

Divisions Affected - All

Health Improvement Partnership Board

19 May 2021

Access to Greenspace and Nature for Health and Wellbeing: A Scoping Paper for Public Health Programme of Work in Oxfordshire

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“Spending time in the natural environment – as a resident or a visitor – improves our mental health and feelings of wellbeing. It can reduce stress, fatigue, anxiety and depression. It can help boost immune systems, encourage physical activity, and may reduce the risk of chronic diseases such as asthma. It can combat loneliness and bind communities together.”

(25 Year Environment Plan)

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Health Improvement Partnership Board is RECOMMENDED to:
 - a. Review the proposed outline of a public health programme of work on access to greenspace and nature for health and wellbeing.
 - b. Support the core strategic objectives that have been suggested to inform the development of this programme.
 - c. Agree to review implementation of the programme after a period of nine months, including reporting on specific projects.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2. Access to, engagement and connection with greenspace and nature are key determinants of physical and mental health and wellbeing.
3. A strong policy context at national and local level supports a public health programme aiming to improve equity in access to greenspace and nature in Oxfordshire.
4. Although this is a relatively new area of focus for public health, there are multiple examples ‘on the ground’ of organisations working with communities to improve health and wellbeing through nature.
5. A public health approach to improving equity in access to greenspace and nature can be conceptualised through frameworks of healthy place shaping and personalised care.

6. Suggested strategic objectives for public health on this theme include:

- a. Raise the profile of 'nature for health' across relevant sectors and advocate for equitable access as a key health and sustainability goal
- b. Ensure that local planning policy reflects national guidance and best practice in relation to green infrastructure standards
- c. Collaborate with all districts, the NHS and other partners to support delivery of targeted nature-based activities or interventions to address health inequalities, including through green social prescribing
- d. Work with a range of stakeholders to raise public awareness of opportunities to participate in nature-based activities, including facilitated sessions and 'self-care' through nature
- e. Identify and address local and national gaps in data, evidence and insight

INTRODUCTION

7. Improving access to greenspace and nature for health and wellbeing is a key feature of Healthy Place Shaping – defined as a collaborative approach which aims to create sustainable, well designed, thriving communities, where healthy behaviours are the norm, and which provide a sense of belonging, identity, and community.
8. An increasing body of evidence suggests that access to greenspace and connection with nature are key determinants of physical and mental health and wellbeing. This includes a positive effect on a wide range of specific outcomes, such as overall mortality, self-assessed general health, healthy weight, mental wellbeing, common mental disorder, and emotional wellbeing and cognition in children¹.
9. Greenspace and nature are also said to have an 'equigenic' effect, whereby greener living environments reduce the impact of other socioeconomic determinants of health, whilst nature-based activities or specific interventions offer the greatest health benefits to people from more deprived backgrounds².
10. These effects are thought to be due to several different mechanisms, including increased physical activity, social contact and community connectedness, development of skills and capabilities, mediation of environmental harms such as air pollution, and increasing nature connection³.
11. Yet access to nature and associated health benefits is currently inequitably distributed, with specific groups consistently missing out^{4,5,6}. These include people living in areas of high deprivation, those on low incomes or unemployed, older people, black and minority ethnic groups and people with a long-term health condition or disability. It is not a coincidence that many of these groups also experience significant health inequality. Barriers to accessing and engaging with greenspace and nature are associated with a range of physical, practical and sociocultural factors that are often poorly understood^{Error! Bookmark not defined.}.

¹ Public Health England. Improving access to greenspace: A new review for 2020. London: Public Health England, 2020. Available from:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/904439/Improving_access_to_greenspace_2020_review.pdf

² Mitchell R, Popham F. Effect of exposure to natural environment on health inequalities: an observational population study. *Lancet*. 2008 Nov 8;372(9650):1655-60.

³ Natural England. Access to Evidence Information Note EIN015. Connection to Nature: evidence briefing. London: Natural England, 2016. Available from: <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/4792791243161600>

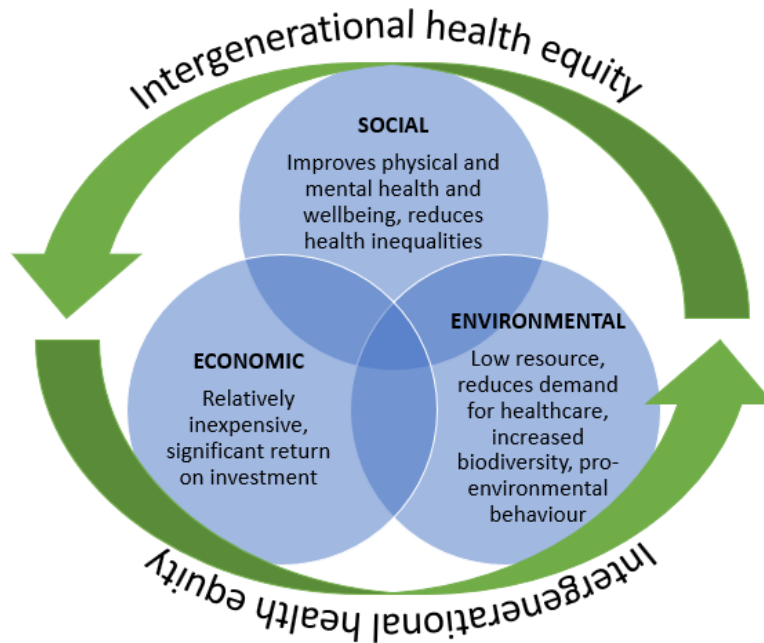
⁴ Armstrong, A., Brockett, B., Eustice, T., Lorentzon, A., O'Brien, L., Williams, S. Why society needs nature Lessons from research during Covid-19. London: Environment Agency, 2021. Available from: <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/research/why-society-needs-nature/>

