

Green social prescribing pilots open for applications

A trailblazing scheme of £4.27m launches today (Monday 5th October) aimed at helping the mental wellbeing of communities hardest hit by coronavirus. The project will examine how to scale-up green social prescribing services in England to help improve mental health outcomes, reduce health inequalities and alleviate demand on the health and social care system.

The fund, [announced in July by Environment Secretary, George Eustice](#), is now officially open for funding applications from potential delivery partners. Expressions of Interest to become a 'test and learn' site for this pioneering social prescribing project are welcome from partnerships of local health, care and environment leads.

Social prescribing connects people to community groups and agencies for practical and emotional support and to improve health and wellbeing. Evidence including from Natural England shows that [the NHS could save over £2 billion in treatment costs](#) if everyone in England had equal access to good quality green space.

Green prescribing could include support for walking and cycling groups, green gyms, and practical habitat management conservation tasks such as tree planting. For more vulnerable groups, it could include supported visits to local green space, activities such as gardening, and other outdoor activities to reduce isolation and loneliness.

Applications will need to:

- Be led by an Integrated Care System working with partner organisations, including organisations from the environment sector.
- Provide a clear explanation of how the project will help to address health inequalities and support coronavirus affected populations.
- Provide evidence of a whole system and partnership approach to project implementation.
- Demonstrate relevant experience and ability to deliver.

Four sites will be chosen from a range of locations across England which have been the hardest hit by coronavirus, focusing on areas with the greatest need and potential for impact, including to support recovery from coronavirus. The pilots will help establish what is required to scale up green social prescribing and the steps needed to increase patient referrals to environment and nature-based activities.

Environment Minister Rebecca Pow said:

We know that connecting with nature is good for us, and the pandemic has given us an even greater awareness of the link between our own health, and that of our environment.

I am delighted to open funding for these trailblazing projects which will test how we can increase use of green social prescribing services to improve the nation's mental health and reduce demand on our health system.

The projects will be jointly managed by Defra, Department of Health and Social Care, Natural England, NHS England and NHS Improvement, Public Health England, and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure value for money and that a robust evidence base is being developed.

Chief Executive of Natural England, Marian Spain, said:

The evidence from Natural England's People and Nature survey shows beyond doubt that nature is good for our health. We have seen that demonstrated on a daily basis during the pandemic, with a resurgence in the use of urban parks, beaches and nature reserves and many people talking about the positive impact on their mental health and wellbeing. There is a compelling case, now more than ever, to provide more access to the outdoors for everybody as part of our health care system as the nation builds back greener from the pandemic.

But we have also seen the stark reality of the inequalities in access to nature. So, I'm absolutely delighted that Natural England will be supporting these projects to help more people – especially those we know are least able to connect with nature – to benefit through social prescribing to improve their mental health and wellbeing.

Health Minister, Jo Churchill, said:

The new green social prescribing pilots will help people improve their overall wellbeing through activities like walking and gardening, while having a far-reaching positive impact on their mental and physical health, reducing loneliness and enhancing employability.

We know we need to think innovatively when tackling health inequalities to ensure everyone can really make the most of life.

I would strongly encourage those who want to make the most of nature and our natural capital and to advance the health and wellbeing of their local communities to apply.

James Sanderson, NHS England director of personalised care, said:

We know how important it is to our mental health and wellbeing to

get outside into parks, gardens and the countryside, and for patients we know that sometimes non-medical care can be effective and less disruptive.

Social prescribing connects people to all sorts of community based activities, depending on what matters to them, including activities in green spaces, so it is exciting to see this project roll out so that we can explore how green social prescribing can be scaled up in a way that will benefit even more people.

Aimee Stimpson, National Lead for Healthy Places, Public Health England:

Public Health England is delighted to be involved in this cross-government project, one of the first to be confirmed as part of the Shared Outcomes Fund.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made many more of us aware of how much we value and rely on outdoor spaces to support our health and wellbeing.

There is a huge opportunity for green social prescribing to help people maintain a healthy weight, boost mental health and reduce health inequalities.

After an assessment of the funding applications, the four successful pilot sites will be announced early 2021 and will run for over two years.

Today's announcement builds on the government's commitment to transforming mental health services and increasing social prescribing, set out in the [NHS Long Term Plan](#) and supported through the work of the National Academy of Social Prescribing.

Earlier this year, [DHSC awarded £5 million in funding to The National Academy for Social Prescribing \(NASP\)](#) to support people to stay connected and maintain their health and wellbeing following the coronavirus pandemic.

The [government's 25 year environment plan](#) sets out an ambition to help more people, from all backgrounds, to engage with and spend time in green and blue spaces in their everyday lives, and the [government's forthcoming Environment Bill](#) will put the environment at the centre of policy making to ensure that we have a cleaner, greener and more resilient country for the next generation.