

Policy Brief Title

Nature's Way: Co-Creating Methods for Innovating Nature-based Solutions for Public Health and Green Recovery in a Post-COVID World

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Summary of the research

Nature-based solutions (NbS- social programmes and physical interventions involving nature/natural environments aimed at addressing urban environmental, social and economic challenges) are an emerging priority in post-Covid 'building back greener' urban agendas. Engaging with natural environments boosts human physical and mental health, and is effective in addressing health inequalities. Despite this, NbS for health and wellbeing has not yet been widely adopted. The knowledge, skills and resources to develop NbS rarely extend beyond the environmental sector into areas such as public health or social care. This could be a barrier for less resourceful communities who do not have equal physical, cultural social access to natural spaces.

The Nature's Way project is an 18 month project that aims to use design as an action research method to co-create ways of accessing and sharing otherwise disconnected or not-readily-available knowledge, resources, and best practice of innovating NbS. Working with communities in Walsall and Bradford, it aims to support wider adoption of grassroots NbS projects.

Policy recommendations

Parks and greenspaces should be seen as critical infrastructure for public wellbeing. It is vital to address the impacts of reduced investment on key skills needed to maintain and promote greater access to them for all communities. We recommend **increasing capacity in both horticultural and community engagement skills** within local government teams, particularly those involved in practical management of their green and blue assets.

We must acknowledge the role of community nature-based projects on preventative public health and give further support to local projects. It is more common to access funding for infrastructure projects (e.g. building planters) than salaries, meaning those working on projects often are volunteers which can stymie their development. **Funding bodies and grantmakers could increase their core and unrestricted funding for local community groups and projects.**

Social prescribing provides opportunities to better link nature to patients but suffers from systemic gaps in communication and understanding. We recommend **tackling the information barrier between the NHS, social prescribing, local communities and nature-based projects** through a place-based approach, ensuring shared understanding of processes and expectations between all actors in the system.

Key findings

- Local governance often operates in siloed ways meaning that navigating these complex systems is a significant barrier to VCSE organisations seeking clarity or advice.
- COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of greenspaces as sites have recorded higher visitor numbers. Greenspaces have conversely been victim to increased anti-social behaviour as alternative spaces are closed.
- Disparities within race and class on visiting green spaces are exacerbated through lack of consultation with local residents. When these communities are meaningfully consulted, it can lead to greater buy-in and engagement.
- Local authority budget reductions over the past decade has put pressure on parks resulting in cuts in maintenance and management. This inhibits the utilisation of these spaces for NbS activities.
- Decreases in skilled knowledge (e.g. horticulture or land management) has led to challenges in maintaining greenspaces to high standard and collaborating effectively with volunteer groups.
- Social prescribing (SP) is a relatively new term that has mixed understanding and interpretation. Prioritising SP is low on the agenda of many stretched healthcare services despite its possible potential at alleviating these pressures by rerouting patients to community projects.

Further information

Project Website - <https://naturesway.rca.ac.uk/>

Project Facebook page -

<https://www.facebook.com/Natures-Way-Research-Project-at-the-Royal-College-of-Art-110141011364583>

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