

## Developing the *Natural* health service in the Highlands and Islands

### Purpose

1. This paper describes the development of the *natural* health service action programme and its application across the Highland and Islands. Members are invited to discuss its further development in the Highlands and Islands.

### Overview

2. The Highlands and Islands are renowned for the quality of their natural environment and the wide range of opportunities they provide for people to be physically active and experience nature. The economic benefits of this have long been recognised. But it is also increasingly clear that these natural assets have the potential to contribute more to a range of health outcomes - helping to tackle health inequalities; addressing issues of social isolation, and supporting the general transformation needed as the population ages towards keeping people healthier for longer.
3. SNH is leading a cross-sector approach to realising this contribution through the **Natural Health Service Action Programme**. Working in partnership with NHS Health Scotland, Forestry Commission Scotland, the Cairngorms National Park Authority and other partners from environment, local authority and health sectors, this programme seeks to build on current activity within the Highlands and Islands and elsewhere in Scotland, together with relevant European experience. It has the potential to make an important contribution to the goals being set by community planning and health and social care partnerships, local outcome improvement plans, and physical activity strategies across the Highlands and Islands.

### Background

4. There is compelling evidence that the natural environment and associated green infrastructure can encourage active lifestyles and promote behaviour change to improve the physical and mental health and well-being of Scotland's people. Well designed and targeted green exercise programmes can address both physical and mental health issues and support action on health inequalities.

- Green exercise activity can help to guard against, treat and manage key health issues such as: depression, coronary heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, obesity and dementia.
- Living close to accessible green space has been related to longer life expectancy, and populations living in greener environments have lower levels of income-related health inequality.<sup>i</sup>
- One in four adults will experience mental health problems at some point in their lives. Outdoor activity and contact with nature can help sleep patterns, reduce stress, improve mood and self-esteem, and provide meaningful social contact.<sup>ii</sup>
- Experience of the natural environment by young people can be life changing in terms of confidence and skills that can enhance job opportunities.<sup>iii</sup>
- Green exercise is often free, accessible and requires minimal specialist equipment. It lends itself to group activities which help build social connections and enhance community cohesion.

5. Maximising the potential of Scotland's outdoors as a health-promoting asset can contribute to Scottish Government priorities for improving public health and reducing

health inequalities. Keeping people healthier for longer can also reduce pressure on traditional health budgets – a key area of preventative spend. Health and environment policy is therefore increasingly seeking to align this activity better to develop what has been termed the *natural health service* to support and complement our existing national health service – see Annex A.

### **The Natural Health Service Action Programme**

6. Working with a range of partners across environment, transport, sport, education and health, SNH has led the development of a *Natural Health Service Action Programme*. Supported by both the health and environment portfolios in Scottish Government and the Deputy Chief Medical Officer, this programme seeks to achieve:

- better targeting of interventions to realise the benefits of new investment in green infrastructure for tackling health inequalities;
- mainstreaming green exercise programmes and projects in health policy and practice; and
- maximising health outcomes from green exercise by developing a joined up approach between health, sport, active travel and environment

7. At the core of the programme are three strategic interventions seeking to co-ordinate and up-scale approaches to increasing physical activity levels and improving mental health and well-being.

- **NHS Greenspace** work with area health boards to mainstream provision, management and use of greenspace in everyday NHS practice, including four pilot local Greenspace for Health partnerships to manage and promote use of the outdoor estate
- **Local Green Health Partnerships** - work with Area Health Boards and local authorities to support the establishment of a series of local Green Health Partnerships to embed green exercise programmes within the priorities and day to day activity of community planning and health and social care partnerships, local outcome improvement plans and physical activity strategies.
- **Green Infrastructure health and well-being** - develop a series of targeted intervention projects to raise levels of physical activity close to areas of greenspace improved as part of the new multi-million European Regional Development Fund - Green Infrastructure Strategic Intervention

Separate workstreams are also being developed which will address national research and evidence needs and co-ordinate information and communications associated with the *natural health service*, as well as supporting the three strategic interventions.

