

# The Care Forum Autumn 2018 briefing - Nature and health



the care forum

## Introduction

There is a growing consensus that spending time in nature improves people's health. More health professionals are prescribing time and activities in nature to improve health and wellbeing. These activities range from Green Care - structured therapy or treatment programmes that take place in natural surroundings (Green Care Coalition, 2018) - to less structured forms of nature-based activity or health promotion. This table (Natural England, 2016) illustrates this spectrum.

	Everyday life – <i>General population</i>	Health promotion – Nature-based activities <i>General population</i>	Green Care – Nature-based therapy or treatment intervention <i>People with a defined need</i>
<b>Experiencing nature</b>	View from window (at home or work)	Restorative landscapes and gardens	Green exercise (as a treatment intervention) Nature therapy; Wilderness therapy
	Green exercise (e.g. walking, running cycling in nature etc.)	Green exercise initiatives (e.g. Walking for Health)	
<b>Interacting with nature</b>	Gardening/Horticulture (at home or work )	Social and Therapeutic Horticulture (STH) Community food growing Community gardening	Social and Therapeutic Horticulture (STH) Community food growing (as a treatment intervention) Horticultural Therapy (HT)
	Forestry, environmental conservation (at work or at home)	Environmental conservation groups	Environmental conservation (as a treatment intervention) Ecotherapy
	Farming	Community farming; city farms; one-off care farm visits	Care Farming
	Human Animal Interactions Animal-based recreation (e.g. dog walking, horse riding etc.)	Animal Assisted Activities (AAA)	Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT)

It is very difficult to gather gold standard evidence – randomised control trials, for example - for many of these interventions, But the University of Exeter report 'A Dose of Nature' (National Environment Research Council, 2016) drew together much of the research on the subject and presented the evidence for the impact of time in nature across a range of health issues:

- 'Studies published in the British Medical Journal found that a Green Prescription increases physical activity levels and improves quality of life over 12 months;
- six to eight months after receiving their Green Prescription: 63 percent of patients are still more active than they were before; 72 percent have noticed positive changes in their health; 46 percent have lost weight; and 64 percent encouraged others to be active;
- spending time in a forest has therapeutic effects on hypertension and [prevents] cardiovascular disorders;
- Significant improvements were found for varied outcomes in diverse diagnoses from obesity to schizophrenia;
- there is a positive association between access to greenspace and physical activity.' (National Environment Research Council, 2016)

### What is the government's plan?

The UK government is enthusiastic about this kind of approach. 'The 25 Year Environment Plan published in January this year specifies actions to integrate environmental therapies into mental health services and promote the linkages through a three-year 'Natural Environment for Health and Wellbeing Programme'' (West of England Nature Partnership, 2018). One of the six chapters of this plan is titled 'Connecting people with the environment to improve health and wellbeing' and lists the following four commitments:

- Help people improve their health and wellbeing by using green spaces including through mental health services;
- Encourage children to be close to nature, in and out of school, with particular focus on disadvantaged areas;
- 'Green' our towns and cities by creating green infrastructure and planting one million urban trees;
- Make 2019 a year of action for the environment, working with Step Up To Serve and other partners to help children and young people from all backgrounds to engage with nature and improve the environment (HM Government, 2018).

Under the first of these four headings - help people improve their health and wellbeing - the government has committed to the following three concrete actions:

- Consider how NHS mental health providers in England could work with environmental voluntary sector organisations to offer mental health therapies;
- Share lessons learned from existing social prescribing programmes widely so others can adopt best practice;
- Develop standardised tools for service providers to support the roll-out of social prescribing across England. The government will do this by seed-funding a project, led by The Conservation Volunteers and supported by NHS England.

