



BUSINESS
IN THE
COMMUNITY

GUIDE

THE POWER OF NATURE FOR EMPLOYEE WELLBEING

Harnessing nature for healthier workplaces

Introduction

This guide, originally published in 2021, translates findings from research within the Urban Innovative Action-funded project IGNITION. Business in the Community (BITC) was a partner on the IGNITION project, which aimed to find innovative funding mechanisms for nature-based solutions to address the climate emergency. In addition to supporting businesses in addressing the climate emergency, we should harness the power of nature as a core part of an integrated approach to employee wellbeing. This guide outlines some of the benefits of this approach and explores possible interventions.

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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.

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 environments that are traditionally devoid of nature.ⁱ At the same time, people are spending more time indoors and have increased virtual and indoor work 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 spaces 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 came 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, which is now prescribing time in nature as part of its 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. Research by University College London suggests that between 2019 and the end of 2023, 5.5 million people were referred by GPs to social prescribing services, reflecting the growing popularity of this approach.^{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
- Helping to address unequal access to green space.

Improved organisational resilience

Businesses have 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 the UK Green Building Council (UKGBC) as part of the IGNITION project, details the many benefits and the value of nature to business. Some insights drawn from studies included in the [IGNITION NBS Evidence Base](#) include:

- A 15% increase in worker productivity when office spaces are enhanced with plants.
- A 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 (US\$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 (US\$2,990 reported) per employee.
- A 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 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 to £45bn, comprising £7bn in absence costs, £27bn to £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}

An estimated 26% of adults have been diagnosed with a mental illness at some stage in their life^{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 guarantee that spaces are designed for how they are realistically used and helps to ensure the longevity of any investment.

As we prioritise work environments designed to promote wellbeing, leading industry building environmental standards such as [WELL](#), [BREEAM](#) and [Building with Nature](#) incorporate [biophilic design elements](#) that nurture the innate human-nature connection into their assessments. These standards recognise both the incorporation of nature and the interaction with nature,

highlighting the importance of allowing and encouraging engagement as much as creating green spaces.

Physical activity is crucial to employees’ health and well-being, 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 while in nature, from providing secure bike racks to providing 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.

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 BITC’s [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 businesses and communities. Extreme weather is 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.

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

One in 8

British households has no garden

Parks are an essential part 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 in 2021 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 an 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.

This inequality has been recognised by the UK Government, which found that equality of access to, and connection with, a healthy natural environment would save billions of pounds in healthcare costs and reduce 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 provide a practical starting point on your journey to reconnecting with nature and can be incorporated into wider environmental sustainability strategies:

Understand your environment

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 local nature and communities

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. Find local groups through services such as [Groundwork](#) and [RHS community finder](#).

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.

Help employees connect with nature

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

Allocate meetings that do not need access to a screen, such as routine catch-ups, 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](#).

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 on page 9.
- 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 visualisation workshops.

Encourage active travel and outdoor activity

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 does not 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.

Create and maintain green spaces

Investigate the potential for a community growing space available on-site 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](#).

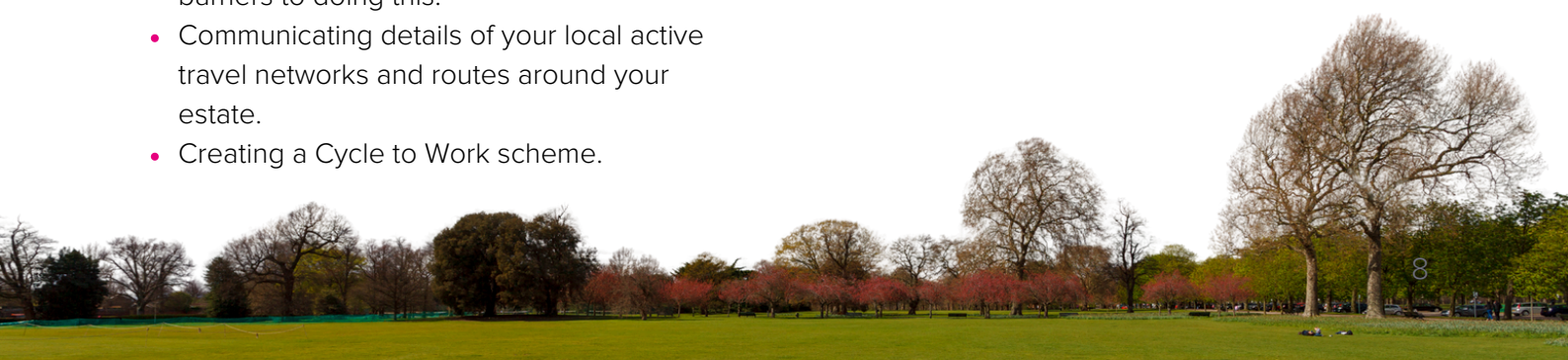
Host planting events. This could either be done internally using the [RHS plant-finder](#) to identify the correct plants for your available space (consider species that will have longevity in the changing climate), or externally with NGOs who specialise in planting, such as [City of Trees](#).

Create a nature-positive culture

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.

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



Case studies

Deloitte

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

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.

The project highlights the business benefits of integrating wellbeing and environmental sustainability within workplace design, including increased employee satisfaction and lower operating costs.

Eden Project

The Eden Project run the [HotHouse programme](#) where they utilise nature and people's 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.



Where to go for more support

We hope that this guide has provided a useful introduction to the various ways that your businesses can enhance employee wellbeing through nature. The organisations below offer further guidance, resources and support:

- [The Royal Horticultural Society](#) (RHS) has many guides and tips on creating small scale NBS and planting and maintaining beautiful and functional green spaces.
- [Groundwork UK](#) can help provide support and guidance on developing green spaces, with a strong focus on building communities and developing skills in the process.
- [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.
- [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, biodiversity, and social value.

- [The IGNITION project](#) website continues to host resources to support the business case for NBS.

BITC's advisory services

BITC's Advisory team supports organisations in various stages of maturity with their environmental priorities through ongoing light-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 align with the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD) and Transition Plan Taskforce framework (TPT).



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Business in the Community (BITC) champions responsible business as essential for long term economic growth and resilience. We convene, campaign, and consult with business to tackle society's most pressing challenges—from climate change and place-based regeneration to inequality, workplace wellbeing, and inclusive growth.

Founded by His Majesty King Charles III in 1982, BITC has over four decades of experience in engaging business and delivering measurable impact in both business and in communities through evidence-based interventions. As a trusted partner to business and government, BITC convenes leadership, influences policy, and accelerates action—helping shape a future-ready economy that works for everyone.

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