

# Nature Buddies:

The role of volunteer-led support in enabling people to engage in community activities to support their health and wellbeing

## A step-by-step toolkit



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This toolkit is accompanied by a [resource pack](#). This pack includes additional guidance such as a volunteer training matrix, sample volunteer role descriptions and information on induction, as well as case studies.

Terms and definitions that are explained in the glossary on p.34-36 are marked in **purple**.

# Introduction

## Foreword

One of the most important aspects of the Preventing and Tackling Mental Ill Health through Green Social Prescribing (GSP) **test-and-learn programme**, which was completed in June 2023, will be to make sure that we are genuinely able to share and learn from the outcomes to support the roll-out of **green social prescribing** more widely.

The creation of this toolkit, developed by Natural England with partners, is in response to what we learnt about the barriers which individuals face in being able to access green social prescribing services. The test-and-learn programme not only enabled us to better understand the range and complexity of these challenges, but also increased our awareness of the sheer numbers of people these challenges affect; it is not insignificant. These barriers range from anxiety and fear, through to issues with infrastructure, such as transportation.

This toolkit has been tested and informed by our partners who have worked tirelessly to bring together best practice and case studies from across the country. It is packed full of resources for organisations who provide personalised care for people in local communities.

I hope you enjoy using this toolkit as an aid to support more people to get outside, explore natural spaces and connect with nature.



*Amanda Craig, Director, Connecting People and Nature Programme, Natural England*



## What's in this toolkit?

In this toolkit and [resource pack](#), we share best practice about how to set up a volunteer Nature Buddies scheme.

### The toolkit includes:

- How to design a Nature Buddies programme that builds on the interests of both your volunteers and the people you work with
- How to enhance your offer to volunteers, recruit new volunteers and give existing volunteers new ideas to develop their relationships with the people they support on a one-to-one basis or in small groups
- How to empower people to feel better, improving their mental health and other health outcomes and to build social connections to overcome loneliness
- How to build people's connection to the outdoor spaces and nature near them
- How to measure success and impact
- Case studies and anonymised testimonials that demonstrate the benefits.

The resources are flexible and adaptable, just like the idea of Nature Buddies itself. How you use the toolkit will depend on your context. Please adapt the resources here in a way that works for you.

## Who is this toolkit for?

This toolkit and [resource pack](#) can be used by charities, community organisations, local authorities, physical activity partnerships, green providers, community volunteer services and health providers.



## What are buddies?

Organisations already use volunteering to offer 'buddying' as one-to-one or small group interventions which help people to overcome difficulties in their lives and empower them to take part in activities they enjoy. Buddies may be volunteers who develop a relationship with a person over time, akin to befriending, or they may be volunteers who reach out to people and support them to connect with activities on a short-term basis.

A trained buddy helps a person to develop the confidence to access a particular activity or intervention. The buddy acts as an enabler to help the person to overcome any barriers that stand in their way to developing independence. The buddy's role varies depending on the person's individual needs.

"I am no longer house-bound and will continue to enjoy the outdoor local environment now I have been introduced to the idea. I am getting fitter and want to do sponsored walks to raise funds for the charity that has helped me so much."

Fred, participant, Seachange

## What are Nature Buddies?

A Nature Buddy is a specially-trained volunteer who enables a person, on a one-to-one basis or as part of a small group, to overcome barriers to taking part in nature-based activities, such as getting outside, exploring natural spaces and connecting with nature.

A Nature Buddy could simply help a participant access a bus timetable to travel to a nature-based activity, or they could play a more involved role in enabling them to fully participate in the activity. A relationship could be short-term or ongoing and could include planning activities together over time.

Nature Buddies schemes can build social connections and cohesiveness, reduce isolation and loneliness whilst improving the health and happiness of individuals and communities. Nature Buddies schemes can provide personalised care for people, which responds to their specific needs.

How a Nature Buddies scheme runs will depend on whether you have existing volunteers whose remit you will expand to include nature. This will be less challenging than having to set up a scheme from the start.

Nottinghamshire-based SUP Fitness creates safe, educational, fun and inspiring environments for people of all abilities and ages to get involved in paddling boarding. Nina's anxiety had increased due to recent bereavements and the pressures of parenting a young family. She was introduced to paddling with the help of a Buddy who motivated her to get outside and make time for herself.

"For me, doing something that's physical is a form of self-care. I find paddling very mindful. I can just have some calm time with nature. Weekly or fortnightly paddle boarding has probably stopped me from having to go back to the doctors to speak about my mental health, and maybe even needing antidepressants. I couldn't have done this without the initial help to get along."

Nina, participant, SUP Fitness



# Why are Nature Buddies needed?

Voluntary and community organisations are pivotal in turning the tide on loneliness and supporting people from all backgrounds and ages to overcome social isolation and mental ill health. They can help build resilient and cohesive communities.

The need for volunteers to work with people to overcome social anxiety, isolation and loneliness has never been greater.

A survey of GPs, carried out before the Covid-19 pandemic, identified that **two in five consultations (40%)** were about mental health concerns. Recent research by the Mental Health Foundation and London School of Economics suggested that **mental ill health costs the UK economy up to £118 billion per annum.**



Millions of people experience mental ill health. This has a significant impact on health care services, which are struggling to meet the demand for care. Yet, we know that by connecting to nature, people can feel better on their journey to recovery. The case for connecting to nature is set out in the [Green Social Prescribing](#) toolkit published here.

However, for some people, getting outside and taking part in nature-based activities will be impossible.

[The Independent Mental Health Network](#), on behalf of the Healthier with Nature Bristol, North, Somerset and South GSP pilot test-and-learn site, reported that people with mental ill health may experience anxiety associated with:

- Finding out about activities
- Researching where to go
- Not knowing how to get to an activity or finding suitable transport
- Not knowing what to wear
- Completing administration and forms
- Joining a new group of people
- Being outside and fear of other people in outdoor spaces.

These anxieties form a significant barrier, preventing people taking part in and benefiting from nature-based activities. Moreover, access to, and use of, natural spaces is not equitably spread across the country and between communities. The benefits of connecting with nature are not easily available to everyone.

The research that has informed this toolkit, and organisations we've spoken to, have all demonstrated the positive impact of having a buddy to help people access interventions that can support their mental health. This support can also help relieve the pressure on health services by helping people to improve their health and wellbeing now, rather than having to wait.

Evidence shows that engaging with nature – whether it is by looking at a garden, learning about natural history, or visiting outdoor spaces – can:

- Lead to reductions in stress, fatigue, anxiety and depression
- Help encourage physical activity
- Reduce the risk of chronic diseases
- Help in the management of long-term conditions.

# Qualities and characteristics of Nature Buddies

There are many qualities and characteristics that a Nature Buddy needs to perform their role well. Here are some that we think are important:

- A real appreciation of and interest in nature and the outdoors, and enthusiastic about its benefits (no expertise required)
- Strong listening skills
- Understanding of the client or participant group
- An ability to approach new people or be approached without prejudice
- Honesty, trustworthiness, commitment and reliability
- Respect for confidentiality
- Friendliness, warmth, empathy and resilience
- A professional approach to volunteering with the organisation.

# The benefits of connecting with nature




Nature Buddies is different from other buddying schemes because it focuses on connecting people with the natural world. Evidence shows that if you improve this connection with nature, then people's mental health and wellbeing improves too. Interventions which use natural environments as settings for mental health promotion or therapy deliver positive outcomes.

