

# Referral guidance: Building buy-in and initial engagement

To be read in conjunction with the guidance manual document





## What is buy-in and why is it important?

This guidance document has been developed from interview and focus group data across the wider project (see main guidance manual for project details).

The people involved in supporting a potential participant onto a greenspace programme will vary depending on where the programme is and who is running it. For example, they might be supported by their support staff to attend a programme internally (if one has been developed), or they might be directed to an existing programme external to the service by staff or external healthcare professionals. Regardless of pathway, this guide has been designed to help service staff, support workers, referrers (those directing participants to programmes), link workers (those supporting or 'linking' participants onto programmes), and/or other people working with potential participants, to build trust and engagement ('buy-in') for greenspace programmes, particularly for those unsure about them. It also provides insight into key considerations when signposting or 'referring' participants to programmes (whether internal or external groups).

## What are the benefits of greenspace activities?

Meaningful engagement and buy-in towards greenspace programmes/activities can be achieved through highlighting their potential benefits for wellbeing, recovery, and mental health. The people involved in supporting potential participants should speak to them prior to the programme to tell them what is involved and discuss the potential benefits. Remember, it is important to source activities that focus on the needs and preferences of the participant, as well as the overall outcomes that could be beneficial to the prospective participant(s). Our research has demonstrated several potential benefits which could be discussed during referral:

- **Time/space away from issues and challenges:** Being in nature can help people feel calmer, reduce stress and anxiety, and provide an opportunity for self-reflection.
- **Learning skills and developing confidence:** Programmes offer the opportunity to take part in enjoyable activities, learn skills, and increase confidence. This can provide a strong sense of achievement and increase self-esteem amongst participants.
- **Greenspace programmes are often distinct from traditional treatment settings:** Greenspace programmes can be described as non-authoritarian, as staff/volunteers typically join in activities, meaning there is less of a distinction between provider/professional and recipient than in other treatment modalities. This can be particularly beneficial to those with previous negative experiences of services/interventions.
- **Building social confidence and connecting to others:** Greenspace programmes offer the opportunity to connect with others, helping to reduce isolation and aiding the development of social confidence.
- **Improvements in mood, physical and mental health, and wellbeing:** Taking part in greenspace activities can have wide ranging benefits for physical and mental wellbeing, and this can be a really important step towards recovery and improved wellbeing.

# How are greenspace programmes perceived amongst prospective attendees?

As part of our research, four focus groups were conducted with 17 participants, all currently residing in temporary accommodation, who had no experience of greenspace programmes. It could be argued that greenspace programmes may be less suitable for populations who have not reached a certain level of stability (e.g., those still using substances), or those who have not had recent experience of being out in nature. Contrastingly, our data demonstrates a high level of enthusiasm for nature-based activities despite no, or limited, prior experience of greenspace programmes. These findings could be drawn on to secure buy-in by showing that highly marginalised groups, such as people experiencing homelessness and/or substance use, see the potential for greenspace programmes within treatment/support provisions, and understand the possible benefits for mental and physical wellbeing. The eight main themes that focus groups discussed are described below in more detail, along with how these points could encourage buy-in:

## 1. Providing space to reflect

Participants saw greenspace activities as providing space to contemplate their lives away from daily stressors, allowing temporary relief from day-to-day concerns. Having space to reflect can be helpful by providing respite from typical routines and therefore, opportunity to consider relevant lifestyle changes that can be beneficial for mental and physical wellbeing:

***"Just to get some space, just to go off somewhere. No emails, no messages, no distractions... I do think it would be quite helpful."***

### ***How might this secure buy-in?***

Framing greenspace programmes as a chance to 'step back' and have time and space, could be attractive to individuals seeking to reduce stress and enhance their mood. Focusing on the serenity offered by activities that occur in nature, as well as the mental clarity that can occur after spending time in nature, could increase buy-in.

