group and the membership so far includes:

- Rosemary Mackinnon – Highland Council Equalities Officer
- Eleanor Adam – Scottish Trades Union Learning
- Catherine MacNeil – Wasps Creative Academy (also a member of the choir)
- Harriet Tay – Project Organiser

We hope to recruit more members from other organisations and to invite the four women from the WEA WITH groups. The group arranged to meet quarterly and the last meeting took place in the WEA offices on 6th February 2020 where we discussed

- planning for a new Women in The Highlands Project from July 2020,
- possible additional Funding Streams and
- Suggestions for Further Members
- development of the self-governing/self-sustaining groups going forward and how we will support them.

While the membership of HI-SAT had been discussed at previous meetings, it was decided to postpone progressing this item as it was felt at the February meeting there were more urgent priorities to address.

Women's Wellbeing Works Course

The women have now settled into a cohesive group but are not yet self-governing or self-sustaining. Initial conversations have taken place regarding this, but nothing is really defined yet. Many of the women participating in this course are improving their own wellbeing and have cascaded their learning to family members and friends as outlined above. They indicate in discussions they are keen that the group continues to develop, are aware that this will require their involvement, and they have stated that it is something they would like to think about at a later stage. Two members of the group have commented that they can see a possibility in the future of setting up a similar group in their local areas.

Writing for Purpose Group.

The group is running well and has held 2 courses to date. The first course (29/10/2019 – 03/12/2019) took place in the Spectrum Centre in Inverness and had 9 participants. The second course (21/01/20 – 19/05/20) was running with 13 women. Both courses brought women together each week for 2 hours to write more purposefully and to positively influence women's issues. The course looks at expressing the diversity of women's lived experiences in the Highlands. They are concentrating on using writing skills to help women gain a voice.

Unfortunately, the first tutor of the Writing for Purpose group left to explore new options. The new tutor (who came on board at the end of January) is establishing herself with the group and brings a different set of knowledge and experience, so course delivery has taken a slightly different direction. The group appears not yet ready to take the step to look at self-sustainability, or to shape the look of the group themselves. They still rely heavily on their facilitator.

However, they are aware that becoming self-sustaining is an aim of the Project and an expectation of the women who engage. The Tutor is hopeful of doing this as the group progresses but does not feel she can start talks with the women about this right now. Given that she is very new in post we can accept that and will monitor progress during the course. The project organiser has spoken to the group regarding self-governing/self-sustainability and two participants have discussed rolling out the group highland wide. One of the women told us “Rolling it out over the Highlands would be fantastic, and can be done with participants who would then be able to set up freestanding groups of their own where they support each other.” We will continue to support the group with this goal.

Unfortunately COVID -19 has taken a further toll on the project. During the lockdown period and while we were transferring many of our classes to the virtual learning environment the new tutor decided she did not wish to continue. We are looking for another tutor to lead a writing group, though we recognise that a third tutor in a short time may be a step too far for some of our current learners. Certainly, Writing for Purpose is a topic that is engaging for women and we look to continue with it.

Nairn Out Loud

The women have now settled into a cohesive group but are not yet self-governing or self-sustaining. However, they:

- Have planned how they will move forward independently
- Have arranged meetings outside of their normal sessional meetings to progress their projects
- Have discussed what role each member will play in their future, discussing individual's strengths, talents and experience and women who want to lead on a particular task.
- Have appointed someone to explore new funding sources for the group
- Have explored joint working with other groups e.g. Nairn Book & Art Festival and considering what contributions they can make together to assist another local group who might be struggling with aspects of a project

Discussions regarding self-sustainability with the Project Organiser will naturally continue and it is anticipated that they will be independent within the lifespan of the project.

The Choir

We anticipate that the choir will move from full support (tutor paid by WITH, sessions are time-tabled and room is booked and paid for by WITH) to a more light-touch approach over the course of 2020. We are looking for women in the group to take over the administration before the end of the project lifetime. One choir member is part of the HI-SAT Group and has been very active in organising.

