

**We have developed five principles, based on our findings in the IWUN project, to help inform policies on planning, health, civil society and the natural environment. The empirical evidence underpinning these principles has been published in peer-reviewed open access papers available at [www.iwun.uk](http://www.iwun.uk)**

**1 Green infrastructure is social infrastructure as well as physical. It is a vital part of how people experience urban life. This requires ongoing investment in green spaces, better ways to access them, and support for the people who bring them to life.**

A city's network of parks and open spaces supports mental wellbeing and social inclusion as well as supporting biodiversity, cleaner air, flood relief and urban cooling. The ecological and the social are interrelated. Habitats should be planned to support both human and non-human wellbeing, paying attention to the ways people connect with nature.

The richer the experience of 'nature' that people have, the more likely it is to enhance their mental health. Wildlife, especially a wide variety of bird life, and planting that provides interest throughout the year, increases the wellbeing benefits of natural spaces.

Green spaces need to feel safe and welcoming. Paving, paths and cycle tracks should be well maintained with wildlife-friendly planting, ecologically sensitive lighting, and safe places to stop and rest. This demands investment in expert design, care and management.

It is not enough just to calculate the amount of green space in an area: quality and ease of access matter too. Poor quality spaces that are lacking in biodiversity and intimidating to reach will not support mental wellbeing or encourage use. Better access means paying attention to the actual routes people travel. Infrastructure and development guidance needs to protect and promote ongoing care and enjoyable access to natural spaces.

**2 Noticing nature improves wellbeing. Our research developed a smartphone app which produced statistically significant improvements in wellbeing for adults in general, and clinically significant improvements for people with mental health difficulties.**

In a controlled experiment, users of a smartphone app were encouraged to notice the good things in green or built environments in Sheffield. After seven days, and in a follow-up questionnaire, users recorded significant increases in both their wellbeing and their connections with nature.

Wellbeing effects aren't simply the result of being in a green space or having one nearby. We found variety in green spaces and biodiversity were particularly important. People felt stronger positive emotions in more biodiverse spaces. Users of the app reported feeling gratitude for trees, wonder at encounters with animals in the city, and awe at views and skies.

**3 Diversity in design, plants and wildlife, facilities, and activities, attracts users across all generations and widens the availability of wellbeing benefits.**

There is no generic template for a good park or green space. And there is no generic user. The myriad of connections between people's experiences of nature and mental wellbeing should inform the design and management of public open spaces. A park that only serves as a children's playground or a football training ground is not fulfilling its potential.

The design of green spaces must maximise opportunities to notice the natural world. Simple interventions – a café in a park or a pedestrian-friendly access route – can make green spaces feel safe, welcoming and inclusive. Toilets, places to stop and sit, on-site park workers, and regular social activities, can help all of us, including vulnerable or isolated people, feel better in green spaces. Policies to encourage and support social cohesion, mental wellbeing and physical exercise should be integrated.

**4 To deliver wellbeing benefits, we need sustained investment in the everyday physical and social infrastructure of urban natural spaces. Development and investment should support the quality of existing green spaces as well as providing new ones.**

The ordinary elements of urban nature – plants, trees, birds, and animals – can increase wellbeing and people’s ability to cope with life. However, poor quality parks and green spaces adversely affect health outcomes. Pressure on public service budgets makes it much harder to provide a high standard of maintenance and cleanliness, and the social programmes that support wellbeing and recovery from mental illness.

Access to good quality green spaces can make a difference. People find it harder to connect with nature where the natural environment is perceived to be poor or where it is harder to access it (for example, where a space feels unsafe or hostile).

People are more likely to feel good in well maintained public spaces that are accessible and welcoming. This underlines the importance of sustained revenue funding to manage green spaces and to support the community-based organisations that can bring green spaces to life. Capital investment on its own is not enough.

**5 Better community infrastructure can help overcome inequalities in access to urban nature. Community infrastructure is the network of organisations and groups, formal and informal, that can connect people with the natural world.**

We found strong support among practitioners and professionals, from GPs to planners, for the neighbourhood based community and voluntary groups that provide opportunities for people to get out and meet others in a supportive environment. Healthcare guidance should encourage GPs to signpost patients to such groups as an alternative, or in addition, to other forms of treatment for mental and physical health problems. Social prescribing offers promising ways to achieve this.

Community infrastructure includes the municipal staff who work in parks as well as ‘Friends’ groups who often coordinate voluntary work in parks and green spaces. These groups need sources of funding and support that are not constrained by the pressures on local government spending.

Pressure on budgets for parks and green spaces makes it much harder to keep providing high quality maintenance and social activities that support mental wellbeing and recovery from mental illness. Healthcare organisations should provide financial support for community organisations working in green spaces.

To maximise the wellbeing and mental health benefits of urban nature, investment is required. Investors are more likely to be persuaded if there is accurate underpinning data showing who uses green spaces, how they are used, and which additional groups could use them as a result of investment.