



# Green Social Prescribing Test and Learn Programme, to Tackle and Prevent Mental Ill-Health: 2021-2023

## Advocacy Pack

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## Introducing the advocacy pack

This advocacy pack is intended as a reference document to inform conversations about green social prescribing (GSP), by providing a framework of language and links to a robust evidence base. As someone in a position to influence others as to the value of GSP, you know best who you need to engage with, what will make them listen, and how to build a case that gets them involved with and supporting the embedding and spread of GSP. The information in this pack is meant to make that job easier by providing a foundation on which to build the arguments you need.

Not every audience will want or need to hear the same arguments for GSP; the table below provides a quick reference guide to which sections of this pack are likely to resonate most with the different kinds of audience you may want to influence. The contents page can also be used to jump straight to the questions you know you need answers to.

Several of the evidence sources used in this pack are themselves reviews of the available research; at the end of the pack you'll find links to resources and research if you want to explore things in more depth.

This pack has been produced by the Green Social Prescribing Programme to Tackle and Prevent Mental Ill-health, led by Defra and including NHS England and Improvement, the Department of Health and Social Care, Natural England, Sport England, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and the National Academy of Social Prescribing.

## Audience matrix

Audience	Key arguments	Relevant sections
Healthcare professionals – including GPs, clinicians, mental health practitioners	Benefits for patients	<a href="#">How can GSP support individuals?</a>
	Suitability	<a href="#">Who is GSP suitable for?</a>
	Benefits for healthcare systems	<a href="#">How can GSP reduce the pressure on health services?</a>
	Evidence it works	<a href="#">How can GSP support individuals?</a>
Health and social care commissioners / Mental health commissioners	Links to their priorities	<a href="#">How can GSP help meet local and national priorities?</a>
	Benefits for healthcare systems	<a href="#">How can GSP reduce the pressure on health services?</a>
	Cost effectiveness	<a href="#">Why is GSP a good investment?</a>
	Evidence it works	<a href="#">How can GSP support individuals?</a>
Integrated care boards and Integrated Care Partnerships	Links to their priorities and core objectives	<a href="#">How can GSP help meet local and national priorities?</a>
	Benefits for healthcare systems	<a href="#">How can GSP reduce the pressure on health services?</a>
	Cost effectiveness	<a href="#">Why is GSP a good investment?</a>
	Engagement with traditionally excluded groups	<a href="#">How can GSP address health inequalities?</a>
	How to make the links	<a href="#">Where can I find out what's going on in my area and how to get involved?</a>
Nature-based activity providers and other VCSEs	Their contribution	<a href="#">How can GSP bring health and green sectors together?</a>
	How to get involved	<a href="#">Where can I find out what's going on in my area and how to get involved?</a>
	What's happening where they are	
	Help with funding	
	Help with capacity	
Resources and guidance	<a href="#">Resources</a>	
Link workers and other community connectors	Evidence it works	<a href="#">How can GSP support individuals?</a>
	Suitability	<a href="#">Who can GSP work for?</a>
	What is available where they are	<a href="#">Where can I find out what's going on in my area and how to get involved?</a>
	How to make it work in practice	<a href="#">Resources</a>
Local government	Links to their priorities	<a href="#">How can GSP help meet local and national priorities?</a>
	What's happening where they are	<a href="#">Where can I find out what's going on in my area and how to get involved?</a>

	Why are our greenspaces important	<a href="#">Why is 'Green' so important?</a>
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## What is GSP?

Social prescribing is a way for health professionals and other agencies to connect people to activities, groups and services in their community to meet practical, social and emotional needs that affect their health and wellbeing.

Those needs can be broad, including, for example, physical health, financial stresses, and social isolation, but this advocacy pack focuses on the prevention and management of **mental ill-health**.

There are four 'pillars' of social prescribing that people can be connected to: physical activities, arts/cultural activities, debt and other practical advice, and nature-based activities. This pack focuses on the application of **nature-based activities**.

So, in the context of this advocacy pack:

**Green social prescribing (GSP) is the practice of supporting people to engage in nature-based interventions and activities to improve their mental health.**

### How does GSP work in practice?

Social prescribing Link Workers (and other trusted professionals in allied roles) connect people to community groups and agencies for practical and emotional support, based on a 'what matters to you' conversation.

Other people who might refer people to GSP activities could include 'community connectors' (such as charity workers, youth workers, faith leaders), community mental health practitioners, GPs (general practitioners), practice nurses, and occupational therapists. It could be anyone who works in health and social care or the voluntary and community sector, that has a role to connect people to community resources to improve their health and wellbeing, based on what is important to them.

A link worker or community connector may help someone to contact a community organisation that delivers nature-based activities and interventions. Some organisations have link workers as part of their teams, who can become a point of contact, providing information about the sessions and what to expect and helping people to prepare to come along to the first session. This might include ensuring that they can access the right equipment to take part, if necessary, and advising about appropriate clothing for the activity. Different organisations have different registration and on-boarding processes, but this might include an invitation to join a taster session or an arrangement to meet a named contact at the first session. In some places, a buddy can be assigned to help someone attend for the first time.

### What kind of activities does GSP include?

There are many different types of nature-based activities and therapies that people may reach through a social prescription, including but not limited to: conservation and other hands-on practical environmental activities; horticulture and gardening; care farming; walking and other exercise groups in nature; and more formal talking therapies based in the outdoors.

## ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES AND CASE STUDIES

**Illustrative Example 1:** 'Sow the City' are one of the community providers commissioned by the Greater Manchester (GM) GSP Programme, 'Nature for Health'. When someone is referred to them, their in-house social prescribing link worker makes contact with them to discuss any concerns that they might have about attending and what to expect from the first session. They talk through practical things like suitable clothing and equipment required for the session. The person is invited

to a taster activity and the link worker arranges to meet the person when they arrive and help them settle into the group.