The Choir is the group is the furthest ahead regarding self-sustainability and self-government. There are several women who have an interest in taking an active lead in moving the group forward and they are already planning how they can manage without our financial assistance and support. This group has several natural leaders

who will be able to ensure the group continues and they have serious ideas about how they will continue and are volunteering to take on specific roles going forward. They are currently thinking about:

- Charging members a small fee each week to raise funds – something around the £2.00
- Holding awareness-raising and fund-raising events locally
- Using the funds raised from membership to cover the cost of rental of the local village halls for rehearsals
- Seeking cheaper alternative accommodation for Choir practice sessions
- Planning further working projects with other local groups and bands
- Possibly travelling to other areas and events to share their singing

This group will finish the year strong and had intended to perform at the Annual Conference in Nairn in May 2020. Additionally, they had intended to speak to the conference about impact the choir has had on their lives, and finish with a singing workshop to encourage new members. However due to the current pandemic situation this will no longer be possible but we have not abandoned all hope of a conference and may hold it in 2021 instead.

Conclusion

We are finishing our project with one last course. One of our third sector partner organisations (The Social Enterprise Academy) has delivered a training course in Courageous Conversations for all the current Project groups and all women who have previously engaged with the Project. Participants were encouraged to hone communication skills beneficial for engaging with individuals and agencies that the groups might need to contact going forward. The intention was that renewed confidence, and new strategies would equip WEA WITH women with the skills they need to make their voices heard.

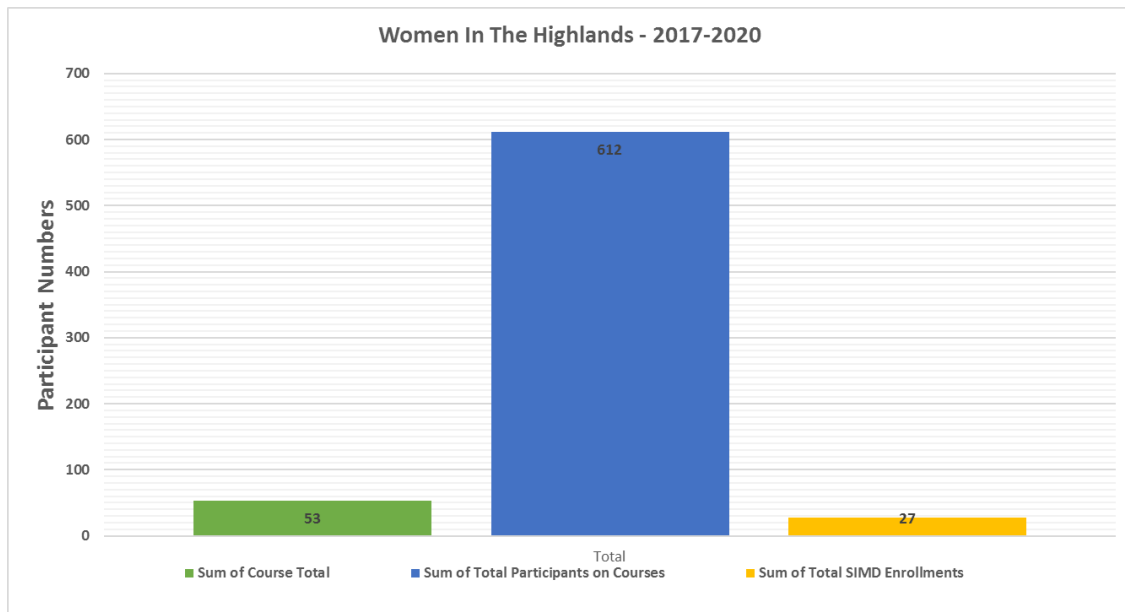
The course includes self-awareness and how to promote a good conversation/or lead a difficult conversation to a successful outcome for all parties. Unfortunately, initial uptake from the previous course participants was poorer than we expected, possibly because it is a full day course over 3 Fridays in February and March. We continued to promote the opportunity, and to encourage women to participate, and the number of participants in the end was fifteen.

