

New sites to test how connecting people with nature can improve mental health

Seven sites which will test the ways in which connecting people with nature can improve mental wellbeing have been awarded a share of a £5.77 million pot, Environment Minister Rebecca Pow has announced today (Saturday 19 December).

The new test and learn sites, which are based across England, will focus on communities hardest hit by coronavirus. This could include those living in deprived areas, people with mental health conditions or BAME communities. Since the coronavirus pandemic, when many people have experienced distress, loneliness or anxiety, there has been an increased public awareness of the benefits of regular access to green spaces. [Studies have shown](#) that this has the potential to improve mental health and wellbeing.

The sites announced today will each explore and bring together opportunities for communities to get involved in their natural environment. This could include activities such as walking, cycling, community gardening and food-growing projects, and practical conservation tasks such as tree planting. For people who need help to get involved this could include supported visits to local green spaces, waterways and the coast, and other outdoor activities to reduce isolation and loneliness.

This will benefit thousands of people across the country, including people in urban, rural and coastal areas. The successful projects are:

- Humber Coast and Vale Health and Care Partnership
- South Yorkshire and Bassetlaw Integrated Care System
- Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Integrated Care System
- Joined Up Care Derbyshire Sustainability and Transformation Partnership
- Greater Manchester Health & Social Care Partnership
- Surrey Heartlands Health and Care Partnership
- Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire Sustainability and Transformation Partnership

Today's announcement builds on [the fund announced in July by Environment Secretary, George Eustice](#) supported by a cross-governmental partnership of Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Department of Health and Social Care, Natural England, NHS England, Public Health England, and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and welcoming two new partners: Sport England and the National Academy for Social Prescribing (NASP). A further £1.5 million has been confirmed today, boosting the total to £5.77 million and supporting more sites across the country.

This will support the Green Social Prescribing programme, which is the practice of supporting patients to engage in nature-based activities, and

play an important role in the nation's recovery as we build back better and greener. If successful, the test and learn sites could be rolled out across the country.

Environment Minister, Rebecca Pow, said:

Many of us have seen first-hand during this difficult time the benefit that connecting with nature can have on our health and mental wellbeing, and I am delighted to announce the first sites for this inspiring scheme which will improve people's access to and engagement with nature and green spaces.

As we build back better and greener from the pandemic, we are looking forward to working closely with these sites to deliver an enhanced green social prescribing offer which will deliver real benefits for individuals across the country.

[Evidence from Natural England](#) shows that almost half the population say that they are spending more time outside than before the pandemic, while the majority of adults surveyed by [Forest Research](#) agreed that their level of happiness when in nature has increased. However, the outbreak also has exacerbated health inequalities and levels of mental ill health whilst also highlighting the inequalities of access to greenspaces.

Chief Executive of Natural England, Marian Spain, said:

Natural England's evidence has made clear that nature is good for our health. For many years we've been working closely with our health professional colleagues to make sure we can create a healthy society, which is even more important as part of a green recovery to help everybody cope with the long term impacts of the restrictions on day to day life necessitated by the coronavirus.

I'm delighted that Natural England has been able to shape this innovative partnership to consolidate green social prescribing as a core part of the government's wider ambitions for health care and health prevention within the NHS. A much needed increase the use of green social prescribing services will improve the nation's mental health, reduce demand on our health system and – crucially – reduce the stark inequalities in access to nature, which have been brought into sharp focus during the pandemic.

It's vital that the whole of our society has access to these benefits. I'm delighted that Natural England will be working with the seven areas who have been awarded funding to help support a resurgence in the provision and use of parks, nature reserves and greenspaces in towns and in the countryside.

The projects will be managed by NHS England and NHS Improvement with support

from Defra, Department of Health and Social Care, Natural England, Public Health England, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, NASP and Sport England.

Health Minister, Jo Churchill, said:

The response to our call for projects has been impressive and these pilots signal the exciting next stage of green social prescribing.

Nature-based activities can improve people's physical and mental wellbeing which is especially important for those communities and groups which have been hit hardest by the pandemic.

I look forward to seeing how these innovative schemes help tackle health inequalities, and improve outcomes for both those taking part and the environment.

James Sanderson, NHS England's director of personalised care and chief executive of the National Academy of Social Prescribing, said:

The pandemic has reminded us how much open spaces and exercise can do for our health so I'm pleased to see this further progress in the NHS' drive to offer people personalised support for their individual health and wellbeing needs, and thank the people leading these seven sites.

Social prescribing link workers are already helping NHS patients across the country and this latest initiative will support even more people in some parts of the country hit hard by Covid-19.

Professor John Newton, Director of Health Improvement at Public Health England, said:

PHE is delighted to support the seven pioneering test and learn sites and be part of the next stage of this programme.

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.

We look forward to working with the seven selected sites, seeing how they use the funding to help local communities access green spaces, maintain a healthy weight, and boost mental health, and sharing this learning across the country.

The seven successful test and learn sites will run for over two years.

Today's announcement builds on the government's commitment to transform

mental health services and increase social prescribing, set out in the [NHS Long Term Plan](#) and supported through the work of the National Academy for Social Prescribing.

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 [landmark 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.

The green social prescribing pilots are being taken forward as part of HMT's £200m Shared Outcomes Fund, a fund announced by HM Treasury to pilot innovative ways of working that will improve collaboration on priority policy areas that sit across, and are delivered by, multiple public sector organisations to improve outcomes and deliver better value for citizens. HMT have approved a grant of £4.27 to this programme of work. Additional funding and support has now been given by NHSE, NASP and Sport England.