

Natural England Board



Meeting: 9
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Paper No: **NEB PU09 07**

Title: **Natural England's Draft Policy on Health and Wellbeing**

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1. Purpose

- 1.1. This paper presents a draft health and wellbeing policy for Natural England. This has been informed by discussions with Board Outcome Group 2 and a policy workshop on 3rd October where some of the UK's leading experts on health gave their advice and support.
- 1.2. Annex 2 outlines the wider health context.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. It is recommended that the Board agree the draft health policy prior to consultation, with the final version circulated to all Board members for comment, and the policy signed off by Chair.

3. Summary of Context for the Health policy

- 3.1. The natural environment affects individuals in three ways:
 - a) increases physical activity;
 - b) reduces chronic stress and improve wellbeing that can also improve the outcome of long term conditions such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and depression etc;
 - c) creates a sense of place in which people feel they belong.
- 3.2. 70% of the UK population are sedentary creating many major avoidable health problems such as obesity, diabetes, heart disease and some cancers.
- 3.3. The health gap between rich and poor as measured by infant mortality and life expectancy stubbornly persists despite huge investment in deprived communities.
- 3.4. Poor mental health affects millions of people not only reducing wellbeing but is associated with poor physical health, health inequalities and lower productivity.
- 3.5. The escalating cost of health care means there will be more emphasis on prevention, rather than cure, with people needing to become more engaged and interested in their own health.

- 3.6. There is increasing interest both inside and outside government in promoting contact with the natural environment to improve health and wellbeing. However there is a lack of strategic leadership and awareness of this potential, particularly within the health sector.

4. Summary of Natural England's draft health and wellbeing policy

- 4.1. Better health and wellbeing are two of the major social and economic benefits we can secure through good management of the natural environment in both rural and urban settings.
- 4.2. Our aim should be 'maximizing the contribution of the natural environment to people's health and wellbeing, raising understanding and sharing the benefits with everyone'.
- 4.3. Natural England believes that every child in England should experience and familiarise themselves with their local natural environment to benefit their mental and physical health and further their social and cognitive development.
- 4.4. Natural England believes that adults should be offered increased contact with the natural environment resulting in more productive, active and fulfilling lives.
- 4.5. Natural England believes that healthy ageing depends on close and frequent contact with the natural environment to promote quality of life, independence and dignity.
- 4.6. Natural England believes that we need to restore the connections between people and the natural environment to create a legacy of healthy communities for future generations.
- 4.7. Natural England believes there is great potential for the health sector, including the Department of Health, Primary Care Trusts and individual health care professionals promoting use of the natural environment as part of the health care given to patients.

Annex 1 Natural England's Health Policy Position

This paper provides a draft policy statement on health and wellbeing for Natural England. The scope for this policy was agreed by the Natural England Board in June 2007. This draft has been refined following a policy workshop on 3rd October where some of the UK's leading experts on health gave their support and advice. The recreation policy overview, confirmed by PSG in October, is also relevant.

Our policy aim

We propose that our aim should be 'maximising the contribution of the natural environment to people's health and wellbeing, raising understanding and sharing the benefits with everyone'.

This supports our Strategic Direction which recognises that better health and wellbeing are one of the major social and economic benefits we can secure through good management of the natural environment in both rural and urban settings.

What is health and wellbeing?

The most widely accepted definition of health is 'a state of physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity'¹. Wellbeing is a wider concept² which embraces:

- Fulfilling our desires.
- Reaching our potential.
- Subjective wellbeing that combines the pleasures in life with our interpretation of how we think and feel about our life.

Throughout this document we refer to 'health and wellbeing' as the two concepts are inter-connected. Without wellbeing good health is vulnerable, and without good health wellbeing fails to thrive.

Rationale for Natural England's involvement in Health and Wellbeing

Better health and wellbeing is achieved by promoting recreation, access, understanding and enjoyment of the natural environment. All form part of our general purpose.

By enlisting the health sector to promote use of the natural environment we can widen the numbers and diversity of people who will benefit from contact with the natural environment.