We had hoped to have all 4 groups self-governing/self-sustaining by project end and are disappointed that this has not happened. However, WEA WITH has done a lot of learning, and we go forward from here feeling more ready for the challenges ahead and certainly more able to identify issues at the earlier stages of a new project.

One of the main lessons learned was that it takes considerable time for women to be willing to take on active roles within a group or project. Other commitments, such as work, caring responsibilities and other roles have prevented women from taking on more engagement and responsibility within the Project. Levels of confidence also play a significant part in a women's event or group. Women may have low levels of self-confidence when they first join and need to be supported to feel connected and

accepted. Women in our projects prove willing to take on more responsibility as feelings of inclusion and trust develop.

We have gathered data regarding the numbers of courses we held and the participants in our project. A chart below shows the number of people we have engaged with over the project lifetime.



We are eternally grateful for the ongoing support we have had from the Scottish Government and the Impact Funding Partners over the course of the project. Without their input, guidance and support (especially when we were without a project organiser) it would have been difficult to make the project the success that it has been. We need to aim higher, do more, and travel further to engage and encourage more women to participate. The Project has demonstrated the wide ranging benefits of the engagement we have carried out so far. It is clear that there is much more to be done in the coming years if we are to connect with and engage with women all over the Highlands of Scotland.

Section 2

Q1 – Has the grant enabled your organisation to maintain and develop connections, networks or partnerships? – 500 words

Involving other public organisations, third sector organisations and charities was a vital part of delivering our programme and building expertise. The partners that we chose to work with brought expertise, new ideas, techniques and a different way of looking at things which was immensely helpful. We have established new working

relationships and collaborated with the following organisations over the lifetime of the project:

- Cromarty Arts Trust - The residential Be a Brave Soul Course was in collaboration with the Cromarty Arts Trust. The course brought 16 women together to be inspired and stimulate their thinking on who they are and what they want; what their truth is and where they need to speak out; how they are brave in engaging and participating in their communities and in wider society.
- Highland Alcohol & Drugs Partnership - A collaboration with the Choir as previously mentioned in Outcome 2
- Parkinson's UK - A collaboration with the Choir as previously mentioned in Outcome 2
- Dingwall Arts Performance and Dingwall Players – A collaboration as part of the Word on the Street Festival – Outcome 2
- RASASH Highland – discussions were held with staff but for several reasons (confidentiality, vulnerability, etc.) it was felt that what we were offering was not suitable for their participants at this stage, they hoped to be able to work with us again. They were happy to advertise any of our courses and look forward to working with us at some point in the future.

Other organisations that we had already established relationships with but who also contributed to the project via classroom activities, project input, accommodation, tutors, courses etc. are:

- Social Enterprise Academy
- Inverness Women's Aid
- Highland Multicultural Friends
- Moniak Mhor – Scotland's Creative Writing Centre -
- Dounreay Women's Group
- Highland Council Equalities Officers
- Women of the World Conference
- STUC
- Glasgow Women's Library

One of our existing partner organisations was the Glasgow Women's Library (GWL) who assisted us with some of the course work (Women Writing the Landscape) at some of our residential events. We also had a 3-way partnership with GWL, The Travelling Gallery and ourselves. Evidence of some of our other work with them is shown in a newspaper article which can be seen found here:

[Caithness Courier - 31 Oct 2018](#)

Another of our existing partners is the Social Enterprise Academy (SEA) who previously ran the Women into Leadership Course in Skye for us. Additionally, they ran the Courageous Conversations Course in February and March in Inverness.

Partnership work is essential in an area as vast as Highland. Relationships with all the above organisations were vital to the success of our project. We were able to offer more coursework and learning opportunities to the women. The organisations we choose offered skills we did not have in house and could not easily access. Developing these networks has extended our own knowledge base of organisations and what they do, but also provided a wonderful opportunity to work with the organisations again in the future.