There is strong evidence that spending time in the natural environment:

- Can reduce stress, fatigue, anxiety and depression
- Helps boost immune systems
- Encourages physical activity
- May reduce the risk of chronic diseases
- Brings positive outcomes for mental health, stress, mood disorders and psycho-social wellbeing.





An illustration of two people standing on a pier or walkway overlooking the sea. On the left, a woman with grey hair in a bun, wearing a purple hooded jacket and light-colored trousers, stands with her hand on the railing. On the right, a man with dark hair, wearing an orange jacket, blue trousers, and a dark blue backpack, stands next to her. They are both looking out towards the sea. The background features a blue sky with white clouds and two seagulls in flight. The sea is a deep blue with white-capped waves. In the distance, there are green hills and a sandy beach. The foreground shows a patch of green grass and some white flowers. A large brown rectangular box on the left side of the image contains text.

Seachange in Devon aims to increase social cohesiveness, reduce isolation and loneliness through events, activities and support for all ages. Seachange paired Rose, who lives alone with severe sight loss, with volunteer Helena who drives her to visit local outdoor spaces.

“Without Nature Buddies, Rose wouldn’t have anyone to accompany her outdoors - something we both look forward to and enjoy. A firm favourite place to visit is the local seafront, where we enjoy smells of the salt sea air, and sounds of seagulls and people passing by, as we gently stroll along.”

Helena, volunteer, Seachange

# Eight principles for developing a Nature Buddy scheme

You can use these principles to guide the development of a Nature Buddies scheme, to shape the training you offer, and to help monitor the scheme when it is up and running.

- 1. Be person-centred.** This includes the volunteers as well as the people you work with. It can be thinking about the training you provide for Nature Buddy volunteers or listening to the interests and aspirations of the person who you are matching with a Nature Buddy volunteer.
- 2. Adopt a whole-organisation approach.** Work closely with volunteers and staff to build a solid foundation for the project so that everyone sees the part they can play.
- 3. Adopt a co-design approach.** Recognise and listen to the expertise of volunteers and of the people you work with. Talk to people who could refer into your scheme and build a shared vision. Together, consider the critical factors that need to be in place to ensure the scheme will work for everybody.
- 4. Be flexible.** Feedback about what works will be iterative and ongoing.
- 5. Be friendly, approachable and supportive.** This is a key principle for how Nature Buddies behave when supporting people to become more independent.
- 6. Be safe.** Set up safe processes for Nature Buddies and the people they support, including skills and training, and ensure the spaces they visit are safe.
- 7. Be inclusive and equitable, so that people from all backgrounds can benefit equally.** Think carefully about inclusion and how you will meet the provisions of the [Equalities Act 2010](#).
- 8. Recognise that Buddying is a high quality volunteering practice.** Buddying can be hugely rewarding for volunteers and the people they work with, as well bringing wider benefits to your organisation. Nature Buddies may work with people with moderate mental ill health and this requires a specific skill-set.



“We have worked the buddying around what we are doing already, rather than starting something completely new. We invited volunteers to take part who wanted to work with clients who typically live alone, are isolated, and some are compromised by mobility. We gave them information about ways to connect with nature, so they could talk to the individual clients they support and find out what they would like to do.

It’s great for our volunteers because it gives them a focus to the relationship they are embarking on with the people they are matched with. We can give our volunteers something back as they develop new skills, such as identifying birds or nature connection, through new training we offer.

We have seen a transformation in how outgoing people feel. Many people have told us that it has reawakened their dreams to do more outside, such as charity events, or try more adventurous activities, such as sailing.”

Sarah Forde, Seachange, Devon



# Step-by-step guide to setting up and running a Nature Buddies scheme

This section of the toolkit provides practical guidance and resources for setting up your own scheme, from initial scoping to delivery and evaluation. We share what we've learnt from organisations that have already done it.

 **Questions to consider**

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 **Ideas and resources**

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 **Section recaps**

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# Step one: Scoping

There are many different things you'll need to consider when setting up a Nature Buddies scheme, including who you will work with; how you will identify activities; and what kind of training you will need to offer volunteers. Clarifying the scope of your project early on will save time and stress later down the line.

## Starter questions


1. Which national and societal issues is your organisation responding to or affected by? How will a Nature Buddies scheme help address these?
2. Which local health priorities and local health inequalities have an impact on your clients? How will a Nature Buddies scheme help respond to these?

## Build the business case for a Nature Buddies scheme

Your business case is the place to start. It lays out why you believe the scheme will help you to meet the needs of your organisation and your clients, and what you need to make that possible.

A business case will help you make the case for funding, staff and resources. It also provides a useful reference point for funders, managers and other stakeholders as the project develops.

The starter questions will help you shape your business case. The information on [p.27-31](#) about the benefits of Nature Buddies to volunteers, participants and organisations will also strengthen your case.



“To build rapport I simply got to know the person, asking their interests, skills and learning about their culture and background. By building this relationship you quickly get to understand their interests from building, painting, and digging to farming, flowers or photography.”

Danny, volunteer,  
Nottingham Refugee Forum



## Link your scheme to national and local health challenges

Nature Buddies schemes and volunteers can directly contribute to meeting national and local policy goals around these issues:

**Loneliness.** There are high levels of social isolation and loneliness across the country. People who experience chronic loneliness, and associated levels of anxiety, are at increased risk of long-term health conditions, such as stroke, heart disease and Alzheimer's. Nature Buddies can help achieve the goals of the [Government's Loneliness strategy](#).

**Mental ill health.** Primary care, community mental health teams, in-patient services and social care, struggle to meet the increasing mental health needs of their local populations. Nature Buddies build on the Government's commitment to transform mental health services and increase social prescribing, set out in the [NHS Long Term Plan](#).


**Building sustainable communities and environments.** Nature can play a key role in enabling people to live full and happy lives. Nature Buddies can help deliver on the ambition set out in the [Government's Environmental Improvement Plan](#) to help more people, from all backgrounds, to engage with and spend time in green and blue spaces in their everyday lives.

**Barriers to participation.** Chronic mental ill health and anxiety associated with social isolation can be barriers to someone taking up activities which could benefit their mental health and social relationships, including nature-based activities. Nature Buddies provide a practical way to overcome these barriers.

### Local health priorities

Nature Buddies is a community-centred approach that takes an individual's unique circumstances into account and tailors support to their specific needs. Each scheme can be adapted to address local health priorities, as set out by [Integrated Care Boards](#).


A Nature Buddies scheme can help tackle local health inequalities, and build support for community groups and organisations that host buddies, as well as for nature-based areas, activities and infrastructure.



The 'Stepping into Nature' project, led by the Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty partnership, works with Age UK and other organisations to deliver activities that are suited to older people, people with long term health conditions and carers.

"I think it's being outside, being with somebody as a Buddy can make you feel more confident. He's very wobbly on his feet. It's enabling him to get out in the fresh air. On a nice sunny day, chatting as you walk is always often easier than chatting just sitting down. I think all of that is beneficial."

Al, Nature Buddy volunteer,  
Stepping into Nature



## Review your existing resources

Think about how your existing systems and coordination resources may be able to support a Nature Buddies scheme. What do you already have in place, and where are the gaps?