Biodiverse environments have more value when people are connected to them and evidence shows that people value themselves more when connected to biodiverse environments.

Contact with the natural environment at all ages can foster positive attitudes and behaviours towards conserving and enhancing the natural environment.

Better health and wellbeing through contact with the natural environment has an economic value because costs of health treatment are reduced.

¹ The Constitution of the World Health Organisation, 1946

² Dolan,P, Peasgood T. Review of research on the influences on personal well-being and applications to policy making.

What needs to happen

Contact with the natural environment can help address some of the fundamental needs of society:

Children - developing their full potential.

Adults - improving their wellbeing and productivity.

Older People – preventing disease, a better quality of life, and ageing with dignity.

We make a distinction between these three stages of people's lives because at each stage we face particular health issues which require different policy responses.

1 Enriched childhood

Children have less contact with nature and fewer chances for informal play than in the past. This is partly due to fewer pockets of land where they can play informally with friends and a culture of electronic games, sports and shopping.

Lack of contact with nature reduces children's resilience to daily stress, which can make them more vulnerable to mental health problems. Children are less active than previous generations resulting in a rapid rise in obesity and diabetes.

Evidence

Playing in a natural environment improves children's social, mental and physical development with some evidence of less bullying behaviour³.

The behavioural symptoms of children with attention deficit disorder are reduced, and concentration levels increased, when children play in a natural environment⁴.

Children use the natural environment to recover from stress and this helps to reduce mental health disorders⁵. When playing outdoors children maintain high levels of physical activity⁶.

Proposed Policy Position 1

Natural England believes that every child in England should experience and familiarise themselves with their local natural environment to benefit their mental and physical health and further their social and cognitive development.

³ Fjortoft, I & Sageie, J 2000. The natural environment as a playground for children. Landscape and Urban Planning Vol 48, 83-97.

⁴ Kuo, F E, Faber & Taylor, A. 2004. A potential natural treatment for Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Evidence from a national study. American Journal of Public Health Vol 94 (9), 1580-1586

⁵ Wells NM, Evans GW; Nearby Nature; A buffer of life stress among Rural Children. Environment and Behaviour, vol.35, No 3 311-330 2003.

⁶ Baranowski T, Thompson WO, DuRant RH, et al. (1993) Observations on physical activity in physical locations: age, gender, ethnicity, and month effects. Res Q Exerc Sport; 64:127-33

2 Productive Adults

Contact with the natural environment has been shown rapidly to reduce stress⁷, increase resilience to further stress and improve concentration levels. It can also increase physical activity which results in further stress reduction and reduces back pain.

Evidence

Many people feel uplifted, emotionally and spiritually, by contact with the natural environment and the social value of sharing nature with family or friends can boost people's sense of wellbeing⁸.

Adults with high levels of wellbeing are more resilient to mental health problems and contribute more to their local community⁹.

Local access to green space increases levels of sustainable travel¹⁰. Regular physical activity can reduce the risk of back pain, which is the leading cause of sickness absence from work affecting up to 16 million adults¹¹.

Proposed Policy Position 2

Natural England believes that adults should be offered increased contact with the natural environment during their working day resulting in reduced stress, more productive and fulfilling lives.

3 Healthy Ageing

Healthy ageing relies on maintaining a lifestyle that includes physical activity, social interaction and mental stimulation. The natural environment allows more activity, encourages people to meet and talk and creates a constantly changing and stimulating environment.

Evidence

The number of people over 85 years will double between 1995 and 2035¹². The ratio of older people to children has risen from 64/100 in 1971 to 98/100 in 2006¹³.

Chronic stress can result in raised inflammatory markers that increase risk of cancers and heart disease¹⁴. Those living in poor environments particularly with little green space have increased stress and less physical activity¹⁵.

People become less physically active as they age¹⁶ yet staying active can reduce a person's biological age and enhance their quality-adjusted life expectancy¹⁷. Elderly

⁷ Pretty J et al, The mental health and physical health outcomes of green exercise. *International Journal of Environmental Health Research* 15 (5), 391-337.

⁸ Pretty J (2007) *The Earth Only Endures*

⁹ Kaplan S (1995). *The Restorative Effects of Nature*. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 15, 169-182.

