

Venture Trust

Outdoor Therapy 2021-22

Year One Impact Report: Pioneering Outdoor Therapy in Scotland

Easy Read Version

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Contents

Introduction: Alastair Pringle, CEO.....	Page 2
Foreword: Katarina Horrox, Clinical Manager.....	Page 3
What’s the need?.....	Page 4
Our journey to Outdoor Therapy.....	Page 5
The Outdoor Therapy Service.....	Page 8
Where we work.....	Page 10
Our clients.....	Page 11
Our impact.....	Page 13
Future plans.....	Page 16
Feedback from clients and referral partners.....	Page 18
Photos.....	Page 21
Thank you.....	Page 23

Introduction

Venture Trust's new Outdoor Therapy Service supports people to gain the mental wellness, stability and confidence needed to lead happier, healthier and more fulfilling lives.

Outdoor Therapy strongly aligns with our vision that no-one should be left behind because they are struggling with adversity, inequality or vulnerability. The service builds on 40 years experience of our work harnessing the power of the outdoors to deliver personal development programmes.

This service aims to support those who cannot, or struggle to, engage with traditional therapeutic services. At a time when the impact of Covid-19 has further increased waiting lists, need is not being met by existing service provision, and long-term treatment options are lacking.

Whilst Covid-19 has had a profound impact on everyone's mental health and wellbeing, it has also brought into focus the benefits of being outdoors.

Venture Trust's Outdoor Therapy Service combines the full range of these benefits with professional therapy to improve mental health and wellbeing.

One year on from the launch, we are delighted to provide this report on the service. We would like to take this opportunity to thank our supporters who have enabled the service to run for the last year. Currently, based on funding, it is available to young people and veterans only, however, our aim is to further grow and develop the service so many more people who need it can benefit.

Alastair Pringle, CEO

Foreword

The Venture Trust Outdoor Therapy Service is an important new service aimed at reaching clients who can sometimes have difficulty accessing traditional clinical settings. Our accredited counsellors and therapists meet with clients in their local outdoor spaces; these include woodland parks, football pitches and coastlines.

Through this practice of meeting clients in shared, mutually accessible spaces, we endeavour to open up access to therapy. For our clients, who have often experienced severe adversity and trauma, meeting them in their own community may be what allows them to take the step to engage in therapy. Furthermore, working outdoors allows them to access the varied benefits of working therapeutically in nature, with the metaphors, embodied experiences and regulating effects that can occur.

Our service is highly committed to maintaining an ethical therapeutic practice in which safety and risk are given careful consideration. This means that our counsellors adhere to the ethical guidelines of their accrediting body; they are also trained in outdoor facilitation, as well as in outdoor first aid and in keeping with the highest level (level three) of the professional outdoor therapy practice guidelines, as outlined in the Institute of Outdoor Learning's Statement of Good Practice on Outdoor Mental Health Interventions and Outdoor Therapy*.

Over the last year we have seen how, through our work in the Venture Trust Outdoor Therapy Service, our clients have been able to connect with themselves, with their communities and with nature in new and meaningful ways.

*Richards, K. et al. (2019). Outdoor mental health interventions. Institute for Outdoor Learning statement of good practice. Carlisle, England: Institute for Outdoor Learning. (outdoor-learning.org)

What's the need?

Scotland is facing a mental health crisis. Publicly funded support for mental health services are under significant pressure with many experiencing long waiting times and not receiving the support they need when they need it.

We know that people who are already struggling are more likely to experience poor mental health. Public Health Scotland say that “adults living in the most deprived areas are approximately twice as likely to have common mental health problems as those in the least deprived areas (22% versus 11%)”.

Likewise, young people are also hit hard by mental health pressure with, the Prince's Trust 2022 Youth Index showing that 48% of young people report that they have experienced poor mental health.

The Covid-19 pandemic has compounded this situation, with a significant increase in reported levels of anxiety across the population. Scotland's services are further stretched and under-resourced. In addition, the Mental Health Foundation Scotland reports the impacts on mental health and wellbeing are likely to last much longer than the physical impacts of Covid-19. The problem is not going away any time soon.

At Venture Trust, many of our clients have multiple and complex needs. Prior to the pandemic, already 70% of our participants required support for poor mental health. Now we are seeing 90% of participants reporting mental health needs.

The overall result is that those living in the most socio-economically deprived areas, with some of the greatest challenges in life, risk not receiving the support they need. There is a critical and growing need for additional mental health programmes which will enhance existing public services.