Setting up a Nature Buddies scheme from scratch can take a great deal of time, resources and coordination. However, if you already have befriending volunteers with your organisation, expanding their role to include a Nature Buddy element will mean that you can make good use of existing systems and resources.

It is really important to factor in a coordinator's time to review the buddying relationships as they develop, and to keep in touch with both Buddies and the person they are working with.

## Identify partners to help deliver the scheme

Working in partnership with others, whether new connections or existing partners, can make your Nature Buddies scheme stronger. Identifying potential partners is a crucial part of the scoping stage.

Partners can help you:

- Access skills, resources, expertise and funding
- Find allies to co-design your scheme with
- Reach new audiences
- Recruit diverse volunteers
- Identify a wide range of activities for participants
- Understand what is already being offered locally, avoid duplication and maximise use of resources.



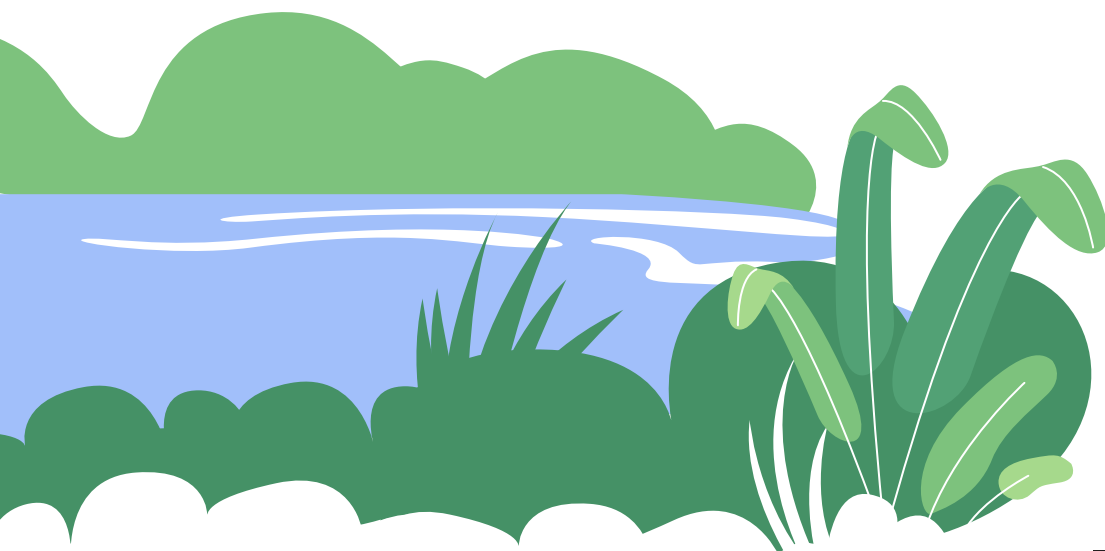
## Ideas and resources

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As you scope your Nature Buddies scheme, you could try approaching:

- Your local Community Voluntary Services (CVS) who may be able to offer volunteers and suggest funding sources. They will also be able to let you know about local directories or networks that would help you discover other potential partners
- There may be many **referrers** who would be interested to find out about your scheme, including local social prescribing link workers.
- Volunteer leads for local befriending or nature-based organisations
- Organisations who provide nature-based activities in your area, for example green space or park friends' groups; [Groundwork Trusts](#); [Social Farms and Gardens](#); and nature and wildlife organisations, such as [your local Wildlife Trust](#) or [the RSPB](#)
- Local Authority Parks Teams who may have programmes of activities or support communities to run activities on their sites.

It could also be helpful to build relationships within your local **Integrated Care System** by joining a partnership of organisations that come together to plan and deliver joined up health and care services, and to improve the lives of people who live and work in their area. These groups of organisations can be called [Integrated Place Partnerships](#) or [Integrated Place Alliances](#).



## Investigate funding options

You may need additional funding to cover expenses like buying materials, hiring transport, volunteer expenses, training, and staff time for administration and coordination of the scheme.

You may not need a full-time coordinator for the scheme, if you can draw on existing volunteers and coordinator time.



### Ideas and resources

- [Sport England](#) grants
- Your local Community Voluntary Service (CVS)
- Local community foundations who often administer funds on behalf of local organisations and trusts
- The National Lottery Community Fund – [Awards for All](#)
- Search for funders on [My Funding Central](#)
- Use this [guidance from NASP](#) to find funding for social prescribing
- Look for opportunities to apply for tenders and/or grant funding from your local authority or Integrated Care System.

## Plan Nature Buddy volunteer training

A successful Nature Buddy scheme depends on well-trained volunteers. Buddies will need a wide range of interpersonal skills to be able to engage successfully with the people they work with.

Like most volunteering roles, Nature Buddies will need training to ensure they can work with people on a one-to-one basis. For example, a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check, safeguarding and health and safety training. They will also need befriending skills and an awareness of the role of nature connection (find more about nature connection on [p.23](#)).

The [resource pack](#) that accompanies this toolkit provides a potential training matrix for organisations to consider who want to set up Nature Buddy schemes.

## Volunteer induction

Having an induction for all new Nature Buddies is a good way to introduce them to the scheme and to begin their training.

### Induction sessions could include:

- An overview of the purpose and content of the role
- Required skills, experience and qualities
- Benefits to the volunteer
- Benefits of being outside
- Setting boundaries
- Safeguarding
- Goal-setting
- Urgent mental health response
- Further training opportunities, resources and requirements.

For more ideas on induction, please see the [resource pack](#) that accompanies this toolkit.



## Develop role descriptions for your Nature Buddies

The role of the Nature Buddy may be different depending on your organisation and the interests and skills of your volunteers.



### Ideas and resources

We've identified some roles in the table below. In the [resource pack](#), you can find samples of role descriptions that can be adapted.



Role	Main purpose of Nature Buddies volunteer
Nature Buddy (Communication)	Reminding people by phone, text or email about their next nature-based activity session.
Nature Buddy (Transport)	Volunteers who are designated drivers can also be Nature Buddies by thinking about how they can build viewing nature into the route they take; and adding in some points to note for the people they drive.
Nature Buddy (General)	Meeting a person regularly to support them to participate in activities outside.
Nature Buddy (Mental health supporter)	Providing support for a person with more acute mental ill health to take part in nature-based activities.

## Identify activities

Think through the kind of activities that your Nature Buddies will support people to access. This will determine the kind of training that you offer to Buddies; the information you share with referrers and how you monitor impact.

In some cases, this will be easy - you may already run certain activities, have expertise in a particular area or know volunteers who have specific skills and interests. You don't have to be prescriptive, but a menu of options is useful. It's most effective when a Buddy and the person they are supporting decide together what kind of activity they want to do. There are more ideas on [p.23](#).

“Activities should be as person-centred as possible. The Buddy should follow the lead of the person they are working with in order for them to get the most from the experience.

“Going outside can be difficult for some people, so just appreciating sitting in the garden and looking at birds is as valuable as, and may be more appropriate than, planning a long hike.”

Donna, Volunteer Nature Buddy, Seachange



## Step one: Recap

Have you thought about...

- How to structure your business case
- Which other organisations you might want to partner with
- What to include in your volunteer induction and training
- What funding might be available
- Role descriptions for specific Nature Buddy roles
- Which activities your Buddies will support people to participate in.



## Step two: Co-design the scheme

Co-design is the process of involving people who have an interest, often called stakeholders, in the design and development of services.

A co-design process weaves together the aspirations of different voices, identifies what shared values or common ground exists and builds a scheme from that basis. Relatedly, the partners we spoke to about their Nature Buddies schemes, described a co-design process where by they gave greater ownership of how the scheme was run to a wider group of people, such as their volunteers.



### Starter questions

1. Who will be directly involved in the scheme?

For example, volunteers who will become Nature Buddies; the people they will work with; and the staff who will coordinate the project.

2. Who are the wider stakeholders who can help shape the scheme and make it sustainable?

For example, social prescribing link workers who may refer people to you to be matched with a Buddy. A local green organisation may be interested to partner with you and provide activities for your scheme.

## Set up a co-design meeting or plan meetings with potential partners

- Once you have identified your stakeholders (using the suggested list on [p.15](#) as a guide) you might want to invite them to an introductory meeting to:
  - Allow you to share information on the proposed scheme
  - Enable people to feed back about how they could work with you
  - Give organisations the opportunity to build their connections and develop their own knowledge
  - Help you develop criteria (such as the level of mental health needs your scheme will work with or if you have other specific criteria for referrers to consider). This will help social prescribing link workers and other referrers identify the right people to refer to your scheme.



### Step two: Recap

Have you thought about...

- How to approach and engage potential partners
- What to include in an introductory co-design workshop
- How to keep partners engaged after the workshop
- How you can best work with social prescribing link workers and other referrers.

# Step three: Delivery

The scoping and co-design steps should give you a clear idea of what you need in place and who you need to work with to deliver your project.

This step explores the practicalities of getting referrals, planning activities and building a sustainable project.

## Starter question

1. How will you add or integrate nature-related activities into your current work?

This could be through adding nature-based activities into one-to-one or small group sessions for volunteers and the people they work with, or by adding these elements to existing group activities, such as a social club.

## Getting referrals to your Nature Buddies scheme

- Building relationships with individual referrers is key to getting referrals. Referrers, such as social prescribing link workers, healthcare clinicians or community organisations, could refer people in your client group who they think would benefit from a Nature Buddy directly.
- Nature Buddies could support the people you already work with without any need to be referred from elsewhere. For example, if you are a green organisation, you could train some of your volunteers to be Nature Buddies, so that you can offer extra support and a warm welcome to new people who come to, or want to volunteer with, your organisation.
- Referrals may also come from social media advertising, such as Facebook posts, about your Nature Buddy scheme.

## Social prescribing link workers

A social prescribing link worker works with individuals to understand what matters to them. They explore ways to improve the person's health and wellbeing by connecting them to activities and services in their local area. Through this conversation, they may identify that going outside or connecting to nature as something the person would like to explore, given the known benefits for both health and wellbeing.

The social prescribing link worker may refer them to your Nature Buddies project. Ask social prescribing link workers to let you know when they refer someone to your scheme, so that you can easily keep track of referrals.

You can find your local social prescribing link workers through GPs, Primary Care Networks or by searching online. Their expertise can help you scope, design and deliver the scheme. It's also valuable that they understand your scheme once it's up and running, for example by seeing your safeguarding and other policies, or knowing what level of mental health needs you can support, so that they can make appropriate referrals.



## Keeping in touch with stakeholders and partners



### Ideas and resources

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Depending on their capacity, the organisations we worked with to develop this toolkit regularly shared (and re-shared) electronic introductory leaflets (including contact details for referrals and any referral criteria). They also sent regular email updates and invitations to events or training to wider stakeholder and partners, as well as their volunteers to help keep them engaged and informed about the Nature Buddies scheme.

Rather than producing your own material, your local Community Voluntary Service (CVS) may be able to help you keep partners and potential partners up to date with progress on your Nature Buddies scheme, for example by including information and updates on their website or newsletter.





## Ideas and resources

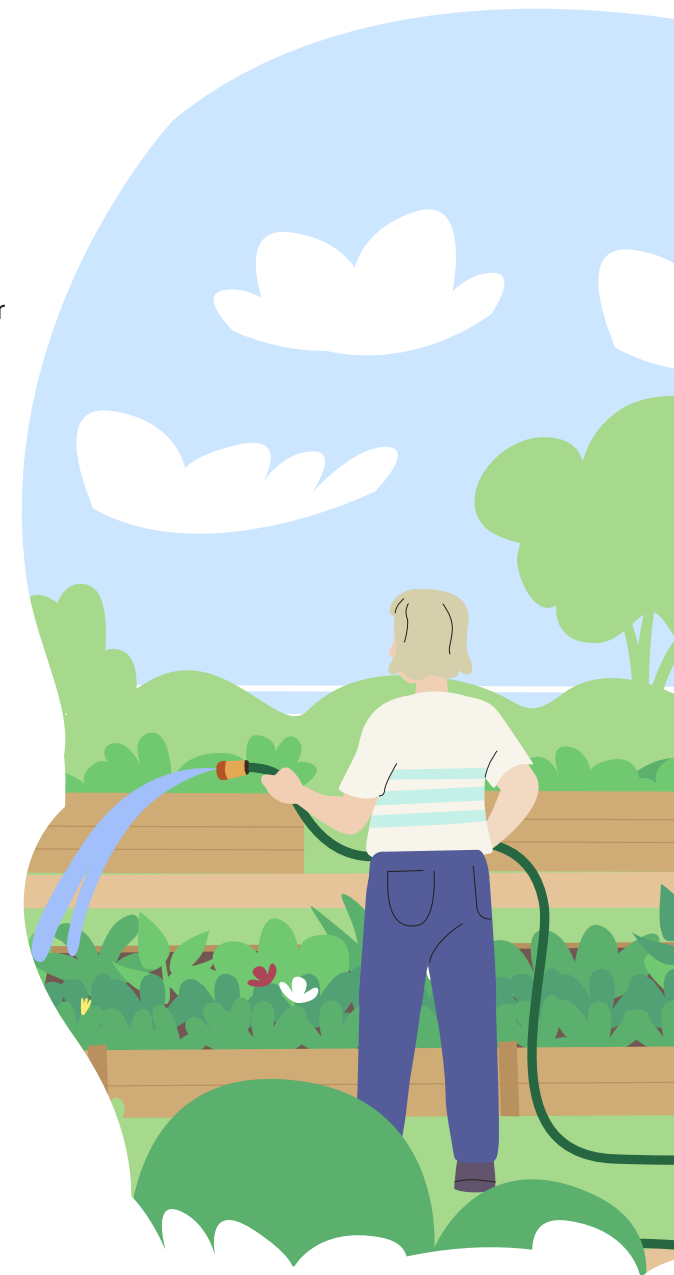
### Increasing the sustainability of your project

To increase the impact that Nature Buddies can have in your area and to make the most of the work you'll do in setting up the scheme, think about long-term sustainability right from the start. Here are some ideas:

- **Capture regular feedback** and experience from your Nature Buddies to help inform the development of their role going forwards.
- **Establish a Nature Buddies network** for both the Buddies themselves and for stakeholder organisations. This can help maintain momentum, provide peer support, retain and attract new Nature Buddies and provide a space to share ideas and good practice. This network could be in-person, virtual or both.
- **Connect with referrers.** Consider how buddies generally (not just Nature Buddies) could help social prescribing be more effective in supporting individuals to access the help, support and advice they require in the community. Who else working in a health or mental health role could use Nature Buddies to help their patients connect with nature?
- **Share learning, training and joint working opportunities** by plugging the Nature Buddies scheme into any wider community connector or health champions schemes in your locality.

