



Using the natural environment to deliver better health in Kent

Kent Nature Partnership

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1 Introduction

The natural environment contributes significantly to public health. There is strong evidence that nature makes a direct contribution to better mental and physical health and improved social engagement. Evidence also shows that access to natural environments benefits everyone throughout life, from young to old, and has an important role to play in reducing health inequalities in society.

Yet the contribution of the natural environment to public health is undervalued; there are many opportunities to make more use of the benefits that nature provides as an effective and value-for-money health resource.

This report examines the current provision of projects and programmes in Kent that use the natural environment for health improvement. The report has been commissioned by the Kent Nature Partnership, one of 48 local nature partnerships across England that have been tasked with working alongside their local Health and Wellbeing Board to make best use of the health benefits that nature provides.

The report will help the Kent Nature Partnership establish closer links with the health sector. It will be of interest to the Kent Health and Wellbeing Board, the public health and adult and children's social services teams at Kent County Council, clinical commissioning groups, and health care professionals in district and borough councils, the National Health Service and voluntary organisations. It will also be relevant to a broad range of organisations working to improve Kent's natural environment.

The aim of the report is:

- To review the key drivers in public health, nationally and in Kent, that relate to the value of the natural environment for good health
- To understand the coverage and impact that nature-based health projects and activities are having across Kent
- To highlight a range of projects and programmes as case studies
- To inform emerging action plans and strategies on health and wellbeing in Kent
- To make recommendations for developing further provision.

This report uses the term natural environment for all green open spaces in towns, cities or the countryside such as parks, paths, woodlands, farmland and the coast. There are many varied uses of the natural environment for informal leisure, recreation and sport, and many programmes that use the outdoors as an integral part of their day-to-day activities, such as outdoor education programmes. These activities undoubtedly have benefits to health even though they are not specifically 'health' projects.

However this study seeks to understand the provision of structured programmes that specifically use the natural environment for health benefit. These are programmes that could be particularly suited to the commissioning of health services. Although this study of the current provision of nature-based health projects in Kent is not comprehensive as the research was limited in scope, the report

provides a valuable insight into the range of ways that nature is supporting public health and exciting opportunities for further provision.

2 Nature, health and wellbeing

There is a wealth of research and evidence on the links between the natural environment and health. Comprehensive reviews of this rapidly evolving evidence base include the authoritative *UK National Ecosystem Assessment: Health Values from Ecosystems*¹; *the Micro-Economic Benefits of Investment in the Environment Review MEBIE*² and *Benefits of Urban Parks – a systematic review*³. This review of scientific research confirms that nature and green spaces contribute directly to public health by:

- Reducing stress and mental disorders
- Increasing the effect of physical activity
- Reducing health inequalities
- Increasing self-reported general health

Indirect health benefits of green spaces include:

- Providing areas and opportunities for physical activity
- Increasing satisfaction of living environment and social interactions
- Offering different modes of recreation.

Green spaces are therefore imperative for maintaining and improving public health⁴.

Advisors on health care in the UK such as The King's Fund⁵ and the Faculty of Public Health⁶ advocate the role of green and open spaces in supporting public health. The Government's statutory advisor on public health – Public Health England – acknowledges the role of parks and green spaces in addressing health issues, particularly in the context of tackling obesity across local authority areas and in making progress towards several outcomes in the Public Health Outcomes Framework⁷.

Mental health

Contact with nature can help to prevent, alleviate and assist recovery from mental health problems. Natural environments help to lower levels of stress, enhance mood, increase concentration and boost self-esteem. Conversely, living in areas with less green space is associated with a greater risk of anxiety and depression, feelings of loneliness and perceived shortage of social support⁸.

¹ <http://uknea.unep-wcmc.org/>

² <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/32031>

³ <http://www.ifpraonline.co.uk/june12/files/assets/basic-html/toc.html>

⁴ A similar summary is provided in <http://www.ifpraonline.co.uk/june12/files/assets/basic-html/toc.html>

⁵ <http://www.kingsfund.org.uk/projects/improving-publics-health/access-green-and-open-spaces-and-role-leisure-services>

⁶ http://www.fph.org.uk/uploads/r_great_outdoors.pdf

⁷ <http://www.noo.org.uk/LA/tackling/greenspace>

⁸

<http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/enjoying/linkingpeople/outdoorsforall/outdoorsforallfeature2.aspx>

Mental health benefits can be gained at all stages of life and by people with a range of health needs. A recent report *Greening Dementia*⁹ assesses the benefits of accessing the natural environment and green space for the elderly, particularly people with dementia. Key findings show that access to the outdoors and nature is important for people living with dementia and has an important role in their quality of life. Findings from the evidence include improved emotional state, physical health, verbal expression, memory, awareness, social interaction and sense of wellbeing.

Research shows that benefits of nature to mental health accrue from:

- Viewing nature – at home, at the workplace, in healthcare settings
- Contact with nearby nature – in urban parks, gardens or the rural countryside
- Green exercise – synergistic benefits of physical activity and exposure to nature
- Green care – nature as therapy for vulnerable groups of people

Physical health

Many prevalent chronic diseases are linked to lack of physical activity. These include common health problems such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, some cancers and osteoporosis. Measures of physical activity in England consistently show that many people do not reach the nationally recommended levels – currently only 56 per cent of adults meet the Chief Medical Officers' (CMO) guidelines of 150 minutes of physical activity per week¹⁰.

Access to nature can encourage participation in physical activity. Evidence suggests that being outdoors in nature is an important factor that helps to maintain people's motivation to keep fit. 'Green exercise' – physical activity undertaken in the outdoors – connects people to nature and their local environment. It has also been shown that when people exercise in green space it leads to lower anger, fatigue and depression¹¹.

Healthy communities

Green spaces in the community provide significant social benefit. This enhanced 'social capital' includes community networks, sense of belonging and equality, co-operation with others and trust in the community. Levels of social interaction can be directly influenced by the availability of green space, particularly in urban areas¹².

Results from the Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment survey¹³ have been analysed to explore the relationship of using the natural environment to levels of wellbeing. This has found that those who visit the outdoors frequently, take part in gardening and watching wildlife, or walk or cycle whenever possible are amongst those that record higher levels of life satisfaction and happiness compared with the population as a whole.

⁹ <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/enjoying/linkingpeople/outdoorsforall/g8-dementia-summit-feature.aspx>

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-fires-starting-pistol-to-tackle-physical-activity>

¹¹ <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/research/briefing-papers/POST-PN-448/urban-green-infrastructure>

¹² <http://uknea.unep-wcmc.org/> see chapter 23 p. 1164

¹³ See 'Wellbeing and the natural environment', an analysis of Natural England's MENE survey <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/research/mene.aspx>

However availability and quality of local green space is not evenly distributed; people in deprived urban areas can have five times fewer public parks and good-quality green space than people in more affluent areas¹⁴ and this is reflected in the poorer health and wellbeing of those communities. Providing access to green space has been shown to be an effective cost-effective tool for addressing health inequalities.

Research shows that some sections of society are particularly disengaged from the natural environment: black, Asian and minority ethnic groups; those living in urban areas with high deprivation; DE socio-economic groups; people aged 65 and over; and people with disabilities and/or long term health conditions¹⁵. These groups are often those whose health would benefit most from spending time in natural environments. It is essential that everyone has opportunities to access high quality natural environments.

Contact with nature – benefits throughout life

Children

- ✓ Satisfies children's innate curiosity and need for nature and generates a sense of freedom
- ✓ Provides an incentive for healthy outdoor exercise
- ✓ Reduces anxiety and disruptive behaviour
- ✓ Improves development, cognitive function and independence

Adults

- ✓ Stimulates and sustains interest in outdoor activity
- ✓ Provides relaxation and reduces stress
- ✓ Offers free or low-cost enjoyment

Older people

- ✓ Provides an incentive to remain active
- ✓ Offers opportunities for social engagement
- ✓ Helps maintain connection with the wider world

¹⁴ CABE (2010) *Community green: using local spaces to tackle inequality and improve health*.

¹⁵

<http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/enjoying/linkingpeople/outdoorsforall/outdoorsforallfeature2.aspx>

3 The role of Local Nature Partnerships

The Natural Environment White Paper 2011 *Natural Choice: securing the value of nature* outlines the Government's ambition that:

Local Nature Partnerships and the Health and Wellbeing Boards should actively seek to engage each other in their work. Forthcoming guidance will make clear that the wider determinants of health, including the natural environment, will be a crucial consideration in developing joint strategic needs assessments and joint health and wellbeing strategies¹⁶.

Defra advocates that Local Nature Partnerships work with Health and Wellbeing Boards to:

- Raise awareness of the value of public access to the natural environment and green spaces in the prevention and treatment of mental health and obesity problems
- Contribute to shaping the priorities in joint health and wellbeing strategies
- Incorporate the value of the natural environment to people's health and wellbeing in joint strategic needs assessments
- Contribute to local delivery of Public Health Outcomes Frameworks¹⁷.

Public health and the Kent Nature Partnership

One of the key aims of the Kent Local Nature Partnership is to establish closer links with the public health sector and to contribute to documents that will have a significant influence on public health commissioning, such as Health and Wellbeing Strategies and the Kent Joint Strategic Needs Assessment. The Kent Nature Partnership Board has strong representation from public health and is establishing a delivery group with the specific aim of widening the use of the natural environment to improve health in Kent.

The Partnership have been working closely with experts in public health, social care, the NHS, planning and the environment to take an integrated and sustainable approach to delivering health and social care. The Kent Joint Strategic Needs Assessment will reflect this sustainable approach and include recommendations for improving public health outcomes through, for example, ameliorating climate change, increasing active transport and improving access to the natural environment.

In 2011 the Kent Nature Partnership (KNP) commissioned an analysis of the value of ecosystem services to Kent, including the benefits to good health and wellbeing provided by the natural environment¹⁸. Subsequently the Partnership identified a need to understand the current provision of nature-based health projects in Kent and identify gaps in provision. Initial results are integrated into this report. The outcomes will help the Partnership contribute to further development of community-based public health services that use the natural environment and the development of emerging health and wellbeing strategies and action plans.

