



Sustainable models of funding Nature-based Social Prescribing in Lancashire and South Cumbria: a case study

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Introduction

Sustainable funding for Nature-based Social Prescribing (NbSP) is critical for its success. As an economically and environmentally savvy non-medicalised intervention, NbSP has the potential to improve physical and mental wellbeing, reduce social isolation and increase the social mobility of participants (Menhas et al., 2024; Santos-Tapis et al., 2025; Bertolli, 2025; Edwards et al., 2025). Although consensus exists on the need for NbSP in the literature, consistent policy level support at Integrated Care System (ICS) across the U.K. is lacking despite SP being embedded within contemporary NHS policy and practice (NHSE, 2019, 2023; Niebieski, 2024; LOCAL 2024). This is troubling given the extensive, albeit temporary, investment in Green SP (GSP) by the government in the ‘Test and Learn Sites’ (DHSC, 2020), the national roll out of GSP (NHSE, 2023) and positive impact upon wellbeing for many (Haywood et al., 2024). People who could benefit from NbSP in neighborhoods do not have equitable access to this across the U.K. Sustainable funding could make this a reality.

Many community organisations in Lancashire and South Cumbria (LSC) actively receive referrals and deliver on the NbSP agenda despite limited or no funding from the referrer (Faulkner, 2024; Pywell, 2024; Pywell 2025). Yet, no definitive definition or model of sustainable funding exists for NbSP or SP in LSC or the UK (NASP, 2022, 2024). Funding for NbSP in LSC is immensely challenging to sustain, as is frequently the case across the UK. Many temporary funding models of SP exist (Bertotti et al., 2018; NASP, 2024) yet no green fund, community fund, community chest, community wealth fund or shared fund (SIF) exists to fund and support every community organisation delivering on the NbSP agenda in LSC. This gap presents an opportunity for sustainable ‘green funding’ focused on the application of sustainable funding into community organisations from multiple sources for the purpose of NbSP (Lovell et al., 2019).

A criticism of SP internationally is the ongoing temporary style contracts and the temporary nature of groups due to the lack of sustainable funding (Khan et al., 2022; Pescheny, Pappas, & Randhawa, 2018). If funding stops, and community organisations close (as seen in recent press (Faulkner, 2024)), fewer destinations will exist to socially prescribe people in need to. Bu et al. (2024) identified funding community infrastructure key to addressing low intervention rates with low rates connected to lack of community assets to socially prescribing individuals to. Although NbSP is defined in the literature in the UK and internationally (Bertotti, 2025), smaller community organisations have potential to miss out on larger funding if not using these terms in grant and commissioning applications. Furthermore, Bertotti et al. (2018) highlighted how smaller organisations

have developed considerable knowledge in engaging specific target groups but are most at risk from funding cuts. They cited NCVS (2016) demonstrating that funding from government to micro, small and medium orgs has decreased yet increased to very large organisations. It could be argued the lack of local, national and international consensus on sustainable funding of NbSP actively threatens the future of the intervention itself (De Bell et al., 2024).

Understanding the existing model(s) of funding used by community organisations, knowledge of where local grants and commissioning occurs, connecting the community organisation to local SP systems (e.g. referral processes and pathways), and their goals are important to develop understandings to create an infinitely, or sustainable funded NbSP offer (Capacity, 2023). Yet, limited research is available on funding models for SP (Oster et al., 2023). This ethically approved compellation of stakeholder perspectives aligned with contemporary literature seeks to explore the concept of sustainable models of funding (and resourcing) NbSP in LSC and explore potential solutions for future research [HEALTH 01175].

Aim

The aim of this project was to explore, utilising Participatory Action Research, need and potential solutions for sustainability within NbSP from multiple stakeholder perspectives.

Methods & Methodology

This case study utilised Participatory Action Research (PAR) to leverage the knowledge of 3 community organisations and local, regional and national leaders on the potential for sustainable funding of NbSP in LSC. The focus was on the potential for creating sustainable funding. PAR can be defined as “scholar-activist research approach that brings together community members, activists and scholars to co-create knowledge and social change in tandem” (Cornish et al., 2023, p2). Recruitment of participants occurred through several “community networks” including those who approached the Social Prescribing Unit network at the university. The Social Prescribing Unit network had engaged with various community groups since the unit inception (October 2019) to explore community voice and local need. Many groups came forward highlighting the need for future research on funding and resourcing SP. In 2022 a Knowledge Exchange (KE) partnership formed, hosted by the university and funded by the Environment Agency. This partnership brought 3 community organisations, several local, regional and national leads and academics at the university together to explore what sustainable funding was and how this could look in the future (Pywell, 2024; Pywell 2025). A structured, negotiated agenda was used with the option for site visits v. MS Teams calls. All partners were encouraged to visit all sites in person to consolidate site specific knowledge exchange. The intention was to create peer support for the purpose of KE, with acknowledgement of the existing structures in place active in this area. It was identified no KE space or

community of practice was active in working on sustainable models of NbSP for LSC during this project, and the benefits of growing this KE for all.