“Nature Buddies will really be able to complement the work that social prescribing link workers do. The key thing for us is having support from the local Community Volunteer Service with training and development so we can roll this out across the Primary Care Networks that we support.”

Louise Redhead, Social Prescribing Manager, Nottingham West and Mid Notts PCNs, Primary Integrated Community Services Ltd



## Resources and ideas for nature-based activities



## Ideas and resources

In order to fulfil their role, Nature Buddies will need to know about nature-based activities and resources in your local area.

These suggestions are from organisations who have led Nature Buddies projects:

**Use wildlife spotter sheets.** These are printable sheets with pictures of different animals, plants or insects that you might see when out and about in nature. Buddies and the people they support can use these sheets to help focus their activities and conversations and to tick off the things that they spot together at their own pace. [Wildlife Trusts](#), [Woodland Trust](#) and the [Wildfowl and Wetland Trust](#) all produce spotter sheets.

**Find a local directory.** Some areas have a directory, like [Nottingham's Big Green Book](#), which list all the local providers of nature-based activities and green spaces. Buddies can look here for places to visit and activities to take part in. Local authority websites are also good places to look for nearby places of interest.

**Keep your eyes open.** Notice boards in local parks or community centres often have information about free outdoor activities.

**Find out how social prescribing can help.**

You may be able to find out about local social prescribing offers through the [National Academy of Social Prescribing](#).

**Use the five pathways to nature**

**connection.** Nature connection is more than spending time in nature; it is about our relationship with nature - how we think and feel about it and how we interact with it. Activities that engage our senses, emotions, compassion, appreciation of beauty and that create personal meaning are all pathways to developing a closer relationship with nature. You could also consider how the scheme links to [the five steps to mental wellbeing](#).



## Ideas and resources

### Tips for connecting with nature

Connecting with nature has been proven to have a positive impact on our health and wellbeing.

Simple actions can help us to connect with nature in everyday life:

- Listening to birdsong
- Watching clouds
- Smelling flowers
- Feeling the texture of tree bark
- Planting seeds and watching them grow
- Taking time to notice bees and butterflies
- Taking a photo of a view or drawing an animal
- Finding a 'sit-spot' to relax and enjoy the nature around you
- Research has shown that even watching nature programmes on TV or viewing nature through a window can have a positive effect on our health and wellbeing.



### Find out more

[Nature Connection Handbook](#)  
[Mental Health Foundation Top Tips for Connecting with Nature](#)  
[Mental Health Foundation Thriving with Nature guide](#)  
[Sensory Trust Nature Activity Ideas](#)  
[National Trust Rewild Your Life](#)  
[Wildlife Trusts 30 Days Wild](#)



### Step three: Recap

Have you thought about...

- How you will get referrals
- How you will make sure your scheme is sustainable
- How you will equip Nature Buddies with ideas for activities
- How you will build Nature Buddies' understanding of nature connection.



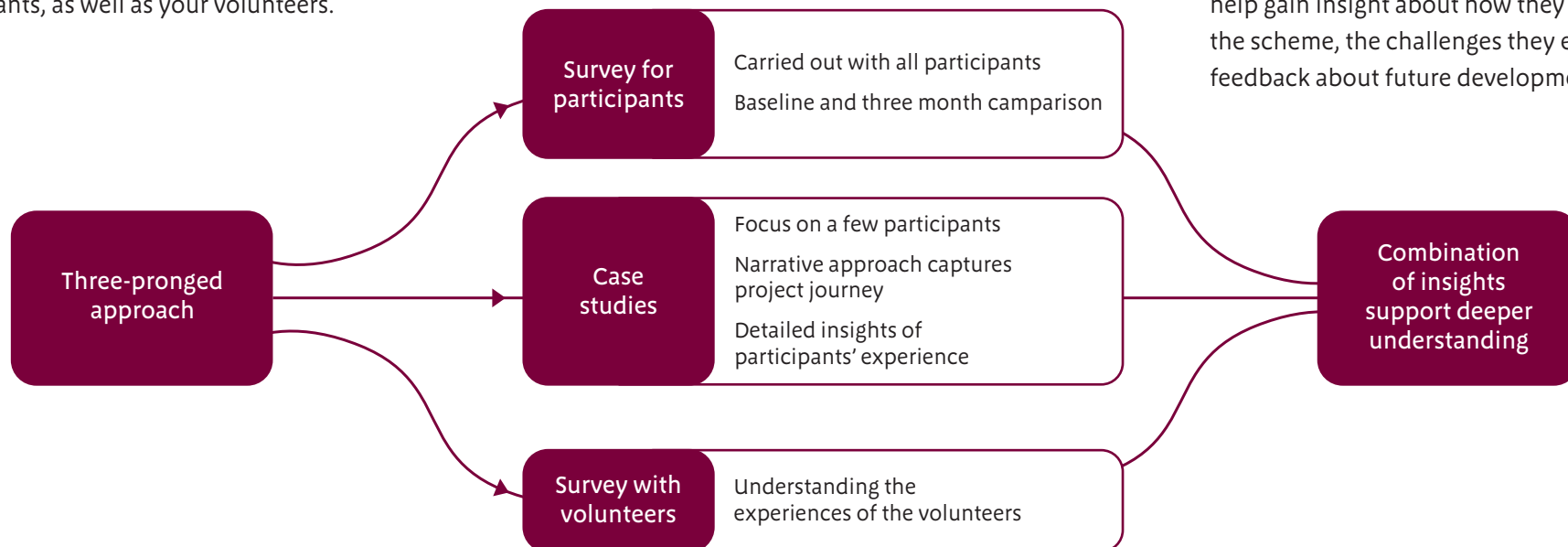


## Step four: Measuring success

You will have your own ideas about how you would like to monitor and evaluate your Nature Buddies scheme. You may also be required to provide feedback to funders, if your funding is from an external source.

Our suggestions about how to capture meaningful data about the impact of your scheme are based on the experience of the projects who helped develop this toolkit.

This diagram summarises how you could measure the impacts of a Nature Buddies scheme on the participants, as well as your volunteers.



### Surveys

Surveys can help to explore the impacts of interventions on participants' mental health conditions. For example, the [ONS 4 Personal Wellbeing survey](#), which has questions designed to measure changes in worthwhile life, quality of life, happiness, and anxiety levels, may be helpful for your project. These questions can be paired with questions about nature connection, such as 'Do you feel part of nature?' (NCI Q6) or 'How interconnected with nature are you?' (INS).

### Case studies

Case studies can capture the personal journeys of individual participants. They can give insight into:

- The main benefits that participants perceive they gained from Nature Buddies
- The biggest engagement challenges participants experienced
- How Nature Buddies has impacted on participants' loneliness and sense of isolation
- Whether participants feel that Nature Buddies has helped to improve and maintain their mental health
- How Nature Buddies has affected participants' wellbeing and nature connection.

