

HEALTH & SOCIAL CARE

Cheshire West and Chester Council

Enhancing Health, Tackling Climate Change

Context

[Cheshire's Natural Health Service](#) uses the best of our county's green space assets to help tackle recognised local health inequalities. This initiative builds on the growing body of evidence that activities in the natural environment can have a significant impact on keeping people healthy. The programme is made up of health-promoting, enjoyable group activities within some of Cheshire West & Chester's wonderful green spaces. It targets the Borough's most at-risk groups and areas of local inequality highlighted in the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA). Since its launch in 2016, Cheshire's Natural Health Service in Cheshire West has seen over 3,000 participants take part in one of the largest community led evidenced-based programmes to date, contributing to influential UK policy and international academic research.

The challenge:

An increasing body of evidence shows that engagement with our natural environment promotes good mental and physical health. Spending time in green spaces can reduce stress, encourage physical activity, boost social cohesion and reduce our exposure to harms such as air pollution. There is a hypothesis that humans are hardwired to need a connection with nature – so called 'biophilia' – and that spending time in green surroundings is an important factor in our overall health and wellbeing.

Evidence suggests that exercise undertaken within green spaces is more beneficial than that taken in an indoor environment. For instance, a study of the Scottish population showed an association between physical activity in natural environments and reduced risk of poor mental health, while activity in other types of environment was not linked to the same health benefit. Another study found that walking in nature produced stronger cognitive benefits than walking in an urban environment, while others have found that exposure to green space reduces chronic stress in adults living in deprived urban neighbourhoods in the UK.

The solution:

The Natural Health Service programme seeks to utilise these proven benefits of green space, introducing more people to the value of undertaking activities within a natural environment in a social setting, improving wellbeing and building lasting friendships close to where they live. In doing so, we also hope to encourage people to become more involved with their local green spaces. Studies have shown that spending time in natural environments may encourage greater pro-environmental behaviour.



The Natural Health Service provides a targeted approach, working in areas identified through the JSNA as those of greatest need across the Borough, and with the most affected communities. It is enhanced by:

- Health asset approach: developing our own green spaces as health assets
- Evidence-based products: interventions targeted at specific conditions within those communities
- Research: robust data analysis, providing detailed powerful feedback on our performance

Each of these elements will be familiar to Councils up and down the country. However, their use in such a collective, strategic and targeted way - with interventions shaped by the specific needs of local communities; evidenced at every stage; and using assets within the Borough - represents a unique and effective approach, and one which continues to support a range of positive outcomes for a considerable number of the residents who need it most.

The impact (including cost savings/income generated if applicable):

- Objective 1:
 - Engaging over 3, 000 people in evidence-based activities over a three-year period
 - Outcome: Exceeded target 3,119 participants were engaged from our targeted, hard-to-reach communities in the service by March 2020.
- Objective 2:
 - Target: Increasing physical activity by 40%
 - Outcome: Exceeded target: Participants complete two nationally-validated questionnaires (The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) and International Physical Activity Questionnaire (IPAQ)), during the first and final weeks of their programme. Analysis shows that the percentage within the high physical activity category increased by 36% while the percentage categorised as low physical activity decreased by 63% as a result of the intervention
- Objective 3: Increasing the overall wellbeing of those who participate
 - Questionnaire results show a 12% increase in overall participant wellbeing.

- Academic data provides a wealth of measurable evidence, but some of the most powerful evidence that we have relates to participant feedback. Many testimonials have included reference to a reduced level of medication, less reliance on the National Health Service and finding new friends and exploring new areas; all of which can radically impact the quality of life of each individual.



Furthermore, a Social Return on Investment study was conducted into an expanded Natural Health Service, predicting a return on investment where for every £1.00 invested in the service, £6.75 social return will be generated.

For further information contact:

Will Pearson

Climate Change Strategy Manager - Cheshire West and Chester Council

will.pearson@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk | 07766 619826 | www.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk