

Thriving Communities in Dorset



Evaluation Report

June 2022

The Arts Development Company

Stepping Into Nature (Dorset AONB)

Active Dorset

Help and Care

Contents and acknowledgements

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About Thriving Communities in Dorset

Aims of the project

Thriving Communities in Dorset was a 15-month project to strengthen arts and nature-based social prescribing opportunities in Dorset, taking place between April 2021 and June 2022, that aimed to:

- Increase the skills of voluntary and community organisations to better support community members who are referred through social prescribing.
- Increase the knowledge of social prescribing link workers around available arts and nature-based activities suitable for social prescribing.
- Develop partnership working between community, voluntary and healthcare organisations.
- Develop Nature Buddies, a scheme to pair volunteers with community members who need support to experience nature for their wellbeing.

The project developed in response to the Thriving Communities Fund opportunity, a time-limited source of funding, launched in December 2020 and managed by Arts Council England (ACE) and the National Academy for Social Prescribing (NASP). Following an open application process, a partnership of Dorset-based organisations were one of 37 projects across England to be awarded funding in March 2021. The purpose of the funding was to support local voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise projects that bring together place-based partnerships to improve and increase the range and reach of social prescribing community activities – especially for people most impacted by COVID-19 and health inequalities. To be eligible for the fund, partnerships were required to be cross-sector and reach across arts, heritage, creativity and culture; sport; nature; financial wellbeing; community advice; and the wider voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector. Criteria for the fund described by NASP included:

Funded activities will increase social connectedness and help communities cope with the impact of COVID-19. By working with those communities most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, including Black, Asian and ethnically diverse communities, the projects we will fund will help to:

- strengthen the range of social prescribing activities offered locally
- enhance collaboration and networking between local organisations
- enable social prescribing link workers to connect people to more creative community activities and services.

(NASP, 2021)

The partnership

Four steering group partner organisations created and co-ordinated Thriving Communities in Dorset: The Arts Development Company (TADC), Stepping Into Nature (Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty), Active Dorset, and Help and Care. Appendix 1 has more information about the work of these organisations. TADC led on day-to-day management of the project and financial management. Dorset Clinical Commissioning Group were key supporters of the project and many other health, social care and voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations engaged and contributed to the project in different ways, including:

Age UK North, South and West Dorset	Dorset Mind
Dorset Race Equality Council	Dorset Council
CoCreate Dorset CIC	Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council
Dorset Local Nature Partnership	Bournemouth University Community Partnerships
Community Action Network and Dorset Community Action	Bournemouth Parks Foundation

Project activities

During the project timeframe, there were some changes to project activities due to a range of factors (explored later in this report), although the four originally planned key strands of activity were delivered:

- Nature Buddies volunteering
- Taster Sessions for social prescribing link workers and VCSE organisations
- Training sessions in Mental Health Awareness, Diversity and Inclusion, and Dementia Awareness for VCSE organisations
- Partnership development.

In addition, an element of the project that was not planned at the outset but developed from the project activities, became a significant fifth project strand – the Nature, Art and Wellbeing Community Fund grants. The partnership working developed during the project led to an increase of arts-based nature and wellbeing activities in the [Help and Kindness web resource](#) that will be sustained beyond the project timeframe.

The geographical county of Dorset includes two unitary local authority areas of Dorset Council and Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) Council. The project aimed to work across both areas. In this report, references to Dorset include the BCP area unless just the Dorset Council area is specified. All but the Nature Buddies strand of the project successfully reached across both Dorset and BCP council areas.

The steering group partners took part in a programme of online learning and sharing events co-ordinated by Arts Council England for the cohort of 37 Thriving Communities-funded projects. It was from these sharing events that the Dorset partnership realised their project was somewhat different to most others, being primarily focused on supporting the infrastructure of social prescribing, whereas other projects were primarily delivering activities for community members to take part in. The steering group partner organisations also engaged with the Thriving Communities Fund national evaluation through attending online presentations, taking part in interviews, and contributing information about the Dorset project.

Changes to planned activities occurred for a variety of reasons including difficulty recruiting volunteers, difficulty engaging VCSE organisations and social prescribers in the project, and delays to the project timeframe. These changes are explored more later in the evaluation report, but in summary, are due essentially to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic with continuing lockdowns and demand on health and social care organisations that was not anticipated in the project development phase.



About the evaluation

Evaluation approach

The Arts Development Company commissioned a freelance evaluation consultant (Nell Farrally) to design and co-ordinate the Thriving Communities in Dorset project evaluation. Nell proposed combining a range of approaches to ensure that the evaluation process and final documents met partners' information needs. Four evaluation questions were developed in collaboration with the steering group partners to provide a focus and structure for the evaluation design and reporting:

- To what extent has the project delivered the planned outputs?
- To what extent has the project contributed to the outcomes and impact in the Theory of Change?
- What contextual factors have influenced, enhanced or inhibited the delivery of outputs and the achievement of aims and outcomes?
- What are the key points of learning from the project which are useful to share with the sector or could help to improve or develop partners' future work?

It was important that the evaluation also aligned with, and could feed into, a national evaluation of the Thriving Communities Fund commissioned by Arts Council England and NASP from Wavehill Consultancy. It was for this reason that a Theory of Change was created at the start of the project that imitated the structure of the national evaluation Theory of Change created by Wavehill.

The evaluation approach combined several elements of evaluation theory:

Collaborative evaluation (where the evaluator leads the evaluation with commissioners and stakeholders invited to collaborate on evaluation design, data gathering, analysis and reporting).

Theory of Change (a description or graphic representation of the need for a project or intervention with anticipated outcomes, including *how* the intended outcomes and impact are to be achieved).

Outcomes evaluation (where pre-defined intended outcomes are judged or measured to assess whether they are achieved).

Illuminative evaluation (open-ended and exploratory evaluation that does not foreground pre-defined outcomes).

An evaluation plan and framework were created that described the intended outcomes, outcome indicators and open-ended questions for illuminative evaluation in more detail. The full Theory of Change is shown in Appendix 2 which includes intended outcomes grouped into four categories, also shown here:

Outcomes for people

- Improvements in wellbeing for Nature Buddies participants, such as reduced anxiety or increased confidence.
- People will have more confidence to get out into nature and take part in arts and physical activities.
- Improvements in wellbeing and/or skills for NB volunteers, such as increased confidence, more social connections or a sense of purpose.

Outcomes for VCSE sector

- Increased skills and knowledge amongst the VCSE sector to deliver activities promoting inclusiveness.
- Development of new and/or enhancement of existing activities to widen the reach of people engaging with activities (either in terms of numbers of people, geography, or greater diversity and inclusivity).

Outcomes for HSC sector

- Increased knowledge and networking for link workers, enabling them to communicate more efficiently with communities about what's available, including benefits to wellbeing of participation.
- Greater experience of working with cross-sector partnerships for Primary Care Networks and Social Care organisations which increases their confidence in the quality and appropriateness of NB activities for social prescribing.

Outcomes for partner organisations

- Increased valuing and recognition of the contribution partner organisations make to social prescribing in Dorset, from HSC and VCSE sectors.

Data gathered

A draft of data gathering methods aligned to outcome indicators and illuminative questioning was part of the evaluation planning, although the data methods were revised to accommodate the changes in project activities as the partners responded to challenges they encountered in delivering the original project plans. The different data gathering methods and sources of evidence that have been considered for analysis in this evaluation report are:

- Online survey of social prescribing link workers to gather baseline information
- Semi-structured interviews with Nature Buddies volunteers and participants
- Semi-structured online interview with Age UK's Independent Living Adviser
- Semi-structured phone interview with a social prescriber who referred people to Nature Buddies
- Training session online questionnaire
- Taster session online questionnaire and verbal feedback from participants
- Nature, Art and Wellbeing Community Fund application forms
- Notes of steering group partners' meetings and reflective evaluation meetings.

Data analysis

Numeric data about people's participation and engagement with the project are presented in tables. Qualitative data from the different methods are analysed using two approaches to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021) – firstly, with a topic summary approach that groups people's contributions to the evaluation on a semantic or 'surface' level. Secondly, the thematic analysis includes a latent level of interpretation that seeks to provide a deeper insight into the evaluation questions and illuminative evaluation approach.

Evaluation outputs

Agreed outputs of the evaluation commission include this evaluation report intended for steering group partners and funders, and a shorter evaluation summary document intended for a wider readership including health and social care organisations and VCSE organisations.

It is important to note that the steering group partners fully engaged with the evaluation process, responding to invitations to input into the evaluation design and data gathering, and ensuring the evaluator was involved in project through, for example, always being invited to steering group meetings. Although not an output planned at the outset, reflective and evaluative thinking during various meetings were evident, therefore a final end-of-project evaluation meeting with all steering group partners, facilitated by the evaluator, took place in June 2022. This meeting was a significant evaluation activity that enabled sharing of perspectives and articulating of learning from the project.