Q2 – Have there been any significant challenges or changes – 500 words

The WITH project have had three Project Organisers (PO) over the project, and two Project Co-ordinators. The change in staff has meant a loss of continuity and momentum as each new member of staff takes time to learn about the project and then decide on priorities and direction. Our first PO left just 2 months into the new project and we had a 4-month gap before appointing a replacement. The WEA Area Education Manager for Highland maintained delivery during the transition period, but there was an obvious loss of momentum and direction. The second PO left for a full time post after 18 months. The latest PO started in July 2019 and has remained with and supported the project through the current phase of delivery.

WEA Highland would carefully consider staffing in the future. The initial PO post was created by, and suited, the person in post at the time of the award. One very capable candidate for replacement was discouraged because the post was only 0.8fte. We're fortunate to have recruited someone who is happy with the current hours, but it's likely that a full time post would be more attractive.

Other challenges have included:

- Learning lessons around how Highland women engage and lead. Women often express self-confidence and self-esteem issues as well as a wish to participate in the project. Confidence remains a challenge to participation and informs the specific ways we engage with women
- Engaging women from a variety of backgrounds, work experience and education levels and finding ways for them to connect and work together
- Tutors and Project Organiser dedicating extra time and patience to getting women involved. No natural leaders stepped forward from early events and courses. Women were willing and even eager to attend events, but less enthusiastic about organising. We had to incorporate long run-in times to achieve productive work, both individually and in groups. While the Women's Choir are progressing, the other women's groups are taking more time and effort. Therefore, 4 groups are established but not are yet ready to be completely self-governing or self-sustaining.
- Moving office twice and setting up again. While we're delighted to be in a modern office that is fit for purpose, it took some time to get here. And now, to get here – working from home under lockdown.
- Holding courses in rural areas with transportation issues for women
- Holding courses in school holidays when some women could not participate due to child-care issues.

Some of the issues reported on the WITH project are Highland wide. Geography and rural transportation in particular are, and will always be an issue for us. E.g. one woman wanted to participate in the Eigg residential course but couldn't because of a journey that involved travel from Jura to the mainland then to Eigg from the mainland! This was prohibitive both in time and expense.

Q3 – What have you learned and what have you changed as a result of this learning – 500 words

We have learned that having the right staff on board is vital. We now have a Project Organiser who is committed to the project and has a knack for engaging and encouraging women. Our Project Co-ordinator has experience of Scottish Government Funding and EU funding.

We have a small but committed group of tutors and repeat participants in the project to help us envisage how to engage and motivate women. We have learned that women in the Highlands need time to commit themselves, and our outcomes need to reflect that long lead-in.

Our engagement with women over three years using a wide range of events from conversation cafes, residential weekends, creative writing events, and courses has shown that there are important common themes across all age groups and backgrounds, and while they are often seen as barriers, they can form bridges. A sense of isolation and a need for opportunities to meet with other women will inform a new WITH Project.

We have developed more engagement techniques for those women who are reluctant at the beginning of a course. We have learned that deeper participation by women takes time. We introduce more ice-breakers, getting to know you techniques right at the start. We do not anticipate this issue to continue to the same extent, partly due to the wealth of experience we have gained in three years of this Project.

Going forward we are committed to finding natural leaders when working with groups. We need to identify leadership skills early, nurture and progress these women if they are to go forward and do more in communities. We have learned that given the right environment, many women can develop skills they were initially unaware of. Group dynamics can be difficult and getting to know people can be challenging for some women. We continue using experienced Tutors who are knowledgeable of the Project and very skilled in assisting a group to settle and develop trust.

We have now arranged for our courses to be close to public transportation links even in rural locations. An example of this is running courses from the Spectrum Centre in Inverness which is next to the main bus station and train station making it easier for women with disabilities or transportation issues to attend. Covid-19 has provided us with opportunities for trialling online and distance provision that we hope will have a very positive outcome for participation.

We plan to schedule our courses at various times, so that women with caring responsibilities can still attend. We are also offering group meetings/events in the evening, enabling working women to participate, and of course expanding our online opportunities.