'Lancashire Wildlife Trust', another GM Nature for Health provider has developed a suite of short films and factsheets to help people get a picture of what green social prescribing is and what it might be like to attend an activity. The short films include an introduction to a named staff member who follows up after the info has been passed to them. This named person speaks to them before they come to their first activity and is a named point of contact throughout the onboarding process.

**Illustrative Example 2:** 'Canal and Rivers Trust' have worked in partnership on the GSP programme, in the Nottingham and Nottinghamshire site, to promote the benefits of connecting with the waterways. Through the programme they have delivered a wide range of engaging water-based activities to improve mental health and wellbeing and activities which connect people to the heritage of the waterways, as demonstrated in the film [here](#).

**Illustrative Example 3:** This [film](#) made in Surrey Heartlands demonstrates the impact that community gardening and horticulture can have on improving mental health and wellbeing and reducing social isolation.

**Illustrative Example 4:** 'Open Minds Active,' a social impact organisation in Bristol, offers wild swimming classes to women to help improve their mental health and wellbeing. The sessions are part of the Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire GSP programme, 'Healthier with Nature'. You can watch a short film about this activity by following the link [here](#) and scrolling down to the second video.

**Illustrative example 5:** This [film](#) made in Nottinghamshire presents different pathways that can be taken to get people into and benefitting from green social prescribing. It demonstrates partnership working between the link workers and green providers in the ICS project with contributions and perspectives of ICS staff, green providers, the voluntary sector and people who have lived experience of mental ill-health and have benefited from nature-based support in the community and embedding green social prescribing in referral pathways and clinical care to benefit people's recovery.

## Why is 'Green' so important?

### TOP LINES

There is strong evidence that spending time in the natural environment can reduce stress, fatigue, anxiety and depression. It can help boost immune systems, encourage physical activity and may reduce the risk of chronic diseases. A large body of evidence exists highlighting the benefits of nature and nature connection to our mental health.

### SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

*Living near natural environments is associated with lower stress and faster recovery from mental health issues.*

*Most studies (for both adults and children/ young people) show that spending time in or being active in natural environments is associated with positive outcomes for mental health, stress, mood disorders and psycho-social wellbeing.*

*There is a growing and strong body of evidence to suggest that using the natural environment as a setting or resource for the prevention or treatment of poor mental health might be effective in treating specific conditions in some groups.*

*Several recent scoping and systematic reviews show that interventions which make use of natural environments as settings for mental health promotion or therapy deliver positive outcomes.*

#### [Links between natural environments and mental health, 2022](#)

Rapid evidence review commissioned by Natural England

*Time spent in nature is linked to a range of positive mental and physical health outcomes including:*

- *reduced stress levels and associated symptoms,*
- *increased wellbeing, including subjective wellbeing, reduced social isolation, happiness, and resilience wellbeing.*
- *a decrease in PTSD symptoms and ADHD (when offered alongside therapeutic and mindfulness activities).*

#### [Social prescribing: the natural environment, NASP evidence review](#)

Rapid evidence review looking at the impact of the natural environment on health and wellbeing, 2023

*Access to green space associated with improved mental wellbeing, overall health and cognitive development of children.*

*This promoted restoration of attention and symptoms of ADHD, improved behaviour, memory, competence, supportive social groups and self-discipline, and moderated stress.*

#### [How the natural environment can support children and young people, 2022](#)

Rapid evidence review commissioned by Natural England

*Findings from several studies have converged in indicating that simply viewing certain types of nature and garden scenes significantly ameliorates stress within only five minutes or less. Further, a limited amount of research has found that viewing nature for longer periods not only helps to*



*calm patients, but can also foster improvement in clinical outcomes — such as reducing pain medication intake and shortening hospital stays.*

[Health Benefits of Gardens in Hospitals | Green Plants for Green Buildings](#)

## How can GSP support individuals?

### TOP LINES

GSP is a subset of social prescribing. It connects people to nature to improve their mental health. It may be part of a holistic range of interventions offered by social prescribing to address social and practical issues which impact people's health.

GSP involves a social prescribing link worker, or another professional who has a relationship with the person, discussing an individual's needs based on a 'what matters to you' conversation, to determine the best activity to meet their needs.

GSP is a non-medical approach that offers people choice about how they improve their mental health, and may be more acceptable to some than traditional NHS approaches.

Part of a culture shift towards delivering personalised care, GSP embodies a more empowering approach, based on personal choice and self-management of health and care.

GSP outcomes can be longer-lasting and self-sustaining because people are connected to community activities and networks, and are shown how to embed nature connection into their daily lives to improve their mental health and wellbeing.

In many instances, GSP activities can also help increase the opportunity to move more and become physically fitter without having to focus on 'getting fit'. There is a large and well-established evidence base which demonstrates the contribution of sport and physical activity to better mental health and wellbeing.

### SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

*Participants experienced improved wellbeing when accessing nature-based activities, indicating that GSP can have a positive impact. Across the seven pilots there was a statistically significant improvement in wellbeing for each of the ONS4 wellbeing domains after accessing nature-based activities through the GSP Project.*

*Prior to accessing nature-based activities participants' happiness, anxiety, life satisfaction and feeling that their life was worthwhile was much worse than the national average. After accessing nature-based activities this had improved so that their happiness and anxiety was in line with the national average, and the gap to the national average for levels of life satisfaction and feeling that their life was worthwhile had narrowed significantly.*

#### [Preventing and tackling mental ill health through green social prescribing project evaluation - final report](#)

*Nature-based social prescribing interventions can positively impact on happiness and wellbeing. This can be by reducing social isolation and developing connection to nature, particularly in people likely to be experiencing health inequalities.*