Utilising co-production, PAR values the perspectives of all stakeholders and their information through an equitable lens (Santos-Tapia et al., 2023). Stakeholder perspectives were captured from monthly meetings notes across this 3-year partnership to explore perspectives of stakeholders and the potential for future development in this area. Contemporary literature following an unstructured literature search (including grey literature) was used to underpin stakeholder feedback. This article was checked with the participants to ensure all points and context had been accurately communicated. Braun & Clarkes (2021) “Thematic analysis” was used to illustrate the knowledge shared by this group into themes. These themes are represented by the “infinity model”, developed by researchers at the Social Prescribing Unit, University of Lancashire.

Results & discussion

Stakeholder themes: achieving sustainable NbSP

Stakeholders agreed five core themes, including subthemes, to achieve sustainable NbSP. These themes were connected to contemporary literature by the research team. Stakeholders repeatedly discussed their vision of financial and strategic support for NbSP as consistent, reliable and infinite. They all thought short term grants would continue, and to break the current cycles impacting infinite sustainable funding of NbSP stated system level changes were required in LSC. The purpose of sharing the results for them was to empower all who need the knowledge to pursue sustainable funding, and to change the way future changemakers approach this. Core themes are illustrated in Figure 1. “Infinity Model”, and subthemes discussed within this section. Core themes included :

- 1. Coproduction**
- 2. Knowledge exchange & communities of practice**
- 3. Research and evaluation**
- 4. Challenging the problem**
- 5. System changes and leveraging networks for non-traditional funding**

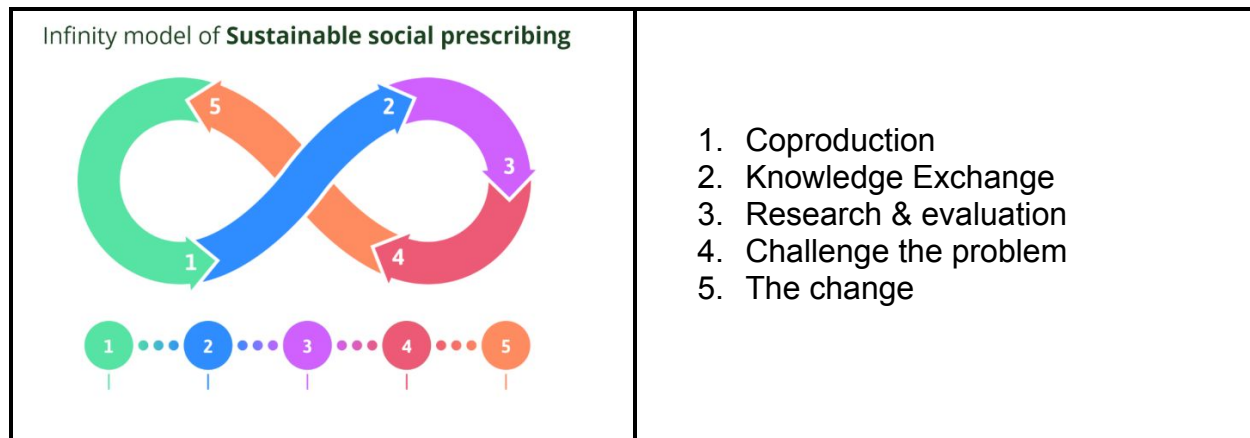


Figure 1 Infinity model of sustainable NbSP

1. Coproduction: identification of the problem & shared goals

The decision to coproduce was mutual. Community organisations had highlighted the need for sustainable funding on numerous occasions and identified system level changes were needed. Co-production is vital but often undermined by imbalanced power dynamics, especially when clinical voices dominate funding decisions (Baker & Irving, 2016; Farina et al., 2025; Thomas, Lynch, & Spencer, 2021). Community partners are often treated as implementers, rather than co-designers which limits their ability to shape services and secure meaningful funding (Ebrahimoghli et al., 2023). Effective co-production requires a shared understanding of values and goals and trust between stakeholders which takes time to develop and cannot be achieved with short-term funding cycles (Calderón-Larrañaga et al., 2024). Stakeholder discussions intersected on the goal (to understand how to achieve sustainable funding), what the future could look like (with infinite support) and practical steps on how to get there. The intention to create change resulted in the observed subthemes: temporary funding models and the capacity of community organisations to bid for funding.

