CREATING GARDENS IN PRIMARY CARE

A TOOLKIT







INTRODUCTION

The role which nature can play in supporting mental and physical health is now well documented.[1]

Green social prescribing, in which patients are offered community based outdoor activities alongside more conventional treatments has been developed in many parts of the UK, including the West of England.

Local projects which have been successful in attracting people less able to access green space, has demonstrated significant increase in happiness and decrease in levels of anxiety.

However, it has been more difficult to achieve successful referrals from general practice, partly due to lack of confidence of vulnerable patients to access unknown spaces.

Improved access for these patients is therefore one reason to create a garden within the trusted space of the GP surgery.

This is linked to the other powerful reason for developing a nature-rich space in primary care - the potential benefit for increased biodiversity and nature recovery.

In 2024, the West of England Combined Authority (WECA) provided Green Recovery funding for a Nature Health Hub project in which gardens were developed in 5 different general practice settings.

This toolkit, based on learning from this project, supports GP practices, primary care networks and other healthcare sites to transform outdoor spaces into valued places for health, wellbeing and nature.





West of England Nature Partnership

WEST OF ENGLAND | MAYORAL COMBINED AUTHORITY

WHY THIS MATTERS

Improved physical and mental wellbeing of patients

IN PRACTICE:

Participant feedback from a session at Charlotte Keel "*So proud of myself for getting out of the house.”*

Reduces inequitable access to nature for vulnerable communities

IN PRACTICE:

Client comments from a weekly group that meet at Harptree, *“ I sometimes don’t feel I have the energy to come, but I am always so pleased I did!”*

Staff well-being

IN PRACTICE:

Access to outdoor space helps staff rest and re-charge. Staff at practices now regularly use the garden space for breaks and informal meetings.

Provides a space for social interactions, for all sorts of people, reducing isolation[2]

The growing of food links into education around healthy seasonal eating and plant-based diets

IN PRACTICE:

Free vegetables and recipe cards are provided to patients in an early-adopter practice

Increased Nature Connexion and Pro environmental behaviours

IN PRACTICE:

Sites introduced pollinator-friendly planting, hedging and bat, bird and frog habitat features, creating visible improvements for wildlife.

Increased biodiversity and nature recovery

IN PRACTICE:

Our gardens and community green spaces are a lifeline for wildlife, little havens scattered through urban networks providing corridors that allow species to safely move, feed and breed.









GETTING STARTED Consider Your Space



What is the purpose of the space?

It is important to understand whether the space matches what you want to achieve. For example; a small space might be suitable for creating a calming sensory area (for staff and outside consultations) but not suitable for creating a community garden where vegetables can be grown. Seek advice from a local expert or wildlife trust to help you decide.

Are you planning to host green social prescribing groups?

- Do you have a social prescribing link worker or care co-ordinator- an essential link between clinicians, and patients?
- What onward Green Social Prescribing pathways for referral from the garden group do you have?
- Are you aware of local **VSCE organisations** that could provide programmes using your space?
- If this is one of your key uses of the space how would the wellbeing support be funded?

How is the space accessed?

Will it be open when the practice is closed?

Who owns the space?

They need to be involved in plans - some practices own their premises, others have landlords.. such as NHS Property Services. They may help to develop and even fund your garden space

No space is too small

Our nature health hubs ranged from a neglected courtyard in an inner city practice to a paddock beside a rural one.

Raised beds make the transformation of tricky spots possible.

Read more about

- **Container Gardens**
- **Creating a Wildlife Haven in a Small Garden**
- **Vertical Gardens**

GETTING STARTED *Gather Your Team*

Project Champion

There's no doubt that there needs to be an enthusiast at the centre of your project. They don't need to be an expert gardener - energy and interest are more important.

Engage Staff

A team approach is key to moving this forward. Staff from different teams bring a variety of ideas and talents. Some will be hands-on, others support with administration and information eg. health and safety, insurance.

Involve Patients

Does your practice have a Patient Participation Group who could be involved?

What ideas and resources can they contribute?

Talking to patients about the benefits of nature can form part of many consultations and lead on to discussion about a practice garden project.



Link with Community Organisations

A key element of successful garden projects is the links which can be formed with local community organisations who may already have allotments, rewilding projects, neighbourhood groups. Look beyond the practice boundaries for these valuable connections.

