

Evidence Summary Note: Social prescribing and health and wellbeing

Introduction

NASP has published 15 evidence reviews to date, on priority themes. These have been carried out using robust rapid evidence review methodology by academic partners in NASP's International Evidence Collaborative. The reviews provide an authoritative summary of what the current literature tells us.

Headline findings: 1, 2, 3, 4

- Social prescribing **can reduce pressure on primary care, and save costs.**
- Social prescribing can have a positive impact on a wide range of outcomes, including **reduction in loneliness, and improvements to mental health and wellbeing and social connectivity.**
- **Social Prescribing can deliver a favourable social return on investment** with studies reporting ratios ranging from 1:109 to 1: 8.56.
- Referrals come from multiple sources, such as self-referral, voluntary organisations and community hubs, alongside those directly from link workers.
 - The Thriving Communities Fund Evaluation reported that 85% of referrals came from the wider health system, such as community hubs and voluntary organisations, and 15% were directly referred by link workers.
 - **Self-referrals were the commonest route** to arrive at a nature-based activity provider (30%) in the recent national evaluation of Green Social Prescribing.

Reduction in pressure on primary care and cost saving ^{1, 5}

Evidence to date highlights that social prescribing can reduce pressure on primary care and save costs.

One study in the review reported statistically significant reductions in the number of visits made to the GP among participants who were referred to the social prescribing service due to their risk of cardiovascular disease (when comparing a 3-month pre and 3-month post social prescribing intervention period and a retrospective case-matched control group showed no change in number of GP visits.) Based on this reported scale of reduction, the following illustration and forecast was completed by NASP in 2022, to illustrate the possible scale of annual impact of the NHS's Link Worker programme once all 4, 500 link workers were in post:

- **Appointments:** estimated 4.5M appointments could be saved per year, delivering a cost saving of over £159M (The average cost of a GP appt is £35 - [Unit Costs Report 2021 - Final version for publication.pdf \(kent.ac.uk\)](#))
- **Prescriptions:** estimated additional reduction in appointment related prescription costs of £141M per year (Based on the average prescription cost to NHS of £31 per appointment [Unit Costs Report 2021 - Final version for publication.pdf \(kent.ac.uk\)](#))
- As benefit to the NHS of 4.5M fewer GP appointments (£159M) and the associated saving to prescription costs (£141M) would be £300M per year, the NHS Link Worker programme would therefore cover its own costs.

Evidence also demonstrated a favourable social return on investment (SROI).

Evaluations of social prescribing consistently reported positive outcomes, across a range of methodologies. SROI values in the included studies ranged from 1:1.09 to 1:8.56.

- One study used a pre-post analysis of over 10,000 users of a national social prescribing service over 30 months up to December 2019. The final net value of the service incorporated the subjective wellbeing value with missed healthcare appointments, volunteer wellbeing, and service delivery costs. The SROI was valued at £3.42 per £1 invested, with an investment of £4.7m leading to outcomes worth £11.5m.
- Simpler return on investment (ROI) studies that do not take into account the wider societal impact of social prescribing report a wide range of results, with smaller returns than SROI studies, ranging from 1:1.011 to 1:1.43.
- One study measuring the Quality Adjusted Life Year (QALY) gain associated with a social prescribing estimated the cost per QALY of £1, 963. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) threshold over which treatments are less likely to

be recommended for use in the NHS is £20,000 so this represented a highly cost-effective intervention in terms of increasing QALYs.

Referral routes to social prescribing^{3, 4}

The reviews, and recent evaluations of the Thriving Communities Fund and Green Social Prescribing Test and Learn Project, reflect that social prescribing referrals come from multiple sources:

- The Thriving Communities Fund Evaluation reported that 85% of referrals came from the wider health system, such as community hubs and voluntary organisations, and 15% were directly referred by link workers.
- Self-referrals were the most common route (30%) to nature-based activity providers in the recent Green Social Prescribing (GSP) Test and Learn project.
 - Link workers were the source of 27% of referrals in the GSP project.

Wide range of positive outcomes²

The literature confirms that social prescribing can have an impact on a very wide range of positive outcomes, including decreases in loneliness, and improvements in mental health and wellbeing, in social connections and in overall wellbeing.

The outcomes reported can be grouped as follows:

- Increases in self-esteem and confidence, sense of control and empowerment
- Improvements in psychological or mental wellbeing, and positive mood
- Reduction in symptoms of anxiety and/or depression, and negative mood
- Improvements in physical health and a healthier lifestyle
- Increases in sociability, communication skills and making social connections
- Reduction in social isolation and loneliness, support for hard-to-reach people
- Improvements in motivation and meaning in life, providing hope and optimism about the future
- Acquisition of learning, new interests and skills including artistic skill

How the arts, culture and heritage can benefit health through social prescribing ⁶

Evidence confirms that **taking part in arts, cultural or heritage-based activities**, including through social prescribing, can lead to a **wide range of benefits** such as:

- Increased social interaction, healthy behaviours, physical movement and activity, and decreased stress.
- Preventing and treating long-term conditions

How the natural environment can benefit our health and wellbeing through social prescribing^{7, 8, 9}

There is now a large body of evidence highlighting the benefits of nature to our mental health. ‘Green’ interventions for mental health can deliver positive outcomes, a positive return on investment and help reduce inequalities.

- Nature based social prescribing interventions have been shown to positively impact on happiness and wellbeing through reducing social isolation and developing connection to nature
- Living near natural environments is associated with lower stress and faster recovery from mental health issues.
- **There is a positive relationship between nature and physical health** - including for our immune system, physical activity, cardiovascular health, and weight.
- Interventions in nature to increase physical activity can be cost effective for the health system.

How physical activity can support health and wellbeing through social prescribing¹⁰

Taking part in physical activity as a referral from a social prescribing link worker can lead to a **wide range of benefits** such as:

- **Physical health:** Increased physical activity levels, improvements in measures such as BMI and blood pressure, and increased healthy behaviours.
- **Mental health and wellbeing:** Improvements in anxiety, depression, wellbeing, and quality of life.

- **Patient empowerment:** Increase in the skills, belief, and confidence to help people manage their own health.
- **Reduction in health service use and costs**
 - Some evidence reports a significant reduction in the number of visits to a GP, and a reduction in emergency hospital activity.
 - One study found a 17.4% and 26% reduction in social care and health costs respectively, although for a small number of people the overall costs increased.
 - One study reported a Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis of a £5.07 return for every £1 invested.

How social, legal and financial advice can support health and wellbeing through social prescribing¹¹

The evidence we have confirms that:

- Financial insecurity is linked to long term physical and mental wellbeing.
- Social prescribing of integrated health and social welfare advice can lead to improvements in mental health, wellbeing, and quality of life.
- Financial, social, welfare and legal advice can have a positive impact on people's financial and related circumstances through avoiding homelessness, housing standards, prevention of the loss or stopping of benefits, improvements in financial health/debt management, alleviation of difficult financial situations.

Appendix:

The links between health and the natural environment: Additional evidence from Natural England reviews

Headline findings:

- **The benefits of contact and connection with nature¹²**
- To date, much policy, research and practice has looked at increasing our contact with nature, using measures like how often we take visits to natural environments, or the time we spend there.

- However, more recent studies are now also exploring ‘nature connectedness’ which is a measure that can capture how we actually feel about nature, not just our exposure to it.
- Nature connectedness is of increasing policy interest as many studies suggest that it is nature connectedness, rather than just contact, that is linked to higher mental wellbeing and to pro-environmental outcomes.
- The review confirmed that both contact and connection with nature have a positive impact on our health and wellbeing.
- One study that considered both contact and connection alongside each other confirmed that these acted as independent factors in supporting health and wellbeing, reporting that contact was good for our general health, and connectedness was good for our wellbeing (and our pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours.) Furthermore, contact and connection appeared to be additive in effect, with health & wellbeing and pro-environmental outcomes being highest among people who also reported the highest levels of contact and connection with nature.
 - However, opportunities for building contact and connection to nature are unequal - with people from lower socio-economic groups and minority ethnic groups being the least likely to have opportunities to benefit from contact and connection with nature. These are also the groups most likely to be experiencing health inequalities. A variety of barriers were highlighted, including variation in availability of local green space.
- **The benefit of nature for children’s and young people’s health¹³**
- Spending time in nature is good for children’s health, increasing physical activity, wellbeing, and cognitive performance.
- 87% of children and young people reported that being outside makes them “very happy”.¹⁴.
- However, families on lower incomes and from ethnically diverse groups are consistently the least likely to have opportunity to benefit from nature, with 61% of children from families in the most deprived areas spending time outside every week compared to 81% in the most affluent areas. The time all children spend playing outside without adult supervision is also continuing to decline.

So what are the implications of the natural environment evidence reviews?^{8,9, 12,13}:

- To ensure the opportunity for both contact and connect with nature is more equal it is recommended that:
- Planning and delivery across sectors should reflect the evidence that both contact and connection with nature are needed to optimise outcomes.

- We need to better understand and address the factors that limit contact and connection among social groups who have the least access to natural environments as these are the same groups who are also likely to be experiencing health inequalities, for example by exploring how to overcome known barriers such as transport and entry costs, lack of confidence in using natural spaces as place for recreation and play , and how to create high quality, accessible and relevant natural environment spaces in urban areas.
- Adults - whether in educational settings, families/care settings, health settings, or community groups - play an important enabling role for others (including children and young people) to benefit from contact and connection with nature. Enabling organisations and individuals to support positive outcomes through contact and connection with nature as part of their daily practice is important.

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