

Scotland's outdoors

Our Natural Health Service

naturalhealthservice.scot



Introduction

Improving public health and reducing health inequalities are key priorities in Scotland

A range of diseases and chronic conditions, often associated with lifestyles and life issues, coupled with an ageing population and more people experiencing multiple conditions, are putting increasing pressure on our health and social care systems.

Greater cross-sector collaboration to realise the potential of the natural environment can be part of the solution to these challenging issues. This leaflet describes the work being led by Scottish Natural Heritage to maximise the contribution of Scotland's outdoors to a healthier Scotland through **Our Natural Health Service action programme**.

There is a strong evidence base for the health and well-being benefits of 'green exercise' – a term which encompasses ways of using the outdoors and contact with nature to foster better health. Activities include walking, cycling, gardening, volunteering, outdoor learning and play, as well as just enjoying being out in green environments and nature.

Making more use of local green spaces and natural places can help guard against and manage key health issues such as depression, coronary heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, obesity and dementia.

Green exercise opportunities are largely free, accessible to most people wherever they live, work or go to school and require minimal specialist equipment. They often lend themselves to group activities which help build social connections and enhance a sense of community, and can help tackle health inequalities.

Making the most of our environmental assets for better health

Benefiting from a healthy environment isn't just about dealing with environmental risks such as pollution, important as this is. The positive links between environment and human health are now well proven, supported by research from around the world and reflected in a range of Scottish policies. The common understanding that 'spending time in nature is good for the body and soul' is also echoed in powerful individual life stories of how the natural environment can motivate sustained behaviour change.

Scotland has an outstanding natural environment which benefits our society and the economy, but it is currently an under-used asset for improving public health. In particular, the parks, paths and other local green spaces and countryside close to where people live, work and go to school, can provide the setting and inspiration for people's 'daily dose' of physical activity, bringing physical, mental and social health benefits.

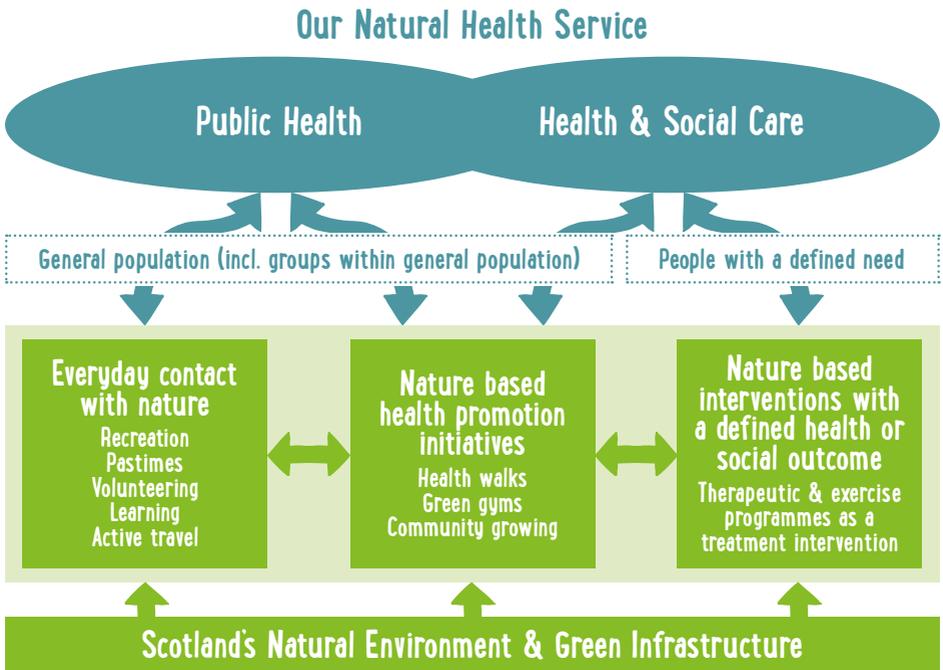
Our Natural Health Service

The growing recognition in policy and practice of the value of the outdoors to improve public health has led to the development of the concept of Scotland's outdoors as **Our Natural Health Service**, to help support and complement our National Health Service.

Increasing the number of people who regularly use and enjoy the natural environment and associated green infrastructure is a longstanding aim in Scotland. Many environmental

organisations target their activities to reach under-represented groups and disadvantaged areas, responding to the need to tackle health issues and inequalities through a range of green exercise projects. But to maximise the health benefits these activities provide, and to develop new ones where there is demand, more joint working with health and social care is needed.

