

Guisborough Wellbeing Forestry Walk

A report to Forestry England on the emotional effects of
the Guisborough wellbeing trail

January 2025



Julian Manley and Chinyere Ajayi

with

Lorna Routledge and Clive Palmer



Participants in the Guisborough forest wellbeing walk

Table of Contents

1. Introduction and acknowledgements	6
2. Executive Summary	7
3. Nature-based/Green Social prescribing	8
4. Psychosocial contributions to the understanding relationships with nature and visual images	8
5. The Visual matrix (VM) Method.....	9
5.1 What is the Visual Matrix?	9
5.2 Why use the VM to investigate Forestry England’s Wellbeing Trails?	9
6. Forestry England	10
6.1 Mission	10
6.2 Wellbeing Trails	10
6.3 Guisborough Forest.....	10
7. Methodist Asylum Project (MAP))	11
7.1 Asylum seekers.....	11
7.2 MAP Middlesbrough	11
8. The Project: Participants, aims and objectives	12
8.1 Preparation.....	12
8.2 Participants	12
8.3 Project plan	12
8.4 Aims and objectives	12
8.5 Outputs	13
8.6 Ethics	13
9. Methodology: what we did	14
9.1 The walk	14
9.2 Drawing activity.....	14
9.3 Visual Matrix	15
9.4 The Post-matrix Discussion	15
9.5 Lunch and general feedback	15
10. Findings	16
10.1 The Post-Matrix Discussion	16
10.1.1 Warmth, warm colours, the fire/comfort/relaxation/connection	16
10.1.2 Squirrel, roots, tree, eagle, sky and freedom.....	16
10.1.3 Change, unknown, hope and motivation.....	16
10.1.4 For the world, renewal and radiance	16
10.1.5 Challenge, cars and vans, walking up hills!	17

10.2 The Visual Matrix	17
10.2.1 The struggle of the asylum seeker’s escape to freedom.....	17
10.2.2 Memories of home, the recognition of the value of sharing and connections	17
10.2.3 Global interconnectivity and magic	18
10.2.4 Slow living	19
10.2.5 What is home?	19
10.3 Drawings.....	20
10.4 Informal feedback	21
Connectivity	21
Less lonely	21
Health and happiness.....	21
Creativity and opening out possibilities and gratitude	21
Conversation and meeting people	21
11. Discussion and Conclusion	22
11.1 Chance encounters.....	22
11.2 The ‘My Forest Wellbeing Journal’	22
11.3 The need for complex emotional expression.....	22
11.4 Limitations and recommendations for future work.....	23
Appendix A.....	26
Appendix B	34



'It is not so much for its beauty that the forest makes a claim upon [people's] hearts, as for that subtle something, that quality of air that emanation from old trees, that so wonderfully changes and renews a weary spirit.' (Robert Louis Stevenson)

1. Introduction and acknowledgements

The authors of this report would especially like to thank Lorna Routledge (Active Forests Coordinator, Guisborough) and Ellen Devine (Wellbeing Projects Manager, Forestry England) for their invaluable and enthusiastic support in the project. At UCLan, we would like to thank Sam Pywell, (Social Prescribing Unit) for coordinating the initial stages of the project and Clive Palmer (Research Ethics Lead for the School of Health, Social Work and Sport) for initial support in scoping the work. We could not have done this without the asylum seekers themselves and the support of the coordinator of the group, Billy Barnes.

Julian Manley and Chinyere Ajayi



2. Executive Summary

The research questions designed for this project seek to **discover to what extent new methodologies that use visual methods can support the evaluation of in-depth emotional reactions to the Forestry England wellbeing trails.**

The methods employed in the research include the walk itself, the participation of the Forestry England Coordinator in facilitating wellbeing exercises, the collection of found objects, the use of drawings, and in particular the Visual Matrix exercise, followed up by the post-matrix discussion.

The pilot project took place in Guisborough Forest with a group of local asylum seekers whose complex wellbeing needs in terms of place, culture and identity provided a potential forum for understanding the effects of the Guisborough wellbeing trail.

The report findings demonstrate a very positive and deep connection between the experience of the walk as a group and the concerns and anxieties that such a group might bring with them. The walk elicited **comforting memories of the asylum seekers' countries of origin** and an expression of **a deep desire for freedom** – like the birds in the sky – **along with a yearning for a living space to call home.** The trail also brought about a deepening of **emotional and bonding connectivity among the walkers** who were able to move towards relationships of friendship as opposed to the isolation of individuals in desperate situations. This human interconnectivity was associated with the way the forest roots interconnect ecologically. In this way, **the wellbeing trail enabled a complex affectivity between people as a mirror of the connections in nature along the walk.** Autumnal colours were associated to the warmth of the sun, even though the physical sensation of the day was freezing!

As a pilot study, the brief experience of the asylum seekers on the wellbeing trail in Guisborough shows promise for future developments of the wellbeing journal currently in use by Forestry England. It provides hope for a **deeper, richer and better understanding of the effects and potential effects of the wellbeing trails on groups of walkers with defined health needs and requirements.**

The report therefore recommends further exploration of these methods and a closer collaboration between the researchers and Forestry England staff as a means of enriching the design and experience of the wellbeing trails for service users of all denominations.

3. Nature-based/Green Social prescribing

There is a wealth of evidence that contact with green spaces has defined health benefits for people. In the case of contact with forests, Mughal et al (2022) state that 'Exposure to forest environments was associated with several health benefits including reduced systolic and diastolic blood pressure, heart rate, sympathetic nervous activity, salivary cortisol and increased parasympathetic nervous activity' (p.5). This is why there is more and more attention given to Nature-based social prescribing in the UK, and an increased role for non-medical organisations, such as Forestry England, to contribute to social wellbeing through contact with nature. According to Mughal et al (2022) 'Nature based social prescribing interventions connect ... populations to the wider community and in turn foster feelings of social connectedness, connectedness to nature and decrease feelings of social isolation; in turn positively impacting perceived happiness and wellbeing' (p. 6).

4. Psychosocial contributions to the understanding relationships with nature and visual images

Although Nature-based social prescribing is focussed on measurable improvements in physiological health, less tangible psychological and emotional benefits are often aligned to physiological benefits. These are sometimes referred to as 'perceived' or 'subjective' and may be somewhat relegated in evaluations due to the difficulties in measuring such outcomes. There does exist, however, a body of work outside the medical professions that is interested in the importance of the relationships between the natural world and the human. While it is beyond the scope of this report to enter into detail regarding these other areas of interest, it is worth mentioning the existence of ecopsychology (Roszak et al 1995) and deep ecology, a branch of philosophy that investigates the human relationship and co-existence with nature (Naess 1989). These other fields of study provide an opportunity to broaden the scope of how Forestry England's wellbeing trails might be understood in terms of wellbeing which is not uniquely focussed on prescription. From an ecopsychology perspective, we learn of the importance of the visual imagination in establishing links between people and nature, since 'Fifty percent of the cortex of the brain is thought to be devoted to processing visual information, indicating a profound, evolutionary commitment to vision as a means of joining inner and outer conditions' (Sewall 1995, p. 203). The visual imagination becomes especially active when in physical contact with nature and as 'the visible world becomes meaningful and vital, we feel it in our bodies' (Sewall 1995, p. 209). Through the visual imagination and stimulated by contact with the forest, people who walk the wellbeing trails are given access to deeper, perhaps more unconscious, feelings and thoughts that are important to their sense of wellbeing. While this may be difficult to measure, the value and importance of these feelings to people on the trails are vital to describe and record.

5. The Visual matrix (VM) Method

5.1 What is the Visual Matrix?

The VM is a group-based method used for exploring the internal, unconscious and deeper emotions of participants in a research or evaluation project. It is used to gather information beyond traditional group methods, such as the focus group. In a focus group, which is limited by the dynamics of the group, the opinions expressed are often deferred to the supposed experts in the group, leaving behind and potentially silencing the less experienced, less knowledgeable or less self-confident members of the group. Furthermore, the type of thinking and language used in the focus group encourages debate and argument that emphasises reason and rationality, a kind of intellectual thinking process. This therefore places people who are less versed in intellectual thinking, but who may nevertheless have important perspectives to express, at a disadvantage. Such people often remain unheard to the detriment of the research or evaluation. The VM is designed to avoid these pitfalls by introducing a mode of exchange of ideas that is emotional rather than intellectual, with an emphasis on the sharing and expression of visual images that resonate with the subject matter being reflected upon. In this sense, it is an equitable process – nobody is more of an expert than anyone else in evoking internal images – and it opens the door to emotional truths that often hold the most important information but may otherwise never be expressed (Manley et al 2015; Froggett et al 2015).