¹⁶ <http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/whitepaper/> see page 46.

¹⁷ <http://www.archive.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/documents/local-nature-partnerships-overview120402.pdf>

¹⁸ See 'Securing the Value of Nature in Kent' available from <http://www.kentbap.org.uk/resources/presentations/>

4 National context

Public Health England

Public Health England is an executive agency of the Department of Health and supports local authorities and the NHS to deliver improvements in public health. It is tasked with ensuring that local health services are effective and that they have the information that they need. The Natural Environmental White Paper states that the Government:

... have committed Public Health England to provide clear, practical evidence about how to improve health by tackling its key determinants including access to a good natural environment....and Public Health England and NICE will form a strong relationship in the future to enhance and promote use of these resources by Directors of Public Health within local authorities¹⁹.

Public Health England has a considerable role in promoting the natural environment for its benefit to health.

Healthy Lives, Healthy People

The Public Health White Paper *Healthy Lives, Healthy People: Our strategy for public health in England*²⁰ sets out the Government's long-term vision for improving health and addressing health inequalities. It focuses on health and wellbeing throughout life and the importance of addressing the 'wider determinants of health' – factors such as employment, education and the environment. It supports the influential Marmot Review that sets out the positive impact that nature has on people's physical and mental health:

High-quality natural environments foster healthy neighbourhoods; green spaces encourage social activity and reduce crime. The natural environment can help children's learning, whilst low engagement is likely to lead to impacts such as lower involvement in wider issues of sustainability²¹.

The Public Health White Paper points out the health benefits of nature and green spaces:

- “The quality of the environment around us also affects any community ... pollution, air quality, noise, the availability of green and open spaces ... all influence the health and wellbeing of the local population.”
- “Improving the environment in which people live can make healthy lifestyles easier. When the immediate environment is unattractive, it is difficult to make physical activity and contact with nature part of everyday life ... lower socioeconomic groups and those living in the more deprived areas experience the greatest environmental burdens.”
- “We will make active aging the norm ... for example by ... protecting green spaces and launching physical activity initiatives...and a volunteer led walks programme. We will protect and promote community ownership of green spaces and improve access to land...”

¹⁹ See page 46 of NEWP. NICE is the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence.

²⁰

http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_121941

²¹ <http://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/projects/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review>

- “Access to green spaces is associated with better mental and physical health across socioeconomic groups. DCLG [the Department of Communities and Local Government] is working with Defra to create a new designation to protect green areas of particular importance to local communities²².”

Responsibilities for Local Government

One of the key changes in the recent re-structure of the health service has been to give local authorities responsibility for public health – defined as improving the health of the population rather than treating disease. Although local authorities have had considerable public health functions for many years, such as responsibility for social care, councils now have responsibility for many issues related to health and wellbeing that were formerly delivered by the NHS. Local government is also responsible for reducing health inequalities between populations in their areas and local authority involvement in planning, leisure services and green spaces give a direct opportunity to encourage people to adopt healthier lifestyles and benefit from greater access to the natural environment.

Public Health Outcomes Framework

The Public Health Outcomes Framework (PHOF)²³ 2013 to 2016 sets out the desired outcomes for public health and indicators that local authorities can use to measure progress. The Framework includes an indicator that is directly relevant to the health benefits of the natural environment:

Indicator 1.16 % of people using outdoor space for exercise / health reasons

This indicator is measured by Natural England’s Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment (MENE)²⁴ survey which provides data on how people use the natural environment and it demonstrates the significance of accessible green space as a wider determinant of public health. Other indicators in the PHOF such as those for social isolation, obesity and physical activity, can also be influenced by increasing access to the natural environment – see box below. The survey of nature-based health projects in Kent carried out as part of this report confirms that benefits to service users range from enhanced wellbeing, physical fitness and community cohesion to reduced social isolation (see page 22).

The most recent evaluation of indicator 1.16 was carried out by the MENE survey team between March 2012 and February 2013. This shows that the percentage of people using the outdoors for health is 10.7% in Kent, well below the England average of 15.3% and amongst the lowest levels in South East England – only Reading and Slough have lower levels²⁵.

²² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/healthy-lives-healthy-people-our-strategy-for-public-health-in-england>

²³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/healthy-lives-healthy-people-improving-outcomes-and-supporting-transparency>

²⁴ <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/research/mene.aspx>

²⁵ <http://www.phoutcomes.info/public-health-outcomes-framework#gid/1000041/pat/6/ati/102/page/3/par/E12000008/are/E06000036>

Access to natural environments and the Public Health Outcomes Framework 2013–2016	
Domain 1 Improving the wider determinants of health	1.16 Utilisation of outdoor space for exercise/health reasons
	1.18 Social isolation
	1.19 Older people's perception of community safety
Domain 2 Health Improvement	2.6 Excess weight in 4-5 and 10-11 year olds
	2.12 Excess weight in adults
	2.13 Proportion of physically active and inactive adults
	2.17 Recorded diabetes
	2.23 Self-reported wellbeing
Domain 3 Health Protection	3.1 Fraction of mortality attributable to particulate air pollution
Domain 4 Healthcare, public health and preventing premature mortality	4.4 Under 75 mortality rate from all cardiovascular diseases (including heart disease and stroke)
	4.13 Health-related quality of life for older people

5 Public health delivery

Health and Wellbeing Boards

Health and Wellbeing Boards (HWBs) are at the centre of health reforms to improve public health and they have statutory responsibilities to improve the health and wellbeing of their local population and reduce health inequalities. Each Board will agree the health priorities of their area and influence commissioning of health services. They provide a forum for integration of healthcare, public health and social care. Their main tasks are to:

- Build a picture of community needs through the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA)
- Identify strategic priorities in a Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy (JHWS)
- Develop commissioning plans.

Health and Wellbeing Boards bring together local authority councillors, representatives of Clinical Commissioning Groups, local authority Directors for Adult Services and Children's Services, the Director for Public Health, a representative from Healthwatch and others from the community. Boards provide a new opportunity to integrate the 'wider determinants' of health, such as the environment, into the commissioning of services and to make links with partners, such as local nature partnerships, to meet local needs and achieve shared priorities.

The shadow Health and Wellbeing Board in Kent was replaced by a new HWB on 1st April 2013 and includes GPs, county and district councillors, senior officers from Social Care and Public Health and representation from Healthwatch Kent.

Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy

The JSNA brings together data and information on the health of the population and some of the factors that affect health. It is a comprehensive analysis of the current and future health needs and

assets of an area. Assets could be “facilities such as green spaces ... (and) local providers with specific expertise”²⁶. The JSNA involves an in-depth analysis of the wider determinants of health.

Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategies are based on the priorities identified in the JSNA and provide the local framework for commissioning health services. Local authorities, NHS and Clinical Commissioning Groups will all reflect the Strategy in their commissioning plans. In Kent, the local NHS budget is spent by seven Clinical Commissioning Groups who plan and buy local health services.

The Strategy will help those planning delivery of health and care services, include preventative measures to keep people healthy, and include ‘wider ranging interventions’. This offers scope to include access to nature and green exercise as interventions to improve mental and physical health. Tapping into the links and knowledge of the Kent Nature Partnership will be of great value in developing health and wellbeing strategies in Kent.

Public health in Kent

Kent health profiles

Health profiles give an overview of the health of the population and are available for each local authority area in England²⁷. The national Health Profiles programme is part of Public Health England and profiles are produced annually for use by local authorities, community groups and health services.

The Kent Health Profile 2013²⁸ is a summary of key health indicators and shows that the people of Kent have a mixed health picture. Estimated levels of adult obesity in Kent are worse than the England average. Life expectancy is better than the national average but there is a considerable gap in life expectancy between the most and least deprived areas. Although the population of Kent as a whole is less deprived than the national average, there are considerable pockets of deprivation in areas of Dartford, Dover, Gravesham, Shepway, Swale and Thanet, and these are on a par with the most deprived communities nationwide.

The Kent & Medway Public Health Observatory provides detailed public health intelligence. Information on health inequalities, physical activity, obesity and mental health gives a clear picture of health in Kent and insights into where the benefits of the natural environment can best be utilised to support better health.

Kent Joint Strategic Needs Assessment

The Kent JSNA²⁹ provides an overview and analysis of the county’s demographics, deprivation scores, morbidity, mortality, lifestyle and life expectancy and is an umbrella for the many needs assessments undertaken in Kent. The JSNA 2012 *Working together to Keep Kent Healthy*³⁰ includes data and information on several health issues where the use of the natural environment could help to deliver health improvements:

²⁶ http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/documents/digitalasset/dh_131733.pdf

²⁷ <http://www.apho.org.uk/default.aspx?RID=49802>

²⁸ <http://www.apho.org.uk/resource/view.aspx?RID=50215&SEARCH=kent&SPEAR=>

²⁹ <http://www.kmpho.nhs.uk/jsna/>

³⁰ Available from <http://www.kmpho.nhs.uk/jsna/>

- **Physical activity** – overall Kent appears to have slightly lower physical activity levels (10%) than the rest of England (11%). Areas with higher levels of deprivation appear to have lower physical activity levels than those in more affluent areas.
- **Adult obesity** – in areas of deprivation, obesity levels are 25-30% of the adult population compared to 20-25% in more affluent areas. If those who are overweight are included, the figure rises to 50% of the total adult population. The effects of obesity include heart disease, diabetes, osteoarthritis and cancer, putting a considerable burden on health care services.
- **Early years** – development of physical and emotional health and health behaviours in early years are crucial to adult good health.
- **Childhood obesity** – levels of obesity in children increase steadily between age 5 (8.9%) and age 11 (18.4%).
- **Child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS)** – estimates are that 15% of all children and young people in Kent will need a CAMHS service. More than half of these children have a diagnosable mental health disorder such as conduct and emotional disorders.
- **Adult mental health** – nearly 1/3 of GP consultations are related to common mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression – about 160,000 people in Kent and Medway. These conditions tend to be more prevalent in deprived areas, in older people, in unemployed people and in those with long-term physical health conditions. People with poor mental health often experience poor physical health and reduced life expectancy.

