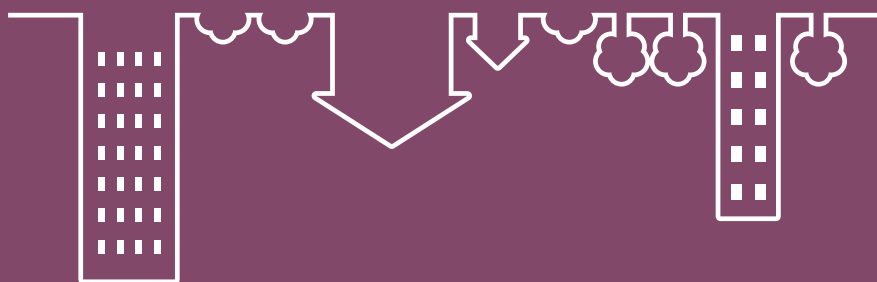




# WHAT VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY GROUPS NEED TO KNOW



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.

The purpose of this briefing is to inform voluntary and community organisations working in neighbourhoods, healthcare or on environmental issues 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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Voluntary and community groups working in neighbourhoods, in healthcare or on environmental issues can support and improve mental wellbeing by making better use of urban natural and green spaces. They need to make sure green spaces are equitably accessible and that their provision, design, maintenance and use promote equality and inclusion.

## 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.

Voluntary and community organisations should work with public agencies and with local residents to make sure spaces are planned, maintained and used in ways that encourage variety. Spaces should cater for a wide range of users and activities, offering spaces for solitude and sociability, and support a wide range of bird, animal and plant life.

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

Voluntary and community groups should work with partners to make sure natural spaces cater for as many kinds of users as possible, and are inclusive and welcoming.

**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.

Voluntary and community organisations should work with greenspace managers to observe how parks and greenspace are used and who uses them, identifying groups who may be excluded or intimidated. They should work with designers, planners and managers to overcome barriers that stop some people using local green spaces.

## WHAT OUR RESEARCH HAS FOUND: THREE MESSAGES FOR VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

1

**GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE IS SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE AS WELL AS PHYSICAL. IT IS A VITAL PART OF THE WAY PEOPLE EXPERIENCE URBAN LIFE. IT REQUIRES ONGOING INVESTMENT IN GREEN SPACES, BETTER WAYS OF ACCESSING THEM, AND SUPPORT FOR THE PEOPLE WHO BRING THEM TO LIFE AND HELP TO CREATE CONNECTIONS WITH NATURE.**

A city's network of parks and open spaces supports mental wellbeing and social inclusion as well as providing biodiversity and supporting cleaner air, flood relief and urban cooling. The ecological and the social are interrelated. Community-based organisations can help to create 'habitats of connection' to support both human and non-human populations by highlighting the wide range of ways in which natural spaces support wellbeing.

Green spaces need to feel safe and welcoming. Paving, paths and cycle tracks need to be well maintained with wildlife-friendly planting, ecologically sensitive lighting, and safe places to stop and rest. Community and voluntary organisations can help planners and greenspace managers by identifying spaces that feel unsafe or hostile and the issues that generate such feelings.

Our research shows that parks need people: people to work in them and create a sense of care and security, and to work with local communities to provide activities that connect individuals with the natural world. Community groups, especially those working with people who don't generally use green spaces, should work with greenspace managers to attract new users and to host activities that make people feel welcome and included.

2

**TO DELIVER WELLBEING BENEFITS, WE NEED SUSTAINED INVESTMENT IN THE EVERYDAY PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE OF URBAN NATURAL SPACES.**

Everyday experiences of urban nature can increase wellbeing and people's ability to cope with life. Noticing a flower in a wall or a squirrel in a park can make a person feel better. Noticing a tree or a view can inspire feelings of awe and wonder. Childhood and family experiences establish memories and connections that persist throughout life. Child-friendly green spaces that are safe for family walks, picnics or play are likely to have long-term wellbeing benefits.

However, poor quality parks and green spaces adversely affect health outcomes. Our research shows that people are healthier where parks are perceived to be cleaner, without graffiti, dog dirt and litter. Pressure on greenspace budgets makes it much harder to provide a high standard of basic maintenance and cleanliness, and the social activities that support wellbeing and recovery from mental illness. We need better data on how people use green spaces and parks and which people avoid them, so that we can know when there are problems that need to be tackled.