5.2 Why use the VM to investigate Forestry England's Wellbeing Trails?

The VM was the chosen method in this project in order to explore the hidden emotional responses to participation in walking the trail. Although there is a growing body of literature that attempts to explain the connections between health, wellbeing, nature and the people who walk in the forest, it is easy to see that it is difficult to intellectually and rationally describe the holistic effects that such an exercise might offer people. Many people will find it difficult to explain how the sight of a squirrel or the magic of the tree root system or the rustling of the leaves affects them. There is often something which is very difficult to express through words about such an experience, despite the fact that this very 'thing' might be experienced as especially valuable to the person who is engaged in this way. In the case of the present study, this difficulty of expression can be supposed to be exacerbated by the nature of the selected group, a group of asylum seekers from different parts of the world whose first language is not English and whose culture may be very different to western culture and who are likely to be under considerable stress, anxiety and struggling with psychological and emotional issues. The assumption of the project is that the VM can provide an opportunity for such a group to be more fully expressive of their experience along the Wellbeing Trail than would otherwise be the case.

6. Forestry England

6.1 Mission

Forestry England is an executive agency, sponsored by the Forestry Commission and manages more land and trees than any other organisation in England. Their mission is to enhance people's quality of life by providing places to enjoy watching wildlife, walking, riding bikes or horses and playing among the trees, bringing people and communities together, encouraging them to become involved with their local forests and woodlands. Forestry England also supports volunteers to help with maintenance, conservation and monitoring wildlife and sites managed are home to some of the country's rarest wildlife.

[\(Home | Forestry England\)](#)

6.2 Wellbeing Trails

Forestry England's Active Forests Removing Barriers Programme (2023-2026), ([Active Forests evaluation: Phase 3 'Removing Barriers' - Forest Research](#)), supported by Sport England, aims to provide opportunities for everyone to actively engage and connect with the nation's forests to improve their health and wellbeing. Part of the Active Forests Removing Barriers Programme is a social prescribing project which is intended to:

- Develop a national Forestry England social prescribing offer;
- Diversify participation in forest-based activities by removing barriers for target audiences (those experiencing or at risk of physical and mental health illness);
- Deliver health and wellbeing outcomes to participants.

Part of this project are the Wellbeing Trails in forests across England. Themed panels along the trail invite people to pause, notice and connect with nature and themselves. People who participate in an organised walk along a Wellbeing Trail are given a Wellbeing Journal and pencil to accompany that trail, with the exercises in the journal being designed to enable people to connect with nature.

6.3 Guisborough Forest

Guisborough Forest measures at 478.2 Hectares and is situated between Teesside and the North Yorkshire Moors and has a rich industrial heritage. It hosts 3 walking trails of differing lengths, a MTB blue trail, wellbeing trail and a Gruffalo trail. There are numerous footpaths and bridleways which connect the forest to some of the areas most iconic landmarks including Roseberry Topping and Captain Cooks Monument. The car park, visitor centre and walkway to access the Forest are owned by Redcar and Cleveland Council. The walkway includes wildlife areas, ponds, a play area, benches and a sculpture trail with walking links into Guisborough as well as a bus stop right outside the car park. In addition, the council have a rentable space in the form of an old railway carriage which is a nod to the walkway's history of being a railway line. There is an active volunteer group who support the council to maintain the walkway and a 'Friends of Guisborough Forest' fundraising group who have been supporting the council side and Forestry England side of the site for a number of years. The site is situated in the Redcar and Cleveland authority which is one of the 20% most deprived districts in England.

7. Methodist Asylum Project (MAP)

7.1 Asylum seekers

According to the UN Refugee Agency [UNHCR] (2024), 122.6 million people were displaced globally by the end of June 2024, an increase of 5.3 million people, compared to the end of 2023. Out of the total number of displaced persons, 8 million were asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2024). An asylum seeker is “a person who has left their country of origin and formally applied for asylum in another country but whose application has not yet been concluded” (Refugee Council, 2024, p.1). Figures show that 99,790 people claimed asylum in the UK in the year ending September 2024, with nationals from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran being in the top three countries of nationality for people who applied for asylum (Home Office, 2024). Asylum seekers are entitled to support in the UK under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. This Act makes provision for ‘adequate, no-choice accommodation’ and basic subsistence, including a cash support of £49.18 for each person in their household per week (GOV.UK, 2024).

However, there are dangers in only focusing on asylum seekers’ physical and financial needs whilst ignoring the emotional and psychological impact of their pre-migration, migration, and post-migration experiences. Many asylum seekers have fled from civil wars, political instability, religious crisis, inter-tribal violence and other forms of violence related to family and generational conflicts (Mohammadi, 2019) and are often subjected to traumatic experiences during migration itself, including violence and different forms of exploitation (Liebling et al., 2014). When the impacts of pre-migration and migration experiences are combined with the lengthy and emotionally taxing asylum process, along with experiences of discrimination, the complexity of the emotional and psychological issues they experience increases (Schock et al., 2015). For this reason, asylum support organisations play a key role in addressing the complex needs of asylum seekers. One such organisation is the Methodist Asylum Project (MAP) Middlesbrough. Along with Forestry England, MAP has participated in the present Wellbeing Trail in Guisborough to assess the psychological and emotional benefits of contact with nature that the Trail offers.

7.2 MAP Middlesbrough

MAP Middlesbrough was established in 2002 from the Middlesbrough and Eston Circuit of the Methodist Church project and registered as a charity in 2009. MAP welcomes and offers practical support and social opportunities to those seeking asylum in Middlesbrough. The support offered are tailored to meet asylum seekers’ physical, material, financial, emotional and information, advice, and guidance needs. MAP also offers a range of activities to support individuals to develop practices that support wellbeing.

8. The Project: Participants, aims and objectives

As part of Forestry England's on-going development of the Wellbeing trails, UCLan were approached to provide a psychosocial evaluation of people's experience on the trail in Guisborough. The purpose of the UCLan intervention was to use a method – the Visual Matrix (VM) – that was created and has been developed by UCLan in order to assess deep emotional impacts and unconscious processes attached to the trail which may not have previously been recorded. The visual matrix method works with an emphasis on visual images and emotional responses instead of linguistic responses (see 8 below).

8.1 Preparation

UCLan staff visited the site in Guisborough on 25th September 2024 to meet Forestry England staff, to get a sense of the Wellbeing trail and to inspect the venue for the VM. The venue was a train carriage adapted for meetings, which was a creative and unexpected space! Forestry England suggested that a group of asylum seekers known to them under the guidance of MAP could be invited to participate. From the point of view of an evaluation method that emphasises visual communication over language, the invitation to participate for a group that might struggle with English as a first language was intriguing and promising. The date set for the Wellbeing trail walk and the VM was 18th November.

8.2 Participants

Participants included the group of asylum seekers, staff from MAP, the Forestry England Coordinator and the two UCLan researchers, detailed below:

- University researchers (2)
- Forestry England coordinator (1)
- MAP lead (1)
- MAP volunteers (4)
- MAP asylum seeker group (7):

8.3 Project plan

The UCLan researchers were to use the VM method to investigate the complex relationship visitors and communities local to forests have with: (a) the wellbeing trail; (b) the forest environment; (c) physical activity/ movement in the forest and (d) their mental health in relation to the forest

The Forestry England coordinator was to recruit a suitable group for walking the Wellbeing trail, provide materials (drawing materials, flip chart), organise the venue and lead the walk.

8.4 Aims and objectives

The aim of the project is to provide information and insights to Forestry England about the emotional responses of participants to the Wellbeing Trail in Guisborough and to pilot a method of assessment known as the visual matrix.

The objectives are - through the organisation and participation of the MAP group in the Wellbeing trail in Guisborough and the follow-up visual matrix work -

- to improve engagement with communities and target audiences around the wellbeing trail site – the participants have increased knowledge of and connection with Forestry England
- to improve participant wellbeing – the participation in the research project in itself delivers health and wellbeing benefits

- to improve understanding of the motivations, barriers and experiences of people using the forest and wellbeing trails (with specific reference to health and wellbeing)

8.5 Outputs

The outputs include:

- One forest walk, including engagement activities, followed by a VM with the same participants delivered at Guisborough Forest
- One report (this document)
- A Teams meeting with Forestry England staff to discuss the outputs/ findings and possibilities for mutually beneficial future funding applications
- A follow-up academic paper publication

8.6 Ethics

Ethics approval was granted on the 6th November 2024 by the UCLan BAHSS2 Ethics Panel Application, Unique Reference Number: HEALTH 01232

9. Methodology: what we did

9.1 The walk

All the participants gathered on the bitterly cold morning of the 18th November in the train carriage located next to the Guisborough Forestry England Visitor Centre. Each person introduced themselves and where they came from, establishing the nature of the group as a multicultural group that brought with them anxieties expected from a displaced and persecuted group. Two participants arrived late but were able to be incorporated on the walk. Participants were issued Information sheets and consent forms to sign and space was made for questions and answers.

