

NATURAL ENGLAND BOARD

Meeting 5
6 June 2007

Paper No: **NEB P07 21**

Title: **Scope of Natural England's health policy**

Sponsor: **Guy Thompson, Executive Director External Affairs**

1. Purpose

1.1 The purpose of this paper is to recommend the scope of Natural England's health policy.

2. Recommendations

2.1 It is recommended that the Board endorses the scope of Natural England's health policy.

3. Background

3.1 Health professionals are being encouraged to prevent illness and encourage wellbeing as a way of reducing the burden of disease, particularly amongst the disadvantaged. The natural environment can help deliver this through physical activity and improved well being. Outcome 2 of our Strategic Direction contains a specific target to expand the "Walk your way to Health" initiative.

3.2 This paper outlines the proposed scope of Natural England's health policy. The scope suggests the key areas where Natural England's policy needs to focus to fulfill its potential. Once agreed, the policy scope will be used to develop detailed policy positions for approval by the Board.

4. Issues

4.1 Leadership role for Natural England

4.1.1 To achieve our strategic outcome, Natural England should develop a leadership role as a practitioner and an advocate. We can lead through our delivery and partnerships in three areas:

- To create, protect and improve local accessible green space near to where people live based on health needs of the local population;
- To support programmes that encourage local people to value and make regular use of this green space to benefit their health and wellbeing;
- To support and educate health professionals so that they understand the health benefits of local green space and value it as part of usual healthcare.

4.2 To support and educate health professionals

- 4.2.1 The health benefits of the natural environment should be promoted to health professionals through research, education and delivery of specific programmes. High quality research will be used to provide an evidence base for health professionals. Education will aim to increase their recommendation of green space.
- 4.2.2 We will work with policy makers to include green space as a health resource for increasing physical activity and improving mental health and wellbeing. Natural England will work with the NHS to signpost outdoor health programmes that health professionals can recommend to their patients.

4.3 Creation and improvement of local green space

- 4.3.1 We will work with other organisations to champion more accessible green space around buildings such as schools, hospitals, care homes, work places etc.
- 4.3.2 We will work to quantify the health value of green space based on the potential health benefits it can provide. This work, in collaboration with health economists and other partners, will help protect local green space by its added health value.
- 4.3.3 We will widen the appeal of green space, access routes and recreation opportunities especially near to where people live and work.

4.4 Encouraging local people to use and value green space

- 4.4.1 We will work with and support all organisations that encourage better health through contact with the natural environment by:
 - Developing and encouraging the use of a common but robust evaluation that is accepted by the health sector;
 - Sharing successful methods to increase the regular use of existing green space and understand how to overcome the barriers;
 - Pooling resources knowledge and influence to provide a greater impact.

We will work with communities to improve their well being and quality of life. Healthy communities will result in a healthy natural environment – if we invest in people, they in turn invest in their natural environment. The Growth Areas and Growth Points will be important to this.

- 4.4.2 We will develop and expand our own programmes which improve health within green space and test new approaches and promote best practice. Natural England should encourage its own staff to use the natural environment around the workplace to increase activity and improve wellbeing.

4.5 Policy development and advocacy

- 4.5.1 Natural England can also provide leadership on health and the environment through its influence and advocacy. The scope of our health policy will be based on the following proposed principles:
 - Improving the design of existing infrastructure to increase green space and encourage more biodiversity has environmental benefits and produces built environments that encourage more health living. Delivering the standard of accessible natural green space within 300 metres of people's homes will bring opportunities for healthy activities to many more people;
 - The land use planning system should encourage mixed land uses, more sustainable travel patterns and more biodiverse environments around new developments for healthy living;

- The Growth Areas and Growth Points should each produce and implement a Green Infrastructure Strategy to provide environments which encourage healthy living;
- Increased access to high quality natural environments for children, particularly under the age of 12, will improve their wellbeing and is the most significant driver for an interest in the environment in adulthood. There are similar health benefits for the old and disadvantaged;
- The professional health sector should increase the resources provided to people to encourage the use of the natural environment to improve wellbeing and reduce physical inactivity.

Annex 1

Summary of evidence showing the health benefits of the natural environment

Physical Activity

- 70% of the population do not undertake the levels of activity as recommended by the Chief Medical Officer.¹
- 22% of adults are obese and about 40% are overweight. Being overweight or obese accounts for as much as 30% of heart disease and 80% of diabetes and costs the UK £2.5 billion a year.²
- Survival of older people lengthened with nearby parks and tree lined streets near the residence.^{3,4}
- The ideal natural area to attract people to exercise contains many separate elements (biodiverse), a focal point, lush, grassy or herbaceous ground cover with sense of safety and the presence of water.^{5,6}
- Accessibility to nearby attractive public green space and footpaths are more likely to increase levels of walking.^{7,8,9}

Mental Health

- Concentration levels in the elderly are significantly improved after resting in a garden compared to staying indoors.¹⁰
- Green Exercise creates an immediate improvement of self esteem.¹¹
- Recovery of from mental fatigue is greater through viewing nature than by watching TV, reading magazines or walking in an urban environment.¹²

