

GREEN GYM

Green Gym Evaluation Summary



‘Fitter and better outside’

Introduction

We have become significantly less healthy as a nation owing to changing lifestyles and working conditions. Much work is now sedentary, with people tied to computers; cars, buses and trains take us around with minimum physical effort; and too many people eat cheap, calorie dense fast food. The result is an epidemic of obesity and related health conditions that the NHS struggles to address with the usual medical model, which tends to treat symptoms and not causes. Type 2 diabetes, musculoskeletal disorders, some cancers and other conditions are largely preventable and can be mitigated by active lifestyles that address both physical and mental wellbeing.

Green Gym does this by bringing people together to take part in outdoor activities that bring sustainable improvements to local green spaces. The programme, which is underpinned by social action theory, reduces isolation, increases fitness and psychological wellbeing, improves people's health knowledge and develops sustainable community-led groups. TCV is proud of Green Gym and the benefits it delivers. This has been reinforced over the past year with recognition such as a health and wellbeing award from the Royal Society for Public Health and achieving level 2 on the Nesta Standards of Evidence. We are now working with several NHS Trusts and local authorities to support the health and social care sector more directly in preventive health and social support programmes.

Craig Lister, Managing Director of Green Gym

Report Summary

Green Gym supports positive changes in the health of participants and the green spaces they create and maintain by weekly participation in outdoor activities, for example conservation, park management and growing food. Volunteers in Green Gyms become more physically active while improving their local environment. Studies show Green Gyms increase both personal and community resilience - through helping to improve people's health and wellbeing, and fostering sustainable community activity, improving the environment for all.

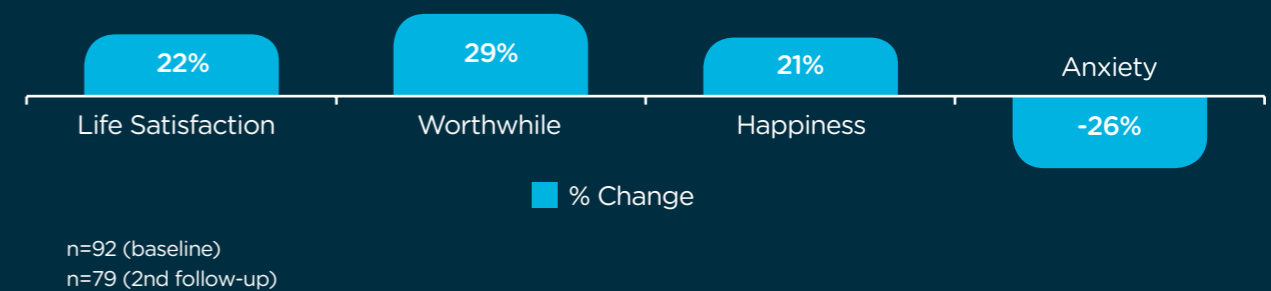
Our new evaluation followed more than 90 Green Gym volunteers for 3 months - From December 2015 to March 2016. This summary reports our results and includes references to other Green Gym research.



Green Gym improves mental wellbeing

Mental wellbeing scores improved over 3 months with a quarter of volunteers reporting a decrease in anxiety.ⁱⁱ

Wellbeing improves; anxiety reduces



Nine out of ten volunteers attributed at least some of their mental wellbeing to participating in Green Gym. For some, participating offers much needed respite:

"I've got a son with special needs and the wife's got mental health problems, so between us we survive on benefits... just coming here gives me a break."

For those struggling with poor mental health, often combined with challenging personal and family conditions, Green Gym offers a safe space where they are given respect and treated with empathy:

"There is no judgement [in Green Gym], no preconceived ideas about what you are or where you've been, what you did, what you haven't done."

Because Green Gym focuses on shared outdoor activities, volunteers meet others, make friends and increase their opportunities for social engagement. For a number of volunteers, weekly participation at a Green Gym is the only time they speak to and spend time with others.

Volunteering also has a positive impact on attitudes and behaviours towards the environment, lifestyles and willingness to engage in the local community.ⁱⁱⁱ

Green Gym reduces social isolation: Over 80% of volunteers feel closer to people in their local area, which is worth over £700,000 in social value.^{iv}



Green Gym has established a social return on investment (SROI) measure of over £4 of social value per £1 invested.^{iv}

