

TOOLKIT

THE POWER OF NATURE FOR EMPLOYEE WELLBEING

This toolkit translates findings from research within the Urban Innovative Action-funded project [IGNITION](#). Business in the Community is a partner on the IGNITION project that aims to find innovative funding mechanisms for nature-based solutions to address the climate emergency. As well as supporting businesses to address the climate emergency, the power of nature should be harnessed as a core strand of an integrated approach to employee wellbeing. This toolkit outlines some of the benefits to be gained from this approach and explores the possible interventions.

Nature, wellbeing, and our disconnection

Having a connection with nature means that as a society, we see ourselves as one part of the natural world, we have an emotional affinity with nature, and we are aware of the vital interconnectivity between all aspects of the living planet.

The pandemic has provided a once in a lifetime opportunity to adopt ways of working that simultaneously promote healthy people and a healthy planet, accelerated by a sustainable approach.

Our connection with nature in the modern world has significantly decreased over the past few generations. There are three key factors at play in this disconnection: 85% of the UK population lives and works in urban environmentsⁱ that are traditionally devoid of nature, people spend more time indoors and have increased virtual and indoor work

BITC MEMBERS REFERENCED IN THIS TOOLKIT

- Deloitte
- Anglian Water
- Eurovia UK Ltd
- The Eden Project

and recreationⁱⁱ, and the richness and diversity of nature is itself in sharp decline.

- The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries (189th out of 218 countries).ⁱⁱⁱ
- Since the 1950s there has been a marked cultural shift away from references to nature in fiction books, song lyrics and film storylines.^{iv}

There is a growing body of evidence that shows that a connection with nature is key to good health and wellbeing, some of which sits within the IGNITION project's nature-based solutions (NBS) evidence base.



Key findings from IGNITION on the link between nature-based solutions and health and wellbeing are:

- Visits to outdoor green spaces of 30 minutes or more during the course of a week result in a 7% reduction in the prevalence of depression.
- Green façades appear to enhance human physiological and psychological relaxation more than concrete or traditional walls.
- For every 1% increase in the proportion of useable or total green space near to the home, there is a 4% reduction in the number of anxiety/mood disorder treatment cases.
- Bird and plant diversity have been found to increase the wellbeing benefits of visiting green space and can lead to a reduction in anxiety, stress, and depression.
- Studies have also found that species richness and perceived species richness have a positive correlation with mental wellbeing.

Approximately one in four people in the UK will experience a mental health problem each year^v. Rebuilding our connection with nature can help provide a strong foundation for reducing the impact of mental health issues and increase overall wellbeing. This has come into sharp focus with the COVID-19 outbreak and a recent study found that nature contact 'buffers' the negative effects of lockdown on mental health.^{vi}

This connection is currently being utilised by the NHS who are now prescribing time in nature as part of their wider [social prescribing programme](#) for those who experience mental and physical ill health. These prescriptions are already happening across the UK, saving the NHS significant funds on alternative treatments. They are predicting at least 900,000 people will be referred to social prescribing by 2023/24.^{vii}

Beyond these health benefits, nature provides so many other services that are vital for a healthy and resilient society, such as cleaner air and water, sound absorption and carbon capture.



What are the business benefits?

Whilst incorporating elements of nature into your ways of working may come with a capital cost, there is a vast amount of evidence, including from the IGNITION research, showing the multiple benefits this could bring. These include:

- improved human, environmental, and organisational resilience;
- employee wellbeing enhanced by a sustainable, nature-positive culture;
- contributing to your organisational response to the climate emergency; and
- addressing unequal access to green space.

Improved organisational resilience

Business has a huge responsibility to go beyond a 'do no harm' model and restore nature in the face of the ecological crisis, widely referred to as the sixth mass extinction. The value of nature to business goes beyond responsible business practice; it is essential to long-term resilience in the face of climate change. The recent report [Nature-based Solutions to the Climate Emergency](#) written by BITC and UKGBC as part of the IGNITION project, details the many benefits and the value of nature to business. Some insights taken from studies in the IGNITION NBS Evidence Base:

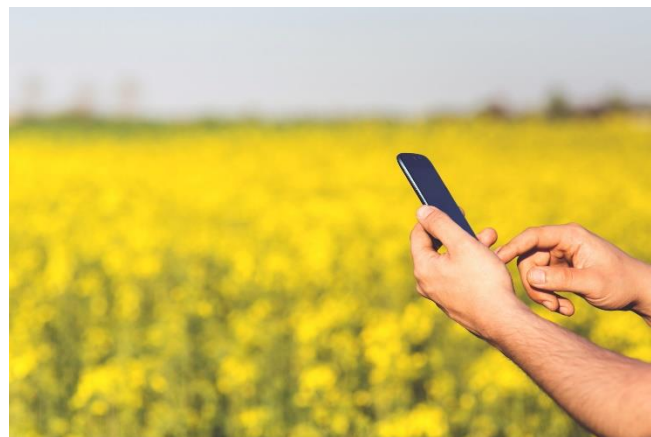
- 15% increase in worker productivity when office spaces are enhanced with plants.

- 12% increase in reaction time when in the presence of plants.
- Employees with views of trees and landscapes took an average of 11 hours less sick leave per year than employees with no view. This equates to an average saving of around £1,600 (\$2,000 reported) per employee.
- Workers with a view of nature handle calls 6-7% faster than those with no view. This generates annual productivity savings of around £2,400 (\$2,990 reported) per employee.
- 23% decrease in sick leave taken by employees with a view of nature.

Ensuring employees are engaged in 'greening' efforts and have the opportunities to connect with nature in a meaningful way will create both environmental and human resilience. A healthy and responsible business will thrive with a healthy team. A recent study from Deloitte found that the costs to employers of poor mental health in the workplace are substantial.

Using conservative assumptions, they estimate a total annual cost to businesses of up £45bn, comprising £7bn in absence costs, £27bn – £29bn in presenteeism costs and £9bn in costs of staff turnover. There are also other indirect costs to employers of poor mental health, such as the adverse impact on creativity, innovation, and other employees.^{viii}

Of adults, 26% have at some stage in their life been diagnosed with a mental illness^{ix} and in 2016 the country lost 4.3 days per worker due to associated sick leave.^x Exposure to, and engagement with, nature can result in reduced staff sick leave, reduced staff turnover and an increase in workplace productivity.



Employee wellbeing enhanced by a sustainable, nature-positive culture

In addition to improved wellbeing, there is growing evidence that links connecting with nature to increased eco-actions.^{xi}

This means that the more we engage and reconnect with the natural world, the more likely we are to change our behaviour to restore and protect it. The speed and scale required to reach organisational carbon reduction and nature restoration targets will be drastic, so ensuring your organisation is open to and prepared for these changes will be essential. Additionally, engaging staff in 'greening' activities helps to guarantee that spaces are designed for how they are realistically used and ensures the longevity of any investment.

As we prioritise work environments that give wellbeing a greater weight in design, popular industry building environmental standards such as [WELL](#), [BREEAM](#) and [Building with Nature](#) consider [biophilia elements](#) that nurture the innate human-nature connection in their assessments. These standards recognise both nature incorporation and nature interaction, highlighting the importance of allowing and encouraging engagement as much as creating green spaces.

Physical activity is crucial to employees' health and wellbeing, but too few people are currently as active as they should be. Around a third of

adults are likely to be damaging their health through a lack of physical activity.^{xii} There are many ways to help employees be more active whilst in nature, from providing secure bike racks, to changing facilities for people who exercise outside. Evidence shows that a workplace's culture is the most important factor in the success of a physical activity promotion programme. You can find out more about building a supportive culture in [the Physical Activity, Healthy Eating, and Healthier Weight Toolkit for Employers](#).

Employee mental health can also be significantly boosted by promoting a positive working culture and supporting people to be more active. You can find out more about creating that culture in our [Mental Health Toolkit](#).

Incorporating nature into ways of working enhances both employee [physical](#) and [mental health](#), whilst creating a culture more likely to adapt to the changes needed to address the climate emergency.



Responding to the climate emergency

There is increasing social and political pressure on business to respond to the climate crisis and many organisations are progressing towards a net-zero society through a just transition.

However successfully we accelerate towards a net-zero carbon economy, the effects of climate change are already impacting on business and

communities. Extremes of weather are set to increase and we need to build resilience to flooding and heat waves. Building economic and social resilience to climate change requires a holistic approach to climate action planning; understanding the role that nature plays in building climate resilience for business, the environment and people is a key building block in any environmental strategy.

