



Mental Health Awareness Week 2021



Mental Health and Nature Policy briefing

This policy briefing builds on the evidence set out in our [research report](#)¹ to propose some priority policy areas for Wales. We begin by introducing the current context for the relationship between nature and mental health, and an overview of the key issues, and then go on to set out our detailed policy recommendations.





Introduction & Overview

As human beings, we are all profoundly influenced by the environment we grow up in and in which we live. Our social, economic, and cultural circumstances all affect our emotional development and wellbeing, and so too does our connection with nature.

Nature's wellbeing is intrinsic to our own experience of health and wellbeing.

The natural environment has the potential to be enormously beneficial to our health and wellbeing, yet almost everywhere we look, the role and visibility of nature is diminishing. The night sky is obscured by light pollution, biodiverse wild areas have been replaced by agricultural monocultures, and, in our daily lives, technology and screen use is rising while mindful time spent in nature is declining.

As well as the obvious ecological implications of these trends, the deterioration of our natural world and our connection with it has damaging consequences for our mental wellbeing. Our research² report for this year's Mental Health Awareness Week sets out the evidence demonstrating the link between nature and mental health and shows that better engagement with nature can benefit our mental health.

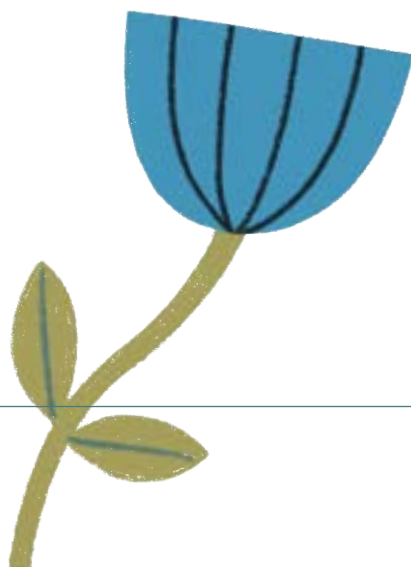
We also commissioned a YouGov poll in Wales³ to explore people's relationship with nature and how it relates to their mental health.

Nature, mental health and inequalities

The mental health consequences of poor connection with nature are not evenly distributed across society. There are inequalities in the quality of nature available to different groups of people and in our ability to easily access nature.

Inequalities in socio-economic status and between people in inner-city, sub-urban and rural areas intersect with inequalities of experience and access relating to race, disability, age, and gender. These inequalities mirror those expressed across health and mental health.

However, the groups experiencing inequalities in access to, and experience of, nature do not have a reduced capacity to benefit from the restorative powers of nature.⁴



¹Mental Health Foundation (2021)

²Mental Health Foundation (2021)

³All figures described as coming from 'our poll' are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 1007 Welsh adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 6th - 8th April 2021. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all Welsh adults (aged 18+).

