



Nature-based programmes for mental health and wellbeing in secondary schools Deliberative Policy Action (DPA) Workshop February 18th 2025

Full report

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Department of Psychiatry.

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Disclaimer: Comments reflect the views of individual participants and not necessarily those of their respective departments or the government.

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Executive Summary

DPA Workshop format and purpose

The Deliberative Policy Action (DPA) workshop held in February 2025 in London was part of the Agile Sprint project: *Is “nature” a policy solution to mental health in schools?*¹ funded by the Agile Initiative at the Oxford Martin School². The workshop brought together 30 students, educators, and staff from the Department for Education and Natural England to critically explore the value and challenges of implementing and evaluating nature-based programmes (NbPs) aimed at addressing mental health and wellbeing (MHWB) in secondary schools (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Small group discussion (mixed cohort).



The findings are drawn from mixed and cohort-specific small group discussions, facilitated by deliberative research specialists Hopkins Van Mil. The report is structured in six parts:

1. Views on impacts of NbPs for MHWB on [secondary school students and their families](#)
2. Views on impacts of NbPs for MHWB on [secondary school educators](#)
3. Views on impacts of NbPs for MHWB on [secondary schools](#)
4. Views on impacts of NbPs for MHWB on [society](#)
5. Responses to the [conceptual evaluation framework](#)
6. Concluding remarks

¹ [The Agile Initiative | Is “nature” a policy solution to mental health in schools?](#)

² [The Agile Initiative](#) at the Oxford Martin School (University of Oxford) is funded by the Natural Environment Research Council as part of the Changing the Environment Programme – NERC grant reference number NE/W004976/1.

Summary Findings

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.

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.

...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.

Introduction

About the DPA workshop

Purpose

On 18th February 2025 a deliberative policy action (DPA) workshop took place to discuss the future of nature-based programmes (NbP) for mental health and wellbeing (MHWB) in UK secondary schools. The workshop was part of the Sprint project: *Is “nature” a policy solution to mental health in schools?*³ funded by the Agile Initiative⁴. The workshop purpose was to:

- Review and refine a cost-benefit model (evaluation framework) being developed by the Sprint Project team
- Build lasting stakeholder connections
- Empower young people and educators to share perspectives with the Department for Education and Natural England
- Equip policy makers to draw upon stakeholder-informed experiences when developing policies and strategies for NbPs for MHWB in England's secondary schools

Who took part

The workshop involved 30 participants: 10 students (age 16-19), 11 educators, 8 participants from the Department for Education (referred to as *policy professionals* hereafter), and 1 from Natural England. All participants were recruited by the Sprint Project Team. 5 of the students are also involved in the NeurOx Young People's Advisory Group (YPAG)⁵. The educator cohort was composed of both teachers and educators with experience of running NbPs for MHWB.

Deliberative research specialists Hopkins Van Mil⁶ (HVM) facilitated the discussions. Also in attendance in an observational capacity were members of the Sprint Project Team: Professor Ilina Singh (Co-PI), Dr Katrin Wilhelm (Co-PI), Jessica Lorimer (Project Manager and Postdoctoral Researcher), Dr Apostolos Tsiachristas (Associate Prof in Health Economics), Dr Saba Arshad (Postdoctoral Researcher), Dr Kim Polgreen (Freelance Sustainability Educator and Honorary Norham Fellow at the Oxford University Department of Education), Dr Rodger Caseby (Wellbeing Outreach Officer at the Oxford Botanic Garden & Arboretum) and Sasha Menon (Research Assistant).

Methodology and process

This workshop was co-designed by the Agile Sprint Team and HVM. It took place in-person, in Central London, on February 18th 2025 between 12pm and 4pm.

³ [The Agile Initiative | Is “nature” a policy solution to mental health in schools?](#)

⁴ [The Agile Initiative](#) at the Oxford Martin School (University of Oxford) is funded by the Natural Environment Research Council as part of the Changing the Environment Programme – NERC grant reference number NE/W004976/1.

⁵ <https://neuroxypag.org/about/>.

⁶ [Hopkins Van Mil](#)

Before the workshop, all participants received a handbook containing information about the Agile Initiative, this Sprint, and the DPA workshop itself. This handbook also contained a glossary of terms (Appendix 1) that had been co-produced with the NeurOx YPAG.

All participants were asked to bring to the workshop an image that represented, to them, nature and wellbeing in the context of education. These images were used as part of an introductory activity where participants had the opportunity to mix with others from different cohorts.

Following this introductory activity the Sprint Project Team presented some background information about the project and introduced participants to the evaluation framework. Participants then had the opportunity to ask the Sprint team questions, which are summarised in Figure 2.

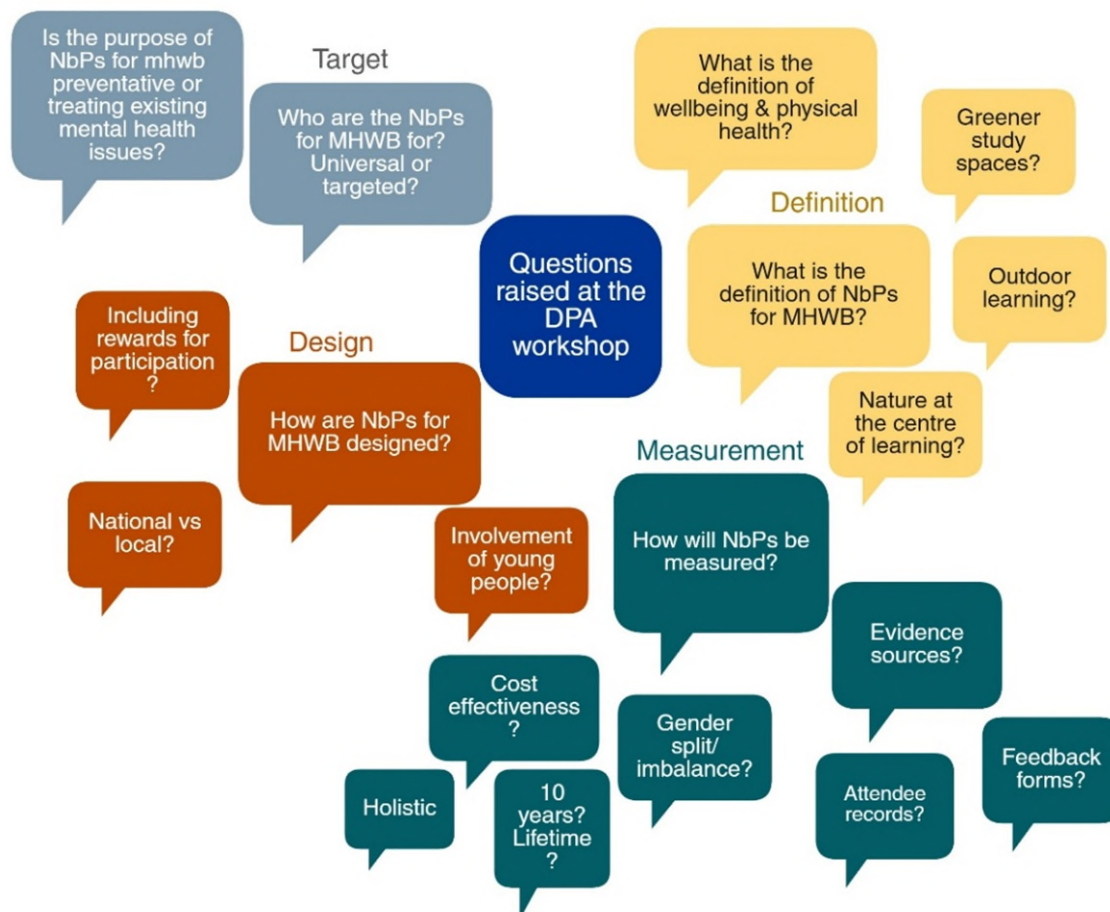


Figure 1 Questions asked at the start of the workshop.

