

Ecotherapy at St Nicks – Final Progress Report



Introduction

Ecotherapy at St Nicks has been utilised by York residents facing mental health challenges for almost a decade. For the last five years it has been made possible by a grant from the National Lottery Reaching Communities Fund. This report will explain what the project has achieved during the final year in receipt of this fund, and also how the project has developed, innovated and progressed over the whole five years.

Friends of St Nicholas Fields (known as St Nicks) has managed and developed a Local Nature Reserve (LNR) on the site of an old landfill site in York for over 20 years. The organisation has its home in the St Nicks Environment Centre, a purpose built centre with gardens, offices, small hall and outbuildings in the middle of the LNR.

Ecotherapy is a term we use to describe a range of supervised groups and activities designed to build nature-connectedness among adults suffering from poor mental health. Research continues to show that nature-connectedness has benefits for both mental and physical health. In 2020, halfway through this five-year project a Natural England report concluded that “*nature connectedness has a positive relationship with people’s eudaimonic wellbeing (the feeling that life is worthwhile)*” and that people with high nature connectedness were 1.7 times more likely to report that their lives felt worthwhile. The widespread growth of social prescribing, and in particular green social prescribing is testament to the outcomes and value of services built around nature-connectedness. St Nicks has been proud to be at the forefront of designing and delivering these innovative interventions.

The Ecotherapy Story

Activities. Ecotherapy at St Nicks has been delivered through a roster of weekly groups, some led by expert tutors with St Nicks Ecotherapy staff in support. Most groups run all year-round with a few being run seasonally. Groups can have up to ten participants in them, typically. Many groups are perennially full with waiting lists. The groups run in 2022-23 were:

Group Name	Details	Led By
Plot to Plate	An allotment group run away from the main site where participants tend a double-plot allotment growing produce and flowers.	Peer-led or supervised by one staff member.
Bearing Fruit	A practical conservation skill group focusing upon traditional natural habitat management caring for our LNR's heritage orchard, wildflower meadow and other species management.	Led by one or two staff members.
Discover Nature	A teaching group about biodiversity, ecology and the natural world on the LNR and beyond. A short learning session in the St Nicks centre is followed by a topically themed walk in nature.	Led by a freelance trained conservation biologist and supported by a staff member
Willow Weaving	Run seasonally outdoors in the St Nicks garden focusing upon this mindful, heritage craft using natural materials.	Led by a freelance Willow Weaving tutor and supported by a staff member.
Creative Writing and Art	Nature writing and art, taking place in the garden and wider LNR, connecting and exploring the natural world through a walk and creativity.	Led by a freelance art tutor and supported by a staff member.
Bushcraft	A seasonal course taking participants through bushcraft and survival skills in the woods, including fire making, water filtration, making cordage and plant identification.	Led by a freelance bushcraft tutor and supported by a staff member.
Words from the Wild	An eco-book group in which participants share readings from nature writing, poetry, articles and the writings of Gilbert White.	Led by a freelance tutor and supported by a staff member.
Ecotherapy at Foss Park	Allotment and craft group for in-patients.	Led by St Nicks staff member.
Wellies and Wheelbarrows	A gardening, craft and woodworking group based in the St Nicks garden conducting practical volunteering tasks.	Peer-led and supported by staff and volunteers.
Grow at Home (co-funded with grant from Guild of St George).	An art, craft and horticulture group based on the ecological studies of John Ruskin.	Tutor, staff and University of York staff- led.
Making Tracks (co-funded with a grant from Natural England).	A pilot group aimed at giving participants the confidence and skills to progress from supervised groups to more independent conservation volunteering around York's wider Green Corridors.	Led by a Green Corridors staff member and volunteers.