⁵ Institute of Health Equity. Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On. London: Institute of Health Equity, 2020. Available from: <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/reports/the-marmot-review-10-years-on>

⁶ Groundwork. Out of Bounds Equity in Access to Urban Nature. London: Groundwork, 2021. Available from: <https://www.groundwork.org.uk/about-groundwork/reports/outofbounds/>

12. Whilst the benefit for humans is clear, improving equity in access to nature also has positive environmental and economic⁷ effects, and therefore plays an important role in the necessary shift to sustainable health and social care systems (Figure 1).
13. In particular, nature-based interventions are associated with reduced demand for (carbon intensive) healthcare, promotion of pro-environmental behaviours, and greater value placed on so-called 'natural capital'⁸. With the climate and ecological crisis as the number one threat to human health in the twenty-first century⁹, public health initiatives that contribute to conserving and protecting our natural assets for the health of current and future generations have never been more important.

Figure 1: Improved access to greenspace – a sustainability issue



14. These issues are now recognised in health and environmental policy, with increasing attention to high quality green infrastructure that offers regular incidental connections with nature, and targeted initiatives to support vulnerable groups. This includes allocation of national funds to explore the potential of Green Social Prescribing, through seven 'Test and Learn' sites¹⁰, and a commitment in the UK's COVID-19 Mental Health and Wellbeing Recovery Action Plan¹¹ to improve access to greenspace for health and wellbeing. Improving access to greenspace is also a key area with greater public consensus for action, as part of an overall package to 'build back better' from the COVID19 pandemic¹².
15. The aim of this paper is to introduce the theme of access to greenspace and nature as a new area of focus for public health in Oxfordshire, and to identify workstreams where we are likely to have the greatest impact on health inequalities. Whilst this is a relatively new theme for public health, we are well-placed to learn from and work with multi-sectoral partners, for a meaningful influence on social, economic and environmental sustainability across a complex system.

⁷ Natural England. An estimate of the value and cost effectiveness of the expanded Walking the Way to Health Initiative scheme 2009 (TIN055). <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/35009>. 2009.

⁸ Richardson M, Hunt A, Hinds J, Bragg R, Fido D, Petronzi D, et al. A Measure of Nature Connectedness for Children and Adults: Validation, Performance, and Insights. Sustainability. 2019;11(12):3250.

⁹ The Lancet Countdown on health and climate change. The Lancet [online] 2021.

<https://www.thelancet.com/countdown-health-climate>

¹⁰ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/personalisedcare/social-prescribing/green-social-prescribing/>

¹¹ [UK's COVID-19 Mental Health and Wellbeing Recovery Action Plan](#)

¹² Demos. What Next? Priorities for Britain. Demos [online], 2020. <https://demos.co.uk/project/what-next-priorities-for-britain/>

16. Rather than set out a clear programme of work with specific activities and deliverables, this is very much a scoping paper to explore ideas to be drawn into a more detailed plan in time.
17. First we summarise the context for a public health programme of work around access to nature for health and wellbeing in Oxfordshire. We then introduce suggested strategic objectives for a longer-term programme of work. Finally, we summarise selected current projects on this theme.

KEY TERMS

18. Throughout this paper, several terms are used that are worth defining from the start:
 - a. **Nature:** All types of natural environment and all the plants and animals living in them. Nature can be close to where you live in towns, the countryside or wilderness areas further away.
 - b. **Greenspace:** Any area of vegetated land, urban or rural. This includes both public and private spaces such as parks, gardens, playing fields, children's play areas, woods and other natural areas, grassed areas, cemeteries and allotments, green corridors, disused railway lines, rivers and canals, derelict, vacant and contaminated land which has the potential to be transformed. For simplicity, we do not distinguish between green and blue space (a term that is sometimes used to describe outdoor environments that prominently feature water).
 - c. **Nature-based activities:** Activities that include exposure to nature as a core element, such as local walking for health schemes, community gardening and food-growing projects, mindfulness in nature, conservation volunteering, sports/recreational activities in a natural setting, etc.
 - d. **Nature-based interventions:** Structured and facilitated nature-based activities targeted at specific groups, in order to improve one or more aspects of health and wellbeing.
 - e. **Nature connection/connectedness:** An individual's subjective sense of their relationship with the natural world.
 - f. **Green infrastructure:** A network of multi-functional green space and other green features, urban and rural, which can deliver quality of life and environmental benefits for communities.
 - g. **Green social prescribing:** social prescribing initiatives that aim to link people to nature-based interventions and activities to improve their health and wellbeing.