The walk was introduced and led by the Forestry England Guisborough Active Forests Coordinator. An important aspect of the pre-walk explanation to participants was the issuing of the Forestry England Wellbeing Journal, pencil and paper bag for collecting found objects. The Journal is a small handy booklet designed to stimulate engagement with the forest walk, which emphasises the purpose of the trail as being more than 'just a walk'. The Journal includes pages for thought, feeling and reflection, with headings such as

PAUSE

NOTICE

APPRECIATE

MINDFUL MOVEMENT

BE AMAZED

BE PLAYFUL

LOOK FOR JOY

CONNECT



There are spaces in the Journal for annotating ideas in response to the prompts in the Journal. The Coordinator made two references to activities in the Journal during the walk, when the participants were able to stop and make special connections to the forest environment. The researchers felt that these were excellent preparations for the VM work to come.

Towards the end of the walk, participants were encouraged to pick up and bag a found object that had meaning for them to bring back to the carriage. By this stage, the call to 'borrow a leaf' from the trees of the forest – became more than an activity, as noted in the following: 'how lovely that would be if human beings could behave like that, not attack each other, but help each other'.

The walk lasted approximately 2 hours and although this was challenging for some of the participants, all completed the trail and there was a general sense of happiness and appreciation upon returning to the carriage.

9.2 Drawing activity

As an introduction to the idea of moving into a space of 'thinking visually', all the participants were invited to draw an image that conveyed how they felt about the walk and to locate themselves as part of the image. They were invited to place their found objects on the tables for inspiration. The researchers made it clear that this was not an artistic test and that participants were not being asked

to draw a figurative representation of a scene from the trail, but rather an image of their feelings or emotions related to the walk. This introduced the idea of the close link between visual imagery and the expression of emotions. Upon completion, the participants were asked to stick their drawing to the walls and to view other participants' pictures asking themselves how they resonated with the other pictures, what feelings were being aroused and whether they could establish any links, connections or similarities between the pictures. This was a personal activity: nobody was asked or expected to report back or make a public comment about their thoughts and feelings. Photos of the drawings can be found in Appendix A.

9.3 Visual Matrix

Normally, the seating arrangement is designed in a 'snowflake' pattern, but the peculiar setting of the railway carriage made this difficult. People sat wherever they could comfortably locate a chair.

Following the drawing activity, the researchers introduced the VM activity. Making sure that participants had questions answered and that everybody was comfortable with the task. The main messages included:

- The contributions were images that come to mind when considering the experience of the walk and how people feel in relation to their life circumstances. It was reiterated that the VM does not seek opinions or commentary on the day-to-day problems and issues that a participant might experience, but rather to allow images as stimulated by the walk to come to mind and be expressed when 'the moment feels right'.
- That there was no obligation to contribute if anyone preferred to stay silent and that there was no turn-taking.
- Images expressed were not interpreted for meaning or associated with individuals. Images are allowed to 'float' and participants are able to make their own links and connections between images as they wish.
- The activity would last no more than an hour.

9.4 The Post-matrix Discussion

After the VM, the participants were invited to sit in a roughly horse-shoe shaped configuration around a flip chart and were invited to initiate a discussion through annotating important images and feelings on a flip chart (anyone could get up and write on the flip chart). Part of this task included making links and connections between the annotated ideas. The instruction for this task was to bring to mind any thoughts, images or feelings that resonated especially strongly with the participants and to contribute this to the flip chart. Unlike the preceding VM, in this session participants are encouraged to make sense and give meaning to their experiences as expressed in the images of the VM. In this way, the first thoughts that assess the experience are those of the participants themselves. A photo of the flip chart can be found in Appendix B.

9.5 Lunch and general feedback

Over lunch, the researchers engaged in general discussion with the participants and collected some informal feedback about the experience.

10. Findings

10.1 The Post-Matrix Discussion

As noted above, the post-matrix discussion (PMD) is the moment where the participants themselves as a group begin to make meaning of what emerged from the previous VM session. In the PMD, participants are expressing the hidden or deeper sense of the images that from the VM and the collages that these images and feelings formed in relationship to each other. The observations below are all directly quoted from the PMD, accompanied further commentary from ourselves. In the notes below, the words from the PDM are in bold. See Appendix B for a photo of the flipchart sheet recording the session.

10.1.1 Warmth, warm colours, the fire/comfort/relaxation/connection

In contrast to the physical **cold** and **winter sunlight**, participants expressed the **warmth** of the occasion, indicating a welcome closeness in human contact. This was an expression inspired by in the warm **colours** of Autumn and the fortuitous encounter with a real bonfire and the memories triggered by this actual **fire**. The references to warmth were closely related to the feeling of **connection** among the walkers, with **connection**, **comfort** and **relaxation** all mentioned as interconnected around the warmth of a **fire**.

10.1.2 Squirrel, roots, tree, eagle, sky and freedom

This connectivity was also one of **connection** to creatures such as the **squirrel** on the ground, with the **roots** and in the trees. Above the **tree**, the **eagle** flying high in a **sky** that connects to a sense of **freedom** and a **space** of **calm**. The mention of the **eagle** is part of the imaginative and emotional landscape of the group, since the bird referred to is a wooden sculpture on the wellbeing trail, not an actual **eagle**, which brings to light the importance of the shared imagination of the walkers in their inter-personal relationships and a growing sense of relationship with the trail in a symbiotic inter-weaving fashion. The intensification of the participants' relationships among themselves and with the environment as expressed in the PMD by the movement of the eye from the **squirrel** by the **roots**, moving up the **tree**, all the way to the **eagle** in the **sky**, where the immersive sense of **calm** finds expression.

10.1.3 Change, unknown, hope and motivation

The **sky** creates a **space** of **calm** and also of **freedom**. Associated to **freedom** are feelings of potential **change**, **unknown** yet filled with **hope**. With hope come **motivation**. In this way, the relationship with the forest environment engenders and stimulates expressions of significance to the asylum seekers, through **hope** and **motivation** for **change** crucial to the participants' sense of belonging and possibility.

10.1.4 For the world, renewal and radiance

The words **for the world** bring a widening sense of situation and location for the participants, whose homes in the world are shifting geographically and emotionally. The open **space** of the **sky** and the **freedom** represented makes possible the abstraction of a sense of belonging in a world that lifts the thinking of the group away from the daily details of finding a new way of life in a new home to a wider meaning of home stimulated by a sense of shared relationships with the nature of the wellbeing trail. Such a feeling of world brings with it a sense of potential **renewal** connected to a feeling of **radiance**.

10.1.5 Challenge, cars and vans, walking up hills!

The walk and feelings associated to the walk in relationship with the participants' inner emotions and thoughts, is not Utopian but also recognises **challenge**, the **challenge** of encroachments to nature (**cars and vans**) and the challenge of nature itself (in **walking up hills!**) Interestingly, however, these items, though recognised, form a small part of the PMD as a whole.

10.2 The Visual Matrix

The following analyses the findings from the VM according to the transcript of the VM session itself which took place after the walk and the initial drawings and before the PMD described above. The sections are described as loosely connected themes supported by quotations from the VM. The extracts from the VM are not necessarily in chronological order, since the VM creates collages of images and feelings that can interconnect in many varied ways. Some of the images may be repeated from the summary of the PMD above, but where the images are new, we are assuming that they also contribute to the overall sense of the experience for participants, even if these have not been made explicit in the PMD. In some cases, the extra detail provided in the VM creates nuances and subtleties that can also contribute to the meaning of the whole.

10.2.1 The struggle of the asylum seeker's escape to freedom.

The evocation of freedom as inspired by the image of the eagle was also connected with the warmth of the fire creating smoke that escapes to the air – 'how freely it was just going to the sky'. This freedom is not hindered by physical boundaries or limitations, however, the images brought out the anxiety associated with the attempt to escape oppression:

... about five, four years ago, when I live in Turkey, come to Greek. And so many times I try to go to Greek, and very difficult. And so many times police Greek take off and come back to Turkey...

The sense of being trapped, moving forwards only to be forced backwards, which was accentuated by the sense of freedom of the walk and the VM, was expressed as an 'image' which was difficult to see, but could be felt:

...an image of back and forth, you know, you know, we talked about freedom...

At another moment in the VM, the trapped sensation of 'back and forth' was re-imagined as a life cycle as inspired by the forest, with the Autumn leaves being 'completely dead' and yet 'knowing that in the Spring the cycle will have gone round again... suns shining...'

This sense of freedom was punctuated by the image of walking through the paths of the forest, an unknown path they had not walked before:

...The path, you know, not been on that walk before... You don't know how the terrain is...But it brings back that image of determination. I'm going to walk through... and I'm going to come at the other end...

This anxiety of walking a new path was mitigated by connecting and walking with others which strengthened the determination to complete the walk.

