

THERAPI Project

Improving health and well-being in Thames Chase



THERAPI stands for Tackling Health through Environmental Regeneration and Public Involvement and represents a concerted effort, by public bodies, health organisations and charities, to promote the use of Thames Chase Community Forest (TCCF) for improved health and well-being. Located on the urban fringe of east London and south west Essex, TCCF provides 44 square miles of accessible green space for local communities to explore and enjoy. THERAPI has successfully implemented an holistic green health programme, enabling people from an urban environment to discover for themselves the healing effects green open spaces have on mind, body and soul.

objectives

- To change health professionals' views of the green environment so that they see it as a positive resource with proven therapeutic benefits for their clients.
- To support local activities which improve people's psychological and physical health and well-being within a green environment.
- To carry out research on the health and well-being benefits of involvement in the countryside.

actions

- THERAPI developed and implemented a green health programme that includes:
- Eco-therapy: Participants spend the day in the woods with a guide who leads them through a series of sensory experiences, inviting them to walk barefoot, observe/touch/smell the flora and explore their connection with nature.
 - Community Park: extensive community consultation on the Mardyke estate in South Hornchurch led to the establishment of a partnership with the local PCT and Havering Sports Department, and the development of a new park.
 - Green summer play scheme: children visiting the new Community Park are offered sporting activities and games, the opportunity to create a wildlife and vegetable garden, work with artists and musicians and eat a healthy lunch.
 - Therapeutic gardens: a specialist landscape design company was brought in to design two new therapeutic gardens at health centres in Dagenham and the Havering and Barking area, and in six other grounds. Created to high sustainable standards, the gardens are of great benefit to people and wildlife.
 - Arts: a community arts company works with local people to produce environmental art around the seasons and the elements.
 - Health and fitness: THERAPI provided map packs and guided walks in the countryside, and a Fit n' Green scheme to provide the community with the opportunity to get involved in local conservation projects.

achievements

- THERAPI raised over £250k in matched funding and delivered 11 projects.
- Local health professionals have a greater understanding of the validity of "Green Health", and now include it in their strategic objectives.
- North East London Mental Health Trust (NELMHT) made the THERAPI project officer an honorary consultant in recognition of his work.
- Health Improvements: Fit'n'Green and Walking for Health projects have been particularly successful in improving participants' mental and physical health.

background

Thames Chase Community Forest (TCCF) is one of twelve national community forests that provides green space on the urban fringe. Covering 44 square miles in east London and south west Essex, TCCF aims to look after existing woodland, enhance the natural environment, improve accessibility, and work with local communities to help them take advantage of healthy living opportunities on their doorstep. In its 15 year history, TCCF has doubled the amount of publicly accessible countryside in the area and created miles of hard surface footpaths.

REACT (Regeneration Through Environmental Action) was established by the Countryside Agency in 2001 to explore the community forest approach to environmental enhancement in areas covered by Area Based Initiatives (ABIs). Funded by REACT, THERAPI began as a three year project, supported by a steering group of health professionals, local authorities, Countryside Agency representatives and Thames Chase staff, which took an innovative approach to influencing local healthcare through partnership working. The partnership continues to be a strong influence on future healthcare policy at regional and national level.

New initiatives under development include a programme for cardiac rehabilitation patients, a range of ecotherapy activities for both the severely mentally ill and those suffering mild to medium mental health conditions. The Countryside Agency invited THERAPI to act as consultants for the Thames Gateway development on health and the green environment. The project has also produced a report on best practice for the Community Forest Group, which aims to help other projects understand and overcome the cultural differences within local authorities, and the health and environment sectors.

quotes

"Many people with mental health problems, or those who have been hurt or damaged, feel disconnected with society. THERAPI shows how nature can be used as a healing tool to reconnect people, first with nature and then with the human environment. THERAPI shows how this can be adapted to suit people whatever their age." Lindsay Royal, Head of Psychology for Barking, Dagenham and Havering NELMHT.

"The countryside can be seen as a great outpatient department whose therapeutic value is yet to be realised". Dr William Bird, GP, and inventor of the "Green Gym".

partners

Countryside Agency
Havering Council
Barking & Dagenham Council
North East London Mental Health Trust
Havering PCT, Barking & Dagenham PCT
London and Essex Wildlife Trusts

funding

Countryside Agency
Havering Council
Barking and Dagenham Council
Havering PCT
Barking and Dagenham PCT

lessons learnt

- The project officer felt that attempting to set up eleven separate projects was perhaps too ambitious and that more time was needed.
- There was more resistance than expected from senior managers in the health service, which took a long time to overcome. A major factor in winning their confidence was change at national government level, most notably the Wanless Report, which set out the serious health and social problems caused by lack of exercise and how preventative work was needed to avert a long-term health crisis.