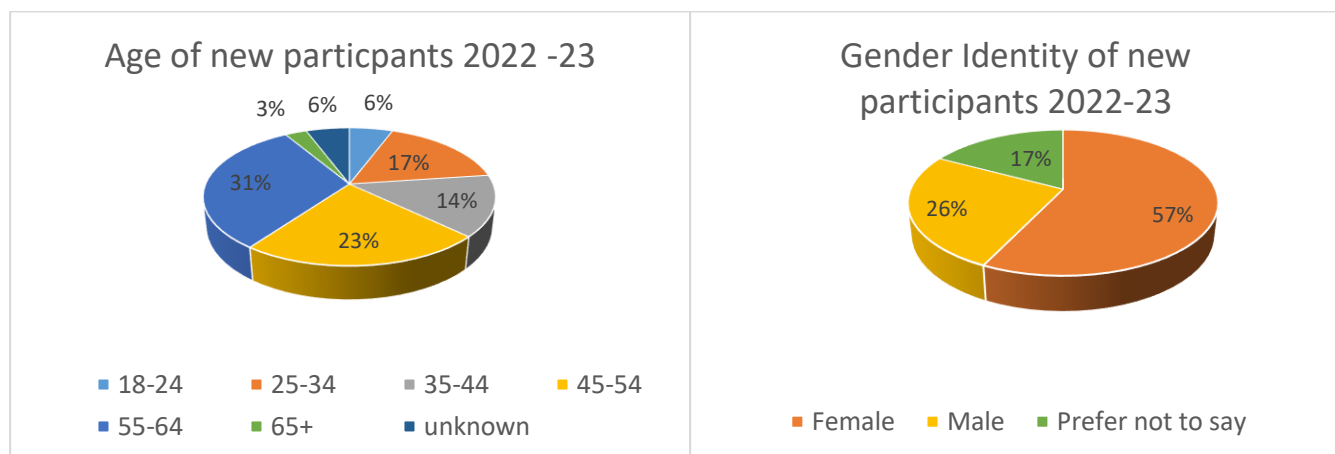
*I'M NOT SURE I'D HAVE FOUND THE
COURAGE TO TRY IF IT HADN'T BEEN
FOR ST NICKS TELLING ME I COULD
DO IT*

Ecotherapy Participant

1:1 Mentoring. In addition to attending the Ecotherapy group sessions, all participants have access to 1:1 mentoring with trained staff. For each person that uses this mentoring opportunity, there are different needs and outcomes. For some it is about goal-setting, for others it may be advocacy, practical support or talking therapy. Not all participants access this, but some use the opportunity often. 1:1 mentoring takes place in a nature-connected way, on a walk, or in the eco-chalet.

Participant data 2022 -2023.

There were 132 initial enquiries and 35 new enrolments during the final year of this project. The demographics of these participants are shown below. Age is calculated at date of enrolment.



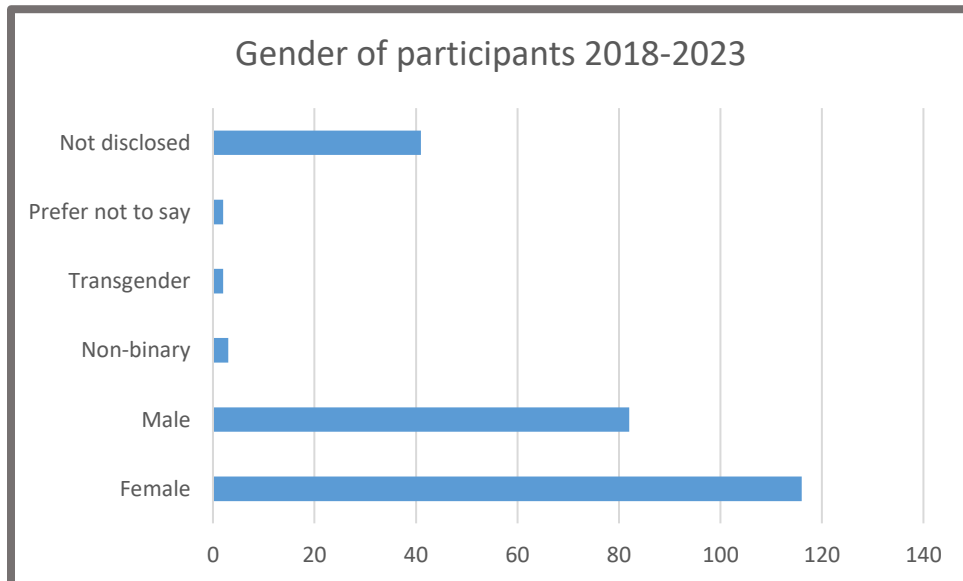
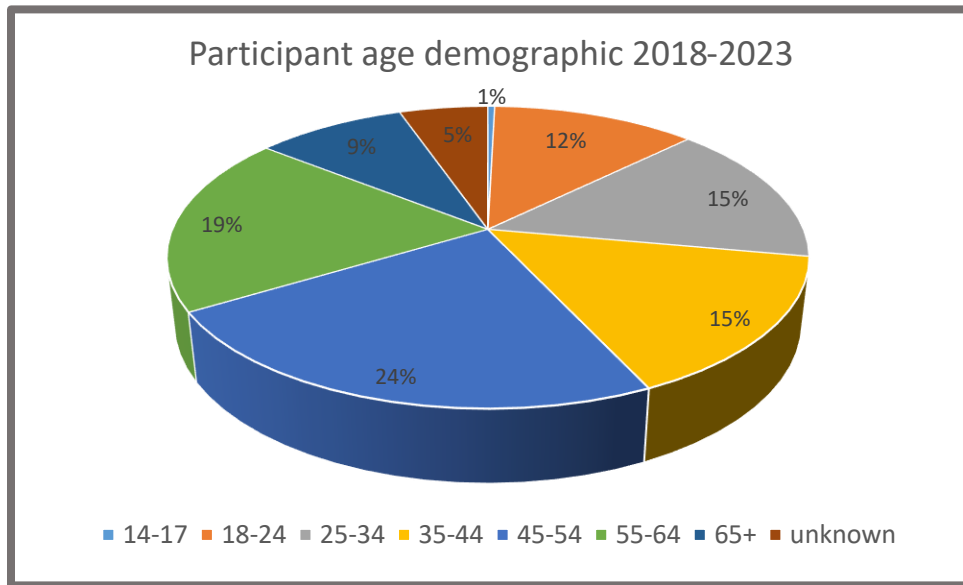
A total of **3,900 participant hours** were delivered across all the weekly groups and **363 hours** of mentoring and initial assessments were conducted on a 1:1 basis in 2022-23.