Temporary Funding Models

All participants feedback funding for NbSP was small, short term or missed opportunities and significant challenges to being commissioned. Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise sector (VCFSE) organisations responsible for the delivery of NbSP are reliant on short-term, competitive grant funding, often from charitable sources (Brown & Aylett, 2025; Khan et al., 2022). In their scoping review on the models of SP Oster et al., (2023) found that 45.3% of international studies, primarily found in the UK (66% of included studies), did not mention how programmes were funded. In those that did, government funding was the most frequent (41.1%) then charities (8.23%), other included combined government and charity (1.9%) social impact bond (1.3%) community-based organisation (1.3%) and private company fund (1.3%). This precarious funding landscape causes job insecurity and high staff turnover (Brown & Aylett, 2025; Calderón-Larrañaga

et al., 2024), inhibiting investment in long-term service development and innovation (He et al., 2022) and programmes unable to continue once the programme funding ends (Baker & Irving, 2016; Bertotti et al., 2018). Whilst substantial investment has been made in some parts of the UK, such as Scotland’s ‘Green Health Partnership’ (NatureScot., 2025) or England’s ‘Green SP Programme’ (NHSE, 2023) concerns exist about how initiatives can be sustained once the initial funding period has ended (McHale et al., 2020). Furthermore, a NASP evidence summary identified *“no studies had included financial sustainability in their design or evaluation, so the evidence summary was not able to report on this aspect”* (NASP, 2022). Participants vocalised the challenges of obtaining funding for delivering NbSP as well known and well researched. Additionally, they highlighted people who were referred through on social prescription from the NHS were not followed by funding from the referrer. Community organisations cited where they had used their own funds and resources, often at significant detriment to their own finances.

Capacity of Community Organisations to bid for Competitive Funding

Many group discussions by participants highlighted the limited capacity of community organisations to bid for competitive funding. Studies outline the diverse, fragmented and inconsistent funding landscape from local health authorities, local government, lottery grants and personal health budgets with a lack of co-ordination (Darcy et al., 2025; Dronina et al., 2020; Kimberlee et al., 2022). This funding patchwork creates administrative burden for activity providers, particularly small organisations, who must spend time on multiple grant applications (He et al., 2022). This creates an inequitable distribution of funding where larger organisations secure investment over smaller ones (Bertotti et al., 2018) and disconnects exists between local community needs and funding priorities (Garside et al., 2020). This administrative burden diverts time from service delivery and disproportionately affects smaller, grassroots organisations who are supporting disadvantaged groups (Bertotti et al., 2018; Ebrahimoghli et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2022 Sands et al., 2023). To ensure these organisations are sustainable funded capacity building, training and core costs which are rarely covered by short term grants are needed (He et al., 2022).

Most community organisations were set up as charities and yet still struggled to apply for, obtain and achieve a healthy, thriving financial picture. Financial issues were a common theme these community organisations discussed at many workshops. At the start of this research project, the community organisations agreed this was not a new challenge, yet all participants agreed it was a challenge which had not been solved and had been made worse for the community organisations since the formal creation of SP. Community organisations continue to take NHS and other organisation referrals because existing systems are breaking down due to systemic underfunding. People in need, as they articulated, are not turned down by the community organisations; they are “met with open arms regardless of funding situation”. So, if funding remained the challenge, what could

we do about this together? KE is the next natural step, yet some may perceive it the same as coproduction. Coproduction and KE have some shared characteristics; however, only true coproduction can raise all voices with equity in shared decision making whereas KE tends to come in with direction and intent in communications (Foley et al., 2023).

2. Knowledge exchange

Directing knowledge to empower and unlock ICS change required focus on experiences, existing knowledge and innovation on sustainable funding. Knowledge exchange (KE) is required to connect medical models and community approaches with a shared language and trust for improved understandings and increasing the potential of partnership working (Fixsen & Barrett, 2022; Foley et al., 2023). Community organisations hold place-based, relational knowledge that can be overlooked in formal evaluation processes (Featherstone et al., 2022). Collaborate structures that support KE prevent siloed working practices (Calderón-Larrañaga et al., 2024).