The Our Natural Health Service concept is illustrated below.



The Action Programme

Supported by both the health and environment portfolios in Scottish Government, the goal of **Our Natural Health Service action programme** is to instigate a step change in how the natural environment can be used to improve people's health.

The action programme is led by Scottish Natural Heritage, working in partnership with Forestry Commission Scotland, NHS Health Scotland and a range of other national and local organisations across environment, transport, sport, education and health sectors.

The action programme seeks to achieve:

- increased public awareness and uptake of the benefits and opportunities to use the outdoors as part of their everyday lives;
- use of nature-based health promotion initiatives and structured interventions routinely embraced by the Public Health and Health and Social Care sectors for prevention, care and supported self-management; and
- stronger recognition across key sectors of the shared responsibility for improving public health through prevention and early intervention.

Delivering these aims has the potential to secure a range of physical and mental health benefits for people at individual, community and target population levels. A strong focus of activity will be on the areas of urban and rural Scotland that have low levels of physical activity and suffer from health inequalities and other aspects of disadvantage.

The action programme contains four main elements:

- **Information and communications** – to raise awareness of the health and well-being benefits of using the outdoors and co-ordinate better access to information about green exercise opportunities as part of public health and health and social care delivery.
- **Product and pathway development** – to tackle the current barriers and promote the routine adoption of green exercise as a health promotion resource and healthcare intervention.
- **Strategic interventions** – a range of local partnerships between public agencies, local authorities and voluntary sector organisations to help develop and demonstrate best practice across a range of settings and geographies in both urban and rural Scotland.
- **Evidence and research** – to underpin the development and implementation of the action programme by collating evidence and good practice, and advising on a monitoring framework.

Strategic Interventions:

- **NHS Greenspace for Health Partnerships** – to test partnership models that contribute to managing NHS greenspace and its use by patients, staff, visitors and local community.
- **Local Green Health Partnerships** – to develop area-wide, co-ordinated, cross-sector action to up-scale and mainstream green exercise by improving information, awareness and promotion of green infrastructure and the provision of green exercise programmes.
- **Green Infrastructure for Well-being Partnerships** – to maximise the health benefits from planned investment in new green infrastructure by developing partnerships to make sure the greenspaces are used fully by local communities and groups.

By mainstreaming green exercise into health policy and practice, this work has the potential to support the delivery of the ‘better care, better health and better value’ ambitions of the national Health and Social Care Delivery Plan, including the specific aims for public health improvement, the roll-out of the National Physical Activity Pathway and the implementation of the Mental Health Strategy 2017-27. Locally, it can also make an important contribution to the goals being set by Community Planning Partnerships and Health and Social Care Partnerships, and to the priorities and targets presented in a range of local strategies associated with health and environment.

The outdoors and green exercise is not the panacea for all of Scotland’s health issues, but it can play a valuable role in helping people obtain and maintain healthy behaviours and be part of delivering a healthier Scotland.

For further information see naturalhealthservice.scot





Active travel can be part of people's **everyday contact with nature**, providing a dose of physical activity and mental refreshment.

'Health walks' is an example of a **nature-based health promotion initiative** and there are hundreds of community and workplace health walks groups around Scotland.



The NHS Greenspace Demonstration Project has helped to provide outdoor places for a range of **nature-based interventions** for patients, as well as green exercise opportunities for hospital visitors and NHS staff.

Photo credit: The Voigt Partnership Limited

“There is compelling evidence that green exercise improves not only our physical health, but also our emotional and mental health as well. Maximising the potential of nature-based solutions can contribute to the collective responsibilities for public health and health and social care delivery. I welcome the joined up approach encompassed in the Our Natural Health Service initiative, the impact of which is entirely consistent with Realistic Medicine.”

Dr Gregor Smith
Deputy Chief Medical Officer



Sources of evidence on the health benefits of green exercise:

- Evidence statement on the links between natural environments and human health, 2017 DEFRA and University of Exeter.
- A Dose of Nature: addressing chronic health conditions by using the environment, 2014 University of Exeter.
- The Great Outdoors: how a green exercise environment can benefit all, 2013 Gladwell et al.



Scottish Natural Heritage
Dualchas Nàdair na h-Alba



Our Natural Health Service is supported by partners from national and local government and the voluntary sector including:



Forestry Commission Scotland
Coimisean na Coilltearachd Alba



Healthier Scotland
Scottish Government