

St Nicks' Ecotherapy

Impact Report May 2020 - April 2021





“ This is a **vital resource**. I know I would be in a very bad place if I didn't have the regular contact that I've had. ”



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Due to the Covid-19 pandemic 2020/21, Ecotherapy groups were only able to run face to face sessions, onsite on the St Nicks 24-acre nature reserve, for 11 weeks across this reporting period. Ecotherapy ran the programme remotely for the remaining 41 weeks of the year.

Message from Ecotherapy Manager

Hello,

I'm Kathy Sturgess and have been the Project Manager for the Ecotherapy Programme at St Nicks since 2015. I am hugely passionate about supporting people to build a relationship with nature as a tool to help improve their overall mental and physical wellbeing. Over the last decade or so, there has been an ever-increasing evidence base proving the benefits of nature connectedness, something I've witnessed first-hand at St Nicks for years. I regularly see the positive effects that sharing knowledge and nature observations have on our Ecotherapy members. This plays an important role in people connecting to not only each other, but also to the natural world in local green spaces and places. This approach also helps to build a sense of community, which is another vital aspect in improving and sustaining positive mental wellbeing.



As I reflect on 2020/21, I recognise that never before have we experienced such rapid change to our lives, or had to respond so quickly to the new and emerging needs of our participants and local communities. I feel very fortunate to be surrounded by such a strong and devoted Ecotherapy team who passionately support the project and have helped to make it the success that it is, especially so during this last year.

For all the challenges we've faced during the pandemic, we should also recognise the achievements and opportunities that have occurred. We have embraced new ways of working, using digital, email, blogs, videos, texts, made wellbeing calls and, in addition, for those unable to access the internet, we posted information to help connect Ecotherapy members to each other, the wider support team and the natural world. This flexible approach forms a solid foundation from which we can rebuild as we look forward into 2021 and beyond. We may still face challenges in the months and years to come, but we've proven to be resilient, adaptable and creative, alongside sheer passion and determination to provide the best possible support, all of which will continue to drive us forward.

So, thank you to everyone involved: our Ecotherapy members, the Ecotherapy team, the wider St Nicks staff team, our funders, our partnerships and our local communities. You help to make Ecotherapy at St Nicks the success that it is. None of this would be possible without you.

Case study: Peter*

"St Nicks was one of the first places I ventured to on my own after a long period of not going anywhere by myself. When I went somewhere it would be a doctor's appointment, with my father.

Most people I know who were friends have left York several years ago now and already having anxieties, it had been hard to engage with new people leading to isolation, apart from family drama (of a serious nature, which in itself is stressful).

This led me to hide away in my room.

At St Nicks, the writing and walks helped me to engage with strangers and talk about myself as well as share my writing which has led to opportunities at York St John University.

It would be a lie to say COVID did not negatively impact me through and set me back. But returning to St Nicks has been a return to normality as, just like when I was introduced to St Nicks, it made me feel more like a person and that what I had to say was like a person and that what I had to say was worth listening to since I am pretty quiet with people I don't know. Routine = lifesaving, more relaxed at centre even though finds socializing difficult.

Routine at St Nicks isn't the routine due to mental health, it has helped me a lot."

* participant's name has been changed to protect their identity



Our aims

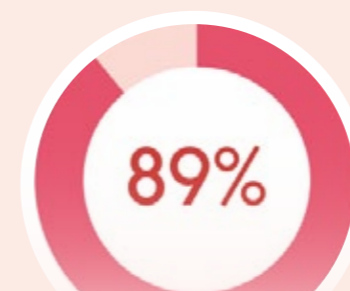
“ Ecotherapy at St Nicks helped me get through one year at home shielding. It has been a literal **life line** for me. ”

There are so many different, dynamic and creative ways to connect with nature. The entire Ecotherapy programme is developed around this principle. Our aim is to support people to connect with nature in the best way for them, in their own time, by providing opportunities alongside gentle encouragement and support. Measuring the impact of our work through data collection and evaluation is an important aspect of the project, but for me, the real achievements are shown within the members' personal journeys. It is a privilege to support people to improve and build their nature connectedness and in so doing better manage their mental and physical health and wellbeing.