Limitations of the evaluation

It is good practice to acknowledge the limitations of an evaluation as project evaluations often involve finding a balance between available resources (time and financial) and the depth of evaluation. The information needs of an evaluation must also be balanced with the ethics of data gathering so that evaluation is proportionate and not detrimental to people's participation in a project.

There are several ways that the Thriving Communities evaluation has limitations which have been considered in the analysis and interpretation of data and the conclusions presented in this report:

- As numbers of people who participated or engaged in the project are lower than planned, the number of people who have contributed information to the evaluation for some strands of the project are few. Although they may be a satisfactory *proportion* of people who contributed, they are still a relatively low number of perspectives, for example, 100% of volunteers and participants who were taking part in Nature Buddies in May 2022 gave feedback to the evaluator, but this amounts to 12 people in total.
- The Nature, Arts and Wellbeing grants were not part of original project plans but were a strand that developed in response to delays in the project timeline. Whilst all funding has been allocated by the partnership within the Thriving Communities Fund timeframe (end of June 2022), many organisations are continuing to deliver work beyond this date and therefore it is beyond the scope of this evaluation to consider outcomes and impact of this project strand. Only the anticipated participation numbers can be reported at this time.
- Given all the changes that occurred in the project, a Theory of Change approach to evaluation was not particularly suited. Blending different approaches to evaluation mitigated against the difficulty of evaluating using Theory of Change.



Summary of evaluation evidence

Who took part: participation and engagement numbers

Target participation and engagement numbers were set during the project development phase for some elements of the project. Where there are target numbers, they are shown in tables below alongside actual numbers.

Nature Buddies

	Actual numbers	Target numbers
Nature Buddies participants	6	30
Nature Buddies volunteers	7	30

Training and Taster Sessions

	Number of sessions provided (actual)	Number of sessions (target)	Number of participants (actual)	Number of participants (target)
Training sessions	9 mental health and 11 diversity and inclusion	No target	95	150 VCSE groups
Taster sessions	5	30	32 individuals representing 8 NHS healthcare organisations and 14 local authority or VCSE organisations	100 social prescribers 150 VCSE groups

Partnerships and other engagements in the project

	Actual numbers	Target numbers
Number of health, social care and VCSE organisations engaging in project meetings (in addition to 4 steering group partners)	6	6
Number of social prescribers / organisations that contributed to baseline questionnaire	29	No target

Nature, Art and Wellbeing grants

	Actual numbers
Number of organisations / projects funded	23
Total anticipated beneficiaries	8,372

In addition to the numbers above documented in project management records, other sources of evidence captured information about target and actual participation numbers, particularly notes from partners' reflective meetings that included:

- Observations about why the take up for the training sessions had been low included that, since the pandemic, there were a lot of free online training opportunities available. Potential participants could have 'Zoom fatigue' for online training.
- The initial targets were too ambitious. The short timeframe to submit an application to the Thriving Communities Fund meant that the project development phase was hurried and more time to establish realistic targets may have avoided under-achieving on participant and engagement numbers.
- There were two reasons for difficulty recruiting volunteers. Firstly, partners observed that people who are able to volunteer for community action had given a great deal of their time to the pandemic response and were now taking a break from volunteering. Secondly, it was more difficult than anticipated to work with VCSE organisations who recruit and refer volunteers than partners expected. This was again, due to the pandemic with many organisations restructuring and reducing staff, in addition to ongoing high levels of staff absence due to COVID-19.

Nature Buddies

Nature Buddies was a strand of the project that focused on developing nature, arts and wellbeing activities for community members to be referred to by social prescribing link workers, in contrast to all other project strands that aimed to support the infrastructure of social prescribing. Nature Buddies involved the Stepping Into Nature project co-ordinator working to link volunteers with community members who could benefit from support to experience nature for their wellbeing. Volunteers offered support for their buddy to enjoy nature more, whether that be walking in open spaces, sitting in parks or enjoying indoor activities such as bird watching from a window. Participants were encouraged to keep a Nature Journal (a booklet provided) to help them think about how nature helps their wellbeing.

Recruiting Nature Buddies volunteers involved developing partnerships with VCSE organisations who already recruited and supported volunteers. It was hoped that organisations such as Volunteer Centre Dorset would engage with recruiting Nature Buddies volunteers, but unfortunately this did not develop. Partners reported that the Volunteer Centre were focused on the pandemic response and later the Ukrainian refugee crisis. Age UK (north, south and west Dorset) were the one organisation who were able to support Nature Buddies in the way the partnership hoped VCSE organisations would. An arrangement was agreed that involved Age UK receiving a fee from the Thriving Communities funding as a contribution for staff time spent on administration of Nature Buddies.

At the time of creating this evaluation report, Age UK has linked six Nature Buddies participants with volunteers (a total of seven volunteers as one withdrew, and their buddy was matched with a new volunteer). There were three methods of gathering evaluation data about Nature Buddies: short semi-structured 1-2-1 phone interviews by the project evaluator with six participants and six volunteers, a semi-structured online interview with Age UK's Independent Living Adviser who matched and supported the buddies, and a phone interview with a social prescriber who referred people.

Nature Buddies Interviews

All the volunteer and participant interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed to notice recurrent or contrasting patterns, and generate key themes that provided insight for the evaluation questions. These themes are described and discussed below, with illustrative quotes from the interviews.

When the buddies (volunteers and participants) met up, they tailored their activity to the needs and interests of the older person, often needing to consider mobility limitations, yet they commonly sought to expand on their experiences of local places.

Across the six pairings of Nature Buddies, there was a wide variety of activities people did when they met up. Some buddies walked for up to two hours, some walked shorter distances, some visited a garden centre and some met indoors in the participant's home. Some visits involved a combination, for example, a walk to the garden centre, around the garden centre looking at plants, and a visit to the garden centre café for tea and cake. Places buddies spoke about visiting locally included: along the river, water meadows, Hangman's Cottage, Roman Villa, Maiden Castle, Poundbury, Maumbury Rings and Borough Gardens. For buddies who are able to travel further afield, they spoke of visiting Weymouth, Cerne Abbas and Abbotsbury Gardens. One pair of buddies had so far only met at the participant's home, although all others walked to visit other places.

Both participants and volunteers had experienced new places through the visits. Participants reported having learnt more about their local area, even those who had lived in Dorchester for many years. Two of the volunteers had moved to Dorset from other areas of the country relatively recently and had benefited from the local knowledge of their buddy.

I know more about Dorset and Dorchester now than I ever did. I've only lived here 7 years. My husband died two years ago. And [name of volunteer] has been a great help. And she encourages me, you know. (NB participant)

We met at Top of Town car park, and we walked down to the river. And it was nice for her too, because she'd not been that side of Dorchester. And we saw the old Roman Villa and things like that, you know, it was a lovely day. I've lived in Dorchester practically all my life, so I know where to go. So, I was the one that suggested this walk. And we're going to do another one weather permitting this Thursday. She is from another area but just recently for about a year in this area now. (NB participant)

She's been to places that she hadn't been to before. But equally, she's able to tell me things about Dorchester that I didn't know. (NB volunteer)

She often gives me tips about places that I might visit and I've got an elderly mother, and so sometimes her daughter may have taken her somewhere and then she'll say, oh, you know, it's very nice there. And then I think well, that's great because I perhaps take my mother there. (NB volunteer)

It was evident in the interviews how much consideration the volunteers gave to ensuring that walks accommodated the mobility needs and lack of confidence some participants experienced. Most participants were restricted in the distance they could walk or the kind of terrain they could manage due to walking aids such as a rollator or walking stick.

It's just once a week. And that's, you know, that's enough for me because I got type two diabetes, and my feet have started playing up at the moment. So I'm waiting to sort that with my diabetic nurse. But walking for about an hour and a half is just fine and then I start feeling a bit tired. (NB participant)

I wouldn't go out on my own without my rollator. I go out with other people, but with their arm and a stick. And I always have an arm and a stick with [name of volunteer]. So, in that way it's given me confidence, yeah. (NB participant)

So it's got to be somewhere that's relatively safe. And things like Thorncombe Woods usually involves some pretty steep hills going out to the car park. So it's like difficult. There were some history guides, but they were written for people who had seemed to be in wheelchairs and things like that and I thought if a wheelchair can go somewhere that will be okay for us. So, they were quite useful. I think those came from the council. (NB volunteer)

So, we did try an off the road walk but I think that was a bit too tricky. And although she loved it, because I took her, we went to Stinsford, which she'd never been to before. I think it was a bit too, a bit too rocky. So we tend to stick with pavements. (NB volunteer)

There were stories of how the buddying was stretching participants to help them with physical rehabilitation and increasing confidence. For one buddying relationship where the participant was keen to improve his mobility following a stroke, there was an explicit intention from the participant and volunteer that the Nature Buddies visits would gradually develop beyond their current walk to the garden centre to other open spaces with more strenuous walks. For another participant, their confidence at walking without holding onto someone else's arm increased.