Participants spent the first part of the workshop in four small groups of 8, each with a HVM facilitator. These groups were composed of participants from each of the 3 cohorts. The focus of these morning discussions was identifying as many benefits, challenges and tensions (social, cognitive, emotional, financial, environmental,

educational/developmental, practical) associated with nature-based programmes for mental health and wellbeing in secondary education. Participants and facilitators used post-it notes and flipcharts to capture discussions. In addition, all small group discussions and Q&As were audio recorded.

After a lunch break participants reconfigured into their 3 cohort groups (students, educators and DfE/Natural England), again each was joined by a HVM facilitator. The focus of this second discussion was the conceptual Evaluation Framework (see Figure 5, page 25). The framework seeks to explore and understand the impacts of mental health and wellbeing of secondary school students on the individual, their household, their school and wider society over the short and long term. Participants were asked to share their first impressions of the framework, as well as what they thought was missing or should be excluded.

The workshop concluded with the small groups feeding their thoughts on the framework back to the Sprint Project Team. The Sprint Project Team also fed back on some of the key things they heard throughout the workshop as observers.

After the workshop all audio recordings were transcribed and then coded and analysed by the HVM team using NVivo software to group key themes and understand where there was a diversity of views.

HVM applies grounded theory⁷ to its analysis of deliberative processes. Theories are built from what facilitators heard rather than having a preconceived hypothesis to test. Throughout the process the HVM coding, analysis and writing team maintained a rigorous approach, holding frequent sense-checking sessions as a team to mitigate against researcher bias. No AI based transcription or text analytics was used.

What do we mean by nature-based programmes for mental health and wellbeing?

At the start of the workshop, participants were advised to think of nature-based programmes for mental health and wellbeing as both:

- structured workshops, interventions, or programmes that involve learning about nature and can also include nature's contributions to wellbeing, skills development, and alternative learning methods.
- outdoor learning programmes that teach traditional educational subjects (e.g. maths, science, history) outdoors, often incorporating nature as a backdrop rather than as the main focus.

The NbPs for MHWB discussed during the workshop included both those targeted at the general student population and those targeted at students with specific educational or mental health needs. Further analysis regarding the definition of NbPs for MHWB can be found throughout this report.

⁷ Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) The pursuit of quality in grounded theory. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 18(3) <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14780887.2020.1780357>

Findings Part 1 – views on impacts of nature-based programmes for mental health and wellbeing on secondary school students and their families

This section will focus on how NbPs for MHWB can impact secondary school students and their families. It will explore benefits as well as tensions and barriers that were identified by the mixed groups of participants.

Sense of purpose and responsibility for the environment

Participants feel that NbPs for MHWB would empower and motivate students to take action to tackle environmental crises. They think this would come from providing students with environmental agency to care for their environment. They feel this to be particularly important given the role young people will have in tackling biodiversity loss and the climate crisis.

“Caring for plants and animals can give a chance at responsibility which could be projected into that, so actually taking on responsibilities.” Student

Participants think that NbPs for MHWB widen students’ perspectives on their place in the world, situating their existence within the broader process of life and nature whilst also improving their knowledge of the local environment. NbPs for MHWB could develop “*ecological awareness*” in students, such as where their food comes from or how it is grown. Participants feel this would foster feelings of belonging, connection, and “*shared experience*”, which would feed into a sense of purpose for students to care for an environment they feel is theirs.

Physical health: NbPs for MHWB offering an alternative to sport

Participants spoke about the physical activity associated with NbPs for MHWB and the role of endorphins, which may benefit mental health. Several students noted that taking part in physical activity outside helps with their focus when back in the classroom and their ability to de-stress.

“It’s just so much better to get outside. When you’re using your brain all the time, you basically just want to get outside. For me, before I exercise, I struggle, you struggle to get outside, but once you’ve done it, it just makes you feel so much better.” Student

An educator suggested that NbPs for MHWB could play an important role in helping secondary school students meet their recommended 60 minutes of daily exercise. This might be especially important for students who engage less with school sports such as football or rugby, because they find these stressful. Another suggested that participating in NbPs for MHWB could help tackle the obesity crisis in secondary school aged students.

"It's useful to give kids a variety of different ways to do physical activity because that might support some of those who don't engage in football, rugby, whatever." **Educator**

Some participants suggested that NbPs for MHWB could help students to get more sunlight and vitamin D, and improve their gut health by spending time outdoors, which they feel could be particularly important for students with existing health conditions. Some also think NbPs for MHWB would improve students' awareness of their own bodily state and their ability to understand and communicate their wellbeing.

"When you're outdoors you're doing physical things, you're feeling the temperature changes, and you become aware of your physical well-being. People then have the literacy, the emotional literacies to say, oh, well, I maybe feel unwell because of this and I'm going to do something about it by getting outdoors and getting breathing and things like that." **Educator**

Some student participants said that NbPs for MHWB would be seen in the same light as school Physical Education (PE) sessions. They think that some students enjoy and value being outside, while others resent being in the cold.

Executive function improved through NbP tasks

Participants feel that NbPs for MHWB support students' development of essential human cognitive functions, such as self-organisation (e.g. being able to pick up a task, drop it and then pick it up again), working memory, impulse control and attention. They stress the importance of supporting the development of these core skills in both childhood and early adolescence.

"It's [helping with] the basic fundamental capacities we need to be human. So things that allow us to have autonomies, to have freedoms like working memory, sequential memory, impulse control, lots of other things." **Educator**

Knowledge and skillset: contextualising the curriculum

Participants spoke about how NbPs for MHWB can help to contextualise the curriculum, especially in subjects rooted in the natural world, like geography and biology. They said that contextualisation leads to increased interest and understanding of the surrounding natural environment. Outdoor learning in particular gives students a way to absorb knowledge in a different and engaging manner.

"I'm doing geography A Level, we're going to visit a farm I think in a couple of weeks to help learn about soil processes and stuff like that. I just think it's really interesting that it can link to your studies to help you link to the real-world experience." **Student**

Taking part in NbPs for MHWB, participants suggested, can lead to discovering new interests and skills related to the natural world. If students can be involved in caring for nature from a young age, they may develop a greater ability and desire to protect it. Some educators noted that this might inspire students to pursue careers in fields such as environmental science, as further discussed in Part 4.

Building resilience and adaptability vs exacerbating isolation

Participants reflected on instances where students experience a crisis of confidence during their time at secondary school and the negative impacts on mental health that follow. NbPs for MHWB are seen to have the power to reinstate feelings of confidence and autonomy in one's own abilities e.g. through picking up new knowledge and skills, finding new talents and interests, or making new friends. Because everyone can be included in nature, participants feel that students may grow in self-awareness and acceptance.

In this way, participants think that NbPs for MHWB could build students' transferable skills such as resilience and adaptability to challenges, whether through adapting to poor weather, finding ways to grow plants effectively by learning from previous mistakes, or overcoming climate anxiety.

"If you're outside and you get mud on your hands or it's soaking wet, it's soaking wet and we can deal with that, and that's fine. It's a small step to being resilient and overcoming things." **Educator**

Some of the student participants raised a caution that participating in NbPs for MHWB as a solo or new student, if others taking part are in friendship groups, could increase feelings of isolation.