Our impact

The Ecotherapy team conducted a participant feedback survey in March 2021 covering the period from February 2020 – March 2021. We sent 60 surveys out to active Ecotherapy participants and had 42 responses (two-thirds) returned. Key aims and outcomes we measured against:

Increased mental wellbeing



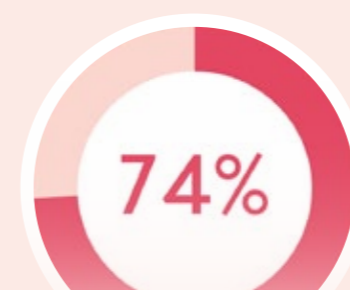
89% of participants said their mental wellbeing increased as a result of the support they received from attending Ecotherapy at St Nicks.

Reduced feelings of isolation and loneliness



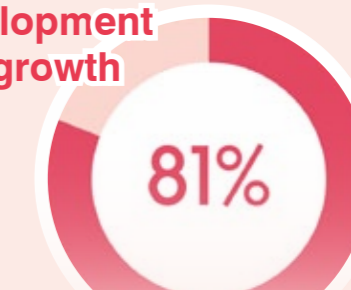
88% of participants said they experienced an increased sense of connection with other people as a result of the support they received.

Increased physical activity



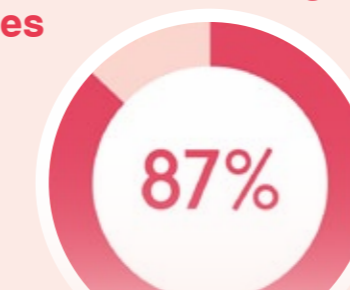
74% of participants said they felt their physical health had improved as a result of attending Ecotherapy at St Nicks.

Increased feelings of personal development and growth



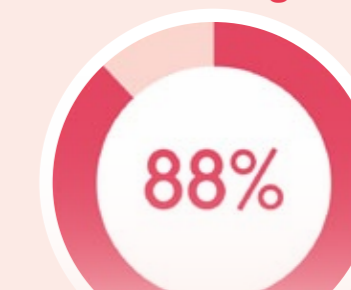
81% of participants said they increased their feelings of personal development and growth as a result of being involved.

Increased access to green spaces



87% of participants said they got out into nature (outside of Ecotherapy sessions) as a result of the support they received. This was especially important during the various lockdowns of 2020/21

Increased knowledge and skills



88% of participants said they experienced an increased sense of connection with other people as a result of the support they received.

External evaluation

In addition to the March 2021 Ecotherapy participant feedback survey, the team also employed Converge Evaluation & Research Team (CERT) to conduct an external evaluation of the project in May 2021. CERT members all have lived experience of mental ill health and are all qualified researchers working for York St John University. CERT members attended each Ecotherapy group over a week to meet the members and get a feel for how the groups were run. The following week, CERT members conducted confidential interviews with Ecotherapy members exploring the following three themes through various questions:

1. The impact of the pandemic on St Nicks Ecotherapy Programme (SNEP) participants' mental health and whether St Nicks affected their wellbeing during this time.
2. How SNEP participants experienced the contact St Nicks made with them in the period in which they were unable to attend the nature reserve due to lockdown.
3. The impact participants felt SNEP has on their lives in general.

CERT report overall conclusion:

"In conclusion, despite only being able to have activities on site for three out of twelve months, SNEP has managed to maintain an extremely high quality Ecotherapy programme via online and telephone activity. They motivated their participants to carry out nature-based activities independently, and had a considerable beneficial impact on participant wellbeing, meeting mental health needs which are not met elsewhere."

“

“Extremely popular with participants, St Nicks Ecotherapy Programme offers a safe, calm, pressure-free and nurturing environment in which people can control how much they interact and progress at their own speed.”

”

Additional, further findings were also overwhelmingly positive. The full CERT External Evaluation report can be found on St Nicks website: www.stnicks.org.uk/ecotherapy

Case study: Jennifer*



Written by a member of the CERT (Converge Evaluation & Research Team), whose members all have lived experience of mental ill health:

"I didn't have any previous expertise in the natural world, even though I do love the outdoors. I felt like I learned a lot in the two weeks I spent at St Nicks. The passion for the outdoors of the tutors was contagious, and I enjoyed that most sessions begin with a walk around the reserve either looking to find things or just to appreciate it. I love the contrast between the distant sounds of the city and the sound of birdsong on the reserve.

