

Green and blue natural spaces – why they are good for us and what local councils can do to protect them

Getting out into nature supports health and wellbeing in many ways. It can help people feel good (fresh air and gentle exercise), connect with their community, strengthen social connections, improve sleep patterns, have more energy, and can help manage weight, blood pressure and other long-term illnesses.

Looking after our land (green) and water-based (blue) natural landscapes is important for protecting biodiversity and improving food security and air quality, as well as making our towns and villages more enjoyable places to live and work.

Whether a small community garden or a national park, being able to get out into open space away from the urban environment is good for our mental and physical and health. Children in deprived areas are nine times less likely to have access to green space and places to play, so it's important that we work to address this inequality.

A Wildlife Trusts report calling for a '[natural health service](#)' notes that

'Engaging with green spaces offers notable advantages, particularly for vulnerable populations. Individuals with better access to green spaces tend to experience reduced health disparities... typically associated with income deprivation. Furthermore, research reveals that ensuring fair and equal access to green spaces in England alone could result in annual savings of £3.1 billion (2023 prices) for the NHS (Natural England, 2009).'

The [Healthy New Towns Putting Health into Place](#) report includes detailed lessons from NHS England's Healthy New Towns Programme. A key component of the programme is to ensure all major new housing developments have easy access to green space to create the conditions for people to engage in physical activity, healthy play, active travel and to inspire healthy eating. It also puts strong emphasis on connecting and involving communities.

The New Economics Foundation's [Five Ways to Wellbeing](#) framework notes that accessing natural environments can empower people to make changes that will help them be more resilient to life's stresses.

1. **Connect** - with your local environment and community in shared green spaces.
2. **Be Active** - getting out for walking, running, cycling and riding in our parks, woodlands, hills and riverside and coastal paths.
3. **Take Notice** - getting out into nature can help you connect with your emotional state and look at your environment in a different way.
4. **Keep learning** - whether it's talks, workshops or self-led nature walks spotting wildlife, there's so many opportunities to expand your knowledge of your local environment.
5. **Give** - whether it's volunteering with a local conservation group or giving yourself time to enjoy some fresh air with friends and family, both can give you more purpose and meaning.

[Somerset Local Nature partnership](#) has a health and wellbeing group that produced [a film](#) documenting the benefits of accessing nature on health and wellbeing and a handful of the wonderful projects that are happening across the County- watch the

film [here](#). And the National Academy for Social Prescribing have produced a green prescribing toolkit available [here](#).

Public health England have also produced a helpful summary of the benefits of sustainable natural environments on health and wellbeing (see figure reproduced below) but some of the key reasons for protecting and promoting access to green and blue spaces are:

Mental Health benefits:

- Reduction in stress, anxiety and the risk of depression, dementia and Alzheimer's
- Listening to birdsong and nature sounds has been shown to be calming and reduce symptoms of anxiety or emotional distress.
- Making our outdoor spaces more attractive and accessible can increase public engagement and improve physical activity among children and older adults.

Wellbeing benefits

- Access to, and engagement with, the natural environment is associated with numerous positive health outcomes, including improved physical and mental health, and reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, risk of mortality and other chronic health conditions. So much so that Exmoor National Park Authority recently completed 'Moor to Enjoy' - in a ground-breaking partnership with the Health and Wellbeing Boards of Devon and Somerset. The first of its kind in England, it aimed to demonstrate how access to green space can reduce the need for drug-based interventions or the development of long-term health conditions.
- Evidence indicates that participation in physical activity in a natural setting is associated with more improved mental health outcomes than participation in physical activity in an indoor setting.
- Natural landscapes inspire creativity in many forms including poetry, art, photography, music, and creative writing.
- Our food and drinking water is sourced from the local environment, so it's important to protect and sustain them.

Climate change and Ecological benefits:

- The Environment Act 2021 requires parish and town councils to consider what they can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity. Government [guidance](#) states that by 1st January 2024, councils should have first considered what action to take for biodiversity. If your council has not already done so, it must now agree its policies and objectives. You can find resources to assist with this duty on the Resources page of the SALC website under [Health & Wellbeing](#). Reduced carbon emissions as plants store carbon and improve air quality by capturing micropollutants and increasing oxygen levels.
- Trees and other urban planting can provide shade and cooling for built environments.
- Increasing biodiversity protects insects that pollinate plants that allow our food to grow and feed birds and other predator species.

- Protecting inland waterways from pollution and drainage reduces erosion and loss of habitats and aquatic species.

