



Midlothian Green Health Prescribing Project

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Matter of Focus
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**Matter
of Focus**
Evidence. Action. Change.



About Matter of Focus

Matter of Focus is a mission-led company and certified B Corp based in Edinburgh.

We work with organisations, projects and programmes to explore, map, analyse and assess the outcomes that matter to them, the people and populations they care about, and their funders. We provide tools and techniques to bring together evidence, data and evaluation to ensure that projects and programmes can meet their outcomes, are successful and adaptable, and can demonstrate that success to funders, service users and other stakeholders.

We have created an innovative and easy to use software tool, OutNav, that enables public service organisations and funders to make effective use of their data and information to learn, improve and tell the story about the difference they make.

Matter of Focus is led by Dr Ailsa Cook and Dr Sarah Morton. Ailsa and Sarah are internationally renowned thinkers, both well known for their ability to develop practical tools backed by robust evidence-based approaches, with extensive experience of delivering solutions for public service organisations.

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Executive Summary

Introduction and Background

Green Health Prescribing is an evidence-based approach to supporting people to improve health and wellbeing through engaging in nature-based activities. This report shares learning from the evaluation of the Midlothian Green Health Prescribing Project. Emerging from NHS Lothian's Greenspace and Health programme, this one-year test of change project aimed to understand how this strategy could be applied at a local level. Key enabling factors for this work were in place in Midlothian, including personal outcomes-focused working practices and infrastructure. A multidisciplinary working group was established to deliver the project, including third sector community organisations and primary health care professionals.

Evaluation approach

Green Health Prescribing is a complex and relational intervention that involved many partners working flexibly with people to improve health and wellbeing. The project took a theory-based approach to evaluation, underpinned by the Matter of Focus outcome mapping approach and existing work developed by the Lothian Greenspace and Health programme. This report is informed by data gathered through the course of the test of change and reflections from a session with key stakeholders to reflect on progress.

Findings

By tapping into the existing work of local community organisations and resources, small amounts of funding have had a large impact. Despite the short timescales of this work the Midlothian Green Prescribing project was able to demonstrate a big difference to outcomes for people who accessed a green prescription. This included people feeling more confident, having improved sleep, and feeling less isolated. Through their engagement with activity providers people have gained outdoor skills and new experiences as well as accessing community networks.

There has been a positive impact too on both prescribers and providers, who have formed a multidisciplinary network to build and sustain momentum. This network described a new way of working together with flexibility and opportunities to go beyond their normal roles to spread awareness of the benefits of green health prescribing widely in primary care settings. The grounding of the project in existing good practice has been an important part of its success.

Conclusions and next steps

This short term, low resource project is already making a positive difference to people and also the wider health system in Midlothian. Those involved are committed to continuing the work and mainstreaming the approach. A number of practical next steps are identified to take this work forward including an 'one cluster at a time' plan to scale this up across Midlothian.

Introduction and Background

Green Health Prescribing is an approach that supports people to engage in nature-based activities which offer solutions to improve physical and mental health outcomes. Building on well-established and evidenced principles of Social Prescribing, a specifically green approach is grounded in the benefits of outdoor activities. This might include opportunities for everyday contact with nature, to nature-based interventions that support the person to work towards a defined outcome. There is a strong evidence base for the contribution to outcomes for people of this approach, including:

- Improved physical health
- Improved mental health
- Reduced social isolation and improved community cohesion
- Reduced risk of Covid transmission compared with indoor activities

In June 2019 the first health board-led Greenspace and Health Strategy in Scotland was published for Edinburgh and the Lothians. The Greenspace and Health programme was tasked with delivery of this strategy, supported through funding from the NHS Lothian Charity. This ambitious and pioneering work set out a vision in which people in the Lothians have “Longer lives, better lived through our green space: Lothian’s natural health service”.

The programme’s interim evaluation set out pathways for green social prescribing, and the ‘golden threads’ which would make taking next steps possible. These threads included enthusiasm amongst communities and stakeholders for this work, imaginative ideas, and a desire to connect and work in partnership. A system wide understanding of the positive case for a green health approach and the mainstreaming of activity across a diverse range of healthcare professionals were identified as key features for successful development. This translated into action in setting up the Midlothian Green Health Prescribing Project as a logical next step, an opportunity to run a test of change and develop a local understanding of what this could look like in practice.