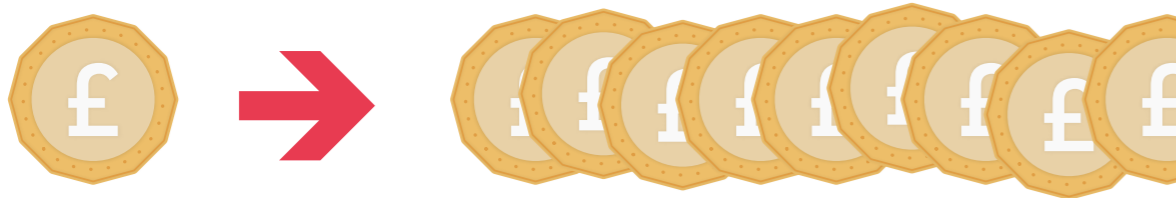
In terms of my emotional reaction to St Nicks Ecotherapy Programme (SNEP), to me, although all of the groups had their own vibe, all of them felt extremely socially safe. They were places where all participants are appreciated and nurtured. Sessions felt calm, gentle and safe, and allowed people to choose what they wanted to do without any pressure being put upon them to do anything. It was clear that attendees experience St Nicks as highly beneficial to their wellbeing, and talking with us, many contrasted their experience of SNEP with their experience of mental health services.

I was struck that more than one participant credited SNEP with saving their life – for them, SNEP is simply a life saver. That people are allowed to attend various sessions without a time limit is compared to other providers that have a set time frame (e.g. 12 sessions). By not doing this, SNEP allows its participants time to adjust on their terms, rather than an arbitrary number of sessions. I feel this is a particularly crucial way of working. What goes on at St Nicks is unique in York, and offers a route through which vulnerable people can begin to improve their wellbeing."

The Bristol Accord, Social Return on Investment (SROI) tool was introduced as a third evaluative measure during 2020.

The Social Value Engine provides a systemised and academically robust assessment of value to forecast, plan and evaluate social value. SROI is an outcomes-based measurement framework that will help us understand and quantify the social, environmental and economic value to society, which may not be recorded by other means.

At present, the SROI for the Ecotherapy Programme at St Nicks is £8.56 for every £1 invested. Although we are extremely proud of this figure, we expect our SROI to increase as this figure only relates to the seven months where Ecotherapy ran the programme remotely due to lockdowns. We are confident that as we continue to update the SROI engine, especially as we are currently working face to face with participants on our 24-acre nature reserve, this figure will certainly increase.



“

I have over forty-years' experience of mental health services, and by far this is the most rewarding.

St Nicks has made my mental health better, it's a lovely place to come to, with nice and friendly people. It gives me some structure and something to help me with my mental health, and to learn things and to get some exercise.

Its help ranges from providing structure to the week, to supporting a sense of purpose and personhood, and even glimmers of positivity and [self] worth.

”

Paul was referred to the Ecotherapy Programme from Changing Lives. He had been making good progress with both his mental health management and his drug addictions for a couple months at the point of referral and felt ready to “push himself” to “feel even more in control of his life after years of chaos”.

Throughout the lockdowns of 2020/21, Paul remained sober and secured a flat; both achievements he is extremely proud of. He commented on “the friendly conversation with other attendees (on Ecotherapy) really keeps me going”, “no one here is judgmental”. He goes on to mention how he is “getting happiness out of being here, doing something constructive with my life, not just staying at home and smoking... [St Nicks] impacted in a big way, just getting out and being among people who don't judge, you can enjoy yourself and bring happiness to other people.” He also described how (one of his groups) has inspired him to start gardening at his home.

* participant's name has been changed to protect their identity

Project design: group activities

There is an ever-growing evidence base for how connecting with nature supports improved mental and physical wellbeing. The Ecotherapy Programme at St Nicks is designed with this evidence base in mind, including our underpinning aims and outcome measures. What we see from the research is that nature connectedness takes time and support. Nature connectedness is more than a casual walk outdoors, it's about creative connection, learning, noticing, appreciating and ultimately building these connections up into daily habits.

One recent report highlighting how nature is good for our wellbeing was written in 2020 with combined efforts from the University of Derby and the National Trust. The *Noticing Nature* report used data from wide-ranging national surveys including fieldwork surveys conducted by YouGov. You can find a copy of the full report via: <https://bit.ly/3io1lcO>.