## 2. Connecting to nature

Participants discussed the opportunity to connect with nature as a key selling point for greenspace programmes. Many were keen to develop their understanding of local ecosystems, biodiversity, and meaningful ways to contribute to sustaining their community. Additionally, participants spoke about how being in nature allowed feelings of awe, and connecting to something wider than themselves:

***"Once you appreciate the world, it would give back."***

### ***How might this secure buy-in?***

To secure buy-in, referrers, link workers, and/or support workers could emphasise how greenspace programmes can encourage new perspectives towards the environment which can lead to feeling more connected with nature and the space they are in. Highlighting that there is strong evidence that increasing connection to nature has significant benefits for physical and mental health, often leading to feelings of happiness and improved mood, can also build support.

### 3. Confidence and personal growth

Participants were enthused by the potential for growth in confidence and personal development presented by greenspace programmes. It was understood that engaging with nature-based activities could help individuals feel confident in themselves, develop skills, and increase self-growth. Seeing the results from participation in an activity was envisaged as a potential source of happiness and as encouraging renewed sense of purpose:

***"So what achievements are they going to get?  
Confidence, instead of thinking it's something you could  
never do; that's my opinion. I thought I could never climb  
Ben Nevis (mountain). Two, it's just seeing there's more to life."***

#### ***How might this secure buy-in?***

Encourage engagement by highlighting the potential for personal growth when attending a greenspace programme. For example, planning and working towards projects/activities (such as creating an allotment or hiking) can give participants a sense of achievement when they complete their goals. Setting out long term goals can also lead to sustained lifestyle changes by renewing an individual's focuses onto activities that are beneficial to their wellbeing.

### 4. Developing skills

Greenspace programmes were seen as offering the chance to learn new skills, such as gardening, bushcraft, and hillwalking. Furthermore, attending programmes were seen to help improve social skills through collaboration and working within group settings:

***"Yeah, you are learning new stuff as well. See like the  
fishing and everything, so the skills like that."***

#### ***How might this secure buy-in?***

Referrers should consider interests of potential participants and any areas of skill development that they want to focus on. This increases the likelihood that the programme will meet their needs as it encourages hands-on experience in these areas. Emphasise the importance of finding new hobbies to achieve long-term health and wellbeing goals, as well as how these can be a source of joy and happiness in moments of uncertainty or distress.

## 5. Nature as a non-institutional setting

Activities in greenspace were perceived as less confronting than those in institutional settings such as a counsellor's office or GP surgery. The focus group participants appreciated the potential for nature to break down power dynamics, especially where peer workers are present to assist with activities:

***"Sitting in a room and someone just saying, 'well, if you do this and if you do that.' Well, that might work for you, but not for other people. Whereas nature, I think for mental health, is beautiful."***

### ***How might this secure buy-in?***

Greenspace programmes could be a suitable intervention for those who may be hesitant to engage with those in roles of authority, or those who have disengaged with other services, as they encourage staff and participants working shoulder-to-shoulder. Consider communicating this reduced power imbalance between participant and staff/volunteers, in comparison to traditional services/support, particularly with those who report negative experiences with care/treatment previously.

## 6. Supporting recovery and quality of life

Participants felt that greenspace programmes could support recovery efforts through self-reflection and shifting their focus onto productive, meaningful activities:

***"Yes, it takes your mind off it. It does, it totally takes your mind off your drugs, you're not even thinking of drugs when you're away."***

### ***How might this secure buy-in?***

Focus on the potential improvements to the person's quality of life that could be achieved through active participation, such as learning new coping mechanisms to apply in times of distress. Being outdoors and engaging in activities can also improve quality of life through increased physical activity, even if low impact. Discussing how taking part in new activities could enhance the person's sense of self may further encourage buy-in.



