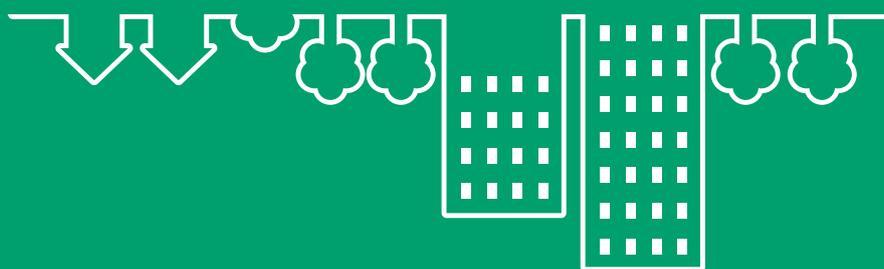




WHAT POLICYMAKERS NEED TO KNOW



This briefing introduces research findings from a three year project in Sheffield. It is an action checklist for national or regional policymakers working on greenspace, planning, health and the environment. The empirical evidence underpinning this briefing has been published in peer-reviewed open access papers available at www.iwun.uk/publications

IN A NUTSHELL

Public policy can support and improve mental wellbeing by making better use of our network of urban natural and green spaces. It should ensure they are biodiverse and accessible to all regardless of ability or culture. Their provision, design, maintenance and usage must promote equality in experiences of nature.

HEADLINE FINDINGS

Everyday experiences matter for wellbeing. Wellbeing benefits can come about through simply noticing the small things in nature. People connect with nature more readily when they can experience a wide diversity of plants and wildlife in cities. Early life experiences help people to appreciate the natural world.

Planning and environment policies should make sure natural spaces, including domestic gardens, are intrinsic to new developments. Public greenspace should be safe and accessible and support a rich variety of wildlife. Education and early years policies should promote experiences of nature. Health policies should stress the wellbeing effects of natural environments.

Context matters for wellbeing: wellbeing benefits depend on the specifics of each site; individual health conditions; and individuals' previous and potential connections with urban nature.

Planning, health and civil society policies should work to create natural spaces that welcome and include as many kinds of users as possible. Policy should emphasise the variety of ways of obtaining wellbeing benefits.

People in cities do not have equal physical, cultural and social access to natural spaces. The wellbeing benefits of nature may not always be available to support the people who need them most.

Healthcare, planning, transport and civil society policies should explore how physical and social access can be improved, ensuring spaces are welcoming to all social and cultural groups. Deprived areas should not miss out.

TAKING POLICYMAKING FORWARD

The Government has recognised the need for investment in urban green spaces to support wellbeing and biodiversity in its loneliness strategy, DEFRA's 25-year Environment Plan, and planning policy. Public Health England, NHS England, and Natural England all stress the value of being connected with nature. However, this comes in the context of a forecast 60% decline in funding for urban parks and reduced resources to protect the natural environment. Policymakers need to join up policy effectively across sectors and departments, provide adequate resources to put policies into practice, and sustain policies for long enough, and consistently enough, to make a difference.

A CHECKLIST FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

1

MAKE THE EVERYDAY AMAZING

To deliver wellbeing benefits, there must be sustained investment in the everyday physical and social infrastructure of urban natural spaces. This can be done in three ways:

SURPRISE: Planning and natural environment policies should encourage natural colour, wildlife, trees, plants, and water in new developments, transport infrastructure, and everyday street scenes.

SOCIABILITY: Housing and planning policies should promote high quality public spaces in new developments, including natural meeting points with planting and spaces to sit.

SUPPORT: Developers should help to fund high quality, biodiverse green spaces for years to come. They should minimise harm to the natural environment and produce a net improvement in biodiversity.

2

CREATE A SOCIAL GREEN NETWORK

Green infrastructure is both physical and social. Environment and transport policies should follow four principles:

ACCESS: Travellers should encounter nature in everyday journeys by foot, bike, car or public transport.

QUALITY: Urban nature needs to be equally accessible and enjoyable for all, including minorities, people with mental health problems and people with disabilities. Greenspace quality should be monitored and improved wherever necessary.

CONNECTIONS WITH NATURE: New developments and infrastructure should preserve existing natural features and include new ones – including good sized gardens in new homes.

ANIMATION: We need ongoing investment in the people who bring green spaces to life and who support individuals' nature connections throughout their lives.

3

MAKE SOCIAL PRESCRIBING GREENER

There is growing interest within the NHS in using community-based activities to help treat long-term physical and mental health conditions. Our findings suggest that 'social prescribing' in natural settings could add further benefits. Healthcare policies and guidance should:

- Adapt social prescribing approaches to draw on and enhance connections with nature.
- Integrate nature into the 'five ways to wellbeing' promoted by the NHS and Mind.
- Let healthcare users set the agenda, fitting social prescriptions to their needs and interests.

4

PROMOTE COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE AND DIVERSITY

Effective healthcare interventions that build connections with the natural world require a vibrant and diverse network of community organisations as well as a physical network of high-quality, well-maintained green spaces, woodlands and watercourses.

To maximise inclusion across cultures and generations, and to make wellbeing benefits available more widely, spaces should offer diversity in design, plants and wildlife, facilities, and activities. National planning policy and Local Plans should identify nature-depleted locations where biodiversity must be restored. Community groups and residents from minority and migrant cultures should be invited to influence national policies on green spaces and urban nature.

ABOUT IWUN

Improving Wellbeing through Urban Nature (IWUN) brings together five strands of research:

- An epidemiological analysis of links between greenspace and health
- In-depth interviews and workshops to explore people's connectedness with nature
- Using a smartphone app to find out whether people feel better when noticing good things in their environment
- Interviews with professionals and community groups to identify interventions to increase wellbeing
- A cost-utility analysis of selected interventions

An accompanying document, *Five Principles for Policymaking*, is available at www.iwun.uk/publications

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