We have learned to be flexible and creative in the project. The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed us all to learn new things. The women themselves have come up with some good ideas (such as flag books and landscape of place map) which can be adapted and used online and we look forward to exploring these further.

Q4 – have there been any unanticipated positive or negative outcomes?

Our WITH project team have noticed a lack of young women (under 30) engaged in the project. We'd like to work with Youth workers and Youth projects in Highland too see if we can engage with younger women in future phases. We know we need to adapt to reach a younger target group and consider their barriers to engagement.

We'd like to have a more visible engagement with projects such as LGBT Highland, Thursday We Wear Black, and Pride. We want to enable as many groups as possible to have a voice on women's issues. Our next phase will look at how we can work in partnership with these organisations.

Despite the small number of women in the Nairn Women's group (ranging between 6 and 8 weekly), they have been very motivated, producing a wealth of work for each of their projects and have taken the initiative to meet independently several times. This indicates that the number of women attending a group is not as important as we had thought. What matters is that we pitch the event to promote curiosity to attend by inviting ideas an input about what matters to women. Once women attend we need to facilitate quality engagement and commitment.

An unanticipated positive has been the amazing journeys of some of the women. We expected women to feel stronger, more confident, more resilient and more able to contribute to their local communities and society. However, we had not anticipated how many women with multiple barriers (mental health issues, alcohol/drug dependency, isolation and loneliness) would participate and benefit from our work. These women obviously had longer and tougher journeys to get to where they are now. Our project was not aimed specifically at people with mental health issues, but we'd like to work with partners who can support us in this work. It has been a privilege and an amazing experience to watch the growth and development that has taken place with these women.

Case Study - Wellness and Mindfulness Project

We have chosen Carole from our Women's Wellbeing Group as our Case Study. Here is her story:

I came to be involved in this project, to some extent, by chance. I had become acquainted with our tutor Margot Henderson, some ten years earlier when she ran a creative writing course at the Maggie Centre; she subsequently offered to come to Orkney, where I then lived, and organise a similar introduction to creative writing for a group of people there, through the Clan organisation.

Margot was an inspiration; all of her encouragements leaned towards simply being kind towards yourself (and others) – in short, she introduced me to self-compassion, a concept I had truthfully never considered before, always confusing it with feeling sorry for oneself. A great part of the philosophy she applied to running a creative writing course forms the basis of her thinking on living a life where your well-being is essential, and the tools you need to achieve this are so simple and easily grasped that you wonder that we have not all worked it out for ourselves through our trials and tribulations as we live our lives.

When the course began, I thought myself accepting of the difficult things in my life. After our very first simple meditation, I realised where my thought had immediately taken me, and I recognised a huge aching sadness for the insolvable issues in my own life. It was a real surprise to me to discover that there were still more aspects of this issue that were crying out to be heard and acknowledged by me.

A large part of the course is about learning simple strategies for stepping back, strategies for calming oneself, strategies like using that kind non-judgemental voice, the compassionate voice that is more likely to use endearments than to issue harsh orders.

It is 'och now, don't be sad' rather than 'pull yourself together.'

We learn to *talk about and to note* the everyday things, however trivial, however laughable, however huge and insurmountable, that cause us to feel depleted by life; we learn to acknowledge also the everyday easily accessible things that bring simple joy, absorption, pleasure, and peace.

The course is aimed at helping us to form habits, good habits for living at peace with ourselves, which is also the basis for harmonious relationships with others. We learn about physical relaxation through gentle movement; we learn about meditation; we learn to listen to what everyone has to say; to learn to respond to, and to respond with kindness, gentleness, and compassion.

And because the course is set up with trust as a very basic premise, anything that is shared, and anything that happens, all of it remains within the group. In an incredibly short space of time, people who were strangers (with all their bristling, their self-protective outer shells) very quickly feel that they are in a trusting and safe environment, where it is alright to be honest, to be open, to be unguarded. No one is judging you.

Margot herself is a very skilful person, careful in her choice of words, careful to give directions too, so that the individuals retain their privacy – the sharing is not about the specifics of our lives, our problems: rather it is about learning new skills for coping, for diffusing, for living a better life.