As businesses work towards climate action plans driven by science-based targets, it is important to incorporate the business impact and reliance on nature. Mobilising employees behind a climate action plan that supports a just transition will be integral to success.

Addressing unequal access to green space

The ability to connect with nature is not universally accessible. One in eight (12%) British households has no garden, and the percentage of homes without a garden is higher among ethnic minorities, with Black people in England nearly four times more likely than White people to have no outdoor space at home.^{xiii}

Additionally, this lack of access to green space is compounded by the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on ethnic minorities as mentioned in our [Ethnicity and the Economic Impact of COVID-19 factsheet](#) and the [Black, Asian and minority ethnic \(BAME\) women, mental health and COVID-19 factsheet](#).

Parks provide an essential piece of a healthy society's infrastructure and when no garden is available, parks provide spaces for connection through socialising and recreation. Whilst the UK is home to some globally renowned national parks, it is the small local parks that provide a greater opportunity for connection. In England and Wales around 25.4 million people (~87%) can access public parks or gardens within a ten-minute walk, while 3.8 million residents (~13%) live further away.^{xiv} Research carried out for the

National Trust last year showed that almost half a million people live in "grey deserts" with no trees or green spaces nearby.^{xv}

This accessibility has been starkly highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, where mass working from home and travel restrictions meant having access to local green space was incredibly valuable to wellbeing. In a recent IGNITION project study, 97% of people felt access to parks and green spaces during the COVID restrictions was very important or important and 84% of respondents visited public parks and green spaces at least once a week. Access to green space is going to continue to be a priority as 92% of respondents to the IGNITION survey stated they will continue to visit public parks and green spaces after COVID restrictions have lifted.

This inequality has been recognised by the UK Government who found that equality of access to, and connection with, a healthy natural environment would save billions of pounds in healthcare costs and reduced economic activity every year.^{xvi}

In light of these inequalities, organisations can help to address this green space gap by greening their workspace and by encouraging engagement with green spaces, whether that be on site, locally or for those who will continue to work from home post-pandemic.



How to get started

The actions below could be a starting point on your journey to reconnecting with nature and can be incorporated into wider environmental sustainability strategies:

Understand the nature on your estate and make sure your organisation is protecting and restoring it, whilst encouraging employees to engage with it by organising events such as outdoor meetings and volunteering projects (see [Greening your Workspace Toolkit](#)).

Connect with your local green spaces and community organisations to see how you can best offer support. Your estate and employees rely on local green spaces for a multitude of reasons such as reducing flooding in the local area and providing a pleasant location for employees to have outdoor breaks for example. Find local groups through services such as Groundwork and RHS community finder.

Prioritise ensuring home workers create home offices that facilitate a connection with nature through:

- Encouraging your teams to set up their desk facing a window with a view of nature.
- Incentivise employees to buy house plants or have a plant on their desk. See Anglian Water seed gifting and growing project case study below.
- For those home workers who are not able to access green space, encourage listening to natural sound, white noise playlists like birdsong or waterfalls, or host nature visualization workshops.



Structure allocated volunteering days into employee programmes to help with local green spaces and community organisations supporting nature, as well as structuring volunteer maintenance hours for your own green spaces. Organisations like Groundwork specialise in delivering employee volunteering in nature. See our Impact story from Eurovia for an example.

Allocate meetings that do not need access to a screen, such as routine catchups, to be walking meetings over the phone, outdoors or in your own green spaces. Read advice for outdoor meeting spaces in our [Greening your workspace guide](#). Unilever created guidance on active meetings that is available [here](#).

Understand your local area and green space hotspots to distribute 'lunchtime walk' routes to staff with varying distances/timing. For home-workers, encourage exploration of their local green spaces. Websites like [The Woodland Trusts Wood finder](#) help with this.

Meaningfully engage employees across your organisation on any 'greening' projects, to ensure the design is inclusive and will be suitable for how spaces are used and managed. As key stakeholders, this engagement will ensure the project's longevity as well as creating a collaborative culture. Resources such as ['The co-production guide book'](#) from Connecting Nature lay out how this is done.