About this report

This report sets out the background and development of the Midlothian Green Health Prescribing Project. It presents a summary of the key learnings and impacts of this work based on evidence gathered by the project stakeholders and through additional data collection detailed in the Evaluation Approach section.

Next steps identified by the project team for this work within Midlothian and for spreading this approach to other areas are presented following the conclusions.

This report was written by Grace Robertson, Senior Evaluation Consultant and Dr Ailsa Cook, Director, Matter of Focus.

Midlothian Green Prescribing Test of Change Project Design

Green Health and Social Prescribing are not new ideas and interventions. Individual health care practitioners and partner organisations have been involved in this work to varying degrees across the Lothians for some time. The key focus for this project has been the integration and development of Green Health Prescribing as a conscious and integrated public health model across the primary health and care system in Midlothian.

The project was planned as a one-year test of change with co-ordination and management supported by a Public Health Project Manager. The NHS Lothian Charity provided £20,000 grant funding for the delivery of the project. Health and Social Care Partnership staff and third sector organisations provided their time, knowledge, and connections to make this possible. Health and Social Care staff included General Practitioners, Practice Nurses, Pharmacists, Physiotherapists, Mental Health Nurses and Wellbeing Practitioners. The third sector organisations in a green health providing role were Ageing Well, Health in Mind, Mayfield and Easthouses Development Trust, and Cyrenians Midlothian Community Garden. This group met monthly with informal activities taking place in between meetings.



Figure 1 Project Delivery Partners

A number of enabling contextual factors within Midlothian made this work possible.

- **A grounding in Good Conversations and the House of Care model** establishes that people receiving health and care services are equal partners in identifying health outcomes and possible solutions. This is well developed in Midlothian as is a public health approach to tackling health inequalities, and the project manager benefitted from a background in this work. The facilitator role of the Wellbeing Service in Midlothian is also particularly well developed in supporting people to explore a wide range of options to progress towards health outcomes.
- In Midlothian there were **stakeholders with an appetite to take this work forward**, despite the challenges of fatigue in the primary care system and third sector following the Covid pandemic. Staff across sectors were keen to explore new ways of working, going beyond their normal roles and learning from others. Green health activity providers came with their own evidence of the benefits of spending time outdoors, but many health

prescribers were also aware of this impact in their own lives from their experience of appreciating green activity during the pandemic. Across many stakeholders there was a strong sense of being ‘bought in’ to the benefits of this opportunity and that this was the right thing to be doing.

- Within the local area **voluntary and community groups acted as a vital resource for prescribers to tap into**. The project benefitted from building on Ageing Well’s existing ‘Fitscription’ model which had been developed through wide engagement with people about how they would like to be referred from Primary Care to activity options. Local third sector organisations were already well established in providing green activities, so small amounts of funding were able to build capacity within these groups rather than building new work from scratch and there was a base level of awareness about what existed in the community. Outside of groups and services, within Midlothian there is a huge wealth of informal green opportunities including parks and other places to walk in nature.

Evaluation Approach

The aims of evaluation are to use the available data and evidence to understand the Midlothian Green Health Prescribing Project’s ability to:

- Embed a sustainable prescribing model within primary health care settings
- Ensure that the work is targeted toward people who can most benefit from green health activity.

The evaluation was underpinned by a theory of change, expressed in the form of an outcome map that described how the project team anticipated that their work would contribute to improved outcomes for people. An outcome map provides a framework for understanding how an intervention contributes to making a difference for individuals and communities. The theory of change for this project was developed by tailoring the Green Health Prescribing outcome map developed as part of the NHS Lothian programme to fit the context of Midlothian. The outcome map was developed using the Matter of Focus approach over a series of workshops involving key stakeholders to set out how this work contributes to outcomes for individuals and communities. The Midlothian Green Health Prescribing Map is set out on page 8 of this report.

