



Natural England Position Statement: Health & Wellbeing

1.0 Key Issues

- The health gap between rich and poor stubbornly persists despite huge investment in deprived communities.
- Sedentary lifestyles are a major and growing concern, which are creating many major avoidable health problems such as obesity, diabetes, heart disease and some cancers.
- Poor mental health affects millions of people, not only reducing wellbeing but is associated with poor physical health, health inequalities and lower productivity.
- The escalating costs of health care means there will be more emphasis on prevention, rather than cure, with people needing to become more engaged and interested in their own health.
- The NHS is gradually shifting emphasis from treatment and cure to prevention because of the strong economic case, improved clinical outcomes for patients and political pressure about conditions such as obesity and depression.
- Reducing our dependence on carbon will encourage more walking and cycling leading to increased contact with the natural environment. Less traffic will also make the natural environment more appealing.
- There is increasing interest in promoting contact with the natural environment to improve health and wellbeing, but there is a lack of strategic leadership and awareness of the potential is limited, particularly within the health sector.
- Much of the current evidence base is of insufficient quality to convince the medical fraternity, the main priority is widely agreed to be high quality causal research.

2.0 We believe that

- Better health and wellbeing are two of the major social and economic benefits we can secure through good management of the natural environment in both rural and urban settings.
- Specifically:
 - children should experience and familiarise themselves with their local environment to benefit their mental and physical health and further their development.

- Adults should be offered increased contact with the natural environment resulting in reduced stress and more fulfilling lives.
- Healthy Ageing is enhanced by close and frequent contact with the natural environment leading to greater independence and dignity.
- Connections between people and the natural environment should go beyond the lives of individuals to create a lasting legacy of strong and healthy communities for future generations.

3.0 We call for

- Government departments and Local Authorities to use contact with the natural environment to deliver their own social, economic and environmental priorities.
- The health sector, including the Department of Health, Primary Care Trusts and individual health professionals to promote use of the natural environment as part of the health care given to patients.
- Funders to invest in programmes that connect people to the natural environment which deliver health improvements to communities most in need.
- Academics and Researchers finding answers to the most important outstanding research questions about the health benefits of contact with the natural environment.
- Planners and Developers to build health gains into the layouts of new developments, transport and green infrastructure plans.
- Institutional Landowners such as schools, hospitals, care homes, workplaces, shops and housing estates to boost the appeal and usability of the natural environment they own or manage.
- Sport and Leisure organisations to integrate use of the natural environment into their policies and programmes.
- Schools to use the natural environment to benefit children's social, physical and mental development.
- Environmental organisations to work together to promote common messages to the health sector and delivering effective programmes that encourage use of the natural environment.

October 2008