3

**DIVERSITY IN DESIGN, PLANTS AND WILDLIFE, FACILITIES, AND ACTIVITIES, HELPS TO MAXIMISE INCLUSION ACROSS GENERATIONS AND MAKE WELLBEING BENEFITS AVAILABLE TO ALL.**

There is no generic template for a good park or green space. Neither is there a generic park user. But the connections between experiences of nature and mental wellbeing are strong and should provide a foundation for designing and managing 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 create as many opportunities to notice the natural world as possible. People experience a sense of wonder at encountering wildlife in the city, calm in the presence of water, gratitude for trees and a sense of awe at dramatic skies and views. Through our smartphone app we found a link between positive emotions and biologically diverse green spaces. Birds are seen as a barometer of biodiversity and are important for human wellbeing.

Simple interventions (such as a café in a park or a pedestrian-friendly access route) can make green spaces welcoming and inclusive. More people are likely to enjoy natural spaces if there are places to stop and sit, facilities such as toilets, staff who can create a sense of safety and social activities that connect with vulnerable or isolated people. Voluntary and community organisations can identify improvements that will encourage more people to use green spaces, and work with parks and greenspace managers to put them into practice.

# A CHECKLIST FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The checklist below provides a framework for voluntary and community groups to assess how well local green spaces are working and what can be done to improve them.

## 1

### CREATE A SOCIAL GREEN NETWORK

Green infrastructure is not just physical: it is social infrastructure too. It provides places for people to get together and support each other. So we need ongoing investment in the people and organisations who bring it to life and who help connect people with the natural world.

Voluntary and community organisations can work with greenspace managers to create and sustain a social green network that enables movement, access and connections with nature. This includes physical access, and making sure spaces are welcoming to all cultures and potential users. Nature connections can be increased by greening everyday journeys. A social green network can be built on three principles:

#### MOVEMENT:

- Is it safe, easy and pleasurable to move through natural spaces and parks?
- Do well-used routes contain natural elements and encourage biodiversity?
- Is there signage and information explaining how to find nearby green spaces, and what to find?
- Is there digital information to help users experience familiar places in new ways?

#### ACCESS:

- Do natural spaces appear under-used? Are there groups who are not using them?
- Are natural spaces accessible and affordable for people from less affluent areas?
- Are access routes well-lit and do they feel safe?
- Do children's play areas (formal or informal) encourage imagination and adventure?
- Are there enough spaces for sociability, fun and recreation?

#### CONNECTING WITH NATURE:

- Are natural spaces rich in wildlife with a variety of habitats?
- Are there spaces for solitude and reflection?
- Are there enough activities going on in the spaces for the whole community and are community groups able to use green spaces in their neighbourhoods?

## 2

### MAKE THE EVERYDAY AMAZING

To deliver wellbeing benefits, there must be sustained investment in the everyday physical and social infrastructure of urban natural spaces. Community and voluntary organisations should encourage greenspace owners and managers to invest for surprise, sociability and support.

#### SURPRISE:

- Is there a wide range of natural colour, trees and plants?
- Are there habitats for insects, birds and other animals?
- Do community-based activities make the most of biodiversity?

#### SOCIABILITY:

- Are natural spaces safe and pleasurable for time with friends and family?
- Are there spaces for gatherings and games?
- Is there enough seating and do the seats create sociable spaces?
- Are there places where organised social activities can take place?

## SUPPORT:

- Are there barriers to accessibility or problems with antisocial behaviour?
- Can activities be arranged for people who don't usually access natural spaces?
- Are there opportunities for volunteering? Are Friends' groups welcoming and inclusive?
- Are BAME communities' needs understood and addressed?
- Are people able to experience nature in new ways and learn about the natural world?

## 3

### BUILD STRENGTH THROUGH DIVERSITY

To welcome all cultures and generations, and to support wellbeing more widely, spaces should offer diversity in design, plants and wildlife, facilities, and activities.

#### DIVERSITY IN DESIGN:

- Where can planting be improved to create new wildlife habitats?
- Do new spaces encourage use and enjoyment through their planting and design?
- Are local green spaces appropriate to community needs and identities?
- Are voluntary and community organisations consulted on the design of new spaces?
- Are there sheltered places people can use in bad weather?

#### DIVERSITY IN USE:

- Do local green spaces offer a variety of ways to connect with nature at different times of day and stages of life?
- Are there enough green spaces for sports and physical activities?
- Do green spaces offer opportunities for recovery and quiet?
- Do green spaces offer opportunities to observe and appreciate wildlife?
- Are there opportunities for community groups to own or manage incidental natural spaces and 'left over' sites?
- How will potential conflicts between different groups of users be managed?

#### DIVERSITY IN CULTURE:

- Can BAME groups influence the design and management of local green spaces?
- Can people with disabilities influence the design and management of local green spaces?
- Are the voices of children, young people and elders listened to and considered in decision-making?
- Do voluntary and community organisations regularly meet and advise greenspace professionals?
- Are voluntary and community organisations consulted on governance arrangements to make sure nobody is excluded?

**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.

## 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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