OXFORDSHIRE CONTEXT

Access to greenspace for mental health

19. The 2021 Mental Health and Wellbeing Needs Assessment for Oxfordshire¹³ identified the importance of addressing inequitable access to greenspace as one of four themes influencing differences in mental wellbeing between groups (alongside finances, employment and debt; physical activity; and connections to others and place). Salient findings from this report include:
 - a. Although Oxfordshire scores relatively highly on several indicators for mental wellbeing, this masks inequalities across different communities and protected characteristics, many of which were exacerbated by the COVID19 pandemic and associated lockdowns.
 - b. Groups identified as having a particular risk of deteriorating mental health and wellbeing during the initial stages of the pandemic included: young people, people living alone, people with low income/unemployed, lone mothers, people with a diagnosed mental illness and longstanding physical illness and some ethnic minority populations.
 - c. According to findings of the 2019 and 2020 OxWell Survey, life satisfaction and mental wellbeing decrease with increasing age among children and adolescents, particularly for girls.
 - d. These effects are reflected in clinical data, including year-on-year increases in diagnoses of common mental disorder amongst adults and referrals to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS).
 - e. Data analysed for Oxfordshire from the last 10 years of the national Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment (MENE) survey (now the People and Nature Survey, PNS), shows that

¹³ [Mental Health and Wellbeing | Oxfordshire Insight](#)

most visits to natural environments are made by wealthier families and those that identify as White.

- f. Barriers to visiting natural and green spaces included older age, long term health conditions and disability and being too busy at work or home.
- g. Unfortunately, the MENE/PNS dataset is not large enough to offer any insights below county level for adults. Sample sizes are even smaller for children and young people, for whom Oxfordshire-level insights are lacking.
- h. As with other wider enablers of wellbeing, there are major gaps in evidence and insight around access to greenspace and the experience of this among probable underserved groups, or groups most at risk or poor access and associated poor mental wellbeing.

20. Among other conclusions, the report points to the importance of primary prevention targeting those most at risk, as well as the adoption of a systems approach to wellbeing.

Local policy context

21. In Oxfordshire, several policies and strategies are directly relevant to the theme of greenspace and nature for health and wellbeing:

- a. Key priorities of Oxfordshire County Council's Fair Deal Alliance include *'putting action to address the climate emergency at the heart of our work'*; *'improving access to greenspace and nature'*; *'prioritising the health and wellbeing of residents'*; and *'tackling inequalities in Oxfordshire'*.
- b. The 2019-2024 Oxfordshire Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy commits to prioritising Healthy Place Shaping. In order to align with the work of the other sub-groups of the Health and Wellbeing Board, the Health Improvement Partnership Board has committed to addressing Mental Health and Wellbeing as a key priority.
- c. The Oxfordshire Prevention Framework 2019-2024 recognises the importance of investment to develop and maintain green spaces that feel safe, are attractive to people of all ages, and promote biodiversity.
- d. Oxfordshire's Mental Health Prevention Framework 2020-23, developed by representatives from Mental Health Prevention Concordat Partnership Group, identifies outdoor spaces as a key enabler of mental wellbeing.
- e. The Director of Public Health's Annual Report highlighted the importance of Healthy Place Shaping and initiatives that prioritise access to greenspace in order to address health inequalities.
- f. Oxfordshire's Climate Action Framework 2020 identifies Healthy Place Shaping as one of six key principles.
- g. Other significant strategies include:
 - i. Oxfordshire's Strategic Vision for Long-Term Sustainable Development
 - ii. Local Plans and Green Infrastructure Strategies for each District
 - iii. Oxfordshire's fifth Local Transport and Connectivity Plan
 - iv. Oxfordshire's Physical Activity Strategy (led by Active Oxfordshire)
 - v. A Food Strategy for Oxfordshire (led by Good Food Oxfordshire)

22. Oxfordshire County Council has recently commissioned a report entitled 'Making the case for investment in Green Infrastructure in Oxfordshire', published earlier this year. The planning department is also currently working with Natural England to pilot their new national Green Infrastructure Standards.

Examples of existing work in this area

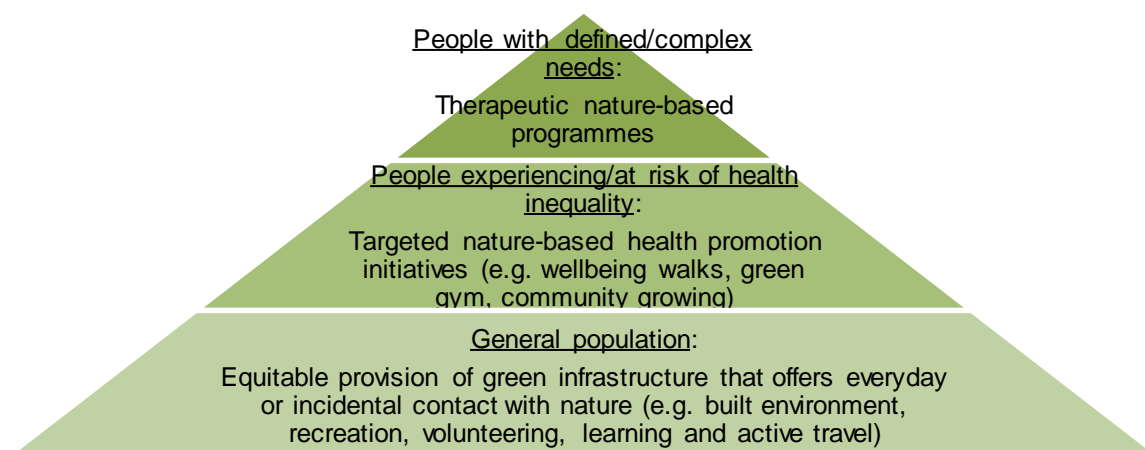
23. In Oxfordshire, there are many examples of voluntary and community sector organisations, and local government (sometimes in partnership), delivering innovative initiatives to connect people with nature for health and wellbeing. Whilst it is not within the scope of this paper to map or describe all of these, the following give a flavour of what is happening on the ground, and an indication of the type of partnerships that we might wish to build on in the future. A major theme running through these examples is the need for additional resources to build capacity to support people with complex needs. More detail on projects mentioned here can be found in Appendix 1.