Community organisation experiences

In monthly meetings stakeholders shared developments, updates and funding resources. Partners often shared good news yet were more reticent to share challenges. Each organisation faced significant challenges during the project from major health conditions, not receiving most grants they had applied for or the grants that would make the biggest difference to them at that point in time, council challenge to use of the land, volunteer and staff changes. Sharing this information was challenging as each community organisation acknowledged the competitive nature of funding impacting on KE with peers. Yet, KE specific to funding opportunities is fundamental to community organisations survivability.

All stakeholders highlighted how community organisations were trapped in a cycle of short-term grants and funding. This reflects wider understandings of systemic underfunding and perceived challenges with releasing unprotected funding into community organisations (Macmillan, Leather, & Stuart, 2022). Freeing community organisations from the power dynamic of short-term funding requires partnering with KE brokers to coproduce system level changes and could be seen as a form of “*epistemic justice*” (Fricker, 2007). Community organisations cannot do this alone, likewise, knowledge brokers will not succeed without understanding, visiting and working with grassroots organisations. At present, obtaining statistics on how NbSP community organisations are funded is immensely challenging. Further research is needed into financial transparency of the realities of this funding in LSC and beyond.

Historic projects: The Missing Link for Green SP

One participant shared the 2023 Capacity research report “Exploring the realities of finding sustainable funding for nature-based organisations delivering green SP activities” (Capacity, 2023). Based on a partnership between the Northern Network, Groundwork

(funded by the National Lottery Community Fund), Natural England and several key community organisations, this report recommended “continued collaboration”, “demonstrate shared impact”, “raise the profile of green health regionally and nationally” and “continue to ask the difficult questions” (Capacity, 2023). They recommended a “Green Consortium” at strategic level within Integrated Care Systems to support and influence Cheshire and Merseyside (Capacity, 2023). Further research is required to support sustaining funding for this national agenda,

Decisions: partnering with knowledge exchange broker(s)

Community organisations have flexibility to decide who are their main KE partners or ‘brokers’. However, this needs to be considered with a note of caution. Challenging personal beliefs on why a particular KE organisation or person has more value than another is needed as meetings can take away valuable time (and resources) from delivering NbSP. When partnering with KE brokers, the community organisations involved in this project highlighted they need to know a. where the funding is to sustain their basic delivery, b. how they can gain additional funding for a comfort zone or funding buffer, c. how to grow their funding model, d. what is the evidence base to support their provision (and future funding applications) e. how can they get research completed on their provision for the purpose of future commissioning

Despite the quantity of research and literature on community organisations provision in NbSP, there is a dearth of research on solutions to sustainable funding in LSC. KE brokers have some (but not all) of the knowledge needed which is valuable to community organisations in this difficult financial landscape. To constantly receive referrals for people in need yet lacking appropriate funding is not a sustainable model for any community organisation. To observe this phenomenon in research without solution is to contribute to the cycle of “ethics dumping” through “unfair distribution of benefits and/or burdens” (Schroeder et al., 2021). Contextual learnings could support community organisations to fund a continuous offer of NbSP, and work toward growing and developing new initiatives to meet local need as the needs of people change. KE without research cannot underpin future change.

Community organisations delivering NbSP may require multiple partners who specialize in KE to leverage personalised solutions. The community organisation may require a short-term evaluation to demonstrate to the next funder outcomes aligning with their funding goals. A report or output could support the charity in gaining the next step on their financial ladder. Organisations including local CVS, CA and NAVCA support charities with the knowledge and tools they need to safeguard the people they are working with and have access to the same information other charities have from an information equity perspective (Macmillan, Leather, & Stuart, 2022; NASP, 2024). It could be argued to leverage further investment (both in cash, kind, research and KE) the community

organisation may need support and guidance as to the right type of partnerships to benefit them. With the focus being upon sustainable funding, KE needed to return to where the funding was in LSC and how could it be mobilized into community organisations for the purpose of supporting NbSP provision.

Communities of practice

At the start of the project, no multiorganizational community of practice existed in LSC to mobilise this KE into system level change. Communities of practice underpinning the SP infrastructure thrive through supporting relationship building and shared learning (Calderón-Larrañaga et al., 2024). These communities of practice can be jeopardised by high staff turnover, short term contracts and siloed roles (Brown & Aylett, 2025). Creating a shared worldview and long-term commitment are considered essential to move beyond a symbolic partnership into a community of practice (Farina et al., 2025). Mobilising communities of practice toward a shared vision of sustainable funding for all is a mission critical goal. In 2025 LSC Integrated Care Board achieved this by creating the Social Prescribing Action Group, focused on NASP's SIF and the potential of sustainable funding for all social prescribing community providers. This required revisiting the evidence base.

