

Report to HEALTH AND WELLBEING BOARD

Natural Health Service – Green Social Prescribing

Portfolio Holders:

Councillor Barbara Brownridge, Cabinet Member for Adults, Health & Wellbeing

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Purpose of the Report

- To provide the Health & Wellbeing Board with an overview of the Natural Health service, the impact it has made to date and plans for the coming year (25/26).

Requirement from the Health and Wellbeing Board

- To note the progress made in the implementation of the Natural Health service and the impact it has made to date and to note the grant award to support the implementation plans for the coming year (25/26).

Natural Health Service – Green Social Prescribing

1. Background

- 1.1 Northern Roots (Oldham) Limited launched the Natural Health Service in Autumn 2023 supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and in partnership with Hilltop GP Surgery. Over the past 14 months it has grown and to date has supported over 200 participants.
- 1.2 The service supports participants through a targeted, person-centred approach designed to understand their needs, interests, abilities and objectives. The service offers a menu of nature connection activities designed to support participants' wellbeing within a supportive community. Activities might include sensory nature walks, breathwork, nature crafts and creativity, outdoor games, nature play, insect hunts, bushcraft, green woodworking, conservation activities, therapeutic gardening, edible food growing, mixed ability rambles, pond dipping, foraging, kite flying, wild sound recording, photography, nature natter picnics and outdoor cooking.
- 1.3 The service is supporting Oldham residents experiencing a range of mental health challenges including;
- Anxiety and depression
 - Social isolation and low self-esteem
 - Mild Learning Difficulties; neuro-diversity
 - Substance abuse
 - PTSD; childhood trauma
- 1.4 Participants often also have physical health conditions such as obesity and diabetes, which the project can support with by promoting increased physical activity as well as improved knowledge about healthy food and diet.
- 1.5 To date referrals from Hilltop GP Surgery reported a collective **54.83% improvement** in wellbeing for the whole group, and **66.48%** average increase in overall wellbeing per person using the Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS).

2. Current Position

- 2.1 The service has been awarded £95,000 from the Social Care Integration Pooled Fund to continue to test the Nature Health model with over 250 people during 25/26. The aims and outcomes of the project are aligned with the priorities of Oldham's Health and Wellbeing Strategy in particular to improve mental wellbeing and mental health.
- 2.2 The service will continue to support residents experiencing the challenges described above, as well as seeking to develop new referral pathways from additional local GPs, as well as developing partnerships and programmes to support the following priority groups:
- People recovering from Cancer
 - Young People
- 2.3 The project will support participants from local communities. It is anticipated that participants will reflect the demographics of communities local to the site. The project will utilise two, paid Community Champions from these communities whose role is to reach into their communities and help to ensure that programmes are culturally accessible and informed by lived experience.

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- 2.4 The programme will be as flexible as possible so that participants feel able to attend as much or as little as possible. There is also an online community of participants so that those who cannot attend physically still feel part of the group and activities.
- 2.5 To support the further expansion of this work Oldham Council have submitted a full application to the “Nature Towns and Cities” initiative, which is funded by National Lottery, Natural England and the National Trust. The application includes a proposal to work in partnership with Northern Roots to roll out a Natural Health Service approach across other greenspaces in Oldham, and across Oldham Schools. The Council will be notified on 7th July 2025 if the application has been successful and will have up to three years to implement the project.
- 2.6 Northern Roots are also partners in a Horizon Europe project entitled “GreenMe” which is exploring how to mainstream green social prescribing for adult mental health in nine European Countries. Oldham is the urban case study for this project, and as part of it the Natural Health Service is helping to develop and pilot the world’s first randomized control trial of green social prescribing and nature connection. This will be rolled out with cancer recovery patients over the coming year.

3. Recommendation

- To note the progress made in the implementation of the Natural Health service and the impact it has made to date and to note the grant award to support the implementation plans for the coming year (25/26).