Bearing Fruit

Sessions are focused around looking after our community orchard, managing existing wildlife habitats and creating new ones.

All sessions take place on our 24-acre nature reserve at St Nicks. The group maintains our established fruit trees (over 80 on site), soft fruit sites and Yorkshire heritage apple trees by learning about and using conservation skills such as scything, pruning and hedge laying.

During lockdown, the tutor sent weekly conservation-based emails, each with a nature focused activity to try at home, and made weekly wellbeing calls to all Ecotherapy members on the group.



Discover Nature

Sessions are seasonally themed with each week focusing on a different species or habitat. We provide a safe and nurturing environment in which members can learn more about the natural world.

There is opportunity to participate in wildlife-based activities including animal surveys. We also go on field trips, both locally and further afield, which are planned around the migration of birds and animals throughout the year as well as arrange talks from local experts.

During lockdown, the tutor sent weekly videos about biodiversity which included photos and videos sent in by participants and members of the public who viewed the clips on YouTube. The videos were immensely popular and widened the reach of Ecotherapy to new audiences.



Nordic Walking

Evidence confirms that connecting to nature with green exercise improves both self-esteem and mood, as well as builds emotional and physical resistance.

All sessions are coached by a qualified Nordic Walking UK instructor and poles are provided. New participants are asked to attend one of our 4 week 'Learn to Nordic Walk' blocks before being invited to the regular Nordic walking group.

During lockdown, the tutor sent weekly emails which encouraged people to spend their allotted hour outdoors trying different and various green exercise activities including mindful walking, night walking and utilising nature as the 'new gym'. She also ran a blog which often explored the science behind outdoor exercise in green spaces.



Letters from the Allotment

This group alternates between nature based creative writing and observational drawing and art.

All sessions start with a short walk around the nature reserve followed the introduction of a theme for the morning's writing or art. The sessions are an inspirational way to develop creativity while making new discoveries about nature through observation.

During lockdown the tutor ran a weekly blog entitled 'Letters from the Allotment.' It had a weekly cycle of posts prompting nature-based writing activity and encouraged readers to send in their work. The blog was extremely popular with our Ecotherapy members and also had engagement from people living in Norway, Russia and New Zealand.



Words from the Wild

This book club offers a friendly social session for those interested in books and literature

with a link to the natural world. There is no pressure to read the book independently, the experienced tutor picks passages for the group to enjoy as a shared reading experience each week. This is followed by a guided walk around the nature reserve and discussion over a hot drink and biscuits. Each session ends with a poem or thought for the day.

During lockdown, the tutor made weekly telephone calls to the group members during which they would discuss particular passages, as well as provide more general wellbeing support. The tutor also sent a weekly email with suggestions of various reading activities and programmes.