Our journey to Outdoor Therapy

The use of the outdoors has been central to Venture Trust's work from its beginnings in 1982. This has been underpinned by our belief that natural environments, and the experiences they can offer, are conducive to enabling people to step out of their day to day lives and consider and work towards life changes. We work in the outdoors and wild areas of Scotland to create time and space away for personal development, as well as to harness the restorative benefits of being amongst nature.

The benefits of being outdoors on mental health have been long understood but little utilised in a clinical sense. Whilst we value traditional approaches to therapy, we recognise that for some clients the usual offer of office-based support can seem daunting. This is particularly true for those sensitive to dynamics of authority and institutional power. Support within an outdoor setting can rebalance perceptions of hierarchy in a neutral location. It can also offer a sense of perspective and scale; invite personal discovery; and provide opportunities for appreciation of an individual's capabilities as well as for the natural environment.

In 2016, we delivered our first therapeutic wilderness journeys for 14-18-year-olds experiencing adversity with multiple barriers to accessing services.

Through our Venture Mòr wilderness therapy model we provided an effective form of support for young people, leaning on practices long-established in North America and Australia. It used an integrated model which combined psychological therapy, delivered by trained clinicians, with time outdoors and outdoor learning. Many clients commented on the value of time away in this new environment, and it offered new perspectives which could be integrated through the accompaniment of professional therapeutic practitioners.

In early 2020 we commissioned an independent feasibility study of an Outdoor Therapy Service for young people using this model. The report concluded that Venture Trust's proposed service would be an effective intervention to improve mental health and wellbeing for this group.

Progression to launch such an Outdoor Therapy Service was stalled when the pandemic hit in March 2020, particularly as lockdowns limited face-to-face meetings. However, through our adapted services (Be Connected Wellbeing Hub) we were able to provide a more traditional counselling service - digitally delivered in most cases - to support clients.

At the start of 2021 our Outdoor Therapy Service resumed, and our therapists began meeting people face-to-face outdoors, restrictions allowing. During this time a client panel from Venture Trust also supported in the co-production of the Outdoor Therapy Service, in particular with the development of an outdoor therapy group.

We were delighted to open up the Outdoor Therapy Service to external referrals and formally launch this pioneering service for Scotland in March 2021.

The Outdoor Therapy Service

Our Outdoor Therapy service offers weekly 1:1 sessions with an accredited counsellor or therapist in an outdoor space that is local to the client. We currently work with young people aged 16 to 25 years old and with veterans of any age, with a focus on those from areas identified as deprived in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. Our current service delivery is outlined below:

Referral & Assessment Stage:

There is an initial assessment process with a therapist. This will usually take the form of a meeting where the client will be introduced to the service, and they will share what has brought them to therapy.

Together with the therapist, they will establish if the service is a good fit for them. In the instance that it is, a therapist will be allocated to them.

Subsequently, a first session will be planned.

Outdoor Therapy Delivery:

12 weekly outdoor therapy sessions are offered initially. Clients are supported by a professional counsellor or therapist to explore their thoughts, feelings and behaviours so that they can better understand themselves. The natural space may act as a conduit for expressing their feelings, perhaps through metaphors or expressive creative activities. Sessions are delivered year-round and in a range of weather conditions.

If a client requires more than 12 sessions, then these are offered by the therapist, with regular engagement with the client's original referrer to ensure holistic ongoing support. As a part of the service, clients may be offered the chance to take part in group sessions alongside individual work.

Exit:

When the client is ready to be exited from the service, we work towards a carefully considered ending. We may also utilise our extensive partnership network to forward refer them to services or agencies which best meet their needs in that moment.

Where we work

We work with clients in local outdoor spaces, these include parks, community gardens and beaches, but may also be a football pitch or the wetlands next to a housing estate. We endeavour to meet our clients where they feel able to be met.

Experience has taught us that this can allow clients to access therapy. In this way, they are able to connect with themselves, with others and, perhaps, nature. They may also build a connection to place and community – a natural place and resource that they can return to.

Here are some examples of places we have worked with our clients:

- Blackford Hill (Edinburgh)
- Hailes Quarry Park (Edinburgh)
- West Sands Beach (St Andrews)
- Pittencrieff Park (Dunfermline)
- Beecraigs Country Park (West Lothian)
- Lennoxlove House (East Lothian)
- Pentland Hills (Edinburgh/Midlothian)

Our clients

The Outdoor Therapy Service primarily works with young people (16-25 years old) and veterans.

In 2021-22, 70% of our clients were from the young person cohort, 25% were veterans and the remaining 5% were clients who do not fall into either of these categories as they had been part of our previous Be Connected support.