- a. Oxford City Council's Go Active Outdoors Programme aims to provide the public with all the information they need to be more active outdoors. Dedicated web pages include a section on green spaces and nature, including links with information on how to access city parks, local nature reserves, walking routes and wellbeing walks, developed in partnership with the Centre for Sustainable Healthcare.
- b. Cherwell District Council's Community Nature Officer works with the Wellbeing Team, with close links to the well-established Healthy Place Shaping Team. Current projects include funded community wilding initiatives, and digitisation of Cherwell's circular health walks, in collaboration with Go Jauntly, to support people to explore and connect with their local natural environment.
- c. Oxford City Farm's Growing Well Together project is designed to support people with known mental health problems and under-represented ethnic minority communities, through inclusive farming volunteering sessions which run on a regular bi-weekly basis. Strong relationships with local mental health organisations provide a clear pathway for referral and all staff have been trained in Mental Health First aid.
- d. The Bridge Street Community Garden in Banbury is an open access site owned by Cherwell District Council and Banbury Town Council and managed by Banbury Community Action Group. It aims to create a sociable space where people can connect with food and nature, to showcase a productive urban green space, educate people how to grow their own food and the benefits of healthy eating, produce food for people who need it, and enhance links with other community groups and gardens.
- e. Boundary Brook Nature Reserve is a 3-acre nature reserve in East Oxford, managed by Oxford Urban Wildlife Group (OUWG). In addition to its core conservation work, OUWG has built several collaborative partnerships for learning, community engagement and wellbeing, including partnerships with local schools and nurseries, a family centre, a community college and Restore.

KEY PRINCIPLES, AIMS AND OBJECTIVES FOR A PUBLIC HEALTH PROGRAMME OF WORK AROUND ACCESS TO NATURE

24. The suggested aim of a public health programme of work around access to nature is to apply public health principles and healthy place shaping approaches to increase opportunities for those with the greatest health need to spend time in greenspace and connect with nature, in order to improve physical and mental wellbeing and address health inequalities.
25. A public health approach to access to nature can be conceptualised using the framework of Personalised Care. This starts with a whole population approach that offers everyday contact with nature for all, building up to nature-based health promotion initiatives for those experiencing or at risk of health inequalities, followed by targeted therapeutic interventions for people with complex health and/or social needs (Figure 2).

Figure 2: A public health approach to access to nature



26. Given the current Oxfordshire context, an initial programme will focus on the following specific populations who experience health inequalities to increase opportunities to access and connect with nature:
- Young people aged 13-18 (particularly girls)
 - People living in areas of deprivation
 - People from minoritized ethnic backgrounds
 - People experiencing loneliness, isolation, anxiety or depression
 - People with long term physical or mental health conditions
27. Suggested strategic programme objectives in the short- to medium-term (2 years) include:
- Raise the profile of 'nature for health' across relevant sectors and advocate for equitable access as a key health and sustainability goal
 - Ensure that local planning policy reflects national guidance and best practice in relation to green infrastructure standards
 - Collaborate with all districts, the NHS and other partners to support delivery of targeted nature-based activities or interventions to address health inequalities, including through green social prescribing
 - Work with a range of stakeholders to raise public awareness of opportunities to participate in nature-based activities, including facilitated sessions and opportunities for 'self-care' through nature
 - Identify and address local and national gaps in data, evidence and insight

Table 1 explores these objectives in more detail and introduces current projects with direct public health involvement, as well as suggested future areas of work over the next 2 years. Further detail for selected projects is given in the next section.