¹⁰ Craig CL, Brownson RC, Cragg SE, Dunn AL, Exploring the effect of the environment on physical activity: A study examining walking to work. *Am J Prev Med* 2002;23:36-43.

¹¹ British Heart Foundation, workplace health activity toolkit 2003.

¹² Royal Commission on Long Term Care, 1999

¹³ National Statistics, UK Snapshot 2007

¹⁴ Ridker N *Eng J Med*. 1997;336:973-979

¹⁵ Kuo F (2001) Coping with poverty: Impacts of environment and attention in the inner city. *Env and Behaviour*, 33

¹⁶ Skelton, D A et al, *Physical Activity in Later Life*, 1999

¹⁷ Shephard RJ, *Ageing, Physical Activity and Health*, Illinois, 1997

people who are inactive are more likely to suffer falls or other injuries. The life span of older people increases when they live near parks and tree lined streets¹⁸.

Proposed Policy Position 3

Natural England believes that healthy ageing depends on close and frequent contact with the natural environment so reducing chronic stress, encouraging physical activity, social interaction and mental stimulation.

4 Healthy Connections to the Natural Environment

The natural environment can nurture good health and wellbeing but the benefits are only realised when people are properly connected to it.

Connections come in various forms: from using recreation and access opportunities such as green spaces and access routes, through having fresh and healthy local food grown in gardens, allotments, nurseries - as well as access to wild foods, and through volunteering and learning new skills. Connections from the past are also relevant today, from stories about how people have shaped the land to personal memories from our own lives. Deeper, more meaningful connections produce longer-term health benefits. Some people's connections evolve as a journey through time.

People of all ages together create communities. When communities have strong connections with nature they create places of more significance and value for themselves and others. Healthy places endure and create a legacy that provide the foundation for the health of future generations. Sustainable living is part of a healthy lifestyle and reduces the contribution to climate change as a result of lower carbon emissions. Healthy people contribute to sustainable communities.

Evidence

Sharing public spaces helps communities develop a sense of identity and belonging¹⁹. Local access to green space increases levels of sustainable travel²⁰. For every 10% increase in green space there can be a reduction in health complaints in communities equivalent to a reduction of 5 years of age²¹.

Green space within communities reduces aggression and crime even when accounting for other social factors²².

Climate change will lead to more heat waves resulting in a greater number of deaths. High night time temperatures are a major factor in heat wave deaths and because green space stores less heat than concrete it provides a valuable cooling effect during heat waves²³.

¹⁸ Tankano, T Nakamura, K & Watanabe, M 2002. Urban residential environments and senior citizens' longevity in megacities: the importance of walkable green spaces. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, Vol 56, 913-918.

¹⁹ Kuo, F E (and others). 1998. Fertile Ground for Community: Inner-City Neighbourhood Common Spaces. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol 26,6.

²⁰ Craig CL, Brownson RC, Cragg SE, Dunn AL, Exploring the effect of the environment on physical activity: A study examining walking to work. *Am J Prev Med* 2002;23:36-43.

²¹ De Vries, S Verheij, R A & Groenewegen, P P. 2001. Nature and Health. The relationship between health and greenspace in people's living environment. Euro Leisure congress, Netherlands.

²² Kuo FE and Sullivan WC (2001) Environment and crime in the inner city. Does vegetation reduce crime. *Environment and Behaviour* 33 343-367

²³ Q Weng, D Lu, J Schubring [Estimation of land surface temperature-vegetation abundance relationship for urban heat island.](#) - Remote Sensing of Environment, 2004

Proposed Policy Proposition 4

Natural England believes that we need to restore the connections between people and the natural environment so the health and wellbeing benefits are maximized.

Summary

Humans require a healthy environment in which to thrive. People are healthier when part of a community which is strengthened when connected to the natural environment. Sustainable communities will endure and create a legacy that will provide a foundation for future generations to develop their full potential as children, be productive as adults and age with dignity and independence.