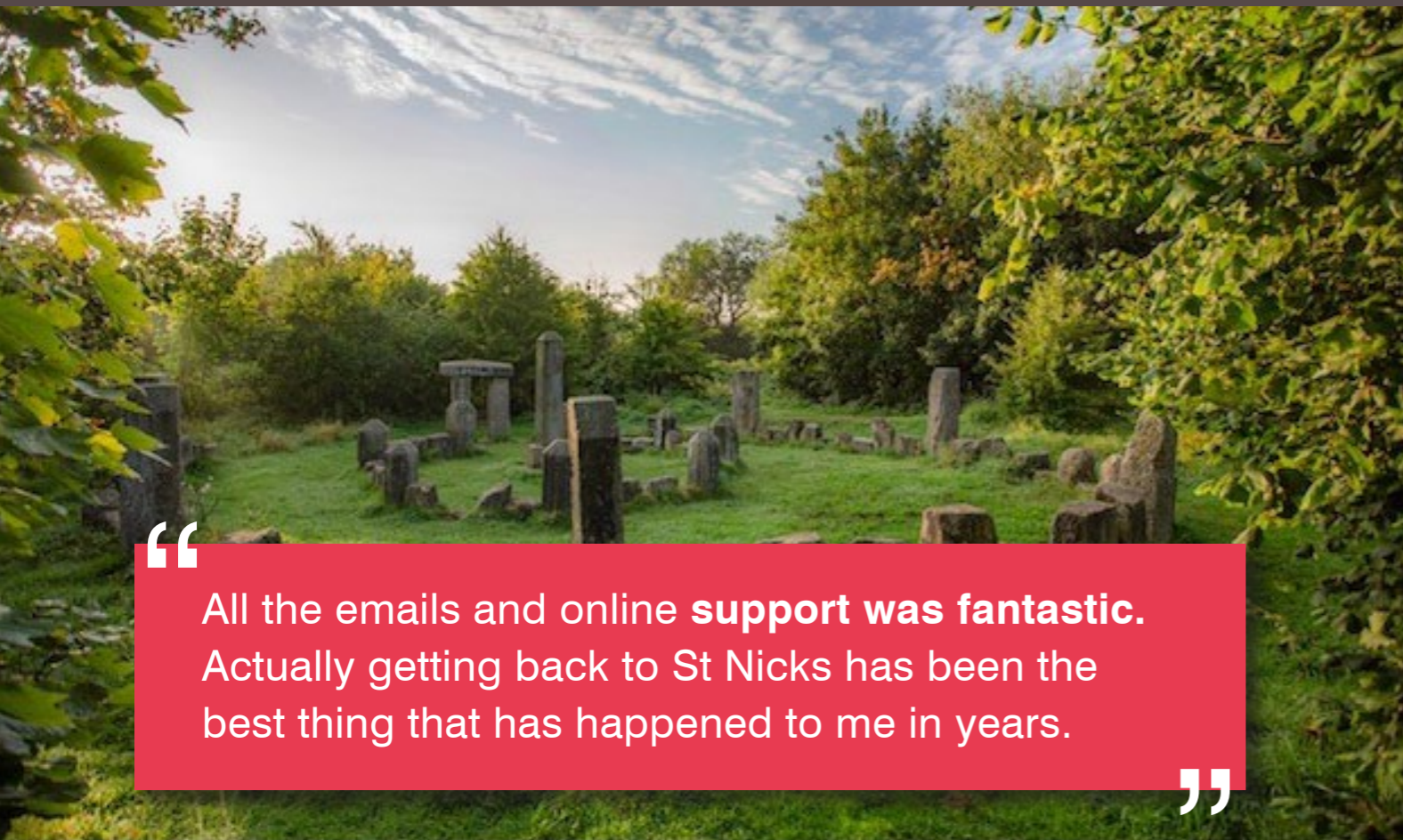


Plot to Plate

Our offsite allotment group where members learn the principles of organic gardening as well as the benefits of eating seasonally.

The site has raised beds, fruit trees, a variety of vegetables, a wildflower area that runs along a beck and a beautiful rose garden.

During lockdown this group was peer led with regular wellbeing calls made to the participants each week. The allotment proved to be a real 'lifeline' for those who were able to use the space for their one-hour outdoor time during lockdown. This was especially beneficial for those who live in flats with no green space.



“ All the emails and online support was fantastic. Actually getting back to St Nicks has been the best thing that has happened to me in years. ”

One-to-one mentoring support is available to everybody who is enrolled on an Ecotherapy group at St Nicks. The mentoring programme is run by Ecotherapy Project Manager Kathy Sturgess and offered to those who may need some additional mental health support outside of their weekly group. The mentoring programme offers an opportunity to connect with nature at our 24-acre urban nature reserve through appointment based, outdoor ‘walk and talk’ sessions. This one-to-one support provides a non-judgemental listening space alongside gentle encouragement to notice the nature around you, from looking at plants to identifying trees and to listening to bird song. These sessions are a lovely way to relax and improve your wellbeing.

We are well connected to other mental health and wellbeing services and can help you to refer to other organisations for specific, more intensive support should you require.

When COVID restrictions are in place and we are not able to meet in person, we offered mentoring support through wellbeing phone calls.

Please note, due to the pandemic we were unable to run our seasonal Get Gardening and Willow Weaving groups during this reporting period.

Doris first contacted St Nicks in 2019. She had retired in 2018 and found that across the following year she was feeling increasingly “lonely and disconnected” which was having a negative impact on her daily routine and mental wellbeing. She sought support from her GP who offered anti-depressants, which Doris wasn’t happy to start taking. Instead, she started to research any local groups that she could start attending on a weekly basis. Doris reports that she “was familiar with the St Nicks nature reserve but hadn’t realised there were opportunities to volunteer there”. She learned about Ecotherapy from the St Nicks website and said “it was a relief I could refer myself” and that “the variety of nature groups on offer was inspiring”. Doris also commented “one of the main reasons I initially enrolled was because of the mentoring support. Although I knew I needed support with my mental health, I wasn’t deemed ‘poorly enough’ to be taken on by the mental health team so the mentoring sounded like the right place for me to talk through some of my thoughts and emotions, and hopefully conquer my loneliness”.

