

Green Health Prescribing: its role in Lothian's COVID recovery



Consultation with people with lived experience

Summary report February 2021

Background

Aim

To learn from people with lived experience about their attitudes towards connecting with nature, how they would feel about talking about connecting with nature with a health care practitioner, the barriers and enablers to taking part and what they think they might gain from it.

Methods

Midlothian Wellbeing Service leads engaged with the project early on and offered to support us in learning from people with lived experience. Discussions led to agreement on a semi-structured interview and opportunities to identify respondents.

People were recruited from the Midlothian Penicuik monthly Wellbeing group and Collective Voice. The lead wellbeing practitioner joined a session of the monthly Wellbeing group to explain the project, and invited the people who were present to participate. The semi-structured interview questions were circulated with an introduction to the project in advance of the Collective Voice group. However, due to technical issues the online session did not go ahead: participants subsequently emailed the lead wellbeing practitioner saying they would like to take part. All people who volunteered to take part were interviewed.

The italicised text in this summary is a copy of the transcription carried out by the interviewer.

All participants gave their consent to their anonymised responses being used in the Green Health Prescribing report.

Results

Ten individuals were interviewed over the phone in January and February 2021: 7 women and 3 men. Six respondents were aged between 50 and 70, 2 were younger than 50, and 2 older than 70.

Existing connection with nature and use of greenspace

People talked about walking in a wide range of locations across Midlothian, from the Pentland Hills to hospital gardens, to beaches, lochs and woods. Most said they had increased how much they walked in lockdown, although one person said *I don't really go out on my own*. Some cycled and ran, others described driving along the coast. Others described purposeful activities: dog-walking, taking photographs, picking fruit to make jam. Some described connecting with nature in their gardens: gardening and feeding the birds. One person referred to places where you can see foxes.

Experience of being introduced to services and support by the wellbeing practitioner

People who agreed to be interviewed were being supported by the Wellbeing service for a range of reasons including stress, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder. Many had attended the Lifestyle Management Course (LMC) and gone on to take part in peer facilitation training, become a volunteer, Midlothian Active Choices, and Mindfulness courses. Feedback of their support, particularly from the LMC was universally positive. Although this is very encouraging, it does suggest that the feedback summarised here is **representative of a group of people who are in a “better place”** because of the support they have received from the wellbeing service. Their responses may not represent people who are in a different place with more anxiety and less confidence.

- *LMC...allowed me to demonstrate to other people that life could be a tough experience but there are other things you could do to face it - developed a real awareness of how physical, spiritual and mental wellbeing are interlinked.*
- *That was very refreshing for me, I felt I wasn't the only person going through that, I met someone who was going through the same experience, I felt less alone. It wasn't just me looking at my issues and battling against it, doing activities with others allowed me to see what other people have used that were helping them, it allowed me to try and discover different techniques. My anxiety improved greatly and then I found the courage to phone and received face to face counselling... my confidence improved and I closed a chapter.*
- *All of this has turned my life around, it was amazing how had changed my life...Thistle had change my life.*
- *I was referred to the Midlothian Active choices program, I went to the gym and worked on becoming fitter. I took the opportunity to give something back to the community helping preparing Lifestyle management course, I've got so much from attending Lifestyle management course. It helped growing people some confidence that things can progress from where you are. Sometimes you think you can't heal yourself going over the threshold the first time, you didn't make it unless there was someone with you there.*
- *I've done the LMC course and now I'm doing the Mindfulness course which has been fantastic and life changing.*

Actual discussions with wellbeing practitioner about going on health walks/gardening groups and experience

A few people had previously talked to the Wellbeing service about connecting with nature and some had been proactive in establishing their own group activity, including thinking about how to include people who can't go outside:

- *We did a couple of walks together with some participants while attending the (lifestyle management) course and after. We used to go to the River Esk and then, after the course finished, we kept it as a **social group**. We couldn't force everybody to come, so it started as a small group, 3 people and then all ended before COVID.*
- *...took part in some workshops walking around nature, walking around woods in Craigmillar. In our neighbourhood we set up a **nature walking whatsapp group between neighbours** when*

*we share pictures from our walking, so **even people who can't go outside can enjoy nature watching.** I'm part of an **outside Tai Chi** session group.*

Those that had previously discussed it explained how they felt and cited some of the benefits:

- *I was **excited** about the idea. It was until I become unwell when I realised how important for me is getting out in nature*
- *The thought of trying to get something organised, to **help other people** making friendships and encourage people to get out and **combat loneliness** is something that would motivate me and inspire me in joining a health walk/gardening group.*

Asked what they'd taken away from the walks:

- *...great to have your views expanded, **much more optimistic.** Is up to your fitness level deciding if you're doing the walk. We did the Mindfulness walking outside during the LMC and we all enjoyed*
- *I was excited about trying something new, maybe anxious but in a good way. I enjoyed especially the **socializing aspect**, I didn't anticipate how much I was enjoying being there with others ... you're meeting up with people with the same kind of things, pick up from each other.*