"Usually, when it's group-based activities, there will be people who are friends, and they'll just tend to go as a group and do an activity together. Then, there will be maybe, say, an introvert or a new person...or find it hard to do social activities. That would probably negatively impact their health because they're forced into social activities and get out of their comfort zone."
Student

Nature classes: "childish" associations with primary school

Participants also considered how students might disengage from NbPs for MHWB because of social pressures specific to secondary school. NbPs for MHWB are perceived by some students to be "childish" and "uncool" because they are seen as a primary school activity for young children, which means they are more stigmatised at secondary than primary school. Some students feel they would have struggled to be involved with NbPs for MHWB because of peer pressure to fit in.

"It was more popular to do in primary school, but as soon as you're getting older in the secondary schools they're a lot harder to implement due to the stigma around getting involved outside." **Student**

Universal vs targeted interventions

Participants raised the question of whether NbPs for MHWB should be universal (i.e. supporting all students' mental health) or targeted (towards those with existing needs). Some, including DfE/Natural England participants, feel that the focus should

be preventative to have longer term impact, but that this would require integration of NbPs for MHWB into a “*whole school approach*”.

There is a concern that if NbPs for MHWB target specific students, this could single out those who are struggling but may not want others to know. But there is also concern that if NbPs for MHWB are for all students, it might be harder to engage those who need it most and who need targeted encouragement to partake in the programme.

“How do you make this attractive for kids who aren’t engaging otherwise - who are disadvantaged and need a level of targeting? Do those kids come when it’s a universal proposal, not something designed specifically for them?”

Policy Professional (*quote abridged for clarity)

A calm space amidst school and home pressures

When students are juggling revision for exams and responsibilities at home, NbPs for MHWB could provide students with a “*third space*” to destress and recharge. Students said school buildings can often be chaotic spaces, full of overwhelming noise and stressful energy, leaving them feeling tense and “*frazzled*”. This negatively affects concentration and performance at school. Being outside in nature can provide a welcome calm relief from the school environment.

“I feel like that it helps students focus better in classrooms once they’ve had that break, and once they’ve, basically, been outside, and then it’s kind of like a refreshment.” **Student**

Having access to a calm, natural environment through participating in NbPs for MHWB could be especially important to a student who would not otherwise have access to a calm space. Many students will likely have family situations that remain unknown to schools, so NbPs for MHWB could provide safe spaces away from other demanding environments.

“Lots of students have stresses at home that they don’t talk about with friends or teachers, or the teachers don’t know about, so it’s good to give those students a break if there are certain things that aren’t known.” **Educators**

A further demand on already stretched time and home finances

Whilst NbPs for MHWB could alleviate stress, participants feel they could also contribute to it. The high level of exams pressure and a results culture might lead to students feeling like they are wasting time participating in NbPs for MHWB when they could be gaining skills which feel more relevant to their studies, university or job applications. This could increase stress for students when they are already dealing with worries about exams and future study/employment, placing further demands on their already stretched time.

“I would say mostly secondary school students, especially people doing GCSEs or A Levels, they’re already preparing for exams. Then if they’re basically forced to be in nature, and they could have, they could be thinking, I

could have used, let's say, this hour to study for biology or geography or chemistry or do something more productive.” **Student**

The pressure on students to achieve at secondary and prepare for the future may also lead to parents feeling like NbPs for MHWB are unhelpful additions to students' workloads. Some students think that they could focus on nature after their exam periods, but if they are going to relax, they would rather do so on their own terms e.g. at home.

One potential solution to this tension between NbPs for MHWB and study time is “green study spaces”. Some students talked about including nature in study environments. This could bring the benefits of exposure to nature whilst studying and so avoid “taking time out from study time”.

“Instead of just nature-based programmes which take time out of the day to specifically put you into nature, make you appreciate nature, could we also have more nature-based spaces instead, where you can just do your studying? At the moment we have a lot of indoor spaces that have no nature to speak of. It would be quite nice to incorporate those so that you are surrounded by nature and not have to take time out of your study time.”

Student

The cost of clothing and equipment to take part in NbPs for MHWB is a concern for participants from all cohorts. They raised the issue of some students not having access to walking or wellington boots or rain jackets and therefore taking part in programmes is impossible or uncomfortable in bad weather.

“If you are in poverty, you're significantly less likely to have appropriate walking boots or wellies or good waterproofs, all these kind of things as well. Again, if you, as a kid, you don't have those things, you have a miserable time and also don't have the equipment to get out in nature probably again.”

Participant

A change of scene vs impact of unpredictability

Participants talked about classrooms sometimes being claustrophobic, dull and restrictive to spend lots of time in. They contrast this to being outside in green spaces, where participants can be less restricted and enjoy natural scenery. Participants reflected on how this is particularly important for students who may learn better in different environments.

"My son, his friend at primary school had a late diagnosis of ADHD. Prior to his diagnosis, I'll never forget, he said to me, 'My preferred habitat is outside. That's why I can't sit still on that chair.' That speaks to that. Some kids respond better in different environments, and if we could include a variety of sites, situations for them throughout the day I think we'd get a much better response." **Participant**

Nonetheless some participants expressed concern for neurodivergent students who may struggle with the unpredictability of nature and change from the more familiar classroom environment. They suggested that NbPs for MHWB would need adaptability because different students will require different approaches.

"I think for children who are neurodiverse nature can be this great tool, but it is also inherently unpredictable. That is a lot more challenging for certain groups of people who are disabled or neurodiverse than it is for other young people." **Educator**

Family relationships and attitudes to climate change

Participants feel that nature can be a source of shared knowledge and interest between children and parents/carers, creating opportunities for conversation and connection. Participants spoke about how students may take their learning and responsibility for the climate beyond school and into their home lives, thereby influencing their families too.

"If the students are more aware of the climate and nature process and what can be done, then that could spill into the home as well." **Educator**

Through creating pockets of calmness and creativity in the school day, NbPs for MHWB can also help to mitigate students' feelings of stress towards their family at the end of the day, which could improve family relationships and potentially decrease conflict. However, this is on balance with the risk that families may experience additional stress from needing to buy outdoor clothing or students coming home with muddy or ruined clothes. This would mean that families will spend additional time and money cleaning and repairing, which could put burden on families who are already disadvantaged or struggling.

"If you're asking a kid to come on a two-hour workshop and the outcome of that is that they need a new pair of trainers because they've absolutely destroyed them, that's not fair on anybody." **Educator**

Findings Part 2 – views on impacts of nature-based programmes for mental health and wellbeing on **secondary school educators**

This section will focus on how NbPs for MHWB can impact secondary school educators. It will explore benefits as well as tensions and barriers that were identified by participants.

Nature connection, purpose and results culture

Educators reported that many of their peers are feeling increasingly disenchanted with the profession and are struggling with a lack of purpose. NbPs for MHWB can help educators feel like their work is having a positive impact. Educators may experience improved wellbeing if they are able to move beyond the classroom and nurture their own connection with nature.

“Teachers all say that the work starts when the children go home. When there's no greenery in the school, when it's a grey space, it's often demotivating, it's often exhausting. It's dark in the winter months in England, so it's dark by the time you leave. I would presume there's so many benefits for teachers and educators and non-teaching staff to have nature and life brought into the school, rather than it just being a building with white walls.”

Participant

Conversely, on top of the results culture and the pressure to meet performance metrics, integrating NbPs for MHWB could place added time pressure on educators. This is particularly the case when other topical areas such as artificial intelligence (AI) are already competing for space in the curriculum.

Creative teaching and student responses

Several educators reported feeling creatively constrained by the four walls of a classroom. This in turn negatively impacts their wellbeing because they feel they are not teaching their students to the best of their ability. NbPs for MHWB could allow educators to explore “*horizontal learning*” and improve relationships with their students outside of formalised, hierarchical settings.

