

Mental Health Awareness Week 2021

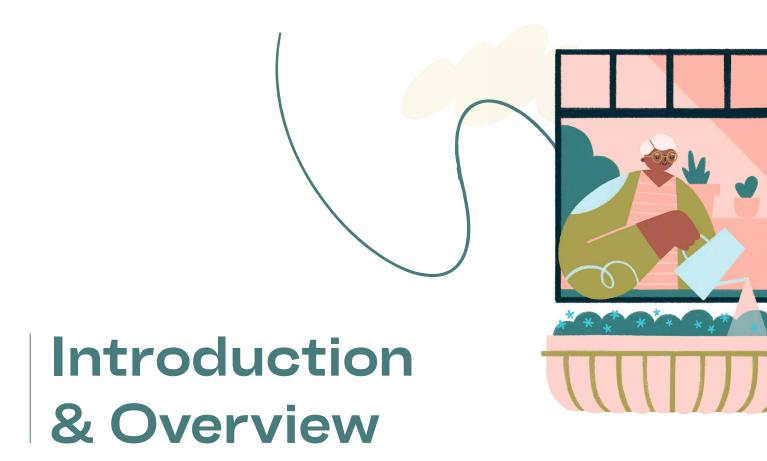


Mental Health and Nature Policy briefing

This policy briefing builds on the evidence set out in our **research report**¹ to propose some priority policy areas for England. 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.







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 The night sky is obscured by light pollution, many biodiverse wild areas have been replaced by agricultural monocultures, and, in our daily lives, technology and screen use is rising while mindful time spent in nature is declining.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 research 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.

The report also includes the results of a YouGov poll we commissioned 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 easily to access nature. People in the most affluent 20% of wards in England, for example, have five times the number of parks and amount of general green space available to them, compared to the 10% most deprived wards.²

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.³



All figures described as coming from 'our poll' are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 4274 UK 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 UK adults (aged 18+).





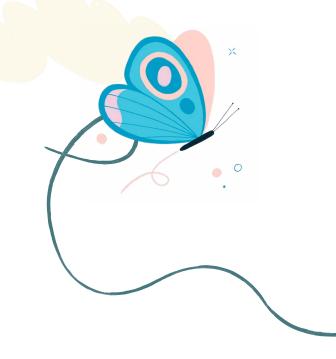


Opportunities to bring about change

Despite the continued decline in the state of nature, 2021 is a year of enormous opportunity to begin 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. It will be important to actively maintain this return to nature.

Our poll found that 'in normal times' before the pandemic, 12% of UK adults spent an average of an hour or less around nature each week. These proportions were particularly high for the youngest adults (16% of 18-24 and 16% of 25-34 year-olds), and for people without gardens (17%).



Unfortunately, the pandemic has also laid bare the systemic inequalities in our ability to access and enjoy nature, adding urgency to calls for change.

Secondly, 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. The Environment Bill moving through the UK Parliament presents a vital opportunity to put into legislation world-leading environmental commitments which enhance the credibility of the UK's global advocacy on this topic. It is also an opportunity to acknowledge the intrinsic link between nature's wellbeing and our own, and to put better mental wellbeing for all at the heart of our environmental policies.

Finally, there is clear public appetite for change. Three quarters (75%) of respondents to our poll indicated that they think the Government should be aiming to encourage people to do more to connect with nature. Importantly, recent research shows that during the pandemic restrictions it is increases in noticing nature that have explained better mental wellbeing, more than recent visits to nature.4







Policy recommendations

research report demonstrates that meaningful

with nature, starting with protecting the natural environment and increasing biodiversity. Ultimately, a strong connection with nature requires bountiful, varied natural areas and the retention and creation of these areas should be a national priority. We then move on to discuss access to these natural

important, we should never forget that nature is all around us. We therefore discuss the role of local authorities, the planning system and urban design,

relationship with nature by encouraging children and young people to build sustained, meaningful



Facilitating connection with 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 a greater noticing of nature.5

This has ramifications for policies such as "green social prescribing"6, 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. The Government has recently announced seven pilot sites for green social prescribing in England, and we urge that these embed noticing and connecting with nature into their standard practice.

More widely, the 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.

The UK Government should particularly examine the barriers to connecting with nature in existing green spaces and in local areas which might relate to inequalities, some of which will be addressed in later sections.