Some, however, said they hadn't taken part for practical reasons, or because they didn't previously have the confidence to join:

- *Talked about getting more outdoor and the importance of nature but the problem with me is that I **didn't have a lot of time***
- *Cyrenian community garden in Bonnyrigg but at that time I couldn't drive due to my diagnosis and **bus route was too long**, so didn't attend the activity*
- *...local walking group in Penicuik but at that time I was **not confident** enough to join it.*

Responses to theoretical suggestion of joining a health walk or gardening group

For those who had not previously discussed or joined in an activity connecting them to nature, they were asked how they thought they would feel if it was suggested. Responses ranged from very positive to being very unsure, with degrees of uncertainty in between:

- *I think I'd feel **very positive** about it. It's part of recovery forming a group and encouraging other, as long as is a positive and constructive group I'd be **excited.***
- *Joining a health walk or green health activity is something I would **really like to do.** I really like walking with some company, appreciate together the different shades of nature.*
- *I think I would be **excited** because it's something I enjoy, I might be a **bit anxious** at the beginning but this would not stop me from joining it.*
- *I'd approach it with an **open mind.** In the current wellbeing group we are a mix bunch of people from different life paths and we connected so well... I think I'd feel **confident** to join a health group. The only reservation you might have is until you get involved.*
- *This would be something I **would consider.** It's really good to be in nature, is a relaxing and calming things to do with others. I turned my life around, I think if someone would suggest me*

to attend a walk/green health activity I will be **willing to give it a shot**. I've not been outside so much because I can no longer walk well due my physical conditions, but it would be **nice to have another purpose** in life.

- I thought that was an **interesting idea**

One person reflected that they would feel confident to join, but only because they were in the right place now because of support they had already received:

- If there was a group I'd be **confident** right now to join the group. Most of my friends have got children, or they are either working or looking after their elderly and I feel a bit left out so it's easy to feel alone. I **would feel ok about joining** the group, I'm not the strongest or fittest person in the world but I could always find someone to rely on! I would **not feel anxious at all about the idea because of the work I've been doing on myself (mindfulness)**.

Two people were concerned about letting others down if they joined a group:

- ...my sleep patterns wouldn't allow me to join a health walking group/green health activity right now. I could be up all night due to pain and feeling exhausted the day. You know, sometimes you are not in the right frame of mind to be around people. I have a disrupted sleep pattern so if people would tell me to be there at 9 or 10 in the morning I **couldn't guarantee to be there every day** and I'd be worried of pissing someone off. Sometimes my head is not in the right place. If someone was having to wait for me at 10 in the morning and the previous night I couldn't sleep at all, I wouldn't be in the right frame of mind then
- I'm also overweight and I **wouldn't want to hold the group back** if I couldn't go for a hike. I'm very aware of my weight and fitness level. Gardening is something I would feel more interested to learn. I would feel wary, anxious. I'd probably have more resistance to the health walk than the gardening group...I'd presume other people fitness level be much better than mine and I would be **worried about meeting people expectations**

And finally, one person was worried that the group might not be for them:

- the majority of groups were for people who are retired

What people would want to know about the activity

People responded to this with things they would want to know such as location, duration, size of group, clothing requirements, activities involved, toilet and refreshments, parking and public transport access.

One person would want to know **who would be the people participating** to the activity, if they would be in the **same situation** as me, understanding or looking after each other. It would be helpful knowing that there are other people like myself.

They also said things that would make them more likely to go, suggesting a solution focused approach

- ...you want to know is something **doable and manageable** for you

- *I think I would persevere and give it a go and do it and then re-evaluate after it. I wouldn't be worried about meeting people and I'd love to walk more, is something you can do easily, it **doesn't cost money***

Self-rated confidence in joining a walking or gardening group

People were asked to rate themselves on a scale of 0 to 10 of how confident they would feel to join a walking or gardening group. The eight responses ranged from 0 (1 person) to 10, with an average of 6.5.

Anticipated reaction if they were offered the opportunity

People were asked if they might join a walking or gardening group

- *I'd be quite excited about the idea, I'd be intrigued and interested*
- *happy to give it a try yes*
- *It would be a bit like going to the unknown but I would **give it a go***

Factors affecting decision to join a walking or gardening group

People were asked what would help or hinder them joining a walking or gardening group.

