

MANAGING TREESCAPES FOR NATURE CONNECTION AND WELLBEING

Research summary

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WOODLANDS *for* NATURE CONNECTION *and* WELLBEING

Offer opportunities for engagement that nurture care and connection

Creative use of the pathways to nature connection to prompt rich sensory and emotional engagement with the beauty and wonder of nature.

Explore personal and cultural meanings of nature in past, present, and future.
Foster compassion through conservation and citizen science activities.

Design for inclusive access

Create accessible habitats for connection through creative design of trails and sit spots, spaces to get away, and spaces to be with others.

Grow trees in and near where people live.
Partner with community organisations to create opportunities for everyone to visit, notice, and enjoy nature.

Engage

SHARE

Celebrate

OPPORTUNITY

INSPIRE

Access

Celebrate stories, cycles, and connections

Share stories of community access and engagement and celebrate the growth and change of people's relationships with nature.

Events, communications, art and conservation successes can inspire others to access and engage.



Access: Design for inclusive and accessible spaces and activities

The foundation for growing treescapes for nature connection and wellbeing is **access**. This includes creating opportunities for all people and communities to spend moments in woodlands and enjoy the benefits of trees and the natural world. It may involve helping some groups visit treescapes for the first time, or ensuring that woodlands have facilities everyone needs, with minimal barriers for anyone, or offering a variety of experiences for the diversity of people's needs and preferences. Some want direction, others want to get lost. Some want space for socialising and picnics, others want space to get away and be alone. Urban treescapes are crucial opportunities for taking trees to communities, bringing meaning, beauty, and wonder into people's daily lives. Community groups and leaders play critical roles in

Examples from the Connected Treescapes case studies and communities included:

- Removing stiles and using gates so more people can access more areas of a treescape
- Providing surfaced trails, good signage, and toilets to increase accessibility
- Creating picnic spaces away from the carpark and café to encourage longer visits in a wider range of areas in a woodland
- A desire for some winding paths and less well-managed areas to enable a sense of peace, quiet and 'being away'
- Planting street trees in busy areas, creating wooded areas in city parks, and planting trees alongside busy roads
- Woodland managers and community providers organising activities for those who may not otherwise access woodlands (e.g. young people, inner-city schools, people recovering from brain injury, or in drug and alcohol rehab)
- Linking up with local schools, NHS, local churches, and sports teams
- Offering forestry qualifications for SEND pupils

bringing treescapes and local residents together and opening up the wellbeing benefits of woodlands for everyone.

Quotes from residents and treescape managers:

"Health and well-being features within the management plan and therefore the management of the site. Even through simple things like provision of facilities – inclusion, and people's ability to connect with the site can be often dependent on whether there is a good hard surface path to get around part of the site. Do you have toilet facilities because that can be a big barrier to a lot of people; do you have directional signage for the directionally challenged?"

"I like building in a sense of exploring. I'm not so worried about clearly marked paths. Puzzling your way through is rather good."
(resident)

"I was working with urban schools in the middle of the city and bringing them out to the forest and they had shocking (to me) responses to trees because these children don't see trees, they see concrete. In some of their playgrounds, there is AstroTurf, but that is as green as it gets. We had children coming out into the forest asking whether that really was grass, they had never seen trees before, and they had never been in puddles before."

[On involving people in drink or drug rehab] ...When they are given the opportunity to engage with green spaces in a physical way and a practical way and actually sometimes, for them, just sitting in it has, for them, given them that quiet in their mind that they need.

"I use the woods as a place to meet up with other dog walkers and walk with friends, but the place I probably spend most time is walking around the streets near me, where all the roads are planted with trees, so it changes the environment all year around, it's beautiful in the winter, it's beautiful in the spring, it's beautiful in the summer. So, I

forget what the trees are until they come out into leaf and it's always a delight" (resident)

"We will be offering training opportunities for community leaders in the area to try and 'train up the trainer', get community leaders involved so that they have the skills and confidence to bring their own groups to the woodland and therefore more groups will have access to it."

Engage: Offer opportunities for engagement that nurture care and connection

Access creates **opportunities** for closer, deeper, and more meaningful **engagement** with treescapes, which nurtures wellbeing and nature connectedness. Woodland management and community organisations can work together to create spaces and activities and other initiatives that encourage a sense of care for woodlands and connection with the rest of nature. The [pathways to nature connection](#) offer a design framework for maximising nature engagement, through sensory contact, beauty, emotion, meaning and compassion. Treescapes can inspire strong individual and community meanings, forming part of personal and community narratives that connect people to the past and to future generations, and to themselves. Opportunities to be involved in citizen science projects, such as wildlife monitoring, or conservation activities like tree planting or coppicing, can help foster a sense of connection to treescapes. the natural world, and to the community. As well as helping nature and

Examples from the Connected Treescapes case studies and communities included:

- Forest bathing to encourage sensory and emotional engagement with woodlands
- A notebook left with a tree for people to say why treescapes matter to them
- Foraging, qijong, yoga activities
- Training people up to contribute to ancient tree inventories, woodland condition assessments, and bat surveys
- Volunteers engaged in conservation work create areas that make more of the woodland accessible and welcoming to the wider community

increasing nature connectedness, such engagement brings a range of wellbeing benefits to people.

Quotes from residents and treescape managers:

“We are trying to create that sort of attachment to areas, so people are protective and appreciative of the woodlands ... one of the things that we shoot for when we’re getting the kids in is to build that respect early on basically and then give it some meaning so that when they are older, it’s not just a chuck away thing, you know, it’s something that we do want to protect.”