I have often wished I had had access to this kind of philosophy, to these kinds of simple strategies, when I was younger, when my children were young, when I was dealing with hundreds of children each week, when I was dealing with scores of adults, all determined on their own desired outcomes, at the times in my life when I

had to reconcile myself to losing people I loved: when life seemed impossibly hard, as it is for all of us at times in our life.

How the project has affected me personally in my development

It has made me aware that I deserve, need, and thrive on self-compassion and kindness.

You cannot become more self-compassionate without being aware of how powerful compassion can be for others.

I have learnt to give myself *time* for peaceful pursuits, for absorbing pursuits, for reflection, for the things that make life rich for myself and the people around me.

I have always loved giving. I'm learning to enjoy being the recipient of other people's generosity.

Reflective thinking has made me avoid things which are a vexation to the spirit, and seek out things which are a balm.

We are taught many small ways to reconnect with ourselves, and these techniques are extremely useful and helpful in everyday life.

A few words from a song – “it's been a long time since my heart spoke to me” - used to resonate with me. Now I feel that even in the busyness of daily life, I have ways of stepping back and listening to myself.

There is an intimacy and an openness in our exchanges that allows an insight one might not normally be afforded. In this way you learn that the woman who struggles to express herself may have lost some degrees of her means of articulation; the strong looking woman who dresses powerfully may have had some of her once great confidence and authority eroded and shaken by illness taking control; the wonderful strong and gentle woman might be someone who finds it hard to make her voice heard; you marvel at the autistic woman who can find the (to her) difficult and unnatural outward show of compassion in the simple patting of another's arm something she can offer in kindness. This is a small insight into the complexities of people's lives that you can so much more easily apply, having seen it in this way. Compassion for our fellow man or woman is a huge and powerful glue, which creates community in its real sense where none would normally exist. There is a warmth of sisterhood, a commonality spanning generations, accepting our quirks and differences, and finding richness in our diversity.

Being lucky enough to have been a part of these two sessions has opened up a wonderful sense of spirituality in me, and a confidence that is something I can tap into, for comfort, for peace of mind, and for a kinder view of myself and the community I am part of.

Being part of the first group, observing how we slowly came together, came to trust and find kindness and acceptance in one another, and then, with the introduction of the second group, the changing dynamics were very interesting to observe. I felt as though the confidence we (the first group) had felt our way towards was very quickly picked up on by the new people, and like the second child in a family, they learned more quickly, because they were learning from us, taking their lead from us, as well as from Margot.

This bears out something very powerful I observed in my long career as an art teacher: initially I had felt I had to spread myself so thinly just to get round to every little person, giving individual help. However, when I stood back and observed, I realised I was watching children teaching one another, learning from one another, and learning more quickly than they might from me alone. Teaching adults I found the same thing happened. I think this is, in part, what happens when new people join a group that has learnt the ropes and rudiments of (in this case) being mindful of the things which can help us to achieve a sense of well-ness and of a life which deserves to be well lived.

Food for thought!

In summing up, the benefits of what I have learnt, and what other women have learnt are due entirely to the accumulated wisdom and knowledge of a lifetime given to contemplating the practices that form the basis for living life well and compassionately, the gentle voice of kindness and reason that comes from Margot Henderson.

She has taught us that practicing the techniques daily will in-bed the thinking that will support us and sustain us. It is so apparent that it does not stop with us, but that we, in our small ways, become exponents of the philosophy, and in this way the kindness, the mindfulness, reaches out to the people around us. It has been a life changing insight for me.

Consider the times in *my* life when I have indicated that I would have appreciated this input, and you have some idea of how beneficial I think this approach to life could be, if it were to be more readily available.

I am so very thankful to the WEA, to Margot Henderson, and to the group of women I have been lucky enough to be part of, for what I have experienced and what I have learnt. –

Carole Harvey

A full video of Carole's experience of the course can be found here:

[Case Study - Carole Harvey](#)