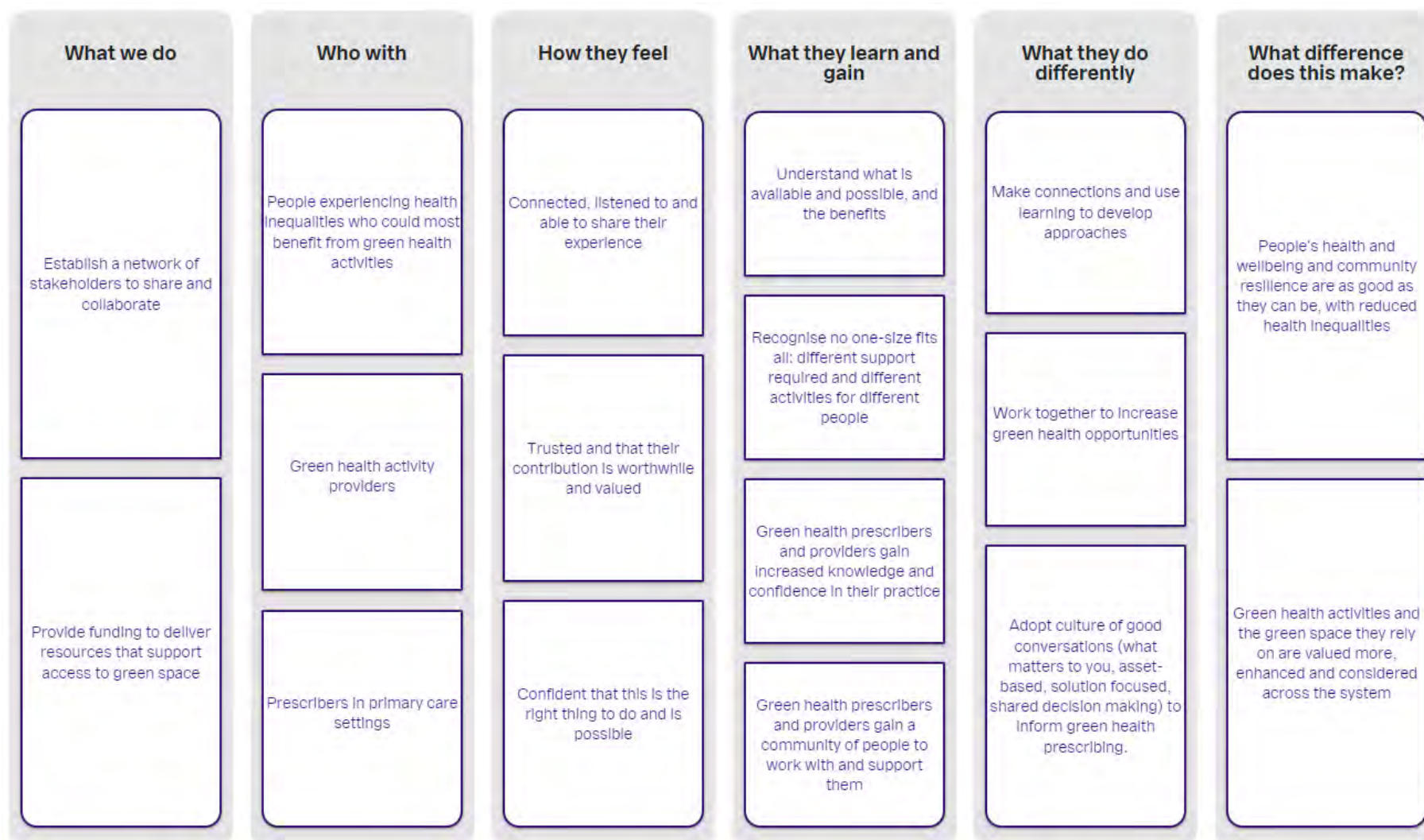
Throughout this work the project manager collected data from both green health prescribers and providers which included activity and engagement data as well as key learning from both groups about what they have learned and gained, and what could be improved. Both prescribers and providers also used this as an opportunity to share outcomes data from their contact patients about their reactions to green health prescribing, what they are doing differently and the difference this made to them.