Participant data 2018-2023.

The five-year Ecotherapy at St Nicks project aimed to help 225 adults experiencing mental health challenges through nature connectedness and mentoring. Over the whole project, Ecotherapy at St Nicks enrolled **244 participants**, exceeding the target by 19, despite a cessation of new enrolments during much of the pandemic. The majority of these adults participated over a number of weeks and months, with several participants maintaining attendance over several years.

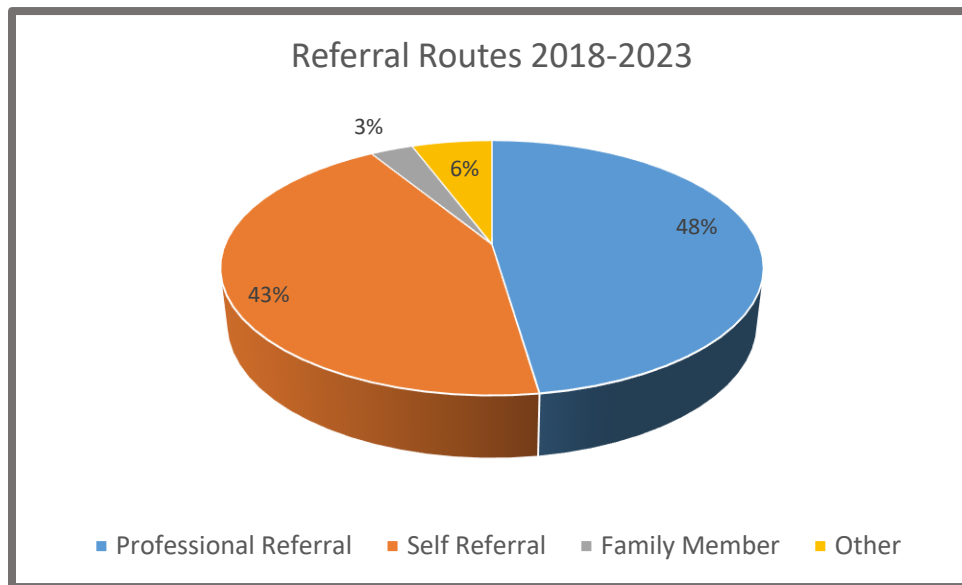
Other data points for the five-year project are as follows:

- **560¹** queries handled in total.
- **2,746** mentoring sessions in total.
- **12,549** participant hours in total.
- **£8.88** of social value returned for every £1 spent on average²



¹ Enquiry figure includes only initial contact. Many enquiries have several follow-on interactions until a participant is fully-enrolled.

² Measured at Year 3 and Year 4 using www.socialvalueengine.com



Annex A shows in detail the agencies sending forward professional referrals or social prescriptions.

Co-production

From the earliest days, participant decision-making and an empowering culture have been key. Choosing themes and topics to study in Discover Nature groups, or selecting books and articles to share in Words from the Wild Book Club have all been participant-led throughout the project, for example.

In this final year of the five-year Reaching Communities funding, this aspect of the Ecotherapy community has developed further. Co-designed drop-in storytelling circles became a regular occurrence. This had the lovely effect of bringing together long-attending participants with newer members across different groups and worked brilliantly to combat social isolation in the aftermath of Covid.