Link with Voluntary Organisations

- Your local wildlife trust will be delighted to hear about your plans and may be able to support you with advice and resources. In our project, an Ecologist produced reports suggesting key features for garden restoration to boost wildlife.
- One of our gardens was designed with the help of a local charity for older people which specialises in gardening activities,[3] and they run therapeutic sessions at the practice.
- Another is the base for well being sessions run by a community interest company for environmental and social change who create and run community gardens.[4]

GETTING STARTED *Understand The Benefits*

Promote Positive Effects of Nature

For the space to be used in a really effective way it is important to promote the understanding of the positive effects nature connected wellbeing programmes can have on patients. We would suggest that this is championed and promoted across the surgery teams.

Experiential learning is helpful for practice staff. Are there local examples of practice or community gardens you can visit - perhaps one of the gardens in this toolkit?

See links below

The Greener Practice Network

Info On Creating a Garden

The Red Whale GP Education Platform offers access to an interesting free short learning module on green social prescribing, including the evidence behind it, particularly helpful for sceptics.



"I go to nature to be soothed and healed, and to have my senses put together." **John Burroughs**



WHAT IS POSSIBLE *Inspiring Practices in the West of England*

Nature Connection / Outdoor Consultations

Harptree Surgery

"I love coming to the Paddock to be with people. I don't see many people and sometimes the Paddock is the only place where I get to speak to others during a whole week." **Patient Testimonial**

The volunteer group at Harptree surgery built an outdoor consulting space for the Care Co-ordinator. She finds it particularly helpful for talking to anxious patients.











WHAT IS POSSIBLE

Inspiring Practices in the West of England

Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise Partnership

Charlotte Keel Medical Practice, BrisDoc

"So proud of myself for getting out of the house."

"Get us, we're proper gardeners now, Look what we did!"

Feedback from participants attending sessions by Alive at Charlotte Keel

This practice is run by a social enterprise and commissioned a local charity 'Alive' to operate a weekly therapeutic gardening group.













WHAT IS POSSIBLE *Inspiring Practices in the West of England*

Nature Connection / Staff Wellbeing

Hanham Health

"I have enjoyed these sessions meeting new people and interacting doing things I enjoy, also learning about what we should be doing."

Feedback from a participant attending the Hanham Health community garden group.

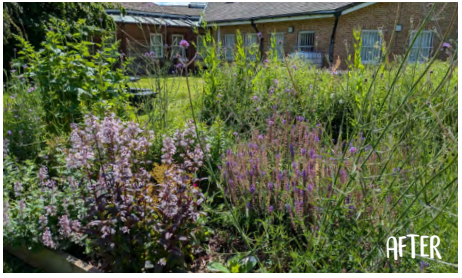
A garden Wellbeing group meet weekly and staff relax daily during breaks at Hanham Health











Hope House Surgery

This project is about nourishing bodies and souls, while bringing everyone together to make our neighbourhood shine even brighter. **Hope House Surgery Team**

The surgery is part of Hope House Centre, an open community space, and a Family and Children's centre, which share access to the garden.











WHAT IS POSSIBLE

Inspiring Practices in the West of England

Nature Connection / Outdoor Consultations

Cadbury Heath Healthcare

The days I get the time to use the garden are the best and I always feel going into the afternoon after lunch a renewed sense of energy! I hope the patients feel the same too! **Staff Testimonial**

GP outdoor consultations are starting and there is a group for young people with mental health problems to develop nature connection











MEASURING OUTCOMES

Think about what information you might want to record, before and after starting your renovation.

Our project used simple data collection tools to measure the impact of the development of the space on health and wellbeing and the change in the area provided specifically for wildlife habitat.

This was important to demonstrate to funders that it achieved its aims.

Natural Englands Healthy Outdoors Guide explains ways to measure the physical and mental health outcomes of nature-based interventions that you could adopt in your renovation.

SUSTAINABILITY AND SUPPORT

- It's important to consider ongoing funding and maintenance, with a core group to carry out routine gardening tasks alongside groups using the garden for therapeutic sessions.
- Build links with local groups, such as schools, residential homes and day centres.
- Explore using corporate volunteers - one of our practices has a link with Bristol Airport staff volunteers.
- Collaborate with VCSE and community organisations on funding bids/projects.
- **Nature Health West** is our local website for nature-based health opportunities.
- **The Wildlife Trust** has a host of 'how to' gardening guides to get you started.

REFERENCES

1 **Natural England Health and the natural environment evidence publications**

2 **Happiness and Feeling Connected: The Distinct Role of Nature Relatedness**

3 **Alive Charity 'Late up Later Life'**

4 **One Planet Matters CIC** (Creates community spaces and runs wellbeing support through the South Glos Nature Health and Wellbeing Network)



Illustrations by Persephone Coelho
Graphic Design by Sarah Lou Studio