

# Bitesize Case Study: Nature4Health

## Voluntary Sector North West

This case study is one in a series of studies curated to capture best practice, and highlight innovations, from the joint Health Education England (HEE) working across the North West and Voluntary Sector North West 'Learning Matters' awards 2017. The awards are part of a cross sector adult learning campaign delivered for the health and care sector through a number of key regional partnerships and collaborations. The overarching theme of the awards is simple: lifelong learning is good for people, organisations and health.

### What was the issue or problem? What did you set out to do?

The Natural Health Service has been running since 2012. The programme was initiated with support from Champs Public Health Collaborative to address four key issues:

1. A need to focus on a greater range of assets that could support improved community health

2. A need to have a coordinated approach from those involved in developing health programmes based in the natural environment to provide a focus for commissioners and enhance opportunities for collaboration

3. A need to develop a range of products, using the natural environment as the basis for treating specific conditions that are of concern to health commissioners

4. A need to move from project-led funding to sustainable longer term commissioning of products that have a proven efficacy and can be shown to reduce costs to the NHS



## What did you do? What was the intervention or initiative?

Over 20 organisations are working collaboratively as part of the Natural Health Service and there are two PhDs looking at specific elements of the programme. The team also work closely with Liverpool John Moores University and the University of Liverpool University on the wider evaluation of projects that are delivered through the Natural Health Service to build up local evidence of impact.

The work with the universities is an example of effective Action Research; there is a close link between the researchers and practitioners that allows continuous improvement of delivery based ongoing monitoring of what works best.

The ultimate aim is to develop:

- a range of specific, natural environment-based products, that are proven to address local health improvement priorities and which are seen as key to keeping individuals and communities in good health.
- a centre of research excellence, working with the universities in The Mersey Forest.
- an expanding network of similar initiatives across England, sharing knowledge and experience and continuously improving the quality of service and impact on individuals and communities.

### Level of award:

Highly Commended - Projects

**Organisation:** The Mersey Forest

### Author and Key contact:

Clare Olver

[clare.olver@merseyforest.org.uk](mailto:clare.olver@merseyforest.org.uk)

### Useful Link(s):

<http://www.nature4health.org.uk/>

## Our Five Activity Products

**Health walks** - Walking is the easiest form of outdoor exercise supporting the widest age and ability range.

**Horticultural therapy** - Improving mental and physical wellbeing through gardening and growing food.

**Mindful contact with nature** - Applying the principles of mindfulness to the outdoors brings a walk in the woods to a new level of intensity. It's all about submerging yourself in the sights, sounds and smells of the woods.

**Forest School and Forest School activities-** Forest School allows children to play, explore and learn about the natural environment and do activities like shelter-building, outdoor cooking, growing plants, using tools and bug-hunting. It's a hands-on approach to promote play in natural environments.

**Practical conservation** - Conservation Workout sessions such as Green Gym™ involve getting stuck in to do practical tasks to improve the environment.

## What were the Key Outcomes?

The Natural Health Service is still developing. However, the organisational infrastructure that has been developed and the focus on condition specific products has raised interest around the country and the work has been cited in local and national literature.

As an action research project delivery has been improved based on the results from research and feedback from participants allowing for improvement to products to be made.

## What were the lessons learned?

### Why share learning?

1. The team believe that the asset based approach works. Other areas could adopt the work and in doing so also help to reduce poor health, and the burden of poor health, on the NHS.

2. Continued shared learning. The infrastructure developed allows organisations to participate in delivery, to learn, to improve delivery and increase the impact of their work.

Learning points identified so far through our delivery project 'Nature4Health' funded through the Big Lottery:

- Identifying local need – the need for continued focus on the local need and design programmes that address this need.
- Taking a holistic approach – products are more than just “a health walk”, information is also provided on what other activities might be available and also, where useful, feedback on progress that has been made by participating in the Natural Health Service is given.
- Engaging the target group - the target groups are often hard to reach and so by definition require imaginative ways to engage, encourage and sustain involvement – this is a continued learning process.
- Understanding the barriers to participant's involvement – related to the item above, a greater understanding of the barriers to involvement is being gained therefore products can be improved to help overcome these barriers.
- The importance of using safe, welcoming and easy to access venues.

- Employing project staff who are empathetic and enthusiastic – critical to the development of the Natural Health Service is finding leaders who can help to sustain involvement by creating enthusiasm for the programmes.

- The use of volunteers in projects - there are many participants who want to carry on with the project or with other activity in the natural environment by volunteering and so projects have been adapted to enable more of this activity. Mentoring and training for those who want to go on to become volunteer leaders is also provided.

- Imparting skills and knowledge to participants – this is a key part of developing an intrinsic motivation to be/stay involved in the Natural Health Service.

Key learning points summarised in the Nature4Health Year One Outcomes Report include:

- the need to tailor activities to fit in with the local culture e.g. in St. Helens walking rugby sessions with Saints RFL have been particularly successful in attracting hard to reach groups
- that these sorts of projects cannot simply have a physical health focus – social interaction is critical to success
- effective monitoring and evaluation is vital, so evaluation tools must be accessible, scientific and robust
- the need to be both proactive and flexible in delivery – the team have learnt to listen and adapt as we develop

*“As you can tell the course changed my life. I would recommend it to anyone. I'm so grateful it was there and I saw the leaflet as without it I would only be stuck in the house not doing anything and increasingly isolated.”*  
– Nature4Health participant

**Published June 2017**