“Changes of relationship between teacher and student in that, in a really positive way, and that you can then bring that back in and you've got a different relationship with the young people, connected with less of the hierarchy.” **Participant**

NbPs for MHWB can in some cases, as mentioned, be brilliant platforms for teaching neurodivergent students or those with additional learning needs using creative methods to suit their learning styles. Participants spoke about how students may be able to regulate themselves more effectively if they spend time in nature. Students might also focus better after a change from the classroom, which has a knock-on positive effect for educators.

"I would start to feel maybe a little bit stressed, and I would just need some fresh air. I think one of my teachers, they used to do this thing where sometimes, for certain class activities we'd go outside. I'd feel a bit better. I would actually focus more." **Student**

Training and structure

Despite the positives of creativity, educators said they often lack confidence in delivering NbPs for MHWB due to a lack of established NbP pedagogy. This makes it challenging for educators to know whether they are *"doing it right"* which leaves them feeling uncertain about how productive the programme was. Participants feel this is particularly challenging in a context where it is the norm for school curriculums to be formalised, so educators may feel less confident if NbPs for MHWB lack similar structure and monitoring to other subjects. Participants are worried that these factors might place extra burden on senior leaders.

"[Teachers] will need somebody to be able to say, here, this is what effective learning looks like in this environment, so that they know that they're doing something in the right way, and they're not going to be judged to be doing something that's really ineffectual." **Educator**

Participants are concerned that educators would require additional training to manage NbPs for MHWB confidently, which would need time, money and resources that few schools have. Because NbPs for MHWB are seen to require different teaching skills, educators may feel unmotivated or disempowered if they do not have the right support.

"Even if it came down 'it's now mandatory to deliver nature-based approaches', the teachers wouldn't. A lot of them wouldn't have a clue why or how to do it. It's that lack of motivation from the teacher, the role model who's in front of them, that lack of wonder and enthusiasm towards nature." **Educator**

Challenges of being outdoors: pushing boundaries

Students and educators also highlighted how many more distractions exist outdoors compared to in the classroom. It is easier to push normal school boundaries outside of the school space, where students may feel like they are outside of rules. Managing challenging behaviour may be more stressful or overwhelming for educators in an unfamiliar environment with different risks. As a result, participating in outdoor or nature-based activities is often used as a reward for good behaviour or academic performance. Therefore, participants feel that those students who might benefit from the experience are the most likely to miss out.

"I was just thinking if students are, say naughty, or like to push their teachers' limits, the teachers may end up, they will get more stressed looking after them. Especially outside, where they may lack control. That could negatively impact their health." **Student**

Participants reflected on the safety challenges in public areas, and how to safeguard NbPs for MHWB effectively, especially when they are taking place offsite and in unfamiliar environments. Educators spoke about the complex risk assessments, additional staff and administrative time required to ensure all involved stayed safe, even if the NbP for MHWB took place on the school site. They expressed concern that the lack of pedagogy and confidence may result in educators limiting students' autonomy out of concern for the risks of nature.

"I worry that there is, the benefits to autonomy or independence actually don't transpire or actually get worse if teachers don't feel confident implementing nature-based programmes correctly, so therefore try and limit student autonomy because it feels scarier to let them wander or be autonomous in nature, as opposed to in a controlled environment." **Participant**



Figure 2: Small group discussion (mixed cohort).

Findings Part 3 – how nature-based programmes for mental health and wellbeing impact **secondary schools**

This section focuses on how NbPs for MHWB can impact secondary schools beyond the individual wellbeing of students and educators. It will explore benefits and barriers as well as areas of tension that were identified by participants.

Thriving nature on school site leading to thriving students

Participants spoke about how participating in NbPs for MHWB based on the school site can instill in students a sense of pride towards the school itself. As a result, they also see how this could reduce instances of graffiti and improve general care of the school site, making it a more pleasant place to be. Several students in the room highlighted how this in turn could improve attendance rates. This student reflected on how she was deterred from attending school because of how disconnected from the natural environment it felt:

“When there is no greenery in the school, it’s just a grey space, it’s often demotivating and exhausting. School felt very claustrophobic for me. I’m autistic...and I felt quite overwhelmed by how gloomy the school was. I just didn’t go in.” **Student**

Another student said:

“I guess there is something in how when you are able to help nature to thrive on your school site, you feel proud of doing that. I guess... it goes back to creating a community, but if we make the school look better, people take more pride in it and then, yes, we’ll start treating it better and behaving better.” **Student**

Indeed, many participants spoke about how NbPs for MHWB benefit biodiversity and can make a significant difference, particularly in urban areas. They also spoke about how this opened their eyes to the important role the school plays in the context of supporting a harmonious natural environment.

“I worked on some biodiversity projects in my own school and that really helped me see the value of our school site provides to...help plants and animals thrive in our area. It makes it a nicer place to be.” **Student**

Cost of maintenance and lack of green space on school sites

Some educators are concerned about the additional costs that come with the maintenance of green spaces on school site. They emphasise the importance of “SLT⁸ buy in” to ensure that necessary maintenance has continued support.

⁸ Senior leadership team.

“Then the upkeep of things, basically this idea of you plant something when you're young, you grow up and it grows with you, then you go off to university, who's looking after that? Probably the teachers. Again, how do you keep that up and not just let it...? I mean, you could pass it on to future students, that is an idea of a solution, but then that taps into normalisation, so it will take a while for it to become a normal part of the process. If we introduced it today, it's not like everyone would take it up and run with it, it would take a while to build in the why and how.” **Educator**

To further caveat this benefit of NbPs for MHWB, many participants highlighted that schools do not always have (green) space available to run NbPs for MHWB on the school site. Often this is the case in urban areas.

“We were saying before, the primary school I went to did not have a blade of grass on site, inner-city Stoke, so very different than leafy Oxfordshire where many schools are privileged to have suitable space for NbPs for MHWB on site”. **Educator**

One educator shared their experience running an NbP for MHWB not on the school site. They emphasised how administratively complex, time consuming, and costly this was due to factors including arranging minibuss transportation. Indeed, several students and educators have a strong preference for NbPs for MHWB on school sites, whilst acknowledging that this is not always possible.

“Anything where you're mandating having to go outside...comes with the difficulty of it depending on where you are and what you have” **Educator**

Community context

Several participants reflected on the potential for NbPs for MHWB to connect schools with their wider community and help them to reap the benefits of being a part of a local network.

Participants highlighted the potential availability of local volunteers as one benefit of being connected to local community networks. This could help to reduce the costs of maintaining green spaces created through NbPs for MHWB.

“Ideally schools would be able to, through these [NbPs for MHWB] to link with other bodies, like the RHS⁹. You can volunteer at the RHS gardens but opportunities to actually do any volunteering on RHS sites are very rare. [Our school] is chronically short of people, so being able to pull those volunteers in.” **Educator**

Participants spoke about how NbPs for MHWB can be vessels for connecting pupils and schools with their local heritage and for fostering inter-generational connection.

“Nature is a common umbrella that we can get everybody, and it comes under society, knows about and can relate to, to bring communities together for well-being. I'd like to see people, members from all the community coming in. We had, in Germany, an expert in the local conservation, nature conservation,

⁹ Royal Horticultural Society.

and they took our students out, explained what they were doing. They used sickles to cut the grass the way that it's done traditionally. So just to have that connection, we should have engagement in the community as well. I think it's beneficial for social skills, social interaction with all ages.” Educator

Participants want to highlight the extra administrative burden to schools of involving external parties or practitioners in their NbPs for MHWB. Some feel strongly that this was something that could deter schools from proceeding in this kind of collaborative effort.