3. Research and evaluation

Research and evaluation on funding and commissioning community organisations delivering NbSP places an emphasis on quantitative, short-term outcomes that do not capture the relational, longer-term benefits of SP (Brown & Aylett, 2025; Cooper et al., 2024; Menhas et al., 2024). Furthermore, community providers are often required to demonstrate value without evaluation funding being provided (Chatterjee et al., 2018). Although research and evaluation are needed to evidence outcomes and impact, a power imbalance was cited by community organisations in this project. One volunteer described a community organisation contractually pressured to deliver results for a research project without funding for basic resources, impacting on the sustainability of provision of sessions into the community for that year. Research tasks e.g. anonymizing, cleaning and extracting data can be time-consuming for community organisations. Balancing funding for NbSP delivery with contracted research tasks can negatively impact on community organizations' funding and delivery capacity. Positive research practice can be achieved by following NIHR guidance on PPIE compensation, aligning with community organisation goals and including delivery costs in future projects (NIHR, 2023; NIHR, 2025).

Evidence, by way of evaluation, is often cited as critical to secure and sustain funding (Calderón-Larrañaga et al., 2024; Cooper et al., 2024). Yet there is a disconnect between what commissioners and funders require and the relational nature of SP (Calderón-Larrañaga et al., 2024; Thomas, Lynch, & Spencer, 2021). Health commissions often

require quantitative, objective measures which do not easily align with the qualitative, holistic impacts valued by community organisations (Baker & Irving, 2016). Providers frequently report the burden of continuous evaluation which often do not reflect long term benefits (Baker & Irving, 2016). Some studies highlight the importance of qualitative data to evidence the broad range of benefits and suggest mixed method approaches (Evers et al., 2024). Social Return on Investment models have also been proposed as convincing methods to evidence the range of benefits from a SP programme (Cooper et al., 2024; Dronina et al., 2020). Funding paths and solutions for NbSP need researching and communicating with transparency.

Existing funding models in SP

NASP evidence summary identified “no studies had included financial sustainability in their design or evaluation” (NASP, 2022). Existing funding models identified in this study included:

- **Single commissioner:** A Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), Local Authority (LA), Housing Association, or Primary Care Network (PCN) mostly Registered charity in England (1191145) 2 commissioning a Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) sector organisation to manage and deliver SP.
 - **Collaborative commissioning of complementary services:** CCG and LA together commissioning a VCFSE organisation for management and delivery.
 - **Fully integrated commissioning:** Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of CCG and LA. e.g. a CEO leading both LA and CCG (pooling of funding).
 - **In-house delivery:** CCG and LAs jointly delivering SP.
 - **Direct funding of VCFSE sector:** CCG providing block grants for VCFSE sector organisations to deliver SP.
 - **Using Personal Health Budgets (PHBs)** or integrated PHBs.
- Adapted from NASP (2022)

Sustainable funding: rhetoric or reality?

Sustainable funding could be considered by some as a utopian concept. Emerging in 2022 (NASP, 2022) in the context of SP with little definition in the wider literature specific to a quantifiable amount needed for sustainability relative to the size of the community organisation and number of referrals they receive, what works in one area may not work in another. Place-based sustainable funding models may require revisiting and redeveloping and may not be static due to the constantly fluctuating Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental and Legal (PESTLE) factors. An overarching model specific to the sector (and translated to place) is needed. Yet the exact threshold of financially sustainable has not been defined by the literature. Participants recommended further research resulting the development of a PhD into sustainable funding in LSC (Pywell et al., 2025) given the fragility of funding and immediate need for solutions.

Fragility of funding ecosystems

Across the SP literature, including Nature-based SP (NbSP), a core and recurring theme is the fragile funding ecosystem. Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise sector (VCFSE) organisations responsible for the delivery of NbSP are reliant on short-term, competitive grant funding, often from charitable sources (Brown & Aylett, 2025; Khan et al., 2022). To obtain future funding and resource, community organisations need to demonstrate financial and evaluation outcomes to commissioners (Chatterjee et al., 2018; Costa et al., 2021; De Bell et al., 2024).

Studies outline the diverse, fragmented and inconsistent funding landscape from local health authorities, local government, lottery grants and personal health budgets with a lack of co-ordination (Darcy et al., 2025; Dronina et al., 2020; Kimberlee et al., 2022). This funding patchwork creates administrative burden for activity providers, particularly small organisations, who must spend time on multiple grant applications (He et al., 2022). This creates an inequitable distribution of funding where larger organisations secure investment over smaller ones (Bertotti et al., 2018) and disconnects between local community needs and funding priorities (Garside et al., 2020).