#### [Social prescribing: the natural environment, NASP evidence review](#)

Rapid evidence review looking at the impact of the natural environment on health and wellbeing, 2023

*Nature-based interventions encompass a wide variety of activities, from therapeutic horticulture, wilderness therapy and conservation activities, to walking in the park or spending time in your*

*own garden. A systematic review of nature-based interventions found participation in these programmes was associated with a significant positive effect on psychological, social, physical, and intellectual outcomes and suggest these are a valuable resource for public health.*

[Improving access to greenspace: a new review for 2020](#), Public Health England

Evidence summary of links between greenspace and health; practical advice on formally valuing greenspace, improving access and levers to improve provision

*Emerging evidence indicates that there is a positive and significant improvement in participants mental health as a result of engaging in GSP, and that the programme has a very strong service take up rate compared to traditional mental health support services.*

[National Evaluation of the Preventing and Tackling Mental Ill Health through Green Social Prescribing Project: Interim Report – September 2021 to September 2022](#)

*Exposure to natural environments, achievement, enjoyment and social contact were important pathways to positive mental health outcomes.*

*Gardens and gardening in context of social prescribing had a significant effect on mental wellbeing, physical activity, and reduced social isolation*

[Links between natural environments and mental health, 2022](#)

Rapid evidence review commissioned by Natural England

## ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES AND CASE STUDIES

**Illustrative Example 1:** Case study from Humber and North Yorkshire Test and Learn Site

‘A’ used to suffer from suicidal ideation and even had a plan to take their own life. Now they describe themselves as ‘happy’.

For over thirty years they were beleaguered by crippling depression and spent their life taking part in various forms of treatment to help them cope. However, earlier this year, a prescription to start gardening was offered, and they have since been going to a community garden in Hull every week. The project is in receipt of funding through the Humber and North Yorkshire Green Social Prescribing Fund, which is managed by HEY Smile Foundation.

“I come every week and it takes me out of myself. I didn’t realise it had transformed my life but when I look back on the last few months, I can see that it has”.

“It seems strange to me now to think that I had a plan to take my life. I used to think about it several times a day. Now I don’t have time to think about it. I am too busy, too many people need me. I used to feel like a burden that people would be better off without, now I feel people want me here.”

Through the gardening project, ‘A’ has met new people and been introduced to another group, where they now work as a volunteer, and has also joined a writing group where they are writing their life story. They have stopped visiting their GP to get help and are no longer accessing other mental health services.

**Illustrative Example 2:** Case study from the Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Test and Learn site

'B', aged 21, was referred to social prescribing because he was stuck in a vicious cycle where anxiety was preventing him from addressing his financial and social situations, and his financial and social situations were provoking anxiety.

'B' worked with his social prescribing link worker to manage the practical issues he was facing and address his financial situation. Doing this reduced his anxiety levels about these issues. He also took up some occupational therapy support to help him manage his anxiety by using breathing techniques. A referral for an assessment led to an ADHD diagnosis and this helped to reduce the sense of shame and self-blame for his situation.

A concurrent referral to an on-site allotment group was the perfect fit for 'B'. The outdoor activity increased his sense of enjoyment and freedom in engaging in the group and his confidence grew as a result of his sense of achievement from growing things. 'B' became a regular member of the community allotment group. At the beginning, he was shy and unsure of himself, but as time passed, he got to know other group members and felt welcomed and accepted for who he was. He soon made new friends and spent time with them outside of the group, reducing his social anxiety and social isolation.

**Illustrative example 3:** This [film](#) from Nottinghamshire explores the participant perspective to understand the impact green social prescribing can have on individuals' mental health.

**Illustrative example 4:** This [film](#) from South Yorkshire and Bassetlaw, also looking at participants' experience of the impact of nature-based activities on their mental health, shows the importance of co-design and including the contributions and perspective of ICS staff, green providers, social prescribing link worker lead, and people who have lived experience of mental ill-health and have benefited from nature based support.

## How can GSP reduce the pressure on health services?

### TOP LINES

GSP can help to reduce demand in primary and secondary care services by connecting people to community resources to meet their needs and preventing the escalation of more serious mental health concerns. It can help to avoid hospital admission and support timely community discharge.

GSP offers an alternative or complementary approach to supporting mental health and wellbeing, particularly for people who find it harder to engage with more traditional types of services, such as talking therapies, and can be effectively delivered as an early intervention to tackle and prevent mental ill-health or as part of the recovery pathway.

As an effective intervention for social isolation, GSP could help to reduce pressure due to other adverse outcomes associated with loneliness, including suicidal ideation, early dementia, cardiovascular and immune system problems.

As well as helping to prevent mental ill health, physical activity often associated with GSP can form part of a treatment or rehabilitation plan to help people manage long term conditions, which affect their mobility and physical health and could be usefully offered in a range of pathways such as diabetes care, falls prevention etc.

The range of green provision enables people to 'step down' from intensive support services and empowers them to embed nature connection into self-management and relapse prevention strategies.

By offering a viable non-clinical option within mental health pathways that complements clinical treatment offers, GSP increases choice for individuals and may reduce overprescribing.

Outcomes can be longer lasting and self-sustaining, over time, because people are connected to community groups and often embed activities into their lives. Over the long term, this has the potential to reduce relapses and pressure on primary and secondary mental health services by helping people to manage their own care.

### SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

*The delivery of GSP could lead to savings to the NHS worth £159m through 4.5 million fewer GP appointments, along with savings to prescription costs of £141m, plus more.*

#### [National Academy for Social Prescribing evidence reviews](#)

Analysis based on paper on economic impact looking at potential impact on primary care of the planned roll-out by NHS England of 4,500 social prescribing link workers by 2023/24

*Before and after studies on social prescribing examples in England have shown reductions in secondary care referrals, inpatient admissions and A&E attendances and primary care contacts.*

Sources: [Maughan DL et al, Primary-care-based social prescribing for mental health: an analysis of financial and environmental sustainability \(2016\)](#) ; [Dayson and Bashir, The social and economic impact of the Rotherham Social Prescribing Pilot: main evaluation report \(2014\)](#)

*A study into an expanded Natural Health Service in Mersey Forest, worked with people at high risk of developing a future need for expensive health services. This predicted a social return on investment of £6.75 for every £1 invested in the service.*

[The Natural Health Service report, Community Forest Trust](#)

Social return on investment analysis and forecast, Cogent

*Around 20% of patients consult GPs for problems that are primarily social rather than medical.*

[The Low Commission. The role of advice services in health outcomes](#)

Evidence review and mapping study, June 2015

*£2.3 billion is spent on mental health primary care expenditure. This figure included £1.4 billion in general population consultations with GPs because of a mental health issue, as well as increased rates of contact with GPs by people with mental health conditions.*

*In 2019/2020 in England specialised mental health spending alone was £10.965 billion. This includes more than £486 million spent on IAPT.*

[The economic case for investing in the prevention of mental health conditions in the UK](#)

London School of Economics and Political Science/Mental Health Foundation

*Studies into the effects of social prescribing on loneliness show that participation led to reductions in health and social care use.*

[Understanding loneliness: a systematic review of the impact of social prescribing initiatives on loneliness.](#) Reinhardt G, Vidovic D, Hammerton C (2021), Perspectives in Public Health.

## ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES AND CASE STUDIES

**Illustrative Example 1:** This film from the Nottingham and Nottinghamshire site demonstrates the importance and impact of embedding GSP into the Mental Health Transformation programme. You can view the short film by clicking this [link](#).

**Illustrative example 2:** This short [film](#) made in Dudley shows how using social prescribing to support high frequency users of health services, including hospital admissions and ambulance callouts, can lead to significant cost savings due to reduced pressure on the health service.

## Who is GSP suitable for?

GSP is suitable for and can benefit, a wide range of people in different circumstances, including those:

- who need support with their mental health;
- who have complex social needs which affect their wellbeing;
- who are lonely or isolated;
- with one or more long-term conditions.

GSP can be offered to individuals whose mental health needs range from those with low level emotional and psychological needs, for example loneliness, worry and low mood, to people with mild to moderate diagnosed mental health need, such as mild depression and anxiety, to people with severe and enduring mental health conditions, who may need support in their recovery and to prevent relapse.

GSP might have a role, alongside other treatment and support, even when someone has been very unwell, as part of their recovery plan, but it is not intended to provide clinical support to individuals experiencing acute mental illness or in mental health crisis.

It is important to clearly define who the GSP activity is aimed at, and for this definition to be shared by both referrers, and those providing the green activity. This will help to ensure that referrals are appropriate, and participants are referred to providers who are best placed to work with them.

GSP can be used as an adjunct to other treatment and support and can provide support whilst people are waiting for other NHS services; for example, to support conditioning whilst waiting for surgery.

### SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

*Evidence suggests social prescribing is a service model that can address some of the more common mental health difficulties experienced by individuals in the UK.*

*Non-medical referrals such as befriending services, practical information including benefits and financial advice, community activities, arts and culture and physical activities, and those that take place in nature can alleviate issues relating to loneliness, stress, mild to moderate depression, and anxiety.*

*Alongside talking therapy and a range of holistic interventions, green social prescribing activities such as nature walks can help individuals with severe mental ill-health, such as those living within institutional care, to connect, be active, notice more, and be mindful. These concepts are key to behavioural change avenues related to relapse prevention and increased self-efficacy.*

*One museum-on-prescription service positively impacted the wellbeing of individuals with severe mental ill-health, who experienced increased nature connectedness and psychosocial wellbeing.*

#### [NASP Evidence Note: social prescribing and mental health](#)

*Clinicians, patients and members of the public all see the value of nature-based activities and buy into GSP as part of a holistic care plan for patients with mental health conditions.*

#### [Green social prescribing: perceptions and behaviours of clinicians and the public](#)

Research conducted by IFF Research on behalf of DHSC, 2023

## ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES AND CASE STUDIES

**The GSP Toolkit**, produced by the green social prescribing programme, gives a range of different examples of how to help referrers and providers provide an appropriate service for people with varying mental health needs. Find the Toolkit at [this link](#).



## How can GSP address health inequalities?

A number of social factors can have a big impact on people's mental health, including someone's background, financial situation, or where they live. These and many other factors can also make it harder for some people to access the healthcare they need.

As a community-centred approach that takes into account the unique circumstances of individuals and helps them find support that will make a difference to their specific needs, social prescribing can help to alleviate health inequalities as well as support the development of community assets and infrastructure that will provide benefit for some time to come.

Access to and use of natural spaces, particularly, is thought to be related to inequalities in mental health, but is not equitably spread across the country and between communities. Green social prescribing can directly help to address that, in part by supporting people who do not access green spaces to begin using them and continue using them.

### SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

*Greener neighbourhoods benefit everyone, but appear to disproportionately benefit disadvantaged groups, and socioeconomic-related inequalities in health are lower in areas with greater access to greenspace.*

*...improving access to quality greenspace has the potential to improve health outcomes for the whole population. However, this is particularly true for disadvantaged communities, who appear to accrue an even greater health benefit from living in a greener environment. This means that greenspace also can be an important tool in the ambition to increase healthy life expectancy and narrow the gap between the life chances of the richest and poorest in society.*

[Improving access to greenspace: a new review for 2020](#), Public Health England

Evidence summary of links between greenspace and health; practical advice on formally valuing greenspace, improving access and levers to improve provision  
Business case

*Nature-based social prescribing interventions can positively impact on happiness and wellbeing. This can be by reducing social isolation and developing connection to nature, particularly in people likely to be experiencing health inequalities.*

[Social prescribing: the natural environment, NASP evidence review](#)

Rapid evidence review looking at the impact of the natural environment on health and wellbeing, 2023

*Social prescriptions help to link patients with third sector organisations such as local non-profit organisations, local public sector services (e.g., social services and schools), recreational facilities, and neighbourhood organisations. Such partnerships can be a holistic strategy for confronting persistent health inequities, addressing unmet psychosocial needs, and reducing GP visits.*

[NASP Evidence Note: social prescribing and mental health](#)

*Evidence suggests that positive mental health is intrinsically related to access to green and blue space. A higher level of deprivation is correlated to lesser access to outdoor space. In England, one in eight people do not have access to a garden and Black people are four times more likely to have no access to outdoor garden space at home.*

*'Green' interventions for mental health can deliver positive outcomes, a positive return on investment and help reduce inequalities.*

### [Links between natural environments and mental health, 2022](#)

Rapid evidence review commissioned by Natural England

*Positive health, environmental and social outcomes for all groups of population are delivered by improved and increased urban green spaces. This is especially true for groups with a lower socioeconomic status benefit from the interventions.*

### [Urban green space interventions and health: A review of impacts and effectiveness](#)

*The GSP Project was able to reach a broader range of people compared to many other social prescribing initiatives, including children and young people aged under 18, ethnic minority populations (21%), and people from socio-economically deprived areas (57% in IMD deciles 1-3). These participants experienced improved wellbeing when accessing nature-based activities, indicating that GSP can have a positive impact. Across the seven pilots there was a statistically significant improvement in wellbeing for each of the ONS4 wellbeing domains after accessing nature-based activities through the GSP Project.*

### [Preventing and tackling mental ill health through green social prescribing project evaluation - final report](#)

## ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES AND CASE STUDIES

**Illustrative example 1:** A focus on codesign of services and working with communities to best address their needs can help to ensure green social prescribing services work to engage the communities that really need it. This [film](#) from South Yorkshire and Bassetlaw showcases how they have focused on engagement with the local Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic community, people with experience of mental ill health, young people and people who live in the most deprived neighbourhoods and communities in the area.

**Illustrative example 2:** This [film](#) on the Nordic Walking Wellness Project in Bristol focuses on alleviating isolation and loneliness in diverse communities across the city through designing services that help people feel comfortable accessing green spaces.

**Illustrative example 3:** During the green social prescribing programme, test and learn sites worked with local people and communities to co-design GSP services and identify where they should be delivered. A report that outlines the extensive co-design work carried out in the South Yorkshire site and the impact on programme design, can be found [here](#) by scrolling down to the Green and Blue Social Prescribing Mapping and Insight Report. As a result of this approach, the level of service take-up and reach into health inclusion groups was high.

**The GSP Toolkit**, produced by the green social prescribing programme, gives a range of different examples of how test and learn sites have worked to address inequalities and target underserved communities. Find the Toolkit at [this link](#).

## How can GSP help meet local and national priorities?

### Government national priorities

GSP can deliver multiple benefits for individuals, communities and wider society, whilst simultaneously supporting a range of government objectives. It can help to improve people's mental health and wellbeing; address important elements of inequality; combat loneliness; support active travel; boost economic growth; help us to deliver against net zero and environmental targets; and tackle obesity and other public health issues.

### Economic growth

GSP can help us to grow the economy by tackling unemployment. It can help those experiencing mental health problems to recover from them as well as preventing these problems developing in the first place, thus helping individuals remain at or return to work. GSP also offers individuals the chance to take up volunteering opportunities, which has been shown to increase individual employability. Similarly, GSP can help to increase the productivity of those who are in work by reducing time taken off work through mental health-related sickness.

### Loneliness

There is a strong body of evidence which tells us that individuals taking part in social prescribing have reduced levels of loneliness. Tackling mental ill health through GSP can decrease levels of loneliness, while helping lonely people connect with others through GSP can also help prevent mental health issues developing in the first place.

### Physical health

Spending time in nature is linked to improvements in physical health. Evidence shows spending time in nature can help to boost immune systems, encourage physical activity, and may reduce the risk of chronic diseases.

Green social prescribing can support people to move out of inactivity (defined as less than 30 minutes moderate intensity physical activity per week) and contribute to supporting people to build up to the recommended guidelines of 150 mins per week, recommended by the [UK Chief Medical Officer](#), for those that are able to do so.

### Net zero

Providing opportunities for people to connect with nature is shown to lead to more pro-environmental and pro-conservation behaviours. This link is strengthened further by high levels of nature connectedness (i.e. not simply being in a green space, but connecting with it in a meaningful way) which GSP helps people to do. Moreover, promoting connection with nature can also equip individuals with the interest and the skills to pursue careers within the green economy.

### Urban green space

GSP can help support Government aims to ensure that as many people as possible have access to high quality green space close to where they live, by supporting those who do not typically access green spaces to do so, and through demonstrating that urban green spaces are actually used by local communities.

### Integrated care systems

GSP presents a number of opportunities to support ICSs to achieve their core objectives and demonstrate greener delivery for the Green Plans:

- It can be delivered with small local community organisations to engage people from marginalised groups.
- It provides choice to those who don't find traditional treatment options accessible or suitable to their needs and connects people to local community resources. As a result, outcomes can be sustained over time and community resilience increased.
- GSP is delivered in local green spaces, including the use of the NHS estate services. Services are accessible and delivered where people live, reducing the need to travel and provide 'greener models of care'.
- The programme offers additional volunteering, training and employment pathways in local communities.