In addition to this data, Matter of Focus have worked with the project team in October 2022 to gather additional information about the work which informs this report:

- Conducted an interview with the project manager and programme lead to understand how this work developed and was implemented, and their reflections on progress.

- Brought together five professionals involved with the implementation of the project, including both green health prescribers and providers, in a reflective celebration workshop to draw out key outcomes data and learning.
- Reviewed the available evidence including examples of resources developed to support the delivery of this work, and data collected by the project manager from both providers and prescribers about referral activities and recording of outcomes.

Midlothian Green Health Prescribing Outcome Map



Findings

The findings of this report first set out the innovative process that the project team undertook to deliver this work. Through decisions made by the project team several useful key learnings have emerged:

- The decision to offer two routes for a prescription and not to require paper referral forms have had the positive impact of making the prescription a more natural part of a good conversation with health professionals; however, this means there is less specific data available about exact numbers and profiles of those who have engaged.
- Physiotherapists and Pharmacists have enthusiastically engaged with this work and it has fit naturally with their professional values and practice. This has been particularly important where other avenues for engagement with health care professionals have been more challenging.
- For prescribers to confidently discuss options with patients it is important that they have a good understanding of a wide range of options available. This is most successful where they can be physically present and have their own experience with provider spaces to share.
- The small amount of funding available for this work has not been a barrier to success; however, it is important that there is investment in leadership to make progress, and to build on existing foundations of resources and an outcomes focused approach to public health.

The findings then set out a summary of the impacts first on health practitioners and green health providers, followed by the impacts on people who engaged in green health activities through the prescription model.

Establishing a network of stakeholders to share and collaborate on Green Health Prescribing

Building on the previous work of the Greenspace and Health Strategy, a group of engaged stakeholders including primary care professionals and third sector organisations formed the Midlothian Green Health Prescribing Group to take this project forward. Led by the Project Manager, they set out a work plan and shared vision for the project and tailored the existing outcome map to better fit the context of Midlothian.

The project team

The group designed and facilitated a round of participatory budgeting with third sector organisations and community groups, distributing small pots of funding (£5,000) to three organisations; Mayfield and Easthouses Development Trust, Cyrenians, and Health in Mind. Ageing Well engaged in this process but did not need to apply for additional funding. This funding was awarded to enable third sector organisations to:

- Support more people receiving a green prescription to access their services and sites
- Support staff and volunteers to improve their skills and capabilities to enable more green social prescribing
- Work with the project manager and project partners to establish a network of stakeholders to share and collaborate with
- Evaluate and share the learning from the test of change with the core project group.

The intention was not primarily about funding more activity; however, it was identified that some investment would be required to enable third sector organisations to buy in to the work. Projects used this funding in different ways including investment in infrastructure such as polytunnels, paths and plants; others used this to fund staff time to run groups. Funds were also identified for both communications and for evaluation due to the importance of good engagement with a wide range of audiences and of capturing the learning and nuance of the project to inform the future direction of the wider NHS strategy.

The project manager engaged widely with a range of stakeholders from primary health care settings to share and collaborate on the project. This included opportunities for potential prescribers to access training in Good Conversations. This was challenging, with expected routes in to care settings through GPs and Primary Care Mental Health Nursing being difficult to set up. The project manager reflected that for some areas of primary health care the demands on the system presented too high a barrier, and whilst there was appetite from individual health care professionals, teams as a whole lacked the capacity to engage in a structured way with the project. The project plan adapted to work with a wider range of healthcare professionals including physiotherapists and pharmacists, which was much more successful and led to building productive relationships.

Green Health Prescriptions

Two prescribing referral routes were developed to fit a range of patient needs. This innovative approach was designed to facilitate good conversations, the focus being on what matters to people, building on their strengths and coping skills. For example it was known that during Covid more people were walking once this was permitted under the guidelines but this had possibly lapsed once restrictions were lifted. Therefore conversations would explore a range of options and “not just handing out a leaflet”.