### How do nature-based approaches currently fit into the wider picture?

The Natural Health Service in Merseyside and Cheshire is often cited as being a particularly forward-looking way of organising nature-based approaches to health. This is a consortium which brings together voluntary sector organisations and statutory bodies to offer a menu of five core products:

- Health Walks;
  - Horticultural therapy;
  - Mindful contact with nature;
  - Forest School;
  - Healthy Conservation.
- (Natural Health Service, 2018)

In other areas of the country, these activities will be available to people through the social prescribing mix. A recent national report (Natural England, 2017) made the following points about how these approaches fit into the wider social prescribing picture:

- In comparison to many voluntary sector initiatives currently included in social prescribing portfolios, the evidence of the effectiveness of nature-based health promotion and of green care is relatively strong. However, the nature, health and wellbeing sector recognises that it is not currently promoting the range of services it provides as much as it could.
- Most social prescribing services contain one or two nature-based health promotion activities aimed at ill-health prevention (through promoting healthy lifestyles), but only a small number include specific green care treatments (that is to say, commissioned, bespoke nature-based interventions for individuals with a defined need).
- Nature-based options are not actively promoted compared to other types of intervention in social prescribing services and are generally suggested only if a patient expresses an interest in being outside. According to the report 'it is unclear whether this is due to: a lack of nature-based projects in the area; a lack of awareness of the existence of these projects locally; or a limited understanding of the benefits that nature-based initiatives can provide'.

The report goes on to make the point that, by encouraging people to spend time together based around a common interest (for example, growing food) rather than a shared medical condition, green care and nature-based health promotion make people feel more normal and socially included.

### What are the current challenges and opportunities facing nature-based approaches?

West of England Nature Partnership (WENP) held a conference in early 2018 where they explored the challenges and opportunities facing nature-based health approaches from everyday interactions with nature to secondary care. Their findings are summarised in the table below:

### How can this picture be improved?

Natural England (NE) identify the following factors as most likely to lead to a successful social prescribing scheme, *in general*:

- a shared understanding of what social prescribing is to be used for and for whom;
- an effective partnership and regular communication between stakeholders;
- a simple and effective referral system which is not time consuming for GPs and suitable for a wide range of interventions;
- assurance that all options in the social prescribing portfolio are safe, high-quality

- interventions;
- the presence of well-informed link workers to support patients in their choice of social prescribing intervention;
- financial support for service provision for the interventions within the social prescribing portfolio.

The two main obstacles it identified to success were:

- no standardised referral mechanism;
- lack of funding for the providers to which people were being signposted.

The Rotherham model is cited as being particularly effective. West Yorkshire Trust and the Rotherham, Doncaster and South Humber NHS Trust have worked in partnership with Voluntary Action Rotherham to develop natural prescribing alongside traditional mental health services. Rotherham's social prescribing service has an unusual structure in that while 44% of its budget goes on core running costs, the remaining money funds the menu of community and voluntary sector organisations to which it signposts people.

NE suggest that providers of nature-based health need to clarify the specific nature of their available nature-based programmes (whether green care, health promotion or something else). There is support from the public for stronger 'distinction between commissioned interventions for the vulnerable and public health initiatives for the general population' (Natural England, 2016).

	Challenges	Opportunities
Everyday	Funding for parks Unequal access Lack of education	Mental health awareness and training in the workplace
Nature-based health promotion	Lack of communication between organisations Conservation can be seen as white/elitist Funding	Develop strong network Communicate inclusively Use '5 ways to wellbeing' message Launch 'Naturally Healthy Month'
General Practice	Funding Time constraints Not easy for GPs to signpost NHS is a huge institution to try to change	Community Connectors across Bristol can be engaged
Secondary Care	Need for evidence Need for packaged interventions Need mechanism from Public Health England/NHS	Mental health/obesity crisis means appetite to work differently

At the same time, commissioners would find it easier to commission and support these services if the language used is more clear and consistent.

NE also argue that the whole natural health sector – including umbrella organisations like Thrive and Groundwork - needs to promote itself in a more coordinated way. This could include an annual ‘state of the nation’ report as well as submitting data on patient outcomes to the National Outdoor for All Working Group. At the same time, individual organisations need to ensure that their offer is included on any available local listings platforms.

The WENP conference suggested the following next steps to strengthen nature-based approaches to health:

- ongoing public engagement;
- more networking – for example a practitioners’ forum;
- better signposting information for GPs;
- embedding green into existing practitioner training;
- developing universal standards for green care;
- cost-benefit analysis of green care offerings;
- look to develop a Natural Health Service in the West of England.

## What nature-based health projects are there in the West of England?

There are dozens of organisations offering many different opportunities to improve wellbeing through nature. For Bristol, Well Aware has a specific page with a list of organisations and nature-based activities at <https://www.wellaware.org.uk/info-resources/nature/> There is no equivalent resource for North Somerset, South Gloucestershire or Bath and North East Somerset.

## References

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