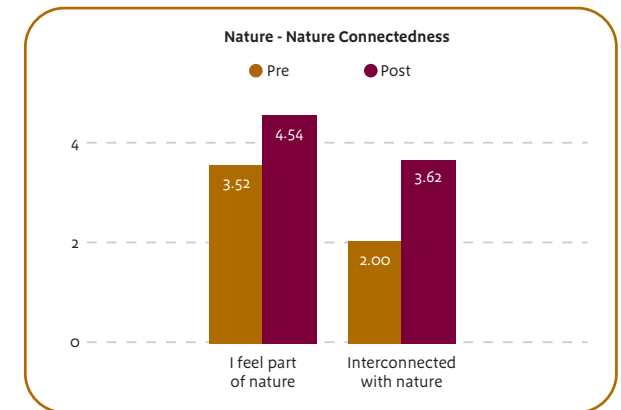
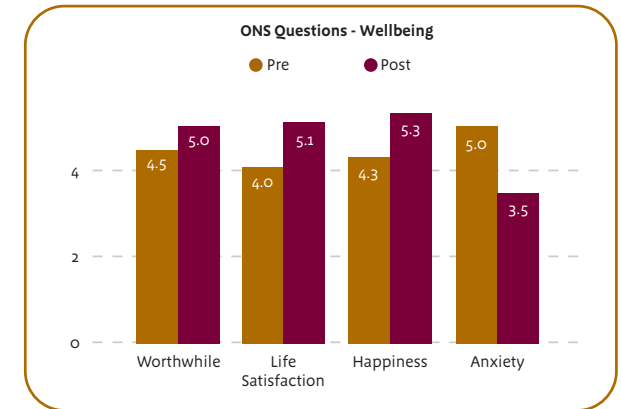
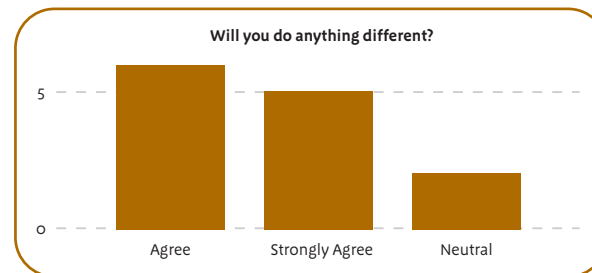
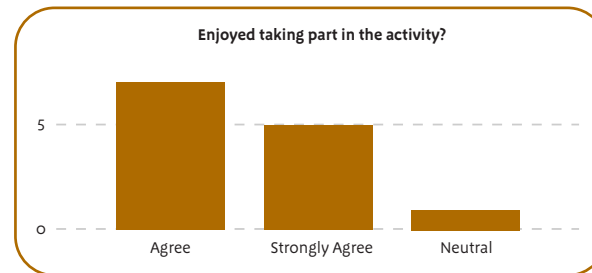
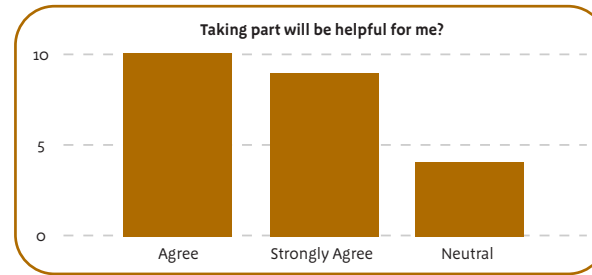
Short questionnaires for volunteers can also help gain insight about how they benefit from the scheme, the challenges they experience; and feedback about future development of the scheme.

## Case study: Evaluating a Nature Buddies scheme

Natural England worked with three organisations (Seachange, Refugee Forum and SUP Fitness) to evaluate the benefits of their Nature Buddies schemes on the people they worked with (N=25).

A three-pronged approach to evaluation was used. A questionnaire for participants was administered at the start of the project, and after three months, using questions from the [ONS 4 Personal Wellbeing survey](#) and questions on nature connection.

As well as using validated scales, we asked individuals if they think that this scheme has made a difference to them. This is one way of understanding whether the change is a result of the activity and gives us more confidence in our results.



### Step four: Recap

Have you thought about...

- How to measure the impact of your project on participants
- How to measure the impact of your project on volunteers.

These findings show a positive outcome across several impact measures including mental health (anxiety), happiness and life satisfaction. The data here shows a correlation between the intervention and the outcome. We cannot claim that Nature Buddies schemes were the main factor in the change. This data is more of an indication that there has been a change. However, it may be a first step in showing that the schemes can play a critical role in supporting someone to access an activity, which has also helped to improve their health and wellbeing. It is likely that how these benefits can be attributed will vary depending on the role that the volunteer took with the person.

# Benefits and challenges of Nature Buddies



Our evidence and experience show that a Nature Buddies scheme can benefit organisations running the scheme as well as participants; volunteer Nature Buddies; referrers; communities, neighbourhoods and the natural environment itself.

## Benefits to organisations

- **Volunteer recruitment and retention.** New Nature Buddy volunteer roles add variety to existing volunteer roles or attract new volunteers with a specific interest in nature.
- **Volunteer training and development.** A Nature Buddy scheme can develop the skills of your volunteers and, through additional training, can support volunteers to develop.
- **Volunteer satisfaction.** Feedback shows that being part of a Nature Buddies scheme increases volunteer satisfaction, thanks to the role itself and the additional training provided. A nature focus is a positive and enriching way for volunteers to build relationships with the people they are working with.
- **Increased participation in activities.** Support from a Nature Buddy makes it more likely for some people to take part in activities. It provides a smoother transition between someone considering taking part in an activity and them actually taking part. This helps you plan sessions and staffing more effectively, as people are less likely to drop out.

- **Partnership working.** This is an opportunity to build networks with other local organisations, which can help expand and strengthen your offer to volunteers.
- **Reaching new audiences.** You can tailor your scheme to reach new audiences, and expand on what you are currently offering to your clients.
- **Organisational development.** A Nature Buddies scheme allows you to broaden your organisation's understanding of the value of connecting with nature.



## Benefits to participants

- **Improved health.** Having a Nature Buddy can bring physical and mental health benefits for participants.
- **Ability to overcome barriers.** A Nature Buddy provides someone with additional support, making it more likely that they will overcome anxieties or practical barriers associated with trying a new activity.
- **Friendship and social contact.** This can be through the buddying relationship itself, and through their Nature Buddy's introducing them to other people taking part in an activity.
- **Community connection.** Participants feel that they can take part in life and in their communities again.
- **Builds on their interests.** It provides opportunities for people who are interested in nature or nature-based activities to do something enjoyable which appeals to them.
- **Personal growth.** Someone taking part in activities that they previously would have found overwhelming and unimaginable, can be transformative. It can enable the person to reflect on their problems in ways that help them come to terms with their life.


"I've found having a buddy is like a refuge, a calm, safe place with a lovely aura. The help is better than the doctors and has a ripple effect through the connections that are made. Nature Buddies is a brilliant concept. I really enjoyed my walk with my buddy. My experiences have inspired me to try and do more walking and maybe one day, the Archangel's Way."

