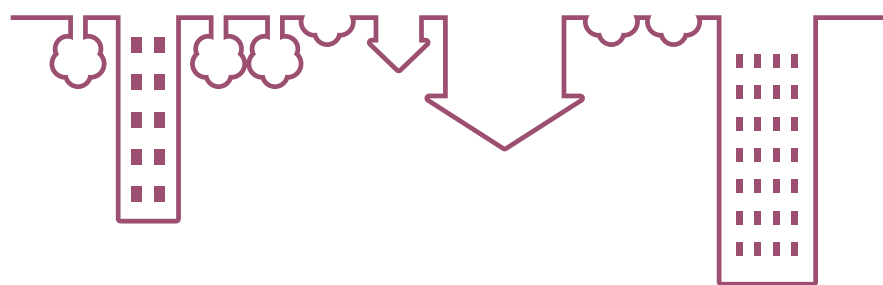




SUPPORTING PEOPLE'S MENTAL WELLBEING THROUGH URBAN NATURE – CHALLENGING INEQUALITIES



A city's green spaces and everyday nature need to be considered assets for people's mental health and wellbeing – especially for new arrivals to cities and those living in more deprived areas. We found that urban nature makes a positive difference to the mental wellbeing of urban residents who face inequalities. Our key recommendations are for nature-based and health organisations to direct resources towards using urban nature for wellbeing - for people living in deprived urban areas, for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) urban residents and to include BAME people in providing that support.

OUR RESEARCH

Nature in a city can help people facing inequalities feel connected to positive memories of other places and to the wider world. Nature is used and valued by BAME people, migrants and those living in deprived areas of cities, yet their green space and nature experiences are more likely to be limited in the variety of local opportunities available, therefore requiring costly travel to high quality greenspaces and to require support from family or community groups. the rest of the world.

"They have big tree there, one big tree. I sit there when I like to think about things and make decisions. I love that place because you have the falling water, it's coming down there, you have the river here so it's beautiful place. Winter or summer or spring or anything, I don't mind. Any time of the year, I go there and think about it, any problem I have."

Helima

WHAT PEOPLE TOLD US – 6 KEY IDEAS

1

URBAN DEPRIVATION CAN AFFECT PEOPLE'S USE OF NATURE FOR WELLBEING

Urban deprivation more than ethnicity, was more likely to affect people's contact with nature for wellbeing. Contrary to an established view that BAME people are less likely to visit nature, we heard many stories about day to day nature-noticing for wellbeing and often deeper and more soulful connections than from white British people. Those people in our study who had little connection with nature and who didn't use nature for wellbeing benefits all lived in deprived areas of the city.

2

SOCIAL ISOLATION, LONELINESS AND ILLNESS CAN BE A BARRIER TO ACCESSING NATURE

Social isolation and illness, evident more in deprived areas, was a barrier to nature contact, sometimes preventing people from all ethnic backgrounds from leaving their house and going to local green spaces. Older white British city residents, living in deprived areas of the city, drew on nature for mental wellbeing less than other participants in our study. Older people related to urban nature especially through being in well maintained parks and formal gardens, usually accessing those spaces through sociable experiences, organised trips or alongside friends, interest groups and families. **Nature experiences in and around the city offered many people a sense of CONNECTION to plants, animals, to people and to the wider world.**

3

MEMORIES OF NATURE HELP PEOPLE FEEL GOOD

First generation migrants drew on their **positive nature memories** of growing up in other countries, and this helped them feel good in and around their city now. Previous experiences of farming, plant growing and of rural landscapes in other countries shaped current experiences in the city: inspiring people to seek views, contact with plants and animals. These experiences then provided **connections to extended family and to previous lives.** Memories of nature were valuable for Sheffield-born participants too, including BAME residents and those living in deprived areas. Those people with childhood memories of being in nature ('stealing' honey, dog walking, growing food, outdoor jobs, outdoor play, care for pets, use of city gardens and parks), carried on seeking feel-good experiences in the city's more natural environments today.

4

AREAS OF DEPRIVATION OFFER FEWER OPPORTUNITIES FOR WELLBEING FROM NATURE

Many of Sheffield's greenspaces that are in deprived areas may be near people's houses, but overall have fewer trees, cafes, high quality play spaces and water features (natural and designed) in comparison to those in Sheffield's most affluent areas. They are less well used and in some places were associated with crime and anti-social activities. **Parks, neighbourhoods, roadsides and through-routes in deprived areas were more often described as having rubbish and not being looked after.** This put some people off walking locally, cycling and going to the nearest greenspaces.

5

A BROADER VIEW OF NATURE – IMPORTANCE OF CITY CULTURE, HISTORY AND WEATHER

Both for new arrivals to the city and for residents with long attachments to the city, **the city's cultural and industrial heritage support wellbeing alongside experience of natural environments.** Museums next to parks combine the city's cultural and natural assets; a walk alongside a canal with industrial history connects people to the past; an outdoor site of historical interest such as a monument or hillfort can inspire curiosity and offer outdoor experiences. People in our study challenged cultural stereotypes around feelings about British weather. 'Kay' with Jamaican heritage, explaining how she doesn't like weather too hot, said: 'they say oh we're black, we're West Indian so we should like it warm'; 'Idin' from Iran was delighted by British drizzle and mist. 'Antara' from south India took great pleasure in snow and in seasonal leaf fall. We heard how new arrivals to the city found it hard to adjust to closed or sparsely used city precincts and parks after 5pm.

6

'NO NATURE IN CITY CENTRE IS THERE? I DON'T SEE ANY GRASS OR OWT'

Participants in our study felt that Sheffield city centre had very little nature, except for The Peace Gardens and The Winter Gardens. These two sites, both very highly maintained and horticultural in style, offered accessible urban nature. These were greatly valued by many people on low incomes, or who had difficulty in travelling independently and for those not working. Therefore **city centre provision can be seen as one important way in which residential inequalities can be mitigated, providing extremely valuable 'mental health respite' for a wide range of city residents.** However, not all participants from deprived areas had been to these places, sometimes preferring instead to use out of town shopping centres which felt cleaner, safer and more accessible than the city centre. Compared with Sheffield residents in affluent areas of the city, those living in deprived areas talked less about local public greenspaces close by and more about infrequent 'special' trips out to the city's surrounding countryside and Peak District towns or to well-resourced parks in more affluent suburbs.

"I just go on that walk, that beautiful place, [Rivelin]. I love that, that's what I like more than owt in life, just being out there, you know, and there's nobody round to bother you, you might see the odd person, you say good morning [...] it is tranquillity, that's peace, some peace of mind and you're out there, nobody around to bother you, you know what I mean."

Kevin

"That's something I regret in my life - I like to see gardens when they're well prepared and that... it must take a lot of time but I didn't have much time... a garden that's full of flowers or in my case, a garden full of concrete, concrete slabs. I love to see gardens nicely done out but when you work seven days, twelve hours a day, you haven't got the time."

Stuart

WHAT YOU CAN DO – 4 STARTING POINTS

1

Prioritise resources

If you have resources to help people connect with nature, especially urban nature that can be noticed as part of everyday life, **prioritise and sustain resources for people in deprived urban areas**. Direct resources to families and youth work, to schools and young people's neighbourhood spaces and to new arrivals to the city in those areas. Investment and maintenance for varied greenspaces in areas of deprivation are needed, so that those areas feel safe, beautiful and lively. Care for these areas helps people feel cared for. People in deprived areas often have less time themselves to engage in voluntary care for their neighbourhood spaces compared with people in affluent areas; they are also more likely to experience ill health and disability that can hinder access to nature. Resource planning needs to take these factors into account.

2

Normalise nature for wellbeing

A sense of risk and fear associated with some natural and outdoor city spaces can be created and sustained through negative stories from family, peers, social and national media. This has an adverse impact on nature contact. **Modelling of greenspace use and provision can be powerful when it is done by those who are respected and trusted**; for BAME people, this may be BAME leaders in their own community. People across a community, including school staff, religious leaders, parents, healthcare workers, shop and business owners can help build confidence, ambition and cultural access to nature. If you are a nature or greenspace worker, collaboration with non-nature interest groups will help, moving into their spheres with stepping-stone activities and approaches. If you are involved in healthcare, social prescribing and include contact with urban nature, what you do will work best if carefully tailored to both the histories and needs of those local places and individuals. Late afternoon and early evening activities and animation of green spaces across the city may be make nature more accessible. Anything you do to help people connect with nature in and near their homes in the city is helpful, facilitating feelings that nature is not just 'out there' in the countryside.

3

Begin indoors or start with what you already do

Many people we spoke to don't identify as 'outdoor types' or 'nature enthusiasts' yet still use and value nature for their own wellbeing. **Indoor activities or those that bridge indoor/outdoor environments can offer safe and welcoming introductions to nature**. Opportunities such as contact with animals and wildlife, food growing, gardening, photography and nature-based crafts can be very valuable, as part of free or low cost nature and wellbeing courses. Can a café or library space with nearby access to a garden/park be used for social space and noticing nature? Can an existing church, mosque, temple or social group include nature-based visits and activities? Can an existing film or book group connect people to urban nature? Feelings of wellbeing may come from a sense of achievement, of developing a new skill or from companionship with people, plants or animals.



4

Help people access nature – physically and culturally

Getting to a variety of nature places in and around the city is more difficult for people who have limited incomes and fewer transport options. How can you facilitate or campaign for easier access to high quality urban nature? Examples might be organising transport for groups, considering transport options for families with pushchairs, subsidised bus fares, lift sharing, resourcing or pointing out local walking and cycling options that feel safe, promoting nature experience in domestic gardens or neighbourhood spaces? Cultural access to nature can be a barrier for people. People whose families have not used nature for wellbeing are less likely to see nature as a health asset. More planting of trees and flowers, green respite spaces in the city centre (and social events around these spaces) may offer urban nature to people who face inequalities, helping it become part of their everyday lives. **What can you or your organisation do so that people can see and get to know a champion of nature, a person who has similar life experiences to those in a deprived area or a cultural community?** How can nature experiences be better communicated to a wider variety of groups? Sheffield Peak Mosaic, Sheffield Environmental Movement, Roshni and Magid Magid all care about urban nature for a diverse city population in Sheffield. Consider collaborating with groups and individuals like these; share ideas with them and others.

"Sometimes I have a little rest by going for a little walk in the fresh air. I find some lovely plants...wild garlic... you can eat it. Where I live there is a bit of a hill and if you walk up you feel more energy. You see plants and animals. I am really happy and tell myself to walk more."

Mai

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

Credits:

Jo Birch and Clare Rishbeth
University of Sheffield
2019

Design:

Humanstudio

 www.iwun.uk

 iwun@sheffield.ac.uk

 [@iwunproject](https://twitter.com/iwunproject)