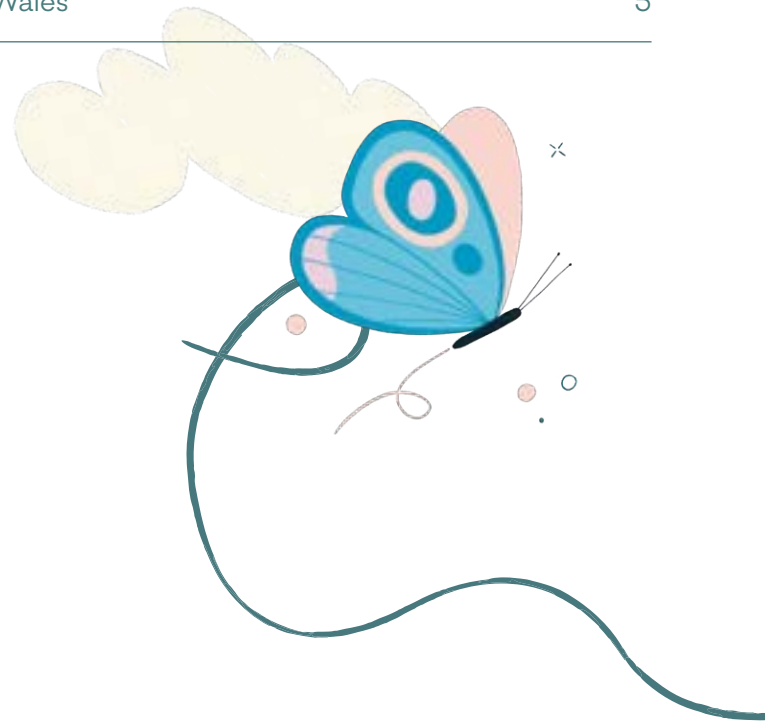
Opportunities to bring about change

Despite the continued decline in the state of nature, there is enormous opportunity in Wales to turn the tide.

Firstly, our collective experience of the coronavirus pandemic has spurred something of a renaissance in our relationship with nature and the outdoors. Our own Coronavirus: Mental health in the pandemic study has found that spending time outdoors is one of the most popular coping mechanisms – 50% agreed that being able to visit green space and 58% reported that going for a walk outside helped them cope with the stress of the coronavirus pandemic. Therefore, it will be important to ensure that accessing nature continues beyond the pandemic

These proportions were particularly high for people aged 18-24 (25%), for people with conditions and disabilities which limit their daily lives 'a lot' (26%), and for people without gardens (26%).

as our Wales poll found that 'in normal times' (pre-pandemic) only 16% of Welsh adults spent an average of an hour or less around nature each week or no time at all.



Secondly, The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (WCFG Act), which is unique to Wales, looks at how public bodies can work together and collectively create a sustainable Wales for future generations through meeting seven well-being goals (including a goal to enhance bio-diversity and another goal to address climate change). Through The Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and The Environment Act 2016, Wales has the legal framework and processes in place to make change for a sustainable future.⁵

Finally, the UK is in November this year hosting the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26), as well as the G7 Summit in July, which will have a strong environmental component. There is clear public appetite for change as our Wales poll showed 79% of respondents to our poll indicated that they think the Government should be aiming to encourage people to do more to connect with nature.



Policy recommendations

Facilitating connection with nature

In our Manifesto for the Wales Elections 2021, we called on the next Government in Wales⁶ to improve access to social prescribing, including access to nature.

The clear message from our review of the research is that connection with nature is the most important predictor of wellbeing. It is not enough to access nature, we must mindfully notice our surroundings and experience nature in a deeper, more meaningful way. It is also the case that building knowledge about nature through facts and figures does not inherently lead to greater noticing of nature.⁷

This has ramifications for policies such as “green social prescribing,”⁸ which aims to improve mental health outcomes by prescribing activities that take place in nature. Our research suggests that social

prescribing must incorporate strategies to notice and connect with nature.

More widely, Welsh Government needs to build the concept of connection into all policies relating to nature and mental health; it should be the core principle which drives such policies.

We recommend that Welsh Government focus on connection with nature in the formation of all policies relating to nature and mental health. Connection with nature should be the measure of each policy’s efficacy, rather than measuring the time spent in nature or the number of visits to nature.

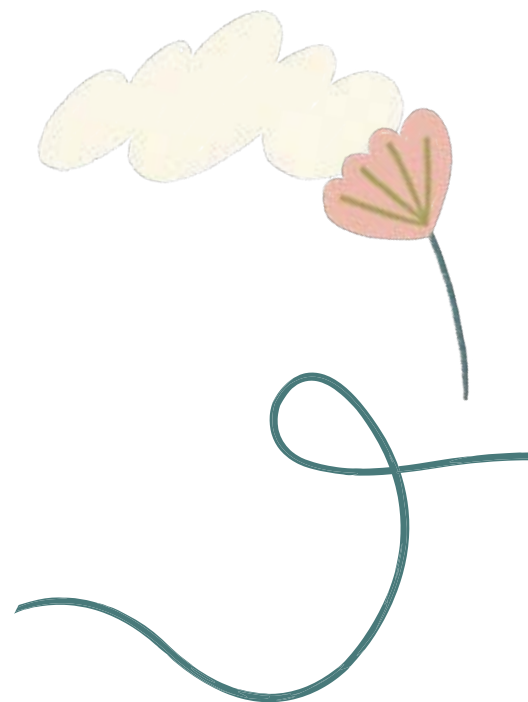


Protecting the natural environment and restoring biodiversity

In the State of Nature 2016 report, Wales is ranked 168th out of 218 countries in its “biodiversity intactness index.”⁹ Whilst this is better than other countries in the UK, it is still in the lowest quarter of the index.