### Local government

GSP can provide a unified way to deliver on a variety of different outcomes which will be within council's local strategic plans. GSP can:

- Help encourage communities to appreciate and value their local greenspaces and use them in ways that benefit their health.
- Help to meet net zero targets by fostering pro-environmental attitudes.
- Meet the needs of individuals from a range of backgrounds, specifically those from low-income backgrounds and minority ethnic groups and help to reduce health inequalities.
- Connect people to local community-led resources, helping to improve community resilience and pride of place.
- Help to demonstrate the value of green spaces to secure more engagement and potential funding for additional green spaces.
- Help to achieve targets for healthy communities by supporting the provision activities in your locality.

### SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

*Providing opportunities for people to connect with nature is shown to lead to more pro-environmental and pro-conservation behaviours.*

*The Public Health England report describes the centrality of access to good quality greenspace as a key factor for health and well-being.*

[Improving access to greenspace: a new review for 2020](#), Public Health England

Evidence summary of links between greenspace and health; practical advice on formally valuing greenspace, improving access and levers to improve provision

*There is emerging evidence that [connection to nature] is correlated with certain wellbeing, educational outcomes, pro-environmental and pro-conservation behaviours which have important implications for society's action for climate change, the biodiversity crisis, or other environmental challenges.*

*There is increasing evidence to suggest that higher levels of [connection to nature] are positively correlated with outcomes such as better wellbeing, quality of life and educational performance.*

### [Connection to nature: evidence briefing, 2022](#)

Rapid evidence review commissioned by Natural England

*Loneliness and social isolation can compromise physical and psychological health. Social prescription activities can improve social connectedness and belonging, particularly when social prescriptions work alongside community organisations, such as those offering local farms or community gardens. Such activities can strengthen local community cohesion and civic life, alongside improving longer term mental and physical health.*

### [NASP Evidence Note: social prescribing and mental health](#)

*Greener environments are [] associated with better mental health and wellbeing outcomes including reduced levels of depression, anxiety, and fatigue, and enhanced quality of life for both children and adults. Greenspace can help to bind communities together, reduce loneliness, and mitigate the negative effects of air pollution, excessive noise, heat and flooding. When controlled for time spent outside, people with high nature connectedness were 1.7 times more likely to report that their lives were worthwhile versus those with low nature connectedness.*

### [Improving access to greenspace: a new review for 2020](#), Public Health England

Evidence summary of links between greenspace and health; practical advice on formally valuing greenspace, improving access and levers to improve provision

*There is extensive empirical evidence of the association between exposure to nature and physical health. A mounting body of evidence tends to show that, at a population level, higher levels of exposure to natural environments are associated with lower all-cause mortality, rates of type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular and respiratory disease, and more positive perinatal outcomes.*

### [Links between natural environments and physical health, 2022](#)

Rapid evidence review commissioned by Natural England

*The social benefits of volunteering programmes, and the role of volunteering as a meaningful alternative and/or addition to paid work, further justifies continued government investment. Even if volunteering does not always lead to paid work, it can enhance the skills and knowledge of unemployed individuals, boost their confidence, offer opportunities to meet other people, empower them to make new choices and provide a variety of other individual and societal benefit.*

### [Volunteering and employability: implications for policy and practice in: Voluntary Sector Review Volume 5 Issue 2 \(2014\) \(bristoluniversitypressdigital.com\)](#)

*The overall annual loss to the economy due to mental ill health in the workplace has been estimated at between £70 billion and £100 billion. Nearly half the UK costs are indirect costs related to lower employment and productivity.*

### [Health at a Glance – 2018, OECD](#)

*Research commissioned by Eden Project Initiative 'The Big Lunch' found that disconnected communities could be costing the UK £32 billion every year, through demand on health services, demand on policing and a loss of productivity.*

<https://www.edenprojectcommunities.com/the-cost-of-disconnected-communities>

*Social prescribing is recognised as a vital resource for its potential to positively impact health, enhance individual and community assets to address consequences of issues such as loneliness and social isolation, reduce vulnerabilities, and build social support among individuals during the pandemic and beyond.*

*As an innovative approach to managing health and social care, social prescribing has the potential to offer both preventive and acute benefits to individual health, system-level management, and community-level well-being.*

[Can Social Prescribing Foster Individual and Community Well-Being?](#)

Vidovic, Dragana, Gina Y. Reinhardt, and Clare Hammerton. (2021) 10: 5276.

# How can GSP help bring about a greener model of healthcare?

## TOP LINES

GSP can offer greener models of care, helping to support the implementation of ICS Green Plans.

By providing local community delivered services, GSP can avoid the need to travel to access interventions, reducing carbon emissions and supporting progress towards net zero.

As a viable, non-clinical option within mental health pathways that complements clinical treatment offers, use of GSP can contribute to a reduction in overprescribing.

Using the NHS estate to deliver GSP activities can encourage and directly contribute to better usage of existing green space.

## SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

*People's health is influenced by a range of social, economic and environmental factors such as housing, economic resources, pollution, health behaviours and diet. Often, medicines only deal with symptoms, and do not tackle the underlying causes of illness or effect a cure. Medicines are sometimes prescribed where the patient would benefit from other forms of advice and support to tackle or alleviate these underlying causes.*

[Good for me, good for you, good for everybody -A plan to reduce overprescribing to make patient care better and safer, support the NHS, and reduce carbon emissions.](#)

National overprescribing review, Department of Health and Social Care, 2020

## ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES AND CASE STUDIES

**Illustrative Example 1:** The Surrey Heartlands Team worked in partnership with the Surrey and Borders Mental Health Partnership Trust to redevelop a piece of land in their estate to offer a welcoming therapeutic green space. Children and young people using the Trust's Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service co-designed the new garden. Trust staff will be able to deliver their sessions in the garden and have also received training to assist them in delivering therapeutic nature-based activities as part of their interventions. The project was co-funded by the Mental Health Trust and Surrey Heartland GSP programme and has improved part of the hospital estate and brought it back into productive use. The addition of the garden and nature-based skills enable the team to offer a wider range of options for working with young people.

