

NATIONAL ACADEMY FOR SOCIAL PRESCRIBING – SUPPLEMENTARY WRITTEN EVIDENCE (HSI0096)

Introduction

The National Academy for Social Prescribing (NASP) is a national charity whose purpose is to champion better health and wellbeing across the whole country through social prescribing. In addition to delivering national, regional and global programmes with multi-sector partners, NASP facilitates and convenes research which demonstrates the impact of social prescribing.

NASP's written evidence focuses on horticulture's contribution to mental and physical health and how social prescribing is a key mechanism through which individuals can access the health benefits of horticulture.

What is social prescribing?

Social prescribing is a way of actively connecting people to activities, information and resources to help address an unmet health and wellbeing need or risk. It recognises the impact of wider social factors on people's health and wellbeing and addresses these issues through personalised care. The evidence shows that social prescribing can have a positive impact on a wide range of health and wellbeing outcomes, including loneliness and social isolation.

Social prescribing can reach those with the greatest health needs in society, thereby helping to address health inequalities. Social prescribing link workers (SPLWs) play an invaluable role in facilitating access to physical, cultural, and nature-based activities and advice and resources, which otherwise may not be accessible.

In addition to a wide range of mental and physical health benefits, social prescribing may reduce pressure on the health care system. Having robust evidence on social prescribing is essential to inform clinical and commissioning decisions around the prevention and treatment of major conditions, including mental health, to maximise the clinical and cost benefits of non-medical approaches.

Horticulture and green social prescribing

What is green social prescribing?

Green social prescribing (GSP) is the practice of supporting people to engage in nature-based interventions and activities to improve their mental health. It is a means to deliver support to those who may benefit the most from time in nature but struggle to do this on their own. Gardening and growing, whether for plants or food, are prominent amongst social prescribing offers across England and beyond, as are natural area or conservation management activities.

There is well-established evidence to demonstrate the mental and physical health benefits of time spent in nature and achieving a [nature connection](#). NASP's [evidence review on nature-based social prescribing](#) found outcomes such as:

- increased wellbeing, happiness, resilience, and social connection;
- lower levels of cardiovascular and respiratory problems;
- slower cognitive decline; and
- reduced risk of diabetes and obesity.

Accessibility of green social prescribing

Proximity to green and blue spaces is associated with higher health and wellbeing benefits and these spaces are key to delivering nature-based or green social prescribing. However, there is inequality in access to these spaces across geography, age, race, and ability. These groups face additional barriers to nature-based activities which SPLWs can help them to overcome. With respect to GSP activity providers, there may be obligations to maintain green and blue spaces outside of direct service provision.

Governmental commitment to green social prescribing

Social prescribing is part of the NHS Long Term Plan, and the recent NHS Long Term Workforce Plan commits to increasing the number of SPLWs to 9,000 by 2036 from the current 3,400. The government's 2023 [Environmental Improvement Plan](#) also includes a commitment to green social prescribing (GSP), which will build on learning from the £5.77 million cross-government [GSP Programme to tackle and prevent mental ill health](#). The programme funded and supported seven 'test and learn' pilot sites across England and explored the changes necessary to embed and scale-up GSP within the health care system. The GSP [toolkit](#) has recently been published and the final evaluation report is forthcoming in 2023. [DHSC analysis](#) found that 97% of clinicians viewed GSP favourably, and 94% were likely to refer patients to social prescribers in the future.

To ensure the continued success of green social prescribing and horticulture, NASP would like social prescribing to be **fully embedded and universally available in the health care system**. To achieve this outcome, we need:

- a sustainable investment model for social prescribing, including sustainable investment in the voluntary and community sector organisations who provide many of the activities to which people are referred; and
- greater recognition of the clinical and cost-effectiveness of social prescribing amongst local- and national-level health commissioners.

Achieving this outcome is not simply a matter of financial resource, but a commitment by policy- and decision-makers from across sectors and agendas to support and invest in social prescribing.

24th July 2023