Table 1: Strategic objectives for a public health programme of work around access to greenspace and nature for health and wellbeing

Objective	Detail/rationale	Desired long-term outcome	Current activities contributing to this objective	Opportunities for further work over the next 2 years
<p>1) Raise the profile of 'nature for health' across relevant sectors and advocate for equitable access as a key health and sustainability goal</p>	<p>This includes working with the wider public health and other local authority teams, health and social care partners and other external partners in the environment and other relevant sectors, to improve understanding of the actual and potential benefits of improving access to greenspace locally.</p>	<p>A shared vision for nature and human wellbeing to support collaboration across organisations and sectors.</p>	<p>Stakeholder mapping and developing relationships with key stakeholders, including commissioners and providers of primary health care.</p> <p>Inclusion of strategic objectives for green social prescribing in a Social Prescribing Strategy for Oxfordshire (in partnership with Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group)</p> <p>Influencing development of the Local Nature Partnership for Oxfordshire to integrate a health and wellbeing perspective into approaches to Nature Recovery.</p> <p>Presentation at or contribution to relevant stakeholder events.</p>	<p>Work with colleagues in public health, across local government functions and the integrated care system to ensure that local policies and strategies are informed by evidence of need for sufficient access to greenspace.</p> <p>Explore options for integrating access to greenspace/green prescribing into existing or planned public health programmes or care pathways (with a focus on healthy weight, physical activity and mental wellbeing).</p>
<p>2) Ensure that local planning policy reflects national guidance and best</p>	<p>Access to high quality Green Infrastructure is absolutely vital to ensuring opportunities to</p>	<p>The health impacts of adequate greenspace provision are considered as standard in all new</p>	<p>Access to greenspace is a core principle in the proposed healthy place</p>	<p>Contribute to work to pilot Natural England's new Green Infrastructure Standards, led by</p>

<p>practice in relation to green infrastructure standards</p>	<p>engage and connect with nature. Important policy levers now exist to support advocacy in this area, such as the 2021 National Planning Policy Framework and national Green Infrastructure Standards. Additional tools are also available to better understand the welfare value of specific greenspaces, including the health benefits they are likely to offer.</p>	<p>and planned retrofit residential and other developments in Oxfordshire.</p>	<p>shaping policy for the Oxfordshire 2050 Plan.</p>	<p>Natural England, OHID Healthy Places Team and OCC's Planning Department.</p> <p>Collaborate with District councils in development of Local Plans, to ensure prioritisation of improving access to greenspace and creating greener communities especially in areas of deprivation or where there is poor or unequal access.</p>
<p>3) Collaborate with all districts, the NHS and other partners to support delivery of targeted nature-based activities or interventions to address health inequalities, including through green social prescribing</p>	<p>This involves strategic and operational cross-sectoral collaboration, to deliver activities that are accessible to underserved populations and are successful in influencing long-term behaviour change.</p> <p>Whilst we recognise that the voluntary and community sector is leading in this area, additional 'support' might include funding/grant management, input of a public health perspective in the planning process (e.g. to ensure an evidence-based approach), co-planning and delivery of projects,</p>	<p>Public health is confident and successful in commissioning, supporting and co-delivering inclusive, effective and sustainable initiatives that increase access to nature and wellbeing for those with the greatest health needs.</p>	<p>Contributing to service model development and evaluation planning for green social prescribing pilot initiatives in Cherwell</p>	<p>Work with community-based providers of nature-based activities, to build capacity and improve access for underserved populations.</p> <p>Use learning from a green social prescribing pilot in Cherwell to adapt scale this approach as a new model of care.</p> <p>Explore opportunities to partner with NHS organisations to develop and measure the impact of therapeutic green social prescribing programmes to support people with complex needs (e.g. young people or adults waiting</p>

	<p>or academic support (e.g. evaluation/research).</p> <p>Ideally, support should be given to a range of initiatives that cater to different groups and levels of need. Public health should champion co-production and be flexible to the needs of beneficiaries and delivery partners.</p>			community-based mental health services)
<p>4) Work with a range of stakeholders to raise public awareness of opportunities to participate in nature-based activities, including facilitated sessions and ‘self-care’ through nature</p>	<p>This involves working with existing providers of nature-based activities, potential ‘signposters’, and those specialising in communications, to improve access to information via a range of channels, targeted to reach specific groups that are underserved with opportunities to access greenspace and nature.</p>	<p>Public health is successful in partnering with relevant organisations to promote widespread public understanding of the benefits of nature to human health and wellbeing.</p>	<p>Work with commissioners of Livewell Oxford to develop relevant information pages available to the public and to social prescribers.</p> <p>Work with partners delivering green social prescribing initiatives in Cherwell to ensure adequate information availability and accessibility.</p>	<p>Develop a targeted comms strategy to promote access to nature for health and wellbeing.</p>
<p>5) Identify and address local and national gaps in data, evidence and insight</p>	<p>This includes addressing important evidence gaps identified by the 2021 Mental Health and Wellbeing Needs Assessment. Public health is well-placed to use established theories of behaviour change to better understand local</p>	<p>Public health has a good understanding of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Levels of access to and connection with nature among different population groups in Oxfordshire - Barriers and enablers that influence access 	<p>Community insights project exploring access to nature for teenage girls.</p> <p>Evaluation of a Green Social Prescribing pilot framework in Cherwell.</p> <p>Collaboration in a feasibility study of urban</p>	<p>Undertake further insights work into access to greenspace for other underserved populations, including people from minoritized ethnic backgrounds.</p> <p>Establish collaborative research working group</p>

	<p>inequities through working directly with underserved populations.</p> <p>Partnerships with academia can also help to understand and address system factors that increase wellbeing through access to nature, whilst contributing to sustainable health and care systems and local economies.</p>	<p>for specific underserved population groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Local system factors that improve population health and wellbeing through equitable access to nature 	<p>food growing in Marston led by Oxford Brookes University.</p> <p>Inclusion of key metrics relating to access to and engagement with greenspace and nature in the Healthy Place Shaping basket of indicators.</p>	<p>to better understand the health benefits of specific local interventions (e.g. in relation to sustainable local food systems, community growing and wellbeing).</p>
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CURRENT PUBLIC HEALTH PROJECTS WITH A FOCUS ON ACCESS TO NATURE FOR HEALTH AND WELLBEING

28. A couple of projects that contribute to some of these objectives have been initiated at an accelerated pace, due to availability of Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF) and other sources of funding.