Participant A: “My main concern, linking with collaborators in the community, is that you are asking fundamentally very, very busy people who just do not have capacity to do this outreach.” Educator

Participant B: “Yes, between dealing with this behaviour crisis incident and the fact that I’ve got four of my teachers out, Year 9 are going mental down the corridor, when will I go and talk to my local community about such and such. It is better if someone is approaching the headteacher saying ‘here is a partnership’, but even with that there is a limit to what a headteacher has space to do.” Educator

A few participants want to highlight that nature programmes in local communities and through alternative provisions already exist, and that integrating similar NbPs for MHWB into schools could be difficult because of the competition from existing local provisions used by students. They also highlighted the bureaucratic barriers that exist between schools and councils that make it challenging for the development of a mutually beneficial relationship between these existing local programmes and schools:

“In Sheffield the city council has a group of providers who are in that system. The issue is that there is a competing system that is already supposedly doing what we want nature to do in schools. You then have all these vested interests and other systems that you’re having to say, ‘You don’t need to do that anymore because we’re going to do it in schools. That creates conflict, not cohesion”. Educator

Timetabling, resources and demands on space

Students and educators emphasise how packed school timetables invariably are and voiced their concern that often there is not enough time, without extending into weekends and after school, to schedule NbPs for MHWB for secondary school students. These concerns echo those discussed by students in Part 1 and educators in Part 2. Educators spoke about how efficiency is prioritised when it comes to timetabling the school day, and that the nature of NbPs for MHWB, especially if they involve changing clothing or travelling from the school site, does not fit especially well with this prioritisation.

“One barrier for schools has got to be the time [NbPs for MHWB] take. Like I do swimming and it takes actually the entire afternoon for 30 minutes in the pool, and I would imagine something similar for a nature-based activity for some school settings, so the amount of time it takes to get it done.” Educator

Students and educators also reflected on the narrowing of the curriculum, where arts and crafts are being pushed out to make more space for maths and English due to pressures to get good examination outcomes in these core subjects. They strongly believe that without a loosening of this, schools will struggle to make space for NbPs for MHWB in the curriculum. Many participants feel confident that students are less likely to participate in NbPs for MHWB if they are run after-school and at the weekend, eating into precious homework and social time.

There was much discussion on how stretched school resources necessitate inflexible timetabling and decisions to fund certain opportunities but not others. A few students shared their perception that their schools are increasingly spending money on IT facilities and technological programmes. They think that this will only increase as schools aim to prepare their students for increasingly digitalised lives, thus increasingly limiting the chance of funding being available for NbPs for MHWB. Several students and educators reflected on how it is often very challenging to ask for some of the costs to be covered by parents whose children are participating in NbPs for MHWB.

“The context is when I started the social enterprise I messaged a friend of mine who's still head of geography at a school in Sheffield, and I said, 'What are the barriers to you getting out? I'm starting a social enterprise and I want to know what to do.' He said he has to book all of next year's fieldwork in July for the following year. There is no flexibility. SLT only allow you to put in a couple of dates per subject because they share it out.” Educator

Several educators also raised the issue of schools having to build additional classrooms and parking on school green space to accommodate increasing pupil numbers. Reflecting on personal experiences, they explained that it is difficult to justify leaving this space available for NbPs for MHWB when the alternative was class sizes of forty plus or having to turn pupils away. A summary of trade-offs is illustrated in Figure 4.

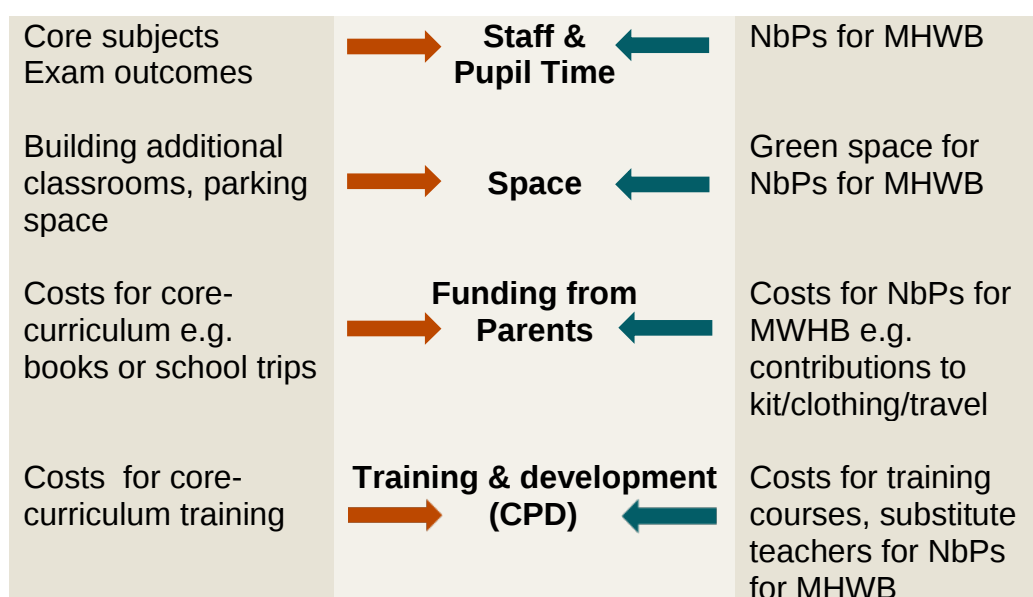


Figure 3 Summary of trade-offs.

Findings Part 4 – how nature-based programmes for mental health and wellbeing impact society

This section focuses on how NbPs for MHWB can impact society beyond schools themselves. It will explore benefits and barriers as well as areas of tension that were identified by participants. When discussing the impact of NbPs for MHWB on society, participants' conversations explored the potential outcomes for nature and the environment rather than the impacts of improved mental health on society.

Economic impact: a route to “green jobs”?

Several participants reflected on the longer-term economic benefits of NbPs for MHWB. Mainly they discussed these programmes' potential to inspire students to pursue nature and environment-related careers, thus contributing to the green economy and reducing the green skills jobs shortage that the UK is predicted to have as it pursues Net Zero. One Policy Professional shared that as part of the National Education Nature Park initiative they would like to measure the impact on children and young people's science identity and whether they go into more STEM and environment-related jobs. They see this as important in the context of a “a green skills jobs shortage coming down the line”.

In response, several students shared that they think their school careers services need to do more to actively promote environment-related careers and inform them of the pending green skills jobs shortage. As discussed in Part 1 of this report, many students currently feel restricted by the examination curriculum and struggle to make the space to pursue other (including nature-based) interests. Some students spoke about feeling pressure from their families and even educators to pursue certain traditionally stable careers, and how many environment-related jobs do not fit this mould. Thus, without additional encouragement from school careers services, students are sceptical of how many would actually feel confident pursuing a career in this sector, regardless of how inspiring the NbP for MHWB was.

Social impact: Pro-environmental behaviours vs nature as a “nice to have”

Several participants champion the power of NbPs for MHWB to reduce environmentally harmful and anti-social behaviour, including littering and even encourage pro-social behaviour, such as litter picking. This relates to the optimistic feeling in the room that running NbPs for MHWB in schools could support community cohesion.

“I wrote down a big one, which is social cohesion. I think that's as a result of some of the things that, if you teach kids to be careful of the environment, go outside, everyone is, cares about their local environment, they used to have litter pickings, and when there is all kinds of other things.” Student

As explored in Part 3, several participants reflected on how NbPs for MHWB support biodiversity. Thinking on a longer-term basis, participants also discussed how NbPs for MHWB help to reduce CO2 emissions; students showed particular enthusiasm for participating in something that they perceive as being a small step that contributes to

large-scale positive change for future generations. One student reflected on their decision to participate in an NbP as a way of proactively tackling their global-warming related anxiety.

"I struggle with climate anxiety...taking up these kinds of opportunities to make even a small positive contribution is one really important tool I use to manage these feelings." **Student**

To caveat this, several students are concerned that we now live in a society where, for various reasons, some young people fear the outdoors. They are concerned that this might be a barrier for some when it comes to participating in these kinds of activities.