## 7. Encouraging social connection

Participants understood greenspace programmes as a means of promoting social connection between individuals of all demographics. Many described a desire to interact with those with a life experience that differed from their own. This was emphasised by others as a benefit that prospective participants could be enthusiastic about, as it was understood to be a gateway to developing new friendships and renewed interest in life:

***"We want to be a part of society, you know... he's camped next to someone... and she might have her own problems [but] they've just connected and are talking naturally."***

### ***How might this secure buy-in?***

Buy-in could be secured through promoting the inclusivity of greenspace programmes. This means a participant could connect to those from all backgrounds, while also finding comfort in speaking to those with similar lived experiences to themselves. It is also important to emphasise how communal activities undertaken in nature can encourage the development of communication and interpersonal skills.

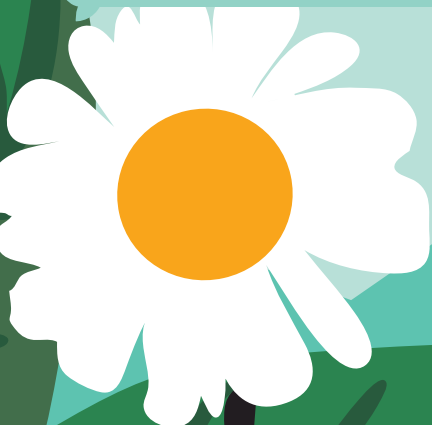
## 8. Improving mood and wellbeing

Participants saw nature-based activities as having the potential to improve mood and wellbeing more widely. A crucial aspect of this was that activities offer opportunity for support and engagement that does not explicitly focus on issues like substance use. This reportedly makes them attractive to those who have mistrust or negative experiences with healthcare and social care providers, but who want to take steps to improve their mental health:

***"Life is more enjoyable, you get stuff to focus on, and get our heads screwed on again, and get things to be occupied with, and to keep you focused... get you socialising properly again."***

### ***How might this secure buy-in?***

Emphasise the importance of having fun and finding enjoyment in the nature-based activities and how this can naturally boost mood, reduce anxiety, and improve overall wellbeing.





### Additional considerations from focus group data

- Participants of the focus groups reflected on the terminology used when describing greenspace activities, particularly the word 'programme.' It may be easier for those with no prior experience of greenspace programmes to understand what a greenspace programme is if terminology such as 'nature-based activity' is used during referral and/or initial discussions.
- There was emphasis on feelings of being let down or unheard when interacting with services, particularly when being signposted to services and receiving no update on referrals during long wait periods. Transparency around waiting times, or information about which programmes can be attended quickly should be communicated.
- Self-referral to programmes may be possible, but those involved in supporting a participant would still need to communicate with the programme to ensure the participant's needs were met and the programme staff have the right expertise.
- Regardless of programme type, communication between services and those involved in referral is essential to ensure that all are informed of the needs and support requirements of the proposed participant. The main guidance manual provides further detail around risk assessment pre-programme.



Painting by Linda McGowan

## How can you ensure suitability of a greenspace programme for a potential participant?

There are a range of potential barriers to accessibility and engagement which individuals may face when attending a new programme. These need to be carefully considered by services, programmes, link/support workers and referrers. We have provided a list of key potential barriers/considerations that were highlighted in our research and provide ideas about how these could be discussed and addressed with potential participants prior to the programme. These suggestions could be used to guide initial conversations and ensure that individuals feel adequately supported and therefore are more likely to engage. Where possible, it is beneficial to have programme champions (typically peers with lived experience who have experience of greenspace programmes) to join in conversations and build rapport. For more details around identifying the suitability of a programme, see the Risk Assessment section of the main guidance manual.