Sustainability and the Kent JSNA

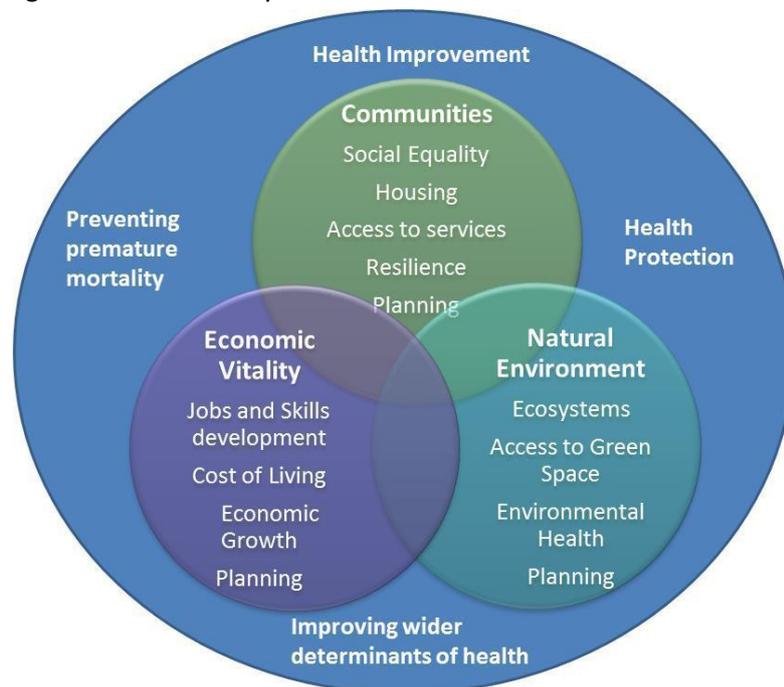
A new chapter of the Kent JSNA will outline how to improve delivery of public health and social care outcomes through taking a sustainable approach. This involves consideration of a range of social, environmental and economic factors that impact on health and wellbeing, such as air quality, transport and the natural environment. Many actions that will improve public health, including access to green space, will also have positive benefits on other policy priorities such as ameliorating climate change.

The Kent Sustainability and Health Working Group are at the forefront of integrating sustainability into the JSNA and have produced a guide for use nationally³¹. Figure 1 below illustrates the relationship of the three main elements of sustainability – social, environmental and economic – and the wider determinants of Public Health.

As part of a sustainable approach to public health services, recommendations are being developed to assist commissioning. A sustainability action plan will incorporate priority research, communications and projects to further understand the role that the natural environment of Kent can play in improving health. Many of these priority actions have been incorporated into the recommendations of this report (see pages 24-25).

³¹ *Joint Strategic Needs Assessment: A Guide to Integrating Sustainability* is available at <http://www.sduhealth.org.uk/areas-of-focus/community-resilience.aspx>

Figure 1: Sustainability and the wider determinants of Public Health³²



The sustainability chapter of the Kent JSNA will also address priorities for a sustainable approach to social care. Local authorities and others provide a wide range of social services to children and adults with care and support needs, including people with mental health issues, those with learning or physical disabilities, young offenders, the homeless and older people. Access to the natural environment particularly supports two social care domains and two social care outcomes in the Adult Social Care Outcomes Framework 2014/15³³.

Access to natural environments and the Adult Social Care Outcomes Framework 2014/15	
Domains	Outcomes
Enhancing quality of life for people with care and support needs	– People are able to find employment when they want, maintain a family and social life and contribute to community life, and avoid loneliness or isolation
Delaying and reducing the need for care and support	– Everyone has the opportunity to have the best health and wellbeing throughout their life, and can access support and information to help them manage their care needs

³² Taken from page 3 of *Joint Strategic Needs Assessment: A Guide to Integrating Sustainability*

<http://www.sduhealth.org.uk/areas-of-focus/community-resilience.aspx>

³³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adult-social-care-outcomes-framework-2014-to-2015>

Annual public health report 2013

The Kent 2013 annual public health report³⁴ focuses on three approaches – community assets, resilience and six ways to wellbeing – all of which are strongly linked to the health benefits of the natural environment.

The asset based approach concentrates on “what is good about a community” and the report recognises the many opportunities provided by the environmental assets of the coastline, country parks and green spaces of Kent:

The Kent countryside is in itself a great asset, economically, culturally and socially. From ... health walks in the many Kent country parks, to groups of volunteers who gather together to improve their green spaces, right through to small numbers of people with mental health problems who go walking together, the countryside is important. Given this abundance of natural resource, we think mapping this for health and wellbeing is important.

Access to nature can encourage participation in physical activity. Going out for a stroll or to get some fresh air inspires people of all ages to be active. Evidence suggests that being outdoors in nature is an important factor that helps to maintain people's motivation to keep fit.

Improving resilience to pressures is also important for good health – “access to fresh air” is highlighted as one of four basic building blocks of building resilience³⁵. The *Five ways to wellbeing*³⁶ are described and illustrated with case studies, including being active in the natural environment through conservation volunteering, health walks and gardening in allotments. A sixth way to wellbeing has been added in Kent, focussing on sustainability – including looking after local surroundings, investing time in a green initiative or planting seeds or vegetables – again reflecting the importance placed on the natural environment for health in Kent.

Kent Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy

The strategy for 2013/14³⁷ produced by the shadow Health and Wellbeing Board reflects the JSNA and focuses on areas of poor health where Kent lags behind national performance and on health inequalities. The focus is on prevention, social conditions, healthy lifestyles and integrated working between GPs and local government, and shifting resources from acute care (treatment) to community health (prevention). The strategy supports “widening the involvement of voluntary and community services in delivering health and social care services...helping to prevent ill health and providing direct services to keep people healthy”.

The strategy will inform commissioning decisions. To achieve the five key outcomes outlined in the Strategy, priorities where the natural environment can play a role in delivery include:

³⁴ Available at <http://www.kmpho.nhs.uk/>

³⁵ See page 7 of the Annual Public Health Report 2013 at <http://www.kmpho.nhs.uk/>

³⁶ <http://www.neweconomics.org/projects/entry/five-ways-to-well-being>

³⁷ The strategy is available at:
http://www.kent.gov.uk/your_council/priorities_policies_and_plans/priorities_and_plans/social_care_and_health/health_and_wellbeing_strategy.aspx

- Work with families to promote healthy eating and increased physical activity
- Improve child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS)
- Improving the proportion of our adult population that enjoy a healthy weight, a healthy diet and are physically active
- Work with the voluntary sector, other providers, carers and families to reduce the social isolation of people with mental health issues.
- Ensuring more people with mental ill health have good physical health.

6 An analysis of nature-based health projects in Kent

The natural environment supports health in a number of ways:

- Through providing a place for informal, self-directed access to nature
- As a venue for outdoor recreation and sport or programmes that use the outdoors as part of their day-to-day activities, such as outdoor education
- As a basis for projects and programmes that specifically use the outdoors to improve physical and mental health and reduce social isolation.

In Kent there is a wealth of opportunities to use the countryside and green spaces in towns and cities for walking, cycling, children's play or simply getting out into the fresh air. There are also many options for outdoor-based sports from canoeing and rock climbing to orienteering and wild swimming. All of these activities are examples of 'green exercise' and they take advantage of the health benefits of being outdoors and the added-value that nature provides.

This report acknowledges that there are many varied uses of the natural environment for informal leisure, recreation and sport as outlined above, but seeks to understand the provision of more structured programmes in Kent that specifically use the natural environment for health benefit. These are programmes that could be particularly suited to the commissioning of public health services.

Survey of nature-based health projects

A questionnaire was developed to undertake a countywide assessment of the number, type and location of projects and activities that use the natural environment specifically for health benefit. The survey sought information on those initiatives that are:

- Health orientated – where the principal aim is improving the mental or physical health of a particular group of people
- Structured – projects that include specific activities and follow a structured programme
- Regular – projects that take place regularly at a certain time and place
- Facilitated – have staff or volunteers to facilitate and guide the activities
- Take place outdoors – in many types of green spaces in urban or rural areas.

In addition to general information about the projects such as providing organisation and geographical area covered, the survey also requested information on health needs targeted, number of service users reached, methods of referral, staffing and funding. A copy of the questionnaire is provided in Appendix 1 on page 42.

One of the aims of the survey was to identify gaps in service provision. However it was not feasible to carry out a detailed search of all existing projects and subsequently a full analysis of gaps in provision. The results are therefore not a detailed picture of all existing projects but a representative summary. The questionnaire was distributed to 62 targeted individuals in as many organisations, and 22 full responses and 10 partially completed responses were received.

A selection of the survey responses were chosen for more in-depth analysis as case studies – see pages 26-41. These eight case study projects were selected to represent a range of types of project

and providers across Kent, to give insights into what works well and some of the barriers, and to give greater detail and evidence of how these projects are using the natural environment to support public health.

