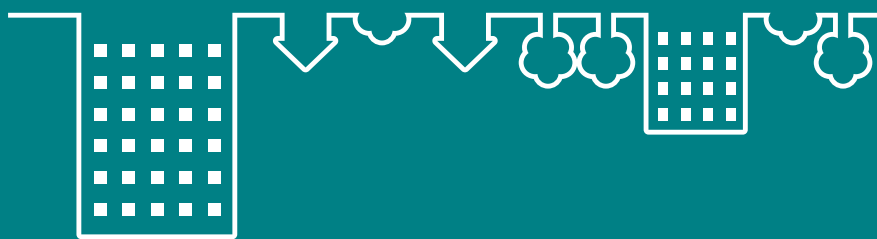




# WHAT HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS NEED TO KNOW



This briefing draws together findings from a three year research project<sup>1</sup> examining the many ways in which 'urban nature' supports mental wellbeing. It used a variety of research methods to understand how natural and green spaces across the city of Sheffield relieve mental stress and help residents to thrive.

This briefing is to inform people working in healthcare, or whose work connects with healthcare professionals, of the evidence from our research and what it means for practice. While our research was based in Sheffield, we have drawn out lessons that apply more broadly to urban areas in the UK.

## IN A NUTSHELL

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Our research shows that noticing and connecting with nature improves mental wellbeing. Healthcare professionals and GPs can support and improve mental wellbeing by making better use of our network of urban natural and green spaces. They need to create and support opportunities for people experiencing mental ill-health to connect with nature.

## HEADLINE FINDINGS

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**Everyday experiences matter for wellbeing.** Wellbeing benefits can come about through simply noticing the small things in nature, as well as being in wider green spaces, and are reinforced by repeated connections. A wide diversity of plants and wildlife supports such connections because there is more to notice and to stimulate responses. Early life experiences are particularly important in establishing these connections.

When people suffer from mental illness, stress, depression or anxiety, reinforcing their links with the natural world can make a positive difference. Healthcare practitioners can signpost patients and service users to opportunities that help them connect regularly with nature.

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

GPs and healthcare practitioners should recognise that in some neighbourhoods green spaces may be insecure or intimidating, especially for vulnerable and marginalised people. Poverty and disability can limit people's opportunities to connect with nature. Links between health services and neighbourhood organisations can help patients benefit from urban nature.

**Context matters for wellbeing.** Wellbeing benefits depend on the specifics of particular sites, individuals' life circumstances, and individuals' previous and potential connections with urban nature.

Green spaces need to be inclusive and welcoming. Activities in or near green spaces, such as health walks and wellbeing workshops, can bring spaces to life and create opportunities to connect with nature. Health professionals and community-based wellbeing workers can work with social prescribing initiatives to link patients with activities that will appeal to them.

## WHAT OUR RESEARCH HAS FOUND: THREE MESSAGES FOR HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS

1

### **NOTICING NATURE IMPROVES WELLBEING. OUR RESEARCH USING A SMARTPHONE APP PRODUCED STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN WELLBEING FOR ADULTS IN GENERAL, AND CLINICALLY SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS FOR PEOPLE WITH A MENTAL HEALTH DIFFICULTY.**

In a randomised controlled experiment, 582 users of a smartphone app were encouraged to notice the good things in green or built environments in Sheffield. In follow-up questionnaires, users recorded significant increases in both their wellbeing and their connections with nature. The benefits were strongest among people who had spent less time outdoors in the past or felt less connected to 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.

However, access to green space, especially good quality green spaces, can make a difference. In another strand of our research, we found rates of depression were lower in areas where public green spaces were cleaner and residents had larger gardens. People find it harder to connect with nature when they feel the natural environment is poorly maintained or it is difficult to access it.

2

### **PEOPLE NOTICE NATURE IN DIFFERENT WAYS. WORKING WITH MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE USERS AND PEOPLE IN DEPRIVED AREAS OF SHEFFIELD, WE DISCOVERED A WIDE RANGE OF CONNECTIONS WITH THE NATURAL WORLD AND THAT PEOPLE USED NATURAL SPACES IN DIFFERENT WAYS AND FOR DIFFERENT PURPOSES.**

This suggests that healthcare interventions should be tailored to individuals' own experiences and connections with nature. While the smartphone intervention had measurable impacts for the people who used it, this was among people who volunteered to be part of the experiment. We also found that arts-based workshops helped mental health service users think about and articulate their nature connections. In-depth interviews highlighted the importance of memories and childhood experiences in establishing connections with nature.

There is more to urban nature than parks and green spaces. Our interviews and workshops spotlighted the importance of views, water, trees, animals and colour in the landscape, all noticed as part of people's everyday routines and movement through the city. Working with Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people we found that they use urban natural environments in a variety of ways to support their wellbeing. These included walking; growing food; enjoying city farms and wildlife; noticing seasons; enjoying gardens at home, and sitting in semi-natural public spaces to reflect or socialise.

Young people's experiences of nature are especially important. Our research shows young people use nature to support their mental health, easing pressures of study or work and reconnecting with childhood memories. Young people in our study had stronger pro-environmental attitudes than other age groups.