Lack of high-quality nature limits the wellbeing benefit that we can derive from it, especially in urban areas where biodiversity loss is the most apparent. Evidence from our research review shows that bird-species richness, plant-species richness, and habitat diversity are all related to improved wellbeing and vegetation cover and afternoon bird abundances are linked to lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress.¹¹

One of the well-being goals in the WCFG Act is ‘a Resilient Wales’ which “maintains and enhances a biodiverse natural environment with healthy functioning ecosystems that support social, economic and ecological resilience and the capacity to adapt to change,”¹² The Commissioner’s analysis for the WCFG Act is that the well-being objectives and steps relating to the ‘environment’ set by many public bodies do not always reflect the true definition of the well-being goal. They focus on areas such as recycling, flooding, cleanliness, fly-tipping and reducing emissions rather than progress in helping to achieve nature recovery



⁴ Richardson M, Hunt A, Hinds J, Bragg R, Fido D, Petronzi D, et al. A Measure of Nature Connectedness for Children and Adults: Validation, Performance, and Insights. Sustainability [Internet]. 2019 Jun 12 [cited 2021 Mar 23];11(12):3250. Available from: <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/11/12/3250>

⁵ Natural Resources Wales (2020) The Second State of Natural Resources Report. Available from: <https://naturalresources.wales/evidence-and-data/research-and-reports/state-of-natural-resources-report-sonarr-for-wales-2020/?lang=en>

⁶ Mental Health Foundation (2021) Making Prevention Happen: how to improve mental health and well-being for everyone in Wales. Available from: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/wales-manifesto/en>

and healthy, resilient ecosystems.¹³ Therefore, public bodies need to work with the Future Generations Commissioner to ensure that there is development of appropriate guidance and effective monitoring of the Section 6 Duty in the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 on bio-diversity and resilient eco-systems.

We support the over-arching policy recommendation set out by the WBFG Commissioner that: Welsh Government should commit to large-scale habitat restoration, creation and connectivity throughout Wales, which includes setting statutory targets for nature recovery and specific species recovery measures to help prevent extinction¹⁴

We also support the Commissioner's recommendation for the development of guidance and effective accountability mechanisms for public bodies in relation to the Section 6 Duty in the Environment (Wales) Act 2016.¹⁵

⁷ Richardson M, Passmore H, Barbett L, Lumber R, Thomas R, Hunt A. The green care code: How nature connectedness and simple activities help explain pro nature conservation behaviours. *People Nat* [Internet]. 2020 Sep 1 [cited 2021 Mar 23];2(3):821–39. Available from: <https://besjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/pan3.10117>

⁸ Cardiff University (March 2021) 'Growing Green' Social Prescribing. Available from: <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/news/view/2506381-growing-green-social-prescribing>

⁹ Hayhow DB, Burns F, Eaton MA, Al Fulajj N, August TA, Babey L, et al. State of Nature 2016 [Internet]. 2016 [cited 2021 Mar 17]. Available from: [http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/state_of_nature_uk_report_pages_1_sept.pdf%5Cnhttps://www.bto.org/sites/default/files/publications/state-of-nature-report-2016-england_O.pdf%0Ahttp://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/State of Nature UK report pages_](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/state_of_nature_uk_report_pages_1_sept.pdf%5Cnhttps://www.bto.org/sites/default/files/publications/state-of-nature-report-2016-england_O.pdf%0Ahttp://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/State%20of%20Nature%20UK%20report%20pages_)