Analysis of survey responses

From the responses received, initiatives can be broadly divided into:

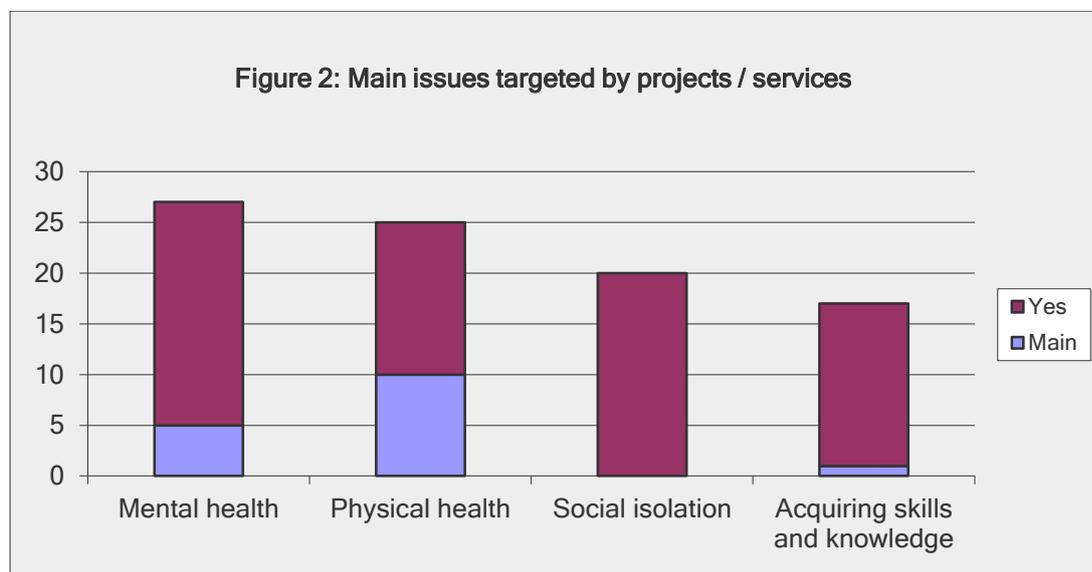
- Green exercise – health walks, cycling
- Conservation management – ‘green gyms’, conservation volunteering
- Green care – gardening, horticultural therapy, care farming
- Nature activities – wildlife walks, nature arts and crafts

Many projects fit into more than one type of initiative and include a blend of activities: for example a horticultural therapy project may also include nature arts and crafts or green exercise.

Providers

Responses indicate that providers of nature-based health projects are almost entirely from the public and voluntary sectors. Health walks are usually overseen by local government at district level, but there is also provision by the county council, NHS and community or privately run ‘healthy living centres’. Conservation management opportunities are available widely through the Kent Countryside Management Partnerships and through locally-based ‘Green Gyms’. In this survey, all projects that focus on mental health needs are provided by the voluntary sector.

Health needs targeted



Most projects and services target more than one health need, for example a project that focuses on mental health will also help to improve the participant’s physical health and social isolation and may lead to acquiring skills and knowledge. From the full responses received, Figure 2 shows that the **main** issue targeted was physical health – this was mainly addressed through health walk programmes or conservation management tasks such as cutting vegetation or improving paths. However all 22 full responses acknowledged that mental health issues were addressed (shown as

'yes' in Figure 1), even if this was not the main purpose of the service. Similarly, social isolation was addressed by almost all projects even though this was not the main purpose. Other issues addressed by projects and reported by respondents include confidence building, promoting independent living skills, emotional and behavioural difficulties, and 'linking people, land and nature'.

Activities provided

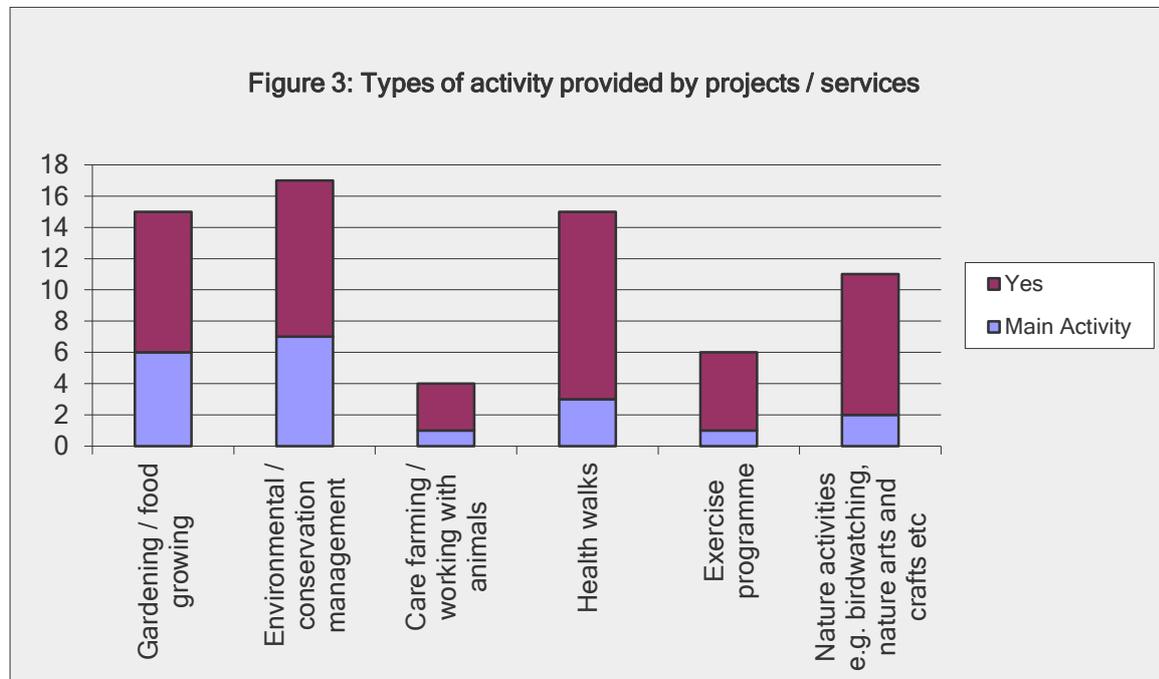


Figure 3 illustrates typical activities that are provided by nature-based health projects:

- The most common activities offered (shown as 'yes' on Figure 3) are health walks, conservation management, gardening/food growing and nature activities such as birdwatching or nature crafts
- Care farming/working with animals and specific exercise programmes are also offered
- The most common activities chosen by respondents as their **main** activity offered was conservation management, followed by gardening/food growing and health walks
- Other activities provided for service users and described by respondents include environmental education, cooking, woodworking and interpretation events.

Typical session

Respondents were asked to describe a typical session and some of these are given below.

Conservation management

“Volunteers working closely with the park maintenance team to carry out maintenance and woodland management tasks around a woodland based wildlife park - 10am to 3pm with a break for lunch. Wide variety of tasks such as rhododendron removal, logging to manage woodland and provide firewood for cafe, shop and education centre, managing and maintaining the compost area, construction and maintenance of enclosures, dyke drainage management, dead hedging and fencing.”

“Moderate physical activity, several hours outdoors in a natural environment with other people, learning new skills.”

“Carrying out practical conservation projects ranging from school wildlife areas through to woodland plants. Programme of environmental education activities through the year such as natural art and crafts through to fungi and bat walks.”

“Help manage and protect the rights of way network that are important to local communities by carrying out small tasks such as vegetation clearance, waymarking, oiling gates etc”

Gardening, food growing and care farming

“Young people are picked up from local stations at 10.00am and driven to the farm. They put on work boots etc and go into the garden or to the farm to work alongside the staff in our social enterprises (market garden, organic dairy farm). They have a break at 11.30. Two young people cook lunch whilst the others continue work after the break. We all eat together. The young people are involved in all aspects of growing, harvesting, packing and selling produce. Some young people do placements with the dairy herd working towards accreditation in milking and herd management. All young people receive weekly person centred therapy provided by trained and experienced mental health staff team.”

“Allotment project links in with family weight management programme”

Health walks

“A brisk walk ranging from 30mins to 1hr for our specific health walks. These walks are also supported by longer walks with the aim of supporting mental health projects.”

“The health walks typically start from a community venue and then walking around the green space for around 2 miles.”

“Weekly health walks around two of the main green and open spaces in the borough. Volunteer leader will take a register and complete an OHQ with new participants and then lead the walk with the support of a back-marker. The walks take place on fairly easy terrain.”

“Short walks of about 1 hour/2.5 miles, for people of all ages and abilities 52 weeks of the year, all free.”

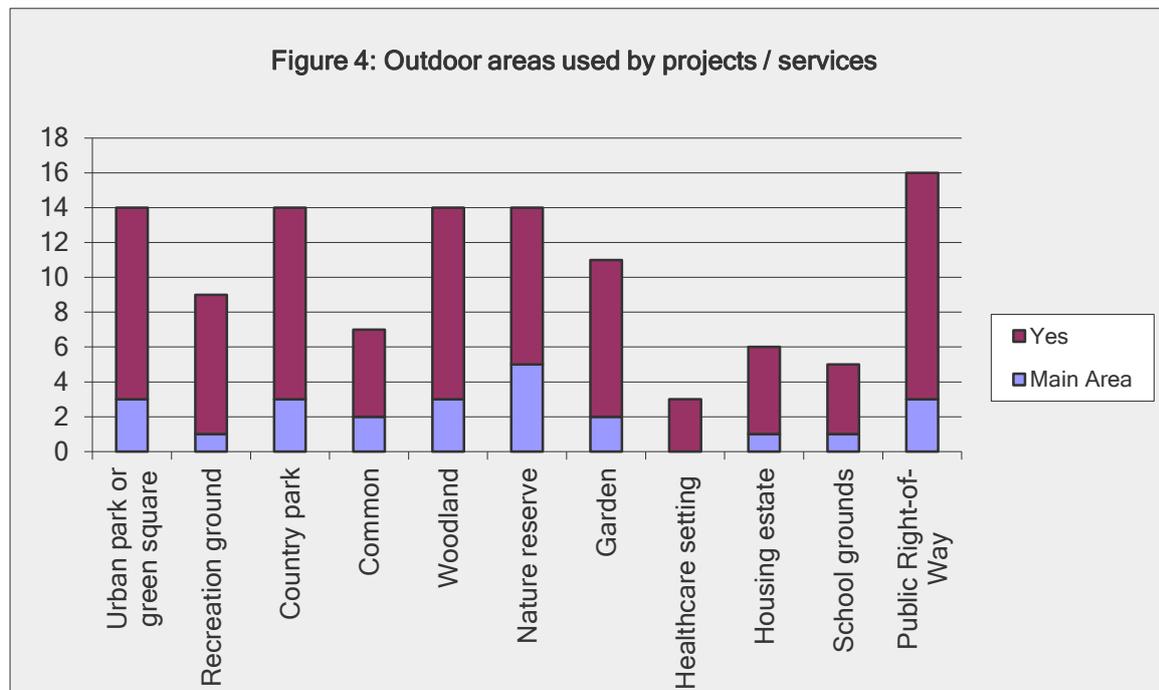
“Short health walks with carers and their children”

“A 5 mile walk in a different place each week with input about landscape and landscape use, local history, social history, flora and fauna, PROW law, and agriculture and horticulture.”