At the moment... we walk to garden centre and we have a mooch around there and a coffee. At the moment that as far as it's gone. We certainly intend to do more of that. A lot of it is a question of how I'm up to it at the moment, I've still got issues. It's a question of how far I can go. It's all slowly, slowly at the moment. But as I recover and our relationship, as it were, befriending progresses, we'll get out into nature more. It's starting at the moment. So as we get out, and walk in the country more, which hopefully will come especially now the weather is brightening up and my strength increasing with it... personally it worked for me very well, obviously it's a very friendly atmosphere in the garden centre and the coffee. That will lead to longer walks as my strength progresses. (NB participant)

I done more walking, because some of the places we go to it's very narrow lanes that we walk so it means we have to walk on my own – single file. It's given me confidence. (NB participant)

There were a variety of motivations for taking part in Nature Buddies: not wanting to walk alone or join a group, to counteract loneliness and to exercise for physical health.

Some people spoke about how they did not want to go walking alone, yet joining a group to walk with was not suitable for them as their mobility issues necessitated walking short distances or keeping to flat terrain.

I got fed up walking alone. (NB participant)

I do have a problem with one of my knees, I have had already an operation and I was told I need the knee replaced so, the way I walk is slow. For how long? It depends very much how I feel that week... There's no organised, for example, to go for a long walk with a group of friends, wherever they wish or decide to do... I don't know if it would be suitable for me in my case. (NB participant)

There were many reasons why participants experienced loneliness and sought companionship through their buddy. One participant retired relatively early and found that she had a disconnection from her friends who continued working for longer. A 91 year-old experienced loneliness following the death of her dog and she found pleasure in her buddy bringing her dog along for their walks. Another participant, for whom English was her second language, felt that people found her way of speaking English difficult to understand, therefore to make friends she needed people who would become familiar with how she communicated. And the restrictions of the COVID-19 lockdowns had made all social contact difficult. One lady spoke about how she was making an effort to 'to get back out and do a few things', the way she observed others doing, as her motivation. For one participant, she was concerned about her safety and was wary of getting to know new people unless it was through an introduction from a mutual acquaintance or a scheme such as Age UK's befriending.

Exercising for physical health was some people's motivation for joining Nature Buddies. One person recognised that they needed to maintain their activity levels for their health even though they didn't enjoy walking. In complete contrast, the participant who had a stroke was committed to improving his mobility so he could resume his hobby of Nordic walking.

Many participants spoke of finding the buddying an enjoyable experience – both the walking and the conversation and companionship.

For some buddying relationships, the role of nature was important, whilst for others they just sought befriending.

In the interviews, there was a variation in how people had come to Nature Buddies. Some participants and volunteers sought out Age UK's befriending scheme and then had been introduced to the idea of Nature Buddies later as an additional facet of their existing befriending relationship. Two volunteers were new to working with Age UK as it was the idea of sharing their enjoyment of the outdoors with others that piqued their interest to get involved. Some participants were ambivalent about the focus on nature – for them, it was the physical exercise or the conversation and companionship that they valued about meeting up with their buddy.

Going out with someone else. Yeah. That's the main reason. I'm not that interested in sort of flora and fauna and talking about that. Conversing and having someone else to talk to. That's the main reason. (NB participant)

To be honest, that that isn't what [participant's name] wants out of it really... To be fair, when we were coming back from Sherborne the other day along the top road, and I was saying, 'Oh, look, there's deer in the field'. She sits up in the car seat, looks over their heads and sees the deer and we talk about the rape fields or the swallows flying over them... or whatever it is that we see or do. And she does take an interest. But most definitely is not her prime motive. I think, you know, what her prime motive is, is the exercise and also a change from her normal life. (NB participant)

For others, however, nature provided a focus or stimuli for conversation, with volunteers pointing out things seen on the walks or sharing their knowledge of planting. Even where the buddies had a shared interest in the outdoors, it was still conversation and companionship that participants valued most.

And [volunteer's name] is more knowledgeable than I am. And she says, 'oh look, there's a so and so, lots of wild primrose and celandine and calves and lambs'. (NB participant)

I enjoy talking to her and we have a walk around the garden centre because she's knowledgeable on planting. I enjoyed that. We have a cup of coffee and chat generally. It's all those things – companionship is really what it is at the moment. (NB participant)

Participants and volunteers recognise that nature and being outdoors are good for wellbeing and they report a range of ways Nature Buddies contributes to wellbeing: increasing or maintaining physical activity, an impetus to get out of the home, improving mood, learning new things, visiting new places and learning more about the local area, and conversation and companionship.

In the interviews, all participants were asked if they thought Nature Buddies contributed to their wellbeing and all volunteers were asked if they had observed any indication that it had contributed to their buddy's wellbeing. The analysis of the interview transcripts also sought to identify *how* people thought Nature Buddies benefited wellbeing. For most (but not all) participants, people either recognised themselves, or their buddy observed, that the meet-ups were beneficial for wellbeing. Learning new things gave pleasure to some.

It's taught me things that I didn't appreciate – the names of plants and flowers. I learnt a lot now, me. I enjoy it. (NB participant)

People also find enjoyment from visiting new places or learning more about their local area. Several volunteers observed that their buddy had improved mood due to the buddying.

I can see that she's happier and she has she actually did voice it vocally as well. (NB volunteer)

She's got quite a serious back problems. So I wouldn't say that walking... generically, yes, it's great for improving fitness... but in her case, I think it is just the mood to get out of the house. I think it's actually painful for her to go out. But she doesn't want to be at home. So there's a trade-off. (NB volunteer)

Oh 100% noticed a difference in his demeanour. The few times that I've been, the second time, he had made an effort with how he looked, you know, gone looking a little bit more smarter. And I you know, I think that made him feel good. (NB volunteer)

Simply having the opportunity to go outside of their home contributed to wellbeing for some.

Well, number one it takes me out of the apartment! (NB participant)

I don't think there's any doubt that it's helped her wellbeing. I don't think there's any doubt that she enjoys trips out. And I try to make them as enjoyable for her as possible. So yeah, I think that if you asked her, she looks forward to it. When you're 90 and you live in a flat on your own, and your husband's died... She's got two granddaughters, one of whom she sees weekly but otherwise... I think she just likes a bit of adult conversation, rather than the other old ladies in the flat that tend to talk about their aches and pains. Yeah, I don't think there's any doubt she enjoys our outings. And so that has to be good for her wellbeing. (NB volunteer)

The quotes above concern simply getting out of home. There were, however, responses that specifically identified that aspects of being outdoors are what bring benefits – fresh air and being surrounded by nature.

I think it's being outside, being with somebody as a buddy to make you feel more confident because he's very wobbly on his feet. So it's enabling him to get out in the fresh air. You know, on a nice sunny day, chatting as you walk, which is always often easier than chatting just sitting down. I think just taking in your surroundings hearing birds singing and seeing, you know, lovely trees that are greening up and flowers and shrubs. I think all of that is beneficial. I mean, anything is better than being stuck inside, let's face it. (NB volunteer)

For all participants, the opportunity for conversation and companionship was the factor benefitting wellbeing that they most commonly identified.

I enjoy [name of volunteer]. It's very good company. We can have a very civilized talk, not only about nature but other things, you know, the Ukraine crisis... (NB participant)

The fact that she's such a nice person to talk to. Company isn't it. That's what I need. (NB participant)

Well, it's nice to have someone to talk to as you walk along. I don't know about wellbeing but it's nice to have someone that you can converse with. (NB participant)

I really enjoy a bit of female company. My husband has Alzheimer's and he doesn't have any conversation, and of course, he doesn't hear very much. He joins in sometimes with the chat if he can hear it properly. Basically, it's just a good old discussion about all sorts. I think it's very good. It's been lovely having somebody come and chat to and we discuss anything. Any topic that comes up with we have a good old chat about it. Quite good that is, that way. (NB participant)

Some participants spoke of how they wouldn't be able to do the walks they have done without someone else to accompany them.

Volunteers' primary motivation for volunteering was a wish to contribute to their community and to help others, however, they recognised that volunteering brings other benefits to them including enjoyment for themselves, learning more about their local area from their buddy, and pleasure from sharing their interest in nature and the outdoors.

The primary motivation for volunteering was to contribute to their local community and to help others, with some volunteers identifying a desire to feel useful following retirement.