Parks and green spaces that are poorly maintained and marred by litter, with limited biodiversity, and where tranquil engagement is hampered by traffic noise, present barriers to noticing and connecting with nature. These are all barriers that are more likely to be the reality in deprived areas, particularly in inner-city, urban environments.

The risk of taking a prescriptive, dosage-based, approach to nature, where time and visits are prioritised, is that these barriers will not be routinely addressed, and people's time spent in nature will not necessarily translate into the wellbeing benefits envisaged in the creation of these policies.

We therefore call on the Government to 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.⁷

There are already several ways to measure connection with nature using reliable, validated scales. From March 2020, connection with nature has been measured in government statistics as part of the People and Nature Survey⁸ and it is also being trialled in the Gallup World Poll.⁹

We recommend that consideration is given to including the 'I feel part of nature' item from the People and Nature Survey as a measurement of nature-connectedness in the new Health Index for England being developed by the Office for National Statistics.



Protecting the natural environment and restoring biodiversity

One of the main barriers to connecting with nature is the parlous current state of nature in the UK. In a 2019 speech in Kew Gardens, the then-Environment Secretary Michael Gove described the UK as being "amongst the most nature-depleted countries in the world".10 Out of 218 countries in its "biodiversity intactness index", the State of Nature 2016 report places England 189th, Northern Ireland 193rd, Scotland 181st, and Wales 168th.11 All are in the lowest quarter of the index.

The lack of high-quality nature limits the wellbeing benefit that we can derive from it, especially in some of the most deprived 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 wellbeing¹² and vegetation cover and afternoon bird abundances are linked to lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress.13

While the current picture is bleak, 2021 presents a significant opportunity to make a difference.

The coronavirus pandemic has demonstrated clear public appetite for opportunities to connect with nature. The UK is also hosting the COP26 in Glasgow and the G7 in Cornwall. The UK Government is hoping to demonstrate national leadership on climate change and the environment at both these events. In Wales, the Future Generations Wellbeing Act has enshrined a commitment to sustainable development in legislation.

At the same time, the Environment Bill is progressing through the Houses of Parliament and it aims to legislate for some of the ambitions set out in the 25 Year Environment Plan. The Government has also in a number of documents published its aspiration to be the "first generation to leave that environment in a better state than we found it", including in the foreword to its 25 Year Environment Plan.14

There is clearly significant support across the Parliamentary parties for work to improve the quality of nature in England, as well as public appetite for opportunities to connect with nature. Now is the time to capitalise on this strength of feeling and commit to ambitious, binding targets to heal nature in the United Kingdom.





Improving access to nature

Although we have advocated prioritising "connection" with nature over "access" to nature as the primary aim and outcome measure for nature and mental health policies, clearly access is still necessary to build that deeper relationship. This is also an area in which mental health inequalities are expressed.

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.15

Some people, including women, the young, and the elderly, can feel unsafe in some of the green spaces available.

People from minority ethnic backgrounds do not always feel welcome in green spaces or as though they belong¹⁶. People with disabilities are prevented from reaching green spaces due to a collective failure to meet their access requirements.¹⁷ People in rural areas who work in natural environments, such as farmers, will also have a different relationship with nature, although more research is needed in this area. In these ways, the mental health benefits of nature are unevenly distributed across society.

There are also inequalities in the number of people who have access to private gardens, an issue which has been brought into stark relief by the coronavirus pandemic. This is particularly unfortunate since there is evidence that children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds stand to gain more mental health benefit from public open space and access to private gardens than their peers.¹⁸



62%

of rural residents said that before the pandemic, they were able to connect as much as they wanted with nature

40%

of urban residents said that before the pandemic, they were able to connect as much as they wanted with nature

of people in London said that before the pandemic, they were able to connect as much as they wanted with nature





Local authorities across the UK should strive to maintain and improve green spaces so that they can be accessed and enjoyed by all. Local authorities should seek opportunities to increase the amount of green space and the number of parks available to local residents, especially in areas that have poor existing provision.

This can also apply in rural areas, where biodiversity is hampered by the quantity of land used for agriculture and industry, or the land being poorly maintained. Our poll found that 75% of UK adults strongly supported local councils "maintaining existing outdoor areas to ensure they are clean and safe". A further 19% tended to support this, making it one of the most highly supported policies presented to respondents.



86%

of people in the Midlands had access to a private garden

This fell to

in London, demonstrating the regional inequalities in access.





Our poll also found that

of UK adults with long-term health conditions (LTCs) and disabilities 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.

37%

of people with a LTC/disability which limits their daily activities 'a lot' were unable to physically access nature because of their health.





