

Is “nature” a policy solution to mental health in schools?



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Introduction

The UK faces a growing youth mental health crisis (*NHS, 2023; RCPsych 2025*). Schools may play a key role in preventing these difficulties from worsening.

The integration of nature-based programs (NbPs) into school settings has been proposed as a policy solution to address such mental health challenges but robust evidence is lacking (*Lomax et al., 2024*), particularly at the secondary school level.

This Sprint utilised an implementation science framework to co-produce evidence on NbPs in secondary schools with stakeholders including policymakers from the Government’s Department for Education (DfE), young people, and educators.

Using a range of methodologies we are evaluating effectiveness, amplifying stakeholder voices, and creating actionable, evidence-based education policy insights.

Methods

This Sprint uses four approaches to create actionable evidence:

1. A scoping review on school-based NbPs for students aged 10-18, focusing on mental health outcomes.
2. Semi structured interviews with educators to elicit perspectives on the implementation of NbPs in schools across the UK.
3. Development of a cost-benefit evaluation framework to enable schools and policymakers to assess the value of NbPs.
4. A deliberative policy workshop with all stakeholders (DfE policymakers, young people, and educators) to collaboratively explore whether NbPs can improve mental health and wellbeing in secondary schools and to co-create policy recommendations.

Translating evidence into policy requires a structured approach to ensure research findings are both relevant and actionable (*Troiano et al., 2024*). All stages outlined above were co-created with stakeholders throughout the conceptualisation, strategy, and dissemination phases.

Outcomes

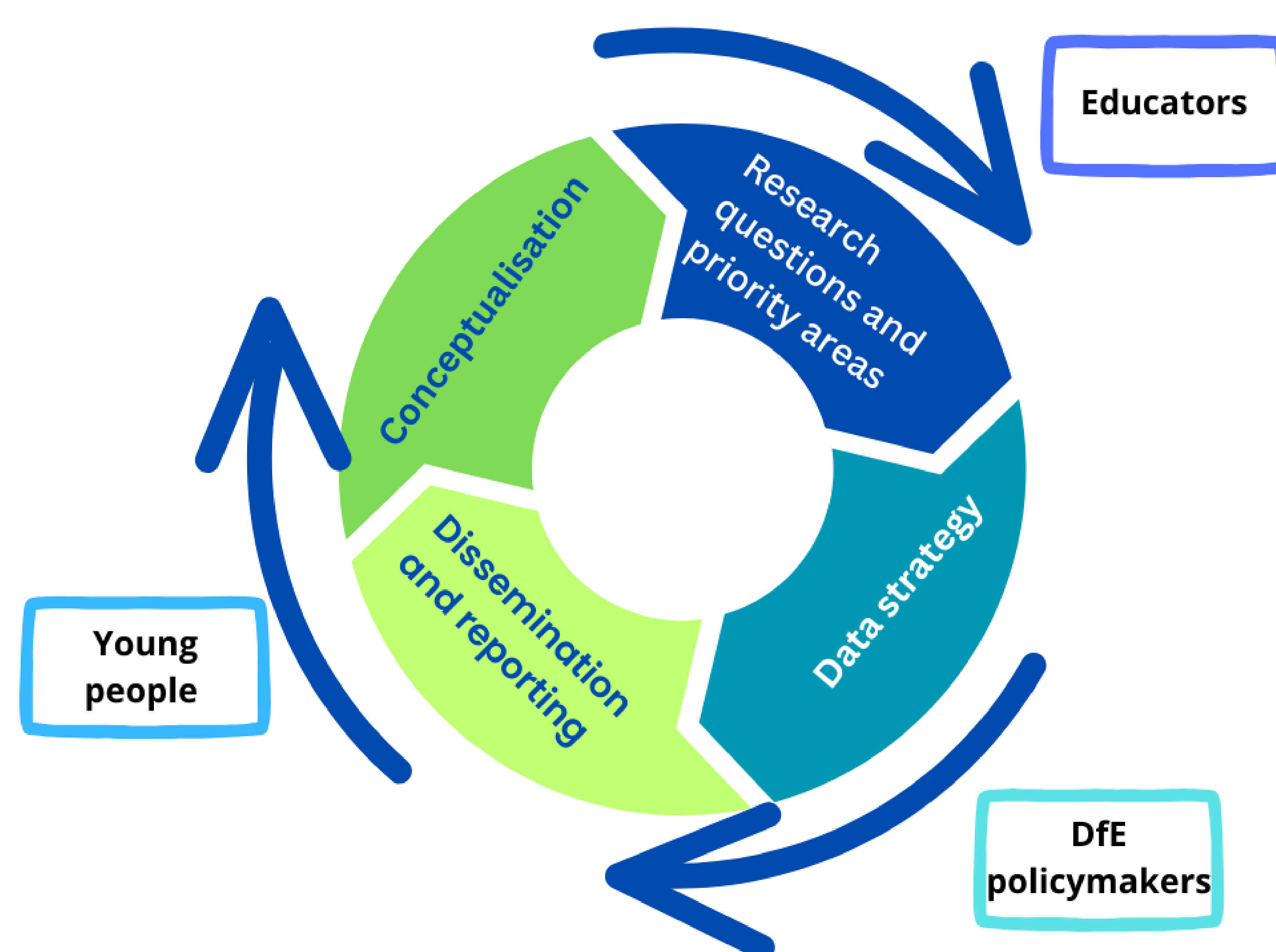
There is some preliminary evidence that NbPs in schools enhance student well-being, reduce anxiety, foster peer connections, and develop leadership skills. Educators report renewed motivation, improved teaching effectiveness, and better student engagement.

At a broader level, NbPs may boost school attendance, strengthen community ties, and promote pro-environmental behaviours.

Challenges: Key barriers include resource limitations, exam pressures, peer stigma, safeguarding and risk management concerns, budget constraints, lack of green spaces, inconsistent pedagogy, and insufficient school support. There remains a notable lack of high-quality evidence at the secondary school level.

Next Steps: Policy support and funding are essential for overcoming these challenges and ensuring equitable access to NbPs. Findings from this Sprint will be shared in a policy brief with actionable recommendations for decision-makers.

Iterative co-creation process with stakeholders



Prompts for reflections

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The Topic

What is the most interesting or surprising aspect of this research to you?

Do you have any examples of similar work or experiences that might help inform this research?

Outcomes

Do you see opportunities for collaboration or integration with other research or initiatives?

What other questions or issues should this research team consider in their next steps?

What types of outputs would be most effective in shaping policy?

The Method

What aspects of this Sprint’s research approach seem most effective?

Were there any gaps or limitations in the research process that you think should be addressed?

How could our methods be improved for future research projects?

How well does this approach balance speed and robustness in generating evidence-based solutions in this sector?