Well, I've always contributed. That was the way we were brought up was that, you know, you contributed to your community. And, and so yes, I get out of it equally, I suppose because I feel as I'm doing something useful in my life, as a retired person, having stopped contributing workwise. (NB volunteer)

Some volunteers were already active volunteers for other organisations. Some volunteers signed up to be Age UK befrienders and the Nature Buddies aspect of the befriending relationship was added later. There were two volunteers, however, who were new to volunteering, and it was the idea of Nature Buddies and their own interest in the outdoors that attracted them.

I saw, I think it was a council thing asking for people who might be interested. And I was brought up on a farm. I love nature. I walk every day. I'm interested in everything from the birds, the butterflies, the plants, the weather, geology, history, whatever. And I thought, oh, that was something I could do. In fact, I would love to do that and to enthuse other people. And so I applied. (NB volunteer)

Oh, yes, I mean, it is something that you feel you've been a little bit useful to one person. Because I think if I didn't take her out, she wouldn't get out into the countryside or along the river and things. Because she doesn't want to walk on her own, she doesn't want to walk in a group. So that that's sort of like an ideal compromise. And to be honest, all my life, I felt the need to go out every day. Rain, shine, or whatever, because that's how I am. So I feel that if I can get anybody else out, then it's got to be a benefit. (NB volunteer)

For these volunteers, the experience hadn't quite been what they had expected, and they had envisaged the budding involving more walking in open spaces, although they said they were committed to continuing to support their buddy.

Some volunteers recognised that volunteering was a mutual exchange and they had gained things from their buddy, including learning about horticulture from a participant who had worked as a gardener, and more knowledge of their local area – particularly valuable to some participants who were relatively new to the Dorchester area.

Um, I think I've gained a huge amount from it. You know, volunteering is a two-way thing, isn't it? You don't do it, if you're not going to get something out of it, even if that makes you feel good, because you've done something to help somebody. I would say, yes, because I feel the time – I'm giving up my time of which I have got some spare time. I've retired. And I actually really enjoy his company. So, it's definitely a two-way thing. (NB volunteer)

I mean, I volunteered with the elderly for last 15 years. I did a lot in when I lived in London. So, when I moved to Dorset, I wanted to carry on partly because it makes me feel better as a person but also I thought it'd be a good way to get involved with a new community. (NB volunteer)

Whilst volunteers were satisfied with the support they received from Age UK to fulfil their volunteering role, there were suggestions of more that could be done by those organising Nature Buddies to maximise their experience – primarily concerning more ideas of places to visit suitable for the mobility needs of their buddy, more ideas of indoor nature-inspired activities, and a wish to meet up with other volunteers to share ideas and experiences.

Volunteers had sought ideas of local walks from different sources such as History Walk guides and the Stepping Into Nature website, but several said they would like more ideas of local walks that were suitable for their buddy's mobility needs – and they felt this could be something that could be provided by people organising the project. They also suggested that ideas for Nature Buddies activities to do indoors would be useful for when the weather is poor or in winter. It was also a suggestion of several people that arranging a meet-up with other volunteers would be a good opportunity to share and receive ideas of places to go.

One volunteer was frustrated that their car insurance would not cover them to have their buddy as a passenger without an additional premium. Another spoke about regularly driving their buddy further afield than Dorchester and suggested linking up with other buddying partnerships to share lifts to places outside of the local area.

Some participants and some volunteers felt a lack of information and clarity over what Nature Buddies actually was and would have liked more information.

It was notable in the interviews that some participants did not really understand the concept of Nature Buddies as they were initially referred to Age UK's befriending scheme. Some volunteers also had signed up to be befrienders for Age UK and had been introduced to the idea of Nature Buddies later and spoke of a lack of clarity about Nature Buddies. One volunteer thought that Nature Buddies was going to involve meeting up in groups and the fact that it turned out to be something very different meant they thought they had misunderstood the purpose.

... doesn't seem to be any organisation. I understood that it was going to be done in partnership with people, you know, what I'd expected was that we would be going out as a group to places like Thorncombe Woods, and suchlike. I'd obviously got completely the wrong idea. (NB volunteer)

This lack of clarity was not universal and other volunteers said they were well-supported by the Independent Living Adviser who was their contact at Age UK, although several said they would like group activities to be organised.

Although not specifically asked about the Nature Journal in the interviews, several participants and volunteers gave constructive feedback. One participant was extremely forthright in her views that it was too detailed, too repetitive and she didn't want to write or draw about her feelings.

This book that they printed – the questions are so repetitive and there's so many of them that I get fed up with it... It's too much, way too much. Yeah, like activities – it's got walk, visit, type of activity, provide as much detail as possible, how you walked, participation levels. I just went for a walk, that's it! (NB participant)

One volunteer spoke about how the journal created anxiety for her buddy as she didn't know what to write. Another volunteer said they had not looked at the journal with their buddy. Another said they would like their own copy of the journal to they could use it to think about activities they might organise for their buddy.

There were a number of factors that the volunteers felt created a successful buddying relationship: that activities and conversation were tailored to the participant's interests, activities accommodated any physical mobility needs and that the volunteer takes things slowly to build up friendship gradually.

In addition, some buddying relationships had genuine shared interests, such the buddies who both enjoyed Nordic walking and sports, which they felt enhanced the relationship. Although it had been chance that led to them being paired together, they both felt that it had been a good match that they had these shared interests.

Interview with Age UK's Independent Living Adviser

Whilst the interview with Age UK's Independent Living Adviser explored their perspective of Nature Buddies success, it offers most insight into partnership working, therefore is summarised in a later section of the report.

Interview with social prescriber

A social prescriber (SP) who referred people to Nature Buddies agreed to speak with the evaluator – notes of the conversation were made (but not audio-recorded). The social prescriber was employed by a GP surgery in a role funded by the Primary Care Network. They had referred three people to Nature Buddies with two going on to participate. The reason for the third person not participating was they moved out of the area.

The SP first heard about Nature Buddies from a direct email, although they couldn't remember from whom the email came. It particularly caught their attention as they have a lot of elderly patients who say they previously enjoyed walking but no longer get out due to health conditions or restricted mobility. Some people are worried about going out on their own when they have experienced health conditions such as a heart attack.

It was just the people were very isolated and lost confidence to go out into nature because their health or mobility concerns. (social prescriber)

Although they were familiar with Age UK, having referred to them previously, the SP wasn't aware of Thriving Communities or the partners involved (although they did qualify that they were new to their role).

Within the requirements of patient confidentiality, the evaluator asked if any feedback or follow-up with the two people had taken place. It had not, but it was usual that once a patient had been referred and the SP had ensured that they had been contacted by the service, there was no further follow-up unless requested by the patient. In this case, however, they

did say that through a conversation with Age UK's Independent Living Adviser, they knew that the two referred were happy with Nature Buddies.

When asked about what a social prescriber looks for in terms of quality assurance when making a referral to a service, they said:

What's important is that the organisation will contact the patient within time they say they will, and that they do follow up with the person. I contact person to check they have been contacted by the organisation referred to, and that they are happy with the service and that it's helping them to meet their goals. (social prescriber)

In the case of Nature Buddies and Age UK, the SP was satisfied that these criteria had been met. A final question asked for any other feedback that could be useful for evaluating Nature Buddies or developing the project further. Ensuring more visibility was their response. They felt that Nature Buddies had been well-advertised in the beginning, but they had not seen any further information for a while so they suggested that it may not be at the forefront of social prescribers' awareness.

Training sessions

The evaluation only has minimal feedback from people who participated in the training sessions to consider, for two reasons. The training sessions took place in two phases with the first phase happening before the evaluation was commissioned and planned. For the Mental Health training in the first phase, Dorset MIND requested feedback from participants using their standardised questionnaire with three responses shared with The Arts Development Company. All three participants selected 'agree' or 'strongly agree' to a series of statements about aspects of the training including: *do you feel this training has changed your understanding of mental health, training was relevant to my needs, the trainer was engaging*. There were no qualitative comments to consider. No method of requested feedback from other training participants was implemented in the first phase.

In the second phase of training sessions, the evaluator worked with the project manager to design an online questionnaire for all the training session participants. Only one response regarding the Diversity and Inclusion training and one response from the Mental Health training sessions were received. It is disappointing to receive a low response rate to free training sessions.

The two responses showed satisfaction with the training. The Mental Health participant felt that their knowledge or skills had increase 'a lot' through the session (scoring 4 out of 5 for how much they'd increased). Examples of where they had gained new knowledge were 'Five ways to wellbeing. Use of language. Wellness action plans'. Responses to open-ended questions showed that this participant was utilising their learning in the context of their work, 'it definitely made me consider things for our programmes and projects that we run', and they wrote about how they would consider including the Five Ways to Wellbeing and wellness action plans into their projects. Comments about the quality of the training said that the course leader was very knowledgeable and good at adapting the content for a single participant – although they were disappointed there were no other participants to enable group discussion. For the Diversity and Inclusion training, the participant felt that their knowledge and skills had increased only a little (scoring 2 out of 5). Examples of what they learnt were 'to use non-violent communication to be a good ally'. This participant would have preferred a blended learning approach and suggested that written resources could have been given in advance, allowing more time to practice non-violent communication in the online session or enabling the online element to be shorter as they felt there was a lot of information to absorb in three hours.

