

A photograph of two elderly people walking away from the camera on a dirt path through a lush green forest. The path is flanked by tall grass and dense trees. The person on the left is wearing a blue floral shirt and blue pants, and the person on the right is wearing a dark blue vest over a light-colored shirt and dark pants. Both are using walking sticks. The scene is bright and sunny, with sunlight filtering through the trees.

Understanding Barriers to Nature Connection

November 2023

HEALTH
AND
NATURE
DORSET

Contents

- 1** Background
- 2** Methodology
- 3** Emerging themes
- 4** Next steps
- 5** Appendices



For more information
contact:

hand@dorsetlnp.org.uk

Thank you to Natural England
for funding this project and to
Southern Co-op & National
Lottery Community Fund for
match funding.

Background

Health and Nature Dorset (HAND) is a collaboration working together to connect with nature for health and wellbeing, by bringing organisations together including the health and environment sectors.

HAND secured Nature Recovery Network Seed Funding from Natural England in 2022 to undertake insight gathering into local barriers to connecting with nature focusing on people with long-term health conditions or disabilities.

The project followed a design research approach to gather in-depth insights from a small sample of people.

The project was led by members of the HAND Working Group from Active Dorset, Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Dorset Local Nature Partnership.

The project was undertaken between February and June 2023.

Methodology – data collection

Focus Group Sessions



Participants were selected based on existing networks and contacts within the project group.

25 people took part.

The sessions did not follow a script but focused on themes including emotional connection and perceived benefits of spending time in nature, factors influencing behaviour, and perceived solutions to barriers.

Nature connection arts-based workshops



HAND contracted the arts and wellbeing organisation, [CoCreate](#), to run creative workshops to gather insights from participants.

Activities included drawing, taking notice, writing and storytelling to support and gather people's views and opinions.

During the sessions, the 47 participants were encouraged to explore similar themes to those covered during the focus group sessions. [Read the full report.](#)

Online survey



To extend reach further, an online survey was created and circulated using email and social media via existing contacts and partner organisations.

The survey was available for 32 days and received 44 responses from Dorset residents (plus 4 with a connection to Dorset).

Of the respondents, 81.1% had a long-term condition, 0.4% were support workers and 14.5% had neither a long-term health condition, nor worked as a support worker.

Methodology – topics explored

Emotions

- What comes to mind when I say nature / green spaces?
- What things do you enjoy or not enjoy about being outdoors?
- How important is spending time outdoors to you?
- What memories come to mind when you think about spending time outdoors in natural spaces?

Benefits

- What differences have you noticed from spending time in nature?
- Do you think being in nature has benefits for your health condition?
- How has / might taking part in activities outdoors helped you to connect with other people or nature?
- Does spending time outdoors change the way that you feel about nature or places around you? Do you feel more connected to the places that you visit?

Influences

- What types of things help you to spend time outdoors? What gets in the way?
- What encourages people and discourages people to spend time outdoors?
- In what ways do you feel that your health influences how often you spend time outdoors?
- How has the amount of time you spend outdoors changed throughout your life?

Solutions

- What would make you spend more time outdoors?
- How could you spend time outdoors in a different way than you have before?
- Where do you look to find outdoor places to visit or activities to do outdoors? e.g. websites, organisations, etc.

Back
to
basics
Nature



Go
His
ETC

What people told us: Emerging themes

Quality of greenspace

Someone to go with

Terrain and obstacles

Facilities

Information source and
quality

Variety of activities

Transport

Cost

Personal barriers



Quality of greenspace

Within the focus group sessions there was much discussion about the quality and nature of the outdoor space. Whilst some people preferred to visit local places that they could get to by walking from their front door, others would prefer to visit more expansive natural spaces as they felt these had a more relaxing and peaceful quality than places like urban parks.

For participants with health condition, just getting out of the house can be extremely difficult. Time spent in local natural spaces was highly valued.

Focus group participants mentioned the value of garden wildlife and acknowledged that for some people getting into the garden could be a good first step.

Commonly mentioned in the focus groups and surveys was the sensory benefits of being in greenspaces. This included the sounds of nature such as bird song, waves and wind, or touching natural objects.

"But there's something very different about being in a large green space in somewhere that's really out in nature" Focus Group (Social Prescriber)

"Parks and paths can feel like fake nature, even though real natural places feel intimidating but its proper nature." Focus Group (Participant with visual impairment)

"It wasn't until COVID that we actually got out exploring the local area so that we actually found there was these couple beautiful cemeteries about 2-3 minute walk away in either direction." Focus Group (Patient Participant Group)



Someone to go with

During focus group discussions, there were many conversations about the benefits of having someone knowledgeable to go with them or guide them. This was of particular importance for people with visual impairments who were more nervous about being alone, feeling vulnerable or safe.

Having someone who can navigate reduced worries. Participants emphasised the importance of finding a suitable person, placing value on it being someone they could trust, could get along with and that was sensitive to their individual needs. This was especially important if this person was providing physical support or guidance. Participants also suggested that going to an unknown place with a companion might help provide confidence that they could visit again in the future.