"I was going to say about fear of nature, so it's dirty, it's stinky, it's these things that our hypochondriac society reacts, and I think there's growing trends within society, for example, like the clean girl aesthetic. Everyone's talking about this. The language being used, right, it's like totally detached from nature and being dirty and all of these topics. Perfectly clean, come out of a plastic box, like a Barbie. I don't think that that's entirely right, but anyway." **Student**

Several participants are concerned that society increasingly perceives access to nature as a "nice to have" instead of a necessity and a right. Several participants said students might feel blocked from participating because of other priorities, such as family carer roles or career planning, which means that spending time in nature is not their priority. They highlighted how a shift in this attitude will help unlock the full value of NbPs for MHWB.

"The stigma of getting involved, not just in students, but also in adults because as an adult you have lots of responsibilities. You might have a family that you need to take care of, you might be caring for elderly people. It might be like, why are you wasting your time getting involved in this programme when you could be going off and doing other things? Or as a student, you need to be saving up for uni, you need to be doing other things that are more beneficial." **Student**

Findings Part 5 – responses to the draft evaluation framework

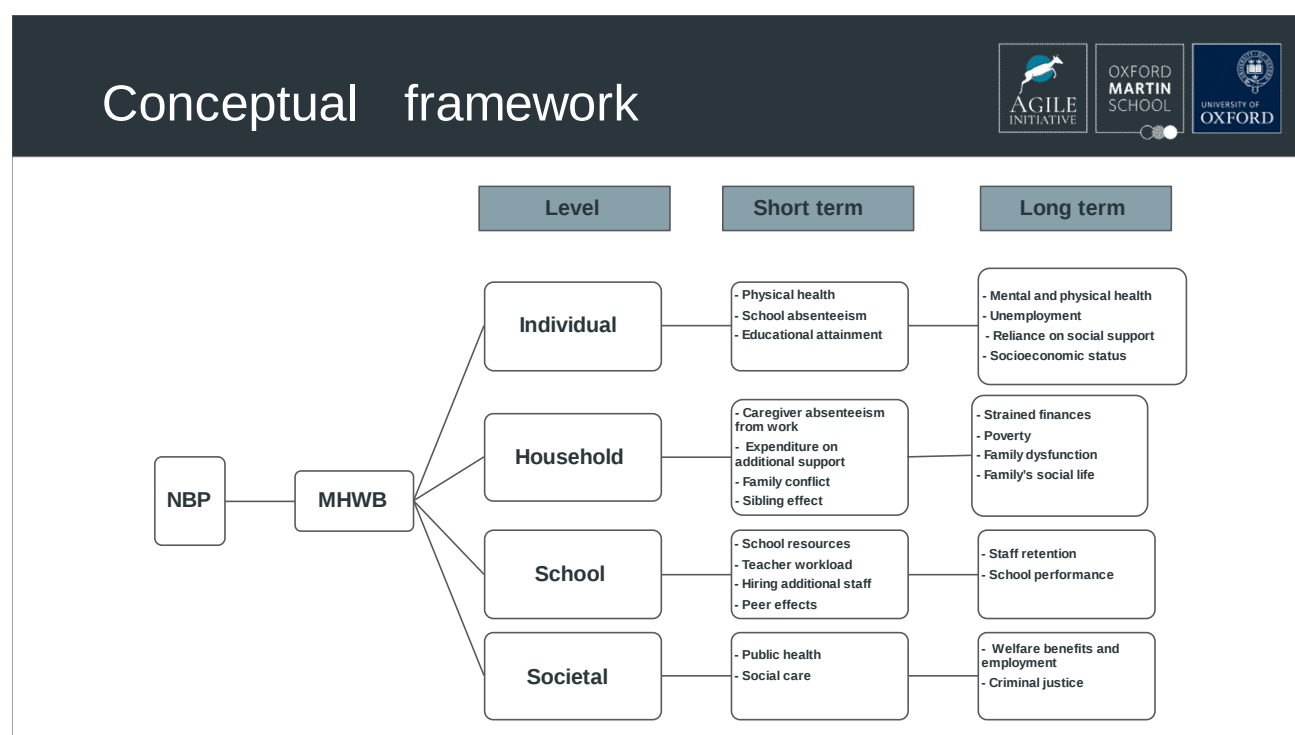


Figure 4 Conceptual evaluation framework presented at the DPA workshop.

The goal of this evaluation framework (Figure 5) is to serve as a structured template for assessing the costs and benefits of the NBP across multiple domains and levels—including individual, household, school, and social indicators. It is designed to support two key purposes: first, to assess the expected short-term costs and benefits prior to implementation, providing evidence to inform initial policy decisions; and second, to evaluate the actual short- and long-term impacts in a meaningful and systematic way, enabling ongoing learning and data-driven program evaluation. The framework was shared with participants twice during the workshop: at the start and again just before the final discussion which focused on the framework. For this final table discussion, DfE/Natural England participants, educators and students re-grouped into their cohorts.

This section of the report begins with views on the need to contextualise the evaluation framework by setting out its focus and framing: for example, who and what it is aiming to influence and whether it is identifying positive benefits, negative impacts or both. The section continues by exploring views on the 'shape' of the framework: the suitability of its linear style for a complex, multi-factorial topic. This is followed by identifying the elements thought to be missing from the model, such as short- and long-term effects, and levels such as nature/environment. The section ends with advice from the DfE/Natural England participants on how to ensure the framework takes into account the Labour Government's Opportunity Mission, which is guiding its policy work and investment in schools.

Focus and framing of the framework

All participant cohorts believe the framework should be introduced with a clear narrative that sets out who it is aimed at influencing, what its definition of NbPs for MHWB is and the level at which it is pitched: general principles for success or evidence that can be applied to specific types of schools, students and locations.

Educators in particular are interested in how general or specific the framework approach will be: will it be one size fits all or specific? This group discussed the tension between the evaluation framework being general so that it can be applied to a range of NbPs for MHWB versus needing to be specific to different school types, for example school size, socio-economic profile and urban versus rural setting. Several educators said that specificity would help with a clearer and more definitive understanding of whether a particular NbP for MHWB is likely to be successful in their school setting. Participants question if the framework could do both.

“It's something that's totally generalised, which in a way is good, it means that it can be applied in nearly every context. In a way it's also bad, because it's not specific enough to talk to your specific context. I guess that's our work in adapting a general framework that could be for the entire country to what our context might look like.” **Educator**

DfE/Natural England participants see ministers and decision makers in their Department as the target for the evaluation framework. When thinking about providing evidence these participants said they need specificity on what it is about NbPs for MHWB benefits that contribute to, for example, reducing schools' absenteeism, versus other forms of workshops or any “extracurricular” activity.

“Understanding what contributes to improved attainment, or what is it that improves school absenteeism is important – is it possible to say it is because of a NbP?” **Policy Professional** (abridged for clarity)

In both the student and educator groups, participants said they think the framework includes a mix of positive (e.g. staff retention) and negative (e.g. absenteeism) effects, which they find confusing. They want to know if the framework is structured to demonstrate positive impacts or negative consequences of NbPs for MHWB. Some students and educators suggested it would be clearer and more powerful if it chose to do one or the other, with some educators expressing a preference for positive effects, to be clear on what benefits NbPs for MHWB can achieve.

“We thought that the framework was just incredibly confusing...it isn't clear what the costs and what the benefits are in each category. It has family dysfunction - does it increase family dysfunction or decrease?” **Student**

“I think positivity, because you're saying this will lead to this, which will positively influence this.” **Educator**

The structure of the conceptual framework

Both DfE/Natural England and student participants discussed the structure of the framework. Among DfE/Natural England participants there was some debate about whether the structure should be linear, to enable a clear path to follow the cause and effect, or “messy” to reflect the complexity of impacts on mental health and wellbeing and outcomes. The consensus among DfE/Natural England participants seemed to be that having a structure for evaluation that helps guide decisions was more important and relevant than a structure that mirrors the complexity of the topic.

