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BTCV Position Paper

Health and well-being



Quality of environment is a powerful driver of health and well-being. Increasingly we see that better quality environments improve health, increase well-being and accelerate recovery times from bouts of ill-health.

BTCV believes in environmental justice – that everyone has the right to a good quality local environment, which benefits their health and well-being. We deliver health, well-being and social inclusion through environmental volunteering, and give others the confidence and skills to do the same.

Key points:

- The current landscape of health in the UK shows the need for a preventative approach: increasing physical activity and promoting mental well-being.
- Conservation volunteering is a powerful tool for engaging people in being active in the outdoors. Evidence shows that this has significant mental and physical health benefits.
- BTCV consistently enables people to improve their health in the communities where they live.

BTCV Green Gym

BTCV's award winning Green Gym® is an innovative alternative to the traditional gym or leisure centre and provides a natural workout in the outdoors. Independent evaluation concluded that overall the physical health status of Green Gym participants significantly improved, with 99% of participants reporting enhanced health and confidence¹. Retention rates are high, with up to 70% of participants still involved after six months².



Health challenges and evidence

INACTIVITY AND OBESITY	THE ENVIRONMENTAL SOLUTION
Only 40% of men and 28% of women meet recommended levels for physical activity ³ .	People living in areas with high levels of green space are 3 times more likely to be physically active and 40% less likely to be overweight or obese than those with low levels ⁵ .
Physical inactivity and obesity are risk factors for chronic conditions such as heart disease, with the cost of inactivity in England estimated at £8.2billion ⁴ .	Regular environmental volunteering produces significant improvements in cardiovascular fitness ⁴ and the Green Gym is recognised by the Department of Health as successfully increasing people's physical activity ⁶ .

MENTAL HEALTH	THE ENVIRONMENTAL SOLUTION
1 in 4 people will experience a mental health problem ⁸ and WHO predicts that depression will be the second largest single cause of ill health by 2020. In the UK mental ill health costs £23.1 billion to the economy ⁹ .	Exercise in green space leads to reduced depression and improved self esteem and mood ¹⁰ . Green Gym participants who joined with the poorest mental health were 3 times more likely to be the ones improving the most ¹¹ . <i>Read Bob's story opposite...</i>

WELL-BEING	THE ENVIRONMENTAL SOLUTION
Since 1970, the UK's GDP has doubled, but people's satisfaction with life has hardly changed ¹² . Well-being is enhanced by supportive personal relationships, strong and inclusive communities, rewarding employment, and a healthy and attractive environment ¹³	Natural spaces have been found to benefit well-being; the human response to nature includes feelings of contentment and a reduction in stress ¹⁴ .

HEALTH INEQUALITY	THE ENVIRONMENTAL SOLUTION
The life expectancy gap between the worst and best off districts in the UK now exceeds 10 years ¹⁵ .	Populations living in greener environments enjoy lower levels of income-related health inequality ¹⁷ .
The poorest people are most likely to live in poor quality environments. 20% of the lowest income group live in poor quality environments compared to 11 % of those in the highest ¹⁶ .	BTCV tackles inequality: 24% of BTCV's volunteers are from the 15% most deprived areas.

CHILDREN'S HEALTH	THE ENVIRONMENTAL SOLUTION
20-30% of children do not undertake enough activity to benefit their health ¹⁸ . 1 in 10 children aged 5 – 16 suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder ¹⁹ – around three in every class.	Contact with nature can significantly reduce the psychological problems caused by stress, particularly in children with the greatest number of stressful events ²⁰ . After a 10 week Green Gym programme, children's psychosocial health increased significantly. This is supported by the children's own views with 84% positive about the statement: "Green Gym made me feel good about myself." ²

FOOD AND HEALTHY EATING	THE ENVIRONMENTAL SOLUTION
Eating five portions of fruit and vegetables a day is consistent with good health. But adults are only eating 3.8 portions and children just 3.3 portions ²² . For households on low incomes, average consumption of fruit and vegetables is just one-half of the recommended amount ²³ .	43% of participants in a community food growing project run by Conservation Volunteers Northern Ireland increased their consumption of fruit and vegetables from 1.8 to 4 or more portions a day.



For the past three and a half years, Bob, who was diagnosed with bi-polar disorder, has been using the Green Gym in Hastings as an alternative prescription for his mental health problems. Bob was referred to the Green Gym by his psychiatric nurse:

"I used to get depressed about the future, but now that is not the case. I have been on medication for eighteen years, but since doing this, I have halved the amount I take. My life is a lot better" Bob



BTCV worked with Oakwood Primary School in Leeds, which is in one of the 10% most deprived wards in the country, to establish a School Green Gym. Children are involved in weekly activities such as planting trees and growing vegetables. Year 5 teacher Abi Fido says: "Green Gym has provided a fantastic alternative way for children at our school to be active."

