

St Nicks' Ecotherapy

Impact Report May 2021 - May 2022



Contents

“

It helps me on many levels, whilst making me feel like I can contribute, have purpose, help the planet and feel more connected to people, my community in York and environment more widely.”

”



Intro: Nature-Based Wellbeing Manager	4
Case study: Terry*	5
Meet the team	6
Our aims	7
Our Impact	8
External evaluation	9
Case study: Hannah*	10
Programme design	13
Case study: Emma	15
Community links	16
Financial statement	16
Case study: Oliver*	17
Poems by Ecotherapy participants	18

Intro: Nature-Based Wellbeing Manager

Thank you for taking the time to read this report. I had the huge privilege of taking up post as the Nature-Based Wellbeing Manager at St Nicks at the beginning of 2022.

As soon as I arrived in this most magical of spaces, I could feel that special things were happening here. Through the Ecotherapy Programme, funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, we are helping people from all walks of life to discover nature, improve or steady their mental health, and sustain friendships. Often participants will be building resilience and confidence, learning new skills and contributing to the guardianship of our green spaces.



It is important to acknowledge the change of management and leadership that has happened within the Ecotherapy programme and wider across St Nicks this year. This could have posed a risk for the stability of the programme and its participants but instead, independent research showed us that this was not the case. During a major survey of participants, only two referred to the upheaval and both in a positive way: *"It's a lovely place to come... Even with major staff changes which were heart breaking. The new staff have worked hard to support me."* and *"It's felt largely seamless"*. [CERT report]. This is a testament to the outstanding foundations built by our predecessors and a credit to new team members who have committed themselves to the selfless ethos of St Nicks.

Meeting in the outdoors became the safest way to conduct activity across society as Covid restrictions began to lift throughout the year. This suits Ecotherapy activity perfectly where a good day is one spent alongside nature. For many participants, our sessions were the first public activities they returned to. For some, it remains the major fixture in their week and has been described to me on more than one occasion as "a lifeline".

I have been humbled to witness the good that the Ecotherapy programme achieves. Every day brings progress, health, connection, triumph and creativity. So, thank you. Thank you to our Ecotherapy members and participants, to the incredibly dedicated St Nicks team, our partners, our local community and to our funders. This is a vital programme that has never been more needed and you all make it possible.

Jo Young

Case study: Terry*



“Coming to the groups helps me with everyday life and it's nice to go somewhere where you can feel a sense of normality. It's a safe place and flexible.”

After the loss of my parent, I found it very difficult dealing with the grief and became depressed. My NHS link worker suggested joining up as a volunteer on the outdoor sessions at St Nicks. I really enjoyed the outdoor volunteer sessions and then later I joined the ecotherapy groups, and I've been a regular ever since.

Coming to the groups helps me with everyday life and it's nice to go somewhere where you can feel a sense of normality. It's a safe place and flexible. Staff are welcoming, respectful and understanding. At times I've felt really isolated, so it's been nice to be a part of a group and has helped my independence too. The staff work with you to find a group which works best for every individual.

During the first covid lockdown the ecotherapy staff loaned me an ipad which helped me to connect to the outside world and reduced my isolation. I'm also able to get support and extra help if I need it. Jo recently helped me to get my free prescriptions sorted out, which was a relief. Having been to other mental health facilities, it can be very target driven but St Nicks isn't like that, they are very supportive and have a good understanding of mental health.

* participant's name has been changed to protect their identity

Meet the team



Jo: I've been the Nature-Based Wellbeing Manager since March 2022. I co-ordinate the Ecotherapy programme along with other nature connectedness activity. My passions are poetry, reading, walking and exploring – all perfect for St Nicks.

Eleanor: I am an Ecotherapy Mentor within the team supporting groups and individuals with their mental well-being using nature connectedness. I offer one-to-one support when things are difficult for participants with their mental health. I love nature and outdoor pursuits and feel proud to work at St Nicks.

Rachel: My role as Ecotherapy Assistant is varied. Some days I can be out all day on site with the ecotherapy groups at the allotment, in the garden or on the nature reserve. Other days I'm in the office, but what I love is the variety of nature centred ecotherapy activities that we offer.