Topic	Consideration	Practice examples
<b><i>Interests and preferences</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do the activities provided align with participant interests and preferences? Is there opportunity for an individual to follow or develop a particular area of interest?</li> <li>• What kind of activities are undertaken on the programme?</li> </ul>	Develop a checklist of activities involved in the greenspace programme and discuss suitability with the potential participant based on likes/dislikes and existing hobbies. Consider using pictures, videos, or other promotional materials to provide a visual idea of what programmes may involve.
<b><i>Mental health and substance use support needs</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do staff/volunteers on the programme have suitable experience and skills to provide adequate support for identified needs?</li> <li>• Is the programme designed for people experiencing substance use challenges only, challenges with substance use and mental health, or is it a mixed, general community group? Is the focus suitable for the individual's current stage of recovery?</li> </ul>	Consider where an individual is in relation to their health and recovery journey and think about matching them with appropriate programmes which can provide the right support. Ensure that programmes have experienced staff with appropriate levels of training. A community group will likely have less intensive support and may not be suitable for those in earlier stages of recovery/still using substances. See Section 2.1 in the main guidance manual for more detail on how to navigate this.
<b><i>Transport, equipment and accessibility</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the transport options for attendance? Is transport arranged by the programme? If not, are there other opportunity to minimise the cost of travel, particularly for those who are unwaged or on low income?</li> <li>• Does the programme provide suitable equipment and clothing? Is there anything which the individual will need to consider bringing themselves in relation to appropriate clothing/equipment?</li> </ul>	Carefully consider transport options and an individual's support needs. Discuss with programme staff/volunteers which transport is available and what support they provide around this. It is also important to establish which equipment and clothing is necessary for meaningful engagement (e.g., warm, waterproof clothing). Discuss which equipment is supplied by the programme during initial conversations with staff/volunteers.



Topic	Consideration	Practice examples
<b>Meeting staff and volunteers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the arrangements for an individual to meet with staff/ volunteers on an informal basis before attending the programme to reduce anxiety/help prepare them?</li> <li>• Does the individual express a need to 'work towards' the programme by increasing physical activity/ spending time outside? How could this be supported?</li> </ul>	<p>It is important for a participant to establish what they wish to gain/learn/ achieve through their attendance and how they can prepare for taking part. This might be as simple as going for a walk in a local park to get used to being outside. Where possible, organise initial engagement sessions with programme staff/volunteers to help reduce feelings of apprehension around attending an unfamiliar programme. A support worker/buddy coming with the participant might be beneficial for the first visit.</p>
<b>Demographic considerations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there any relevant considerations around gender (e.g., can it be mixed gender programmes, or is women-only necessary)?</li> <li>• Are there any barriers to attending which relate to work commitments, childcare, or other caring responsibilities?</li> <li>• Are there any cultural considerations relating to an individual's background, ethnicity, religion or other personal factors that may influence engagement?</li> </ul>	<p>Consider programmes that are focused on specific demographics (for example, women only groups) to ensure that all potential participants feel comfortable. Consider referral to programmes delivered by those from a specific demographic or background, or a programme designed for a specific audience (for example, single fathers with childcare commitments). Ask participants during initial conversations about times/ days that do and do not work for them around existing commitments. Unlike traditional 9-5 services, many greenspace programmes run at different times, and it is very possible that a suitable programme will exist.</p>

# What benefits do greenspace programme participants report?

Asking individuals who take part in a programme already to share their experiences can provide a valuable source of information for future participants during referral/initial conversations. It is important to select diverse quotes highlighting different aspects of the programme, as the outcomes are then more likely to appeal to a wider range of potential participants. Below are some quotes from participants we interviewed who have experience of greenspace programmes:

## Connection to Nature

*"If you're out.... walking the dogs, you suddenly notice 'aw I saw that, and I know about that now' and you take your time more to see what's around you. I think, having done it, you're more likely to go out to these places (greenspace)."*

*"I would just recommend it for everyone. There is like heaps of waterfalls and the nature is beautiful out here. It's just embracing it... and taking the time to notice."*

## Improvement to Mood

*"It gives you so much more freedom. Being in the canoe with the water around me and I just felt... free. I don't know if it's the water, or the trees, or the fresh air. It just really helps your mental health and makes you think a lot clearer."*

*"It's important to me because I would have just stayed in the house, being depressed and not having a life. Now I'm getting out, I'm eating better and I have a life."*

## Recovery and Wellbeing

*"People that we get to these groups have stuck to these groups. It is part of their recovery and if they hadn't come to this group, where would they be now?"*