Ensure provisions and strategies are in place to encourage active travel. Not only does this address concerns over public transport post-pandemic, but it encourages employees to spend time connecting with the outdoors each day. This could look like:

- Introducing financial allocations for walking and cycling business travel, as there is with mileage in car journeys to encourage and incentivise active travel.
- Providing facilities for exercise such as lockers, bike sheds and showers. We know that proximity to a green space will increase an individual's probability of exercise, so ensure the workplace doesn't hold any barriers to doing this.
- Communicating details of your local active travel networks and routes around your estate.
- Creating a Cycle to Work scheme

Investigate the potential for community growing space on site available for employees to volunteer to maintain. Growing projects heavily feature in green social prescribing programmes to improve wellbeing due to the required connection with nature. Local community growing projects can be found through RHS community finder.

Start a nature-positive culture by dedicating a nature-focussed segment on internal communication channels that highlights current or planned actions your organisation is taking to restore nature.

Host planting events. This could either be done internally and using the [RHS plant-finder](#) to identify the correct plants for your available space (consider species that will have longevity in the changing climate), or externally with NGOs who specialize in planting such as City of Trees. You can calculate the carbon capture from your planting for contribution to any unavoidable carbon emissions offsetting, in line with The Challenge 2030 campaign.

Host workshops on nature and biodiversity. Resources such as [ARUP's Biodiversity Cards](#) can be used.

CASE STUDY | EDEN PROJECT



The Eden Project run the [HotHouse programme](#) where they utilize nature and our connection to it, to rejuvenate leadership or whole organisations to drive rapid change and development. The Nature of Leadership is the HotHouse flagship open programme designed for leaders who want to be a force for good in their businesses, organisations, and communities.

HotHouse's work is guided by an exploration of our relationship with the natural world. There are many strands to this thread, but they can be broadly summed up by: what we can learn from nature, how experiences of nature influence our wellbeing, how nature can deepen learning experiences across many contexts and how experiences of nature relate to the emotional landscape; awe, empathy, compassion. They are connecting change-makers across business sectors with nature to ensure this connection organically influences their practices for the better.

What are BITC members doing?

CASE STUDY | ANGLIAN WATER

Anglian Water value the benefits that a connection with nature can bring. In 2018 they encouraged a connection with nature for their 5,000 employees by distributing seeds, alongside nature guides and materials, and running a 3-month campaign centered around growing competitions using the seeds. They posted blogs continuously alongside the campaign to maintain engagement.

They have also created allotments, wellbeing gardens and memorial gardens in unused spaces on their water treatment facilities to provide spaces for employees and surrounding communities to connect with nature. This work sits alongside their yearly wellbeing plan and wider environmental strategy.

CASE STUDY | DELOITTE

Deloitte LLP challenged traditional 'green building' thinking to deliver a workplace that would truly benefit their people and the planet with their new London HQ. On occupation, this exceptional building became the largest WELL Certified™ Gold 'New and Existing Interiors' in the world; achieved BREEAM Outstanding for its exemplar environmental design, and was the first office fit-out to attain both BREEAM Outstanding and WELL Certified™ Gold worldwide.

The 14-storey multi-use office development considered the wider comfort conditions that facilitate wellbeing such as natural light, noise, temperature, air quality, nutrition and mindfulness. Additionally, they prioritised a connection with nature by installing 6,300 plants in 700 displays, 140m² of green walls and significant use of wood and stone throughout. Their experience highlights the business benefits – from increased employee satisfaction to lower operating costs – to blending wellbeing and environmental sustainability within a truly sustainable workplace.

Where to go for more support

We hope that this toolkit has provided a useful introduction to the various ways that your businesses can enhance employee wellbeing through nature.

The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) has many guides and tips on creating small scale NBS and planting and maintaining beautiful and functional green spaces.

www.rhs.org.uk

Groundwork UK can help provide support and

CASE STUDY | EUROVIA

Eurovia encourage employee volunteer days to enhance open spaces and to protect and promote wildlife. In these sessions the teams help to remove invasive weed species local to their business throughout the UK, focusing especially on himalayan balsam.

Specialising in highways management, Eurovia encourage verge biodiversity development, where they prevent cutting in some areas and encourage diverse wildflower growth. Alongside these efforts they encourage volunteer days to be planned in partnership with the local community to gain maximum impact, ranging from supporting Scouts and Guides groups to schools and social projects. See how Eurovia are delivering sustainable services here.

guidance on developing green spaces, with a strong focus on building communities and developing skills in the process.

www.groundwork.org.uk

City of Trees can provide expert advice and guidance on how, where and why to plant trees



to ensure maximum benefit for the environment, your organisation and the community.

www.cityoftrees.org.uk

UK Green Building Council (UKGBC) has a wealth of resources and case studies that support transformation to a sustainable built environment, ensuring planning, design and construction support nature, climate mitigation, resource use,

touch engagement or targeted advisory support. We work with members to help them understand their environmental issues and set an environment strategy; measure their greenhouse gas emissions and set their net-zero targets; and

ENJOYED THIS CONTENT?

