

Investing in Health and Wellbeing

BTCV's vision to improve the health of 500,000 people



Tom Flood CBE, BTCV Chief Executive

Part 1: Reflecting on our Achievements

Quality of environment is a powerful driver of health and well-being. We are grateful that the Department of Communities and Local Government also recognises this vital relationship.

Since 2005, your support for the Green Gym has enabled BTCV to:

- Set up and run 53 Green Gym programmes, improving the health of over 9000 volunteers.
- Improve 1600 green spaces for communities, biodiversity and food growing
- Build BTCV's capacity to work with local partners, including Local Authorities, Primary Care Trusts and Community Groups, to establish Green Gyms.

For BTCV access to a healthy local environment is an issue of social justice. Everyone has the right to good quality local green space that benefits their health and well-being. But at present – too many people either don't have access to the kind of outdoor space that they would like to spend time in, or that they feel safe in.

BTCV's work enables people to spend time improving their natural environment, and enjoying being active in the outdoors.

As a nation our health is nothing to be proud of – we are plagued by obesity and depression. But you can see from the evidence in our health position statement that those people who live in areas with high levels of green space are 40% less likely to be overweight or obese. And that exercise in green space can significantly reduce depression.

Our work with people in the natural environment means that we are able to make a positive difference – and hear stories like we have from our volunteers today.

For many people, coming out with BTCV has been a major part of turning around their prospects for health and well being (move).

I would particularly like to highlight some of our achievements in improving health and wellbeing over the last year:

Physical Activity

- The contribution of BTCV Green Gym in helping the nation to become more active was recognised in the government's Physical Activity strategy: 'Be Active, Be Healthy' 2009: *"BTCV's Green Gyms have used conservation volunteering to successfully increase people's physical activity and promote good mental health and well-being. The benefits of working in the Green Gym have been evaluated by Oxford Brookes University and demonstrate increased fitness, better mental health and a strong retention rate of 70% of participants after six months."*
- BTCV has been an active partner in Defra's 'Muck In 4 Life' campaign – to promote environmental volunteering for physical activity. After a successful campaign aimed at children and young families, we look forward to supporting the new emphasis of the campaign on middle aged people, especially men.

There've been a number of high profile campaigns on unhealthiness of schools – Jamie's Dinners etc. We have, perhaps more quietly, been getting on with extending our network of school green gyms.

We published the findings of our School Green Gym Evaluation, undertaken by Oxford Brookes University, which showed that:

- Both children's mental health and physical activity levels (at the weekend) improved significantly after 10 weeks of Green Gym.
- Over 100 children surveyed were positive about the statement 'Green Gym made me feel good about myself' *Tidy this stat – 100 out of how many kids?*
- Our achievements were recognised by a Children and Young People Now Award in 2009

We are grateful to the Department of Health for enabling us to undertake this evaluation.

Mental Health and Social Inclusion

BTCV are one of only 5 organisations to be awarded a flagship grant from Ecominds (Lottery funding administered by the mental health charity Mind). Launched in November, this is the only national project being supported. We have begun:

- Integrating 450 people with experience of mental distress into 28 community conservation groups.
- Many of these people will have experienced stigma and social exclusion. We are using environmental volunteering to welcome and include them in their communities.
- With BTCV and our community network, 'service users' become 'service providers' to their local community and environment – building their skills and self-confidence

We will evaluate the improvements to mental and physical health, and the increases to physical activity - using accredited tools from our Green Gym evaluation. We will record and report the benefits using our own state of the art online system (which BTCV has licenced to Natural England for Walking the Way to Health and to Sustrans for Active Travel).

Health Inequality

The recently published Marmot review on health inequality gives weight and evidence to many of the trends we already knew/suspected. People with higher socioeconomic position in society have a greater array of life chances and more opportunities to lead a flourishing life. They also have better health. The two are linked: the more favoured people are, socially and economically, the better their health.

BTCV is working to improve the health of some of the most excluded in our society. For example:

- We began work with the North West Prison Service to train and support their staff to run Green Gym in 6 prisons.
- Amongst the prison population, 90% have a mental health or drug dependency problem or both, and a third are overweight or obese¹
- We are a partner in the NHS Forest, enabling patients in hospitals to benefit from improvements to hospital grounds.

Part 2: Our Vision for the Future

¹ Social Exclusion Unit (2002) Reducing Re-Offending By Ex-Prisoners. London: SEU.

Today, I am delighted to announce BTCV's manifesto for health (our health position statement), setting out our beliefs and commitments to a 'natural health service'.

Our Commitments:

We commit to enabling _ million people to become healthier by 2013, through an investment of £27 million.

We will achieve this by engaging people in their natural environment, particularly through:

- Environmental volunteering and Green Gyms
- Food Growing
- Health Walks (BTCV run a number of Health Walks schemes around the country)

Of this _ million, we particularly aim to reach those who have the most to gain:

- 32% (160,000) will be people increasing their level of physical activity from less than 2 sessions per week to 3 or more sessions per week.
- 10% (50,000) will be children under 16.
- 21% (105,000) will be people from the 15% most deprived areas
- 9% (45,000 people) will be engaged in community food growing

But our health statement doesn't just set out our own commitments – to genuinely aspire to improving the health and well-being of the nation we must work in partnership, and must increase the emphasis that policy makers place on keeping people healthy.

BTCV calls for:

Government and Policy makers:

Policies that recognise the evidence base for the mental and physical health benefits of environmental volunteering and food growing,

Policies which support the expansion of environmental volunteering initiatives throughout communities and schools in the UK. These efforts should be targeted to reduce health inequalities and focus on those most in need.

PCTs and Local Authorities:

We want all PCTs to 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 wellbeing, so that prescriptions for green exercise, including Green Gyms and health walks become the norm.

Our Environmental Colleagues and Third Sector Organisations:

We invite you to work in partnership with BTCV to develop Green Gyms – please talk with one of our staff before you go, and we will follow this up with you after the event.

Volunteers:

Please share the stories of your group's success with others in your local community and beyond – inspire people to improve the places where they live, as well as their health.

With BTCV, government and funders can invest in the health of the nation. Marmot review stresses that investment in preventative care, and investment in green spaces and the environment where people live is a good investment. We are looking out, and hope to strike up conversations. We want to discuss how this investment can be achieved.