8. The following measures of success have been identified for the programme overall:

- greater public awareness of the benefits & opportunities for contact with nature as part of everyday lives
- an increase in the number of people being active through contact with the nature
- greater awareness among health professionals of the contribution of nature-based health promotion and interventions to physical and mental health and well-being
- Public Health and Health & Social Care sectors routinely embracing nature-based health promotion and interventions across the full range of relevant programmes for prevention, treatment and care
- increased commissioning of, and stable funding for, nature-based health promotion programmes and interventions by health and social care partnerships

- the role of nature-based health promotion and interventions mainstreamed in the planning and use of the public estate

### **Developments in the Highlands and Islands**

9. A number of projects and programmes are already in place across the Highlands and Islands which link well to the natural health action programme, including various health walks, green gyms and conservation therapy programmes (such as the FCS “Branching Out”). Key links to the strategic interventions are currently as follows.

#### *NHS greenspace.*

10. Phase 1 work which sought to improve greenspace at existing hospital grounds included projects at Lawson Memorial Hospital, Migdale, Invergordon and more recently at New Craigs. The latter has now established a NHS greenspace for health partnership as part of phase 2 of the project which is seeking to embed use of the improved grounds for use by patients, staff and visitors.

#### *Local greenhealth partnerships.*

11. Early discussions have been held with Highland CPP partners on the scope to develop a greenhealth partnership that can contribute to the development of the local improvement plan, the health and social care plan and the Active Highlands Strategy. In the Cairngorms, there is scope to build on the [Active Cairngorms](#) strategy led by the Cairngorms National Park Authority, including a proposal to develop an “Active Aviemore” initiative. The Western Isles CPP is considering developing a participatory budget project on the Natural Health Service. On Orkney, one of the outcomes of the North Isles (Locality Plan Area) Participatory Budgeting consultation is to participate in community activities which improve local access.

#### *Green Infrastructure health and well-being*

12. While the [Green Infrastructure Strategic Intervention Fund](#) focuses on larger urban areas, one application in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round is from the Highlands, and future rounds may be open to smaller towns. Also relevant is the new [Community Engagement Challenge Fund](#) which is currently seeking applications from areas which have not applied from the main fund for community engagement projects. For smaller projects, a range of existing sources of funding for paths and greenspace improvements are already being used such as lottery funding, the SRDP Improving Public Access option, the [Woodland in Around Towns \(WIAT\)](#) programme, and the [Community Links Programme](#) run by Sustrans
13. We would welcome further discussion on these and other initiatives that could support the development of the natural health service across the Highlands and Islands. Examples of the type of activity that would be relevant include
  - **Green exercise ‘products’:** Commission an agreed menu of nature based interventions which contribute to local health priorities and targets. This may require the tailoring and up-scaling of existing programmes and capacity from service providers, or negotiating new programmes focused on priority geographic areas or population groups with specific health needs.
  - **Referral and signposting:** Establish a referral and information sharing system that is efficient and effective. Key to scaling up and mainstreaming the use of green health interventions is finding practical ways to enable health practitioners to make

use of the services available in the area and overcome barriers and time pressures in signposting or accessing nature based services that might benefit their patients.

- **Co-ordination and added value:** Better integration with physical activity and lifestyle programmes and initiatives in the Partnership area (e.g. Community Sports Hubs; Active Schools; Active travel initiatives; Social prescribing/community referral initiatives etc.) to include, or increase, nature based programmes and information on what they offer.
- **Physical Activity Pathway:** Adaptation of the Physical Activity Pathway (brief advice and brief intervention) to offer tailored and accessible local information for the public on opportunities to be more active in the outdoors.
- **Promotion:** co-ordinated communication products for the public on the local opportunities to be active in the outdoors and the range of organisations and initiatives available to encourage individuals to benefit from nature based activities.
- **Targeted interventions in green infrastructure:** Creation of new, and improvements to existing, paths and greenspace resources in and around disadvantaged communities