The 'Get Gardening' group, which had been a very active group prior to the pandemic was reformed as 'Wellies and Wheelbarrows' - an informal drop-in for existing participants who wanted to give back by carrying out practical gardening, wood-work, craft and DIY tasks around the garden and redesigning and decorating the eco-chalet. This sharing group has had some wonderful, positive outcomes with participants having free-rein over projects, volunteering their own time. The beautiful wall lettering and the natural dying in-progress shown in photos overleaf are examples of some of the self-started, skill-sharing activities that have taken place.



Participant-led natural dyeing sessions.



Display board crafted by participants.

Progressing to volunteering, peer-leadership, skill-sharing and developing a sense of community belonging have characterised the way in which Ecotherapy at St Nicks has evolved since the full return from the pandemic. Building nature-connectedness together and investing in our surroundings have enabled the weekly groups and mentoring sessions to embed wellness and positive change for participants facing a wide range of mental challenges and illness.

CASE STUDY

I first started attending St Nicks as a participant in two of its Ecotherapy courses. First, the 8-week Bushcraft course and then joining the ongoing Bearing Fruit group on Monday afternoons. I was suffering badly with stress and depression, having become mentally burnt out by a combination of working in an intense and pressured job and continually caring for a sufferer of mental health issues. Having always loved the outdoors and nature these were obvious courses for me to attend; in the early days though it was an effort to attend all bushcraft sessions, and there were occasions where I could not bring myself to attend Bearing Fruit.

Over time, however, things improved for me. The others attending the Bearing Fruit sessions were very welcoming; we all had the unspoken connection of having our own mental health issues, but as I learned quickly this was not the focus. Rather it was about taking an interest in the nature reserve, enjoying the natural world and engaging with it, and escaping from “real-life issues” for a couple of hours. The staff directly running it (Freya and Rachel) as well as the wider St Nick’s staff, were all friendly, caring and “there for you” without being intrusive or overwhelming.

A few months of this achieved a lot for me – a renewed sense of purpose and of belonging somewhere, as well as being less stressed. Plus, it was enjoyable! I gradually wanted to become more involved in St Nicks and what it does, in particular trying to help others gain from it the same as I have done. With Ecotherapy Team support and guidance I took on more general volunteering; this has evolved to the point where I now volunteer 4 days a week – two as a Volunteer Park Ranger and two assisting the Ecotherapy team. This latter includes actually helping to run the Bearing Fruit group where I started out – that seems to have gone down well with the other participants. This is not, of course, a magic answer to all of my issues with life, but it is definitely helping me to make progress. I feel well supported as part of a caring organisation to which I am giving something back, at the same time as trying to draw on my own life experiences to help others deal with theirs.

Ecotherapy Participant

Making a Difference

Evaluation by questionnaire has been done at periodic pulse-points throughout the project and show that, on average by the end of the five-year project;

- **86%** of participants felt less lonely when attending St Nicks.
- **92%** of participants felt more connected or interested in nature.
- **79%** reported improvements to mental wellbeing or less stress.
- **79%** felt they had improved their knowledge or skills.
- **74%** felt they had experienced personal growth as a result of attending St Nicks.

Learning and Changing

Building networks. The Ecotherapy project has benefitted from partnerships and networks throughout its duration. During Year 5 of the project the team continued with, or joined, the York VCSE assembly, the Good Place Network, the People on the Ground Network and the Connecting Our City assembly. Developing and growing close relationships with referral agencies and social prescribing teams has ensured that the project has been able to help hard-to-reach groups including the mentally ill, those awaiting diagnosis and adults with physical health challenges. Using some of the Building Capabilities fund allowed 11 staff members from Ecotherapy and the wider team to learn basic sign language and we welcomed a Deaf participant onto one of our groups for the first time.

Meeting Need. We learned that we needed to provide Ecotherapy opportunities at different times of the week and ran Bushcraft courses in the evening to cater for those in work who could not make it to daytime groups. We will be providing a Friday group in future, as the 3-day weekend that emerged from having a largely part-time staff team was detrimental to some participants, who relied almost solely on St Nicks to provide activity away from their homes. We observed that many referrals were coming to us with multiple diagnoses or were awaiting diagnosis from statutory services for several months. This has been an observation rather than something we have gathered data on, but we feel that we have streamlined our own enrolment processes to accommodate this need in the community.

Covid. We reported on the way in which Ecotherapy at St Nicks adapted and then returned to 'normal' during the pandemic in previous years' reports. However, it is worth noting that the outdoor nature of the activities enabled those who remained vulnerable, or who continued to feel vulnerable, were able to return to regular participation sooner than they may have done for a service led indoors.

Budget

The financial statement for Year 5 of Ecotherapy at St Nicks is as shown in table 1 below.