I think the content is certainly valuable; it was a lot to take in over three hours and so would be more memorable and actionable, I feel, if delivered in split learning. A pdf/online section to read prior to a practical 1hr/90 min session. Thank you very much!
(Diversity and Inclusion training participant)

They were appreciative of the course leader's passion and knowledge. They intended to apply their learning in their work through being, 'more consciously, actively inclusive'.

Whilst the responses received are generally positive and include some constructive feedback, it is not possible to draw conclusions with such a low response rate.

Taster sessions

For the taster sessions that took place in May and June 2022, there were two methods of gathering feedback. An online questionnaire received 16 responses (a 50% response rate) and the artist who led the taster sessions documented some verbal feedback from participants. Attendance records show that the sessions engaged a range of people from health organisations (Primary Care Networks, NHS trusts, GP surgeries) and VCSE organisations – a total of 32 individuals from 22 different organisations.

Online questionnaire

Although the questionnaire was anonymous, respondents were asked to describe their professional or voluntary role so the range of responses could be gauged. There were six responses from social prescribers, three from other health or social care professionals, five from VCSE organisations and two from workshop leaders. Out of 16 respondents, 13 of them were in roles that involved social prescribing and referring people to activities. A mix of open and closed rating-scale questions began with asking, *what was the most important or valuable aspect of the taster session?* Answers to this question were grouped into themes, with some people giving answers that fell into more than one theme. The most common topic in the responses described networking and meeting others working in the field as the most important or valuable thing for them.

Linking up with other Health and Social Care providers and artists and developing contacts and potential access to more activities and provision from their organisations and mine. (taster session participant)

The opportunity to meet people in various roles and discuss ideas that may benefit our patients. (taster session participant)

Meeting others and finding out what they do and how we can all support each other. Experiencing a taster session was really helpful to be able to be able to properly explain to clients what to expect from any sessions they attend with you. (taster session participant)

The second most prevalent kind of response was that people found the content of the sessions and experiencing a creative wellbeing activity for themselves to be valuable.

Drawing sounds session – connecting with nature, trying something outside my comfort zone and a taster of some of the activities clients could get involved with. (taster session participant)

The delightful exercise in mindfulness. I arrived stressed and left calm! (taster session participant)

The practical experience of being creative in a group setting. (taster session participant)

A couple of people wrote about being reminded of the role art and nature has for wellbeing and the positive impact on mental health. A couple of other participants identified specific things they learnt about, for example the Five Ways to Wellbeing, as most important or valuable.

Three closed questions with rating-scale answer choices were designed to understand how much the sessions increased participants' experience of arts and nature wellbeing activities and the likelihood they would make referrals.

	1) No, not at all	2) Only a little	3) Yes, somewhat	4) Yes, a lot	5) Yes, beyond any expectation	Question n/a
Has the taster session increased your knowledge or experience of arts and nature-based activities suitable for social prescribing?	0	1	4	10	1	-
If your role involves social prescribing or referring, how likely is it that you will refer the people you work with to arts and nature-based activities?	0	0	0	8	5	3
If your role involves social prescribing or referring, based on your knowledge of arts and nature-based activities you could refer people to, how confident are you of the quality of the activities?	0	0	2	8	3	3

The closed questions also had the option for additional comments. The main points in the additional comments were that although some participants had some knowledge or experience of arts and nature-based activities, the taster session deepened their understanding or was a 'reminder'. It was evident that many participants had a belief that arts and nature activities were beneficial to wellbeing and suitable for social prescribing, for example:

I work with individuals with learning difference some of whom have high anxiety at times. Access to nature helps to diffuse this and is also enjoyable and physically desirable. (taster session participant)

I am a firm believer that interaction with nature is an essential part of life to keep our mind and body in balance. (taster session participant)

To understand how the taster sessions might have reached people who hadn't previously engaged with the work of the steering group partner organisations, people were asked if they were aware of the four partner organisations before the session. Amongst the 16 questionnaire respondents (who were 50% of all participants) the numbers of people who were aware of the partner organisations before the taster sessions are shown in the table below.

The Arts Development Company	5
Stepping Into Nature	8
Active Dorset	11
Help and Care	11

These figures show that the taster sessions were an activity that increased the reach of some partner organisations with half of respondents not previously aware of Stepping Into Nature and less than a third previously aware of TADC.

An open-ended invitation to give any other feedback including thanks for an enjoyable and informative session. The only constructive feedback came from an online session participant, who felt that some activities and the opportunities for conversation may have been better with a face-to-face activity.

Session notes and verbal feedback

The artist who led the taster session created written records of discussion topics that arose in the sessions and verbal feedback from participants. The documented verbal feedback echoes the main points in the questionnaire – networking, meeting others and sharing information were a valuable part of the taster sessions. Several people highlighted a need for communication between activity providers and social prescribers, with a suggestion that there needed to be clearer and more formal routes of communication, for example, *'Can we create a framework for referrals to help SP, patients and VCSE'*. Limited resources were an issue for some, although there were several aspects to this. It was felt that some groups didn't have the capacity or expertise to accept referrals from people with higher support needs. The scale of need from patients meant that social prescribers had a large workload. Activity providers felt that financial resources to support their work were lacking and there was a frustration that NHS resources did not follow the individual which could be a way to direct funding to activity providers. Establishing an ongoing group for activity providers and social prescribers to share information was suggested. It was felt that more resources for PCNs to find out about groups suitable for referral would be beneficial. Discussion included how social prescribing was being measured for efficacy and if there should be a SP outcomes framework. The idea of creating a model or framework for pan-Dorset social prescribing was raised.

In summary, the taster sessions were a valued opportunity for sharing information, networking and learning, but there is a wish for greater development of structures that support and enable social prescribing.

Partnership development

Baseline social prescribers survey

Before the project evaluation was commissioned and planned, The Arts Development Company created an online survey for social prescribing link workers that was intended to consult the sector and gather some baseline data that could be used to judge progress later in the project. When the evaluation framework was created, the survey results were identified as a source of evidence and baseline data, with an intention that a further survey towards the end of the project would enable assessment of project outcomes. Due to changes in the project activities that impacted on evaluation plans, a second county-wide survey was not done, but nevertheless, there are a few elements of the survey that are useful to consider for evaluation – particularly the context of the social prescribing infrastructure.

There were 29 responses from social prescribers across Dorset and BCP, showing good engagement and interest in the project from social prescribers. There were responses from urban and rural areas and a good geographical spread.

A question about how long respondents had been in their role showed that the majority had been working as social prescribers for a relatively short time – from 2 months to 3 years. Only a few respondents counted the time in their role in years rather than months.

Social prescribers use a variety of methods to find out about groups and services they can refer people to, with a mix of health funded resources (such as Live Well Dorset), VCSE resources (such as Help and Kindness), more informal sources of information (such as word-of-mouth, church newsletters and local noticeboards), in addition to some creating their own databases.

A question about how often social prescribers signpost people to different kinds of activities showed that they signposted people to arts-based activities less than they signposted to physical activity and nature-based activity.

Age UK partner interview

Age UK were the VCSE organisation who engaged most with the project through their role in recruiting and supporting Nature Buddies volunteers and participants. The Independent Living Adviser (ILA) who co-ordinated Nature Buddies for Age UK contributed to the evaluation through a semi-structured interview with the evaluator.

The reason why Age UK were able to commit organisational time and resources to be a Nature Buddies partner was because it enhanced their existing befriending scheme. By utilising the Nature Buddies concept and 'branding', Age UK could see that it was way to engage new volunteers and clients for the befriending scheme that may not respond to the marketing of their existing befriending offer. This alignment of purpose was a key reason for Age UK becoming involved in Nature Buddies. A second reason given was the energy of the Stepping Into Nature co-ordinator who *'matches our culture quite well'*. A third reason was that it aligned to older people's needs. The ILA spoke about how common it was that older people want to walk but they did not want to walk alone for varied reasons.

Although the ILA did not have much direct contact with befriending clients other than reviewing that things were OK, where he did have contact and feedback about Nature Buddies, comments were positive, for example, *'I'm kna*****d! I've been out walking for two hours today and it's been marvellous'*. He said that the buddying relationships had a *'buzz'* and he was pleased with the feedback he'd received.