*"(Greenspace) takes every worry away from me. Where else would I be? Sitting at home, staring at the four walls, thinking about my next drink? While I'm here, I don't think about (drinking) at all. I am out in the open with people enjoy... (greenspace) takes you out into the big outdoors... there is much more to life."*

## Building Confidence

*"I think (greenspace) (taught) me a lot more than school (taught) me, to be quite truthful. You're never too old to learn."*

*"It builds up my confidence for socialising because I don't normally mix with others. I always feel anxious even saying 'hi' to people or having a conversation with people, so that's always good."*

## Developing Skills

*"Realising what your strengths are and what you maybe need to work... more on. That's basically what I took from it anyway - realising what my strengths are."*

*"So I think, emotionally, skills that I picked up (are) tools to regulate how I'm feeling. Yes, it (greenspace) has given me tools to regulate myself emotionally."*

## Social Connectivity

*"They (greenspace group) are a community, that's all I can say to you... we're like one extended family."*

*"It's important that it (greenspace) is real, relatable, normal, as we're all human beings with human failings. We all have failings, but it (greenspace) made me realise that it wasn't the end of the world. It was something I had to sort out for myself, but it wasn't the end of the world. I just stopped beating myself up about it - I think that's maybe one of the biggest changes."*

## Case Studies

Case studies are a good way of showing potential participants what others have got out of programmes. Here are some examples that could be used in initial conversations to encourage buy-in:

### Venture Trust Wilderness Journeys for Young People

This video focuses on Venture Trust, a Scottish organisation that supports people experiencing a range of health and wellbeing challenges, including substance use challenges and criminal justice involvement: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bEaKpaNIEic>

### Jackie's Story

The video below focuses on one woman, Jackie. We follow her journey through Venture Trust, her experiences, and the positive impact of participating. This testimonial focuses on prior traumatic experiences, personal growth, and development, so it may be useful to secure buy-in amongst potential attendees who are seeking to improve their wellbeing relating to these areas:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVYTQSgKQww>

### Craig's Story

Below is a case study of a referral pathway from the perspective of a member of staff on an existing greenspace programme. This could be a useful example to share with potential participants to show them what the referral pathway may look like, as well as the preparation that could happen before attending a greenspace programme. It is important to note that this may not be as relevant for organisations supporting participants onto greenspace programmes within their own service, and may be most helpful for thinking about supporting a person onto an existing external programme:

***“The first discussion was had when the alcohol and drug service colleague made an initial enquiry to our programme staff about the suitability of the programme for Craig [pseudonym]. Enquiries from alcohol and drug service staff are common, however, initial enquiries also come in from community mental health colleagues and GPs who are aware of our programme.***

***The initial conversation about the overall suitability of the programme for Craig was positive and we agreed that there was no undue risk to him, staff, or other attendees on the programme. The referrer began discussions with Craig, letting him know about the existence of the programme and exploring with him whether he thought it could be helpful for him. Craig agreed it sounded a good idea and was then able to talk to one of our team directly, alongside a link worker and/or drug/alcohol colleague. Through this, Craig was able to find out more about the programme and what it had to offer. Craig was keen to be referred, so we arranged for necessary referral forms to be filled out, initial programme visits so Craig could meet the staff/volunteers/other attendees and see how it ran, and organised discussions around how Craig was going to travel to/from the programme and any clothing/equipment he needed.”***