Freya: Much of my work at St Nicks is running environmental schemes and educational activities for children. In addition to this I also facilitate the Bearing Fruit ecotherapy group where participants use and learn traditional and modern skills to help St Nicks preserve its heritage orchards and other key habitat areas.

Griselda: As the Ecotherapy Creative Writing/Nature Arts tutor I enjoy promoting the benefits of the nature reserve, which include taking notice, giving and connecting. Participants are encouraged to discover through drawing, writing and creativity, exploring green spaces and connecting to the world around them.

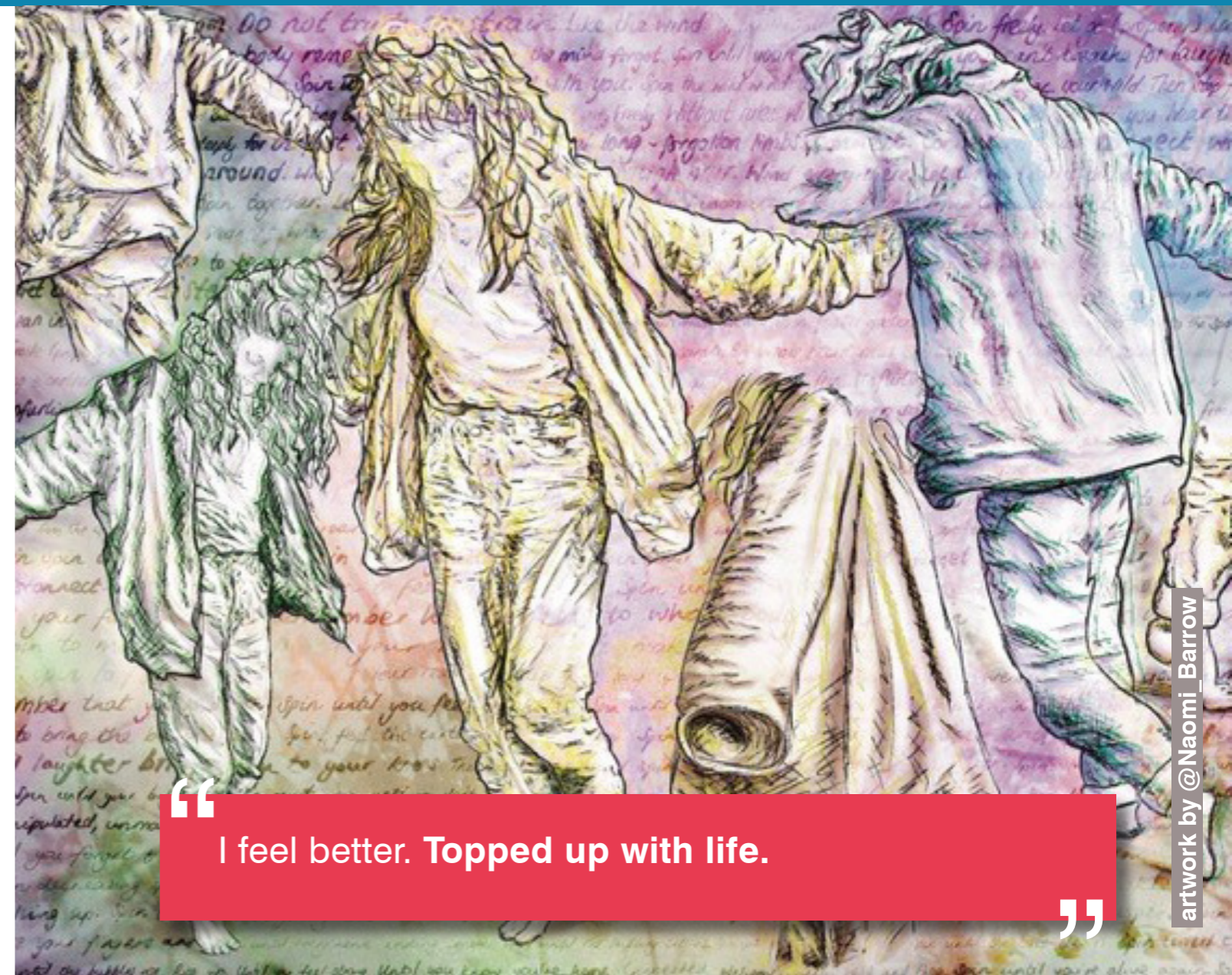
Phil: I run Discover Nature sessions at St Nicks. We explore the wildlife on site, with topics including insect identification, bird territory mapping and folklore. I love St Nicks as it's a constant source of surprise – you never know what you'll encounter!

