

# Feel better outside, feel better inside: Ecotherapy for mental wellbeing, resilience and recovery

Ecominds



## A briefing for Health and Wellbeing Board Chairs

**The practical side of gardening is great for mental health problems, it has really helped me. I still have the odd day where I 'disappear' but this is getting much less frequent. It is great to be able to take out any frustration in the soil, when digging holes and concentrating on hard physical work.**

Ecominds project participant

Ecotherapy is an intervention that improves mental and physical health and wellbeing by supporting people to be active outdoors: doing gardening, food growing or environmental work.

*Feel better outside, feel better inside* sets out clear evidence for the effectiveness of ecotherapy as an intervention to:

- support everyone to look after their mental wellbeing
- help the recovery of people with existing mental health problems
- meet care and support needs of people living with mental health problems.

The report sets out the essential role that Health and Wellbeing Boards can play promoting and facilitating joint commissioning of ecotherapy, which will meet outcomes across the portfolios of Board's members.

### Poor mental health is expensive

At least one in four British adults will experience some kind of mental health problem in any one year<sup>1</sup> and The World Health Organization has predicted that depression will be the second biggest cause of illness worldwide by 2020.<sup>2</sup> Mental health problems place enormous social and economic strains on individuals, their families and communities, as well as resulting in increased costs and demand for health and social care services and welfare benefits; while tax and national insurance contributions from people who cannot work are lost.

The cost of mental health problems to the economy in England is estimated to be £105 billion a year:

- £21.3b for health and social care
- £30.3b lost economic output
- £56.6b in human costs

### Ecotherapy improves mental and physical wellbeing

Evidence from Mind's lottery-funded Ecominds scheme<sup>3</sup> found that 7 out of 10 people experienced significant increases in mental wellbeing by the time they left an ecotherapy project. In addition to improving mental wellbeing, ecotherapy also helps people to:

- increase their resilience levels so that they are better able to withstand difficult times and have a supportive community around them
- adopt healthier lifestyles including increased physical activity levels
- feel more involved in their local community, reducing social isolation
- connect more with the natural world and adopt environmentally friendly behaviours



## Ecotherapy is accessible and inclusive

Ecotherapy services have successfully engaged people from a range of different age groups and social circumstances including people with learning disabilities, people who are homeless and people with alcohol and drug misuse problems. The Ecominds projects were particularly successful in overcoming the barriers to accessing wellbeing services that men experience, with many men saying they appreciated the 'leave your diagnosis at the gate' approach that many ecotherapy services adopt, where the emphasis is not explicitly on therapy or mental health; however once involved this is a significant feature that takes place 'under the surface'.

56% of Ecominds participants were men, while recent IAPT statistics show that men account for only 36% of those receiving psychological therapies.<sup>4</sup>

## Ecotherapy is cost effective

Being unemployed is strongly linked with poor mental wellbeing; while people with mental health problems can also experience difficulties finding work. Ecotherapy projects have been successful in helping people move back into employment or training: 254 people found full-time employment and 366 secured part-time work

as part of the Ecominds programme. Ecotherapy can deliver economic benefits for the individual, their communities and the wider economy. Demand for health and social care services and medication can be reduced, while the costs of paying welfare benefits can reduce and tax and National Insurance contributions increase as people re-enter work.<sup>5</sup>

The new economics foundation identified average savings of £7,082 per participant through reduced NHS costs, benefits reductions and increased tax contributions. Using nef's formula, in one year, we can project savings of £1.46m from welfare savings and tax revenues just for the 254 people who found full-time work through Ecominds.<sup>6</sup>

## Ecotherapy meets health, social care and public health outcomes

Ecotherapy can help to achieve outcomes across the NHS, social care and public health and therefore offers an opportunity for pooling budgets and joint commissioning which would bring wellbeing benefits for local people and cost savings for commissioners. Feel better outside, feel better inside sets out the outcomes ecotherapy can meet across each outcomes framework, along with the independent evidence to support commissioning decisions.

## Recommendations for health and wellbeing boards

- Facilitate and promote the use of pooled budgets to enable joint commissioning of services like ecotherapy.
- Identify ecotherapy in Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategies as an intervention that can help meet objectives across outcomes frameworks.
- Consider the social value of procurement decisions and how these can be used to improve wider economic, social and environmental outcomes for the community when services such as ecotherapy are commissioned.
- Ensure that the views of any Local Nature Partnerships, local voluntary and community sector, and patient and service users groups are represented on the board either directly or via engagement mechanisms.
- Use Joint Strategic Needs Assessments (JSNAs) to identify groups who are at increased risk of developing mental health problems, and those who are less likely to engage with traditional mental health or wellbeing services, both of whom should be particularly targeted by accessible services like ecotherapy.

Find out more at [www.mind.org.uk/ecotherUpyworks](http://www.mind.org.uk/ecotherUpyworks)

1 Mental Health Foundation (2013) *Mental health statistics*. [Online] [mentalhealth.org.uk/help-information/mental-health-statistics/](http://mentalhealth.org.uk/help-information/mental-health-statistics/)

2 Murray C and Lopez A (1996) Evidence-based health policy; lessons from the Global Burden of Disease Study. *Science*, Volume 274, Issue 5288, pp. 740-743.

3 Bragg R, Wood C, and Barton J (2013) *Ecominds effects on mental wellbeing: An evaluation for Mind*. London: Mind

4 HSCIC (2013) *Improving Access to Psychological Therapies Dataset Final Quarter 4 2012/13*. London: Health and Social Care Information Centre.

5 nef consulting (2013) *The Economic Benefits of Ecominds: A case study approach*. London: new economics foundation.

6 ibid