Nature activities

“Children and young people engage in various craft activities with their parent/carer, growing and harvesting fruit and vegetables, food preparation and cooking, bread-making and green woodworking. The session finishes with a lunch that has been prepared with the families and is eaten together.”

Outdoor areas used



Over 80% of the areas used by organisations and their service users are publicly owned and accessible to all. Most commonly these include urban and rural open spaces owned by local authorities. There are also gardens and other types of spaces that are owned privately or by a charitable trust. Figure 4 illustrates the types of outdoor spaces used by nature-based health projects in this survey:

- The types of green space most commonly used include public rights-of-way (footpaths), woodlands, country parks and urban parks
- Also commonly used are gardens, nature reserves and recreation grounds
- Some projects use grounds within housing estates and school grounds for carrying out conservation management works
- Areas within healthcare settings, such as hospital grounds or the grounds of a community health centre or care unit, were not used by any project as their **main** area although 3 projects did use healthcare settings for some of their work.

Additional types of areas that were described by respondents included community orchards, small holdings, allotments, and a farm / market garden.

Service users of projects

Most projects cater to mixed groups of between 5 and 30 people. The most common size of group is 10 to 15 people per session.

The projects surveyed address the mental and physical health needs of people of all ages. However some projects target specific age groups:

- Several projects cater specifically for children or young people with emotional and mental health difficulties
- Most health walk programmes cater for adults of all ages, but for several the main users are from the over 60 age group
- Conservation management initiatives also cater for all adult age groups but some projects tend to attract those over 60 years old
- Many projects run mid-week and therefore tend to favour the semi-retired, retired, unemployed or students.

Many projects are run as drop-in events, particularly health walks and conservation management days. There is a wide variation in how many weeks people attend for, and in some cases this can be for up to 2 years or more.

The number of people that participate in a project each year can range from about 20 per year for initiatives that provide intensive support several times per week to many thousands participating in a range of weekly health walks. None of the projects reported a waiting time for service users to join their project.

Signposting and referral

Most projects target the general public from the local borough or district. Some projects target those with mental health issues or those who take part in little physical activity. In addition, about 25% of respondents reported that they specifically target people in areas of deprivation and areas with marked health inequalities.

Health walks are advertised through a range of methods including websites, newsletters, advertising and posters and leaflets distributed at, for example, GP surgeries, offices, shops, libraries, information centres and sports centres. In addition, respondents note that many walkers come through word-of-mouth. Two projects also noted that walkers can come through GP referrals.

Projects that offer conservation management work days advertise through websites, leaflets and other marketing tools such as advertisements, but also rely on word-of-mouth and project work with partners. Projects can also be signposted from volunteer bureaux, local papers and job centres.

Referrals for one of the projects supporting young people with mental health difficulties come from all local young people's services, parents, and through networks such as the Kent Integrated Adolescent Support Services (KIASS).

Health benefits for service users

Survey respondents were asked to summarise the key benefits provided to service users and some of their views are provided here.

“Social contact, improved health and wellbeing, a sense of belonging and contributing to the communities in which they live”

“Increased self-confidence, increased motivation and interest in life. Improved mental well-being through spending time outside in the natural environment. Developing soft skills such as team work, communication, time management. Developing practical skills such as dead hedging, fence construction, cement mixing”

“Easy access to information, improved physical and mental health, links to other people in the local community to build community cohesion and support social inclusion, sense of responsibility and ownership when helping to manage the public rights-of-way network - big society, providing value for money for PRow services, sustainable health benefits reducing reliance on health services later in life”

“Support people to make changes in their lifestyle which have a positive impact on their health”

“Better physical and mental health, taking them away from isolation, interaction with other people, more positive outlook, regular group, practical skills, more confidence”

“Improved health (and in many cases, recovery from illness/injury) Increased sociability. Enhanced knowledge of the local area”

“Approximately 95% report benefits to their health and wellbeing. Make friends, feeling better in themselves and increases in physical activity figure high on the list”

“Opportunity for individuals to take part in a free, low intensity, sociable activity in local open green spaces”

“Improvement in the performance of Heart, Lungs and Circulation. Lowering Blood Pressure. Weight management, reducing risk of Diabetes, Cancer, Osteoporosis, Joint damage”

“Measurable community and biodiversity benefits. The social aspects for attendees are very important, meeting with likeminded people in the outdoors.”

“Young people make significant improvements in mental health, social skills, educational and employment outcomes etc all using standardised outcome measures. 85% make a successful transition into education, employment, voluntary or paid employment”

Funding

Most projects rely on funding from the public sector and grants from charitable trusts, supplemented by local fundraising, personal budgets, participant contributions or project work for private clients.

- Health walks are commonly supported or commissioned through the NHS, public health, or local authority budgets such as those for health improvement projects. Some also rely on local grants or participant fees. Although some projects are time limited, most have been running for 8 to 12 years.

- Environmental management projects run by the Countryside Management Partnerships are usually funded by local authorities, lottery funding, grant-aid organisations and charities, and private clients including companies, housing associations and schools. Set up and running costs for a green gym project in Shepway come from local authority funds.
- Projects principally aimed at supporting mental health needs are also commonly funded from statutory funding, grants from charities, foundations and companies, local fundraising, or paid placements from personalisation / social care budgets or schools. Some projects also raise funds through community enterprises such as sales of produce or through member subscriptions. Several projects in Kent benefitted from the national Ecominds scheme which closed in 2013, and of these, one has since been unable to secure funds to continue operating.

Main challenges

The main challenge faced by projects and mentioned by respondents was the lack of funding, linked to associated problems such as having adequate staffing or transport. Other challenges included attracting enough volunteers to assist with activities and not being accepted as a viable alternative health intervention.

More funding would enable projects to continue with current activities, move forward with new plans and enable service users to participate more often, for longer periods and more consistently. Additional staffing would enable more support to service users and facilitate 'extra' jobs such as evaluating outcomes. For some projects, such as conservation management initiatives, lack of transport can severely restrict the range of people who can take part as many service users are unable to get to the venues or are uncomfortable with arriving and finding venues on their own.

Evaluating the outcomes of projects

An aim of this study was to seek information on the impact of projects on service users. This relied on information received from project organisers as asking service users directly about their experiences was not included in the scope of the study.

- Most health walk initiatives undertake evaluation of health outcomes, often through feedback questionnaires. Those projects that are part of the national Walking for Health scheme³⁸ are encouraged to carry out 'outdoor health questionnaires' and submit their data to the national website. Other walk schemes also tend to undertake evaluation at least annually.
- Conservation management programmes are less likely to undertake evaluation, although some do collect annual feedback and informal ongoing feedback after tasks.
- A range of standardised outcome measures including Children's Global Assessment Scale (CGAS), Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWEBS) and recovery or wellbeing outcome stars are used by projects that supports young people with mental health difficulties.

From the survey results, fewer than half of respondents carry out any formal monitoring of outcomes of their projects. Of those that evaluate outcomes, many do not monitor health changes

³⁸ Run jointly by the Ramblers and Macmillan Cancer Support <http://www.walkingforhealth.org.uk/>

of service users but other factors such as the numbers of people taking part or the amount of conservation management work delivered.

Although monitoring of outcomes is generally not quantitative, project coordinators have much qualitative evidence that people feel better from participating in nature-based projects. The case studies that follow demonstrate the success of these projects in addressing a range of priority public health issues in Kent, including tackling obesity, improving mental health and addressing inequalities between communities.

7 Conclusions and recommendations

Extensive changes in health and social care provision present new opportunities to explore alternative ways to meet health care needs. Many interventions that get people outdoors in the community, such as health walks, green gyms, gardening and looking after nature, can help to improve health effectively and at low-cost.

This study shows that there are a range of innovative and high quality projects and programmes across Kent that utilise the natural environment to support good mental and physical health. The projects appeal to a cross-section of society and attract people of all ages and abilities, and many projects in Kent target those communities where health needs are greatest. These projects are effective and viable alternatives for improving health that are suitable for the commissioning of public health services.

Access to the natural environment is an important wider determinant of health. Many nature-based health projects are effective in reducing social isolation and supporting community cohesion, and give participants new skills and opportunities.

From this limited survey there is a strong indication that there is a lack of awareness amongst health professionals of the many opportunities to use the outdoors as an effective and value-for-money health resource. There is an urgent need for closer working between health and environment professionals to make best use of the health benefits that nature provides.

Recommendations

Health commissioners, public health teams and health care professionals

- Engage with the Kent Nature Partnership as a central voice in Kent for using the natural environment to support public health
- Consider joint commissioning and funding of providers of nature-based health projects to achieve outcomes across public health, social care and the NHS
- Set up a central register of nature-based health projects for use by health and social care professionals
- Increase signposting and referral to nature-based opportunities that offer community-based non-medical interventions
- Research the current number and location of referrals from health and social care practitioners to green exercise and green care and undertake a detailed gap analysis of nature-based health projects in Kent. Use this information to develop a targeted action plan.