The gender split of our clients over the year was 63% male, 35% female and 2% selecting another option, however this imbalance was due to the make-up of our veterans cohort last year, which were all male, our young person cohort was an equal split between male and female.

Our clients have come to us with a range of different personal circumstances. We have seen a fairly even spread of those who are students (31%), in work (23%), unemployed (25%) and on long-term sick (18%), we have also worked with some clients who are retired (3%).

The Outdoor Therapy Service uses the CORE (Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation) system to measure the changes in clients' mental health throughout their treatment. CORE is an externally validated tool to measure global psychological health, tested with the UK population, and NHS Primary/Secondary care.

When clients are first referred, the 34-item CORE-Outcome Measure (CORE-OM) is used to provide a baseline of their psychological health at the beginning of treatment. It measures: 'subjective wellbeing', 'problems & symptoms', 'life function', and 'risk & harm'. Responses are designed to be averaged by the practitioner to produce a mean score to indicate the level of current psychological global distress.

At the end of treatment, the CORE-OM is repeated to give a measure of end-to-end change in psychological health.

Of those we worked with in 2021-22, 75% of our clients reported a total baseline CORE-OM score of 68 or higher, signifying that their psychological level of distress was either moderate to severe or severe, with 45% of clients considered severe.

Common to all those we work with is experience of multiple adverse childhood experiences, including relational and shock trauma. These experiences will have impacted on their physical and mental wellbeing, and clients often have a dual diagnosis. Clients may have attracted diagnoses, such as, personality disorder, schizophrenia, post-traumatic stress disorder, amongst other things.

As a result, the therapeutic work commonly focuses on addressing issues such as: depression, anxiety and stress, loneliness and social isolation, relationships and family difficulties, trauma and grief, self-esteem, suicidal ideation, violence and aggression, problem substance abuse, self-harm and risky behaviours.

Our Outdoor Therapy Service is currently available to clients from Edinburgh, the Lothians and Fife. Most of our clients are located in Edinburgh (42%) with a fairly even spread across the other local authorities: East Lothian (14%), Fife (11%), West Lothian (11%), Midlothian (8%). We have also worked with clients from local authorities outside of our operating area (14%) – these clients first engaged during our Covid delivery which was based online.

We primarily work with clients who live in areas identified as deprived in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) – 34% of our clients come from the 20% most deprived areas in Scotland – these are clients who would usually face multiple barriers to access clinical therapy services.

Our impact

Outcomes of therapeutic intervention are highly individualised, however some of the results we would expect for this kind of service include:

- Reduced interpersonal distress – e.g., anxiety, depression.
- Improved interpersonal relationships – e.g., interaction with family and friends, communication.
- Reduced social problems – e.g., antisocial behaviours.
- Improved behavioural function – e.g., handling frustration, impulsivity.

The numbers

In 2021-22, we worked with 63 clients delivering a total of 690 one-to-one therapy sessions. This equates to an average of 11 sessions per client over the course of the year. We also ran an outdoor therapy group in conjunction with this, which clients of the outdoor therapy service could access. Most of our clients had a meaningful level of engagement with the service, 86% (54 clients) had at least 4 sessions with one of our therapists. This level of engagement is important as we feel this is where clients could begin to see the impact of the service on their mental health.

This year saw 45 clients complete their engagement with the Outdoor Therapy Service. Of those who completed, the average number of sessions they had engaged in was 15. This is above the number of sessions we originally thought would be required by our clients, however, as this service is bespoke and based on the client need, we have adapted to support them for as long as is suitable.

The impact on mental health

As previously described, our client's mental health is monitored throughout their time working with us using the CORE-OM system. We gather scoring of these measures when they first join the service, and when they exit. This is to give a measure of end-to-end change in their psychological health.

If a client sees an improvement to their average CORE-OM score (which is scored 1-5) of 0.2-0.5 points, they are classed making a small improvement, an improvement 0.5+ indicates a meaningful improvement.

Early results on the change the service is making to our clients is very encouraging. 82% of clients, who have successfully left the service after receiving at least 4 therapy sessions, reported an overall improvement in their Core-OM score, with 59% of our clients reporting a 'meaningful' improvement to their level of psychological distress.

We have also seen a correlation between the number of sessions a client has and the impact this has on their CORE-OM score. Although those with a limited number of sessions (4-10) have seen some improvement to their psychological health, we have seen a more significant improvement to those who have had at least 10 sessions. Those who have had 17 session or more have not seen the same level of improvement compared to those with 10-16 (67% seeing improvement vs 91%), this is because these would be clients who have presented with more need, and therefore we would not necessarily expect them to make the same overall improvements.