William: I lead the Ecotherapy Book Club. Each week, I bring an extract from a nature-related book and a poem to share. We read, talk and walk together around the meadow and through the woods of our wonderful reserve.

Wolf: I'm owner of Forest Quest and instructor of the St Nicks' Bushcraft Course. I love sharing my enthusiasm and knowledge with the Course's participants. It provides them with the skills to develop a lasting appreciation of the natural environment and a great sense of wellbeing.

Angela: I run sessions developing basket making skills using willow and natural materials. In true craft tradition, skills are practiced and repeated, building confidence and ability. I aim to facilitate a companionable, mindful, and relaxed space where people and their creativity can flourish. St Nicks never fails to be warm and welcoming, embracing and promoting the wellbeing created by the connection between people and nature.

Our aims



“ I feel better. Topped up with life. ”

artwork by @Naomi_Barrow

The aims of the Ecotherapy Programme are to increase mental wellbeing through connection with nature and with others and to increase feelings of personal development and growth through group sessions and mentoring in nature. We also aim to help ease social isolation, strengthen communities, teach nature-based skills and knowledge, and encourage physical exercise in green spaces.

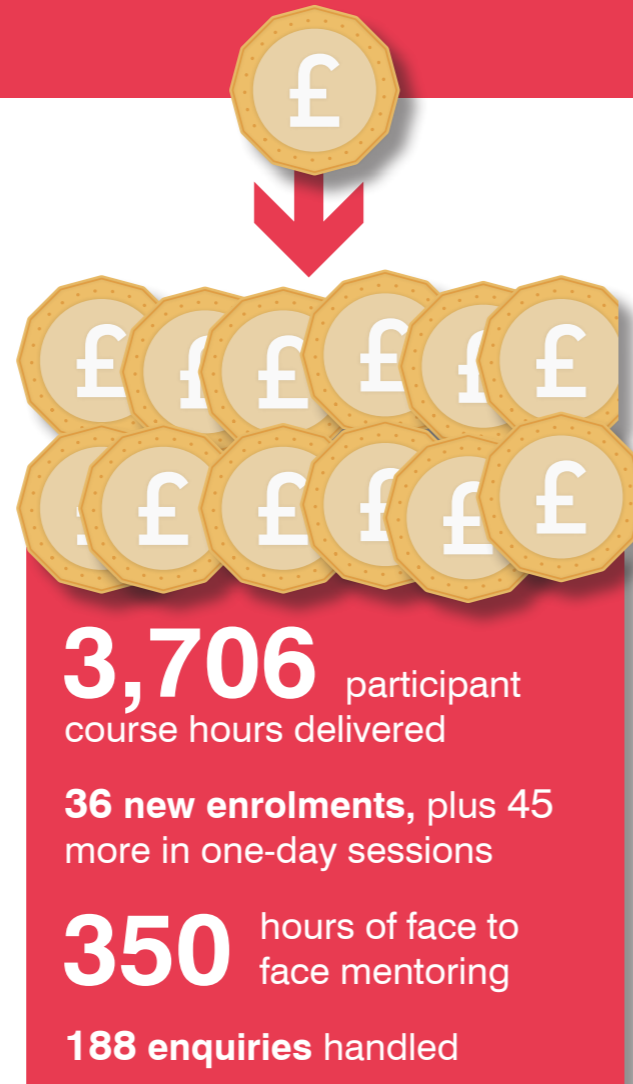
It's a lot to aim for! But we have the best that nature and community can offer here at St Nicks. Our environment and our people help us to achieve inspiring results.

Our impact

After the wholesale changes encountered as Covid restrictions were eased, we wanted to measure how Ecotherapy had adapted to the needs of our participants and the changes this brought on everyone's lives.

We applied the rigorously-measured, externally-validated Social Value Engine to the entire ecotherapy project this year and discovered that:

For every £1 invested
in the programme,
£9.39 social value
is returned.