- Support providers of nature-based projects to measure and evaluate their effectiveness to identify specific improvements in health and wellbeing and to ensure high quality services
- Provide further guidance to health professionals on the opportunities for improving health and wellbeing through green exercise and green care
- Review opportunities for greening the health and social care estate to improve the health of patients and staff
- Use data from Natural England’s ‘Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards’ (ANGSt) to map the availability of access to green space across Kent and incorporate into the JSNA
- Ensure that planning and transport strategies encourage active travel and provide access to green space across the population

Kent Nature Partnership

- Contribute to updates of the JSNA and the Kent Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy
- Disseminate the evidence about the benefits of nature more widely and make available to GPs and other healthcare professionals in the NHS, local government and the voluntary sector
- Engage with a wide range of social and community services, such as probation services, to raise awareness of the benefits of using the natural environment to support mental and physical health
- Engage a champion GP to help widen GP referral to health walks and signpost to existing activities and facilities available from community and environmental organisations
- Develop a GP referral project involving key environmental organisations that provide nature-based health projects
- Engage with providers of nature-based health projects and programmes to share best practice and identify opportunities for increasing provision
- Increase access to green space through influencing plans and strategies such as Green Infrastructure Strategies, Local Development Frameworks and sustainable transport plans and engage with linked programmes such as sustainable development and climate change

Abbey Physic Community Garden

Using the natural environment to deliver better health in Kent – Case Study

Project type – Horticultural therapy

Lead organisation – Abbey Physic Community Garden

Location – Faversham, Kent

Contact details – abbeyphysic@btinternet.com or 01795 539915

Website – www.abbeyphysiccommunitygarden.org



Abbey Physic Community Garden is a half-acre walled organic garden that has won many accolades including gold awards for 'Gardening for Wildlife', certificates of excellence from the South and South East in Bloom, the 'Wild about gardens 2012' community award from the Kent Wildlife Trust and 'outstanding' in the RHS 'It's Your Neighbourhood' awards. The garden was established in 2007 and includes a mixture of communal plots, single beds and raised beds, and includes a wildlife garden and forest garden.

The project focuses on the therapeutic benefits of horticulture and gardening with nature. The Garden welcomes adults of all ages who experience mental ill health, learning difficulties, bereavement, physical disabilities and all those who are vulnerable, socially isolated or economically disadvantaged. Garden tasks are matched to each gardener and most facilities are accessible for all. Members of the Garden also include people who enjoy working alongside those who need extra support.

The project offers training, including achieving qualifications such as an NVQ in horticulture in association with Hadlow College and a CVQ in volunteering, providing skills for possible future employment opportunities. The project also offers nature-related activities such as making birdboxes, green woodworking and botanical drawing. The Garden aims to help gardeners develop life skills, self-esteem, confidence and coping strategies:

"I enjoy ... the feeling of potential. We're growing together in more ways than one and reaching out to the wider community"

"My discipline is much better and my mental health has improved very gradually"

"Being in the garden makes you forget for a while that you have a 'mental health' problem... I have got part of myself back; the garden gives you an inner peace"

"This has helped to give me a sense of purpose, which I would not have found without the help and support of the garden"

The Garden is open 5 days per week and approximately 12 to 18 people volunteer during each session. Just over half of the volunteer members experience long-term mental health issues or are going through a period of trauma. Of these, 60-70% are unemployed. Currently there are 53 volunteer members and approximately one-quarter are over 60 years old.

The project is coordinated by 2 part-time staff and funding is secured through grants and donations from local companies, Kent County Council, charitable trusts, and local people. Funds are also raised through member subscriptions, community events and donations for the purchase of garden produce.

The project has continual referrals from Community Mental Health Teams, the Shaw Trust, occupational therapists and through word-of-mouth. The 'Recovery Star' evaluation method is used to monitor outcomes of the project and activities on the health and wellbeing of volunteer members. In a recent anonymous questionnaire, all those with mental health issues reported an improvement in their mental wellbeing. Last year, four members gained employment and two returned to education. A number of members completed various courses including an NVQ in Horticulture level one, first aid, health and safety, green woodworking and safe use of hand tools.

Future plans for the project include the addition of a new cabin to serve coffee, tea and cakes to the visiting public in a more professional way than is done at the moment. This would give enhanced work experience for members, with handling money, time keeping and helping to build self-esteem and confidence. It would also help raise the garden's profile in the community and help with raising funds. Other plans include expanding on heritage craft activities, including pottery and green woodworking, and 'groundforce' action teams to go out in the local community.

Key points

The main challenge faced by the project is that of securing funding to continue with current activities and move forward with new plans.

The project's success is partly due to being member-led, excellent at engaging men and community participation in special events.

Integration with the local community is achieved well as the garden is open to the public and serves coffee and tea.

Dandelion Time

Using the natural environment to deliver better health in Kent – Case Study

Project type – Care farming, horticultural therapy, nature arts & crafts

Lead organisation – Dandelion Time

Location – Maidstone, Kent

Contact details – info@dandeliontime.org.uk 01622 814001

Website – www.dandeliontime.org.uk



Dandelion Time supports children and young people between the ages of 7 to 16 with emotional and behavioural difficulties. The project provides practical farm-based activities and a therapeutic service to help children develop confidence, self-esteem and new interests. Children engage with the natural world through caring for animals,

growing and harvesting vegetables and using natural products such as clay, wool and green wood for craft making. The outdoor activities and exercise offered at Dandelion Time promote good physical and mental health and connection with the natural environment.

Children come with family members or carers with about 70 families supported each year. Many families are from deprived areas and experience poverty, unemployment and other health and social issues. The project helps the whole family start to overcome their difficulties.

“Dandelion Time helps children and families to relax in a natural environment and overcome pent up feelings” Consultant Paediatrician

“Despite many years of Mental Health input from medical agencies for all members of this family, the one intervention that has truly worked is the Dandelion Project. We have seen a remarkable transition of all family members with an increase in their confidence, and significant improvement in their relationships within the past few months” Community Mental Health Nurse

Dandelion Time is based on 40 acres of private land and the site includes a garden, small holding, orchards, fields and woodland. The site has been chosen for planting 3,700 trees as part of the national ‘NHS Forest’ initiative that aims to plant 1 tree for each of the 1.3 million NHS employees.

The project was developed in 2003 and now employs 8 full-time equivalent staff and has an annual budget of £380,000. About half of the funding comes from foundations, trusts and charities, a quarter through public agencies such as Kent County Council, and almost a quarter from donations and fundraising. A small amount also comes through private placements. Paid staff are supported by

10 regular volunteers and many other volunteers help with gardening, animal care and other jobs on an ad hoc basis. In 2012 about 3,000 hours were volunteered.

An important focus of the work with children and families is the growing, preparing and jointly eating of food. This has nutritional, social and environmental benefits and is often something the family continue to enthusiastically pursue when no longer engaged with the project.

Independent evaluation shows dramatic improvements in emotional wellbeing and conduct in referred children during their time at the project. Evaluation indicates that children and young people are less fearful, able to regulate their behaviour and gain a belief that they can achieve in life. On average 90% of families complete their programme and 75% of children re-engage with education. The outcomes against personal goals are also very successful.

On average a child is actively engaged with the project for 6 months but they also maintain links afterwards and may return to events and open days. Children are referred through a variety of routes, principally from education and social services. There are also some self-referrals or via other voluntary or health services.

Dandelion Time is developing an accredited education programme so that this successful methodology can reach more children. There are plans to open a new site in another part of Kent.

Key points

The natural world is a source of delight and wonder for children, particularly animals – the experience of nurturing and caring for another vulnerable creature can be both therapeutic and help build skills and confidence. If children are unable to connect with nature at a young age evidence has shown that they may never be able to enjoy this important aspect of life and their long term physical and mental health can suffer as a result.

As we create a bespoke programme for each child the work is resource intensive. It is important that every family has the best chance to improve their life though, and often they have tried and failed many times with other agencies before they come to Dandelion Time so it is vital for them to retain some hope of successful progress.

Mealtimes are very special and important – for many families this is their first experience of all eating together around a table having helped to harvest and prepare the food.

We focus on use of the hands and working with wool is particularly soothing and therapeutic.

Dartford Health Walks

Using the natural environment to deliver better health in Kent – Case Study

Project type – Green exercise, health walks

Lead organisation – Dartford Borough Council

Location – Dartford Borough

Contact details – anna.card@dartford.gov.uk

Website – www.dartford.gov.uk/walks



In Dartford the local Council run health walks on easy terrain in two of the main green spaces in the borough: Central Park and Darenth Country Park. The scheme started in February 2010 and is overseen by the Borough's Healthy Lifestyles Coordinator. The weekly walks are run by three volunteer walk leaders.

The main aim of the project is to improve the physical health of Dartford residents. The walks are open to all, but promotion is aimed at individuals who take part in minimal physical activity and those with a health condition. Many participants find the walks through word-of-mouth, but the project is also included on the local 'healthy living referral form' used by GPs. The project is advertised on posters across the community, through press releases and in local publications.

At a typical walk session the volunteer leader will take a register and complete a simple 'outdoor health questionnaire' (OHQ) for any new participants. Both the register and health questionnaire have been developed by the national Walking for Health programme and the Dartford Health Walks are a 'Walking for Health accredited scheme'. This is for local schemes that offer walks at least once per month that are suitable for beginners, use the health questionnaire and participant register, and collect basic monitoring information and supply this data to the national scheme.

The main participants in the Dartford Walks are age 60+. About 50 to 80 people take part in the walks each year and each walk has on average a group of 8 to 12 walkers.

"After being made redundant, the walks have given me something to do and my blood pressure has gone down and I no longer need my medication"

"I've lost a stone and a half thanks to the Health trainer and the walks"

"I suffer from depression; coming on the walks really helps me escape from the fog"

"The fresh air is fantastic, I barely exercised at all before I joined the group and now I attend exercise classes as well!"

"After losing my wife last year, the walks are great to meet new people and talk"

In 37 evaluations completed in 2012/13, individuals reported the following positive outcomes:

- 100% of respondents acknowledged the activity had improved their general health
- 100% of respondents reported increased activity levels
- 73% of respondents reported they had gained either a social or mental wellbeing benefit
- 32% of respondents reported the activity had helped them to lose weight
- 12% of respondents reported they had improved their diet due to the activity.

The annual budget for the scheme comes from Public Health (Kent County Council) funding for health improvement projects.

Future plans include recruitment of additional Volunteer Walk Leaders so that the number of walks can increase, for example in new locations and on different days including weekends. The project also hopes to increase the number of referrals from health professionals.