Economic and Tourism benefits:

- Protecting and promoting green and blue spaces can attract tourism to the area and connect with our heritage and history.
- Many Somerset natural landscapes have been used as locations for film and television, attracting revenue and additional tourism benefits.
- Our green and blue spaces provide training grounds for athletes, and a backdrop for sporting events and challenges such as Duke of Edinburgh award.
- Rural economies depend on visitors to green and blue spaces to support them, and many are closely linked to the health of the natural landscape (fishing, eco-tourism, crafts made with natural materials e.g. willow weaving)
- National parks and AONB's form key partnerships in rural Development programmes, supporting local businesses and attracting external funding.
- Viable woodland economies are important to support local jobs and alternative energy sources.
- Farming, fishing and food production businesses relying on natural resources bring jobs, income, food security and tourism to the area.



Natural & Sustainable Environments

Quality of Evidence:

- Improved
- Reduced
- High Quality
- Medium Quality
- Low Quality
- NR (Not reported): Methodological quality of the original research is unclear and should be treated with caution.

Greyed Out Text

Best Available Evidence:

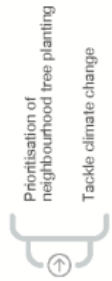
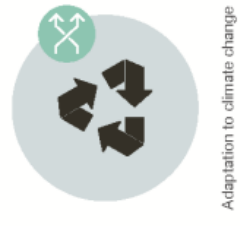
In some instances, more than one piece of review-level evidence reporting on the same health impacts and/or outcomes was identified as part of this umbrella review. In such instances this table highlights findings of the review(s) which reported evidence of the best methodological quality.

Population Groups:

- General Population
- Older Adults
- Children & Adolescents

Disclaimer:

This diagram has been produced as part of a wider evidence resource, commissioned by Public Health England and developed by the University of the West of England. Please see the document 'Spatial Planning and Designing Healthier Places' for further information.



What can councils do to encourage access to green and blue spaces?

According to the 2020 review of [improving access to green spaces](#) local authorities play a vital role in:

- providing new, good quality greenspace that is inclusive and equitable
 - improving, maintaining and protecting existing greenspace
 - increasing green infrastructure within public spaces and promoting healthy streets
 - improving transport links, pathways and other means of access to greenspace, and providing imaginative routes linking areas of greenspace for active travel
- Here are some ways that your council can support and encourage access to green and blue spaces to improve health and wellbeing:

Examples of **green spaces** are:

- public parks and gardens – including urban and country parks, and formal gardens
- private gardens or grounds – private gardens and school and institutional grounds
- amenity greenspace – residential, business and transport amenity space, including communal recreation spaces, domestic gardens, informal recreation space, greenspace around housing, town and village greens
- play space for children and teenagers
- sports areas – playing fields, golf courses, tennis courts, bowling greens and other sports areas
- green corridors – green access routes including green cycle ways, and routes along canals and rivers
- natural and semi-natural greenspace – woodland, open semi-natural, open water, beach, foreshore or manmade
- allotments and community growing spaces
- burial grounds – churchyards and cemeteries
- other functional greenspace camping and caravan parks, and areas undergoing land use change.

Examples of **Blue space** includes: the sea, coastlines, rivers, lakes, canals, waterfalls and fountains.

Some ideas for easy actions:

1. Share what we have: Somerset is blessed with a National park and three National Landscapes (formerly know as Areas of outstanding natural Beauty, AONB's) within it's borders that are open 24/7 365 days a year and cost relatively little to the taxpayer, with public spending on them less than £1 per person!

There are plenty of projects happening in these areas that need volunteers and funding to keep them safe and accessible for all.

- a. The **Mendip Hills** AONB introduced a Young Rangers Scheme in 2005 linked to the EUOPARC Junior Ranger programme. The scheme offers a 2-year programme of varied activities, held once a month, for 15 Young Rangers aged 13-15 years selected from local schools. The young rangers work locally but also have the opportunity to attend the annual European Young Ranger conference and learn about other countries and cultures too. The Mendip hills strategic partnership brings together a range of organisations to coordinate the protection and enhancement of the landscape. The entire area lies over an important Carboniferous Limestone aquifer which is designated as a Major Aquifer Unit making a major contribution to public water supply and supplying Bristol and the surrounding area via Cheddar, Blagdon, and Chew Valley reservoirs. The Mendip aquifer also supplies the hot springs in Bath. You can find more information [here](#).
 - b. **Quantocks**: Famous as the birthplace of Romantic poetry after inspiring Coleridge and Wordsworth the Quantock land partnership scheme work closely with local communities including four local councils to engage, educate and enable access to the beauty of the landscape. You can find more information [here](#)
 - c. **Blackdowns**: The Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership has been working with landowners, conservation organisations, neighbouring AONBs, community interest groups and other stakeholders to create a Nature Recovery Plan for the area. This includes the Blackdown Hills State of Nature Report, visualisations and several working documents to address the biodiversity emergency. Find out more [here](#)
 - d. **Exmoor**: Exmoor National Park Authority has completed a three-year partnership health and wellbeing project, 'Moor to Enjoy', with public health in Somerset and Devon Councils, and are now running the FUN project, **Families United through Nature** to engage with families to give children the best start in life possible. FUN will do this, by developing in partnership with parents, nature-based activities that will improve the physical and mental health and well-being of children and young people in West Somerset. More information on the FUN project and other wellbeing activities on Exmoor can be found [here](#).
2. Somerset Council has produced a series of walking and cycling maps to help you to explore the county, which has over 9000 rights of way, totalling 3808 miles (6129 km). The extensive path network is varied ranging from long distance routes like the Southwest Coast Path and the River Parrett Trail, to a number of promoted circular routes and local country paths. Why not check out what's in your area and encourage your community to get out and enjoy it, and if there are any barriers to accessing such as drainage, overgrown vegetation or ground conditions then work with your community to fix them. Find the maps [here](#):
 3. Somerset Wildlife Trust support a range of projects to enable better access to nature for wellbeing, including their Nature Connections and conservation volunteer programmes. Find out more [here](#)