“I absolutely love the almost artistry of tree trunks, perhaps more than the canopy, really. I often stop, you know, I’m arrested by the shape, and style, and barks on a tree trunk. It is almost an artwork, really. Lovely.” (resident)

“...there is this lovely sense of having almost grown up with the forest, with the treescape.” (resident)

“If you think the park is about getting your boots on and yomping across the moor well, that’s only one way, there are lots of other ways to enjoy it, to be out in nature, to get an education that comes without it being very didactic and a lot of that comes from understanding the many layers of cultural history.”

“The trees I really love, are the ones in my village - I saw the woods being planted here, it was a pit, a working pit, just down the road here from my house, the whole village was just black and grimy, and it wasn’t the place you would want to live. But now it’s become some beautiful jewel, and I am so proud to be helping out to help to manage these woodlands now, it really gives me a real, yes, I feel very privileged I guess is the word I’m looking for to be involved in helping to secure them for the next generation”. (resident/community volunteer)

“When they’re involved in something, they feel more of a sense of purpose I suppose; people do really benefit from that as well where there is an opportunity to get involved in something. It might be as simple as doing a butterfly survey once a month or something like that, and actually, they are contributing in some ways, so, the ways in which people can actually get involved and the variety of opportunities that people have, even from putting a tree in the ground, right the way through to nurturing in, chopping it down even; some people do that as well, not in a bad way, but in that they are positively managing and understand why.”

Celebrate: Share and celebrate stories, cycles and connections

Rich engagement with treescapes increases opportunities to **share** the joys and wonders and benefits of treescapes with others. Sharing can start from individuals sharing their experiences with friends and families, through to collective celebrations amongst communities. Increased access for all, deeper engagement with treescapes, enhanced wellbeing, and the recovery and thriving of nature in new, ancient and cared-for treescapes can all be the focus of celebrations. Telling the stories of nature's cycles, of the histories and growth of woodlands, of the heritage of treescapes, and of people's relationships with trees and woodlands.

Organised events, works of art, audio-visual or written celebrations (e.g. films, zines, notebooks or email-a-tree projects) provide opportunities to share why treescapes matter to people and their communities. Public celebrations of threatened, recovering or reintroduced species, new planting schemes, or annual natural events, can bring communities together to share how nature's wellbeing is people's wellbeing – consider a blossom or fungi festival, bluebell walks, or an ode for the return of migratory birds. Seasonal rituals such as wassailing or events to celebrate solstices, or traditional dates like Beltane or Samhain offer points on a calendar to

Examples from the Connected Treescapes case studies and communities included:

- The 'Black to Green' story of the 'Heart of the Forest,' telling the story of the rapid change of an area once heavily mined, with woodland increasing from 1% to 27% in 25 years
- Bluebell walks to invite communities to share in the annual beauty and wonder of the treescape
- A Heritage Day to celebrate the opening of a woodland to the public and share community stories of the treescape
- Volunteers involved in coppicing telling woodland visitors and community groups about their work and why it mattered

connect communities with each other, with heritage and with the rest of nature. Public celebration of woodlands and community relationship with nature can inspire a wider range of people to access and engage with their local treescapes, helping the cycle of connection with treescapes continue.

Quotes from residents and treescape managers

"I love talking about things we've seen, particularly to younger generations. I've got grandchildren and that is such a real pleasure to tell and share and watch their response to all the things that you are seeing and can pass on, it's sort of like an oral history, you kind of pass it on to another generation. I like to think I can do that" (resident)

"We are running a Heritage Day event which will allow us the opportunity to share with the local community and visitors what we've discovered about the woodland and its history and heritage, and for the community to share their stories and memories. (...) There is so much history, knowledge and love for the site and the people in general, are very, very keen to share that."

"With the people I can share it with, I like saying what I've seen, and what it might mean. I think understanding, or trying to understand, what I can see, and thinking about it afterwards, and sharing that, and sharing the delights of finding something." (resident)

"There is a tree in one of my woods that I used to manage... it's a 160-year-old silver birch...it is just a fabulous tree and about 15 years ago I put a pencil with an empty notebook and I put a poster up saying if you've got any positive things to say, write them in the book...literally within a couple of weeks we had hundreds of messages saying, "We love woodlands and this is why. It's still there..."

Methods

To explore how wellbeing benefits were considered in the design and management of treescapes, and how these were experienced by local communities, a series of online focus group sessions were conducted. Five focus groups were held with those involved in managing or organising or delivering well-being related activities in treescapes with one focus group discussion per Connected Treescapes case study (n=18). The discussions explored participants' perspectives on the health and wellbeing benefits of treescapes, the range and delivery of engagement and wellbeing opportunities in each case study and how these were recognised in treescape governance, opportunities and barriers for developing wellbeing benefits of treescapes, and the meaning and value of treescapes.

Four focus groups were conducted with people who lived in or near two of the treescape case study areas (n=16). Most participants in these groups were involved in voluntary woodland conservation activities and reported themselves as having strong connections with their local treescapes. Discussions explored participants' contact and activity with local treescapes, relationship with treescapes, engagement and experiences with trees and woodlands, pathways to nature connection, and meaning and values of trees and woodlands.

All focus groups took place on Microsoft Teams and lasted around one-hour. They were transcribed and anonymised and analysed using content and thematic analysis.