We have also seen promising results on the extent to which our clients CORE-OM scores have improved during their time with the service. The graphs below show the changes made in client's level of psychological distress between their

baseline score and when they exited the service. The graph to the left shows that 64% of clients were between moderate and severe when they began engaging with the service. After our intervention, this number reduced to 24% (when they came to exit the service).

The graph to the right maps the clients baseline scores against their score at exit, if they are in the light blue area of the chart, they have seen an improvement in their level of psychological distress, the dark blue area would indicate a decline. As you can see, the majority are in the light blue area, with many showing a significant improvement. Of those who had not improved, the results for these clients show that their CORE-OM scores remained very similar to their baseline score, there was no significant reduction in their mental health.

Future plans

We anticipate the growing need for mental health support to be further exacerbated by the current economic challenges facing people across Scotland, disproportionately affecting those who are already struggling. It is increasingly important that accessible therapy services are available for those who need it.

Our aim is for as many people to benefit from Venture Trust's Outdoor Therapy Service as possible, and to expand the service to a wider geography and larger client base, continuing to target areas of multiple deprivation with higher rates of poor mental health, and those who would otherwise struggle to access therapy.

We will build on our outdoor therapy group work and provide regular therapeutic group sessions alongside individual appointments. We also plan to develop and reintroduce wilderness therapy programmes in conjunction with this service.

In support of this, as sector leaders, we will develop the workforce and outdoor therapy practices nationally through offering training and development for professionals, as well as bespoke training and consultation for organisations looking to implement Outdoor Therapy Services. We will provide high quality placements for trainee student counsellors. They will be supported by a dedicated practice educator in developing their professional outdoor therapy practice.

We have received positive feedback and support from clients, referrers, therapists and outdoor practitioners and we will continue to work with others to progress the profession of Outdoor Therapy. We will grow professional

networks, undertake research, and share learning and best practice nationally and beyond.

Feedback from clients and referral partners

“The client finds it difficult to engage in a clinical setting, I think the outdoors environment will work better for them. This is especially because this service meets them where they’re at.”

Statutory service for young people (referral partner)

“The client doesn’t get out much and is very isolated. I think working with a therapist outdoors will help them connect again with the outside world, especially after lockdown.”

Ex-service third sector organisation (referral partner)

“Having someone to talk to was really valuable. It helped me voice what was worrying me and having the perspective of my therapist helped me understand my emotions and get to the root of what was causing me to feel so down at times.”

Paul (client)

“Being able to walk and talk whilst being in nature was something I really valued about outdoor therapy. I found this more comfortable than sitting in a room, and my experience with the outdoor therapy service has been more positive than my previous encounters with therapy. I felt safe and comfortable opening up with my therapist in this environment”

James (client)

“The outdoor therapy helped me establish a healthy routine, and it also got me outside and more comfortable spending time in nature.”

Kirsty (client)

“The outdoor therapy made me realise how beneficial being outside is, and how much I enjoy it. It gave me the space to talk about how I have been feeling and allowed me to come to terms with and better understand those emotions.”

Andrew (client)

“I enjoyed not being sat in a room, sitting talking. The outdoor therapy meant I could get out of my house and appreciate the world around me. It gave me space to think about myself, my thoughts and my feelings, and the presence of nature meant I felt more grounded and able to reflect on my answers before voicing them.”

Lorna (client)

“Being outside provides an open space that can strengthen the grounding process, which can be highly supportive to those who have gone through trauma.”

Sally (Outdoor Therapist)

“I have tried counselling before and didn’t find it useful at all, it felt like an interview with the person sitting opposite me, asking questions, writing stuff down and then judging me. I feel far more relaxed walking alongside someone than I do sitting face to face.”

Jenny (client)

Client names have been anonymised for confidentiality.

Images



Image Description: Two people walk along a path in a park. They are facing away from the camera and are surrounded by trees.



Image Description: A picnic bench in a park overlooking the Edinburgh skyline.



Image Description: Two people sit side by side on a park bench. The image is cropped so you can only see their torso and hands.



Image Description: Two people are walking side on a hill. There are trees and a beach in the background.

Thank you

We would like to sincerely thank all those who have funded the Outdoor Therapy Service. These include: Scottish Government Health Directorate, Armed Forces Covenant (Positive Pathways), The Veterans' Foundation, Cordis Charitable Trust, The Nancie Massey Charitable Trust, The Pixel Fund, UCB Community Health Fund and every single one of our individual supporters - you are vital to the work we do.