¹⁰ Aerts R, Honnay O, Van Nieuwenhuysse A. Biodiversity and human health: Mechanisms and evidence of the positive health effects of diversity in nature and green spaces [Internet]. Vol. 127, *British Medical Bulletin*. Oxford University Press; 2018 [cited 2021 Mar 17]. p. 5–22. Available from: <https://academic.oup.com/bmb/article/127/1/5/5051732>

¹¹ Cox DTC, Shanahan DF, Hudson HL, Plummer KE, Siriwardena GM, Fuller RA, et al. Doses of Neighborhood Nature: The Benefits for Mental Health of Living with Nature. *Bioscience* [Internet]. 2017 Jan 25 [cited 2021 Mar 17];67(2):biw173. Available from: <https://academic.oup.com/bioscience/article-lookup/doi/10.1093/biosci/biw173>

¹² Future Generations Commissioner for Wales (2020) The Future Generations Report: executive summary. Chapter 3: A Resilient Wales. Available from: <https://www.futuregenerations.wales/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Chapter-3--A-Resilient-Wales.pdf>





Inequalities in accessing nature


The mental health benefits of nature are unevenly distributed across society. For example, people living in deprived, urban - and in many cases rural - areas do not typically have access to the same quantity or quality of green space as people living in more affluent areas.¹⁶ In Wales, 35% of people live in rural areas (compared to compared to 20% of residents in England and 30% in Scotland¹⁷) and 88% of land is used for agriculture.¹⁸ People who live and work in rural areas (such as farmers) also have a different relationship with nature, although more research is needed in this area.

When we asked Welsh adults, what prevented them from enjoying nature, not feeling safe was reported by 16% of respondents. When we asked about particular fears around safety and harassment, there was a pronounced gender gap. Not feeling physically safe/safe from harm had hindered 25% of women from

enjoying nature, compared to 6% of men. In particular, fear of sexual harassment had affected 14% of women compared to 0% of men in terms of their ability to enjoy nature, and actual experiences of sexual harassment 12% of women compared to 1% of men.

Disabled people and those with long term conditions are often prevented from reaching green spaces due to access issues. Our poll found that 36% of people in Wales with long-term health conditions (LTCs) and disabilities which limit their daily activities 'a lot' cited being unable to physically access nature because of their health (or that of a family member) as a factor which limited their ability to be close to nature.

Our research report identified that people from minority ethnic backgrounds do not always feel welcome in green spaces, or as though they belong.¹⁹ Furthermore, Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups are more likely to live in urban areas²⁰ and are less likely therefore to reap the health and well-being benefits that connecting to nature and green space can bring.²¹

An illustration of a woman with dark curly hair, wearing a pink long-sleeved top and a blue and white striped skirt, sitting in a wheelchair. The wheelchair has a large, colorful wheel with pink, blue, and orange sections. A thin green line loops around the top left of the illustration. The background is a light yellow rounded rectangle.

Access should therefore be guaranteed by using Universal Design principles to design parks and playgrounds in a way that is accessible to the widest range of people – inclusive of all disabilities, access needs, and ages – without the need for adaptation, modification or assistive device.

Local authorities should ensure good lighting and park patrols and work with local community groups and the police to ensure that public green spaces can be enjoyed by everyone, free from fear of harassment, sexual harassment, violence and discrimination.

¹³ Future Generations Commissioner for Wales (2020) The Future Generations Report: executive summary. Chapter 3: A Resilient Wales. Available from https://www.futuregenerations.wales/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Chapter-3_-A-Resilient-Wales.pdf

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Wang D, Brown G, Liu Y. The physical and non-physical factors that influence perceived access to urban parks. *Landsc Urban Plan.* 2015 Jan 1;133:53–66.