In the words of one participant: "This is the best after-school club ever!"

BTCV's beliefs

On the basis of our experience working with people in the natural environment over the past 50 years, and the evidence outlined above, we believe that:

- The environment is crucial to health, both in keeping people healthy and preventing illness; and also for helping people manage or recover from mental or physical illness.
- Prevention is better than cure. We believe that in supporting people to lead healthier lives we are reducing ill-health in the future. Investment should be made in public health and preventing people from becoming ill.
- Activities in the natural environment provide an ideal setting for inclusion and integration, particularly for people with mental or physical health problems, long term conditions or social care needs.
- Supporting people to realise their potential is crucial to promoting well-being. People should be empowered to have control over their own health and well-being. With the right support, volunteers can set up and run green exercise programmes, thus building their own skills and self-confidence whilst providing a valuable health service to their local community.
- Environmental justice is essential in tackling health inequalities. Inequality of access to green space compounds health inequalities.
- Children and young people benefit from connecting with the natural environment. We believe that all children and young people should have easy access to green space and the opportunity to be active outdoors.
- Growing food helps to promote healthy eating. Community food growing initiatives provide a source of fresh fruit and vegetables as well as physical activity and new skills and knowledge.

BTCV's commitments

BTCV will enable half a million people to improve their health and well-being by 2013.

We will achieve this through environmental volunteering opportunities which offer enjoyable physical activity, a connection with the natural environment and with other people and the chance to learn new skills.

- **SOCIAL INCLUSION** We welcome everyone on to BTCV projects, including those with health problems and those referred by social care services. Our work in this area will be informed by our "Wellbeing Comes Naturally" initiative which will tackle stigma by integrating 450 volunteers with experience of mental distress into 28 environmental groups. This initiative, supported by Ecominds, will offer opportunities for people to recover and to move beyond their condition into other volunteering, training or employment.

- ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND TACKLING HEALTH INEQUALITIES We make an ongoing commitment to undertake at least 20% of our work in the 15% most deprived areas. We will enable disadvantaged communities to improve their local environment and access opportunities for green exercise.
- WORKING WITH CHILDREN AND SCHOOLS BTCV works with schools to build their capacity to establish Green Gyms. We provide a wide range of opportunities for children and young people to become more active and healthier through environmental volunteering. In addition to running programmes targeted at particular age groups, we welcome children and young people into our community activities.
- HEALTHY EATING We offer opportunities for people to come together to grow their own food, to provide a source of fresh fruit and vegetables and encourage healthy eating. By 2013, we will improve the health of 45,000 people through involvement in community food growing projects.
- BUILDING THE EVIDENCE BASE Following 10 years of work with Oxford Brookes University, BTCV will continue to lead in building the evidence base for the health benefits of environmental volunteering. The SF12 form, recognised by the medical community is now integrated within our online Management Information System. This, along with other evaluation tools is being used to collate information on the health benefits of conservation volunteering across all of our projects.
- COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIP We recognise that we cannot improve Britain's health on our own, and therefore actively work in partnership with others to achieve improved health and well-being through the natural environment. We are partners in the Outdoor Health Forum, The NHS Forest and Defra's Muck In 4 Life.

BTCV asks for...

- Public health policies to make the link between health and the environment and to draw up plans to use the "natural health service" more widely. Policies should recognise the evidence base for the mental and physical health benefits of environmental volunteering and food growing, and support the expansion of these opportunities throughout communities and schools in the UK. These efforts should be targeted to reduce health inequalities and focus on those most in need.
- Funders to support programmes which use green space and food growing to improve health and well-being, and to fund the evaluation of these programmes to further build the evidence base.
- Social care services to continue to expand their referral of people with social care needs into community based environmental volunteering, but should ensure that adequate support and finances are provided.
- Government level cost-benefit-analysis, comparing costs associated with public health initiatives using green space to the costs of treatment for inactivity-related illness.
- PCTs should each have environmental outreach programmes. We call for health professionals to routinely make use of the outdoors as an integral part of their work in improving public health and well-being, so that prescriptions for green exercise, including health walks and Green Gyms, become the norm.

For more information about BTCV's work, please contact us:

BTCV, Sedum House, Mallard Way, Doncaster DN4 8DB

TELEPHONE 01302 388 883

E-MAIL information@btcv.org.uk

INTERNET www.btcv.org

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inspiring people, improving places