10.2.2 Memories of home, the recognition of the value of sharing and connections

Although the wellbeing trail is focussed on the forest, the participants were able to associate all aspects of the walk to their feelings as part of a process of reflection. Therefore, in the short section of the trail where the walkers walk along a road before rejoining the trail, the group passed by some

people on bicycles, evoking welcome memories of home and connecting the sense of 'back and forth' to memories and feelings of life itself. In the following image, the present scene of the bicycles and the happiness in the sense of greeting people and the relationships established in the present is connected to a similar image in the speaker's memory, imitating the 'back and forth' of attempting to make connections between an old and new home:

... the image of the bike, when we're walking, the bikers, you know, saying hello, and it just brings back that image of, you know, going to farm when we're much younger, you see bikers, people on the bike with loads of cassava, you know, on the bike, and people are saying 'hello', and they are happy, just like the way people are saying 'hello' and happy, but then very much like back and forth, back and forth life, you know...

Later, the fire that was witnessed by the roadside evoked another important memory from another place, making further connections between places and enabling an important description of social warmth:

... the fire and straight away the feeling of home. I remember again, when we're growing up, we have what we call Tales by Moonlight... where you sit around fire and you have grandparents tell stories. So, you sit around fire and you roast corn... and the fire is burning and everybody is relaxed and everybody is happy and there's connection... there's that peace, enjoyment and happiness... everybody would just want to see the fire, sit around the fire...

This brings up the need to reflect upon the value of sharing, which is an image that arises directly from the walk among the trees:

... when we were walking through the woods, about all of the trees being interlinked ... and when one tree is attacked or hurt, sends messages and the other trees prepare themselves to react to that. And we were seeing how lovely it would be if human beings could behave like that, not attack each other, but help each other.

In this way, the VM expresses a hope of mutual support, clearly in short supply for asylum seekers, and as a potential response to the 'back and forth' sensation of being moved between Turkey and Greece. This leads to the image of 'the planet' as a unifying whole and the need for connection, which was a powerful part of the PMD and the general feedback. For some people, this connection was associated to the fire and warmth in the imagery that contrasted with the external cold and created sensations of home: 'that feeling of home, be safe, be myself'. Overall, the forest trail became a space of inward reflection that brought out what is most valuable to the participants, the sense of home which is where the person can be themselves.

10.2.3 Global interconnectivity and magic

The connection with the forest became magical in the images evoked in the VM. In the following extract, the tree becomes the universe and a symbol of interconnectivity and a powerful expression of imagination:

I feel that the entire universe is one single tree with its roots... I'm a tiny part of that tree... so we all are sitting on that tree. And, you know, that tree is flourishing, breathing, and it's alive, and everything in it is alive, every single thing, like most of the things, even those things they don't consider alive, like stones, fountain and stuff, all of those things are also breathing.

In another contribution, the tree is compared to 'a protector' from the elements, whether, cold, heat or breeze, and in walking the wellbeing trail among trees, the body is 'refreshing'. These descriptions

of the effect of the walk in the forest go beyond the normal health benefits associated with walks in nature and appeal to the magical, almost spiritual nature of the experience.

It is almost as if something new is being planted in the participants, as expressed in the following:

Whenever I'm anxious, I feel stuck, I have this very strong ... tiny beanie seed that's trying to...come out of the earth... just that last push is left and I have to do this last push...

This newness is maybe include a sense of hope that can suggest a move away from the sensation of being stuck. An asylum seeker may have this feeling of being stuck, but imagining oneself as the beanie seed that needs just one more push to be free from the hold of the soil - this imagination gives strength to the mind and helps to build resilience every time.

10.2.4 Slow living

In comments that describe 'slow living' (possibly a memory of previous homes?) there is an association with the space provided by the walk in the forest for slowing down, contrasting with the cars and transport of a different kind of life:

I think the feeling of immediate sort of anxiety when you're trying to look after yourself and that group of that, the car, of something, whatever it is, coming and sort of you having to respond to that rather than being that kind of slow, gentle living...

The chaos of living represented here by the interruption of the cars to the flow of life, is also related to the quietness an asylum seeker craves and the determination, as expressed below, to achieve new goals and aspirations. This is emphasised in the contrast between the old home and adaptation to the new. With the latter a determination and drive is born:

I'm going to walk through the hilly part, you know, I'm sweating and my heart rate is going but I'm going to walk that path and I'm going to come out the other end and I'm going to arrive in the warmth, so [the whole walk] sort of captures that whole image of, you know, a new place, a new beginning, a new everything.

10.2.5 What is home?

The consideration of home was paramount for these participants, which is unsurprising in asylum seekers. However, the VM brought about an almost existential reflection on the nature of home which demonstrates the profound implications of leaving home and the great difficulties of creating another home. The wellbeing trail through nature enabled a connection of the definition of 'home' as being a place of nature, since nature is shared by all:

... what is our home? Our home is connected to the nature that we're surrounded by, but we live in a home

... I'm not sure what I'm saying, but there's something about being in nature as home.

These reflections evoked a sense of silence that was difficult to assess. The silence was associated to the calm felt on the wellbeing trail, but it may also have been an uncomfortable silence provoked by the discussion of home:

I also think that this calm silence now reminds me of the calm silence we had during the trail, during the walk... and silence has a sort of calmness to it, which is almost like an image, not quite, but almost...

10.3 Drawings

The drawings created by all the participants provided a chance to:

1. Provide an initial reaction to the walk and participants' thoughts and feelings relating the walk to each of their personal situations, and
2. Begin the process of 'thinking in images' in preparation for the visual matrix exercise.

It also turned out to be more than this, since the problem of language barriers for some of the asylum seekers could be to some extent bypassed through the medium of drawing. The drawings referred to here are collated in Appendix A, (the order of the pictures is random).

Overall, the drawings were joyful and most included the warm colours of the autumnal forest: oranges and yellows of the leaves and the sun. The images of warmth and flight, in the form of birds and the sky resonated with the visual matrix. In one bird image, the wooden sculpture of the bird on the trail was given flight, clearly connecting the experience of the trail with the imagination and the sense of flight and freedom implied (Picture 3). It was interesting to note that pictures 1, 9 and 10 all depicted the houses that could be seen from the trail. This is an example of the unpredictable connections that might be made by walkers on the trail: for an asylum seeker, the safe, warm home is so important that although the houses may not have been conceived as especially belonging to the trail, they feature markedly. On the one hand, the wooden sculpture of the bird that was especially designed for the trail has meaning attached to it, and on the other a feature that is maybe unconnected to the trail also has meaning for these walkers. This would seem to indicate that it is worth both making the effort to coordinate meaning (as in the wooden sculpture) but also leave other meanings to chance (as in the houses).

Words include on some of the pictures (numbers 4 and 6) are: restoration; abundance; movement; happy; linked to nature; connected to friends; and thoughtful. All of these words speak to the experience of the trail. Especially interesting to note, in the context of this particular walk, is the idea of the trail connecting friends. This would seem to indicate the value of the wellbeing trail not primarily as an individual experience but as an interconnected experience.

Finally, the hand that features prominently in pictures 6 and 7 is indicative of a sense of care and 'reaching out'. In picture 7, then hand appears to be almost on fire with autumnal colours, joining care and reaching out with the experience of the walk.

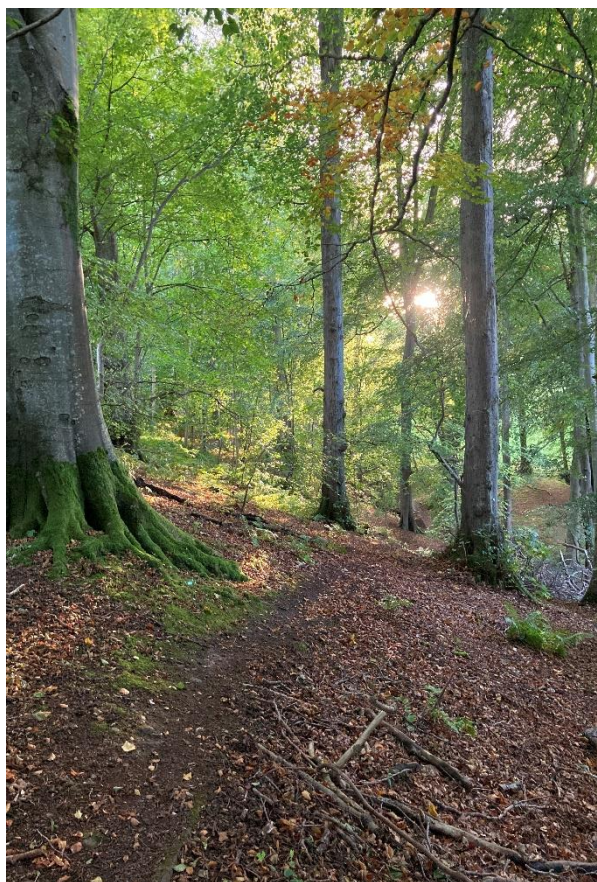
10.4 Informal feedback

In this section, we list some extracts from the informal feedback received at the end of the event.