3

### **LOCAL ORGANISATIONS AND GROUPS, FORMAL AND INFORMAL, CAN CONNECT PEOPLE WITH THE NATURAL WORLD. HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS SHOULD TAKE OPPORTUNITIES TO REFER PATIENTS AND CLIENTS TO COMMUNITY-BASED WELLBEING ACTIVITIES.**

We found strong support among a range of practitioners and professionals for community and voluntary groups that can help people to get outside and meet others in a supportive environment. If GPs are aware of such activities in their area, they can signpost patients to them as an alternative, or in addition, to other forms of treatment for mental and physical health problems.

Pressure on budgets for parks and green spaces makes it much harder to keep providing a high standard of basic maintenance and the kind of social activities that support mental wellbeing and recovery from mental illness. Healthcare organisations should consider financial support for community and voluntary organisations working in green spaces. These could include 'Friends' groups who often coordinate voluntary work in parks and green spaces. While they do not necessarily provide direct benefits in terms of mental wellbeing, they make parks and green spaces safer and more welcoming, helping to overcome social anxiety and fears of antisocial behaviour.

## A CHECKLIST FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The checklist below provides a framework for healthcare practitioners to consider how their activities can help people connect with nature and improve their wellbeing. It offers some questions to guide practical action.

### 1

#### MAKE SOCIAL PRESCRIBING GREENER

There is growing interest within the NHS in using social prescribing to help treat long-term physical health conditions, mental ill-health, loneliness and isolation, and for helping people with complex social needs<sup>2</sup>. Social prescribing has the potential to reduce reliance on medical interventions, is likely to provide value for money, and can help to address the wider social determinants of health. In a one pilot scheme, 83% of patients experienced improvements in wellbeing<sup>3</sup>.

Our understanding of the wellbeing benefits of urban nature suggests that social prescribing in natural settings could be even more beneficial. This could include digital interventions such as a wellbeing app, or bespoke workshops for people with mental health difficulties.

#### GPS AND OTHER HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS COULD:

- Make prescribing greener. How can current social prescribing approaches be adapted to draw on and build connections with nature?
- Green the 'five ways to wellbeing'. Nature needs to be integrated into the 'five ways to wellbeing' promoted by the NHS<sup>4</sup> and Mind<sup>5</sup>. How can healthcare professionals encourage patients to use nature to connect with others, volunteer in natural environments or use natural spaces for exercise and activity? How can they make their own premises more wildlife-friendly?
- Let healthcare users set the agenda. How can healthcare professionals involve patients in identifying and adapting green social prescriptions to fit their needs, cultures, and interests?

#### CLINICAL COMMISSIONING GROUPS SHOULD:

- Fund and evaluate green social prescriptions involving activities in natural spaces.

### 2

#### CREATE AND IMPROVE HABITATS FOR CONNECTION

Healthcare professionals can help to create and look after habitats for connection – places and spaces where people can appreciate urban nature and mitigate everyday stresses. They can do this through:

- Funding and supporting therapeutic and wellness activities and facilities. How can GP practices and therapy services link with community-based organisations and refer patients to activities in natural settings, and promote local nature-based activities?
- Creating everyday opportunities to connect with nature. How can healthcare practices provide their own green spaces or offer their patients maps showing green routes and natural spaces in their localities? Can they work with artists to help people connect with nature?
- Supporting a range of locally suitable opportunities to build nature connections. How can healthcare professionals signpost service users to nature-based activities that are culturally and socially accessible?

Clinical commissioning groups could:

- Gather data on a citywide basis on patients' connections with nature to inform future service commissioning.

## SUPPORT AND PROMOTE COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE

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

- How can healthcare organisations fund specialist practitioners (including artists and wellbeing practitioners) to run workshops, events and activities that connect people with nearby nature?
- How can healthcare organisations effectively signpost patients to community-based activities that link to their neighbourhood or interests, and identify gaps and under-served areas?
- How can healthcare practitioners link patients with local 'Friends' groups in parks and green spaces to encourage volunteering and social connections?

Clinical commissioning groups should:

- Recognise the wellbeing benefits of activities provided outside the NHS by voluntary and community organisations.
- Fund partnerships between community organisations and healthcare providers to broaden and deepen connections with nature at a neighbourhood level.

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**The empirical evidence underpinning this briefing has been published in peer-reviewed open access papers available at [www.iwun.uk](http://www.iwun.uk)**

**You can also find documents explaining how we came to our conclusions and setting out principles for policymaking based on our research.**

<sup>1</sup> IWUN is led by the Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of Sheffield, with colleagues at the university's department of Urban Studies and Planning and School of Health and Related Research, and at the University of Derby, Heriot-Watt University, Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trusts, the Centre for Sustainable Healthcare and Sheffield Flourish. Further information about IWUN is available at [www.iwun.uk](http://www.iwun.uk). The IWUN project is supported by the Natural Environment Research Council, ESRC, BBSRC, AHRC and Defra INERC grant NE/N013565/1.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.england.nhs.uk/personalisedcare/social-prescribing/>

<sup>3</sup> Dayson, C. & Bashir, N. (2014). The social and economic impact of the Rotherham Social Prescribing Pilot: main evaluation report. <https://www4.shu.ac.uk/research/cresr/sites/shu.ac.uk/files/social-economic-impact-rotherham.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/improve-mental-wellbeing/>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.mind.org.uk/media/4220803/five-ways-to-wellbeing\\_poster.pdf](https://www.mind.org.uk/media/4220803/five-ways-to-wellbeing_poster.pdf)

## 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](http://www.iwun.uk/publications)

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