

## VENTURE TRUST OUTDOOR THERAPY SERVICE

# WHAT, WHO AND HOW?

### AUTHOR

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Katarina is the Clinical Manager of the Venture Trust Outdoor Therapy Service. She is an art psychotherapist and psychodynamic organisational therapist registered with the British Association of Art Therapists and British Psychoanalytic Council. Her professional experience is in community, institutional and outdoor settings, in the last decade focusing on work as an Outdoor Therapist and Senior Field Therapist on wilderness programmes in the Scottish Highlands. She is a representative of The International and European Adventure Therapy Committees.

The Venture Trust Outdoor Therapy Service is a free service offering therapy in outdoor settings in Scotland. Accredited counsellors and therapists work one-to-one with clients for up to twenty sessions in green spaces within the client's local community. Green spaces can be parks, wetlands or woodlands. The work tends to take place in nature-based settings, but sometimes it happens in urban environments, such as housing estates or docklands. This depends on the needs of the client and where the person feels able to meet. We have found that adapting to the needs of our clients by working in their local communities can increase access to therapy.


The service is open to young people and ex-service personnel of any age. The motivations for therapy are varied, though clients will often have experienced trauma and adverse life circumstances. They may also have received diagnoses such as borderline personality disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression. Before starting work with any client, we will take time to carefully consider and assess whether we are the right service for them. We work with clients on whatever issues are present in their lives and hopefully accompany them in finding ways to move forward.

The service operates across Edinburgh, the Lothians, Fife, Glasgow, Clackmannanshire and Falkirk. In these Local Authority areas, there has been a focus on working in locations defined as "deprived" on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. These settings tend to have fewer resources and lower incomes.

The therapeutic model has been developed by a clinical team with extensive outdoor practice, building upon Venture Trust's experience of working with vulnerable client groups in outdoor settings. The organisation has facilitated personal development work in outdoor, wilderness and community environments since 1982. Through its work, it has understood that offering an "alternative" means to experiential learning and, more recently, to therapy, has the potential to engage a broader group of people.







The staff team is made up of six counsellors and therapists of various modalities. For example, there is a psychodynamic counsellor, an art therapist, a transpersonal counsellor etc. Each therapist is professionally trained, accredited and practising within clearly defined ethical guidelines. As part of the work, therapists receive individual and group supervision with an experienced practitioner. The supervisor will invite therapists to reflect on themselves, their client work, the staff team and the wider organisation, as well as the socio-political and environmental context. All therapists have studied an ecotherapy-related field, such as ecopsychology, deep ecology or conservation. They also hold relevant outdoor qualifications for the environments in which they practise and they hold valid Outdoor First Aid Certificates.

The service is built on the rationale that, when therapy is practised outdoors, it must take place safely and ethically. This includes respecting the natural environments that we enter into. We believe that we work both in and together with the natural world. In the spirit of ethical practice, we value the Institute for Outdoor Learning's Statement on Outdoor Mental Health Interventions and Outdoor Therapy (7). This comprehensive document has set out how we might understand the level and type of therapeutic offer we are making. Our service sits in both zones two and three – “therapeutic enhancement” and “integrated outdoor therapy”.

### **Why develop an Outdoor Therapy Service: greater access and ecological sensibility**

The service was developed because there is compelling evidence that outdoor therapy has the potential to offer additional elements, when compared to traditional clinical practices, and can widen access to psychological therapies (1, 2, 3, 5, 6). These concepts have been consolidated through client feedback, data monitoring and professional experience.

Outdoor therapy may have the potential to increase access to therapy because it takes place in a non-clinical setting. The location is chosen by the client which can provide a sense of familiarity and autonomy. The therapist-client power-dynamic is altered because the therapist is stepping into the client's environment, rather than vice-versa. The meeting takes place in a public space, which may be particularly important to clients who have experienced institutional power dynamics, such as being taken into care. These encounters with institutions may have caused an understandable resistance to engaging with statutory services. Meeting outdoors invites the client to take more control over the therapeutic process.

The environment is a live natural space which brings with it animate experiences and the embodied process of moving through a landscape together (4). It offers visible, tangible metaphors and an interaction with the natural world. This can inform and shape the therapy, helping clients to develop their connection to nature and an ecological sense of self. This may encourage the development of a healthy and engaged response to the climate crisis, rather than one overwhelmed by anxiety or disavowal (8).

### **Impact: improved wellbeing and nature connection**

The impact of the service is monitored through clinical measures and through client and referrer feedback. The measures used are the Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation (CORE) and The Nature Connection Index (NCI). Initial results have been promising. The CORE, which measures wellbeing, has indicated that in 2021-2022 59% of clients showed a significant improvement, 23% a small improvement and 18% stayed the same, in a sample of 54 clients. The NCI showed a 64% increase in nature connection in a sample of 31 clients.

Anonymous feedback collected from clients after the end of the therapy has also been insightful. Elements identified as valuable in outdoor therapy are the sense of space, feeling at ease in nature, movement in sessions and being able to manage



eye-contact. For clients who have experienced trauma, being able to navigate eye contact and being in a naturally regulating environment like a green space, may aid engagement with a therapeutic process. On average, clients have rated the importance of therapy being outdoors as 4.8 out of 5.

**The future: broader reach, outdoor therapy training and professionalisation**

The intention is for the service to expand its reach across Scotland in the next 3-5 years. Given the varied potential benefits of this practice, we hope that outdoor therapy will be adopted at a statutory level. We believe that more research needs to take place to evaluate its impact and what is efficacious about it. We welcome research collaborations with these objectives.

Venture Trust has also developed a series of Outdoor Therapy Trainings. These are rooted in the long-term experience of our service and are designed for both outdoor practitioners and therapists. The aim is to introduce participants to a safe, ethical and creative outdoor therapy practice. These 1-day, 2-day and 4-day trainings cover a variety of topics, including containment, boundaries and risk. There is a focus on attending to both psychological and physical safety. The trainings introduce attendees to working together with the natural environment through experiential and reflective activities. Courses continue in 2023 and we hope they will evolve and grow.

As a service, we have been encouraged by the development of nature-based therapies in recent years. We are aware that the pandemic opened many people’s eyes to the benefits of time spent in nature and the possibility of practising therapy outdoors, and for this we are grateful. At the same time, we hope that the profession continues to grow responsibly, with respect and consideration both for clients and for the environment at the forefront of our practice. We welcome the continued professionalisation of the sector and we hope that 2023 sees this practice consolidate in a sustainable and meaningful way ▲

**WANT TO KNOW MORE?**

Check out the [Venture Trust Outdoor Therapy Report 2021-22 here](#), head over to the [Outdoor Therapy Training Page here](#) and for more information on the [Outdoor Therapy Service click here](#).



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