The first was a more light-touch model, where prescribers used information resources developed by the project to share opportunities and ideas for green health activities for patients to consider and take up at their own pace. This also included green health promotion within primary care settings such as making use of garden space and sharing information about resources. For patients who needed more support to explore options (and may be facing a range of



Figure 2 Green Prescription Poster

health inequalities) the second route involved a referral to the Wellbeing Service who could work more closely with individuals using the Good Conversations approach.

Ageing Well's existing 'Fitscription' referral tool was used as a prototype for the Green Prescription and which was redeveloped and retested with communities accessing green health providers. The prescription was then adapted to be printable and easy to complete for green health prescribers alongside a guidance document for professionals. An Easy-Read poster and booklet was also developed to help prescribers to signpost to green activities, this development was led by a Pharmacy Technician who was a member of the project team. Both traditional paper referral forms and leaflets and online information were available to prescribers to best suit the needs of patients; however, a formal 'paper' referral was not required by green health providers in order for people to access their services. In both referral options it was made clear that a prescription should only be given as part of a Good Conversation with a patient. In practice, paper referral forms were not widely used; however, people would often tell provider organisations that this was how they had heard about the opportunity.

A Multidisciplinary approach to Green Health Prescribing – impact on prescribers and providers

“This is the right thing to do”

A key feature in the success of this project has been the shared commitment to the value of green health opportunities for improving people's wellbeing within the network. Provider organisations brought in a wealth of experience of the benefits of green health activities and a passion for sharing this with a wider audience. Green health providers have largely continued to deliver their existing services; however, the funding available through this work has created development opportunities they would not otherwise have had.

The decision not to require a formal referral to provider organisations means it can be difficult to track the exact number of patients who engaged with the work; however, evidence from providers suggests that this joined up approach has led to a wider and more diverse audience engaging with their projects. There has been a gradual 'trickling in' of referrals which has developed over time led by patient choice and control. Providers reported that the focus of the project has enabled them to build in time to reflect carefully on the purpose of their work and realise their projects' potential.



Figure 3 GP Advanced Physiotherapy Practitioner

Prescribers reflected that although they had not explicitly used a green health prescribing model in the past, this way of working did align closely with their existing practice and professional values. One healthcare professional explained this holistic approach to care as “this is what physios do”. The ability to signpost to opportunities or refer patients for further support with a range of options available felt like a natural way of sharing information with patients and ensuring the patient is in control of their choice to take next steps. Prescribers gained the ability to explore options more deeply, to find ‘the right thing for the right patient’. A GP Advanced Physiotherapy Practitioner explained:

“We would not have known what was available if we had not been part of the project. Learning about the green health options has meant we can give this information to our patients”

A new way of working together

The core group of providers and prescribers engaged in the project reported overwhelmingly that this work had been a positive experience. They described a supportive and constructive working process in which they were able to come together to progress an ambitious shared action plan with space to flex and adapt along the way. The experience of working across sectors with a range of professionals was highlighted as a particular success. This working environment enabled professionals to be inspired to go the extra mile despite the challenges of doing so alongside their normal working role and without having dedicated time built in. Being a part of this work in particular enabled healthcare professionals to gain project management experience outside of their normal working role, such as developing project communications materials and chairing the core group meetings, which they found to be an enjoyable challenge.

The inspiration and opportunities gained by this multidisciplinary approach have enabled projects and individual professionals to develop new working practices to spread the benefits of green activity. The Wellbeing Service has used this focus to progress a long-held goal of developing a Mindfulness in Nature course. Their Practitioner Manager explained:



Figure 4 GP Surgery Green Health Notice Board



Figure 5 GP Surgery Plant Table

“The existence of this development in Midlothian has been the spur to us to make that course happen and that we would not have done it without green health prescribing”

In Quarryfoot, Dalkeith and Loanhead GP surgeries healthcare professionals have raised awareness of the benefits of green health activities by ‘greening’ their waiting rooms through innovative ways including a ‘help yourself’ plant table where staff and patients can try something new in their homes and gardens. Curated resources notice boards in Quarryfoot, Strathesk, Dalhousie and Dalkeith GP surgeries along with posters and information leaflets shared in other locations have helped to raise the profile of this work and share ideas and opportunities with patients.