Children

- Children who spend time in green space are more likely to continue visiting green space as an adult and more likely to find these places magical and energising.¹³
- Children's self discipline can be improved by 20% by simply having views of trees and vegetation outside their homes. This mainly affects girls and is related to better concentration even when adjusted for all other factors.¹⁴
- Children who walk in green space are able to concentrate more on subsequent work than those who take a similar walk in a built up area.¹⁵
- School playgrounds are still based on asphalt and man made structures. A natural play environment at school helps reduce bullying, increases creative play, improves concentration and a feeling of self worth in children.^{16,17,18}
- Academic performance has significantly improved across the curriculum in schools when natural environments are integrated into their education.¹⁹
- Children with attention deficit disorder have significant improvement of symptoms if they play in natural areas or even have views of trees and grass outside their home.²⁰
- Children's physical activity levels are also associated with the number of play spaces near their homes and the amount of time children use those play spaces.²¹

Community Benefits

- Green space in a housing complex encourages more social activity and more visitors compared to barren areas. The residents also knew more neighbours and said that their neighbours were more concerned with helping and supporting each other.²²
- More adults are observed in groups and involved in social activities in green areas in an urban environment compared to a barren area.²³
- 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 age.²⁴

References

1. Chief Medical Officer's report. 2004. *At least five a day - evidence on the impact of physical activity and its relationship to health*. HMSO
2. Cabinet Office. http://www.strategy.gov.uk/work_areas/sport/index.asp
3. TAKANO, T, NAKAMURA, K, & WATANABE, M. 2002. Urban residential environments and senior citizens' longevity in megacity areas: the importance of walkable green spaces. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, Vol 56, 913-18.
4. DE VRIES, S, VERHEIJ, R A & GROENEWEGEN, P P. 2001. *Nature and Health: The relation between health and green space in people's living environment*. Euro Leisure-congress Netherlands.
5. ULRICH, R S. 1986. Human responses to vegetation and landscapes. *Landscape and urban planning*, Vol 13, 29-44.
6. KAPLAN, KAPLAN & RYAN R. 1998. *With people in mind: Design and management of everyday nature*. Washington, DC: Island Press
7. GILES-CORTI, B & DONOVAN, R. 2003. Relative influences of individual, social environmental, and physical environmental correlates of walking. *American Journal of Public Health*; Vol 93(9) 1583-1589.
8. HUMPEL, N, OWEN, N & LESLIE, E. 2002. Environmental factors associated with adults participation in physical activity. *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, Vol 22(3).
9. Owen, N (and others). 2004. Understanding environmental influences on walking. *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, Vol 27(1).
10. OTTOSSON, J & GRAHN, P A. 2005. Comparison of leisure time spent in a garden with leisure time spent indoors on measures of restoration in residents in geriatric care. *Landscape Research*, Vol 30 (1), 23-55.
11. PRETTY, J (and others). 2005. *A countryside for Health and Well-Being: The Physical and Mental Health Benefits of Green Exercise*. Countryside Recreation Network.
12. HERZOG, T R (and others). 1997. Reflection and Attention Recovery as distinctive benefits of restorative environments. *Environmental Psychology*, Vol 17, 165-170.
13. BELL, S, THOMPSON, C W & TRAVLOU, P. 2003. Contested views of freedom and control: Children, teenagers and urban fringe woodlands in central Scotland. *Urban Forestry and Urban Greening*, Vol 2 (2), 87-100.
14. TAYLOR, A F, KUO, F E & SULLIVAN, W C. 2001. Views of nature and self-discipline: evidence from inner city children. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 21 Supp.
15. HARTIG, T, MANG, M & EVANS, G W. 1991. Restorative effects of natural environment experiences. *Environment and Behaviour*, Vol 23, 3-26.
16. FJORTOFT, I & SAGEIE, J. 2000. The natural environment as a playground for children: Landscape description and analyses of a natural landscape. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, Vol 48, 83-97.
17. HERRINGTON, S, STUDDTMANN, K. 1998. Landscape interventions new directions for the design of children's outdoor play environments. *Landscape and Urban Planning* Vol 42(2-4), 191-205.
18. MALONE, K & TRANTER, P. 2003. Children's environmental learning and the use, design and management of school grounds. *Children, Youth and Environments*, Vol 13 (2).
19. The National Environmental Education and Training Foundation. 2000. *Environment – based Education: Creating High Performance Schools and Students*. Washington, DC.
20. 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.
21. SALLIS, J F (and others). 1995. Correlates of physical activity at home in Mexican-American and Anglo-American pre-school children. *Health Psychology*. Vol 12, 390-8.
22. KUO, F E (and others). 1998. Fertile Ground for Community: Inner-City Neighborhood Common Spaces. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol 26, 6.
23. SULLIVAN, W C, KUO, F & DEPOOTER, S E. 2004. Vital Neighbourhood Spaces Environment and Behaviour. *The Fruit of Urban Nature*, Vol 36 (5), 678-700.
24. DE VRIES, S, VERHEIJ, R A & GROENEWEGEN, P P. 2001. *Nature and Health. The relation between health and green space in people's living environment*. Euro Leisure-congress Netherlands.