The interview explored the uncertainty around Nature Buddies and Age UK's befriending scheme some participants and volunteers spoke about in their interviews with the evaluator. The ILA was surprised by people's confusion, as he said all but one of the Nature Buddies relationships were initiated as Nature Buddies rather than based on existing befriending relationships. He surmised that clients may not remember how Nature Buddies was introduced to them, or that the distinction was not important to them. He reflected that terminology used by professionals to describe services is often not relevant to clients, therefore they don't take it onboard, but he was confident that Nature Buddies was a distinct part of the wider befriending service and had been presented to volunteers and clients as such.

When asked for constructive feedback that could improve Nature Buddies the ILA raised two points, the admin involved and the Nature Journal. He felt that the journals needed reviewing as people had found them lengthy and complicated to complete. Feedback about 'admin' concerned the volume of information requested in the participant forms. The ILA said the amount of information asked for was too much for a client's first engagement with a service. There needed to be an experience first to build the relationship and then admin such as GDPR permissions could be done later.

There was a strong wish from the ILA to develop Nature Buddies further including small group walks and partnering with other organisations such as the RSPB and Dorset Wildlife Trust to provide walks and events such as talks.

The interview concluded with discussing if there was any aspect of Nature Buddies that needed to be developed to enable Age UK to continue being a partner in the scheme. Funding was the main issue, particularly as a substantial source of income for Age UK were their charity shops which had seen large decreases in spending since the pandemic.

Notes of partners meetings

Notes by the evaluator that capture discussions and decisions during meetings were a method of documenting the evaluation process and the learning that arose. The evaluator was invited to attend steering group partner meetings as an observer. Other meetings about practical aspects of evaluation included reflective discussions that were also documented. There were two more formal evaluation meetings. The first took place in March 2022 facilitated by a Wavehill Consultancy researcher to capture information for the Thriving Communities Fund national evaluation. An end-of-project reflection meeting with the four steering group partners, facilitated by the project evaluator, took place in June 2022. The key points of learning summarised here are composites from notes taken at all the meetings described above.

Pandemic impacts

The premise of the Thriving Communities Fund was to channel support to covid recovery for those most impacted by the pandemic. When initially planning the project, partners did not anticipate they would be delivering it in the wake of further lockdowns and an ongoing pandemic. As one partner described it, *'We were delivering a project in a pandemic rather than a project about recovering from a pandemic'*. The impacts of the pandemic manifested with many organisations restructuring and reducing staff, and there was ongoing high demand on health, social care and VCSE organisations, including redeployment of social prescribing staff to support the booster vaccine programme. These factors all created difficulties in spreading the word, marketing opportunities such as the training sessions, and hampered the strategic way partners had planned to network. Furthermore, the pace of change the pandemic caused meant that what was originally planned in the funding application, was not relevant one year later as people's needs had changed.

Timescale for project development

The opportunity to submit a bid to the Thriving Communities Fund came with a very tight timescale to respond (only a few weeks from the fund's launch to the application deadline that spanned Christmas holidays). What enabled the partners to respond swiftly was that some partners had worked together before and were primed for partnership working on this project. However, there were drawbacks with responding quickly to an opportunity that, with hindsight, the partners identified. One partner felt that target participation/engagement numbers were *'plucked out of the air'* and had there been more time to consult with partners, target numbers may have been lower and more likely to have been achieved. A second area where more consultation time would have been beneficial concerned the training. The low attendance for some training sessions suggested that perhaps the training offer was not relevant enough to the needs of those the training was intended to engage.

High ambitions

There were mixed thoughts about the project having high ambitions. One partner felt that the project had been too ambitious in the target numbers. Another partner commented that one reason the application was successful was the scale of ambition. Another partner felt it was right to have high ambitions for the project and then adapt if those ambitions can't be reached. Timescale was again a factor in the ambitions. More could have been achieved if there had been a longer timeframe. Achieving what had been originally planned was really a two or three year project and not something that could have been achieved in one year. The budget available was also a factor that limited the achievement of ambitions, particularly for the Nature Buddies strand of the project. Greater financial resources could have supported the capacity of more partners to be involved in Nature Buddies. Organisations need financial support for the staff time involved in recruiting and supporting volunteers. The original plans were felt to have potentially been achievable, but were not achievable with the additional hurdles created by the pandemic.

Project concept

Partners were proud that their Thriving Communities in Dorset project had focused on strategic work to develop the social prescribing infrastructure, rather than delivering social prescribing activities as the majority of other Thriving Communities Fund supported projects did. They reflected that this was the right focus. The learning from the project process and the evaluation showed that a good model of working had been developed and that there is a need for support regarding the infrastructure of social prescribing in Dorset. The pandemic removed access to green spaces and nature for many people and levels of isolation and anxiety were high.

The partners were also proud that when problems arose, they found ways to address those problems through devising the NAW grants. Rather than give up and return the funding (one of the 37 projects in the national cohort of Thriving Communities funded projects did withdraw before completing) they found a way to adapt and changed project activities but still with the same end-goals.

Strength of partnerships

The partners were very satisfied at how they had worked together. Partners commented that other partners had been very active and supportive. No blame was cast for things like target numbers not being met. Partners were proactive at supporting others. Reflections about the success of the partnership included having confidence that there were shared goals. The project was ending with partners in a good place to do further work together. The evaluator's observation notes support partners' own reflections on the strength of partnerships. The practical support and advice and the sharing of knowledge and contacts were evident to the evaluator in the partnership meetings. The evaluator's perspective captured in her notes were that it was an achievement to establish such an effective cross-sector partnership.

Project profile

Reflections on the profile of the project varied between partners. One partner had experienced feedback that showed the Thriving Communities in Dorset project had a high profile and awareness. Another partner felt that being part of the national Thriving Communities programme had created a pressure to create a high-profile project that demonstrated good practice and innovation, although they felt that what had been delivered fell short of being an exemplar of good practice. The project producer observed that VSCE organisations were aware of the project, but the health sector much less so. TADC regretted not engaging specialist marketing support, which had been part of original project plans, however, she spoke about how they now had marketing capacity (such as filmmaking) in place that was not there at the start of the project.

A lot of learning

Partners felt that a lot had been learnt through the project process which they can build on. When projects are difficult, learning arises. Partners identified that what had been good about the project was that difficulties were acknowledged. *'When we knew we were going to struggle we adapted. We supported each other – we learnt from it and adapted'*. One partner was satisfied that the project concept was good, and that the *'stumbling blocks'* that had made its implement difficult had been created by the pandemic. The learning from the project can be built into developing the work further with an intention to seek three to five years of funding support.

Nature, Art and Wellbeing Community Fund

The Nature, Art and Wellbeing (NAW) Community Fund was a strand of the project that was not planned at the outset but developed in response to challenges encountered in delivering the project. NAW became a way to meet the aims and outcomes of the project, albeit with different activities. In the latter part of 2020, the steering group partners were aware that engagement from health and VCSE organisations had been lower than expected – participation in the first phase of training sessions had been very low and partnerships with organisations who could help deliver Nature Buddies were not developing as planned. The steering group partners were concerned that the project was not on-track to meet participation and engagement targets, delays to timescales meant that initiating Nature Buddies relationships heading into winter was not ideal, and it was felt there was a real risk of not being able to fulfil obligations of the funding. The group made a decision to pause plans for taster sessions and more training sessions, and undertake a review of project activities. An outcome of this review was the Nature, Art and Wellbeing Community Fund. The group decided that an effective use of some Thriving Communities funds was creating a new opportunity to support social prescribing activities for groups in Dorset by joining up with some Stepping Into Nature funding and the Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF). The COMF objectives, *'to reduce the risk of social exclusion and longer term inequalities by creating opportunities to rebuild community connections, improve mental health and physical activity levels for people significantly impacted by Covid restrictions, in particular people with dementia, learning disabilities or Autism,'* aligned with Thriving Communities in Dorset aims. The NAW fund offered an open application process in two rounds for individuals, groups or organisations

working in communities to offer nature, arts and wellbeing activities. The funding could enhance existing activities or be used in varied ways such as volunteer training, purchasing equipment or financing public liability insurance. Establishing the NAW fund was a strategic decision to support the VCSE sector to develop their capacity to engage in social prescribing activities.

Applicants were assessed by a panel of project partners. All the available funding was allocated by the end of June 2022 (as per Thriving Communities Fund requirements) although some NAW fund supported activities will continue to March 2023. Organisations that have received funding are required to report back when their projects have ended. Due to this timescale, evaluating the outcomes of the NAW funded projects is beyond the scope of the current commissioned evaluation described in this report. Information that is currently available relevant to aims and outcomes of Thriving Communities in Dorset concerns the reach of the project and financial information. 23 projects were awarded grants from the NAW funding (see Appendix 3 for a full list of projects, organisations and their location). The projects cover a good range of locations across Dorset and BCP. The successful applicants were primarily small VCSE organisations with a few projects co-ordinated by local authority services and medical practices. The total anticipated reach of the projects from planned participants/beneficiaries, is 8,372 people.