NbSP relies on the existence of community infrastructure that can accept referrals. However, community providers state they are overstretched and often operate in crisis mode (Ebrahimoghli et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2022). There is an expectation that services can meet the fluctuating demand without appropriate support or investment (Bu et al., 2024). Smaller, grassroots organisations, who are often best placed to support disadvantaged and marginalised groups, face disproportionate challenges to access funding (Bertotti et al., 2018; Sands et al., 2023). To ensure these organisations are sustainable funding needs to cover capacity building, training and core costs which are

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3 rarely covered by short term grants (He et al., 2022). There are instances where, a
4 programme in Scotland, described as “well-resourced government funded” (Chng et al.,
5 2021, p.919) has failed to gain traction which suggests that funding is not the only barrier.
6 However, this study did not provide details of which elements of the programme had been
7 funded nor if community organisations received any funding. This perhaps points to the
8 problem being funding distribution rather than availability (Marmot, 2020).
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12 It is frequently explained that collaboration, co-creation and partnership working between
13 health sector, VCFSE sector and service users are vital for a successful model of SP
14 (Hassan et al., 2020; Thomas, Lynch, & Spencer, 2021). However, cultural misalignment
15 can strain these relationships due to differences in institutional logics, power asymmetries
16 and poor communication (Baker & Irving, 2016; Farina et al., 2025). Link workers or
17 connectors, have been highlighted as critical to bridge cultural divides (Baker & Irving,
18 2016). Attempting to create mutual understanding and trust and working towards shared
19 goals. This is challenging when roles, such as link workers, are poorly defined and staff
20 turnover is high (Calderón-Larrañaga et al., 2024; Foley et al., 2023).
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24 Despite the significant health sector policy support in England, funding from the NHS
25 stops with the link worker and does not flow to the community activities they connect to
26 (Bu et al., 2024). Funding frequently fails to address health inequalities and rural,
27 marginalised and minoritised communities face the greatest barriers (Bu et al., 2024;
28 Robinson et al., 2022). The need for “long-term funding mechanisms” (Rafiei et al., 2025)
29 is increasingly apparent yet there is little clarity on how system-wide change can take
30 place in practice (Bhaskar et al., 2025).
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34 Participants agreed critical to the ability of a community organisation to demonstrate
35 outcomes in current financial climates is the need to demonstrate cost benefit (De Bell et
36 al., 2024). Commissioners and grant holders need more evidence to establish the best
37 way to spend restricted budgets. Researching cost benefit and Social Return on
38 Investment for community organisations could become a lifeline to achieving sustainable
39 funding. With no formal research to underpin the outcome and evaluation process,
40 community organisations reported significant challenges in demonstrating outcomes for
41 the purpose of commissioning and recommissioning. Research active providers have a
42 civic responsibility to explore solutions to deliver research for grassroots community
43 organisations to support their development and demonstrating outcomes.
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51 **4. Challenging the problem: non-traditional funding solutions to NbSP**

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53 Non-traditional funding solutions for NbSP in LSC have not been explored at scale before.
54 Creative solutions are needed to ensure funding supports the community organisations
55 providing NbSP(Bu et al., 2024). Moving away from time limited, competitive grant funding
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that undermines the sustainability of the intervention is one option (Bertotti et al., 2018; Sands et al., 2023). Initiatives that use place-based, blended funding approaches such as NHS, local authority and philanthropic investments, demonstrate greater long-term financial and resource sustainability (Dronina et al., 2020; Foley et al., 2023; NASP, 2022). Investment from the private sector is also highlighted as a potential solution (Rafiei et al., 2025). In 2022, the National Academy of SP (NASP) announced the intention to create SIF and started a consultation process with stakeholders specific to sustainable SP (NASP, 2023). Although not exclusive to NbSP, this included the potential of sustainable funding for NbSP. Leveraging funding opportunities to support the national agenda of SP in the UK is needed. NASP highlighted the potential of philanthropic funding with the sector (NASP, 2022, 2023, 2024). Philanthropic funding was highlighted as being a critical component where one off, larger grants from non-traditional sources can be obtained through wills/ legacy donations, untapped organisational underspend. At present, no single funnel or finance capture mechanism exists to channel funding into community organisations delivering on NbSP in LSC. Further research is needed into specific philanthropic funding models which may enable sustainability in LSC ICS.