**Illustrative Example 2:** The Greater Manchester site chose to use existing green assets to deliver accessible services in the City Centre, where people lived. For example, they worked with providers delivering in City Centre parks, like 'Manchester Urban Diggers' (MUD). MUD regenerated and repurposed a neglected and overgrown bowling green and turned it into a productive market garden and community growing space. Their story can be found [here](#).

'Sow the City', a green provider in Greater Manchester formed a partnership with Prestwich Hospital to deliver onsite health and wellbeing walks and activities for people staying in the in-patient mental health facility and to improve staff wellbeing. The wooded area hadn't been managed or maintained previously and has now become a valued part of the hospital estate, which can be accessed by patients in the hospital, out-patients, visitors, and staff. It has provided a valued calm space, where people can take some time out and reflect.

## What is the role of voluntary and community organisations?

Voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations are a vital building block in the delivery of green social prescribing, providing the activities and connecting people with services and communities. Many organisations are already delivering what would be considered to be green social prescribing activities, through existing programmes.

Engaging with GSP provides a way for organisations to capitalise on what they are already delivering and to receive the recognition to develop and test sustainable funding models.

Being recognised as a GSP provider can help to embed green providers in the healthcare sector and promote greater understanding of the benefits of nature-based interventions and suitable referrals amongst health professionals.

By bringing a range of sectors together there is an opportunity to deliver a host of benefits, e.g. reducing inequalities, increasing pride of place, preventing and tackling mental ill health and improving physical health outcomes.

### ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES AND CASE STUDIES

**Illustrative example 1:** This [film](#) from Greater Manchester demonstrates how they have partnered with organisations across the VCSE sector to best support the diverse needs of local communities, including working with existing organisations that are locally based and rooted in local communities.

**The GSP Toolkit**, produced by the green social prescribing programme, gives a range of different examples of voluntary and community organisations working with the health sector on green social prescribing. Find the Toolkit at [this link](#).



## Why is GSP a good investment?

The existing evidence on GSP suggests that it is a cost-effective model that is generally less expensive than other interventions and could result in considerable savings to society.

Monetary benefits of GSP could be realised through value to the health system and savings associated with preventing or reducing the need for more acute forms of care, through benefit to the economy associated with reducing unemployment and increasing productivity, and through the social return of improvements in individual life satisfaction.

### SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

*Compared with other interventions for people with mental health needs [...], nature-based activities appear to be a relatively cost-efficient way to support people across a wide spectrum of mental health needs.*

*Allowing for sensitivity adjustments to prevent overclaiming, the value of WELLBYs (wellbeing-adjusted life years) estimated to have been created through the GSP project ranged from £7.6 million to £23.3 million, with a central estimate of £14 million. This means that the (social) return on investment of the GSP project ranged from £1.31 to £4.03 for every pound (£1) invested in the GSP project by HM Treasury's Shared Outcomes Fund and national partners, with a central estimate of £2.42.*

[Preventing and tackling mental ill health through green social prescribing project evaluation - final report](#)

*The small number of studies that have estimated the economic value associated 'green' interventions for mental health, have typically shown them to be cost effective and to result in savings to society. Social returns on investment ranged between £2.35 and £11.94.*

*Nature-based health interventions to support mental health including horticultural and agricultural schemes, walking groups and regeneration projects in local parks were estimated to have resulted in savings (through reduced NHS costs, benefits reductions, and increased tax contributions) of around £7,082 per participant. It was estimated the programme would result in savings of £1.46m for 246 people who had found full-time work following participation.*

*A Scottish programme prescribing a series of formally led, woodland activities to individuals with mental ill health found the cost per Quality Adjusted Life Year gained (QALY) was £8,600 In comparison to the NICE threshold of £20-30,000 per QALY.*

[Links between natural environments and mental health, 2022](#)

Rapid evidence review commissioned by Natural England

*The delivery of GSP could lead to savings to the NHS worth £159m through 4.5 million fewer GP appointments, along with savings to prescription costs of £141m, plus more.*

[National Academy for Social Prescribing evidence reviews](#)

Analysis based on paper on economic impact looking at potential impact on primary care of the planned roll-out by NHS England of 4,500 social prescribing link workers by 2023/24

*Evaluation of a national social prescribing programme for loneliness found that the social value was £3.42 for every pound invested.*

[Impact of social prescribing to address loneliness: A mixed methods evaluation of a national social prescribing programme.](#)

Foster, A, Thompson, J, Holding, E, et al. (2021) Health Soc Care Community.

## Where can I find more information and support?

Provision of information and support varies by locality; the organisations below are places you can go to help you find a range of practical information including:

- what's going on in your area
- how to get involved
- resources and best practice
- how to find funding

**National Academy for Social Prescribing (NASP)** offers advice and support on green social prescribing and wider social prescribing. Please contact NASP at: [greensocialprescribing@nasp.info](mailto:greensocialprescribing@nasp.info) or explore at [The National Academy for Social Prescribing | NASP \(socialprescribingacademy.org.uk\)](https://socialprescribingacademy.org.uk)

**Natural England** offers information about evidence and nature-based activities in your area; to find out more about how to start delivering green social prescribing, please contact Natural England at: [gsp.sga@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:gsp.sga@naturalengland.org.uk).

**Sport England** invests in **Active Partnerships**, many of which are interested in social prescribing and are working with health partners. Please talk to your local partnerships about your plans and see what support or connections they can help you with. Look for regional support here: [Active Partnerships | Active Partnerships](#)

**National Association of Link workers** is the only professional body for all link workers across the UK, a membership organisation providing support and development for link workers. Explore here: [Home - National Association of Link Workers \(nalw.org.uk\)](https://nalw.org.uk)

## Links to national policies

Below are links to, and relevant lines from, policies and strategies across government that can strengthen the case for GSP.