¹⁷ National Statistics for Wales (2008) A statistical focus on Rural Wales, 2008 edition. Available from: <https://gov.wales/statistical-focus-rural-wales-2008>

¹⁸ Armstrong, E. (2016). The Farming Sector in Wales. Research Briefing. The Farming Sector in Wales. <https://senedd.wales/research-documents/16-O53-farming-sector-in-wales/16-O53-web-english2.pdf>

Using the planning system to improve the visibility and availability of nature

One in eight British households do not have access to a private or shared garden according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS).²² For those that don't have access to a private or shared garden, the availability of local green space is crucial to health, well-being and connecting to nature. Furthermore, our immediate environment has become even more important during lockdowns. In Wales, 21% of the population are within a five-minute walking distance of a park or public garden - this rises to 49% if you include playing fields.²³ The Future Generations Commissioner is calling for changes in Wales so that everyone can access a public green space within four minutes' walk of their house – four minutes' walk is about 300 metres for a person with average walking speed.²⁴

Local authorities, planners, and urban designers should work together to increase the visibility and salience of incidental nature in local environments. Planners should look for natural places of rest or pause, such as at bus stops or in places where queues regularly form and build up the nature visible in these places. Public Services Boards (under the WCFG Act) could play a convening role in bringing people together in Wales.

Public Service Boards (under the WCFG Act) and local authorities should have a convening role in bringing together public health experts, planners, local nature partnerships, and other partners to ensure that local planning and policy making all works towards the common goal of building up the natural environment, urban or otherwise, to support people's connection with nature.

¹⁹ Collier B. The race factor in access to green space [Internet]. Runnymede Trust. 2020 [cited 2021 Apr 26]. Available from: <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/blog/the-race-factor-in-access-to-green-space>

²⁰ Office for National Statistics (14 May 2020) One in eight British households has no garden. Available from: One in eight British households has no garden - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)

²¹ Collier B. The race factor in access to green space [Internet]. Runnymede Trust. 2020 [cited 2021 Apr 26]. Available from: <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/blog/the-race-factor-in-access-to-green-space>

²² Office for National Statistics (14 May 2020) One in eight British households has no garden. Available from: One in eight British households has no garden - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)

²³ Office for National Statistics (14 May 2020) One in eight British households has no garden. Available from: One in eight British households has no garden - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)

²⁴ BBC News (14 March 2021) Covid: Call for all homes in Wales to be minutes from green space. Available from: BBC News Covid: Call for all homes in Wales to be minutes from green space

Building a life-long relationship with nature

Childhood and adolescence are formative periods of life that can define a person's future connection with nature and therefore their potential to seek it out and derive well-being benefit from time spent in nature. Policies that build a child's sustainable, long-term connection with nature have the potential to deliver iterative benefits that accrue across a person's life.

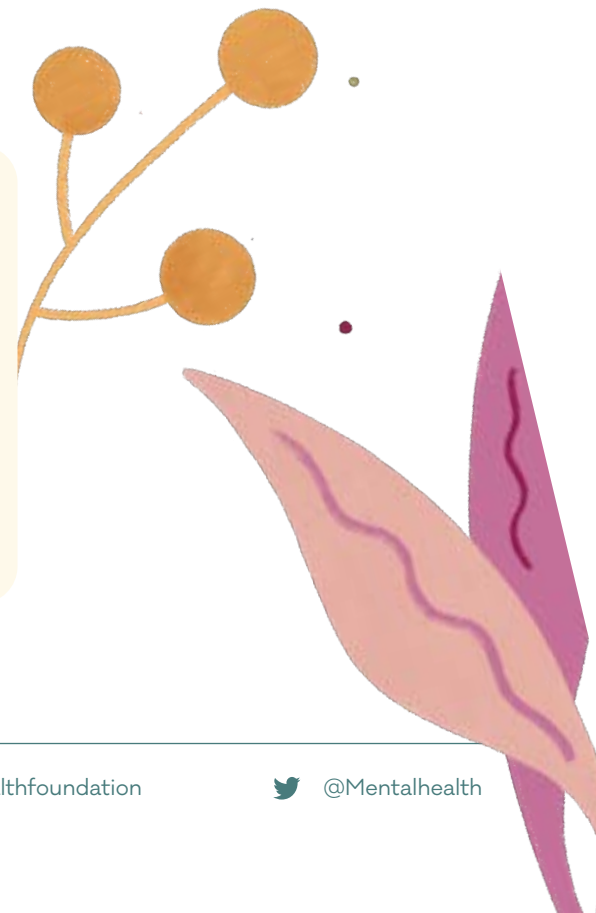
However, research shows a pronounced dip in a young person's relationship with nature around the ages of 10-12, which does not recover until their 30s.²⁵ Secondary school, therefore, should be a priority for targeted action.