You might also like to:

- [find out more about our work on nature stewardship](#)
- [learn more about our advisory services](#)
- [join us for one of our upcoming events](#)



Talk to one of our expert team today to learn how membership of BITC can help take you further on your responsible business journey and drive lasting global change.

biodiversity, and social value.
www.ukgbc.org

align with the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD).

The IGNITION project has resources to support the business case for NBS as well as other resources. For more information contact Amanda.skeldon@bitc.org.uk or visit www.ignitiongm.com

Our Advisory team supports organisations in various stages of maturity with their environmental priorities through ongoing light-

REFERENCES

ⁱ Tradingeconomics.com. 2021. United Kingdom - Urban Population (% Of Total) - 1960-2019 Data | 2021 Forecast. [online] Available at: <<https://tradingeconomics.com/united-kingdom/urban-population-percent-of-total-wb-data.html>> [Accessed 9 April 2021].

ⁱⁱ Kesebir, S. and Kesebir, P., 2017. A Growing Disconnection From Nature Is Evident in Cultural Products. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 12(2), pp.258-269.

ⁱⁱⁱ WWF. 2021. The Living Planet Report. [online] Available at: <<https://www.wwf.org.uk/living-planet-report>> [Accessed 9 April 2021].

^{iv} Kesebir, S. and Kesebir, P., 2017. A Growing Disconnection From Nature Is Evident in Cultural Products. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 12(2), pp.258-269.

^v Kanani, D. and Murdoch, C., 2021. NHS England » Mental health. [online] www.england.nhs.uk. Available at: <<https://www.england.nhs.uk/mental-health/>> [Accessed 9 April 2021].

^{vi} Pouso, S., Borja, Á., Fleming, L., Gómez-Baggethun, E., White, M. and Uyarra, M., 2021. Contact with blue-green spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown beneficial for mental health. *Science of The Total Environment*, 756, p.143984.

-
- vii England, N., 2021. NHS England » Social prescribing. [online] England.nhs.uk. Available at: <<https://www.england.nhs.uk/personalisedcare/social-prescribing/>> [Accessed 9 April 2021].
- viii Deloitte (2020) Mental health and employers: Refreshing the case for investment Report. Available at: <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/uk/Documents/consultancy/deloitte-uk-mental-health-and-employers.pdf>
- ix Health Survey for England (2014). Mental Health Problems. Available at: <http://healthsurvey.hscic.gov.uk/support-guidance/public-health/health-surveyfor-england-2014/mental-health-problems.aspx>
- x Office for National Statistics (2016). Sickness absence in the UK labour market. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/labourproductivity/articles/sicknessabsenceinthelabourmarket/2016> [Accessed:02/04/21].
- xi Alcock, I., White, M., Pahl, S., Duarte-Davidson, R. and Fleming, L., 2020. Associations between pro-environmental behaviour and neighbourhood nature, nature visit frequency and nature appreciation: Evidence from a nationally representative survey in England. *Environment International*, 136, p.105441.
- xii Health Survey for England 2018. Published on NHS Digital, 2019.
- xiii On.gov.uk. 2021. One in eight British households has no garden - Office for National Statistics. [online] Available at: <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/articles/oneineightbritishhouseholdshasnogarden/2020-05-14>> [Accessed 9 April 2021].
- xiv Shoari, N., Ezzati, M., Baumgartner, J. and Fecht, D., 2020. Accessibility and Allocation of Public Parks and Gardens During COVID-19 Social Distancing in England and Wales. *SSRN Electronic Journal*.
- xv National Trust. 2021. New research shows the need for urban green space. [online] Available at: <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/new-research-shows-the-need-for-urban-green-space>> [Accessed 9 April 2021].
- xvi GOV.UK. 2021. State of the environment: health, people and the environment. [online] Available at: <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-the-environment/state-of-the-environment-health-people-and-the-environment>> [Accessed 9 April 2021].