



Media release

New report proves nature-based health projects save NHS time and money

- Targeted green prescribing could save over £635 million per year
- Wildlife Trusts programmes help tackle anxiety, depression and social isolation
- “Nature is an essential part of health and social care” – The Wildlife Trusts

Nature-based health and wellbeing programmes could save hundreds of millions of pounds each year and reduce society’s reliance on the NHS, according to a new report by The Wildlife Trusts.

New analysis published today, ***A Natural Health Service: Improving Lives and Saving Money***, found that green prescribing can save more in healthcare costs than the price of running a green prescribing scheme.

Green prescribing is an evidence-based pillar of social prescribing that harnesses the health, wellbeing, and social benefits of spending time in nature. It enables GPs and other health care practitioners to refer people to nature-based programmes to improve physical and mental health.

The new research, undertaken by global strategic environmental and engineering consulting company, Ricardo plc, and The Institute of Occupational Medicine Health, analysed five Wildlife Trusts programmes to see how they benefitted the NHS.

If just one of these programmes was offered to everyone likely to take them up – estimated at 1.2 million people – it could result in annual cost savings of £635.6 million.

- **Wild at Heart** by Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust is a social group that runs nature-based activities and helps people learn new skills. Analysis found healthcare cost savings of **£38,646** of 82 participants over a year. For every £1 invested, there is £1.19 of additional benefit in terms of reduced costs to the NHS.
- **MyPlace** by Lancashire Wildlife Trust helps people improve mental and physical health. Analysis found healthcare cost savings of **£7,024** and reduced employment-related costs due to mental health of **£28,442**. For every £1 invested, there is £2.16 of additional benefit in terms of reduced costs to the NHS.
- **Feed the Birds** by Shropshire Wildlife Trust addresses social isolation and loneliness by linking individuals with volunteers who help them feed birds. Analysis found healthcare cost savings of **£15,460 per year** of 57 people. For every £1 invested, there is £0.40 of additional benefit in terms of reduced costs to the NHS. Assuming

all participants were fully engaged over the full 31-month duration, the accumulated benefits over this period are much higher, at around **£102,440**.

- **Nature for Health in Greater Manchester** is part-run by Lancashire Wildlife Trust and harnesses the power of nature to improve mental health. Analysis found healthcare cost savings of **£44,745**. For every £1 invested, there is £0.18 – £0.93 of additional benefit in terms of reduced costs to the NHS.
- **Wild Health** by Gwent Wildlife Trust provides opportunities for recreational, social, and work-based outdoor activities that benefit physical and emotional well-being. Analysis found healthcare cost savings of **£66,882**, equating to **£471 saving per participant**. For every £1 invested, there is £0.58 – £1.10 of additional benefit in terms of reduced costs to the NHS.

This report focuses on how green prescribing can reduce NHS costs. There are additional health and wellbeing benefits through increased access to natural places and more wildlife.

Dom Higgins, head of health and education at The Wildlife Trusts, says:

“This new research proves the immense value of nature-based projects for improving individual health and helping to ease the burden on the NHS. Nature is an essential part of health and social care, but we are not maximising that potential. Green prescribing works and the more we can develop these kinds of programmes, the greater the benefit to society.

“We need more investment for community-based health services and clear backing from Government for green prescribing. Ahead of the election, we’ll be paying close attention to how policies join the dots between nature, health, and social inequalities. The evidence is clear – investing in nature makes sense for people, our health service, and the economy.”

Dr Amir Khan, NHS doctor and vice-president of The Wildlife Trusts, says:

“What excites me about this research is that it shows the potential of Wildlife Trusts programmes to work alongside and reduce reliance on NHS services. Programmes that tackle some of the causes of preventable illnesses: social isolation that can lead to feelings of loneliness or depression, physical inactivity – which is linked to musculoskeletal problems, and a lack of skills or prospects leading to economic inactivity. The Wildlife Trusts’ programmes can shoulder some of the burden of ‘mainstream’ NHS services, and they should be available to all health professionals, to refer patients to, where appropriate.”

To increase access to green social prescribing projects and enable the NHS to benefit, The Wildlife Trusts are calling on the UK Government to:

- Integrate green prescribing into community health and social care services everywhere.
- Encourage shared investment from Government departments working on housing, employment, community cohesion, transport and culture.
- Provide support to help strengthen partnerships between local healthcare services and community-rooted organisations like Wildlife Trusts.

A Natural Health Service: Improving Lives and Saving Money can be downloaded [here](#).

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Editor's Notes

A Natural Health Service: Improving Lives and Saving Money (2023) by Ricardo plc and The Institute of Occupational Medicine Health on behalf of The Wildlife Trusts.

- A summary document highlighting key findings can be found [here](#).
- The full technical report can be found [here](#).