23 applications were awarded funding of between £180 and £6,664. The total value of grants made was £45,714 of which £20,000 was from the Thriving Communities in Dorset project budget. This £20,000 leveraged £30,000 from Stepping Into Nature's National Lottery Community Fund grant and the Contain Outbreak Management Fund. The combined funding pot leveraged a further £88,744 in match funding making a total of £134,458 to support arts and nature-based social prescribing activities in Dorset. A third round of NAW funding will take place shortly after completion of this evaluation report.

The timescale of some funded projects continuing until March 2023 enables The Arts Development Company to document the stories of a selection of projects through making short films.



Considering the evaluation questions

This section of the report revisits the evaluation questions and summarises what can be concluded from the evidence and data described in the report.

To what extent has the project delivered the planned outputs?

Due to difficulties in the strategic work and project delivery created by the ongoing effects of the pandemic, the numbers of people participating and engaging with the project have been significantly less than targets set at the start of the project. The partners did, however, deliver some activity within each strand of the project and adapted to create two new project activities – a sustainable source of information about arts-based nature activities suitable for social prescribing within the Help and Kindness web resource and the Nature, Art and Wellbeing Community Fund. The NAW fund has the potential to reach significant numbers of beneficiaries, although this is not known at the time of completing the evaluation report.

The Stepping Into Nature co-ordinator plans to continue supporting Age UK's Nature Buddies work until 2023 with funds from the Stepping Into Nature budget, therefore extending the reach of the project beyond outputs that can be counted with the Thriving Communities project timeframe.

To what extent has the project contributed to the outcomes and impact in the project's Theory of Change?

Creating a Theory of Change early in the project was intended to enable alignment with the Thriving Communities Fund national evaluation. Given the difficulties encountered in Thriving Communities in Dorset, developing a Theory of Change was perhaps premature. The evaluation has responded flexibly to the shifting project activities and lower-than-anticipated participation numbers, particularly in the choice of data gathering methods. Given the scale of challenge and adaptation in the project, it does not seem fruitful to give a close examination of the project against the initial Theory of Change. It is, however, worthwhile considering the short-term outcomes that partners expected to achieve within the timeframe of the one year project and commissioned evaluation.

The contributions to the evaluation from the Nature Buddies participants and volunteers show that intended outcomes for individuals were met. The observations of the volunteers and self-reporting from participants show increases in physical activity for almost all participants. Many participants would not be going out walking without their participation in Nature Buddies and they spoke of becoming more confident to walk outdoors. The things that appeared to contribute

most to wellbeing were the conversation and companionship, experiencing new places and learning more about the local area. For volunteers, many reported that Nature Buddies enabled them to feel they were contributing to their communities and gave them satisfaction from helping others. For some volunteers, they gained greater knowledge of the local area and experienced enjoyment for themselves.

The evaluation is only able to make a limited assessment of the intended outcomes for the VCSE sector. Whilst feedback about the training was good, the low response rates to feedback requests means that it is not possible to understand the effect of the training across the project.

The NAW fund has initiated new activities that could widen the reach of arts and nature-based activities and has the potential to enhance existing activities, but for reasons already stated, the timescale means that it is not possible to consider the achievement of NAW-funded projects in this evaluation. The partnership with Age UK has successfully involved a wider reach of people in Nature Buddies.

Outcomes for the health and social care sector included *'increased knowledge, confidence and networking for link workers, enabling them to communicate more efficiently with communities about what's available, including benefits of participation to wellbeing'* and *'greater experience of working with cross-sector partnerships for PCNs and Social Care organisations which increases their confidence in the quality and appropriateness of NB activities for social prescribing'*. Feedback regarding the taster sessions provides evidence that these intended outcomes were achieved. The data gathered also shows, however, that there is much more scope for further developing the communication and sharing of information between activity providers and social prescribers. Whilst SPs had solid confidence in the quality of social prescribing opportunities in arts, nature and wellbeing, taster session participants had good suggestions of how this could be enhanced and there was a will to further develop the infrastructure to improve social prescribing in Dorset.

An intended outcome for partners was an *'increased valuing and recognition of the contribution partner organisations make to social prescribing in Dorset, from HSC and VCSE sectors'*. This has certainly been achieved, with high regard from Age UK and a wish to continue working together. Participation in the taster sessions has been positive and has reached a wide range of health and VCSE organisations. Significant proportions of taster session participants were not previously aware of The Arts Development Company or Stepping Into Nature's work. The engagement of small VCSE organisations in NAW applications shows the appetite for groups to connect with social prescribing opportunities, although the impact of this strand of the project cannot yet be known.

In summary, the Thriving Communities in Dorset project has achieved the majority of outcomes to some extent, although it is acknowledged that participation and engagement numbers are lower than originally planned.

What contextual factors have influenced, enhanced or inhibited the delivery of outputs and the achievement of aims and outcomes?

Clearly, covid recovery is a much longer process than partners envisaged when developing the project and this has had multiple detrimental effects on delivery of the project. Parameters of the Thriving Communities funding opportunity were a factor that influenced the project – both the tight timescale for project development and the initial one year (later extended to 15 months) limit for project delivery to be completed. The ambition of the project is to be applauded, but was perhaps unrealistic to expect that the significant strategic change envisaged could be effected in a one year project.

What has enhanced the project is the strength of partnership working and the perseverance of partners to adapt to the difficult circumstances of the pandemic.

What are the key points of learning from the project which are useful to share with the sector or could help to improve or develop partners' future work?

From the documenting of meetings and high levels of engagement in evaluation activities, it is clear that partners have a good awareness of the project's challenges, the learning they have taken from the challenges, and there is a will to act on the learning. The reflections on pages 22-23 provide a good summary of the key points of learning that can be further summarised as:

- Adequate time to develop projects in the early stages is important for enabling consultation with project beneficiaries and setting realistic targets for participation.
- High ambitions are a good thing but the capacity to adapt when circumstances restrict the ability to meet ambitions is important.
- A key asset for partnership working in this way are active and supportive partners who were able to acknowledge difficulties and revised project activities to meet overall project aims.



Recommendations

Partners may wish to consider the following recommendations which come from the reflections of the evaluator and her observations of the project's successes and potential for further development.

If the Thriving Communities in Dorset project is considered as a pilot, it has shown there is potential for this way of working in a cross-sector partnership to bear fruit. The project has demonstrated there is a need which it can fulfil in developing the infrastructure, communication and information sharing needed for effective social prescribing. This project has made a good start, but there is great potential for more work to maximise the benefits of social prescribing for arts and nature-based activities for people in Dorset. Partners could consider seeking further funding to continue expanding the strands of work initiated by the Thriving Communities in Dorset project.

The concept of Nature Buddies is a good one and the evaluation evidence shows that Nature Buddies partnerships contribute to the wellbeing of participants and volunteers. There are several ways that Nature Buddies could be developed further. One of the strengths of Nature Buddies is that each budding relationship has adapted the concept to their own circumstances to accommodate the needs of participants and the assets they have available to them such as their local outdoor spaces and places to visit, volunteer's and participant's knowledge of the local area, the buddies' capacity or wish to travel further afield. Feedback about the Nature Journal shows that it should be reviewed with perhaps a Nature Buddies 'lite' version for people whose motivations don't include completing written journals. Developing how Nature Buddies is introduced to future participants and volunteers could be more clearly presented as a range of options with choices about which elements of the scheme people engage with.

Whilst the steering group partners were fully engaged in evaluating their work and clearly intend to utilise their learning, there are some improvements to evaluation processes that could be considered for future work. It was not the intention of the partnership to confirm the evaluation commission some months after project delivery started, but this did mean opportunities for planning the evaluation and gathering data in the early stages were not maximised. Some difficulty was encountered with a project partner (not a steering group partner) not being willing to collaborate with the evaluator to ensure that training feedback met the information needs of all partners. Clearer communication and agreement about partners' evaluation expectations could be considered in future partnership working.

Conclusions

Thriving Communities in Dorset was an ambitious project that aimed to develop both the infrastructure of social prescribing across Dorset and Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole local authority areas, and the provision of nature, arts and wellbeing activities suitable for social prescribing. The project did not reach this ambition in terms of meeting target participation numbers but, nevertheless, has contributed well to the overall aims and intended outcomes. Reasons for not achieving the anticipated reach were primarily due to the ongoing effects of the pandemic on health and VCSE organisations. Partners' reflections included that more time to develop partnerships and project plans in the funding application phase may have led to more realistic target engagement numbers and more consultation with the sector. Partners were proud of how they adapted the project activities to accommodate the difficulties encountered whilst remaining focused on the original intentions of the project.

A notable success of the project has been the strength of partnership working, both between the four steering group partners and with other partner organisations in the health and VCSE sector.

