

Nature-based programmes for mental health and wellbeing in secondary schools

About the workshop: A deliberative policy action workshop was held on 18th February 2025 with 30 students, educators & staff from the Department for Education & Natural England. The workshop explored the value & challenges of implementing & evaluating nature-based programmes (NbPs) aimed at addressing mental health & wellbeing (MHWB) in secondary schools.

Findings: Benefits of NbP for MHWB...

...for students & families:

Mental & emotional wellbeing: Being in nature provides a change of scene from the classroom & help to improve focus and manage emotions.

Cognitive & physical development: Exposure to nature supports executive function (e.g. impulse control, memory), & offers inclusive alternatives to conventional sports activities.

Environmental awareness & agency: Fostering a deeper connection to nature, inspiring personal responsibility for environmental stewardship & an interest in environmental careers.

...for educators:

Wellbeing & professional renewal: The chance to teach in less hierarchical, more collaborative environments. Provides a sense of purpose & opportunities for creativity.

Student relationships & behaviour: Time spent outdoors can improve student focus & behaviour, especially among those with additional needs.

...for secondary schools:

Enhancing school pride & attendance: Green, biodiverse spaces create a more inviting school environment, particularly in urban areas & have the potential to increase student motivation & reduced absenteeism.

...for society:

Pro-environmental behaviours: Encouraging litter reduction, biodiversity awareness, & engagement with local nature.

Social cohesion: Activities can bridge generational divides & strengthen local networks.

Findings: Challenges of NbP for MHWB...

...for students & families:

Social stigma: Associations with primary school, so seen as childish and uncool by some students.

Pressure to prioritise exam preparation: an issue around the time of GCSE and A-Level exams.

...for educators:

A lack of structured guidance & resources for training & uncertainty around what types of programmes are effective.

School results culture & pressure of performance metrics: integrating NbPs for MHWB could place added time pressure on educators.

...for schools:

Infrastructure & time constraints: Land availability, maintenance & tight timetables. Urban schools without green space & schools with large or expanding student populations are especially constrained.

Evaluating NbP for MHWB:

The Labour Government's 'Plan for Change' includes the mission to "break down barriers to opportunity". The DfE/Natural England participants emphasise the goal of helping "every child to achieve and thrive and school". Achieving is about "getting the grades" in exams. Thriving includes a student's sense of belonging, which links to their school attendance and behaviour and ultimately their wellbeing & mental health. Evaluation needs to provide evidence of how NbPs for MHWB are contributing to this mission.

Clarity is needed on whether the NbPs for MHWB being evaluated are universal or targeted at specific students. There is a hope that programmes could be universal but have targeted elements & measures.