4. **Somerset Health Walks** are supported walking groups for wellbeing that offer gentle, moderate and advanced routes. Walks are sociable and friendly and are run by trained volunteers in many locations.
 - For further information on health walks contact Georgina Hainsby, Health Walks Coordinator, via walks@sasp.co.uk.
 - Somerset Health Walks Facebook page is [here](#)
 - **If there isn't a walk in your area- you can register for one [here](#)**
5. Walk your way- Walking *your* way to better health and happiness pulls together programmes, links and resources to guide you along your walking journey and we have teamed up with various partners to help make this happen. From GP surgeries, schools, voluntary groups, leisure centres, community halls, toddler groups, workplaces and NHS services. Somerset Activity and Sports Partnership (SASP) is dedicated to promoting the walking message, encouraging more of you to walk in ways that work best for everyone and have a host of resources to inspire and encourage independent walking available here: <https://www.sasp.co.uk/walking>

Here are some examples of how local councils are improving the green and blue spaces across the county:

SALC Grant fund recipients:

- **Bishops Hull Parish Council** has been awarded £2,500 for the installation of raised beds to improve accessibility of allotment space, benefitting plot holders, and the opportunity to allow access to the social seating area and some of the raised beds to the local primary school and local community groups.
- **West Monkton Parish Council** was awarded £2,500 towards a community garden development project. The whole community will benefit from the improved space at the garden through educational and family learning aspects of the project, and individuals will benefit by learning improved perceptions about self-care, self-reflection, and ways to improve mental health and wellbeing.
- **Leigh on Mendip Parish Council** was awarded £1,750 for provision of relaxing and socialising spaces with hedging, raised beds, and seating in a recreation ground play area development. The project will enable residents of Leigh on Mendip and visitors from surrounding parishes to enhance their fitness, health, and wellbeing. Circular benches are designed to help alleviate loneliness by allowing people to sit more sociably and chat. The sensory garden area will offer a tranquil space for all to experience the sights, smells, and touch of stimulating, tactile plants.

Other Councils:

- In January 2023 **Wellington Town Council** took over the management of an 62.5 acre area of land known as the [Green Corridor](#) on a 150 -year lease from Somerset West and Taunton Council. Working with partners, they aim to ensure that the land remains available for public use and that it is used it to promote recreation, healthy lifestyles, local food growing and the development of arts and cultural spaces. They want to ensure that the

land is maintained and developed in a way that promotes biodiversity and improves wildlife habitats.

- [Frome Town Council](#) supports many projects to increase access to green and blue spaces, including
 - a '[Green and Healthy futures](#)' scheme partnering with Frome medical practice and Edventure Frome,
 - sharing a list of their [green spaces](#) on their website,
 - supporting '[wild about](#)' projects to encourage the community to get involved and record and protect local biodiversity

More information:

- Much more than the view: https://mendiphills-nl.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/So_much_more_than_the_view1.pdf
- The Value of AONB's: <https://mendiphills-nl.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/Value-of-AONBs-Report-FINAL.pdf>
- Planning for health: [Spatial Planning for Health: an evidence resource for planning and designing healthier places \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/264842/spatial-planning-for-health-evidence-resource.pdf)
- Children in deprived areas are nine times less likely to have access to green space and places to play: National Children's Bureau . *Greater Expectations: raising aspirations for our children*. London: National Children's Bureau; 2013
- Natural England- Link between Natural environment and mental health: <https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/4973580642418688>
- Natural England- Link between Natural environment and physical health: <https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/6416203718590464>
- Natural England- Connection to nature : <https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/5777215462834176>