Connectivity

'... the activity that we did, you know, connecting with the soul, connecting with yourself, with people around you, you know, with nature around, so, you know, I think that's also a basic need of a human being. You don't just need food and shelter and blankets, but you need to feel connected because you are part of the universe... talking about trees, how they are connected, you know. And if one tree feels any kind of need, if that's sick, you know, he grabs the help from around, from all the trees around. So, being human being, we also need that kind of push.'

'... when we feel connected, then we begin to value each other, you know, all those sorts of biases and all these other things, you know, they begin to slowly wipe away. In a way, brings that value to everybody.'



Less lonely

'...I'm good at here for communication and other people, I'm happy, lot less lonely'

'And I got to meet so many nice people.'

Health and happiness

'I had fun, and I got my steps in... made me feel healthy and like happy with myself'

'... to get out to this conversation and intimacy and happiness together with you...'

Creativity and opening out possibilities and gratitude

'... appreciating nature, the trees, you know, squirrel, all those... when you appreciate nature, when you take it in, it gives you... creativity and gives you, and you can begin to see possibilities, and then it gives me a sense of gratitude ... You're also grateful for where you are now and also hopeful for where you want to be...'

Conversation and meeting people

'... that lovely conversation at times, that's what it's missing, isn't it? You know, having that conversation with somebody that you wouldn't normally have that conversation with, and appreciating their own viewpoint, appreciating their perspective and taking that in, and it kind of makes you more alive... and I think this activity, the walk, you know, really, really facilitated that conversation...'

'... you know, I'm a human being, I'm worth listening to...'

11. Discussion and Conclusion

All the different perspectives gathered from the sessions – the guided walk itself, the found objects, the drawings, the VM, the PMD and the informal feedback – indicate the special value and very worthwhile benefit of the walk for this group of asylum seekers. The effects point to a complex web of emotional and holistic engagement that the participants were able to relate to their own individual and personal situations. These personal situations were also sufficiently generic to acquire a sense of consensus in resonating emotions. The walk served to not only connect an individual walker to nature, but to develop social connections among the participants and a sense of solidarity and common ground. The reactions and reflections encouraged by the Wellbeing Trail were far from simple and direct. For example, the wooden sculpture of the eagle could be imagined flying in the sky and as our thoughts and mind's eye follow the squirrel up the tree to the top branches and into the sky, this then becomes a symbol of freedom, which is a way of emphasising the ultimate importance of the feeling of freedom to asylum seekers. Another example discussed above is the surprising reference to the root connections that interconnect the trees in the forest. While these cannot be physically seen, they are imagined in connection with the physical trees that *can* be seen and then these interconnections are 'translated' into reflections of mutual help and support, again of essential importance to the asylum seekers. Working as it does through association rather than direct causal linking, the VM creates the association between solidarity, mutual support and freedom.

11.1 Chance encounters

Although the Wellbeing Trail is well planned and the guidance is pre-designed (for example through the signs along the way and the Journal), the experience of the walk takes in the possibility of chance encounters, which points to the impossibility and undesirability to control all aspects of the experience. The two instances of chance in this walk were the passing by a bonfire and the crossing of paths with cyclists, both discussed above. These external events were also important to participants. Similarly, it is never certain what the walkers will want to notice. While the focus of the Wellbeing Trail is the immersion in the forest, in the case of this particular group of walkers, there was an important observation of the houses/farms outside the actual Trail itself, with several of the participant drawings including images of these houses (See Appendix A). For an asylum seeker, the house or home must be agonisingly important in memory and in aspiration. The walk reminds us of this.

11.2 The 'My Forest Wellbeing Journal'

It was not clear from the sessions if the idea of the trees connecting with each other was inspired in any way by the 'Connect' section of the Journal, but either way, it is a demonstration of how the Journal (Forestry England n.d.) does or could work with the VM as an associated method. The researchers were struck by the potential of using the Journal alongside the experiential work. For example, the exercise called 'Mindful Movement' brought about a reflection on sensations that were aligned to the emotional expressions in the VM. We suggest that it would be of interest in the promotion of these experiences to develop the connection between the Journal and the experiential work of the VM. In this way, the ideas triggered through the Journal can be shared and further developed in the group setting of the VM, bringing individual experiences to play with the shared experience.

11.3 The need for complex emotional expression

The Findings in the Report provide clear evidence of the participation of the group of asylum seekers in an emotional journey associated with the Wellbeing trail. While this work cannot and is not designed to provide a cause-and-effect link between the Wellbeing trail and improved health

benefits for participants, the mere fact of active and vital participation by the group is a strong indication of the benefits of taking a visual and affective approach to the evaluation of the trail and its effects. Furthermore, the expressions of emotion by the participants are in no way simplistic (which is often the result of a standard survey that might ask for a plain response to a simple question that would seek, for example, to ask if a participant had 'enjoyed the trail'). There are many examples of such subtleties and nuances in the Findings, such as the evocation of memories of home and the associated sense of loss and nostalgia; feelings of determination and resilience and mutual support in asylum seekers, which they connected to the root patterns of the trees in the forest; the 'image' of to-and-fro, so complex in emotional significance that it can hardly be imagined, yet is given a chance to be expressed; the sense of freedom, rather than the idea of freedom, as expressed in the forest immersion and the movement of the eye (and spirit) from the roots of the trees to the eagle in the sky. The Wellbeing trail in itself becomes the 'trail' that asylum seekers have had to tread to reach safety and comfort. The evidence in this Report brings out the deeper, more complex elements of the Wellbeing trails in ways that both inform the design and purpose of the trails and provide an even richer experience for the participants.

11.4 Limitations and recommendations for future work

It was noted in a debrief meeting that the participating group were not all able to fully participate in the discussions due to language barriers. This had been unexpected, since there had been an indication that all the participants would be able to speak sufficient English to fully participate. This meant that some of the participants, despite all feeding back positively about the experience of the wellbeing trail, could not participate in depth, with some participants being more vocal than others. It was suggested, therefore, that translators might help in any future sessions to facilitate more participation from non-English speakers., including budgeting for interpreters if necessary.

Aside from any obvious difficulties with language, it may have also been the case that cultural differences were playing a part in inhibiting some participation. Cultural dynamics might have influenced the men's participation, with some cultures being more vocal than others. It might be speculated that men might become more comfortable after multiple sessions. This also brings up the question of the potential benefits of having separate male and female groups to facilitate more open communication. These unknowns are open for further research and testing in future sessions.

In the light of these reflections, we note the usefulness of including the drawings as part of the exercises. It may be that drawings could be given more importance in the overall balance of the tasks.

This report recommends:

1. Organising seasonal walks (4 in a year) with the same/similar group in Guisborough Forest, paying due regard to language barriers and increasing the role of drawings in the method, in order to understand the connection between states of wellbeing and seasonal changes in the walk and to better gauge the bonding effects of repeated walks in the same group.
2. Organising two further walks in Guisborough Forest, one for females only and another for males only, in order to better assess the impact of gender on the wellbeing of asylum seekers on the walk.
3. Doing some work with the Active Forests Coordinator to merge the exercises contained in the 'My forest wellbeing journal' (Forestry England n.d.) with the research methodologies, providing a more holistic and potentially more enriching experience. In particular, the journal as it stands is directed at the individual experience, whereas the Visual Matrix and associated feelings are shared, group exercises. The present research and evaluation strongly