Ecotherapy	REVENUE		
	BUDGET	ACTUAL	DIFFERENCE
Year 5	£63,998	£64,377	-£379

Table 1

The financial statement across the five years of the project is as shown in table 2 below³.

Ecotherapy	REVENUE		
	BUDGET	ACTUAL	DIFFERENCE
Year 1	£54,374	£51,848	£2,526
Year 2	£54,063	£56,395	-£2,332
Year 3	£58,914	£51,824	£7,090
Year 4	£57,908	£63,671	-£5,763
Year 5	£63,998	£64,377	-£379
Total	£289,257	£288,115	£1,142

Table 2

With permission from the National Lottery Community Fund, this surplus £1,142 could be used to make improvements and enhancements to the Eco-chalet. This chalet is used for mentoring and small group sessions and is being redecorated and redesigned by participants using craft, art, woodworking and fabric dying techniques that they have learned in Ecotherapy sessions.

This five-year grant also included £14,490 of Building Capabilities fund money and this has been spent over the five years as shown at table 3.

Building Capabilities			Capability
	Budget	Actual	
Year 1	£14,490	£3,278	Organisational review, marketing review, strategy sessions.
Year 2		£1,257	Implementation of org strength review and strategy sessions.
Year 3		£157	Lockdown period prevented much expenditure
Year 4		£0	CEO gap and changeover paused expenditure
Year 5		£5,628 £2,680 £1,490	Full redesign and relaunch of website by Seegreen. British Sign Language training for 11 staff members. Membership offer review with Red Pencil consultancy.
Total	£14,490	£14,490	

Table 3

³ Project Year runs 1 May – 30 April and so has always been one month out-of-step with FY reporting.

Reflections and the Future

We know from tracking our attendance that Ecotherapy at St Nicks has never been more needed. Mentoring hours are 50% higher and participant hours have almost doubled since 2018-19. Several of our groups remain full with waiting lists, while referrals continue to come to us every week.

We have also learned through feedback and surveys, that our participants know Ecotherapy at St Nicks is making a difference to their mental and physical wellbeing; bringing them connections with nature that are keeping them well.

We are therefore delighted to have secured funding for a further three years to continue helping our community.

Social prescribing and in particular green social prescribing has the attention of academia, government departments and statutory services across Humber and North Yorkshire. We are very proud and privileged to be part of this conversation, the research and the practice on the ground. Ecotherapy at St Nicks has been part of the vanguard and will continue to provide much needed support to the community, while helping and hoping to embed green social prescribing and community support into mainstream commissioned services.



I FEEL AS IF I ACHIEVE SOMETHING EVERY WEEK...IT HAS DEVELOPED MY SENSE OF DIRECTION IN SURVIVAL, KNOWING WHERE THE SUN IS IN THE SKY AND ALSO MY DIRECTION IN LIFE

THIS SESSION IS VERY HELPFUL FOR MY MENTAL HEALTH. IT IS MUCH BETTER TO BE AROUND OTHERS IN A RELAXED SOCIAL ACTIVITY.

I FOUND THE BUSHCRAFT GROUP SO HELPFUL. IT HAS HELPED ME SO MUCH TO THINK MORE POSITIVELY AND TO HAVE MORE CONFIDENCE.

I CAME AWAY WITH A SENSE OF ACHIEVEMENT AND I HAVEN'T FELT THAT IN A LONG TIME. IT WAS REALLY THERAPEUTIC.

Ecotherapy participant quotes.

ANNEX A

Professional Enquiries – Organisations: out of the 267 professional enquiries, we had a range of enquiries from mental health, health care and community organisations.

Organisation	No of Enquiries
1. Ways to Wellbeing York CVS Social Prescribers	66
2. GP Surgeries	34
3. Community Links	21
4. Converge – University of York St John	20
5. Peppermill Court Mental Health Facility	19
6. Crisis Resolution Team	16
7. Huntington House	13
8. Foss Park Hospital	8
9. Early Interventions Team	7
10. City of York Council	6
11. Humber NHS foundation trust	4
12. York Pathways	4
13. CMHT	4
14. Blueberry Academy	4
15. The Retreat	4
16. Garrow House	4
17. Mental Health Recovery Team	4
18. East Riding Community Hospital	3
19. TEVV NHS Foundation Trust	3
20. York House	3
21. Experience Counts CiC	3
22. The Avenue	2
23. York Mind	2
24. Changing Lives	2
25. Bridging the Gap	2
26. Restore	2
27. Access Team	1
28. MEAM	1
29. Sycamore House	1
30. Amitola Community	1
31. Union Terrace	1
32. IDAS	1
33. Alzheimers York & Selby	1