Doris has been regularly attending a couple of groups for over a year now. She says that “joining Ecotherapy was a real turning point. I’ve made friends, learned loads and probably the best bit is that I’m now an allotment holder for the first time in my life (at 68) which I never would have considered, or had the confidence or knowledge to take on a plot before attending St Nicks”.

* participant’s name has been changed to protect their identity



Participation and our cohort

345 Participant Hours

This figure covers just 11 weeks of face-to-face sessions as we could not run them during lockdowns. Many were shielding during this time and unable to attend so we also continued to run online support throughout.

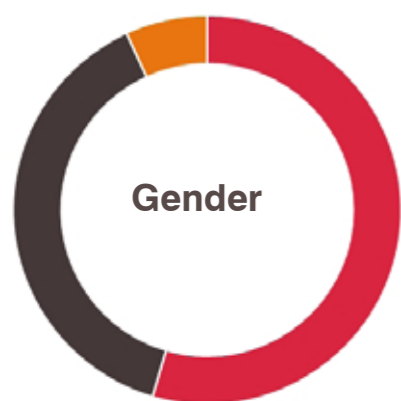


1410 Mentoring Sessions

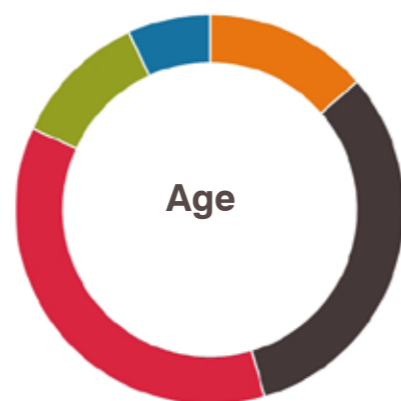
The number includes 131 face to face sessions and 1279 phone calls.

Our cohort

We had 44 new enrolments during this reporting period:



■ Female 24
 ■ Male 17
 ■ Transgender 3



■ 18-24 6
 ■ 25-39 14
 ■ 40-64 16
 ■ 65+ 5
 ■ Unknown 3

Case study: Chris*

“I was lucky to grow up with a Dad who loved nature and gardening. From my 20s I have had a good friend who I went walking and bird watching with. I had nature as part of my life before.

Two friends took me to St Nicks to an Apple Day. I was very depressed and had had depression for many years. I saw how friendly it was. A beautiful nature reserve I didn't really know existed. I met Kathy, talked to her and she encouraged me to call her.

I am so pleased my friends persuaded me to visit that day. I have nature in my life most days now. The skills and techniques I have learnt. The support. The tranquillity of the reserve. This is what helps me daily.

I have been in the creative writing group the longest. The eco book group from when it started. I have also done some art and photography.

Since the first lock down I have continued these two groups online and also receive the discover nature group emails. I enjoy getting the emails and taking part. I often send photos back as it helps me feel included.

I have received mentoring. In the last year I have received a lot of extra support as I am shielding and my partner was very ill in hospital for four months when the first lockdown started. I also have had a couple of walks at St Nicks with Emma and Kathy on my own.

St Nicks has made a big difference, it's a bit like being given a new box of tools to use to get through the depression and the hard days. Encouraging me to look at the details, the changes, colours, textures of nature. To listen to the sounds. To see the changes with the seasons. Then I use this to write or photograph or bring nature into my home. Or just sit and watch.

I keep a nature journal now and enjoy writing most days. I didn't write at all before. Adding a bit of drawing or photos in. I take a lot of photographs of nature and use a trail camera in my garden. I have been learning about hedgehogs and shield bugs recently. I have discovered new authors. That I do like some poetry. I really enjoy collaging nature with scrap paper. That I find texture in nature particularly interesting to photograph and touch.

I now have a nature table at home. On days I don't get out it is really useful to have. I pick up bits not needed like pine cones, fallen leaves, feathers, seeds and driftwood.