CEO Summary – Ellie Stead

The outcomes of this vital programme have been evident to me since I took up post in April 2022. The companionship, mental health support and community the groups generate is far more than the sum of its parts. This is very clear from the startling amount of social value returned for each pound invested by funders; a figure which has risen as face-to-face activities have resumed and a groundswell of complex individual and community needs have been addressed by this small team.

The National Lottery-funded ecotherapy programme had an original target to enrol 225 participants over the 5 year period and currently sits at 174 (excluding one-day courses). This running total is despite the complexities of enrolling new members during Covid and an enrolment pause last winter due to every group being over-subscribed. The team are constantly adjusting the programme design to broaden the scope while maintaining stability for existing members; they have innovated around course times and sizes, collaborated across St Nicks and with other organisations and are set to meet that final target.

More important than targets are the tangible, positive steps group members, staff members and participants have made throughout the year: large, small and connected with nature. In the words of one of our friends... "it's about being a part of something greater, something good".

External evaluation

In addition to the quantitative analysis, the independent evaluation and research team from Converge (CERT) in partnership with the University of York St John conducted in-depth qualitative and quantitative study of the programme. The evidence from CERT is used throughout this report and will be used to evidence future reports and bids. These are results of our participant survey by CERT:



97% notice nature more and seek it out more as a result of attending ecotherapy sessions

69% say Ecotherapy has made them more confident in learning new skills

83% say that attending St Nicks Ecotherapy makes them feel less lonely

72% felt more positive and found it easier to talk to people after attending St Nicks

83% say St Nicks has helped them with the stress of life

66% feel useful and that they are making a positive contribution while at St Nicks

Case study: Hannah*

St Nicks has given me more than I can probably put into words. It's encouraged me to meet and engage with others. To pick up a pen (or keyboard!) and write; something that's become vital for maintaining mental health. To go outside more, learn about birds (I've gone from knowing around two or three to having 22 species that I can identify in my garden alone). To look and listen more closely. To start reading books about nature, or nature-based biographies. To engage with nature videos during lockdown. To go and learn things and look things up. To discover a plant nursery not far from my house, and to get to know some of the staff there. To nature journal. To learn to love every weather and every season.

The impact is far, far greater than just coming to the reserve.

St Nicks has always been welcoming and helpful but never more so than the last year or so. I developed an inability to leave the house due to various mental health bits and bobs, and a very recent, late, autism diagnosis that I was mentally processing. I still struggle to get out, but I can get to a couple more places now thanks to building up the confidence to be out and about through coming to the reserve weekly. St Nicks is safe. It's a place I can come to on rubbishy days where everything feels bleak and I'm physically unable to settle, and it's a place I can come to when I'm doing a bit better. However I am, I can engage as much as I want, or am able to, and that's okay. The mask can be dropped.

There's a real community. It's the first place in a really long time where I realised that people notice if I'm there or not. Not only do they notice, but they care. They're pleased to see you - and that's a very strange thing to get used to when not used to it. It feels almost uncomfortable at first.



Connection is vital for pretty much anyone to differing degrees. But when you live alone, don't have family nearby, work from home, struggle with friendships, struggle to leave the house, and are autistic, it can be something that's incredibly hard to achieve. Being part of the community at St Nicks is connection. But it also provides connections far beyond the gates. Every week my Grandad (who lives hours and hours away



“**St Nicks has given me more than I can probably put into words. It's encouraged me to meet and engage with others...**”

and I don't see as often as I'd like due to both of our health issues) asks me about St Nicks - what I've done there, what I've seen, and I tell him about it, sometimes with pictures. Then he tells me about his recent walks. We discuss plants, birds, and other nature-related things, and it's built up an even stronger, special, connection between us. Posting about St Nicks, or nature more generally, online has connected me to others with shared interests. It helps the place I live to feel more like a home, because I'm more settled. I've even discussed willow bird feeders with a neighbour I rarely speak to who spotted it in my garden.

I can honestly say that without coming to St Nicks, my current involvement with services would be far, far, far greater than it is. Coming to the site is a reason to eat, get up, get dressed, wash your hair, clean your teeth, get some sleep, etc. Sometimes it feels like the hours spent there are a “top up” to get through the rest of the week.

