



The  
**Wildlife**  
Trusts

# A Natural Health Service

Improving lives and saving money





## Foreword

I know through working as a GP, and in my personal life, that nature brings all kinds of health and wellbeing benefits. There's plenty of good evidence to support this. What excites me about this research is that it shows the potential of Wildlife Trusts programmes to work alongside and reduce reliance on NHS services. Programmes that tackle some of the causes of preventable illnesses: social isolation that can lead to feelings of loneliness or depression, physical inactivity – which is linked to musculoskeletal problems, and a lack of skills or prospects leading to economic inactivity. The Wildlife Trusts' programmes can shoulder some of the burden of 'mainstream' NHS services, and they should be available to all health professionals, to refer patients to, where appropriate. I wholeheartedly support The Wildlife Trusts' call for other organisations in the environment, creative arts, sport, and physical activity sectors to be supported and increase the amount of 'Social prescribing' on offer. If we bring all these activities into health and social care services in the community, then our much-loved NHS can be more closely aligned with the organisations that are able to work quickly and effectively, targeting and reaching people much earlier.



**Dr Amir Khan,**  
GP and Vice President  
of The Wildlife Trusts



BLACKBIRD © BOB COYLE

YOUNG VOLUNTEERS © MATTHEW ROBERTS



## The Wildlife Trusts are playing an important role in reducing demand on NHS services

Evidence shows that a thriving, wildlife-rich environment benefits people's physical and mental health. People with nature on their doorstep are more active, mentally resilient and have better all-round health. The Wildlife Trusts have now taken this evidence to the next level, thanks to independent economic analysis.

In May 2023, Global strategic environmental consultancy Ricardo and The Institute of Occupational Medicine Health carried out an economic assessment of Wildlife Trusts programmes, to investigate if there were any benefits to the NHS and calculate any cost savings. They looked at the levels of mental health, loneliness, and physical health of participants in Wildlife Trusts programmes and if this changed as a result.

What they found has significant implications for health and social care in the UK. The economic analysis showed that Wildlife Trusts health and wellbeing programmes save the NHS money and cut reliance on their resources. Furthermore, it showed much greater cost savings if these programmes were delivered at scale UK.

As just one illustrative example, the Wild at Heart\* programme connects older people with each other and the natural environment in Sheffield and Rotherham. Those taking part find that their feelings of loneliness and social isolation reduce, and their mental and physical health improve. This leads to fewer NHS inpatient admissions, accident and emergency attendances and outpatient appointments. This in turn, reduces NHS costs £38,646 associated with mental health conditions of the 82 participants over a year.

The research then examined the potential impact if Wild at Heart was delivered at scale, across the country. Reaching a similar demographic of 1.2 million people living with poor mental health would achieve **cost savings to the NHS of £635.6 million**. This from a funding requirement of £534 million.

It is also important to note that there are many additional benefits to Wildlife Trusts programmes that were not part of the analysis, and therefore not included in the cost-benefit calculations. These include gains for wildlife, biodiversity, functioning eco-systems such as clean water and flood prevention – as well as greater access to natural places for the wider community, and so extending the public health benefits.

The potential, therefore, of a Natural Health Service across the UK, delivered by Wildlife Trusts and many other organisations is huge, with positive impacts for both people and nature.

### About The Wildlife Trusts

We are a grassroots movement of people from a wide range of backgrounds and all walks of life, who believe that we need nature and nature needs us. We are supported by 900,000 members and over 35,000 volunteers. The Wildlife Trusts are rooted in local communities and neighbourhoods, in towns, cities and the countryside. They work with people in those communities to benefit their health and wellbeing and make a positive difference to local wildlife and future generations.





Our health is shaped by the world around us: from good-quality homes to stable jobs, social connections, and neighbourhoods with green space and clean air.

*“It has helped my depression and agitation, to wind down and make decisions about my life.”*

Wildlife Trusts Participant

Five Wildlife Trusts programmes were selected due to the comprehensiveness of the data provided, and the feasibility of applying a sufficiently robust economic analysis model to it. The size of savings varies depending on the size of the scheme and the methodology applied to estimate cost savings. Detailed workings within the full analysis can be found here <<LINK TO TECHNICAL REPORT>>

The Wildlife Trusts programmes included in this study:

[Wild at Heart](#) is a social group for adults, run by the Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust, with the aim of exploring local green spaces, and to use the natural world to boost wellbeing, learn new skills, and reduce isolation in the community: **£38,646** in reduced NHS costs associated with mental health conditions of 82 participants over a year.

[Feed the Birds](#) is a programme run by Shropshire Wildlife Trust. It aims to address the issue of social isolation and loneliness by linking individuals-in-need with a volunteer, who visits them once a week to feed the birds in their garden: **£15,460 per year** in healthcare cost savings of 57 people. If the assumption could be made that all participants were fully engaged over the full 31-month duration, the estimated benefits over this period are much higher at around **£102,440**.

[Lancashire, Manchester & North Merseyside Wildlife Trust's](#) partnership with Pennine Care NHS Foundation Trust's on an early Intervention programme in Bury and Rochdale. The people using mental health services get connected with the areas' natural green spaces to improve their mental and physical health: **£7,024**. Reduced mental health treatment costs: **£28,442**. Economic inactivity due to employment loss meaning that for **every £1 invested, there is £2.16 of benefit in terms of reduced costs of treating mental health related conditions**.

