



Conservation Volunteers Northern Ireland Position Paper

Health and well-being



Quality of environment is a powerful driver of health and well-being. We increasingly see that better quality environments improve health, increase well-being and accelerate recovery time from bouts of ill health. Conservation Volunteers Northern Ireland's (CVNI) ambition is to set new standards in encouraging people to use the natural environment to influence and improve their health.

CVNI, the Northern Ireland region of BTCV, believes in environmental justice, that everyone has the right to a good quality environment which benefits their health and well-being. We deliver these objectives through environmental volunteering, and we give others the confidence and skills to do the same.

Key points:

- Improving health in Northern Ireland requires a preventative approach: increasing physical activity and promoting mental well-being.
- Conservation volunteering is a proven way of encouraging people to become active to gain significant mental and physical health benefits.
- CVNI consistently enables people to improve their health and that of their community.

The Green Gym

CVNI use the Green Gym as a vehicle for health promotion work – a socially inclusive, innovative alternative to traditional gyms. A health-promoting approach, it provides a natural workout in the outdoors, increasing physical activity, promoting mental well-being and improving the local environment. Independent evaluation concludes that the physical health status of Green Gym participants significantly improved, with 99% reporting enhanced health and confidence.¹ Retention rates are high, with over 70% still involved after six months.²



Health and well-being issues to which CVNI contributes and the track-record on which it can build

MENTAL HEALTH	CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS SOLUTIONS
1-in-4 people will experience mental ill health ³ , WHO predicts that depression will be the second largest single cause of ill health by 2020.	Independent research shows that Green Gym participants who joined with the poorest mental health were three times more likely to be the ones improving the most. ¹
Good mental health promotion depends on partnerships working across all sectors. Many influencing factors lie outside the control of the health and social services. ⁴	Delivered with multiple health and community partners, the Green Gym is a valuable project in joint-working towards achieving individual care plans and sustained, independent living.
In 2007, over 240 people took their own lives, 80% were male, most commonly 25-34 year olds. ⁵	At a community level the Green Gym is delivered as a preventative project, actively engaging at-risk groups. 62% of CVNI volunteers are male.
INACTIVITY AND OBESITY	CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS SOLUTIONS
Only 20% of women and 30% of men engage in sufficient levels of physical activity, as many as 1-in-4 adults are obese. ⁶ Obesity has an estimated cost of £14.2m in lost productivity and £90m cost to health and social care services. ⁷	People living in areas with high levels of green space are three times more likely to be physically active and 40% less likely to be overweight or obese than those with low levels of green space. ⁸
Physical inactivity and obesity are risk factors for chronic conditions, e.g. heart disease (nine people per day), type 2 diabetes (5% of population over 20yrs), the cost attributed to inactivity includes over 2,100 deaths per annum. ⁹	The Green Gym tackles the root causes of physical ill health, helping people to change their behaviour for a healthier lifestyle. Project monitoring shows that the health impacts of the Green Gym go beyond the weekly Green Gym task day. ¹
WELL-BEING	CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS SOLUTIONS
An increase in sedentary, 'virtual' lifestyles has a dramatic impact on physical and mental health.	Natural spaces strongly benefit well-being – the human response to nature includes feelings of contentment and a reduction in stress. ¹⁰
HEALTH INEQUALITY	CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS SOLUTIONS
People from the most deprived areas are much more likely to die from smoking, suicide, heart and lung disease, and alcohol or drug related issues, than people from least deprived areas. Seven years earlier for men, four years earlier for women. ¹¹	People living in greener environments enjoy lower levels of income-related health inequalities. ¹² CVNI tackles inequality: 24% of our volunteers are from the 15% most deprived areas.
CHILDREN'S HEALTH	CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS SOLUTIONS
Studies show approx. 22% of primary school children are classed as overweight and obese. ¹³	Tailored programmes of practical activity in school grounds address physical activity, healthy eating, active citizenship, education and learning.
1-in-10 children aged 5-16 suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder ¹⁴ , around three in every class.	Contact with nature can significantly reduce psychological problems caused by stress, particularly in children with the greatest number of stressful events. ¹⁵ After a 10 week Green Gym programme, children's psychosocial health improved significantly. This is supported by the children's own views with 84% positive about the statement: "Green Gym made me feel good about myself".
2,470 people are diagnosed with skin cancer each year, 1-in-4 of all cancers and increasing especially in young people.	Based in school grounds CVNI's <i>Willows for Shade</i> project in partnership with Ulster Cancer Foundation highlights a safe sun message from an early age.
FOOD AND HEALTHY EATING	CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS SOLUTIONS
Eating five portions of fruit and vegetables a day is consistent with good health. Individuals on average consume fewer than three portions per day.	43% of participants on CVNI's Community Food Growing programme increased their consumption of fruit and vegetables from 1.8 to 4 or more portions per day.
For households on low incomes, average consumption of fruit and vegetables is half the recommended amount. ¹⁷	In partnership with Community Dietician Services, CVNI engages individuals from lower socio-economic groups developing skills to sustain healthier lifestyle choices



Three years ago, John was unable to maintain employment, use public transport and he became increasingly isolated at home. Supported by his occupational therapist, John started attending the Green Gym to re-establish routine, structure and social contact into his week.