Annex 2 The Context for our Policy on Health and Wellbeing

Children

The future health and wellbeing of children is of particular concern, with childhood obesity rising rapidly and a recent UNICEF report showing that the UK came bottom of a league table for child wellbeing across 21 industrialised countries.

The Government health target to halt the year on year rise in obesity by children under 11 by 2010 is widely seen as unachievable and has just been replaced by a softer target to reduce the proportion of overweight and obese children to 2000 levels by 2020.

Children are facing a rapid detachment from contact with the natural environment, compared to just a generation ago.

Adults

Seven in ten adults are not active enough to benefit their health, which is a major factor in the current high levels of diabetes, heart disease, strokes and bowel cancer.

Increasing physical activity is effective in reducing a wide range of major physical health problems and can be as successful at treating depression as medication.

Taking exercise in the natural environment has a synergistic effect in increasing mental and physical health.

Older People

Caring for older people is becoming more challenging and costly as the population of England ages. People become less physically active as they age yet staying active can reduce a person's biological age and enhance their quality-adjusted life expectancy. Elderly inactive people are more likely to lose their independence. The life spans of older people increase when they live near parks and tree lined streets.

Health Inequalities

Many of today's preventable health problems are concentrated in the most deprived areas where a combination of environmental, social and economic factors lead to relatively poorer health and lower life expectancy. The health gap between rich and poor stubbornly persists despite Government policy and spending to reduce such health inequalities.

There tends to be a concentration of the lowest quality and paucity of natural environments in the most deprived communities where health inequalities are most acute. These communities have fewer chances to connect with the natural environment, and to meet and socialise, thus reducing their sense of belonging, of community spirit and ultimately their health and wellbeing.

Wellbeing is seen as a fundamental part of personal prosperity and happiness. The UK is 15th out of the 30 European Countries for wellbeing despite having one of the strongest economies.

Economics

Inactive people cost the economy some £8.5 billion each year. Motivating just 10% of the inactive population to actively use the natural environment would save around £500m and 6,000 lives annually.

Poor mental health affects millions of people resulting in individual isolation, loneliness and damage to families and communities.

The costs of avoidable physical and mental health are a significant proportion of the nation's GDP, with estimates ranging from £11-50 billion per year.

Obesity will cost the UK £22.4 billion by 2015 and £45 billion by 2050

The escalating costs of health care means there needs to be more emphasis on prevention, rather than cure, and people need to become more engaged and interested in their own health. The Prime Minister recently announced a higher priority for prevention in the NHS.

Climate Change and Development

Climate change will bring its own health impacts such as heat exhaustion, especially amongst children, older people and those with long term conditions. Promoting low carbon means of accessing the natural environment for health could reduce our carbon footprint .

The built environment can suppress rather than encourages healthy lifestyles. Poorly designed development can leave less room for open spaces and gardens, generate more traffic and make cycling and walking less attractive.

The Natural Environment

The natural environment is an additional motivator for keeping active and provides additional mental benefits when compared to indoor environments.

Around 60% of health professionals are interested in getting more involved in promoting the natural environment compared to only 9% who said they currently had links with environmental organisations and only 5% who worked in a practice which organised outdoor activities for patients.

Against a background where use of the natural environment has been declining over the last decade new programmes such as the Green Gym (750 participants a week), Active Woods (1,000 participants a week) and 'Walking the Way to Health' (200,000 participants a week) are demonstrating in the UK how contact with the natural environment can make a measurable impact on people's health and wellbeing, and widen the diversity of users.

Canada, New Zealand, Holland, Australia and Finland also demonstrate innovative policies and practice.



Health & wellbeing - maximising the contribution of the natural environment

Benefits

Every child in England should experience and familiarise themselves with their local natural environment to benefit their mental and physical health and enrich their social and cognitive development.

1
Enriched
Childhood

Adults should be offered increased contact with the natural environment resulting in more productive and fulfilling lives

2
Productive
Adults

Healthy ageing depends on close and frequent contact with the natural environment to promote quality of life, independence and dignity

3
Healthy
Ageing

4
Healthy connections with the natural environment

We need to restore the connections between people and the natural environment to create a legacy of healthy communities for future generations