Greenspace & Us community insights project with teenage girls in East Oxford

29. The Greenspace & Us project is designed to explore issues around inequitable access to greenspace for teenage girls, as a key determinant of health and wellbeing and health inequality. It is a community insights partnership project between funded by Natural England, between Oxfordshire County Council (Public Health and iHub, with additional support from the Engagement Team), Oxford Youth Enterprise (Name It Project), Fig Studios, RESOLVE Collective, the University of Oxford and Natural England. Oxford City Council Green Spaces Team and Active Oxfordshire have also been instrumental in implementation of the project. This project focuses on East Oxford as a geographical area of interest, which contains four of the ten most deprived wards in Oxfordshire which are also identified as having lower than minimum standard for publicly accessible local park and greenspace provision¹⁴.

30. The Greenspace & Us project has two main aims:

- a. To build shared knowledge and understanding to inform future initiatives to improve teenage girls' access to greenspace for and health and wellbeing, in a way that is equitable and sustainable. This includes understanding current use of local greenspace; the extent to which local greenspace provision meets the needs of teenage girls; and the barriers and enablers that influence access to and engagement with greenspace.
- b. To do this by engaging with teenage girls living in deprived areas of Oxford, using participatory, creative and empowering approaches.

31. Specific objectives are to:

- a. Work with an east Oxford-based youth organisation and community-based arts organisation to develop and deliver a series of exploratory workshops with 15-20 girls aged 11-16 that will build shared knowledge and understanding of their relationship with, use of and access to greenspace.
- b. Develop and deliver further workshops with a focus on reimagining greenspaces, to build a creative manifesto for design and management of greenspace that is inclusive of the needs of teenage girls.
- c. Develop a short survey around use of and access to greenspace, to be implemented in an east Oxford secondary school, in order to offer a quantitative context to the workshop findings.
- d. Present findings in a way that is engaging and accessible to a range of audiences – ensuring that project outputs are co-produced by participants and working group members.
- e. Commission an independent project evaluation, which will use predominantly qualitative methods to report on the extent to which we have met our objectives and desired outcomes.

32. At the time of writing, the survey has been implemented, six workshops have been delivered, and an interim report submitted to our funders at Natural England. Work is ongoing with our creative partners to bring together the co-produced creative elements, which will take the form of a written manifesto for inclusive design and management of greenspace and a piece of artwork to embody and illustrate some of the manifesto concepts.

33. Following completion of the project, a full report on workshop findings and the creative process will be available for circulation amongst stakeholders. This project is being independently evaluated, with a focus on the process of engagement through creative activities.

¹⁴ <https://fieldsintrust.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=c633ad3588d3466b8937b110b94120d4>

A green social prescribing pilot for Cherwell

34. Social prescribing is a way for local agencies to refer people to a link worker, who give people time, focusing on 'what matters to me' and taking a holistic approach to people's health and wellbeing. Link workers help people connect with community groups and statutory services for practical and emotional support. Green social prescribing aims to link people to activities and programmes that include exposure to nature as a core element, such as community gardening groups, walking groups, mindfulness in nature, conservation volunteering etc¹⁵.
35. In Cherwell, we are working closely with the Healthy Place Shaping Team and Community Nature Officer to pilot and evaluate social prescribing as a mechanism to increase participation in nature-based activities among those with the greatest need, and as a means of improving health and wellbeing and reducing pressure on health services.
36. Cherwell District Council has recently agreed to fund two providers of community nature-based activities over the next two years, using COMF funds, on the understanding that they offer certain social value related to the offer of targeted intervention for specific cohorts within the community and the ability to harness capacity within the voluntary sector. These two projects are complementary in their overall aims, yet are likely to provide opportunities for people to engage with nature, based on different levels of need and provider expertise:
- a. The Growing Spaces Project, delivered by Cherwell Collective, will work in areas of deprivation in Bicester, Kidlington and Banbury, to establish several sites in the community focusing on culturally relevant food growing and community engagement.
 - b. Community Wilding Projects, delivered by Berkshire, Buckinghamshire & Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) (Wild Bicester and Wild Banbury) and Wild Oxfordshire (Wild Kidlington), will work with the local community to enable residents to improve spaces for wildlife and help people connect with nature on a hyper local scale, with a focus on areas of relative deprivation and/or communities that are less well-served with opportunities to participate in nature-based activities.
37. Following initial stakeholder engagement, we have developed a framework to strengthen green social prescribing through these two projects, which will be implemented over coming months. We are also working on a theory of change and monitoring and evaluation plan, in order to be able to apply learning from this demonstrator site to the wider Oxfordshire area.