Overall, it's a wonderfully kind, caring place with a bunch of encouraging, creative, people. People who genuinely value one another and build each other up. There is time and space to 'be' when needed, time and space to talk when needed, time and space to learn and grow (and we all need that!). We might all have our own challenges - but to an extent that doesn't matter because for once we're not being squished into a box we've never fit in, told that we're not magically 'better' magically quickly, shamed for struggling, or pathologised. Instead, we're built up, encouraged, checked in on, and allowed to go at our own pace. We're just us. Accepted at face value and never rushed, shamed, or another item on someone's tick list.

It's a haven in the midst of an otherwise often-chaotic life and although it's a cliché, I genuinely don't know where I'd be without it.

* participant's name has been changed to protect their identity

Programme design

The project design has developed over the last four years and focuses on the feedback of participants in a continuous loop of co-design.

There are three main aspects to the Ecotherapy Programme at St Nicks; year-round, continuous groups which have no fixed duration for participants, seasonal courses which run for a set-number of weeks, and a supportive mentoring provision alongside the groups and courses. Sessions take place mostly in the Environment Centre Garden and on the Nature Reserve, always taking the opportunity for a walk to promote physical as well as mental wellbeing.

Participants and group members join St Nicks Ecotherapy through a range of referral routes from primary and secondary healthcare Social Prescribers, other VCSE groups, some self-referral and through our community partnerships. It is important to note that most of St Nicks ecotherapy courses are frequently full, with waiting lists and that in this reporting year, the demand for one-to-one mentoring has been stretched to capacity. The services have never been more needed or more called upon as the reverberations of global and local events make themselves felt while pressure on NHS and community services intensifies.

“
Brilliant, don't think I've ever known a referral be processed so fast! Thank you!
”
York Social Prescriber

Words from the Wild Book Club

This is a reading group which begins with a walk around the reserve, followed by collective reading and discussion of extracts from nature-related writing. Whilst exploring many contemporary books, the group also handrails the writing of 18th century naturalist Gilbert White which has provided a centuries-long view of the wonders of nature.

Creative Writing & Nature Art

Led by an expert, members of this group explore their connections with nature through drawing, writing, poetry and journaling. Sometimes sharing their work and sometimes keeping it private, this is a nurturing and non-judgemental group which results in some stunning work.

“The difference it makes is astronomical. Getting out the house can be tough - but it's one of the most accessible, inclusive places I know.”

“
The sun made me smile. The sunshine, connecting with people, discovering small things/ leaf skeletons, seeing birds on the branches – **it's hope!**
”

Plot to Plate

The only group which currently does not run from our Nature Reserve and Environment Centre. Teaching gardening skills, sharing resilience with nature, this group also provides themselves and others at St Nicks with wonderful fresh produce from our allotment at another site.

Year round activities

Bearing Fruit

A group where attendees learn conservation skills on the St Nicks nature reserve, such as heritage orchard-care, scything, sowing and collecting seeds; and some litter picking!

Discover Nature

Weekly sessions are themed around an individual species or habitat and enable members to become experts in bird-calls, grass species, insect habits or natural territories. Each member can explore their own interests and contribute their own knowledge whilst being led by an expert naturalist.



Seasonal groups

Seasonal Groups this year have included learning survival and resourcefulness in Bushcraft sessions, learning a mindful and heritage craft in Willow Weaving lessons, contributing to the beauty of the Environment Centre's garden in Get Gardening groups, and going deep into creativity around the natural world in a John Ruskin-inspired Grow at Home course which was supported by a wrap-around grant from the Guild of St George.

“Bushcraft has been life changing. I notice nature so much more now and am significantly better for it!”

Case study: Emma

“ They do not pressure people and set targets... They understand how hard it is for people with long term issues that cannot be cured, they offer stability and support. ”



Mentoring

Many group members take the opportunity to benefit from one-to-one mentoring in between sessions. This is on offer to all who are enrolled on St Nicks ecotherapy and can take the form of counselling, advocacy, signposting, quiet observation of nature, listening to music or a complete mixture. This predominantly takes place in person – on a safe walk, in a quiet corner of the garden or in the comfortable eco-chalet and always looking for those connections with nature. For many, this non-judgemental, person-centred approach is a lifeline. Around a third of ecotherapy participants regularly take mentoring sessions.