Jade, participant, Seachange



# Benefits to volunteer Nature Buddies

- **Personal satisfaction.** It is satisfying for a volunteer to be able to help another person, especially for a volunteer who has overcome their own health challenges. Volunteers report finding it an immensely rewarding experience to see someone get out and enjoy the natural world.
- **Brings focus to their volunteer role.** Being part of a Nature Buddies scheme gives volunteers a focus for their conversations with the person they are supporting, which helps with building the befriending relationship.
- **Life skills and employability.** Being a Nature Buddy can help a volunteer to use their creativity, develop problem-solving skills and increase their knowledge of the natural world, local green spaces and how to build nature connection.
- **Improved health.** Buddies can also experience the benefits to physical and mental health of nature-based activities and nature connection.
- **Shared interests.** The opportunity to share their interest in the outdoors or love of nature with someone else.



Ed buddies with Kit, who lost confidence in going out by himself since being injured in a car accident. The pair started with short walks and built up to going further afield. Not only has this relationship helped Kit get out into the countryside again, but they have both enjoyed spotting birds and sharing their knowledge of wildlife on their walks. The Seachange reception team have also been available on the phone to support Kit when there has been some confusion about meeting places.

“The change in him has been amazing, I am so proud to have been part of his journey. His fitness has improved, we are walking further each time. The main achievement has been that he is pushing his boundaries. I have really enjoyed having a reason to connect to nature myself and have rediscovered areas that I hadn’t been to for a long time.”

Ed, volunteer Nature Buddy, Seachange



## Benefits to referrers

- **Increased and sustained participation in activities.** People supported by a Nature Buddy are more likely to take part in recommended nature-based activities or interventions, and to continue with these activities.
- **Builds engagement.** Engaging people who are already interested in nature is easier if referrers can offer them an activity that matches their interests.
- **Joint working.** A Buddy provides a useful point of contact for a referrer who is supporting a particular person. They can work together to build that person's trust, confidence and willingness to engage.
- **Builds confidence.** A referrer could offer the support of a Nature Buddy to a person who may not otherwise feel confident enough to engage with nature-based activities or with social prescribing.
- **Builds professional knowledge.** A referrer could use a Nature Buddy's local knowledge and connections to discover a greater range of nature-based activities to offer the people they support.



"I've only got limited capacity, as has my team, so having someone we trust who could introduce our patients to green spaces would be absolutely beneficial for us. Anything that gives us the opportunity to get more patients into the community, we will embrace with open arms."

Andy Simpkins, Senior Social Prescribing Link Worker,  
Nottingham



## Benefits to communities, neighbourhoods and the natural environment

- **Care for natural environments.** When people feel connected with nature they are more likely to take care of it. People who participated in the schemes that fed into this toolkit grew their connection with nature throughout the course of the project. This connection involved more frequent contact with nature as well as taking action to care for nature.
- **Independent living.** Improving a person's life satisfaction can lead them to feel more in control of their life and enable them to lead an independent life in their community.
- **Sustainable communities.** Nature Buddies schemes can contribute to building healthy neighbourhoods and investment in local services and places. The scheme can improve the sustainability of communities as well as the environment.



# Challenges of setting up and running a Nature Buddies scheme

There will be challenges in setting up and running any new scheme.

Organisations, volunteers and participants from the pilot projects share some of the challenges they experienced when delivering their projects.

You can think about how you address or prepare for challenges in advance, through volunteer training, flexibility in the choice of activities offered, managing expectations and the timing of the project.

## Challenges for organisations

- Organising activities, such as visits further afield, as these require a lot of planning and consideration about participants' varying needs.
- Finding funding to set up a Nature Buddies scheme and for ongoing activities.
- Understanding how much co-ordinator time you will need to support a scheme where volunteer Nature Buddies have already been recruited. Schemes may not need a full-time coordinator role, but some coordination is essential.
- The time it takes to find resources. One of the reasons that this toolkit was developed was to make this process easier.
- Providing additional training for volunteers for some organisations with limited capacity. For example, matching Buddies with people requires careful consideration, as well as inclusive practice and knowledge about protected characteristics (Equalities Act, 2010). However, organisations felt that this investment in volunteers helped develop their skills and awareness and so built strong schemes.

## Challenges for participants

The participants that fed into the test-and-learn pilots for this toolkit highlighted the following challenges:

- Frustration when illness sometimes stopped them from taking up opportunities to go out.
- Preferences for one-to-one meetings, rather than group activities, which may only emerge once an organisation or Buddy has started working with them.
- Bad weather, which is off-putting and makes people feel uncomfortable outside.
- Feeling let down when activities end, if the project is time-limited.
- Finding and identifying activities that fit with their personal circumstances. However, they also said that Nature Buddies helped them with this.

## Challenges for volunteer Nature Buddies

The volunteers who fed into the test-and-learn pilots for this toolkit highlighted the following challenges:

- Tailoring activities carefully in response to a person's multiple needs.
- There could be some overwhelm when working out how best to support someone. It could be a steep learning curve.
- The logistics behind planning activities. However, organisations helped with this through coordination and support.



# Further resources and information

## Definitions and glossary

### Co-design and co-production

Co-design is actively involving stakeholders in the process of designing a project or activity. Co-design and co-production processes involve people who use health and care services, support organisations, carers and communities in equal partnership. A co-designed project engages people and partner organisations at the earliest stages of service design, development and evaluation.

### Buddy

A volunteer who offers one-to-one support to a person to overcome the challenges they face so that they can live a fulfilled life. This can include supporting people to engage with nature-based activities.

### The Green Social Prescribing Pilot Programme

The *Preventing and tackling mental ill health through green social prescribing* pilot programme ran from Spring 2021 to Spring 2023. This £5.77m cross-government programme examined how to increase use and connection to the natural environment through green and/or blue social prescribing. The programme included seven test-and-learn Green Social Prescribing pilot sites as well as national research and evaluation work streams.

The programme has recorded over 8,000 referrals to nature-based activities (up to January 2023). It is gathering evidence on the effectiveness of green social prescribing and how best to implement it. Emerging findings from the programme are encouraging, showing significant improvements in participants' mental health.

### Green social prescribing

The practice of supporting people to engage in nature-based interventions and activities to improve their mental health. Social prescribing link workers, and other trusted professionals in related roles, connect people to community groups and agencies for practical and emotional support. This is based on a conversation about that person's situation, their needs, and what matters to them.

Social prescribing link workers take time to get to know people, understand what matters to them, and help them make a personalised plan. They use the knowledge gained through a conversation with the person to help identify interventions to support them. If someone says that being outside benefits their health and wellbeing, the link worker could refer them to a Nature Buddy scheme.

There are many different types of nature-based activities and therapies that people may be prescribed, including: 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 that take place outdoors.

Blue social prescribing is very similar - supporting people to engage in water-based activities around coasts, lakes, rivers and wetlands to improve their mental health.

## Integrated Care Board

A statutory NHS organisation which is responsible for developing a plan for meeting the health needs of the population, managing the NHS budget and arranging for the provision of health services in a geographical area.

## Integrated Care Systems

Partnerships of organisations that come together to plan and deliver joined up health and care services, and to improve the lives of people who live and work in their area.

## Loneliness

Defined by the [Government loneliness strategy](#) as “a subjective, unwelcome feeling or lack or loss of companionship. It happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those we want”.

## The National Academy for Social Prescribing (NASP)

An organisation dedicated to the advancement of social prescribing through promotion, collaboration and innovation.

## Natural England

The Government’s adviser for the natural environment in England. It helps to protect and restore our natural world. Natural England is an executive non-departmental public body, sponsored by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs.