5. The change: System level changes and leveraging non-traditional organisational funding toward community organisations delivering NbSP in LSC

There is potential to leverage non-traditional organisational funding to invest in a limitless 'green' or NbSP fund, utilising principles of the SIF in LSC (Pywell, 2024; Pywell, 2025; NASP, 2024). In 2025 (after the completion of this research), LSC Integrated Care board announced the development of LSC being a test and learn site with NASP for SIF funding with potential to connect to local philanthropic funding. However, significant KE and brokering is required at systems level to activate said funding requiring financial expertise, knowledge of the sector and a willingness of all parties through legal agreements to proceed (Russell, 2022). Significant work is ongoing at the point of writing with multiple organisations to explore if solutions are possible. ICS level leaders supported this growth working with community organisations, academics, councils and many partners to explore leveraging non-traditional funds for the community organisations delivering on NbSP. Like Many organisations have Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) or social value funds (Levitt, 2014), but not all understand NbSP and what this initiative can do for people, communities and places (NASP, 2024). "The change" will only occur through increased understandings of NbSP at ICS and neighborhood level. Organisations within the ICS with civic anchor responsibilities have potential to broker place-based partnerships to benefit community organisations delivering on the NbSP agenda using the infinity model (Figure 1). Leveraging all stakeholders to fund a "green community fund" with local concordat where the fund will be topped up by non-traditional funders could be a solution

to sustainable funding. Considerable work is required to negotiate and maintain the organisational relationships to develop this. To improve the flow of sustainable funding (toward its full potential of being infinite), all 5 themes need continuous attention and action alongside local mapping of potential funding sources.

Participant feedback on sustainable funding of NbSP could be described in the flow of this “infinity model” (Fig. 1). Represented within the infinity model are each of the themes constructed by researchers from participant responses in this project. Where the infinite flow of action, funding, resources and innovation are disrupted or severed in this model illuminates where action is required on sustainable funding. For example, in LSC, participants vocalized the lack of system level policy on NbSP severely disrupts the flow and sustainability of provision of the intervention. In LSC, participants identified existing methods of funding and resourcing NbSP include (but are not limited to); coproducing research with VCSFE/SME, university input, KE (KTP), CVS, Council and Local Authority match funding, HAF & childcare vouchers, NHS (NHSE Health Inequalities fund), National Lottery Community Fund. Despite the quantity of partners, sustainable funding had not yet been achieved. Until now, a model (approach, framework or perspective) has not been created yet to support solution focused dialogue specific to these community organisations challenges. No coproduction, knowledge exchange or research and evaluation of NbSP will seriously negatively impact the future potential of sustainable NbSP. Likewise, assuming this is the only action required may miss fundamental intricacies related to sustainable NbSP. Stakeholder feedback is the key element unlocking flow across the Infinity model. Restricting stakeholder voices restricts the future potential of sustainability.

Applying the infinity model to LSC ICS

This case study has illustrated the stages of the “Infinity Model” (Fig.1) in LSC ICS, and potential solutions. One example of flow disruption within the model pertains to understandings (and realities) of funding sources. All community organisations involved in this project held the belief the NHS would fund the NbSP referrals they received from SP link workers. They saw KE with statutory services as a priority in the attempt to get commissioned (NHS, social care), and prioritised NHS referrals over other organisation requests. Through co-production and knowledge exchange (1 & 2) it became clear wider understandings of funding flow within LSC ICS were needed for all stakeholders, alongside solutions for sustainability. Emphasis and focus on advocacy for sustainable funding through policy change and system level leadership were identified through exploration of the evidence base and this project (3). The problem was clear (4) and system level changes were needed (5). Yet, community organisations need support to challenge system level problems in funding NbSP. Furthermore, nationally, in the UK,

there is a visible difference between areas that invest in NbSP and those who do not. Some solutions can be observed within the literature; however further research is required into solutions positively impacting sustainable funding in LSC ICS and beyond.

Potential solutions

Ultimately the policy changes required to support sustainable funding would need to recognise NbSP as a permanent agenda and intervention, therefore requiring permanent commissioning within health, social and care organisations (Chatterjee et al., 2018; De Bell et al., 2024). This was agreed by all stakeholders in this project. Greater Manchester Environment Fund is an example where policy has changed to reflect and support practice. Policy and commissioning are critical to the sustainability of NBSP (Whitelaw et al., 2017). The infinity model of sustainable NbSP needs to be applied to neighborhoods and local solutions found within ICSs to benefit all (Whitelaw et al., 2017). This will not happen without advocates, KE brokers, changemakers and strategists working for the community and NbSP at all levels. Mobilization of funding into community organisations is critical for our current and future health and wellbeing. LSC ICS could implement policy changes to support community infrastructure through regulated funding mechanisms and application of the Infinity Model in future projects.