Walking pace was also cited as a particular concern for walking companions. Focus group participants felt that those providing support would need to be patient and prepared to walk at a slower pace than they might normally do.

Although it was agreed that having someone to go with was of particular importance to many participants, it was identified that the complexities of making arrangements with another person adds an additional barrier.

“Going to places on my own can be intimidating. I'm a carer and after doing that I'm usually too tired to make the effort - if I was going with other people, I'd probably try harder.”

Survey respondent

“My brother... passed away last year... He used to take me to the countryside, to little places in the New Forest. He was full of knowledge about nature & had a particular talent for spotting things no one else would. He made nature accessible to me. I don't know how to access it without him and I'm frightened of getting lost trying to find places to visit.” *Survey respondent*



Terrain and obstacles

Barriers cited to access natural spaces included feelings of vulnerability and specific safety concerns such as falls or injury. This was of particular concern to visually impaired participants with experiences of being hit in the head by overhanging branches or falling due to uneven ground.

When having to negotiate uneven ground, focus group participants felt that the high level of concentration required was tiring and detracted from the experience of being in nature. Similarly, if a companion needs to spend the entire visit giving instructions on the terrain underfoot it would also distract from enjoying the natural surroundings.

Survey and workshop attendees also noted that the ground surface was important. For example, visually impaired participants also explained that using white sticks on gravel doesn't work well, and in the case on uneven ground the cane would offer no support to prevent a fall. Guide dogs are also not trained to walk in natural spaces. Gravel paths were also noted as not suitable for those with rollator walkers (where grass or tarmac were preferable), and walking frames did not work on grass.

Beach access is clearly difficult for people with mobility issues especially wheelchairs. One survey respondent noted that some people have a small scooter which isn't suitable on many surfaces and accessible surfaces are not accessible unless there is access to a large scooter.

"The white sticks only work on paths, you know tarmac paths, they don't work on gravel. ...I don't feel safe."

Focus Group (Participant with visual impairment)

"I can't do uphill anymore. A rollator can help but is hopeless on gravel. A path of tarmac or grass is easier than gravel." Survey respondent

"Access the beach is very difficult, it would be really good to have more wheelchair accessible areas going down to the beach. Most pathways are either too narrow or too bumpy for a wheelchair." Survey respondent



Facilities

A survey respondent noted that they couldn't access river spaces because there were not enough disabled car parking spaces or those that were there were too narrow.

Lack of wheelchair or scooter access was also noted as a barrier (while one respondent noted that they recognised that not all places could be accessible).

Availability of trampers to hire was suggested as a solution but some requested that these were available at shorter notice, rather than having to book so far in advance, so they could go when the weather was good and/or they were feeling up to it.

In terms of site facilities, those mentioned as being important included toilets, places to sit and rest (for both people with limited mobility and people who experience fatigue), phone/internet signal for emergencies, and having people/staff that would provide help if needed.

"Bowel problems. Prevents me from most outdoor pursuits."

Survey respondent

"It is because some of these places don't have enough benches and like I said, I've got joint problems."

Focus group (Diabetes Group)

"Lack of access, not inclusive, not suitable for a wheelchair user, lack of toilets, not being able to fully enjoy with family." Survey respondent

"I have mobility issues, which makes walking difficult so accessible seating is always a bonus, and wheelchair accessibility is really helpful"

Survey respondent

"When you have certain health conditions, you need the support of certain facilities like toilets or frequent seating along a walking route, or refreshments" Survey respondent



Information source & quality

Word of mouth was the most common way focus group participants found new places to visit. However, many people said they only go places that they already know.

There was feeling amongst some focus groups participants that it was difficult to keep up to date with what activities were taking place and where, and difficult to discover new places to go to. Some participants did not use social media and did not know where to look to find the information. Workshop attendees proposed a 'Nature partnership' map of ideas of where to go, complimented by clear and consistent information on access and facilities.

Many participants said they were more likely to take recommendations from people with the same health condition as them, or someone who understands their personal requirements. They said they would find it difficult to trust recommendations from people who might not notice the kinds of things that would make access difficult for them. Social prescribers involved in the focus group said that they found it easier to signpost people to activities or places they had previous personal experience of.

The workshops and survey highlighted the importance of having information available in advance, such as the type of surfaces, gradient and length of path and information about toilets. Once out in nature, signage was important for some, however others noted that too much signage and notices can spoil the environment.

"I think it's good to experience anything before we recommend it."

Focus Group (Social Prescriber)

"More information on distances between seating areas, toilets, parking info as to whether it's private or council, large enough parking spaces, plenty of space to move around in cafés or on-site visitor centres/shops & people clearly visible as staff, to help with any queries, assist with getting equipment & people out of their cars and with information on where to find things & how far away things are."