A visible green prescribing presence within GP surgeries has helped to generate conversations about this work with health care colleagues. This has led to one GP Practice Manager visiting the MEADT café and subsequently inviting the Development Trust Manager to attend a practice team meeting to share information about their work. One Practice, who had invested in Good Conversations training for their whole team, committed to a whole practice approach to social prescribing.



Figure 6 Midlothian Community Hospital

For both green health providers and the people engaging with their activities, this prescription model offered a new way of working together. Providers reflected that group work can be intimidating for people, and that having overly structured start and end times or commitment to set hours can be a barrier. Activity providers built in flexibility and control for people accessing activities so that they could engage in the ways that best work for them. This can include becoming regular volunteers in projects or lower levels of commitment where people can come and go, and participate, at a pace that they control.

Amongst both providers and prescribers, further developments in green health prescribing are already underway to build on the work to date. This includes expanding the range of initiatives provided such as cycling activities and green space development, and on expanding the awareness of this model to further professionals and GP practices. There is a clear appetite amongst those already involved in the project to continue and build on their success so far. Project stakeholders have reflected that this now feels like a ‘snowball effect’ that will continue to grow and gain momentum and there is a strong appetite for continuing to meet and work together.

The difference Green Health Prescribing makes to people experiencing health inequalities

This work aimed to bring the well-established benefits of green health activities to a wide audience in Midlothian, particularly for those people most impacted by health inequalities. It is clear from the evidence shared by providers, prescribers, and patients who engaged, that people are finding positive solutions in nature and it is having a positive impact on their lives. This includes a diverse range of green health activities including gardening projects, social walking groups and wild swimming. Formal in-depth tracking of individual personal circumstances was not included in the design of the prescribing model; however, from the feedback from the participating organisations about their experiences of working with individuals it can be assumed the vast majority if not all of those engaged experience health inequalities.

Overall, prescribers reflected that their patients were open minded and positive about considering green health options during a good conversation about their health outcomes. For many this has included discussions about building on informal green health activities that they already enjoy such as walking outdoors, as well as the more formal referral options through providers. Patients have appreciated a wide range of options to suit their own circumstances and what's right for them; for example, where they don't feel ready or able to join in with a group activity at that time. This approach to health does feel like a shift in thinking for some, as one GP explained in their feedback:

“Many patients still feel quite surprised when specifically bringing up green prescribing options and it has not been something they considered at the point of accessing GP review”

A new way of thinking about health

Patients have gained a new way of thinking about their health as well as access to resources including referrals which go 'beyond medicine'. They have also gained support to take up those

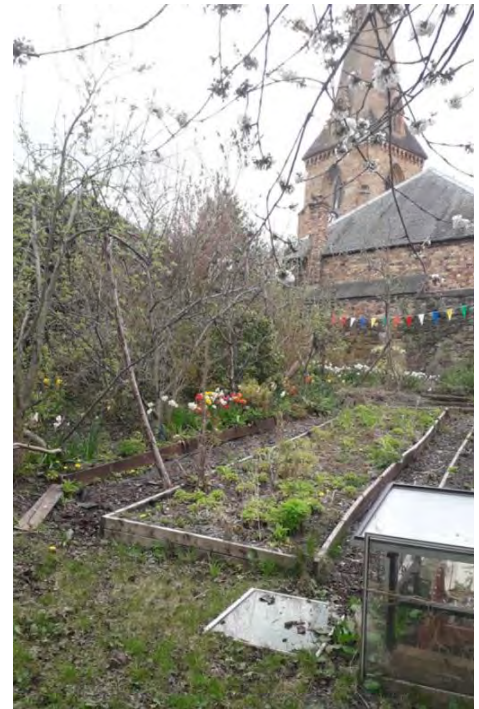


Figure 7 Health in Mind Outdoor Garden Group

opportunities where they have needed it through the Wellbeing Service. For many this has meant exposure to new ideas that they would not normally have considered. Through the range of activities providers offer opportunities to build team working skills, practical gardening experience, and to meet people outside of their normal lives that they can make connections with. For others, there has been a shift in the way they think about what they are already doing, for example recognising the health benefits of taking a walk outdoors and affirming this as a positive health activity. This connects people with the bigger picture of health promotion and the benefits of the choices they are already making.