Key points

The main challenge for the project is that it relies on a very small number of volunteers. Increasing the number of volunteer walk leaders would enable the project to offer a much wider range of walks across the Borough.

A particular feature is the commitment of the volunteers to deliver the Health Walks and the social groups that have formed from the programme. A number of the walkers and one of the volunteer walk leaders have established their own slightly more challenging 'progression walk'. The group go on walks all across Kent and South East London independently once a week.

East Kent Health Walks

Using the natural environment to deliver better health in Kent – Case Study

Project type – Green exercise, health walks

Lead organisation – Kent Community Health NHS Trust

Location – Canterbury, Swale, Ashford, Dover, Shepway and Thanet

Contact details – healthwalks@nhs.net

Website – www.kenthealthwalks.nhs.uk



East Kent Health Walks have been running since 2004 and cover 6 local authority areas of eastern Kent.

The walks are led by volunteers and the main aim is to improve the physical health of participants, although the service also benefits mental health and social isolation. The walks take place in a mixture of green spaces from parks and recreation grounds in urban areas to commons, woodlands, nature reserves and public footpaths in the countryside.

A typical session lasts 60 to 90 minutes. Walks are of varying levels of intensity from a gentle stroll through to a brisk walk and faster pace on rough terrain. Each walk starts at an accessible venue such as a library or community centre. Walkers just ‘turn up’ and most health walks finish with refreshments and a chat.

“I’ve lost about a stone and a half but it’s not just the weight – we’ve made lots of new friends through walking ... I feel fitter now than I felt 10 years ago. It really is the best prescription for better health”

“Today was my first walk. Janet took us above the Warren where I discovered some fantastic views over the cliffs. Everyone was so friendly and I certainly will be back”

“I have found new local footpaths I can use when out with friends”

“I can now manage the distance and speed without getting puffed”

“We have a lovely part of the world to walk in and sharing it with people of like mind is fantastic”

The programme is currently commissioned by Public Health and has 2.6 staff (Scheme Co-ordinator, Volunteer Coordinator and Administrator) and 266 trained volunteer walk leaders. The scheme provides free walk leader training and leaders then set up walk dates, plan interesting routes and

socialise with the walkers. Training gives walk leaders the confidence to lead walks safely and effectively.

On average 12 people participate in a typical walk, with 1,815 registered walkers clocking up 28,822 walk attendances with the East Kent Health Walks scheme last year. Many walkers are in the 60+ age group and whilst the programme runs across eastern Kent, the aim is to target areas of greatest need. The scheme also works with other agencies such as Age UK and Carers Support to set up walks for their service users.

Most people find the service through word-of-mouth and through seeing posters in places like GP practices. Others are signposted or referred through their GP, practice nurse or other allied health professional. Although changes in the health of participants are not formally measured, project staff visit each walk annually and obtain information on both walker experience and walker outcomes.

The scheme has a range of ideas for future development. These include offering additional services such as a one-to-one walk mentor scheme to help people who have finished treatment for cancer to get walking; to introduce Nordic Walking as a way to help less physically able people to get walking; and to appeal to a younger demographic.

Key points

Just under half of the participants are still walking after 2 years.

90% of walkers report an improvement to their health and wellbeing.

65% of walkers are extremely likely to recommend the scheme to their friends and family.

Grow2Grow

Using the natural environment to deliver better health in Kent – Case Study

Project type – Horticultural therapy, care farming
Lead organisation – Commonwork Land Trust
Location – Edenbridge, Kent
Contact details – PaulaC@commonwork.org 01732 463255
Website – www.commonwork.org/projects



The Grow2Grow project supports vulnerable young people with mental health problems and young people in, and leaving care. The project offers placements for people aged 15 to 25, one or two days per week for up to two years on a busy organic dairy farm in west Kent.

The project started in 2010. About 20 young people are involved in Grow2Grow each year, with 5 to 8 joining each session. In addition to

addressing mental health issues, the project targets social isolation and helps people acquire new skills and knowledge.

A typical session starts with young people being picked up from local stations and driven to the farm where they put on work boots and clothing. They work alongside staff in the associated social enterprises of market garden and organic dairy farm and each day two young people cook lunch for their peers and staff. The young people are involved in all aspects of growing, harvesting, packing and selling organic produce or do placements with the dairy herd working towards accreditation in milking and herd management.

“I am more confident, less anxious, able to go up to people and start a conversation. I have found what I would like to do (be a gardener) and now know who the real me is”

a Grow2Grow client

“Grow2Grow has given my son a new lease of life” a parent

“Every child we’ve sent to you has had a positive outcome” Assistant Head, Hillview School for Girls

“I volunteered for 2 years at Grow2Grow as part of my training in psychotherapy. I think I was lucky to have experienced a project with a dynamic and positive ethos and to have been able to observe how the combination of practical work and therapeutic support enabled the young people to grow emotionally as well as acquiring marketable skills.” Trainee Psychotherapist

All young people receive weekly person-centred therapy provided by trained and experienced mental health staff. The project is managed by a consultant clinical psychologist with 20 years’

experience working with young people with mental health difficulties. Referrals come from all local young people's services, parents and through west Kent networks such as the Kent Integrated Adolescent Support Services (KIASS).

All young people who have engaged at the project have made improvements in mental health, and over 80% have achieved educational or employment outcomes including progression into education or work. Changes are measured regularly using validated tools including the Children's Global Assessment Scale (CGAS), the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) and a recovery star.

The project employs 3.3 full-time equivalent staff including clinical psychologists, occupational and horticultural therapists, and has 5 volunteers. Initial funding was secured through Ecominds, part of the Big Lottery Fund's Changing Spaces environmental programme, and subsequently from Comic Relief. Currently about 1/3 of the annual budget comes from paid placements through personalisation and social care budgets or from schools.

Grow2Grow continues to raise grant funding to support the project but plans to become about 80% independent of grant funding over the next five years: there will always be young people who could benefit from the project but for whom there is no funding, so the project will always require grant funding for those who would otherwise fall through the gaps. Grow2Grow is increasing the social enterprise side of the project, growing more produce, and building up the customer base in the local community as well as supplying the Commonwork conference centre and education programmes.

Key points

The project is underpinned by a clear mental health model that all staff are trained and supervised to work with. This means we have a common language and understanding of the difficulties the young people bring to us, and can make useful, meaningful interventions. This has been our greatest strength in supporting some of the most vulnerable and troubled young people to make significant progress in their lives.

The greatest barrier for Grow2Grow and other similar projects is that we are not yet seen as an effective and viable alternative mental health intervention, funded by Councils and Local Authorities.

Let's Grow

Using the natural environment to deliver better health in Kent – Case Study

Project type – Nature arts & crafts, horticultural therapy

Lead organisation – Folkestone and District Mind with Kent Wildlife Trust

Location – Romney Marsh Visitor Centre and The Green Room, Elham

Contact details – contact@folkestonemind.org.uk or 01303 250090

Website – www.folkestonemind.org.uk/let-s-grow/



Let's Grow provides a weekly session at the Romney Marsh Visitor Centre – an award-winning eco-friendly centre and nature reserve run by the Kent Wildlife Trust. The nature reserve is largely dune grassland and there is an associated community garden with several demonstration areas, including a wildlife garden, organic garden and forest garden. Let's Grow also operates at a second venue, The Green Room at Elham.

Let's Grow provides opportunities to learn how to grow plants and produce, maintain a wildlife garden, take photographs of nature and enjoy guided nature walks. The programme of creative and horticultural activities is open to anyone experiencing mental distress and resident in the Shepway area, and these are provided by Mind, the Kent Wildlife Trust and the Green Room Elham.

Although the project is primarily aimed at supporting adults with mental health concerns, it also benefits the physical health and social isolation of participants and promotes independent living and improved self-esteem. Regular sessions introduce routine and structure to participants and give a sense of purpose and achievement. The project promotes friendships and teamwork and gives access to new skills and interests. The varied programme enables everyone to be inspired by nature whether through physical activity such as digging and planting or through creative arts.

"This is better than any medication"

"When I am here all my negative energy is transformed into positive energy"

"I met a vast range of people from all walks of life, we all worked at our own paces and I found it reassuring that I wasn't the only one that suffered and had bad days"

The project was initially funded for two years from July 2010 by the Big Lottery Fund (BLF) through the Ecominds programme and subsequently through an alternative BLF programme 'Reaching Communities' until October 2015. Folkestone Mind oversee the project through their community activities coordinator.

Referrals come through GP practices, mental health teams, social services, other local health care professionals and self-referral, and awareness of the scheme is spread through leaflets, fundraising events and word-of-mouth. On average 6 to 12 people participate in each session, with about 30 people involved each year.

The project measures changes in the health of participants using feedback forms and the 'Wellbeing Outcome Star'. Responses from 55 participants show that the programme:

- Made people feel happier
- Made people feel confident
- Taught new skills
- Improved confidence and motivation
- Helped people make new friends
- Helped people feel more connected with the world.

The project has helped to develop improved social skills and has led to new friendships, and encourages team work, mutual respect and tolerance of varied personalities and individual differences. The skills and experiences gained extend into other areas of the member's day-to-day life and have vastly enhanced independent living skills. The improvements include feeling able to return to work, more at ease using public transport and giving courage and confidence to try new activities and develop new interests and hobbies.

Future plans include building on the art lessons and making them more structured and inspired by nature, learning more about making structures out of willow, further developing gardening skills and healthy eating patterns, and participating in more art exhibitions.

Key points

The only challenge for the project is the popularity of some of the workshops, resulting in having to split the day into two sessions. More funding would enable members to participate more often, for longer periods of time and consistently.

The horticultural element of the project encourages members to engage in activities inspired by nature including photography, clay sculpture, drawing and painting and working with natural materials such as wood, willow, leaves and plants. This approach gives members the opportunity to try new activities and has encouraged a wider range of participants than gardening alone.

