

## Case Study

# Growing New Roots – reflections on our therapeutic outdoor wellbeing group

Brighton and Hove Food Partnership

### The Vision

Growing New Roots (GNR) was an 8-week group offering therapeutic outdoor activities at beautiful chalk grassland sites in the project area.

The project targeted participants with at least one mental health condition. Growing New Roots aimed to improve their wellbeing whilst learning about South Downs heritage and conservation of chalk grassland and build up confidence to visit independently.

### Background

Coastal towns within the project area have high levels of social deprivation and poor mental health.

Many people who would benefit from time in nature face multiple barriers accessing it, e.g. not knowing where to go or having confidence to try somewhere new; no car, or anxiety around public transport; difficulties leaving the house without the accountability of the group or the company of others.



*Gathering flowers and friendship.* Credit: Rosie Linford, Brighton & Hove Food Partnership

### What we achieved

We ran 12 groups in total, reaching over 180 people. Sessions offered mindfulness, nature identification, walks, foraging, whittling, practical conservation, farm visits, creative writing, and a sense of community. Groups were supportive and inclusive, helping people to feel comfortable with each other and at home in the landscape.

Feedback from participants showed significant improvements with 83% improving wellbeing and 92% more likely to visit nature more often (using Warwick Edinburgh measurement scale).

The impact for some extended years. After groups ended, some participants continued meeting, forming lasting, supportive friendships. Various participants went on to return to work, some after extended absence due to poor mental health. Even years later, many still describe Growing New Roots as a main contributing factor in their recovery.

*“This has helped in ways medication and therapy couldn’t: being outdoors, connecting with others face-to-face, and learning new things have all built my confidence. The leaders struck the perfect balance of encouragement without pressure, creating a space where we could have a break, connect, and do something meaningful together.”*

## How we did it

Our groups were led in a warm and welcoming way, focusing on 'being' rather than 'doing'. Activities were optional, giving participants autonomy. For some, simply getting to the group was a major achievement, and they needed time to settle, refuel and rest. Others relaxed more easily by having an activity to do.

A relatively large team (x2 staff and x2 support volunteers for up to 12 participants) helped to manage the diversity in the groups, allowing for the group to split in two at times, to manage different needs.

Other elements that contributed to our project's success included offering minibus transport to participants, providing kit to help with accessibility e.g. walking poles, waterproof jackets, and having a backup indoor space in case of wet weather.

Whilst we offered a supportive environment with encouragement to share, we also agreed boundaries as a group. Whilst many found the group 'therapeutic,' we were clear that we weren't offering group therapy.

“ **As a middle-aged, queer and neurodivergent trans guy, I struggle to find safe, welcoming spaces. Growing New Roots' understated approach signalled inclusiveness and understanding. All-gender toilets, pronouns, name tags, snacks, mindfulness breaks, and friendly facilitation were thoughtfully provided. This is rare.** ”

Growing New Roots participant



## Further information

The Brighton and Hove Food Partnership [bhfood.org.uk](https://bhfood.org.uk) continue to run outdoor wellbeing groups, with a new focus on food and farming on the South Downs and shared meals as part of the session.

## Lessons learnt

Delivering the groups from one set location is far easier than multiple venues. Although delivering groups in East and West Sussex extended our reach, it also made logistics much more complex.

The Brighton and Hove Food Partnership is a well-connected organisation with a wide reach. By promoting the groups on our social media, newsletter and working with mental health organisations, we were able to reach more people than anticipated. Most groups ran at full capacity with a waiting list.

We worked closely with other charities delivering similar groups. This helped influence our content, delivery style, share learnings and offer a reflective space. It also helped us signpost participants to similar groups when ours ended.

Being clear about our eligibility criteria for the group was very important. Inviting people to attend whose support needs were beyond what we could manage would have been problematic for everybody. It was hard to turn people away who were desperate to attend, but occasionally we had to.

## The Changing Chalk Partnership

Led by the National Trust, Changing Chalk was a four-year partnership project from 2022 to 2026 working to reverse the ecological decline of chalk grassland in the eastern South Downs, bring histories to life, and connect local communities to the internationally significant landscape on their doorstep.

[www.nationaltrust.org.uk/changing-chalk-partnership](https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/changing-chalk-partnership)



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