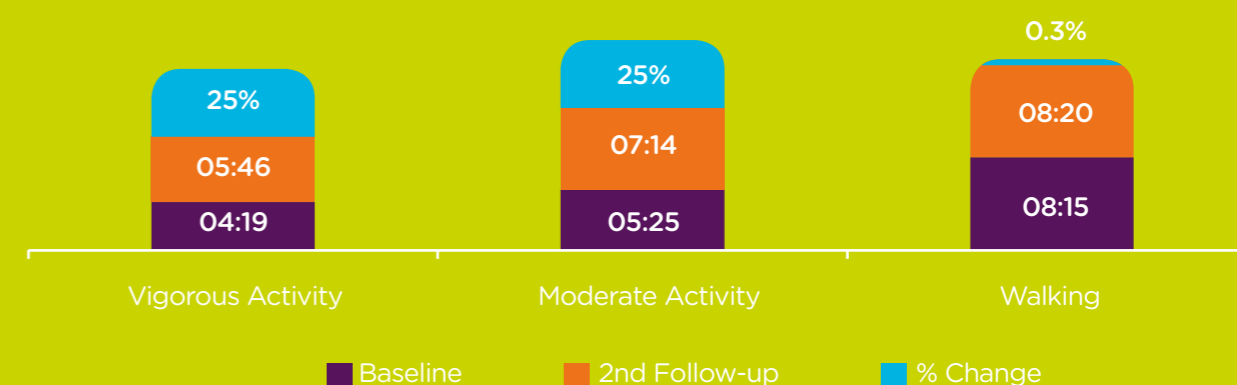
The personal benefit for individual, regular volunteers is worth over £4,600 in social value.^{iv}



Green Gym improves physical wellbeing

On average, volunteers said they spent 50% more time engaged in vigorous and moderate activities by the end of the 3 month study period. Volunteers were walking more too. Nine out of ten attributed their higher physical activity to participation in Green Gym.

Volunteers increase the amount of time spent in vigorous and moderate activities



n=92 (baseline)
n=79 (2nd follow-up)

A number of volunteers said being fitter came from a change in dietary habits – eating more fresh vegetables and less junk food and takeaways – a result of growing food at a Green Gym:

“I know how to grow fruit and veg now in the garden; I know how to cook seasonal veg, so I make a lot of soup now.”

Encouraging healthy living is a part of the Green Gym approach and helps to support lifestyle change, particularly for conditions such as diabetes:

“Finding out I was diabetic, I had to change my diet anyway, so I cut out all sweets and cakes [and at Green Gym] they do try and promote healthy eating and a healthy lifestyle.”

Green Gym also supports weight loss. An evaluation in Northern Ireland found that more than 80% of volunteers lost weight after becoming more active as a result of Green Gym.^{vi}

Our Social Return on Investment found that increasing the physical health of volunteers by as little as 33% is worth £2.6 million.^{iv}

Green Gym improves employability

Participation in Green Gym is an opportunity to get back into work. Many hope to update skills, gain experience and obtain a reference through volunteering:

"I used to do gardening years ago... so it's the sort of thing that I want to do as a job, but I've been unemployed for a long time, so I thought it may be a good way to refresh my skills."

Getting back to work can be difficult. Green Gym volunteering can help restore confidence, teach new skills and establish a routine – helping people get their foot back on the job ladder:

"I think some of it is taken out of my hands, the jobs that need doing – it's not all my responsibility to decide what they are – there's a structure here that makes me do stuff."



Summary

Financial constraints have placed significant strain on the NHS and social care sector. The big increase in conditions associated with sedentary lifestyles is costing an estimated £8.2 billion a year. One in four British adults experience a mental health problem annually – and psychological and physical health problems are costing the NHS alone more than £11 billion. The Department of Health recognises that Green Gym has a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of those who take part and they directly support the reduction of health inequalities by targeting recognised at-risk groups. Green Gyms reduce the demand for health and care services by helping those who are susceptible to preventable illnesses to become more active and those impacted by isolation and loneliness to join a socially inclusive environment.

For more information on this report contact: j.beishon@tcv.org.uk or n.munoz@tcv.org.uk

- ⁱ Beishon J, Munoz N (2016). I feel fitter and better being outside: Green Gym evaluation report. TCV.
- ⁱⁱ ONS questions used to measure wellbeing. <http://bit.ly/1YIGsMW>
- ⁱⁱⁱ TCV (2014). Volunteering impacts. <http://www.tcv.org.uk/volunteering/volunteering-impacts>
- ^{iv} NEF/TCV (2015). TCV's impact: Organisational social return on investment. Summary findings. For more information on this report email n.munoz@tcv.org.uk
- ^v IPAQ questions used to measure physical wellbeing. <http://growyourwellness.com/tools/physical-inactivity-assessment/international-physical-activity-questionnaire-ipaq>
- ^{vi} Collins K (2015). Independent evaluation of the Green Gym programme delivered in Northern Ireland.
- ^{vii} Public Health England. About obesity: Lifestyles and behaviours. https://www.noo.org.uk/NOO_about_obesity/lifestyle
- ^{viii} Naylor C, Das P, Ross Shipa et al (2016). Bringing together physical and mental health. <http://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications>



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