Individual:

- *My **tiredness and health** would stop me from going. If I was different health wise and I wouldn't be so erratic that I could piss everybody off, I'd join a group*
- *I also suffer with **chronic acute back pain** and trying to manage it day by day, so it would depend on how I would manage then*

Social:

- *if **people are nice**, this would encourage me to go back*
- *Bringing a **friend** along, even just for the first time, is something might help me to go. Is more difficult doing something new for the first time on your own. Sometimes I think I'd need an **escape route planned** if I'd go! I ... have bad memories of being pushed far beyond my limits from others*

Several people focused on the need for a person-centred approach

- *There needs to be an element of **structure**, there needs to be **boundaries of course, like confidentiality** for example, people who are coming to the course are not sharing who else is in it. I think again **flexibility** is key, but not prescriptive, actually if we want to do **some sort of timetable/programme with a bit of thought put into it, but not prescriptive.***
- *something that was **quite organised** so not just let's say " we all meet up at 9 somewhere and let's see"... You get **people wanting different things and sometimes people with very different capabilities**, and is good when people help each other, it makes you feel good*
- *not everyone has the same capabilities and availability of time, sometimes **daytime events don't work well for people who are working or have child care responsibility** . It would be great if would be something that would **allow people to dip in and out**, not letting people to*

*feel bad if their shifts are not working, needs to be child friendly because of people with kids or other caring responsibility, possible **animal friendly too**, so people can bring their animals too. It would also need to be **inclusive** for people with physical conditions, fits with people with **different expectations**, there is **no one size fits all really**. It would be good if people could go on walking route and people could **join and go half of a walk and then go home**. It would help for the group be **local, be flexible and give people options**. I'm also thinking of a **bus tour** for older people or younger people with disabilities.*

Material

- *If it was somewhere **local** that might suits me*
- *it would depend on **weather**, now the weather is a bit icy and this will affect*
- *I'd need to know what sort of **access** might be available, how **long** the walk/green health activity will be for, **time and location**, whether I need to use the car to **get there**, or use public transport, etc.*

Ways in which walks/gardening groups could help people

People explained how walks/gardening groups could help them individually. Most of the comments referred to the mental health and social benefits rather than the physical benefits.

- *Joining a health walk group now it would **help me greatly**, it would give me a **focus**, it would give me **something to look forward**. Sometimes walking on your own can be boring and monotonous.*
- *Afterwards I would feel the benefits, at the moment I'm suffering because I can't go nowhere, I will feel the benefits **mentally and physically**. Overall my **general wellbeing** will improve. **Little things initiate changes**, I think I will feel more energised and more interested in doing things.*
- *...**get me out, get me moving**, sometimes I need that **extra motivation**, to interact with **other people***
- *maybe in spring time as it would **help me to be out of myself***
- *A health walk/gardening group might help me as an opportunity to **meet other people** in a similar situation, improve my **happiness level with the release of oxytocin, serotonin***
- *It would be really good for my **mental and physical health** during lockdown, **feel a lot happier**, more **content**. I want to **live in a day**, just have a **sense of wellbeing***
- *Joining a health walk/gardening group would help me **moving out from the house** where I live, going out and **getting fresh air**... I don't have a garden at the moment and walking with others might help. Some people don't feel like to walk on their own, a bit of **companionship, security**, doing something for yourself at **no cost**. A lot of people can't afford going on tours or walks, they might be able to improve mentally and get fresh air, you getting out there, you never know what you can pick up...I started to **made apple jellies, pear jellies**... you start to be able to **notice little things**, seen butterflies, is all the other aspects, see the birds, butterflies, apple trees, being **present in the moment**. Some people are stuck in their houses in a vicious cycle, so this might help*
- *The **social aspect is paramount**, **lift your mood** to be with other people, take you out from everyday anxiety.*
- *It would help me to get out of the house and doing **exercise**, getting **fresh air** into my lungs, I do also want to **get fitter!***
- *It would be fantastic for my **confidence** and it would help me getting out and about, engaging with gentle **exercise** as well*

- *and is good **when people help each other, it makes you feel good***

Some described how the group activities could help the wider community, and could be a learning opportunity either for themselves or others

- *If you are doing it with others it becomes more like a **communal experience**. I would also like to **share with other people nuggets of Midlothian area***
- ***be there for others, been involved with community as part of a group***
- *Gardening it would be really something I'd be interested in learning, I like the idea of **developing a community garden and feel more connected with my community***

People also raised the importance of thinking about how to help people who can't currently access nature:

- *Just thinking that some people might not be able to enjoy the outdoors and it would be good bringing nature to everybody regardless of individual circumstances. It would be ideal signposting people to **virtual tour** in nature for example. It's ideal to go out and feel the fresh air but also watching pictures of nature has beneficial effects too for people who can't.*
- ***Nature is so important but we cannot all access it, there is a social component to be taken in consideration.***

Conclusions

Although this summary reflects the feedback from a relatively small group of people, it has provided some critical learning for green health prescribing. The people interviewed here had a range of mental health issues and had already received considerable support from the Wellbeing service. Most had not experienced green health prescribing, but were open and excited about the possibility. They identified a range of factors important for their participation. They were able to recognise the potential benefits of taking part in nature-related activities and identified several benefits, largely relating to improved social connectedness and improved mental health. Even though they had already received support for their mental and physical health issues, confidence in joining a group varied considerably and concern about letting down others in the group was identified as a barrier. The importance of a person-centred and inclusive approach to green health prescribing was underlined by many responses.