“All that complexity is there. The point is, what works?...The whole purpose of this is to try to eliminate some of those [complexities], so that you can work out what you can do.” **Policy Professional**

For the student participants, some want to see more connections between the short- and long-term effects and clearer distinctions between positive and negative effects.

“I feel like the model is too binary and categorising... I feel as though I'd prefer to see it on a graph where you've got, like, positive effects, negative effects, and then different coloured dots that represent the different things. I think that would be much more accurate to what it's trying to say, and the issues we're having where it's like they exist in both categories.” **Student**

As the quotations demonstrate, both groups wish to see causal threads running through the model from features of NbPs for MHWB through to short- and long-term effects.

Students question how the framework will account for the range of students and their different responses to NbPs. An NbP may be positive for some students but not others. How will the framework account for differences such as neurodivergence?

“They have mental disabilities such as autism and ADHD. That will mean that they experience it differently to neurotypical people, and they may not see the benefits or will see different benefits or different negatives.” **Student**

Suggested additions to the conceptual framework

When reviewing the draft framework, all participant groups have suggestions for amendments to its different elements. They include comments on:

- **Levels:** the draft currently includes individual, household, school and society
- **Effects:** the draft currently has a range of effects: some expressed neutrally, some negatively and some potentially positively
- **Timeline:** the draft currently includes short-term and long-term effects

Levels

The additional levels and components of levels suggested are for teachers to be included in “individuals”, not just students. For “community” and for nature/ environment to be included.

+ Teachers to individual level

DfE/Natural England and educator participants advocate for teachers to be included in the individual level. This acknowledges the role that teachers play in the delivery of NbPs for MHWB. The programmes need to be beneficial for them as well as students to be successful.

“Yes, I'd change individual, put children and young people, and teachers.” -
Policy Professional

+ Community as a level

Educators want to see community added to the framework. This is because they see NbPs for MHWB as opportunities for the student, teacher and school to engage with the wider community. They see this yielding an array of benefits to both individuals: social, physical and mental health and wellbeing, and also to nature (see Part 3).

“The engagement of individuals within their community, but also school engagement with wider community and the benefit of these.” **Educator**

+ Nature and environment as a level

Students and educators recommend the inclusion of nature/environment as a level in the framework for the following reasons:

- The impact on nature/climate/environment is one of the biggest issues for society, so including it as a level of impact seems vital.

“It seems the frameworks lost sight of not just it's good for human mental health, but actually it's really, really good for the planet to have nature connections.” **Educator**

“It doesn't say how it impacts the environment or how it impacts the climate. So it's entirely on the people and if we are in a climate crisis, we can't vote on the people. So that is a massive thing that is missing from this framework.” **Student**

- Excluding nature/climate/environment makes the current framework too focused on individualism and the economy.

“We just saw that glaringly obvious thing is very human-focused... It's very both ego and individual focused, and economically focused.”
Educator

- Nature/environment is seen as interlinked with wellbeing.
- The model could incorporate UN Sustainable Development Goals as part of the outcome measures.

There is a recognition among educators and students that it may not be simple to identify and measure effects on nature/environment/climate (all are mentioned in conversations), but this was not seen to be a good reason to exclude them.

Effects

Suggestions for additional effects came in the most part from educators and students. The DfE/Natural England group spent much of their time discussing how the framework needs to factor in the Government's Opportunity Mission (see page 26).

Short Term: Individual Effects

+ Student behaviour: this is seen as important by educators, alongside absenteeism, physical health and attainment. Both students and educators elucidated the kinds of behaviours and attitudes as including the following:

+ Student social confidence: educators suggested that through interactions with other students during NbPs for MHWB there is the potential for positive effects such as growing confidence by associating in new, unfamiliar surroundings. Students also reflected on possible negative effects such as the greater likelihood of bullying if being out in nature means being out of the teacher's line of sight.

+ Student consumption of social media: students are interested in the impact of NbPs for MHWB on individuals' use of social media. It is seen as such a significant part of young people's lives that it makes sense to include it in a framework that is exploring this age group's mental health and wellbeing.

"I think being online is such a massive part of young people's lives. That needs to be accounted for." **Student**

+ Student agency: educators see involvement in NbPs for MHWB as having the potential to encourage students to feel inspired by the wonder of nature and to make positive changes in the future, such as increasing pro-environmental behaviours.

"Kind of purposefulness isn't it, and a feeling of self-efficacy and agency and fulfilment. Purposeful. Awe and wonder, definitely." **Educator**

+ Student career plans: the potential for students to be inspired to progress from secondary schools to environmental studies and careers – a short-term measure of interest linked to a longer-term measure of career choice (see below).

+ Student sense of self: raised by students, distinct from agency, which is about independent action, this is more about how an individual sees themselves in the world: positively or negatively. Nature is seen as having a potentially positive impact on the sense of self. Being part of the wider natural world, helping young people to move beyond difficult personal relationships or circumstances.

"You don't feel like you fit in where you live. I think being in nature can... really help with that. I feel like a person and a part of something instead of just an orb sort of floating in the world." **Student**

+ Student workload: linked by students to absenteeism but seen as a negative effect of poor mental health: a student putting off assignments, then becoming overwhelmed and resulting in poor academic outcomes.

"They haven't mentioned student workload. If you have poor mental health, you're going to keep on putting off assignments. Eventually, that workload is going to build up, especially if you're in the later years in school." **Student**

+ Thriving teachers: Currently the framework identifies two teacher effects: avoiding burn out (teacher workload) and resignations (staff retention). This is seen by educators as too limited a set of outcome measures. They wish to see a more positive and holistic set of outcome measures for teachers.

"I like to see a more evolved idea of what's important for staff. The only things down here are teacher workload and staff retention. As long as they don't feel like they're burning out and that they don't leave, that's a win. Whereas actually, thriving teachers who are leading programming or whatever, the kind of different terms we want to throw in." **Educator**

Other short-term effects identified included households making more environmentally friendly choices and schools achieving more biodiversity on site.

Long Term Effects

+ Student green careers: students and educators see the potential for NbPs for MHWB to increase the numbers of young people going into "green careers".

Timing: short-term vs long-term

Students are particularly interested in what they perceived as being a significant gap between short-term and long-term effects. They want to understand if there is a role in the framework to bridge and explain the gap between, for example, school absenteeism and unemployment or if, as a framework, that gap is acceptable.

"For example, if you were to go to school, and it's just this dreary, grey block of cement that you really don't want to be in for the next seven hours, and then that would lead to unemployment. It is just the short-term and the long-term, but it's not fully fleshed out, which I guess isn't the point because it's just a framework." **Student**

Other suggested additions or considerations for the framework included participation levels. Students said it is important to know who is and is not taking part in NbPs for MHWB. They want to understand if some students are excluded because they don't have the resources to obtain the necessary equipment, such as hiking boots or waterproof clothing.

Intention to influence

Government's Missions: Achieving & Thriving

The Department for Education is interested in all sorts of outcomes for children and young people, including attainment, attendance, behaviour, and mental health and more broadly their capacity to thrive.

The Labour Government's 'Plan for Change' includes the mission to "break down barriers to opportunity" (Figure 6). 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 and mental health. Evaluation needs to provide evidence of how NbPs for MHWB are contributing to this mission, with the DfE participants suggesting that contribution to the thriving element would be the most appropriate focus.

