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## How Green Social Prescribing Could Save Your Parks Service

Green Social Prescribing (GSP) offers the opportunity to link the health benefits of parks to those who would most gain by spending time in a park. This benefits:

- The patient/resident – a prescription for nature is better than one you take to the chemist
- The NHS – because it saves money
- The GP – whose workload is cut
- Deliverer of activities – who has more participants and a strengthened case for funding and support for the activity
- The park – which has more users, whose health is being improved
- The parks service – which can make the case for parks to the health sector and the council, and secure/protect funding

### Health Benefits of Nature

1. “Spending time in the natural environment – as a resident or a visitor – improves our mental health and feelings of wellbeing. It can reduce stress, fatigue, anxiety and depression. It can help boost immune systems, encourage physical activity and may reduce the risk of chronic diseases such as asthma. It can combat loneliness and bind communities together.”

[HM Government: Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment \(2018\)](#)

2. Physical activity levels increase where participants have convenient and close contact to green space, especially if exercise is a secondary motivation.

[W Bird: Can Green Space and Biodiversity Increase Levels of Physical Activity \(2004\)?](#)

Physical activity cuts the risk of dementia & Alzheimer’s disease (UK’s biggest killer), heart disease (2nd biggest killer), stroke (3rd biggest killer), cancer (bowel, breast, womb), osteoarthritis, type 2 diabetes, stress & anxiety, a poor immune system, a hip fracture, high blood pressure, pregnancy complications and older people falling over.

[Physical activity guidelines: UK Chief Medical Officers' report \(2019\)](#)

3. Physical activity in natural environments is better for mental health than activity elsewhere. Each additional use of a natural environment per week is associated with about a 6% lower risk of poor mental health.

[R Mitchell: Is physical activity in natural environments better for mental health than physical activity in other environments? \(Social Science and Medicine, August 2013\)](#)

4. Park & green space users report better health (3.17/5) compared to non-users (2.86/5) & save NHS £111m per year based solely on a reduction in GP visits.

[Fields in Trust: Revaluing Parks and Green Spaces \(2018\)](#)

5. In the UK, woodlands save £185 million costs associated with mental health illnesses, including visits to GPs, drug prescriptions, inpatient care, social services, and the number of days lost due to mental health issues.

[Forest Research: Valuing the mental health benefits of woodlands \(2021\)](#)

6. Parks and green spaces enhance physical health, mental wellbeing, and life satisfaction, and create opportunities for social integration and community engagement.

[National Lottery Heritage Fund: Space to Thrive – Rapid Evidence Review \(2020\)](#)

### The Unique Offer of Parks

- A place to be in nature
- Free
- Numerous: there are probably more parks in a local area than most people realise

- All or most residents are likely to live near to a park; many households may have no garden (see [Access to gardens and public green space in Great Britain, ONS](#))
- Open long hours
- Offer something to see and do / An enjoyable way to be outside / A place to meet
- Individual parks may have a specific offer, e.g. a lot of wildlife, boating lake

### What is Social Prescribing?

[Social prescribing](#) enables GPs and other health & care professionals to refer people to a social prescribing link worker. A link worker helps an individual focus on what matters to them to improve their health and well-being. Social prescribing works for a wide range of people, including people:

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

Social prescribing is growing. The NHS England Long Term Plan (2018) states 1,000+ link workers to be in place by the end of 2020/21, rising further by 2023/24, with the aim that over 900,000 people can be referred to social prescribing schemes by then.

Green social prescribing is the social prescribing link worker referring the individual to parks and nature. It is one of four themes in social prescribing and links to two others: physical activity, arts & culture.

## How to Make Green Social Prescribing Work

### 1. Identify the local health sector

- **Local delivery organisation(s) for social prescribing.** This organisation may be an existing VCS organisation
- Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), who commission social prescribing
- GPs
- Primary Care Network (PCN) structure. PCNs are groups of GP practices
- Local NHS mental health trust
- Council officers involved in health – Public Health, Adult Social Care, physical activity team
- Voluntary organisations linked to health

### 2. Research

- Engage with local social prescribing organisation(s). The organisation needs to be fully involved in what you do that is described below: it is in their interest to do so as you are aiming to deliver one of the four social prescribing themes
- Identify local commitments to improve health
- Use this to seek funding and support from the council/Public Health/the CCG and any other potential funder

### 3. Activities in Parks

Identify activities in parks appropriate for GSP:

- Ideally, a regularly held activity that is free
- Offers an opportunity to be with other people
- Supportive instructor

These activities could be walking, gardening, nature conservation, volunteering, fitness, running, a men's shed, birdwatching, and others: anything that gets people into a park. It does not matter who runs them, whether a VCS organisation, sports clubs, Friends group, council officers or others.

Create activities in parks for GSP, such as walking, gardening, and nature conservation. Offer a named contact, support, site visit, and sources of funding.

Seek to provide a venue in a park for the delivery of existing health programmes, e.g. health clinic, exercise on referral activities.

#### **4. Quality Assurance**

Health and care professionals want assurance of the quality of activities they refer to. Send the deliverer of the activity a document or [online](#) that:

- promotes the benefits of GSP
- states that support can be given by the local social prescribing organisation and parks team
- invites them to complete a quality assurance form

The form should ask for:

- Standard information – park, activity, time, name of deliverer, etc
- Additional information – how participants are supported, experience and qualifications of instructor, if relevant policies are in place (health and safety, risk assessment, DBS)

Send completed forms to the local social prescribing organisation to approve. VCS groups are highly likely to want to engage; Friends groups less so. To encourage deliverers to accept referrals, set up meetings jointly organised with the local social prescribing organisation.

#### **5. Communications**

Create a webpage that brings together:

- Health benefits of parks
- The unique offer of parks, e.g. free, open long hours
- Location of parks
- What main parks offer, such as key features, address, and transport links
- Current activities in parks. To prevent information becoming out of date, do not list detailed information but instead link to deliverers' websites
- Highlight activities that have been approved to accept referrals by health professionals
- Include that people can self-refer to parks and activities
- Create vanity URL to help with promotion

The webpage could be on a social prescribing organisation's website or the council's website, wherever the health sector can easily access information. Information could be provided locally, e.g. PCN area.

Promote, promote, promote:

- Email
- Promotion by social prescribing organisation
- Offer a site visit to a park or an approved activity
- Use case studies
- Engagement with existing health-related structures:
  - Health and Well-being Board?
  - Partners' meetings, e.g. social prescribing meetings, VCS health forums, GP practice meetings

- GP forums and social prescribing link worker forums, if established
- Area-specific partnerships for your locality

## **6. Does Green Social Prescribing Work?**

Seek for the local social prescribing organisation to:

- Record number of referrals made to parks past, present and future
- Follow up a sample number of referrals to find out if health has improved

The organisation may need funding to do this work

Collect case studies, which are powerful:

- *At 81 and through the first lockdown I wondered how I was going to take pleasure in my remaining time on earth. These walks opened up a new lease of life and the start of a new community which I could embrace.*
- *Walking to Camden's green spaces with a group of local residents I had never met before four weeks ago has changed my life and changed me.*

Camden & Islington GSP pilot participants

### **More Information**

- [NHS Social Prescribing Guide](#)
- [A Handbook for Nature on Prescription to Promote Mental Health](#)