In addition, as the CERT report notes:

“Where a participant has missed sessions, staff often contact them to check they are OK and to see if there is anything they can support them with. We asked how important this is to participants. Rather than finding it intrusive, the vast majority of respondents found this to be very important.”

Spotlight on inclusivity

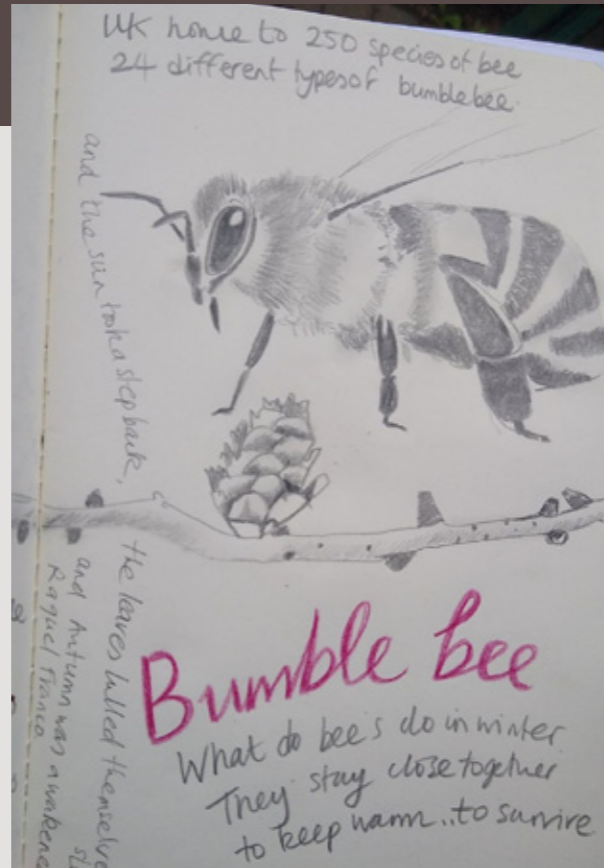
One new member who joined us is deaf and was only able to participate with interpreter assistance. Facilitating this level of inclusivity was very important and this was a learning moment for us at St Nicks. We were able to make the required adjustments and bring in an interpreter and both the participant and interpreter were key members of the group throughout. We now factor in a contingency for this provision and hope to host some basic BSL training for our staff members.

I took part in the 12 weeks St Nicks ecotherapy bushcraft course in summer 2021 having moved back to York in spring 2021 following spending 12 months of lockdown with my Mum who lives alone. Having previously lived in house shares, I started renting a ground floor flat alone and had no plans to make it ‘green’. With the encouragement of my bushcraft colleagues and feeling inspired by the course I was donated several plant pots and even a few plants (it’s amazing what people give when you ask!), which I’ve added to for my flat’s designated patch of outdoor space. I bought some houseplants too.

Looking after my plants and seeing them grow, flower, and change over the seasons (it’s now summer 2022 as I write) boosts my mental health and I now find myself buying bigger pots for them and adding new plants to the collection. If I hadn’t been on the bushcraft course, I don’t think I would have been motivated to get any plants at all.

Community links

St Nicks continues its strong partnership links with the NHS Discovery Hub and Converge, drawing expertise from their tutors as sessional staff and their university researchers for independent evaluation. Working in partnership with Humber and North Yorkshire Health and Care Trust, St Nicks are contributing learning to their Test and Learn Green Social Prescribing site and have become a member of York's VCSE Assembly to share lessons, ideas and expertise. St Nicks Nature-Based Wellbeing is forging community links with other social prescribing organisations including renewing the links with Foss Park Hospital and exploring partnership possibilities with York Archaeological Trust.



Financial statement

Income received from the National Lottery Community Fund in financial year 2021-2022 was **£55,721**.

Expenditure was **£61,789**. This £6,068 overspend is largely accounted for by staffing costs generated by the increase in one-to-one mentoring required as group members returned to physical meetings.

Uplift from other small grants is, or has been secured, to ensure that the unexpectedly high need for mentoring support can continue to complement the Ecotherapy programme in Year 5.



by @Naomi_Barrow

Case study: Oliver*



by @Naomi_Barrow

Shortly after rejecting and trying to end the course of my life I found myself on a 'How to put a c.v. together' programme, aimed at older people. This seemingly ironic brick wall turned out to be a clearing in the woods.