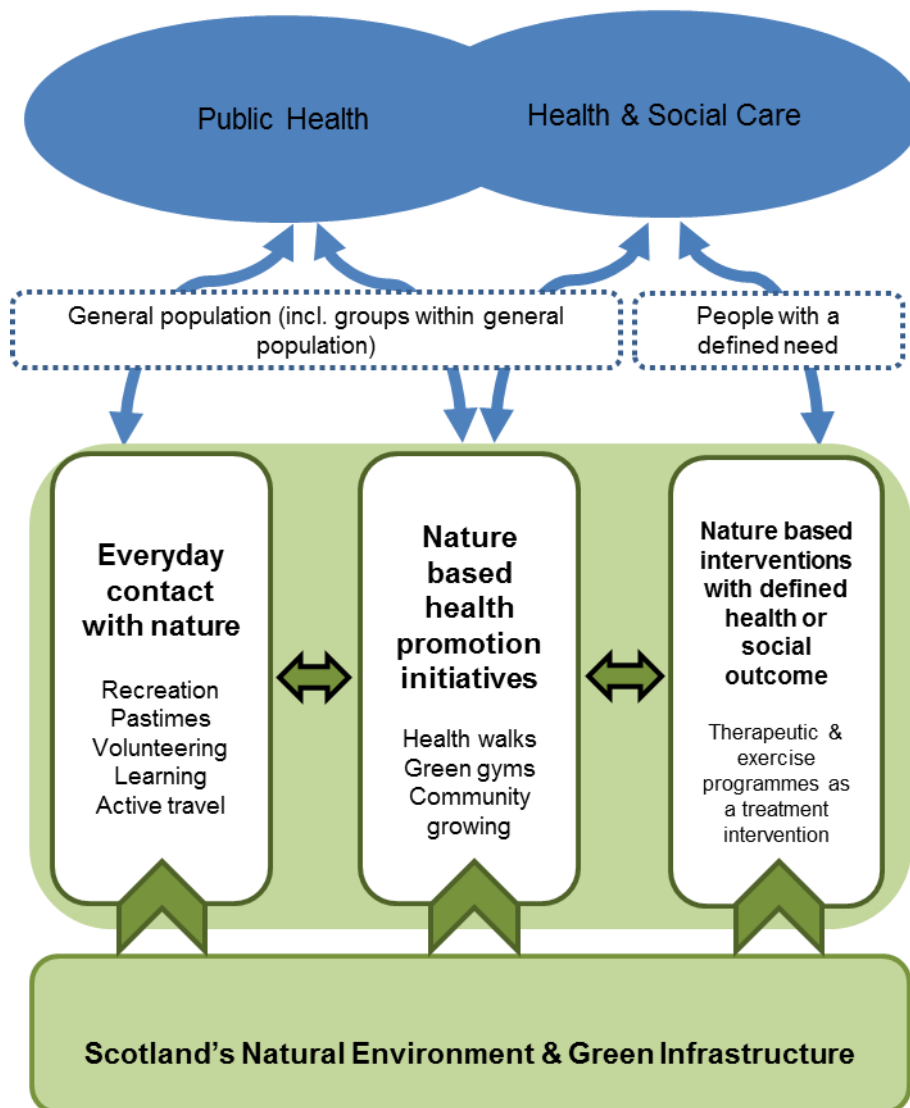
## Recommendation

14. Members are asked 1) to note and support the development of the natural health service work and to 2) discuss its further development in the Highlands and Islands, in particular the issues and opportunities:

- to link this work with other relevant projects and programmes addressing health inequalities; social isolation and promoting healthy lifestyles and
- to embed the key elements of the **natural health service action programme** in the work of Community Planning Partnerships and Health and Social Care Partnerships

**Scottish Natural Heritage**  
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## Annex A - The natural health service concept



Realising the health benefits of the natural environment and associated green infrastructure is dependent on:

- improving the supply, quality and accessibility of these assets, particular in disadvantaged areas or groups suffering health inequalities;
- increasing the number of people who regularly engage with the natural environment; and
- the extent to which the benefits are recognised in health policy and practice

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/projects/natural-solutions-to-tackling-health-inequalities>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/physical-activity-sport-and-exercise/>

<sup>iii</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/182177/SDC\\_IYPL\\_report.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/182177/SDC_IYPL_report.pdf)