The friendship, support, incredible amount of knowledge people have to share. St Nicks is the only place I have been where everyone is accepted for who they are. The only place where I haven't had to hide my depression. Exploring the nature reserve at St Nicks. Every visit there is something new to see.”

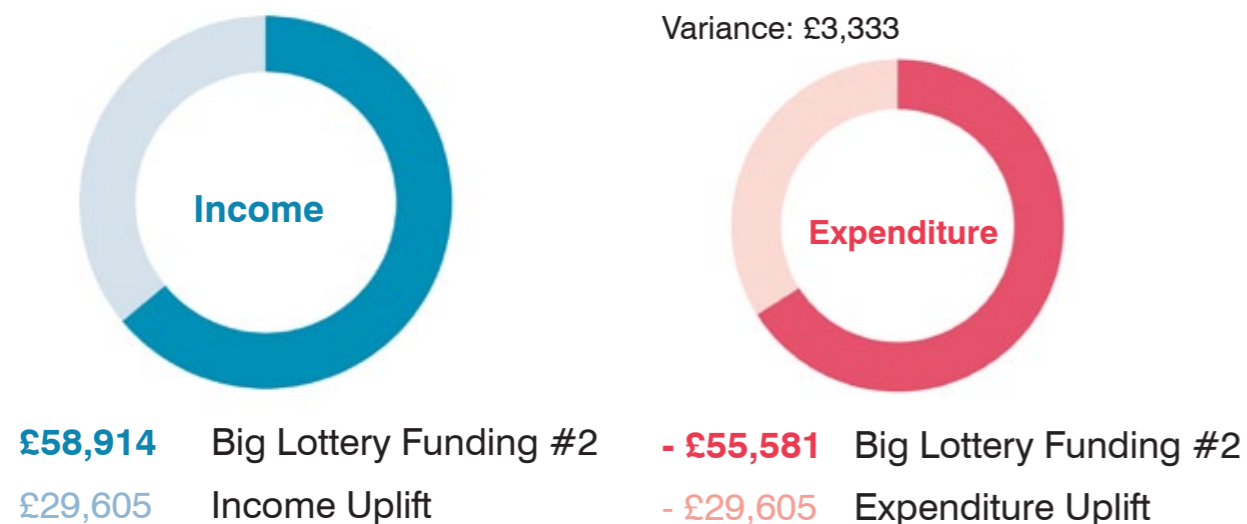
* participant's name has been changed to protect their identity

Community outcomes and finances

At the beginning of this reporting period there were plans in place to run Ecotherapy sessions at both York Minster and the York City Art Gallery. Due to COVID-19 restrictions these partnerships were put on hold. We are pleased to report that sessions will be reinstated with both partners from July 2021. Ecotherapy at St Nicks had also received grant funding from Wates Family Enterprise Trust to run Ecotherapy gardening sessions at Foss Park, the newly built inpatient mental health hospital. The pandemic also caused a delay to the start of this grant, however we were able to commence this project in April 2021.

One partnership we were able to maintain throughout 2020/21 was with NHS Discovery Hub & Converge, which proved to be an invaluable partnership supporting participants across all three organisations. Two wraparound grants secured in 2020 were from Two-Ridings allowing us to introduce a Bushcraft course from June 2021 and another grant from Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust (JRHT) allowing the introduction of a Willow Weaving course from July 2021. We also received a wraparound grant from The Guild of St George which will allow us to introduce our 'Growing at Home' project in the spring of 2022.

Financial statement



The £3,333 underspend was mainly due to not undertaking external evaluation before the end of year 3 (£2,500 budgeted). This will be completed by the end of June 2021. Furthermore, we were unable to undertake field trips due to Covid and the effect of the restrictions on in-person delivery. These field trips will resume as soon as restrictions allow.

Building capabilities add on – We have only spent £157 of this in this year due to planned activities being impacted by the effects of Covid on the organisation.

Case study: David*



Written by an evaluator from the Converge Evaluation & Research Team (CERT), whose members all have lived experience of mental ill health:

“Upon arriving at St Nicks, I could instantly feel the small community that had been created within the course groups. It was clear that these individuals really wanted to be there to spend time working as a collective on the weekly project. I spoke to one participant who, when I asked how he had heard of St Nicks and whether it had impacted his life, voiced that he was referred from a mental health charity a few years ago.