The Nature Buddies element of the project was effective at supporting the wellbeing of participants and gave volunteers a sense of satisfaction through contributing to their communities and helping others. The concept of Nature Buddies was adapted to suit different participants' needs. A recommendation of the evaluation is that further development of Nature Buddies emphasises the flexibility of Nature Buddies relationships and activities when recruiting participants.

There are several ways that the impact of project activities are being sustained beyond the time-limited funding period (up to June 2022). Organisations that have received Nature, Art and Wellbeing Community Fund grants are continuing with their projects (some up to March 2023). Arts and nature-based activities will continue to be updated on the Help and Kindness web resource. Existing Nature Buddies relationships will continue to be supported through Age UK into 2023. The evaluation evidence and the learning from the Nature Buddies element of Thriving Communities in Dorset will help to refine this strand of work and support Stepping Into Nature to seek funding for a longer timeframe. The steering group partners have found that the cross-sector partnership developed through this project to be extremely fruitful and there is strong desire for further work together that will utilise their learning to continue supporting social prescribing in Dorset.

References

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2021) *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. London: Sage.

National Academy for Social Prescribing (2021) *Thriving Communities Fund*. Available at: <https://socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/thriving-communities/thriving-communities-fund/> (Accessed: 18 August 2021).

Appendices

Appendix 1: Partner organisations

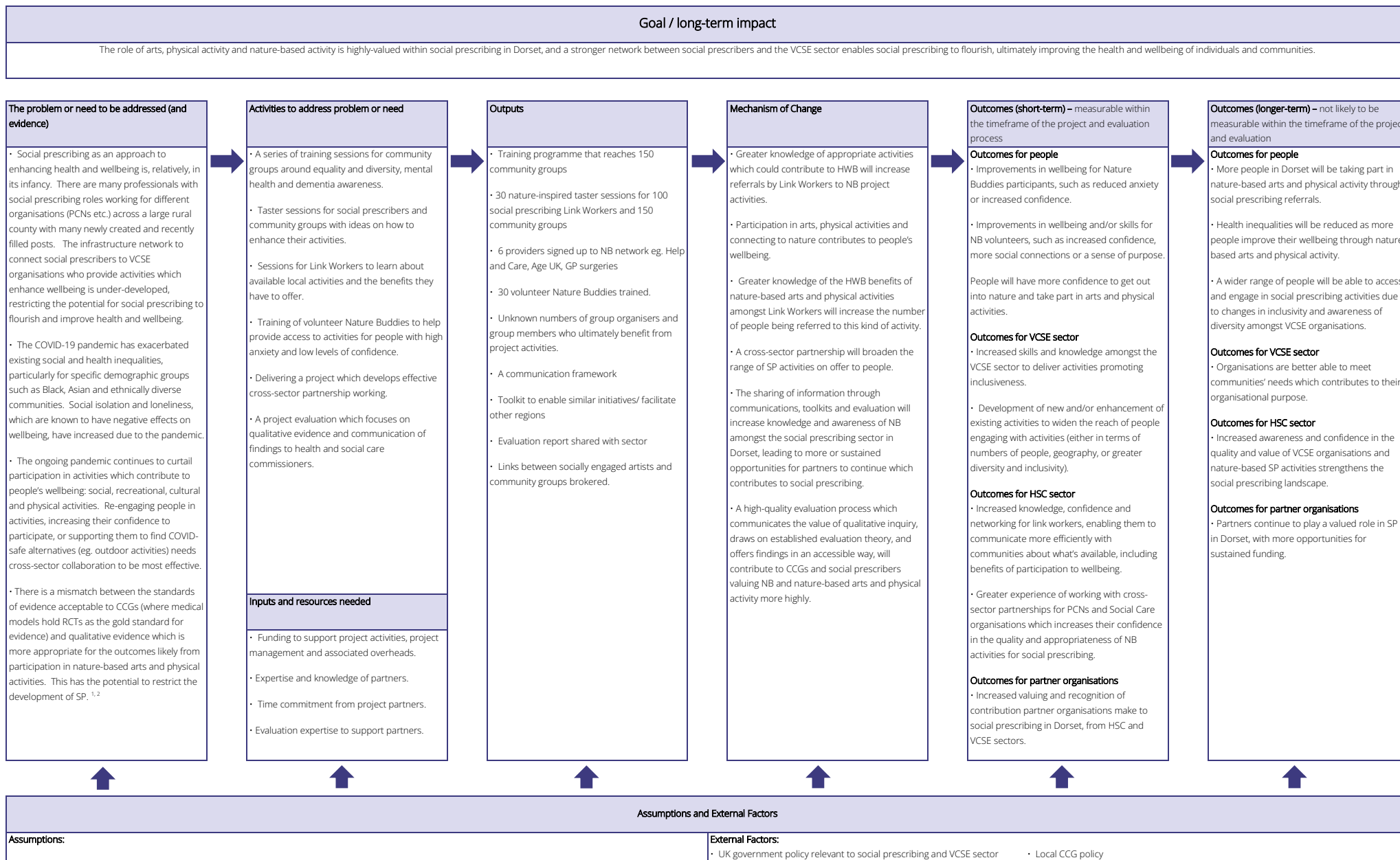
The Arts Development Company (TADC) are a Social Enterprise and Community Interest Company, committed to supporting groups and communities to action creative solutions for social change. They do this through: commissioning new arts events and experiences; exploring and sharing innovative ways to fund arts and culture in the UK; connecting arts and culture with business, tourism, health and environment sectors; supporting the development of the arts and culture sector through networks, resources and mentoring; sharing experiences and expertise to develop new arts development companies in the UK; and advocating for the impact and value of arts and culture, both in Dorset and nationally.

Help and Care is a registered charity that works with older people, carers and communities to live the life they choose. In 2019 they were awarded the non-clinical Health Coaching and Social Prescribing NHS contract by Dorset CCG in partnership with Dorset Mental Health Forum and Dorset Healthcare.

Stepping into Nature is a project led by Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Partnership (funded by the National Community Lottery Fund) which uses Dorset's natural and cultural landscape to provide activities and sensory rich places for older adults, including those living with long term health conditions, such as dementia, and their care partners. Stepping into Nature offers nature-themed activities – both indoors and out – to help people find new places to go, learn new skills and meet like-minded people.

Active Dorset work with partners through a system change approach so increased numbers of people are supported to become more physically active. They are one of 43 Active Partnerships across England and work collaboratively to create the conditions for an active nation and use the power of sport and physical activity to transform lives.

Appendix 2: Theory of Change



Appendix 3: Nature, Art and Wellbeing Community Fund successful applicants

Project	Organisation	Location
Nordic walking for those affected by cancer	Axminster and Lyme Cancer Support	West Dorset
Westhaven Community Garden	Westhaven House	Weymouth
Learn About Plants Through Art	Bournemouth East Allotment Society	Bournemouth
The Cowshed Goes Wild	Bridport Health and Wellbeing Champions	Bridport
Back to Nature well-being group	The Bus Shelter Dorset	Weymouth
Never Enough Nature	Merley Nature Group	BCP
Creating a Wellbeing Assessment Tool for 'Big Butterfly Count'	Butterfly Conservation	Dorset-wide
Explore: A Sense of Nature	Dorset Blind Association	Weymouth and across Dorset / BCP
Park Yoga	The Parks Foundation	Bournemouth & Christchurch
Hands Together	CoCreate Dorset CIC	Weymouth
Outdoor Peer Support	Mental Health North Dorset Help and Peer Support	North Dorset
Wild Writing for Wellbeing	ArtfulScribe	Purbeck, Hengistbury Head, Cerne, Lulworth
Outdoor Theatre Centre	The Bourne Foundation	East Howe, BCP
Lodmoor Green Gym restoration	Weymouth Town Council	Weymouth
Walking into Wellness	Nature Connects	Hengistbury Head, Boscombe Shelly Park area
Bib The Bike scheme	Blackmore Vale Medical Practice	Sturminster Newton
Wild Brownsea, Shore Rangers	Oceans to Earth CIC	Brownsea Island, Poole Harbour
Sensory equipment for Community Woodland	Weymouth Town Council	Westham
Walk of the Dandelion – taking hopeful steps forward	Luke Brown Dance	Blandford Forum to Sturminster Newton
The Green Space project	Lantern Community	BCP
Mindfulness in Nature	The Parks Foundation	Boscombe
Our Inclusive Garden	Affinity Trust	Sturminster Newton
Heart of Stone community play Tour project legacy podcasts	Sarah Acton	Portland and Dorset
Art Therapy Classes	Dorchester Arts	Dorchester
Creative Play	The Alcohol Education Trust	Poundbury
The 5 ways to wellbeing – Connect, Listen, Active, Notice and learn	Highcliffe Medical Centre	Christchurch