



Thriving Communities in Dorset

Evaluation Summary

The Arts Development Company
Stepping Into Nature (Dorset AONB)
Active Dorset
Help and Care

About Thriving Communities in Dorset

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, managed by Arts Council England (ACE) and the National Academy for Social Prescribing (NASP), which aimed to support voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise projects to improve and increase the range and reach of social prescribing community activities – especially for people most impacted by COVID-19 and health inequalities.

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. TADC led on the day-to-day project co-ordination. A wider range of partner organisations engaged with the project in different ways.

There were four key strands of activity planned from the outset:

- 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.

Nature Buddies was the delivery 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. 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. They did this through engaging partner organisations who already recruited and supported volunteers. Volunteers were paired with their 'buddy' and offered support 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 to help them think about how nature helps their wellbeing.

In contrast, all other project strands aimed to support the infrastructure of social prescribing. A series of free online training sessions for VCSE organisations were offered in Mental Health Awareness (delivered by Dorset MIND) and Diversity and Inclusion (delivered by Dorset Race Equality Council). Taster sessions offered opportunities for social prescribers to understand more about the benefits of arts and nature-based activities and experience activities for themselves. Partnership development involved the four steering group partners working together to implement the project and building relationships with health, social care and VCSE organisations.

In addition, the Nature, Art and Wellbeing Community Fund was a further project strand that developed as a response to challenges encountered during project delivery. 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.

About the evaluation

The steering group partners commissioned an evaluation specialist to support the project evaluation. This short evaluation summary describes the main points from a longer evaluation report. A collaborative approach to evaluation involved partners contributing to the evaluation design, data gathering and reporting, although the evaluator co-ordinated the evaluation and authored reports. Data gathered that was considered in the evaluation includes interviews with Nature Buddies participants, volunteers and partners; online questionnaires; Nature, Art and Wellbeing application forms; and notes of steering group partners' meetings and reflective evaluation meetings. The evaluation sought to explore four evaluation questions discussed in the summary of evaluation findings that follows.

A summary of what the evaluation found

To what extent has the project delivered the planned outputs?

The numbers of people participating and engaging with the project were significantly fewer than targets set at the start of the project, primarily due to difficulties created by the ongoing effects of 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.

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 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.

Key outputs and engagement numbers were:

Nature Buddies: 6 participants, 6 volunteers and one partner VCSE organisation

Taster Sessions: 5 taster sessions engaging 32 individuals representing 8 NHS healthcare organisations and 14 local authority or VCSE organisations

Training Sessions: 20 sessions with 95 participants

Partnerships: 6 health, social care and VCSE organisations engaging in project meetings (in addition to 4 steering group partners) and 29 social prescribers / organisations contributing to baseline questionnaire

Nature, Art and Wellbeing Community Fund: 23 projects/organisations funded with an anticipated 8,372 beneficiaries

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 commissioned by ACE and NASP. 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 and the consequential changes to evaluation plans, a close examination of the project against every aspect of the initial Theory of Change is not worthwhile. 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.

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.

The contributions to the evaluation from the Nature Buddies participants and volunteers show that intended outcomes for individuals were met. 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 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 the timescale of projects continuing delivery into 2023 means that it is not possible to consider the achievement of NAW-funded projects in this evaluation.

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).

The evaluation was only able to make a limited assessment of the intended outcomes for the VCSE sector regarding the impact of the training due to very low response rates to feedback questionnaire. Whilst feedback about the training that was received was good and showed some increase in skills and knowledge for participants, the low response rates mean that it is not possible to understand the effect of the training across the project.

The partnership with Age UK successfully involved a wider reach of people who may not have been attracted to their existing befriending scheme as volunteers or participants.

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 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 provided 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 social prescribers 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.

Outcomes for partner organisations

- 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 was 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, even though 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?

Covid recovery was 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. A summary of the key points of learning includes:

- 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, but the capacity to adapt when circumstances restrict the ability to meet ambitions is important.
- A key asset for partnership working are active and supportive partners who were able to acknowledge difficulties and revised project activities to meet overall project aims.

Conclusions and Next Steps

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.

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