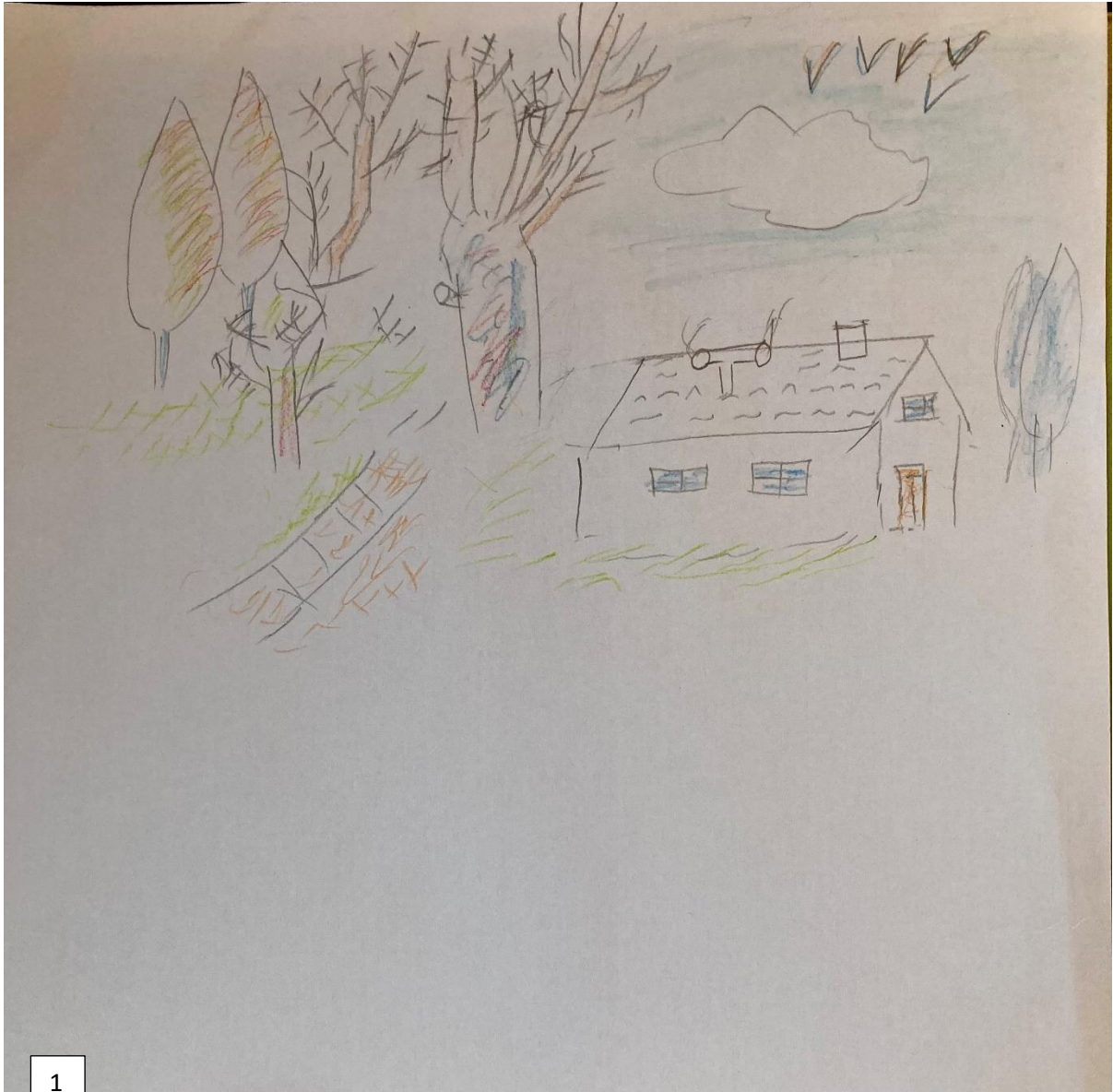
recommends the sharing of thoughts and feelings as experienced in the wellbeing trail. If successful, this could also lead to modifications in and improvements to the journal.

4. Providing Forestry England an opportunity to further engage in these research methods with other groups who use the wellbeing trail(s), which could be in Guisborough or another site according to Forestry England's perceived needs.

References

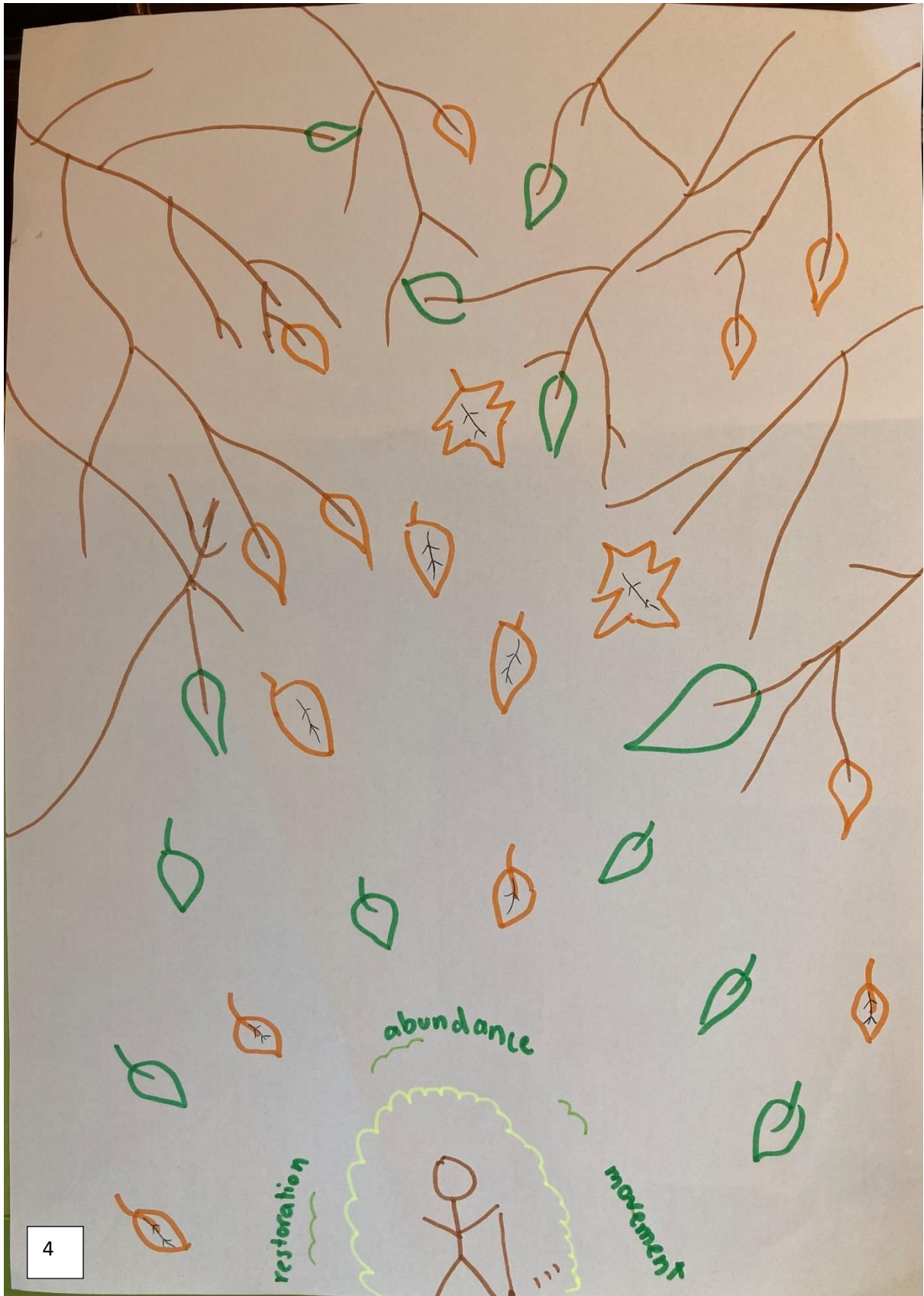
- Forestry England (n.d.) *My Forest Wellbeing Journal*, [Forest wellbeing journal.pdf](#) (accessed 30.01.2025)
- Froggett, L., Manley, J. and Roy, A. (2015) 'The Visual Matrix Method: Imagery and Affect in a Group-based Research Setting', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research./ Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 16 (3)
- GOV.UK. (2024). Asylum support. <https://www.gov.uk/asylum-support/what-youll-get>
- Home Office (2024). Immigration Statistics, year ending September 2024. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-september-2024>
- Liebling, H., Burke, S., Goodman, S., & Zasada, D. (2014). Understanding the experiences of asylum seekers. *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care*, 10(4), 207-219.
- Manley, J., Roy, A. and Froggett, L. (2015) *Researching Recovery from Substance Misuse Using Visual Methods*, in (Eds.), L. Hardwick, R. Smith and A. Worsley, *Innovation in Social Work Research*, London: Jessica Kingsley
- Methodist Asylum Project (MAP) (2024). <https://mapmiddlesbrough.org.uk/>
- Mohammadi, A. (2019). The Perception of Home Among Afghan Refugees. *REMS*, 88.
- Mughal R., Seers H., Polley M., Sabey A. & Chatterjee H.J. (2022) How the natural environment can support health and wellbeing through social prescribing. NASP. ([how-the-natural-environment-can-support-health-and-wellbeing-through-social-prescribing .pdf](#)) Accessed 05.12.24.
- Naess, A. (1989) *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Refugee Council (2024). The truth about asylum. <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/refugee-asylum-facts/the-truth-about-asylum/>
- Roszak, T., Gomes, M.E. and Kanner, A.D. (eds) (1995) *Ecopsychology*. Berkeley: California University Press
- Schock, K., Rosner, R., & Knaevelsrud, C. (2015). Impact of asylum interviews on the mental health of traumatized asylum seekers. *European journal of psychotraumatology*, 6(1), 26286.
- Sewall, L. (1995) 'The skill of Ecological Perception'. In Roszak, T., Gomes, M.E. and Kanner, A.D. (eds) (1995) *Ecopsychology*. Berkeley: California University Press, pp. 201-216
- UN High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] (2024). Key displacement and solutions trends in the first half of 2024. <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/mid-year-trends>