In our poll of adults in Wales, younger age groups were more likely to say that they didn't want to or enjoy spending time in nature, with this feeling at its highest among adults in the 18-24 age group (7% compared to 3% of the overall adult population, and just 1% of over-55s). In addition to this, 95% of people supported encouraging children to connect with nature more.

The Dasgupta review of The Economics of Biodiversity argues compellingly that "It is a cruel irony that we surround children with pictures and toys of animals and plants, only to focus subsequently on more conceptual knowledge, marginalising environmental education relative to the wider curriculum."¹⁸ Its recommendation is that "every child in every country is owed the teaching of natural history, to be introduced to the awe and wonder of the natural world, and to appreciate how it contributes to our lives."

Following a wide-ranging independent review and consultation across Wales led by Professor Donaldson,²⁶ the new curriculum is currently being rolled out. This aims to support children and young people (ages 3 – 16) to be:

- ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives
- enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work
- ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world
- healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society.





Centred around six thematic areas of Learning and Experience (AoLE), including health and well-being, all areas will require an element of outdoor learning. In his independent review of the curriculum Professor Donaldson said: "The Areas of Learning and Experience should not be seen as constraining the ways in which schools organise the school day, week or year. They do not lead directly to a timetable based on the Areas of Learning and Experience headings."²⁷

Outdoor schools in Wales have pointed to the opportunity that the new curriculum provides: "real-world, multi-sensory experience which can form the basis of exciting and meaningful opportunities for cross-curricular learning."²⁸ Opportunities for learning about nature in Wales also need to be accompanied by changes to school estates to prioritise, protect, and build new wild areas and green areas for such purposes.

We recommend that all schools and nurseries in Wales plan to connect children with nature – this should include using outdoor learning and connecting with nature, across the six Areas of Learning and Experience in the new curriculum. In addition, the school estate itself should be designed to give children and young people easy, daily experience of nature and green space.

Our review of the literature also found that children's experiences of accessing nature are impacted by different inequalities, with children from ethnic minority backgrounds and those from lower income households being less likely to spend time outside.²⁹ A small qualitative review of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic youth (aged 17-27) found that trees, water, open spaces and views in their urban environment offered benefits such as a stronger sense of self, feelings of escape, and of connection with and care for the human and non-human world.³⁰

Therefore, Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and schools need to consider both universal and targeted approaches to connecting children with nature.

For more information please contact: Emily Wooster, Senior Policy Manager (Wales)
ewooster@mentalhealth.org.uk

²⁵ Dean J, Shanahan D, Bush R, Gaston K, Lin B, Barber E, et al. Is Nature Relatedness Associated with Better Mental and Physical Health? *Int J Environ Res Public Health* [Internet]. 2018 Jun 29 [cited 2021 Mar 17];15(7):1371. Available from: <http://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/15/7/1371>

²⁶ Donaldson, G. (February 2015) Successful Futures Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales. Available from: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-03/successful-futures.pdf>

²⁷ Donaldson, G. (February 2015) Successful Futures Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales. 2015:pg 8. Available from: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-03/successful-futures.pdf>

²⁸ Pembrokeshire Outdoor Schools (2021) The new curriculum in Wales. Available from: <https://pembrokeshireoutdoorschools.co.uk/policy-context-in-wales/>

²⁹ Natural England. The People and Nature Survey for England: Children's survey (Experimental Statistics). 2020 Oct 14 [cited 2021 Mar 17];1-15. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-child-data-wave-1-experimental-statistics/the-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-childrens-survey-experimental-statistics>

³⁰ Birch J, Rishbeth C, Payne SR. Nature doesn't judge you – how urban nature supports young people's mental health and wellbeing in a diverse UK city. *Heal Place*. 2020 Mar 1;62:102296.





#ConnectWithNature
#MentalHealthAwarenessWeek