"This is a theory of change, but you improve mental health and thereby pupils are better able to pass exams. That would be an important part of it, but also that mental health in itself is going to be part of thriving." **Policy Professional**

Alongside achieving and thriving, tackling school absence is another key component of the opportunity mission highlighted by DfE/Natural England participants. They spoke about qualitative evidence that extracurricular activities improve attendance. However, they point out a lack of quantitative data, such as from randomised control trials, to provide evidence-based guidance on the best interventions to reduce absence.

The ability to track school absence at an individual rather than school level is important for DfE/Natural England participants. They hope to understand the types of pupils who benefit from NbPs, their family situation, the type of school they attend, but question whether this feasible or too "granular" for what the model intends to deliver.

DfE/Natural England participants want clarity on whether the NbPs for MHWB being evaluated were universal or targeted at specific students. There is a hope that programmes could be universal but have targeted elements and measures.

Government Mission: Break down barriers to opportunity

Help every child to achieve and thrive at school, through excellent teaching and high standards. This will include a focus on disadvantaged children and those with special educational needs and disabilities.

Impact will be measured through attainment at the end of secondary school. The mission will also tackle the generational challenge of school absence, including by bolstering young people's sense of belonging.

Figure 5: Excerpt from Plan for Change: Milestones for a Mission-Led Government.

Concluding remarks

What comes across very clearly from the comments of the student participants is how much they see the value of having time outside - being in and learning about nature and the environment. They see multiple short-, medium- and long-term benefits for their mental health and wellbeing; for how they see themselves in the world; for encouraging pro-environmental behaviours, biodiversity and care (concern) for the environment and for some, future “*green careers*”. However this is counter balanced by the pressure they feel to be studying for exams and achieving good grades.

Students also raised several cultural and psychological challenges to secondary school students taking part in NbPs for MHWB that need to be understood when designing programmes. Nature lessons’ are associated with primary school and therefore seen as “*childish*”. Social trends such as the “*clean girl aesthetic*” are contrasted with the “*dirtiness*” of nature.

The ‘achieving and thriving’ agenda that forms part of the Labour Government’s ‘Opportunity Mission’ for education mirrors this dual ambition for students who are resilient with a positive sense of belonging and successful in their learning goals. This highlights how important it is to evaluate the effect of NbPs for MHWB on both academic achievement as well as factors such as attendance, behaviour and wellbeing.

All participants talked about the challenge of fitting NbPs for MHWB into a curriculum that is focused on exam success. For educators in particular there are concerns about “*how to teach*” these programmes, raising a lack of “*pedagogy*”. Educators can see how personally rewarding and refreshing involvement in these programmes could be, but this is countered by concerns about resources, skills and questions about delivery: teachers vs external specialists.

Department for Education and Natural England participants see a role for NbPs for MHWB in the Government’s ‘thriving’ agenda. But they need evidence to prove to Ministers how this type of programme, as opposed to other “*extracurricular*” activities, contribute to the ‘achieving and thriving’ mission.

Collectively, participants feel that NbPs for MHWB could instill a sense of purpose, responsibility and autonomy in secondary school students, inspiring students and, through association, potentially also their families, to feel more personal agency and collective empowerment to tackle environmental crises such as biodiversity loss and climate change. NbPs for MHWB could improve students’ feelings of belonging and connection to their local area and improve students’ executive functioning and physical health. Moreover, NbPs for MHWB can alleviate some academic and social pressures by providing a calm space for students to learn in different ways, away from their busy lives.

Many participants in the workshop expressed hope to see NbPs for MHWB taking a universal approach. This is to avoid a “*free school meals-style stigmatisation*” of the programmes. But there are calls for the inclusion of modifications for students with

particular mental health challenges and those with different social, emotional or cognitive needs.

When considering the evaluation framework, the discussions revealed several fundamental questions about its scope. Will it be evaluating NbPs for MHWB that are universal to the student population or targeted at those with existing mental health issues or both? Is the model only interested in the impacts on the mental health and wellbeing of students, or will it include wider impacts? Should the model also include more factors related to teachers such as job satisfaction and their mental health, as well as impacts on the environment? Clarity is also needed on whether this is a model for evaluating impact or a blueprint for successful NbPs for MHWB. All this suggests the importance of setting out the context for the evaluation framework.

During a period of life where personal confidence is often tested, NbPs for MHWB may provide students with the opportunity to learn new skills and develop their resilience. NbPs for MHWB may face implementation challenges due to stigma about nature being “uncool,” and because some students face high pressure to perform academically. At present, spending time in nature is not rewarded with jobs or grades. But NbPs for MHWB could include skills and training for jobs that tackle environmental crises, thereby contributing to national preparedness for these crises.

About this report

HVM produced this analytical report. They also produced a DPA workshop headline findings briefing which was shared with the Department for Education in March 2025. Both reports underwent two review cycles with the Agile Sprint Team at the University of Oxford, who contributed feedback on structure, interpretation, and clarity.

We gratefully acknowledge the workshop participants and contributors from policy, education, and youth, whose insights informed the findings.

Throughout this report quotations from those who took part in the workshop, drawn from the transcripts, are used to illustrate the analytical points being made and to emphasise main points. Some quotes have been edited to remove repeat or filler words. There have been no other edits to quotes which might distort the meaning intended by participants. Where possible quotes are attributed to a type of participant e.g. 'student', 'educator' etc. Sometimes, because of mixed groups in the first part of the workshop, it has not been possible to say who said what, in which case attribution is to a 'participant'.

In this report, when speaking of the workshop findings, terms such as 'a few', 'many', 'several' or 'some' are used to reflect areas of agreement and difference.

This report should be read as presenting considerations for the evaluation framework throughout. In Section 5 we present more policy-making based and structural considerations for the framework design.

Interpreting and extrapolating findings

With any research method, it is important to consider what the approach means for interpreting or extrapolating findings.

- People interested in a topic are more likely to agree to attend workshops such as these; therefore, we may be missing the views of those who are less interested in NbPs for MHWB.
- This report is a snapshot in time; people's views may change in the future.
- The workshop was a qualitative exercise, which did not aim to be representative of the UK population. As such, findings are not intended to be statistically representative or generalisable across the wider cohorts of students, educators and civil servants.

This work was commissioned by the University of Oxford as part of its Agile Sprint: *Is "nature" a policy solution to mental health in schools?* This work was financially supported by a grant from the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) (grant number NE/W004976/1) as part of the Agile Initiative at the Oxford Martin School.

Appendix 1 – Glossary of terms

  	Nature-Based Education		
Nature Education		Learning <i>about</i> nature and the living world, including plants, animals, and ecosystems.	
Nature-Based Education		Learning <i>in</i> a natural environment, where people have the chance to interact with and experience nature.	
Care Farming		The use of agricultural settings to provide social, therapeutic, and rehabilitative services to people who may face mental health challenges and/or are in need of additional support.	
Horticultural Therapy		The use of gardening and growing food to promote mental health and wellbeing. This approach supports physical and psychological health while enhancing communication, cognitive skills, and social connection for individuals who may face mental health challenges or require additional support.	
Social Prescription		Supporting people's mental health and/or wellbeing by connecting them to community services, groups, and activities.	
Nature on Prescription		Supporting people's mental health and/or wellbeing by connecting them to nature and the natural world. Also called "green social prescribing."	
Green Education		A broad education that emphasizes sustainability through knowledge and practices essential for environmental preservation, with a focus on fostering a transition to a green economy.	
Ecoanxiety		The distress caused by the negative consequences of climate change where people are experiencing worry about their future.	
Flourishing		A state of thriving and positive growth, where individuals or communities are content and engaged in life both as an individual and within a community.	

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NeuroOX YPAG is a group of young people who work with researchers at the University of Oxford to develop methods for working with young people to understand their views in mental health research and interventions.