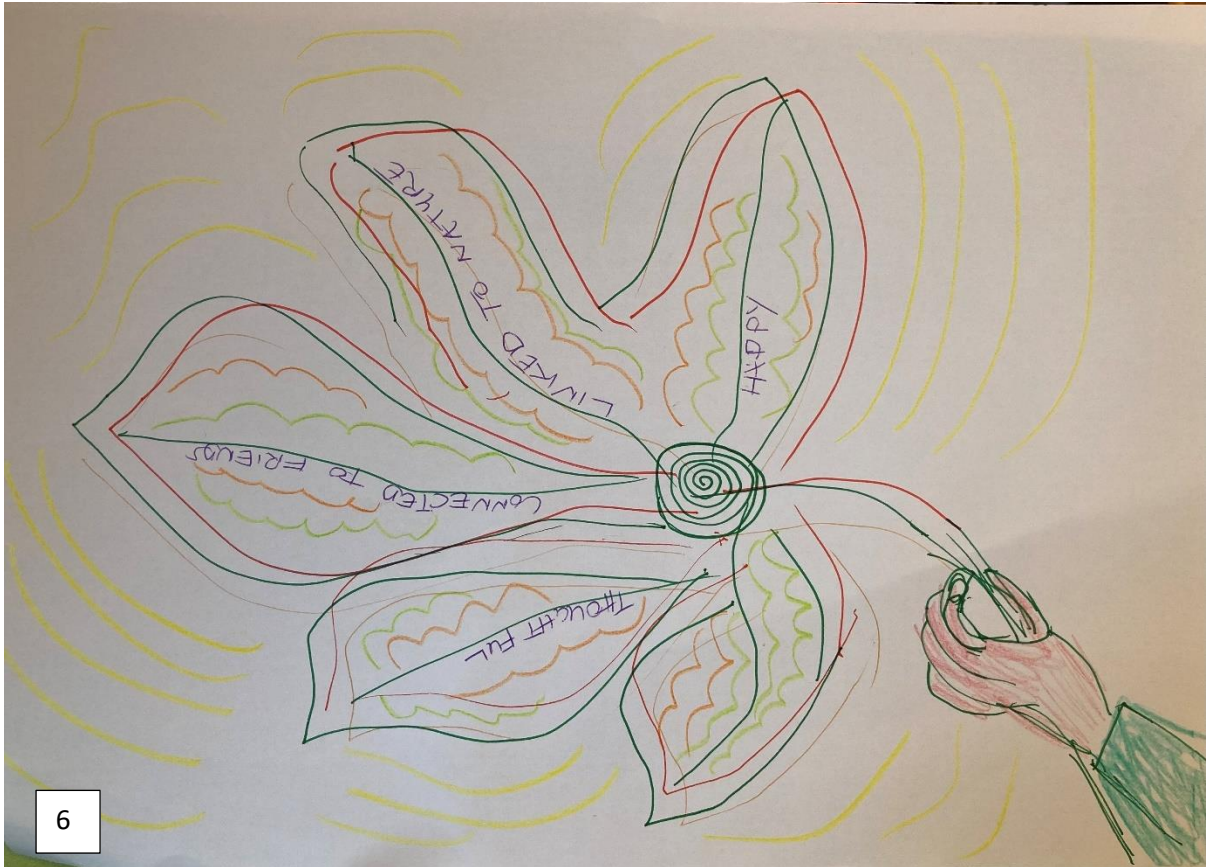
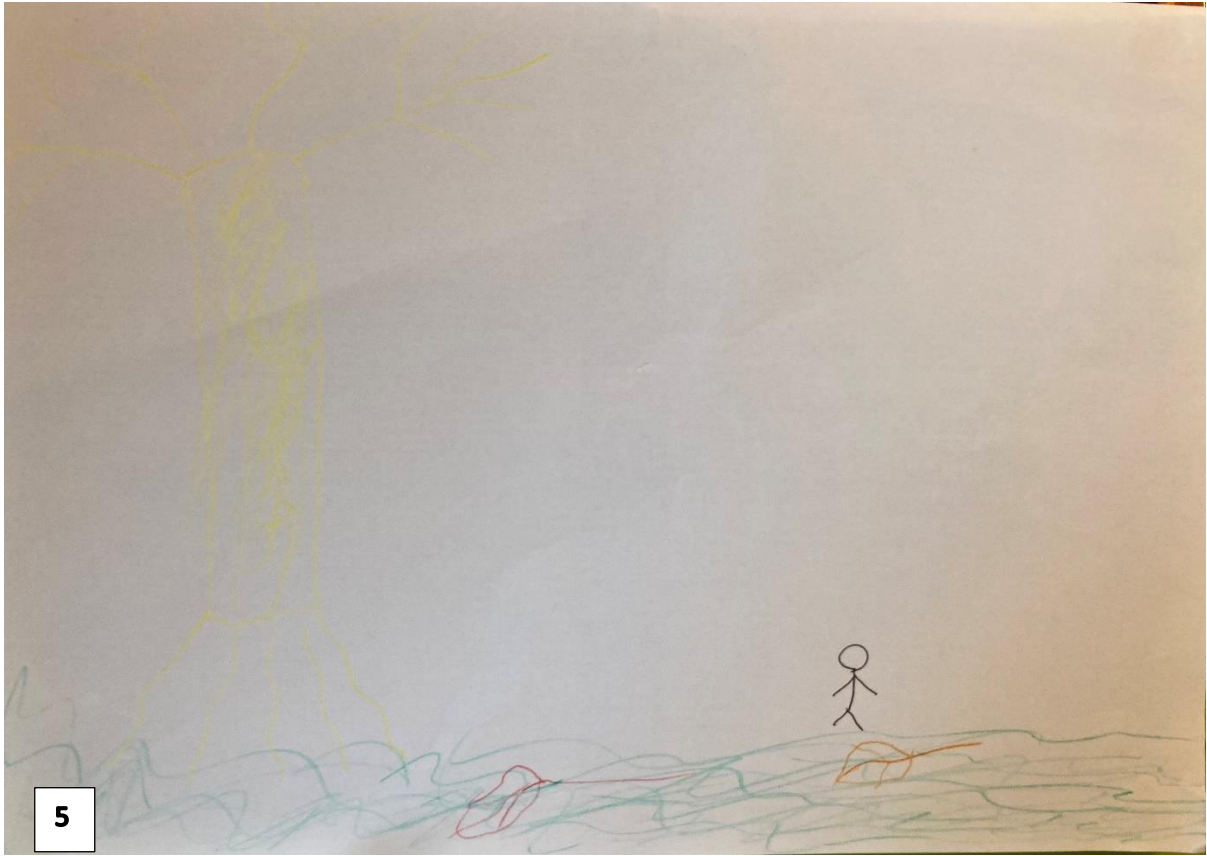
Appendix A