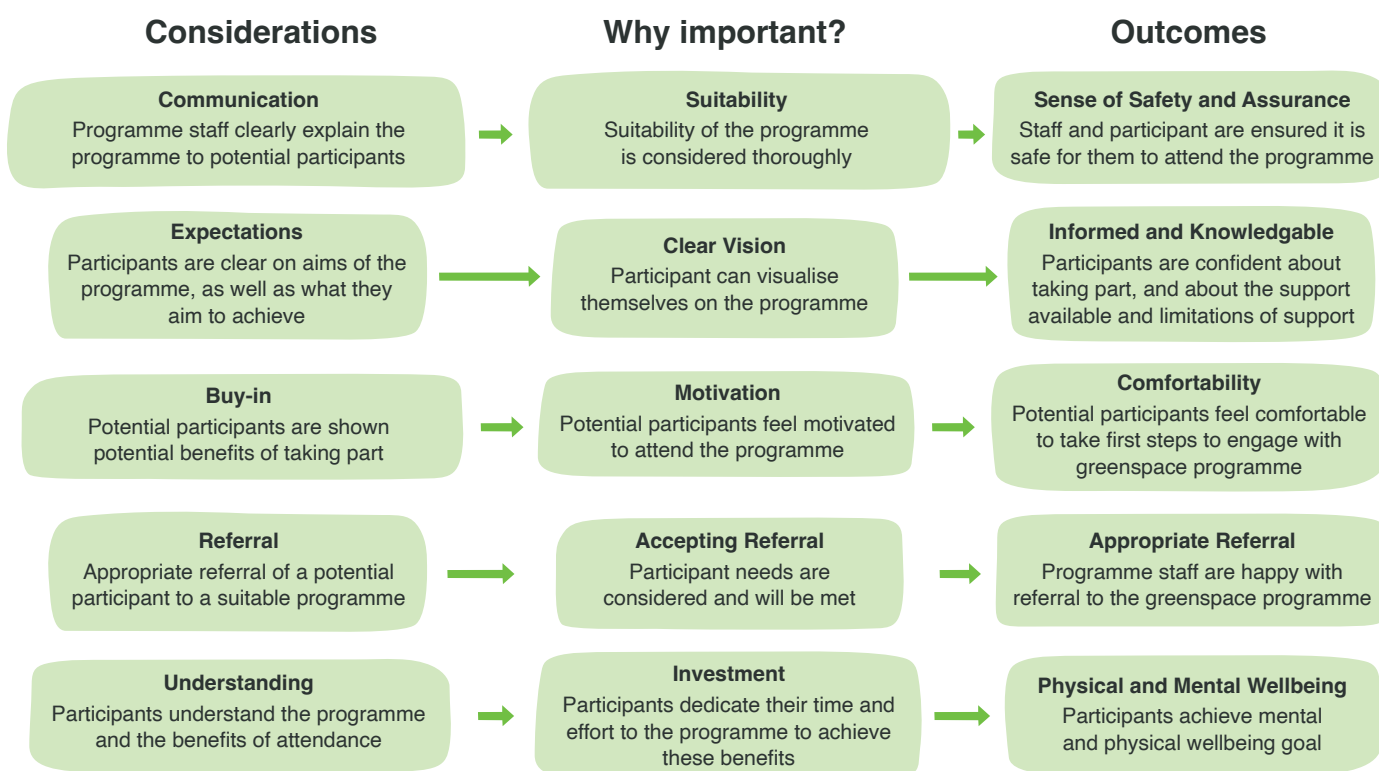


# Personal reflections from the Lived Experience Project Advisory Group

To further aid buy-in for potential participants, we have developed a video of recordings from our 'Lived Experience Advisory Group'. This group was made up of individuals with lived experience of substance use and mental health challenges, who had previously used greenspace as part of their recovery journey. They met throughout the study to discuss our research findings and provide guidance and insight. Using group discussion sessions, this video focuses on the areas the group felt were most important in their improved wellbeing and ongoing recovery. The objective of the video is that it can be shown to potential participants during initial discussions/referral so they can visualise how a greenspace programme could help them: <https://vimeo.com/1066526490>

## Summary

This document has been designed to support referrals for greenspace programmes amongst people with experience of poor mental health and substance use challenges. It shows how buy-in could be secured through use of testimonials from those with similar life experiences and who have benefited from greenspace programmes. Buy-in could also be secured through emphasis on the benefits to wellbeing for potential participants. It is important for those supporting participants to consider barriers to attendance/commitment to a programme to ensure that those from all demographics can participate meaningfully in an activity. Below is a summary flowchart of referral considerations:



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