Natural England’s Connecting People and Nature programme aims to tackle barriers to nature and ensure that everyone can access the health benefits from engagement with the natural environment.

## Nature connectedness

This term describes our sense of relationship with the natural world. It is different from simply contact with nature. It encompasses our emotional and intellectual relationship with nature and our sense of place within it.

Many people have a very personal relationship with nature, which has developed throughout their life. The natural environment can provide a space where you can talk and spend time with the people you care about. Nature can evoke memories of ‘home’, which for many people may be physically or emotionally distant from their lives.

## Referral pathway

This is the route by which a person gets involved in your project. A common referral pathway is through GPs and/or social prescribing link workers, who will refer patients to your project. Other participants may be introduced to the project through friends, family members, local charities, faith groups, libraries, social media or other people in their community.

## Referrers

A person or organisation who refers people who would benefit from a Nature Buddy to your scheme. These will vary depending on your client group. Referrers may include social prescribing link workers, community mental health teams, health and wellbeing coaches, midwives, health visitors, cancer care teams, dementia support teams and diabetes teams, as well as charities like Age UK, Mind, Framework, Citizens’ Advice, or job centres.



## Social prescribing

The [NHS Long Term Plan](#) commits to delivering personalised care across the whole health and care system. Personalised care means people have choice and control over the way their care is planned and delivered, based on what matters to them and their individual strengths and needs. Social prescribing is one way of delivering personalised care.

Social prescribing connects an individual with a link worker who can help that person to access community-based activities, related to their health and wellbeing needs. It is holistic, as it recognises that health is influenced by economic and environmental factors. Social prescribing also aims to support people to take greater control of their own health and to improve mental health and physical wellbeing. It can be used in primary and secondary care.



## Social prescribing link workers

Professionals who talk to people about what matters to them and connect them with activities that might make a difference to their health and that can help them:

- Find a sense of belonging through being part of a community group
- Discover a new sense of purpose through enjoying activities they might not have tried before
- Stay physically and mentally well for longer
- Manage any long-term conditions they might be living with.

Social prescribing link workers can refer people to your Nature Buddies scheme.

Other health professionals in your local area may carry out social prescribing and green social prescribing. These could be mental health practitioners, health and wellbeing coaches, community mental health teams or occupational therapists. The work we've carried out to develop this toolkit identified that all of these roles welcomed the idea of buddies.

## Test-and-learn pilot for Nature Buddies

To inform this toolkit, as well as speaking to a number of organisations who led Nature Buddies projects, Natural England worked with partners to test different models for Nature Buddies in two locations in England: Nottingham and Devon, working with Seachange, Nottingham Refugee Forum and SUP UK Fitness. The results of the pilot have informed this toolkit.



# Acknowledgements

Thank you to everyone who has generously contributed their time and expertise to inform the development of this toolkit, in particular the people whose stories we've shared, and the volunteers and organisations who led the local Nature Buddies demonstration projects.

Thank you to the many organisations and individuals who regularly support people to overcome the challenges they face, so that they can have meaningful and enjoyable experiences outside. Our special thanks to the Nature Buddies Advisory Group who have informed the direction of the project and contents of this toolkit.

The toolkit is drawn from the experiences of a wide range of partners who offer buddies to the people they work with - stakeholders representing green and blue nature-based activity providers; the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector; the sport and physical activity sector; representatives from social prescribing, such as link workers and the National Academy of Social Prescribing (NASP).

## Our special thanks to:

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- Nature in Mind / Framework
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- Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust
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- Primary Integrated Community Services Ltd
- Reengage.org
- The Refugee Forum, Nottingham
- Refugee Roots, Nottingham
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- Sarah Hagger-Holt
- STAA at St Ann's Allotments
- SUP Fitness, Nottingham



# How did this toolkit come about?

This toolkit was developed from partnerships established during a cross-governmental **green social prescribing programme**, *Preventing and Tackling Mental Ill Health through Green Social Prescribing* (March 2021 to April 2023). This programme found that services were struggling with increased demand from patients.

From November 2021 to June 2023, **Natural England** led a test-and-learn pilot project to explore how buddies could help people who experience social isolation and anxiety to improve their mental health by accessing nature-based activities outside and by connecting with the natural world. The project also explored how buddies could complement existing local health offers.

This toolkit has drawn on the experience of community organisations who have designed their own Nature Buddies projects, such as b:friend Doncaster and Dorset AONB. We also worked closely with Nottingham Community Volunteer Service (CVS) and the **National Academy of Social Prescribing** (NASP) to explore models for Nature Buddies, and talked to a wide range of organisations.

Natural England commissioned demonstration projects to test these models in two locations in England: Nottingham and Devon. We worked with Seachange, Nottingham Refugee Forum and UK SUP Fitness. The learning from these models has informed the development of the toolkit.

Throughout the toolkit, names of participants and Nature Buddies have been changed to protect their anonymity.

## Tell us what you think of the toolkit

This toolkit is available for organisations to adapt in a way that works for them. If you have suggestions for amendments or improvements, based on your work, please do let us know on [gsp.sga@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:gsp.sga@naturalengland.org.uk)



# References

## Green social prescribing pilot project

- [Preventing and Tackling Mental Ill Health through Green Social Prescribing](#) (2020)
- [National green social prescribing delivery capacity assessment: final report](#) (2023)
- 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.

## Loneliness

- [Tackling loneliness evidence review: executive summary](#) (2023)
- [A connected society: a strategy for tackling loneliness](#) (2018)
- Perleman, D., & Peplau, L.A (1981) [Towards a social psychology of loneliness](#) in R. Gilmour & S Duck (Eds). *Personal Relationships: 3. Relationships in Disorder* (pp. 31-56). London: Academic Press.

## Further information about green social prescribing and nature connectedness

- [Exploring perceptions of green social prescribing among clinicians and the public](#) (2023)
- Coventry, Peter A. et al, (2021) [Nature-based outdoor activities for mental and physical health: Systematic review and meta-analysis by Coventry et al.](#) *SSM Population Health*.
- [Social Prescribing: the power of nature as treatment](#) (2022) Natural England.
- Lumber, Ryan; Richardson, Miles and Sheffield, David (2017) [Beyond knowing nature: Contact, emotion, compassion, meaning, and beauty are pathways to nature connection](#) *PLoS ONE*.
- [Nature Connectedness among adults and children in England](#) (2022), Natural England.

## Mental health

- McDaid, David, & Park, A-La (2022) [The economic case for investing in the prevention of mental health conditions in the UK](#), from the Care Policy and Evaluation Centre, Department of Health Policy, London School of Economics and Political Science.

## Evidence information notes

A series of new evidence reviews by NASP's academic partners – commissioned by Natural England and NHS England – suggests that nature is a powerful tool for improving the health of our communities, and highlights the many ways in which spending time in nature, and connecting with it, is beneficial for people's health and wellbeing.

- [Links between natural environments and mental health \(EINo65\)](#)
- [Links between natural environments and physical health \(EINo66\)](#)
- [How the Natural Environment can support Children and Young People \(EINo67\)](#)
- [Connection to Nature \(EINo68\)](#)

## Volunteering

- Donahue, K., McGarvey, A., Rooney, K., & Jochum, V. (2020) [Time well spent: diversity and volunteering](#), NCVO.

