

Food growing on prescription available to all by 2030



A submission from Sustain to the National Food Strategy call for evidence National Food Strategy:

We believe that a universal offer to all NHS patients, via social prescribing, to be able to access a care farm or community food garden via referral from a health care practitioner, would benefit people's health and the food and farming sector, while creating savings to health budgets.

The evidence that food growing and farming improves health and wellbeing is clear; not only access to nature, but the process of growing food and being part of a productive system have positive impacts on healthⁱ. This is supported by 2016 Kings Fund report which calls for gardening to be integrated into health policy and practiceⁱⁱ.

There are hundreds of care farms and many hundreds more community food gardens that not only produce food but also deliver health outcomes and provide training and jobs. Some are commissioned by NHS, with most grant funded and therefore unable to provide a consistent service via local referral agenciesⁱⁱⁱ.

Investment in a programme to create links to the health service, would benefit farms and community food gardens, helping them meet wider social objectives. Providing income streams would enable the farms and gardens to offer a cost effective service for patients, reducing dependency on grant funding, and potentially saving millions in GP time and prescription drugs.

Why now?

This idea is not new, but it is timely as the NHS is driving forward a preventative health agenda to tackling the rising cost of mental health interventions and medications (the latter costing over £200 m a year). Their approach includes social prescribing, with investment in infrastructure via 1000 newly funded link workers. This needs to be met with supply of local food growing spaces and farms, to offer a destination for referrals, linking health and food agendas.

Natural England have championed the wider 'access to nature' as a pivotal part of this agenda, particularly in the delivery of mental health.^{iv} This has influenced the DEFRA 25 year plan, leading to a £1.4m investment to upscale the capacity of the care farming sector^v. This project focuses on therapeutic approaches looking at growing demand and supply simultaneously. This now needs to be widened out to other types of projects that can place food and farming in the future vision of social prescribing.

What impact would it have?

Reviews, such as Sustain's Growing Health campaign, show evidence across health issues – from dementia, stress, depression, obesity and more^{vi}, with particular benefits for mental health^{vii}. More generally exposure to nature has been shown to improve population level health, with many recommending green prescriptions^{viii} and studies showing cost effectiveness for these interventions.

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Food Growing on Prescription would give more people access to nature using the social prescribing model to improve health and increase local food production –in productive or community settings. Whilst the level of food production may not always be at scale, it will engage people in restoring and enhancing the environment, creates understanding of agro-ecological food production and help

organisations in the sector. Importantly it embeds food growing in the future of this health service provision model, joining up health and food and farming policy with some of the future savings to the NHS potentially diverted to support food and farming organisations.

Social Prescribing is a new mechanism, based on a tried and tested concept – that the health service can work with other sectors to deliver health outcomes. Although in its early stages, it's showing good outcomes and return on investment. For example a recent study found that social prescriptions reduced GP appointments to one fifth^x.

What needs to happen next?

The development of social prescribing is a key opportunity not to be missed. To date there have been local pilots, but we have not seen bigger momentum that would be created by a country-wide scheme to address supply and demand, so ALL healthcare workers know about and can refer to these schemes.

There is a risk that food growing will miss out on this area of opportunity, as the sector does not have the infrastructure or support to take up the opportunities presented, unlike sectors such as the Arts and Sports, who have the support of their relevant Councils.

Currently there are community growing hotspots in towns and cities, and various national initiatives, but we need investment in better infrastructure across England to improve consistency of provision and messaging to CCGs and link workers.

A significant amount of pump-priming sector (e.g. £5 -10k x221 x CCGs = £1-2m) is needed for the wider community food growing food and farming sector to be recognised alongside other key deliver sectors. This could be used to:

- Identify gaps and increase local capacity where needed.
- Pilot infrastructure and funding needs at a CCG level to ensure Food Growing on Prescription can happen and the services have capacity to support the patients.
- Making a business case, through sufficient evaluation, for sustainable funding streams for delivery via the NHS, which would ultimately be offset by savings within health budgets.
- Ensuring link workers have access to training and resources to ensure they understand the opportunities in food growing and farming organisations locally.

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List of references and links to supporting evidence

ⁱ Benefits of food growing for health & wellbeing – overview of the evidence , Sustain, 2014
https://www.sustainweb.org/resources/files/reports/GH_Benefits_food_growing_for_health.pdf

ⁱⁱ Gardens and Health, Kings Fund, 2016 <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/gardens-and-health>

ⁱⁱⁱ Food Growing on Prescription, Sustain, 2019
https://www.sustainweb.org/publications/food_growing_on_prescription/

^{iv} A review of nature-based interventions for mental health care, Natural England, 2016
<http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/4513819616346112>

^v <https://naturalengland.blog.gov.uk/2019/05/30/launching-the-growing-care-farming-project/>

^{vi} Benefits of food growing for health & wellbeing – overview of the evidence , Sustain, 2014
https://www.sustainweb.org/resources/files/reports/GH_Benefits_food_growing_for_health.pdf

^{vii} Factsheets, Sustain https://www.sustainweb.org/resources/files/reports/GH_Stress_Factsheet.pdf
https://www.sustainweb.org/resources/files/reports/Dementia_Factsheet.pdf

^{viii} The health benefits of the great outdoors: A systematic review and meta-analysis of greenspace exposure and health outcomes. Bennett & Jones (2018) <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29982151>

^{ix} Feel Better Outside Feel better Inside, MIND 2013
<https://www.mind.org.uk/media/336359/Feel-better-outside-feel-better-inside-report.pdf>

^x Review of Evidence assessing impact of social prescribing, University of Westminster, 2017
<https://westminsterresearch.westminster.ac.uk/download/e18716e6c96cc93153baa8e757f8feb602fe99539fa281433535f89af85fb550/297582/review-of-evidence-assessing-impact-of-social-prescribing.pdf>