Some members who demonstrated little interest in horticulture initially have taken it up as a hobby as a result of attending the art projects.

As a result of growing vegetables, activity leaders are able to discuss healthy eating, impacting on members' perceptions of a healthier life style. Many members have lost weight and engaged in more physical activity such as going to the gym and taking regular walks.

Shepway Green Gym

Using the natural environment to deliver better health in Kent – Case Study

Project type – Environmental conservation
Lead organisation – Shepway District Council
Location – The Warren SSSI, Folkestone
Contact details – csu@shepway.gov.uk 01303 853260



The Warren is a nationally important wildlife site (Site of Special Scientific Interest or SSSI) and is also protected as a Local Nature Reserve. The coastal area is a mixture of chalk grassland and woodland and supports a wealth of wildlife. Conservation management is needed to keep a good balance between open and scrubby areas to maximise wildlife and keep the area accessible and attractive for visitors.

In 2011 Shepway District Council set up ‘Shepway Green Gym’ to help manage The Warren. Volunteers are invited to help with conservation management and the group includes people in the community with learning difficulties and with substance misuse issues. The free weekly Green Gym attracts on average a mixed group of 12 people per session and there are over 60 people registered with the project. Participants cut back vegetation and help to clear footpaths, fix bridges and build steps. Green Gyms are a national initiative developed by the Conservation Volunteers with the dual aim of improving people’s health and the local environment.

Although the project is mainly targeted at improving the physical health of participants, there are also benefits for their mental health and social isolation and many acquire new skills and knowledge – for example the project has helped four volunteers to find work. A typical session starts with a safety brief and new members fill out a health questionnaire. The group works for 3 or 4 hours and join together for a sociable refreshment break during the session.

“I really enjoy the sessions, I feel it is time for myself, it gives me a bit of structure and a sense of achievement”

“I love being outside and doing something physical, it makes me feel better about myself and I have learnt some new skills and more about the local environment”

“It’s great to do something to give a bit back to the community and I have enjoyed meeting new people”

The project does not formally measure outcomes but feedback from participants indicates a clear positive benefit to their health.

Initially the green gym aimed to attract people from wards in East Folkestone where there is a disparity in life expectancy of up to 12 years compared to nearby areas. New participants join mainly through word-of-mouth or learning about the project through newspaper articles. The Shepway Troubled Families Team also frequently use the scheme to restore confidence in the long-term unemployed and to restore a sense of worth. In 2013 a group of 10 young people working with the Prince's Trust in Folkestone joined one of the sessions.

The project is run by the Shepway Community Safety Officer in about 4 hours per week with an annual budget of approximately £3500 for staff time, tools and fuel. Set up costs were secured from an 'East Folkestone Together' grant, and other funding comes from the district and county councils. In future the project hopes to engage additional support staff to provide cover and help with tasks such as filling in health questionnaires and keeping a photographic record of the project.

Key points

All are welcome to participate in the Green Gym and the all-inclusive nature of the project, mixed make-up of the group, and the way everyone works to their ability and speed are what makes the Green Gym so successful.

Keeping the footpaths clear and improving access helps the whole population in addition to the benefits gained by participants.

It is important to have adequate staffing to provide support to participants and to enable extra jobs such as filling in health questionnaires and taking photographs.

White Cliffs Countryside Partnership

Using the natural environment to deliver better health in Kent – Case Study

Project type – Environmental conservation

Lead partners – Dover District Council, Shepway District Council, Kent County Council, Eurotunnel, Natural England and others

Location – Dover and Shepway districts

Contact details – sue.bradford@whitecliffscountryside.org.uk

Website – www.whitecliffscountryside.org.uk



The White Cliffs Countryside Partnership is one of the Countryside Management Partnerships (CMPs) that help to maintain Kent's landscape and wildlife, support Kent's communities and increase access to the countryside. One of their roles is to encourage volunteers to help conserve and enhance the natural environment.

The White Cliffs CMP runs a variety of volunteer projects and one of the main priorities is to reduce social isolation. There are about 250 'White Cliffs

Conservation Volunteers' that help with regular management tasks that are offered 3 or 4 times each week. For each 'task', the Partnership provides an experienced leader, training, tools, gloves and refreshments. A typical task will involve training in the use of hand tools and clearing scrub in nature reserves across Shepway and Dover districts. The Partnership also runs guided health walks for all abilities, nature activities for children during school holidays (the Green Gang), as well as other activities such as birdwatching or visits for school groups.

The conservation management programme attracts people of all ages and on average 5 to 20 people will take part in a typical session. Volunteering is free to join and people can come as often or as little as they wish and need no previous experience. Staff describe the key benefits for volunteers as better physical and mental health, increased interaction with other people, reduced social isolation, a more positive outlook and gaining practical skills and confidence.

"The clients enjoyed the social interaction and seemed to be calmer when out in the countryside attending a volunteer task" Local Autistic Trust leader

"The path building and clearing back has been enjoyable and really got the students pulling together well. I am really pleased with their efforts." Local school teacher

"I feel very privileged to be entrusted with this work, and have never done anything so immensely satisfying in my 46 years." Volunteer

“It was the first time he had ever gone out on his own. He really enjoyed the event, and was made very welcome.” Carer of autistic young adult

Volunteers are signposted to the White Cliffs through the Shepway and Dover volunteer bureaux, word-of-mouth, the local paper, job centres and the Partnership web site. The Partnership has been running since 1989 and now employs 11 staff (full and part-time) with an annual budget of approximately £400,000. Funding is provided by local and national government, lottery funds and local businesses.

The Partnership measure changes in the health of participants through questionnaires. For example the ‘Fit as a Fiddle’ programme involved participants attending 16 volunteer tasks and they gave the following feedback:

“given me a better quality of life“

“slept well, better appetite, sharp mind“

“relaxed mood“

“very beneficial for those who are currently out of work“

“feel good in myself knowing that work for the community is being done“

“happier in mind and spirit“

“satisfied at having done a good job“

Evaluation showed that all participants except one felt that they were much fitter and/or more energetic as a result of volunteering on the programme.

Staff aim to increase the number of tasks so they can be offered on the same day, at the same site, on a weekly or fortnightly basis. This has been offered at some sites and helps to form a regular volunteer group, giving the volunteers the chance to be part of a team that bonds together.

Key points

We used to have a minibus to pick volunteers up from fixed points in both Shepway and Dover. This meant that we could offer people with no money for public transport, who couldn’t drive, or who couldn’t walk a great distance, a chance to join in with these events. It was particularly useful for new volunteers as they didn’t have to make their way to the sites on their own, some of which could be in remote places. It was particularly important also for the volunteer bureau to be able to offer their clients this option, some of whom may not have the confidence to make their own way to our sites. It also gave the volunteers and staff a point of refuge in bad weather, and a chance to chat to each other on the way to and from the site.

The majority of our volunteers are more interested in the social or physical side of volunteering rather than an interest in conservation. We have found that with all types of volunteers you need to keep in contact with people in order for them to continue the link, and to think of themselves as part of a team, whichever role they play. This can be through newsletters, email or Facebook.

It is particularly important to keep a high profile, through press releases for example, to maintain recruitment of volunteers as their situations change, they move away, or their health deteriorates. However, this does take a lot of time and money. We have also found an annual get-together that brings all the volunteers together is needed, so that they can meet each other and learn about and value all the roles the different volunteers play.

Appendix 1: Survey questionnaire

Using nature to improve health – service provision in communities across Kent

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your feedback is important to us and we will be using the survey results to raise awareness of the value of the natural environment for people and communities. We will also share our findings with the Health and Wellbeing Board and provide evidence for Kent's Joint Strategic Needs Assessment.

This survey should only take about 10 minutes of your time. Please let us know if you would like to receive a copy of the survey results. If you have any questions about the survey, please contact us at natural.environment@kent.gov.uk or call 01622 221 537.

1 Details of person filling in questionnaire

Your name

Your role/position

Name of your organisation/employer

Contact details

2 Details of the project/service

Name of project

Project address, postcode or grid reference

Project website (if applicable)

What is the geographical area covered by your project/service?

What is the main issue targeted by your project/service? If more than one, please indicate the main one. If you choose 'other', please describe.

Mental health

Physical health

Social isolation

Acquiring skills and knowledge

Other (please specify)

When did your project/service start?

How many are employed in the project/service? *(Please indicate number of FTEs/full-time equivalents)*

How many volunteers are there?

What is the annual budget?

Please outline the funding arrangements

3 Main activities provided by the project/service

If you offer more than one type of activity, please indicate the main one. If you choose 'other', please describe.

Gardening/food growing

Environmental / Conservation management

Care farming / working with animals

Health walks

Exercise programme

Nature activities e.g. bird watching, nature arts and crafts etc.

Other (please specify)

Please briefly describe a typical session:

4 Details of the outdoor area or greenspace used for the project/service

Name of area

Location, postcode or grid reference of the area used (this may be different from the project address)

Owner of outdoor area/greenspace

Is the area open to the public?

What type of outdoor area/greenspace is it? If more than one type of area, please indicate the main one. If you choose 'other' please describe.

Urban park or green square

Recreation ground

Country park

Common

Woodland

Nature reserve

Garden

Healthcare setting e.g. hospital grounds, grounds of care unit

Housing estate

School grounds

Public Rights of Way

Other (please specify)

Additional comments:

5 Who are the main users of the project/service?

Age – under 18; 19 to 30; 31 to 59; 60+; all ages

Gender

How many people participate per session?

Do you target a specific sector of the population or a particular geographic area? If so, please provide details.

How many people participate each year?

How many weeks do they attend for?

Do they generally have to wait for a place at your service?

How do people find your project/service? (Please say whether this is through word of mouth, a referral, signposting, social services, advertising etc and give the name of the organisation making the referral where applicable.)

Please summarise the key benefits that your project provides to your service users.

Additional comments:

6 Evaluation methods and tools

Do you measure changes in the health of participants?

What evaluation methods/tools do you use?

Do you have any results available?

Additional comments:

Thank you very much for completing our questionnaire