Solutions proposed in the literature to enable more sustainable funding include; a shared outcomes framework with agreed-upon evaluation tools including qualitative and quantitative components (Brown & Aylett, 2025; Hassan et al., 2020), funding models that prioritise flexibility, relationality and community, co-production in commissioning (Ebrahimoghli et al., 2023; Farina et al., 2025), shifting resources alongside policy approaches that value prevention (He et al., 2022; Menhas et al., 2024) and investment throughout the community sector including training, leadership development and infrastructure (Calderón-Larrañaga et al., 2024; Foley et al., 2023). A recent research report from a partnership between the Northern Network, Groundwork (funded by the National Lottery Community Fund), Natural England and several key community organisations recommended a “Green Consortium” at strategic level within Integrated Care Systems to support and influence Cheshire and Merseyside (Capacity, 2023).

Brokering the intricate connections between policy level changes and practice to support sustainable NbSP, education and training for community organisations on how to record the appropriate outcomes for commissioning. A regional ‘green SIF’ is the next natural step and aligned with LSC ICS becoming a test and learn site with the National Academy of Social Prescribing in 2025. Navigating the complexities of organisational goals specific to SP, nature, and health inequalities to obtain untapped organisational underspend requires multi-organizational input. Authors are continuing to work at ICS level to support solutions to sustainable models of NbSP in LSC.

Other areas may provide transferable solutions. RHS Bridgewater Wellbeing Garden applies many aspects of the Infinity Model (Howarth, Lawler, & da Silva, 2021). Despite being a new initiative, this has flourished given the support from an existing structure and close connections with the Royal Horticultural Society, NHS, SP Link Workers and embedded ethos of NbSP in the area. “Community Chests for London” is a partnership approach, brokered by “Transformational partners in health and care” (Coleman, 2023). This combines funding from all sectors to deliver on local health priorities. Community organisations and stakeholders of NbSP can reflect on their contributions and align their future goals with additional steps toward sustainable funding by applying this Infinity model. Further research is required to support the reality of significant challenges in sustaining funding for this national agenda.

Strengths and limitations

This article is based on co-production over several years with three community organisations delivering on NbSP and several leading organisations in the sector. The article does not represent all perspectives on LSC as there are hundreds of community organisations across LSC delivering on NbSP. Furthermore, this article content, although checked with the stakeholders involved, contains interpretations by one department of researchers. Other researchers and stakeholders may interpret the points raised in this article in many ways. This is, however, a seminal article on the potential of collaborative working when addressing sustainable funding for NbSP. Sustainable funding is a contemporary topic for social prescribing at the point of writing given the historic and ongoing funding challenges.

The research team facilitated the coproduction meetings across the length of this project. Future research could separate the researcher from the facilitator. Yet in PAR, the researcher can be part of the process. This model is one interpretation of the perspectives of stakeholders. Numerous models and interpretations can be created to explore sustainable funding. The infinity model should not be considered the end point, but rather the beginning of exploration into this critical area. This research was conducted between 2022 and 2025 and may not represent all timeframes and regional challenges as the variables within and influencing the infinity model change for community organisations funding of NbSP. A structure literature review is needed to explore sustainable models of social prescribing for NbSP, with specific focus on “green funding” solutions and application of “the infinity model”.

Conclusion

Sustainable models of Nature Based Social Prescribing (NbSP) are possible yet require co-produced research and practice innovations driving system level funding changes.

This case study, utilising PAR, offers stakeholder perspectives blended with contemporary literature to illustrate existing challenges faced by community organisations in meeting sustainable funding and for their delivery of NbSP. The “Infinity model” is offered as an overview of what sustainable funding could look like, with connections to contemporary evidence. NbSP connects with many critical agendas (including reducing mental health waiting lists, action on climate crisis, reducing loneliness and childhood obesity). With positive impact demonstrated across the evidence base, and being the most impactful specialism within SP, NbSP demands sustainable funding. Further research is required to apply the infinity model to support future developments of sustainable models of NbSP and ultimately find the solution(s) that work for people, neighborhoods and communities. Research into the potential of a “green shared investment fund” is needed in Lancashire and South Cumbria, alongside application of the “infinity model” to explore the potential for longer term sustainable solutions to delivering NbSP.

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