Part of [NHS England's Green Social Prescribing Pilot Programme](#) 'Nature for Health in Greater Manchester' is a programme part-run by Lancashire, Manchester & North Merseyside Wildlife Trust, and managed overall by the Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership. Greater Manchester and its Nature for Health project is one of seven national test and learn sites that aims to use the human connection with nature to improve mental health: **£44,475** reduced NHS costs associated with mental health conditions per year, equating to **£471 saving per participant**.

[Gwent Wildlife Trust's Wild Health](#) provides opportunities for recreational, social, and work-based outdoor activities that leverage the potential benefits of nature-based interventions for physical and emotional well-being. The project primarily focuses on the enhancements in health and well-being outcomes derived from connecting with the natural world, along with the therapeutic and environmental benefits: **£66,882** reduced NHS costs associated with mental health conditions per year, equating to **£471 saving per participant**.

By working with local NHS partners, Wildlife Trusts can also be there to ensure that the right sort of empathetic help is given to the people we support:

*“Thanks to this project, individual X now has a care package in place, which wouldn't have been possible before because they were reluctant to allow anyone into their house.”*



BLUEBELL WOODS © TOM MARSHALL



## Wildlife Trusts and Health Inequalities

The landmark 2010 study 'Fair Society, Healthy Lives' by Professor Sir Michael Marmot shone a light on the direct relationship between the built and natural environment, how long people live and the quality of those lives. Marmot's review set out the objective to "Create and develop healthy and sustainable places and communities" by prioritising policies and interventions that mitigate climate change and improve access to good quality open and green spaces.

Despite Marmot's recommendations, health inequalities have widened over the past 13 years. Those living in the most deprived areas are more likely than ever to suffer from the worst environmental conditions. For example, those living in the most deprived areas are ten times less likely to live close to natural spaces; just 35% of households with annual incomes below £10,000 are within a 10-minute walk of a publicly accessible natural green space.

*"The Wildlife Trusts are clearly providing benefits to people faced with health inequity, including those with restricted mobility, older people, carers, and who are economically inactive. What is remarkable, is that in addition to improving peoples' physical, emotional and mental wellbeing, there is a clear cost-benefit to the NHS, and therefore to wider society. If Wildlife Trusts programmes like those described in this research were made available to more people in more places, they could help prevent unnecessary ill-health and reduce the number of people requiring NHS services. This 'Natural Health Service' alongside the creation of natural spaces in communities across the country will help bring about will result in healthy and sustainable places to live and work."*

**Professor Sir Michael Marmot,**  
UCL Institute of Health Equity



## Conclusion

The evidence from this study provides compelling, independently verified evidence that Wildlife Trusts' initiatives are successful in providing benefits to different groups facing health inequalities. These include those with restricted mobility, older people, carers, and participants from under-served areas and visible ethnic minorities.

They also benefit the NHS by providing interventions that reduce the strain on their resources. These projects have effectively improved physical and mental health while addressing barriers related to access, engagement, and representation in nature. The level of payback could be enhanced by significantly scaling up the number of community-based initiatives and targeting them more effectively through closer working with local NHS services.

### What needs to happen?

1

#### Cross-Government 'shared investment' funds to support community-based health services.

The Wildlife Trusts and other organisations in the environment, creative arts, sport and physical activity sectors delivering 'Social prescribing' must be integrated into health and social care services in the community. It makes economic sense and has the potential to deliver improved health and well-being at scale. This research has shown the potential impact on the 'mainstream' NHS. We now need policies that enable shared investment from Government departments concerned with housing, employment, community cohesion, transport and culture. This would create the 'engine room' for community-based health services and would also enable private, public and philanthropic investment at a local level. There are existing bodies such as the National Academy of Social Prescribing through which the investment can flow, growing the number of organisations involved, and continued innovation.

2

#### Community-based health services to become more widely available and targeted (to need).

The NHS is an incredible institution; the first Universal Health System in the world, free at point of access. However, people's health and well-being, how long they live, and the quality of that life is shaped by the world around us. It is clear that the NHS needs organisations to work alongside them and prevent illnesses caused by social factors like loneliness, physical and economic inactivity. Local health systems must be much more closely aligned with the organisations that are able to work quickly and effectively, targeting and reaching people much earlier. Policies that enable and strengthen partnership working between local health and social care services and community-rooted organisations like Wildlife Trusts are needed.

“It's clear from our results that green prescribing has the potential to deliver cost saving benefits to the NHS and 'take weight out of the system'”







FOREST  
GARDEN



**We are facing climate and ecological emergencies**, and the two are inextricably linked — we cannot solve one crisis without tackling the other. The Wildlife Trusts is on a mission to restore a **third of the UK's land and seas** for nature by 2030 — not only in celebration of the value of nature, but also because people are part of, and entirely dependent on, nature.



We believe **everyone, everywhere, should have access to nature** and the joy and health benefits it brings. No matter where you are in the UK, there is a Wildlife Trust **empowering people to take action for nature** and standing up for wildlife and wild places. Each Wildlife Trust is an independent, grassroots, community-powered charity formed by people getting together to make a positive difference for wildlife, climate and future generations. Together we care for 2,300 diverse and beautiful nature reserves and work with others to manage their land for nature, too.

## The Wildlife Trusts

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🖱 [wildlifetrusts.org](http://wildlifetrusts.org)

🐦 @WildlifeTrusts

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This summary report is based on research carried about by Ricardo, in collaboration with the Institute for Occupational Medicine (IOM). The research was an economic assessment of a selection of Wildlife Trusts' 'Natural Health Services' – projects and programmes that are designed, alongside NHS services, to deliver health and wellbeing outcomes for the people that take part in them.



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