### [Levelling Up the United Kingdom, 2022, DLUHC](#)

*Levelling up mission for health: By 2030, the gap in Healthy Life Expectancy (HLE) between local areas where it is highest and lowest will have narrowed, and by 2035 HLE will rise by five years.*

*Levelling up mission for wellbeing: By 2030, well-being will have improved in every area of the UK, with the gap between top performing and other areas closing.*

### [NHS Long Term Plan, 2019, NHS](#)

*We will roll out the NHS Personalised Care model across the country, reaching 2.5 million people by 2023/24 and then aiming to double that again within a decade. As part of this work, through social prescribing the range of support available to people will widen, diversify and become accessible across the country.*

*Link workers within primary care networks will work with people to develop tailored plans and connect them to local groups and support services. Over 1,000 trained social prescribing link workers will be in place by the end of 2020/21 rising further by 2023/24, with the aim that over 900,000 people are able to be referred to social prescribing schemes by then.*

### [The 25 Year Environment Plan, 2018, Defra](#)

*We will scope out how we could connect people more systematically with green space to improve mental health, using the natural environment as a resource for preventative and therapeutic purposes.*

*Our ambition includes encouraging mental health service providers to explore the potential offered by environmental therapies and doing more to spread the word about the benefits of nature.*

*The Government will promote collaboration between the health and environment sectors, at national and local level.*

*We will consider how NHS mental health providers in England can establish new working arrangements with environmental voluntary sector organisations to offer appropriate therapies – such as gardening, outdoor exercise and care farming – in natural settings to people with mild to moderate mental health conditions and who may be struggling to overcome loneliness and isolation.*

### [Environmental Improvement Plan, 2023, Defra](#)

*The evidence is clear that spending time in nature is beneficial for our physical and mental health and the Government recognises the importance of improving access for all to green and blue spaces. Creating new greenspace, preventing loss of existing greenspace, and making them more inclusive, accessible and better quality could help to deliver improved population health outcomes, reduced health disparities and environmental sustainability.*

We will:

- explore options for how best to embed green social prescribing, including across multiple healthcare pathways.
- drive the roll-out of social prescribing more broadly, so that at least 900,000 people will be referred to social prescribing by 2023 to 2024.
- Work with the National Lottery Community Fund and Groundwork to develop a Northern Network of 5 Green Community Hubs in high deprivation areas as centres for nature-based activities for green social prescribing.

#### [A connected society: a strategy for tackling loneliness, 2018 DCMS](#)

*The Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England are committed to improving and expanding social prescribing services. Social prescribing connects people to community groups and services through connector schemes where 'link workers' introduce people to support based on their individual needs. This will include an expansion of social prescribing services.*

*By 2023, government will support all local health and care systems to implement social prescribing connector schemes across the whole country, supporting government's aim to have a universal national offer available in GP practices. This means that more people will be connected with the care and support they need when they are experiencing loneliness, no matter where they live.*

#### [Sustainability and climate change: a strategy for the education and children's services systems, 2022, DfE](#)

*Creating an environment from an early age where we are able to connect to nature is essential for self-enforcement in protecting and valuing nature'.*

*We will increase opportunities for all children and young people to:*

- spend time in nature and learn more about it
- become actively involved in the improvement of their local environment

*We know that regular contact with green spaces can have a beneficial impact on children's physical and mental health. However, access to green space is not equal and we must do more to ensure that all children have opportunities to benefit from access to green space and build connections with nature.*

#### [Launch of Green Jobs Taskforce, 2020, BEIS & DfE](#)

*The UK government set a clear ambition to support 2 million green jobs by 2030, launching a new Green Jobs Taskforce to set the direction for the job market as we transition to a high-skill, low carbon economy.*

#### [Gear Change: a bold vision for cycling and walking, 2020, DfT](#)

*Increasing cycling and walking can help tackle some of the most challenging issues we face as a society – improving air quality, combatting climate change, improving health and wellbeing, addressing inequalities and tackling congestion on our roads.*

*Bold action will help to create places we want to live and work – with better connected, healthier and more sustainable communities. It will help deliver clean growth, by supporting local businesses, as well as helping ensure prosperity can spread across the country and level up our nation.*

[Uniting the Movement, 2021, Sport England](#)

*Sport and physical activity makes people happier and healthier, and movement is the lens through which we can make that happen. It does the same thing for our communities, with life-changing, sustainable benefits that have huge economic and social value.*

*There's overwhelming evidence for the life-changing benefits of being active – from childhood through to old age. Every year, these benefits deliver billions of pounds of value to our healthcare systems, society and economy.*

## Resources

### General resources

NHS England Social Prescribing pages: [NHS England » Social prescribing](#)

NHS England Green Social Prescribing pages: [NHS England » Green social prescribing](#)

National Academy of Social Prescribing: [The National Academy for Social Prescribing | NASP \(socialprescribingacademy.org.uk\)](#)

### Resources from Green Social Prescribing Programme to Tackle and Prevent Mental Ill-health

#### **Green Social Prescribing Toolkit**

A toolkit for those looking to implement and embed GSP, providing information, examples and tools, as well as a clinicians and healthcare professionals resource pack.

Access the Toolkit at: [Green Social Prescribing - National Academy for Social Prescribing | NASP \(socialprescribingacademy.org.uk\)](#)

#### **Green Social Prescribing Practice Report**

A practice report sharing some of the highlights of learning from practice that took place during the test and learn programme, and key recommendations for how to deliver and embed a programme of green and blue social prescribing.

Access the Practice Report at: [Green Social Prescribing - National Academy for Social Prescribing | NASP \(socialprescribingacademy.org.uk\)](#)

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