Q. 'What are you really interested in?'

A. 'Er....rocks, water and trees'

And from this tiny answer I was guided to place on the Ecotherapy programme at St Nicks.

St Nicks is a bio-diverse wonderland of life regenerating from a base of landfill-unloved, discarded and buried beneath layers of clay. And yet it's not just, or not even, the place itself that can bring such hope and inspiration. Far more it's the people I have met, talked with and worked alongside.

It is a therapeutic and a learning community, where welcoming and supportive groups engage with whatever commitment is appropriate to each person on any given day. There is also an ever-present but subtle professional hand to help guide through individual unease or crisis. St Nicks is not a 'fluffy' place, it's as much about the storm as the shelter, about slamming a spade into mute clay and stone, but also of finding your voice. Most of all, for me, it's about being a part of something greater, something good.

* participant's name has been changed to protect their identity

Poems by Ecotherapy participants

Bearing Fruit

by Brinley Price

Fruit trees need nursing,
The clicking of metal blades
Correcting misgrowth.

We stand on compost,
Its heaps unstable platforms,
And wield our loppers.

New to pruning trees,
Over-enthusiastic,
We reach for the sky.

The topmost branches
Are safe from our stretching arms-
Our loppers snap air.

Nearer to the ground
The broken or mal-formed limbs
Are amputated.

A soft snapping sound
Then twigs plunge through the cold air
To merge with the soil.

Later, while we sit,
Our labour's elation past,
Our legs grow heavy.

Car's distant thunder-
Then a robin's bright singing
Evaporates gloom.

After the Storm

by Brinley Price

After this winter gale has loosed its power
So many trees lie fallen in its wake-
And yet we see the snowdrop's little flower
In the retreating tempest fiercely shake,
And this gives hope that trees that still may tower
Will soon be green and gone the cold's dull ache.

The alder's cones lie scattered in the mud;
Two tree trunks smashed through some poor
neighbour's fence,
By blasts brought low; the beck is in full flood
Like feelings of our loss now so immense.
Yet we discover bold and sticky bud
Of lone horse chestnut and our gain we sense.

There from behind a branch a nuthatch peeks
And, playing peek-a-boo, retires from view;
A dray high up a jumpy squirrel seeks
As if escaping from our nosy crew
With our intrusive stares as each one speaks
Excitedly of seeing something new.

Then we return indoors, sit round warm stove,
Drink tea, eat cake and talk of future days
When under leafy canopy we'll rove
And learn a little more of Nature's ways;
Further from when against life's winds we strove,
Now mending, once again our heads we raise.

*"When I were a lad"
Old blackbird said
To new world blackbird, young
"You had to be brave, bold and brilliant
To avoid a farmers' gun."*

*"When I were a lad"
Old blackbird moaned
Whilst new blackbirds hopped around
"We didn't have fancy feeders
Had to peck food out of the ground."*


*"When I were a lad"
Old blackbird huffed
"There weren't new-fangled nest boxes
We had to build our nests ourselves
High enough to avoid foxes."*

*"But when you were a lad"
New-world blackbird replied
"It was a different life
The natural world took care of you
Helped keep the species alive"*

*"But humans took the trees down
Replaced them with concrete towers
And now we're forced to rely on them
They have all the power."*

*"It isn't that we're lazy
Or scared to use our voice
The very simple truth is
We have no other choice."*

@Naomi_Barrow



“The difference it makes is astronomical. Getting out the house can be tough - but it’s one of the most accessible, inclusive places I know.”

“Laughter, words, poetry, fresh air, coloured pencils, drawing outside, shadow dancing, thoughtful tasks, refreshments, noticing nature, sharing, moving, walking, bending, silence, time alone safely and courage”

“It was a real treasure of a time that I had. Learning great skills was one thing, but the opportunity to be absorbed in something so creative in the cocoon of St Nicks woodland was a real tonic for me.”

“My head is filled with a garden now. I’m at peace, as in, I’m noticing things, I’m aware, I’m not just coping. If I know I’m feeling vulnerable or fragile, I’ll just think about that little robin, and it brings me beaming smiles.”

“I use St Nicks to relax before I go to work... keeps me grounded... helps me with stress.”