“I like to keep active and busy and it gets me out of the house for a few hours every week. The Green Gym has a purpose and it gets me socialising and meeting new people.” John



In 2009 CVNI worked with four primary schools across Belfast, all based within the 10% most deprived wards of NI, to establish School Food Gardens. The children were involved in weekly Green Gym sessions incorporating physical activity, healthy eating and environmental learning.

In the words of one pupil: “It was brilliant eating the fruit and veg we grew ourselves”.

Conservation Volunteers beliefs

With over 26 years experience of working with local people, devising solutions to local issues, we believe that:

- The environment is crucial to health, both in keeping people healthy and preventing illness and also for helping people manage or recover from mental or physical illness.
- Prevention is better than cure. We believe that in supporting people to lead healthier lives we are reducing ill-health in the future. Investment should be made in public health and preventing people from becoming ill.
- Activities in the natural environment provide an ideal means of promoting inclusion and integration, particularly for people with mental or physical health problems, long-term conditions or social care needs.
- Supporting people to realise their potential is crucial to promoting well-being. People should be empowered to have control over their own health and well-being. With the right support, volunteers can set up and run green exercise programmes, thus building their own skills and self-confidence whilst providing a valuable health service to their local community.
- Environmental justice is essential in tackling health inequalities. Inequality of access to green space compounds health inequalities.
- Children and young people benefit from connecting with the natural environment. We believe that all children and young people should have easy access to green space and the opportunity to be active outdoors.
- Growing food helps to promote healthy eating. Community food growing initiatives provide a source of fresh fruit and vegetables as well as physical activity and new skills and knowledge.

Conservation Volunteers Northern Ireland’s commitments

CVNI will enable some 35,000 local people (contributing to half a million people across BTCV) to improve their health and well-being by 2013.

We will achieve this through environmental volunteering opportunities which offer enjoyable physical activity, a connection with the natural environment and with other people and the chance to learn new skills.

SOCIAL INCLUSION We welcome everyone on to our projects, including those with health problems and those referred by social care services. Our work in this area will be informed through our ‘targeted approach’ – Green Gym’s which actively engage individuals known to mental health services in practical conservation projects. Supported by local Health and Social Care Trusts and Occupational Therapy Services this initiative creates the opportunity for inclusion in supported activity aimed at fulfilling individual care plans towards sustained independent living.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND TACKLING HEALTH

INEQUALITIES We make continuing commitment to undertake at least 20% of our work in the 15% most deprived areas. We will enable disadvantaged communities to improve their local environment and access opportunities for green exercise.

WORKING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE We work with schools to build their capacity to establish Green Gyms. We provide a wide range of opportunities for children and young people to become more active and healthier through environmental volunteering. In addition to running programmes targeted at particular age groups, we welcome children, young people and families into our community activities.

HEALTHY EATING We offer opportunities for people to come together to grow their own food, to provide a source of fresh fruit and vegetables and encourage healthy eating. By 2013, we will improve the health of 5,000 people through involvement in community food growing projects.

BUILDING THE EVIDENCE BASE Following 10 years of work with Oxford Brookes University, CVNI and BTCV will continue to lead in building the evidence base for the health benefits of environmental volunteering. The SF12 form, recognised by the medical community, is now integrated within our online Management Information System. This, along with other evaluation tools is being used to collate information on the health benefits of conservation volunteering across all of our projects.

COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIP We work in partnership with others to achieve improved health and well-being through the natural environment. We currently work in close partnership with local Health and Social Care Trusts, Public Health Agency, Investing for Health, Community Nutrition and Dietetic Services, Health Promotion, Occupational Therapy Departments, and other health focused groups in the community and voluntary sector, making our outcomes relevant to priority areas for numerous health and social strategies.

Conservation Volunteers will continue to ask those involved in developing and implementing public health strategies in Northern Ireland for the following:

- Public health policies to make the link between health and the environment and to draw up plans to use the "natural health service" more widely. Policies should recognise the evidence base for the mental and physical health benefits of environmental volunteering and food growing, and support the expansion of these opportunities throughout communities and schools. These efforts should be targeted to reduce health inequalities and focus on those most in need.
- Funders to support programmes which use green space and food growing to improve health and well-being, and to fund the evaluation of these programmes to further build the evidence base.
- Social care services to continue to expand their referral of people with social care needs into community based environmental volunteering, ensuring that adequate support and finances are provided. In terms of economics, research shows that £1 invested in our work can yield a measurable social return on investment of at least £4.
- Government-level cost-benefit-analysis, comparing costs associated with public health initiatives using green space to the costs of treatment for inactivity-related illness.
- Health and Social Care Commissioners and GPs to routinely make use of the outdoors as an integral part of their work by promoting prescriptions for green exercise, including health walks and Green Gyms, as a routine contribution to health and well-being improvements.

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