Methodology

Ricardo collected data from several Wildlife Trusts to explore the running costs of various green prescribing projects and schemes, and to estimate the benefits to the NHS. Ricardo explored different approaches to capturing aspects of participants' health which, if improved, would benefit the NHS; these included mental health, loneliness and physical health. Ricardo did not measure the wider (not explicitly health-related) benefits, such as the benefit to individual residents, local neighbourhoods and the economy through, for example, increased productivity. Other natural capital benefits that were not measured include, for example, natural flood defence, climate regulation and the health of pollinator populations. The research investigated the role green prescribing can play in addressing health inequalities in the UK. Additionally, Ricardo scaled the costs of running an individual local green prescribing project to a UK level.

Recommendations and lessons learned*

The report includes lessons learned about operating successful green prescribing schemes, including:

- Many successful green prescribing projects are short-lived due to lack of funding.
- Green prescribing projects present opportunities to reduce health inequalities.
- Benefits could be enhanced by more targeted design of green prescribing projects.

*The full list of recommendations can be found in the technical report

Case studies

- **Wild at Heart** by Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust is a social group that runs nature-based activities and helps people learn new skills. Sessions are based around the five ways to wellbeing; Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning, and Give, which supports the principles behind Active Ageing. Programmes are participant-led and incorporate local knowledge and personal interests to help people enjoy nature-based activities in the local area. Sessions usually start with a discussion and a nature walk, and often involve organisations, artists, and experts from the area. [Wild at Heart - Sheffield & Rotherham Wildlife Trust](#)
- **MyPlace** by Lancashire, Manchester & North Merseyside Wildlife Trust and NHS Foundation Trusts across Lancashire and Greater Manchester helps people improve mental and physical health. Weekly sessions led by trained staff focus on one of the five ways to wellbeing –

Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Learn and Give. Activities include wildlife walks, bushcraft, gardening projects and practical conservation sessions, such as creating dead hedges or planting trees. Sessions are hosted on Wildlife Trust nature reserves, like Brockholes, and in urban parks and outdoor spaces. A recent project The Bay – A Blueprint to Recovery, uses nature around the Irish Sea to help people deal with depression, anxiety and other mental health issues, in communities in and around Morecambe, Fleetwood and Barrow in Furness. Partners in The Bay are Cumbria Wildlife Trust, Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust and the Eden Project. [Myplace | Lancashire Wildlife Trust](#)

- **Feed the Birds** by Shropshire Wildlife Trust addresses social isolation and loneliness by linking individuals with volunteers who help them feed birds. The Trust recruits and trains volunteers and matches them with someone in their community who has been referred to them from their GP or Social Prescriber. This could be for a variety of reasons such as an age-related condition, mental health condition or physical disability, leaving them unable to get outside and as a result cut off from nature and other people. The volunteer visits their client once a week, tops up the bird feeder and chats to them. Some clients develop an interest in other wildlife in their garden and volunteers can also benefit from further support through the scheme if other issues arise. [Feed the Birds | Shropshire Wildlife Trust](#)
- **Nature for Health in Greater Manchester** is part-run by the Wildlife Trust for Lancashire, Manchester & North Merseyside which harnesses the power of nature to improve participants' mental health. The programme works with individuals most at risk of developing poor mental health and creates activities and support they need. It uses nature as a prescription to mental and physical health problems. Activities include gardening and environmental projects that benefit participants, wildlife and the wider community. Many participants are referrals from their GPs. [Nature for Health | Lancashire Wildlife Trust](#)
- **Wild Health** by Gwent Wildlife Trust offers recreational, social and work based outdoor opportunities for people who may benefit physically and emotionally from nature-based activities. The Trust is proactively engaging with the health and well-being needs of local communities by running regular workdays and recreational activities at nature reserves, in local green spaces and in their wild places. These are geared towards, and are highlighting, improvements in health and well-being derived from direct engagement with the natural world. Activities include practical conservation tasks, lessons on the medicinal properties of plants and natural navigation techniques. As well as the environmental and therapeutic benefits, the project also supports other issues people are tackling such as confidence, self-esteem, social isolation and employability. [Wild Health | Gwent Wildlife Trust](#)

The Wildlife Trusts

The Wildlife Trusts are making the world wilder and helping to ensure that nature is part of everyone's lives. We are a grassroots movement of 46 charities with more than 900,000 members and 38,000 volunteers. No matter where you are in Britain, there is a Wildlife Trust inspiring people and saving, protecting, and standing up for the natural world. With the support of our members, we care for and restore special places for nature on land and run marine conservation projects and collect vital data on the state of our seas. Every Wildlife Trust works within its local community to inspire people to create a wilder future – from advising thousands of landowners on how to manage their land to benefit wildlife, to connecting hundreds of thousands of school children with nature every year. www.wildlifetrusts.org

About Ricardo plc

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