He proceeded to explain that his mental ill health had previously withheld him from holding a job, and that his weekly attendance of sessions had stabilised his mental health enough that he had been working an almost full-time job for the past few months. He expressed his appreciation of the course which “got him through the week”, which is why he made time in his job so he could still attend the Ecotherapy session each week.

His outlook really highlighted the positive impact that St Nicks had on his life, as he was passionate about remaining on the course so he could continue to feel supported and fulfilled enough to also maintain his working role. This alone made me really appreciate the work that St Nicks does for its participants, as it clearly has profoundly improved individuals' quality of life.”

* participant's name has been changed to protect their identity

Poems by Creative Writing participants

Trees

by Brinley Price

The storm inside my mind roared on for days;
I tried to ride its waves that seemed immense,
Watch gloomy clouds race past,
Feel lightening hurt rip through me but embrace it.

And then I met the elder,
Its tortured trunk, its evil-smelling leaves,
Yet utterly alive,
Giving life to delicate jelly ear.

I gazed on weird goat willow
Winters had worn down,
Its lower branches dead, some broken off,
But high above the thinnest spray of green.

And then an ash the world had darkened,
Lichens embroidering its aged body;
A sycamore's huge hands that tar spots ate
And yet that caught the pouring light.

I heard the poplar's pain
As the wind wrenched its limbs
But saw it rise above its torment,
Reaching high because its roots drove deep.

And lastly the laburnum,
Its poisonous yet beautiful cascade,
Its blooms malignant but like amethysts,
Leaving no room for rage.

Laburnum tree, by Lewis Outing

by SB

Surprisingly, supreme this little haven of green
Calming and quiet, bird song and flowers, creating an inspirational riot
Informative and gentle encouraging people to be mindful
Non-judgmental safe and supportive helping to reach new potential
Nature and nurture seeking out little insights of adventure
Walking through the green, pink, blue a virtual rainbow many things new
Fascinating and vibrant like entering a secret world not at all frightening
I genuinely can't think of anywhere else I'd rather be
It was an honour to be invited into this eco inspired place
Working alongside nature away from the larger proportion of the human race



Blue Tit

by Brinley Price

A blue tit pecking the bark of a birch,
Probably rooting out insects,
And climbing up the trunks intense white.

We watched it while we sat outdoors
In brilliant early summer
As though our vision was suddenly
focused.


Awake to an avian symphony
Immediately we fell silent
And were for a moment all eyes and ears

And held our breaths while the breeze
sighed out
As though the world breathed for us,
The canopy shaken, a tambourine.

And now that I sit alone, uneasy,
Far from that peace and joy,
Surrounded by the gloom of my thoughts,

I bring it all to mind once more:
The light that lifted our hearts
The breath that inspired us, songs that
soothed;

And what gave us wonder: the silk-
skinned tree,
Its countless tiny green cymbals
And, almost as small, the bird-
mountaineer.



“Today Kathy told us to nurture any new awareness in nature and that we would ‘reap the benefits that are sure to follow’. That just sums it up, this is what it’s like at St Nicks. All the staff give us hope. Every week. I always feel more hopeful after a Discover Nature group.”

“Even just a phone call once a week makes such a difference – it makes me feel cared for and still part of a community...”

I really love the emails and links – it keeps me going and that there’s something to do and look forward to.”

“Thanks for your input in making lockdown bearable, it is very much appreciated.”

“Ecotherapy calms me and relaxes me, raises my mood and self-esteem and helps me feel connected to other people... As someone with paranoid psychosis, contact with other people can trigger paranoid ideation. It’s probably better in the long term that I remain connected with other people and be involved in activities that give me a sense of meaning and purpose, and that I am leading a socially useful life.”

“I was up early this morning and went for a walk around the lake to listen to the birds as the sun came up... It’s relaxing sitting and watching the birds... Thank you for all the contact and content you all send out, it helps give me ideas of things to do and helps keep me busy during this difficult time.”

“Throughout lockdown Kathy often reminded me that there’s no wrong way to connect to nature... just need to be curious and explore different ways. I never thought I’d be keeping a nature journal - doing so has been a real life changer and something I look forward to doing every day, even when I can’t get out. I find nature inside and add it to my journal.”

“I’m learning so much and am really grateful for Ecotherapy and St Nicks. I know I wouldn’t have gotten through lockdown without you!”