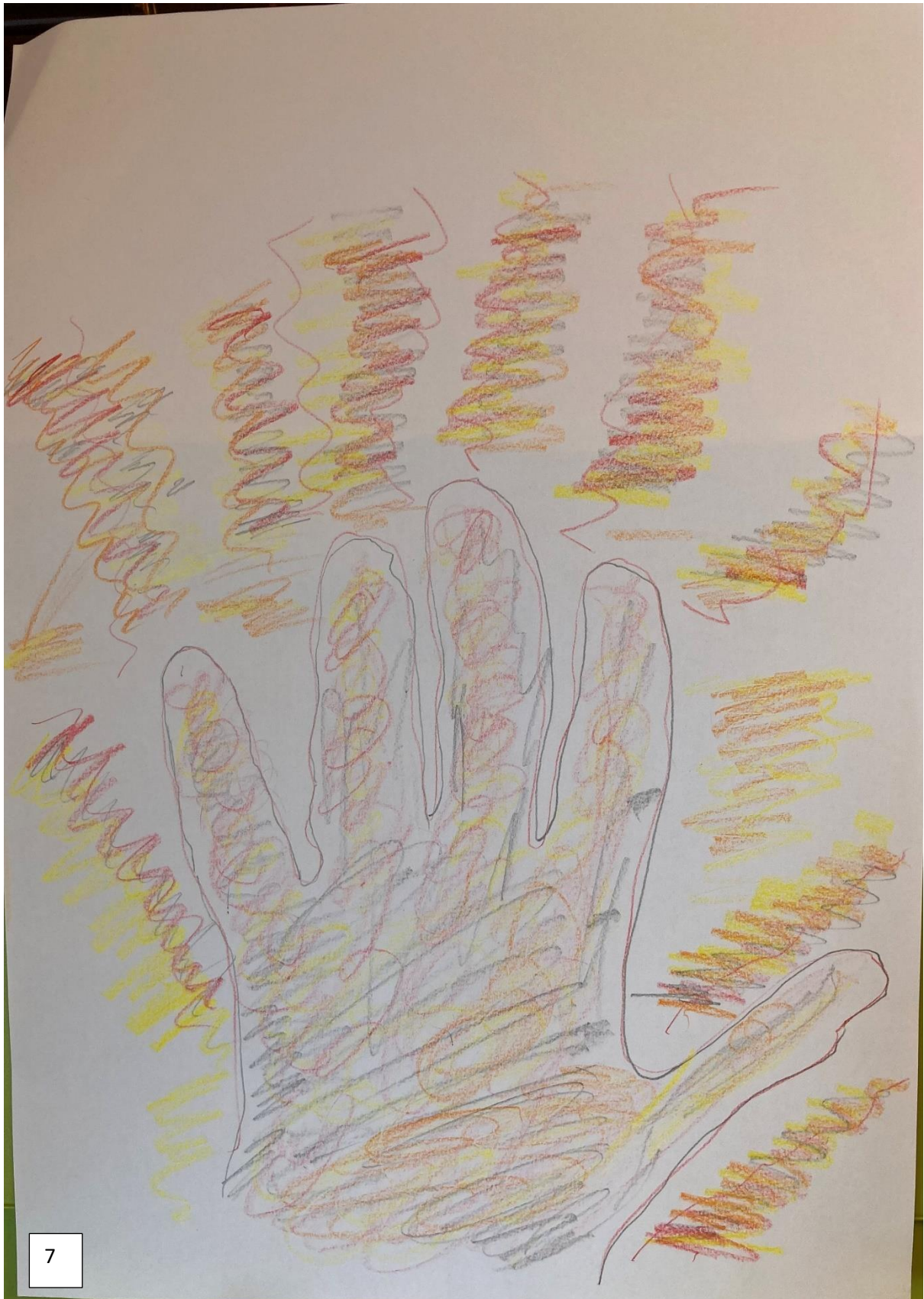


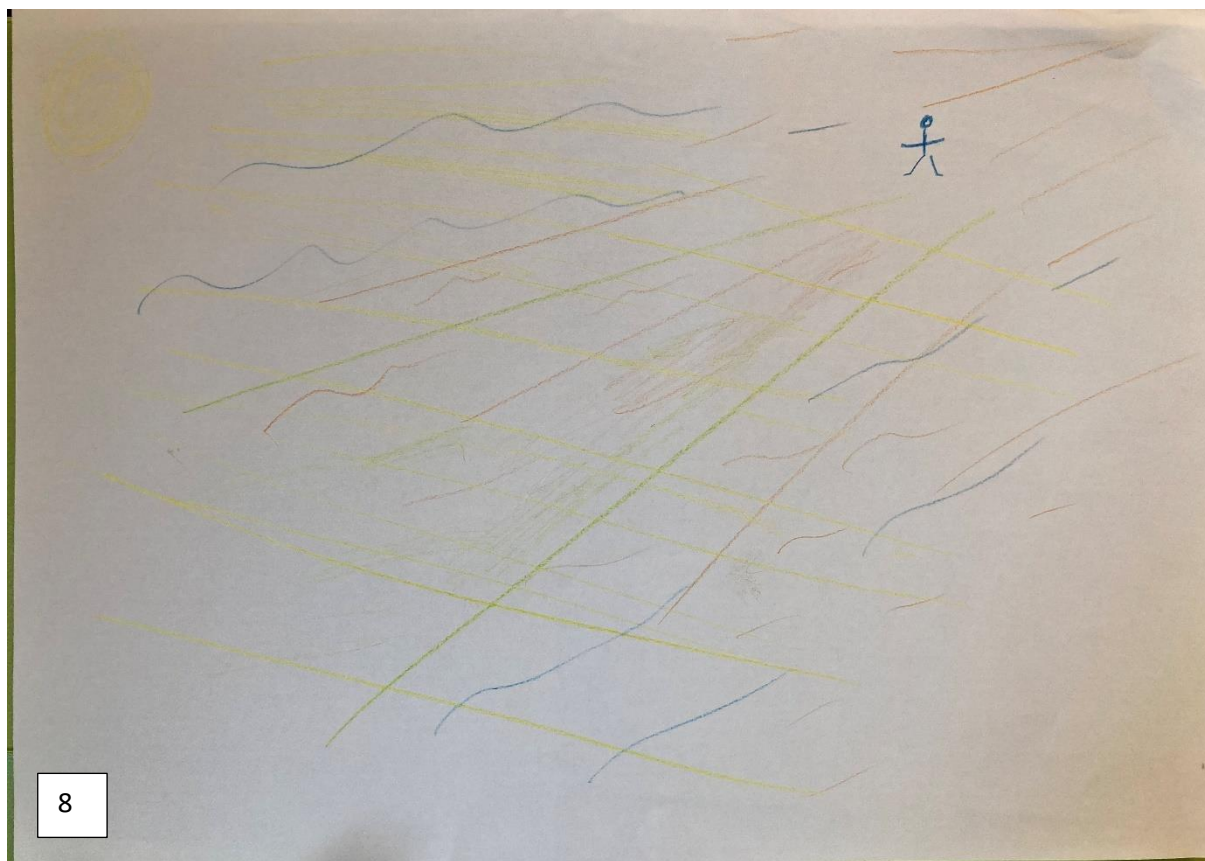
1









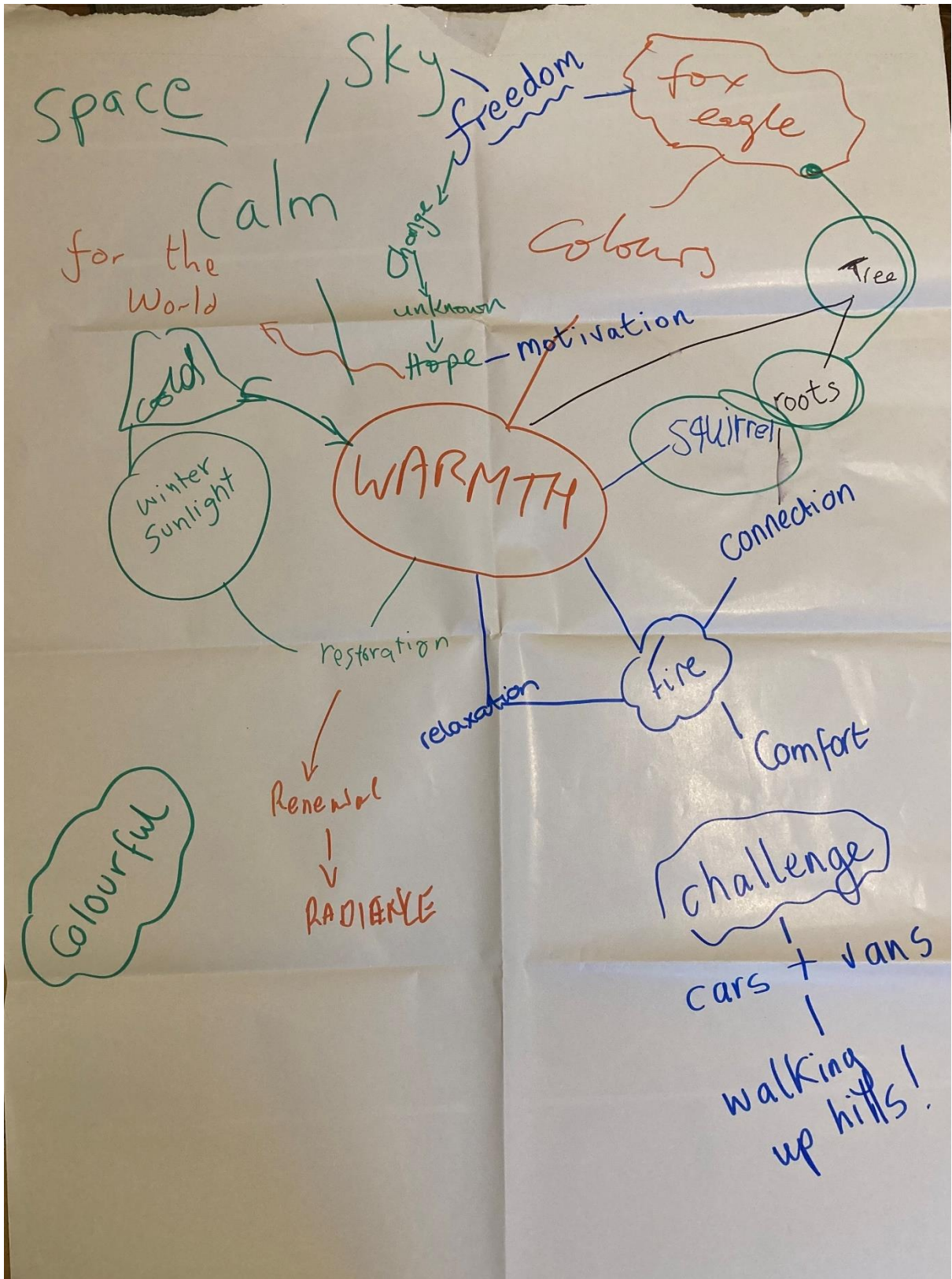






10

Appendix B





Julian Manley

Chinyere Ajayi

Contact: jymanley@uclan.ac.uk



Preston,
Lancashire, UK
PR1 2HE