¹⁵ James Fullam, Harriet Hunt, Rebecca Lovell, Kerry Husk, Richard Byng, David Richards, Dan Bloomfield, Sara Warber, Mark Tarrant, Jenny Lloyd, Noreen Orr, Lorna Burns, Ruth Garside (2021) *A handbook for Nature on Prescription to promote mental health*. Version 1. University of Exeter. Available from: [Nature on Prescription Handbook - European Centre for Environment and Human Health | ECEHH](#)

NEXT STEPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

38. This paper has described the context for a programme of work in Oxfordshire on access to greenspace and nature for health and wellbeing, making the case for investment of time and resources as a key health inequalities and sustainability issue. It has proposed some strategic objectives to achieve the greatest impact with limited public health resources, and summarised current projects that offer insight into the range of activities that could form part of a longer programme of work.
39. Whilst the Healthy Place Shaping Team in public health is well placed to lead some aspects of the proposed programme, we also aim for this approach to become 'everybody's business', by supporting colleagues to identify opportunities to integrate access to greenspace and nature into wider public health programming.
40. The Health Improvement Partnership Board is recommended to:
 - a. Review the proposed outline of a public health programme of work on access to greenspace and nature for health and wellbeing.
 - b. Support the core strategic objectives that have been suggested to inform the development of this programme.
 - c. To agree to review implementation of the programme after a period of nine months, including reporting on specific projects.

APPENDIX 1: EXAMPLES OF LOCAL INITIATIVES TO INCREASE ACCESS TO GREENSPACE AND CONNECT PEOPLE WITH NATURE

Oxford City Council's Go Active Outdoors programme and Green and Blue Spaces network

Oxford City Council's GO Active Outdoors¹⁶ programme aims to provide the public with all the information they need to be more active outdoors. This is managed by the Sport & Physical Activity Manager in the Active Communities Team, in close collaboration with the Green Spaces Development Team within Community Services and conservation volunteer coordinator. The programme has dedicated web pages on green spaces and nature, including links with information on how to access city parks, local nature reserves, walking routes and wellbeing walks, and is a provider and licensor of Forest School activities. The Council has also partnered with the Centre for Sustainable Healthcare, to produce neighbourhood maps¹⁷ that highlight green spaces and walking routes for all fitness levels, with walks going from local health centres and back. An ongoing project seeks to develop a network map of all Oxford's Green and Blue Spaces, with active travel routes and additional information linking different parts of the city. Oxford City Council also coordinates a Green and Blue Spaces network, with a broad membership base, to support sharing of information and ideas, and collaboration across organisations and sectors.

Cherwell District Council's Healthy Place Shaping Team and Community Nature Officer

Cherwell District Council has a strong focus on Healthy Place Shaping approaches, with a dedicated team that works closely with colleagues across the District and Parish Councils. In more recent years, partnership projects have been developed with an explicit focus on access to greenspace and nature for wellbeing at their heart. The Council also employs a community nature officer within the Wellbeing team, whose role it is to ensure opportunities for people to connect with and take action to protect nature in their local area (including managing a dedicated webpage¹⁸), and with whom the Healthy Place Shaping Team works closely. Relevant partnership projects include

- Working with Berkshire, Buckinghamshire & Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) and Cherwell Collective to strengthen green social prescribing provision.
- The well-known Bicester 'Blue Lines' walking routes, which offer 5km guided trails designed to help residents become more active and explore their local area, including greenspace assets, which are now funded to be expanded to Banbury and Kidlington.
- Funded targeted programmes to support early years outdoor education.
- Digitisation of Cherwell's circular health walks, in collaboration with Go Jauntly, to support people to explore and connect with their local natural environment.
- Commissioned insights study of access to local parks, in collaboration with the national charity, Women in Sport.

Oxford City Farm

Oxford City Farm is an East Oxford based charity with a vision of empowered communities learning and working together to produce food locally and live healthy, enriched, and sustainable lives. Volunteers are at the heart of everything they do. The neighbourhoods around the Farm site are very diverse, ethnically, culturally, by age and by income. Some are among the most deprived in Oxford, whilst other areas are relatively affluent, yet there is limited opportunity for people from different groups to mix.

The Growing Well Together project is designed to support people with known mental health problems and under-represented ethnic minority communities, through inclusive farming volunteering sessions which run on a regular bi-weekly basis. Strong relationships with local mental health organisations provide a clear pathway for referral and all staff have been trained in Mental Health First aid in order to increase confidence and success of the programme overall.

¹⁶ https://www.oxford.gov.uk/info/20315/go_active_outdoors

¹⁷ <https://nhsforest.org/projects/green-health-routes/east-oxford-health-routes/>

¹⁸ <https://www.cherwell.gov.uk/connect-with-nature>

Community Farming volunteer sessions actively address mental wellbeing by helping people to engage with each component of the “5 ways to wellbeing” framework:

- Connection – sessions are facilitated in a way that enables people to work together and share experiences that help people feel part of something meaningful
- Be active – staff ensure that there are opportunities for people of all fitness and ability levels to be involved in the work of the farm, from gentle weeding to caring for animals or constructing a greenhouse, participation is possible for all.
- Learn new skills – many volunteers come to learn more about food growing that is in harmony with nature, but all bring a wealth of life experience. Exchange of ideas and skills is actively encouraged.
- Help others – a key piece of volunteer feedback is that the opportunity to help others through providing fresh local produce for others in the community makes them feel good.
- Take notice – being in nature observing the changes that come with seasons, listening to birdsong, or the sheep munching, or chickens scratching, is fertile territory for taking time out from habitual worries or preoccupations.

