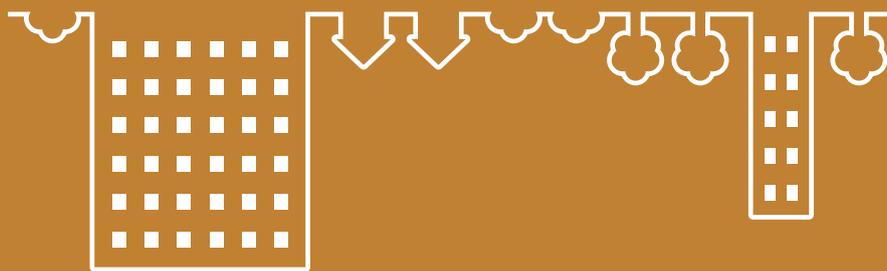




WHAT PLANNERS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT POLICYMAKERS NEED TO KNOW



This briefing draws together findings from a three year research project¹ 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 people working in spatial planning, or whose work connects with planners, 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

Planning and local government can support and improve mental wellbeing by making better use of our network of urban natural and green spaces. They need to make sure green spaces are equitably accessible and that their provision, design, maintenance and usage promote equality and inclusion.

HEADLINE FINDINGS

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.

This means that planners and local government policymakers should ensure natural spaces of varying sizes and characteristics are intrinsic to new development. Such spaces need to be safe, accessible and include diverse planting to support wildlife.

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.

This means that planners, health professionals and community organisations should 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.

This means that planners should work with greenspace managers and elected members should address the barriers to green space equity and explore how infrastructure can be adapted to improve both physical and social access, ensuring spaces are welcoming to all social and cultural groups.

WHAT OUR RESEARCH HAS FOUND: THREE MESSAGES FOR PLANNERS

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

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.

It is not enough just to calculate the amount of green space a person can access: quality and ease of access matter too. This means paying attention to the actual routes people travel, taking into account obstacles such as busy roads or derelict buildings. Poor quality spaces that are intimidating to reach and lacking in biodiversity will not support mental wellbeing.

There is a link between the size of larger private gardens and good general health (even when controlling for socioeconomic factors)². New developments should provide enough space for a family garden with room for trees and space to grow plants and vegetables.

2

DIVERSITY IN DESIGN, PLANTS AND WILDLIFE, FACILITIES, AND ACTIVITIES, HELPS TO MAKE SPACES MORE INCLUSIVE SO THAT MORE PEOPLE CAN SUSTAIN AND IMPROVE THEIR WELLBEING.

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 can 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.

3

TO DELIVER WELLBEING BENEFITS, WE NEED SUSTAINED INVESTMENT. THIS INCLUDES MAINTAINING PLANTING AND FACILITIES, BUT ALSO SUPPORTING ACTIVITIES THAT BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER AND SUPPORT MENTAL WELLBEING. PLANNING INTERVENTIONS SHOULD IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF EXISTING GREEN SPACES AS WELL AS PROVIDING NEW ONES.

Everyday experiences of urban nature can increase wellbeing and people's ability to cope with life. However, poor quality parks and green spaces adversely affect health outcomes. Pressure on budgets for parks and green spaces makes it much harder to keep providing high quality maintenance and offer the social programmes that support wellbeing and recovery from mental illness.

People are more likely to feel good in well maintained public spaces that are accessible and welcoming. 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.

WHAT PLANNING NEEDS TO DO: A CHECKLIST FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The checklist below provides a framework for planners or the public to assess how well their 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.

Planners and policymakers must protect and improve access to green spaces. This includes physical access, and making sure spaces are welcoming to all cultures and potential users. Biodiverse walking and cycling routes can increase both the number and range of greenspace users, creating incidental nature connections by greening everyday journeys. A social green network can be built on three principles:

MOVEMENT:

- Is accessible high quality greenspace³ integrated into commuting and leisure travel patterns?
- Is there signage and information encouraging people to use green walking or cycling routes?
- Are existing routes planned for biodiversity?
- Can planning powers and Community Infrastructure Levy funds be used to create new green links?
- Are existing rights of way protected and are new rights of way provided within developments?

ACCESS:

- Are there regular audits to check the provision of green spaces and green routes between them?
- Do greenspace audits check the routes people are likely to use, not just how close a green space is?
- Are green routes safe, well lit, and accessible to people who are less mobile? Is cleanliness and biodiversity equally good in less affluent areas?
- Are there opportunities to create easily accessed digital maps of green 'wellbeing routes'?

CONNECTING WITH NATURE:

- Are there opportunities to provide new encounters with the natural world by opening up views of hills, parks, woodlands and sky?
- Do all new developments provide interesting planting and habitats for wildlife?
- Are mature trees being protected and preserved?
- Do new homes have front and rear gardens? Are large areas of tarmac and block paving discouraged?
- Are property owners discouraged from paving over gardens and removing mature trees?

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. Green spaces need to offer surprise, sociability and support.

SURPRISE:

- How can natural colour, wildlife, trees, plants, and water be introduced into new developments and transport infrastructure?
- Do everyday journeys offer places to stop and notice nature?
- Is biodiversity written into open space maintenance agreements in new developments?

SOCIABILITY:

- Do new developments and public space improvements offer natural meeting points with planting and spaces to sit?

- Are such meeting places safe, well-lit, and visible from beyond their perimeters?

SUPPORT:

- Are developers funding the ongoing maintenance of green spaces they provide, and are such spaces well designed and biodiverse?
- Do developers of industrial and commercial projects contribute to a thriving natural environment around business premises to support workers' wellbeing?
- What is being done to minimise harm to the natural environment from new developments, and to make sure development results in a net improvement in biodiversity?

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:

- Do neighbourhoods have a variety of green spaces that support different ecological habitats?
- What opportunities are there to introduce plants, colour and water where they are absent?
- Is there a database of priority locations where planting and wildlife can be improved?

DIVERSITY IN USE:

- Do neighbourhoods have a sufficient variety of green spaces suitable for sports, socialising, therapeutic activities, walking, stress relief, and observing wildlife?
- Do planners work with greenspace practitioners and community groups to assess how parks are used and what uses are under-resourced?
- Are potential conflicts between different groups taken into account when planning new spaces?

DIVERSITY IN CULTURE:

- Do planners consult with minority and migrant groups to ensure new spaces meet their needs?
- Are local communities consulted on the future of incidental natural spaces such as ex-industrial sites?

The empirical evidence underpinning this briefing has been published in peer-reviewed open access papers available at 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.

¹ 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. The IWUN project is supported by the Natural Environment Research Council, ESRC, BBSRC, AHRC and Defra INERC grant NE/N013565/1.

² See Brindley, P., Jorgensen, A. and Maheswaran, R. (2018). Domestic gardens and self-reported health: a national population study. *International Journal of Health Geographics*, 17:31, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12942-018-0148-6>

³ For more details, see Natural England's Access to Green Space Standard; British Standard BS 8300-1:2018 ('design of an accessible and inclusive environment'); and Department of Transport guidance on Inclusive Mobility.

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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