Access should therefore be guaranteed by using Universal Design principles to design parks and playgrounds in a way that makes them accessible to the widest range of people - inclusive of all disabilities, access needs, and ages - without the need for adaptation, modification or assistive devices.¹⁹

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.





Using the planning system and urban design to improve the visibility and availability of nature in every local area

While the previous section deals mainly with parks and formal green spaces in local areas, it is important to remember that nature is all around us, from the weather, to birdsong, to the trees and flowers lining the roads.

However, it is not always possible to attune to this nature, or to notice it meaningfully, due to the distracting qualities of modern life. Traffic noise drowns out birdsong, hectic schedules limit time to notice, and screens call us away from the world around us.

Our review of the research found that urban nature that is abundant and biodiverse can be a valid substitute for wild nature.²⁰

A small qualitative review of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic youth (aged 17-27) also 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, while uncared for and unsafe-feeling 'natural', green and watery environments could reduce young people's likelihood of visiting these resources.21

Our review of the literature did not uncover much research looking at connection with nature in rural areas. It is likely however that many people living in rural areas will experience their own challenges with access to and connection with nature. More research is needed in this area. There is a greater role for public health in the design of public places.²²

Given the strength of the evidence that connection with nature supports better mental health, there is a clear argument for updating the National Planning Policy Framework in England to go beyond "conserving and enhancing" the existing natural environment to building new, visible nature into all development plans for the explicit purpose of supporting population mental health and wellbeing.

Local authorities, planners, and urban designers can also help by increasing the visibility and salience of incidental nature in local environments. This includes those planning hospital buildings and residential care settings.

Our poll found that 84% of UK adults supported the policy of hospitals providing care users with plenty of opportunities to be around and notice nature on a daily basis (43% of respondents strongly supported this), and 91% of UK adults supported the policy of residential and care facilities providing residents with plenty of opportunities to be around and notice nature where they live (with 59% of respondents strongly supporting this). 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.

Local authorities also 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. There is a significant opportunity for local authorities to facilitate and enable community-led initiatives in this area.

68%

of respondents to our poll strongly supported requiring new housing and business developments to include trees, plants and green spaces in their designs.

24%

of respondents to our poll tended to support this proposal.







Building a life-long relationship with nature

of 18-24 year olds were more likely to say that they did not want to or did not enjoy spending time in nature.

of the over-55s were more likely to say that they did not want to or did not enjoy spending time in nature.

of the overall adult population were more likely to say that they did not want to or did not enjoy spending time in 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 wellbeing 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 lifetime.

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 3Os.²³ Secondary schools, therefore, should be a priority for targeted action.

Some recent UK Government reviews have suggested possible solutions. The Glover Landscapes Review, for example, suggests that all children should spend one night in a national park.²⁴ However, our research review would suggest that one, solitary, experience of nature is not enough to build a lifelong relationship with nature.

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."25 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." In our poll, 64% of UK adults strongly supported and 29% tended to support the statement that "schools should encourage children to connect with nature more".

Certainly, time spent learning about the benefits of nature, especially if it leads to the wider appreciation of nature, promises great benefit (although learning facts and figures about nature does not reliably lead to a greater connection with nature, as noted above).









64%

of respondents to our poll strongly support encouraging children to connect with nature more.



We believe that nature can be brought back into secondary schools as a way of teaching, that it is not just something to be taught. Classes should be taken on outdoor activities that support their learning of curriculum subjects; nature should be a part of the learning process. Our review of the literature found that education outside the classroom could promote social wellbeing, particularly for pupils of low socioeconomic status.²⁶

This needs to be accompanied by changes to school estates to prioritise, protect, and build new wild areas and green areas for such purposes. All new schools should be planned with nature in mind and the Government should review the amount and type of green space available in secondary schools and develop a plan for building up nature in schools whose environment currently lacks natural spaces.

As with other areas of policy presented in this briefing, the national government needs to be mindful of inequalities. Natural England's People and Nature survey found that children's access to nature during coronavirus varied according to different inequalities. For example, 71% of children from minority ethnic backgrounds reported spending less time outside since coronavirus, compared with 57% of white children. Further, 73% of children from households with an annual income below £17,000 spent less time outdoors, compared with 57% from households with an annual income above £17,000.27

The UK Government should therefore take a universally proportionate approach to connecting children with nature, balancing universal approaches with more targeted interventions designed to redress these inequalities.







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