There is evidence that the skills and tools people gain through getting involved with provider activities are being built into people's everyday lives, for example breathing exercises that can form a part of a person's wellbeing toolkit. Relationships within communities are forming and people are building new networks of support. There is also evidence that once people have engaged through the green health prescribing pathway, they are more able to independently access these activities in future, without having to go back through their GP.

People who engaged with green health providers have reported improvements in their overall wellbeing as a result of getting involved with the activities, including improved sleep, self-esteem and confidence. Others have been able to identify feeling less anxious and less isolated. One person illustrates this change in their feedback below:

“When I was walking in a got a churning in my stomach - I didn't know if it was anxiety or excitement but I feel really relaxed now. My shoulders have dropped. I feel good” – participant feedback collected by green health provider

There have also been examples of volunteers within green health activities taking on and deepening peer support relationships with newer attendees, elevating their status and support to others and connecting it to health benefits. Volunteers increasingly recognise and share their own experiences of how activities help them to feel well and become part of a community empowering each other.



Figure 8 Ageing Well's Dalkieth Walking Group



Figure 9 Mayfield and Easthouses Development Trust Pavilion Activities

Conclusions

Within a short space of time and limited resource the Midlothian Green Health Prescribing Project has developed a model for how to do green health prescribing. An active community of learning and practice has emerged around this model. This harnesses the passion and enthusiasm of individual professionals and supports them to take action in their workplaces and recruit others. The project manager has reflected, however, that for this work to become thoroughly embedded and system wide this would require more time. The short time frame of this work means that it is still in the beginnings of much of its impact on the system. It is clear from the learning gathered so far that there is a lot of potential for its further development in Midlothian and beyond.

It is clear from the evidence gathered about the impact on individuals and communities that green health prescribing is having a positive impact on their health and wellbeing. This is consistent with the existing evidence about the benefits of green activity. There is evidence from both prescribers and providers that this work has been successful in widening access of green activity to people experiencing health inequalities and those who were not already engaged.

Next steps

The project team have identified a range of next steps to progress this work further in Midlothian building on the success of the project to date:

- This project has benefitted from strong project management and leadership to initially set out a clear action plan and throughout the project to keep the project team on track. Continuing leadership for this work will sit in the Physical Health Public Health Priority as part of the Health and Social Care Partnership Strategic Plan. The group will be facilitated by a GP Advanced Physiotherapy Practitioner who is able to commit one day per month to support this work.
- Awareness of green health opportunities should be maintained and spread throughout the Partnership. Mapping out these activities will support health practitioners to signpost patients to what is available. This could be hosted on the Midspace website where information already sits, or in other appropriate locations.
- To scale up this work a gradual 'one cluster at a time' approach will be helpful, starting with the identification of green health opportunities that already exist in other areas.
- The prescribing model should be spread across all Health and Social Care Partnership teams as part of their prevention work.
- Good Conversations training should be expanded by at least a further three cohorts of training per year in order to meet the current demand of applicants.
- Continuing involvement of the Wellbeing Service will be required to support those facing health inequalities who require the most support to engage with a Good Conversation where health practitioners lack the training or capacity to deliver this directly at present.

The team have also reflected on what would be required for this project to be scaled up and replicated across the Lothians in other Partnerships:

- As set out in the context to developing this project, key to its success has been an appetite amongst potential prescribers and a network of providers already active. Having a group of motivated and engaged stakeholders ready to take this on, which includes leadership, should be an important in deciding where and how to progress in other areas.
- Taking a whole system approach includes ensuring that training in good conversations is available and taken up and that link workers are in place to support those who require additional support to access solutions. In Midlothian the project team based this work on a foundation of the existing wider social prescribing model and drawing in a green health focus.
- Care needs to be taken in considering which stakeholders are able and have capacity to be involved, and once work is underway it is important to be flexible and sensitive to local need and the demands placed on local health care services.