

Title

Green Gyms®

Short description

The Conservation Volunteers (TCV) created and runs Green Gyms® across the UK. The aims of Green Gyms are to improve health and the environment at the same time. Objectives are to improve health and wellbeing – by increasing or maintaining fitness, reducing isolation and supporting better mental wellbeing, and increase employability – by increasing knowledge, skills and confidence.

Green Gyms are free outdoor sessions where people are guided in practical activities such as planting trees, sowing meadows and establishing wildlife ponds. Unlike other conservation projects, the emphasis is very much on health and fitness - volunteers warm up and cool down in preparation for a range of light to vigorous activities to suit all abilities.

Green Gyms are a weekly activity, running for 3-4 hours at a local community facility such as a park, usually in the day time on a weekday. Each Green Gym has up to 50-60 volunteers, with turnout on any one week typically ranging from six to 20.

Green Gyms are available to everyone, people can just turn up and join in. GPs now prescribe Green Gym® sessions to patients to encourage them to improve their health and wellbeing. By taking part, participants are encouraged to make positive changes to their lifestyle, such as walking and cycling more.

Topic

Living – Green spaces

Moving- active transport

Consuming- food

Characteristics (type, level)

National, implemented locally by communities

Country/Countries of implementation

UK, Germany (Hamburg and Berlin)

Aims and Objectives

Aims are to improve health and the environment at the same time, under the vision of “healthier, happier communities for everyone”. Objectives are to improve health and wellbeing – by increasing or maintaining fitness, reducing isolation and supporting better mental wellbeing, and increase employability – by increasing knowledge, skills and confidence.

Target Group

Available to everyone, but GPs now prescribe Green Gym® sessions to patients to encourage them to improve their health and wellbeing. By taking part, participants are encouraged to make positive changes to their lifestyle, such as walking and cycling more, and including more fruit and vegetables in their diets.

Status

Implemented on a continuous basis, and developing new pathways with clinical groups such as Hospital Trusts

Start and Completion dates

From 1997 and ongoing

Lifestyle and Behavior Change

Experienced leaders guide people through a range of practical projects, giving them the opportunity to tackle physical jobs in the outdoors - improving their strength and stamina, boosting practical skills and confidence and benefitting local green spaces. Underpinned by social action theory, Green Gym increase self esteem, reduces anxiety and causes participants to reflect more on giving back to society and being part of a community.

Effects on:

Health and Wellbeing	Green gyms encourage people out of the house into the open air to join others in the community to improve local green spaces for everyone to enjoy. Examples of activities include conservation, park management or food growing. People increase their physical activity and reduce isolation; both are demonstrated in numerous literature to increase health and wellbeing across a range of markers.
Vulnerable populations	An independent evaluation of Green Gyms by Oxford Brookes University shows that health improvements are greatest amongst those with the poorest health. This group was nine times more likely to substantially improve their health and fitness. The same study found that participants with the lowest mental health scores were three times more likely to be the ones improving the most. Over three-quarters of respondents agreed they had become more confident since joining the programme.
Environment	TCV and the Green Gym project improve the quality of green spaces; this may be through renovation of grass areas, management of wildlife habitats or planting trees. In 2016/17 TCV will have planted or enabled others to plant approximately 250,000 trees. People on some programmes report reducing waste and eating more healthily.

Initiated and/or implemented by

The Green Gym® began in 1997 and was initiated by Dr William Bird, a practicing GP and internationally recognised specialist on physical activity and health, and an organisation called The Conservation Volunteers (TCV). It was begun as an adjunct to normal medical practice as Dr Bird found some patients were returning over the years with deteriorating symptoms in certain conditions, representative of a failure to change lifestyle behaviours.

Stakeholders and sectors involved

Green Gyms are run by a voluntary sector organization (TCV) with support from public sector and private sector organizations.

Financial support

Funders currently include NESTA, the Cabinet Office, Department of Health, Garfield Weston Foundation and a number of councils.

Evidence-base

The benefits of habitual physical activity and reducing social isolation are demonstrated in numerous reports to improve health and wellbeing. There is a growing body of evidence that such activities in green spaces has an additional benefit.

Main activities

Participants tackle physical jobs of different kinds in the outdoors

Evaluation

A number of evaluations have been carried out over the years.

The Green Gym Evaluation Report 2016 describes a mixed method approach. A short questionnaire survey collected once a month, for three months (December 2015, Jan & Feb 2016) and a series of recorded qualitative interviews with both volunteers and referral partners.

Questionnaires and Topic Guides: Both the survey and interviews gather information on the main Green Gym impact outcomes: better health and wellbeing and increased employability.

There is an ongoing reporting process and a new evaluation form due for release to better engage with the clinical fraternity.

Self-reported tools used to assess physical activity levels (IPAQ), mental wellbeing (WEMWBS), social cohesiveness (ONS) and diet.

Main results

The 'Health for Life in the community' programme found that 43% of participants increased their consumption of fruit and vegetables from 1.8 to four or more portions a day.

A survey of 5,000 participants indicated an average of 120 minutes' activity per week towards the government's recommended 150.

In the 2016 evaluation report, wellbeing scores improved over the three month period for the sample as a whole, with a large decrease in anxiety. Nine out of ten volunteers attributed at least some of their wellbeing to participating in Green Gym. New volunteers showed a larger degree of improvement, when compared with the sample as a whole. (Source: Green Gym Evaluation report 2016 page 26)

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According to a Social Returns on Investment analysis conducted in 2015 by the New Economics Foundation, the Green Gym programme has created a social value of £4.02 for every pound of investment.

Key success factors and barriers

Key success factors are inclusiveness of the programme, a wide range of tasks from very light to vigorous, the focus on delivering an outcome that was appreciated both by the participants and the wider community (e.g. a renovated play area), trained staff who could engage participants with mild to moderate mental health issues and feeling part of a group.

Funding is a challenge. Historically, much funding has come from local authorities and public health. The funding environment in local authorities, which is where public health now sits in England, continues to deteriorate. Most local authorities are nearing a position where they can only fund mandatory programmes.

New areas of funding are being developed, with some success, such as clinical commissioning groups (CCGs), NHS Hospital Trusts, charitable funding groups and potentially social funding.

INHERIT Perspective

Green Gyms® chime with INHERIT's triple wins of improving health, health equity and the environment through behaviour change. Green gyms improve health, social inclusion and the environment at the same time. They enable participants to increase or maintain fitness, help reduce isolation and support better mental wellbeing, and increase employability – by increasing knowledge, skills and confidence. Green gyms are available to any person in the community, but benefits are greater for those with poorer health. They improve the environmental state in local areas, and influence individual exposure and experience through participation in physical activities that improve aspects of the local environment.

More information

Access a license, support, and training from: greengym@tcv.org.uk .
TCV owns the IP rights across Europe for Green Gym.

Green Gym Evaluation report 2016: NEF / TCV (2015) TCV's impact: Organisational Social Return On Investment.

<http://www.tcv.org.uk/greengym>

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