

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 Northern Roots Natural Health service, the impact it has made to date and plans for the remainder of the 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 remainder of the 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 2 years it has grown and to date has supported over 350 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).
- 1.6 Northern Roots' Natural Health Service was one of seven delivery partners for NHS-England's Green Social Prescribing funding in 2024-5. The NHS Impact evaluation report published in September 2025 found that the Northern Roots programme was the most effective in improving mental health for patients. Average SWEMWBS scores at Northern Roots increased from 20.92 before the intervention to 29.08 after. This average increase of 8.15 is statistically significant at the 1% level ($p < 0.001$). The overall initiative demonstrated a substantial positive net economic benefit, with an average net social value of £2,530 per participant. Northern Roots' net social value was **nearly double the average, at £4,940 per participant**.

2. Current Position

- 2.1 The service has been awarded £95,000 from the Social Care Integration Pooled Fund to continue to test the Natural 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 is continuing to support residents experiencing the challenges described above, as well as developing new referral pathways from additional local GPs, and partnerships and programmes to support the following priority groups:

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- People recovering from Cancer
 - Young People

- 2.3 A new referral partnership has been set up with Glodwick GP Practice; a new programme for individuals recovering from cancer, or managing untreatable cancers has now been launched for patients referred by Macmillan, Maggie's Oldham and Dr. Kershaw's; and a pilot project to support schools to use eco-therapy approaches as part of their mental health offer for their students is being developed with Oasis Academy.
- 2.4 The project is supporting participants from local communities who reflect the demographics of communities local to the site. The project is utilising two, paid Community Champions from these communities whose role includes reaching into their communities and help to ensure that programmes are culturally accessible and informed by lived experience.
- 2.5 The programme is 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.
- 2.6 Northern Roots are also partners in a Horizon Europe research 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. The cancer recovery group is serving as the first cohort for this study.

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 remainder of the year (25/26).