The city farm receives regular feedback from users on the positive effect of volunteering on their mental health. These effects can be understood in more detail and colour through individual stories. One such story included in the latest funding monitoring report features a man who after initially being withdrawn, depressed and anxious, eventually became able to connect with others, offer a wealth of skills and train as a volunteer co-leader.

The success of this project, which was partially supported by a public health grant in April 2021, has now led to further public health funding through the Healthy Hearts grant. This will support delivery of 7 sessions per month, and showcase seasonal vegetables and dishes with a focus being placed on the benefit of beans and legumes on cardiovascular health. A concurrent programme of work to enhance the Farm’s approach to equality, diversity and inclusion is also ongoing which involves mapping of local organisations and outreach to groups to access the farm. Despite ongoing success of the farm, sustainable funding sources to adequately meet costs remains a challenge.

It is vital that where social prescribing is taking place that additional funding is made available to organisations. An increase in referrals of individuals with more complex needs means that additional staff training and volunteer co-leader capacity is needed, especially given that Oxford City Farm is not principally a mental health support organisation.

Bridge Street Community Garden, Banbury

The Bridge Street Community Garden in Banbury is an open access site that is owned by Cherwell District Council and Banbury Town Council, and managed by Banbury Community Action Group and financed through various short-term grants, including from Good Food Oxfordshire, Cherwell District Council, the National Lottery Community Fund, and the Trust for Oxfordshire’s Environment.

The Garden aims to create a sociable space where people can connect with food and nature, to showcase a productive urban green space, educate people how to grow their own food and the benefits of healthy eating, produce food for people who need it, and enhance links with other community groups and gardens.

The Garden itself is divided into several hexagonal shaped raised beds based on Forest Gardening approaches, that are managed by various community groups representing underserved populations, including the Sunrise Multicultural Project, Homestart and Restore, with support of a regular freelance member of staff.

A central shelter provides a calm space for individuals or groups to meet and relax. Regular Volunteer Gardening sessions are held on a bi-monthly basis and welcome people of all abilities. Social prescribing links have been made with the local health centre, which has enabled a few vulnerable people to enjoy the space and contribute to regular volunteer sessions. Despite enthusiasm to work on a more regular basis with social prescribers, their Freelance Garden Officer, currently working 10 hours a week, confirms that at the moment they don’t have capacity or support to carry out a comprehensive social prescribing program.

Despite going from strength to strength, like other community-based initiatives, it is a constant challenge to seek adequate and sustainable sources of funding, with grants often offering to cover costs of materials, but not staff time. Given better resourcing and appropriate partnership, the garden space is an ideal venue to be used by groups of people working with a practitioner, for a targeted health and wellbeing programme.

Boundary Brook Nature Reserve/Oxford Urban Wildlife Group

Boundary Brook Nature Reserve is a 3-acre nature reserve in East Oxford, leased and managed by the Oxford Urban Wildlife Group (OUWG) and owned by Oxford City Council. The reserve is situated in an area of significant deprivation, neighbouring Donnington and Cowley wards. Access is through membership, which costs just £5 per year for individuals and £8 per year for families, concessions available (a code to the gate is given to new members), with current membership of around 260. The site itself is described as a 'delicate mosaic of wildlife habitats' and includes mixed woodland, freshwater habitats, grassland, butterfly glades, a demonstration wildlife garden and a forest school site. Trustees and members are all volunteers, sharing and learning conservation skills, developing ecological understanding, and building cohesive communities related to wildlife concern.

In addition to its core conservation work, OUWG has built a number of collaborative partnerships for learning, community engagement and wellbeing. In their latest 5-year management plan, alongside Habitat Wildlife Management sits Community Engagement, which features public events (including wellbeing in nature themed days), activities for members, conservation work training courses, species ID events and volunteering. OUWG actively reaches out to local institutions and community groups, aiming to increase accessibility for local people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities, including those within underserved communities. Current partnerships include:

- working with Larkrise Primary School, as a site for Forest School activities and an opportunity for selected children with special educational needs to join in volunteer activities
- working with Donnington Doorstep Family Centre to develop opportunities for families to connect together in nature in a wildlife reserve setting in their local community.
- working with Flo's in the Park nursery to develop opportunities for nursery age children to spend time together in the nature reserve and connect to nature.
- working with Restore to support long-term volunteers, who have experienced, or are experiencing poor mental health, to build self-confidence and self-esteem in a community setting.
- working with EMBS community college to provide opportunities for language students to connect with nature in a calm environment for students who are refugees or coming through the asylum system

OUWG are hoping to further the reach of their work into the surrounding communities and are grateful to all the volunteer members who take time to support this work. Volunteers benefit from a feeling of giving back to their local community and being a part of ensuring local land is being managed with benefit to both wildlife biodiversity in the urban environment and for fostering guardianship of the local land by future generations.