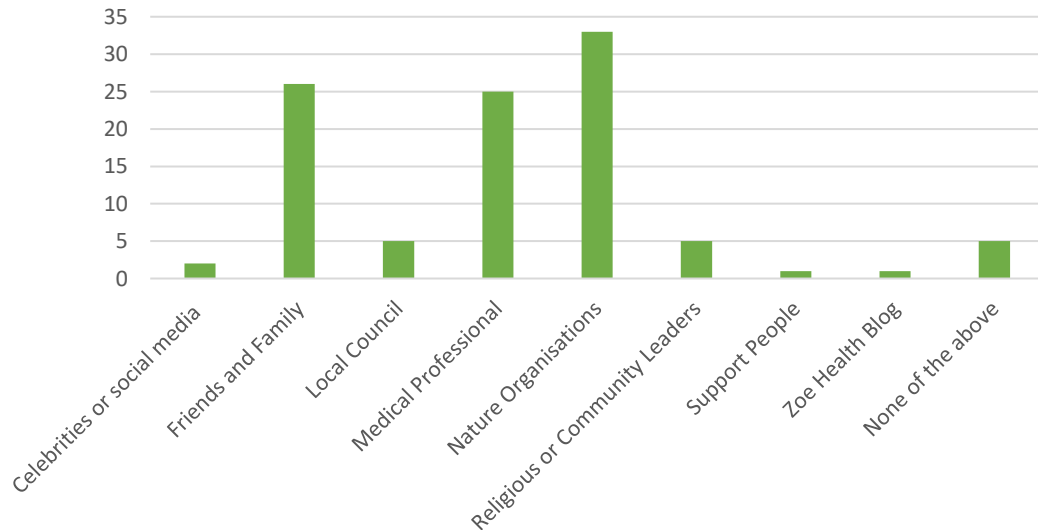
Survey respondent



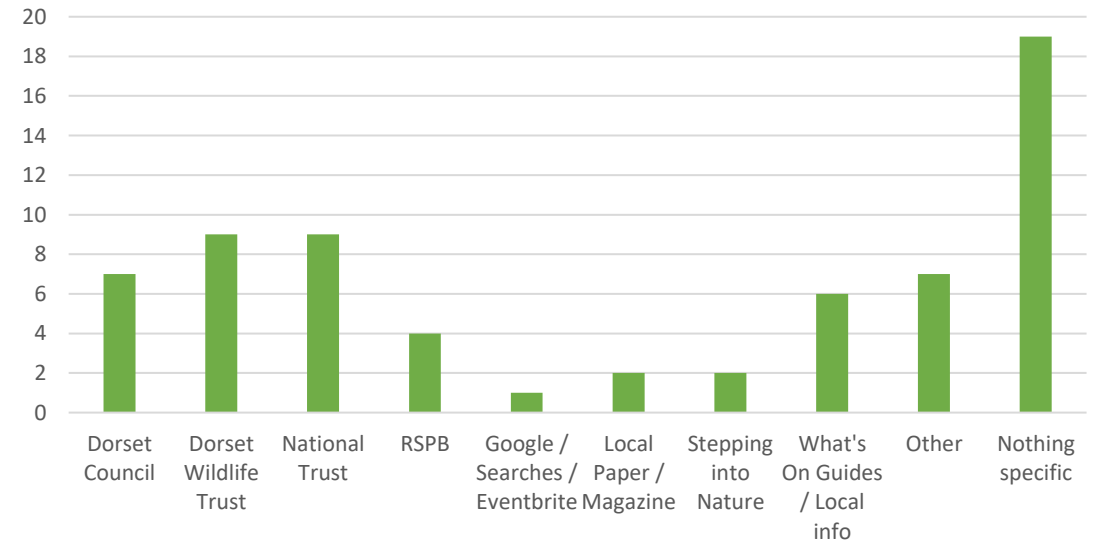
Information source & quality

Survey respondents trusted medical views, natural organisations and friends and family as the key trusted sources of information about the benefits of wellbeing for nature. Some focus group participants mentioned that they didn't need to be told by a healthcare professional that being active outdoors was good for them, what they needed was help with overcoming the physical barriers that make it difficult for them, such as one to one support.

Who would you listen to when talking about the benefits of nature?



Are there any specific organisations, websites or information outlets that you use?





Variety of activities

Participants shared that some organised groups or events were not always suitable for their individual health needs and suggested that providing an individual who has received training in supporting particular health conditions might be beneficial.

Alternatively, events organised by support groups for those with a shared health condition were a preferred option for some participants because everyone has a shared understanding of the impact of their condition.

Survey respondents noted that those who worked during the day struggled to access many activities due to most being during the working week. Opportunities for activities for people of their age group or within work could be useful.

The survey asked if there were things that people would like to do but aren't able to. Responses not already included in the themed sections included picnics with others, multigenerational activities, wheelchair beach swimming, Park Yoga at more sites, arts and wellbeing activities, accessible horse riding and woodland crafts.

"Walking friends / group of my age group during weekdays. 35 to 55 yo."
Survey respondent

"I would love to see space as where people can take laptops or work and work in nature, perhaps a sheltered place and where people can also have picnics or meet friends, even when the weather is inclement."
Survey respondent



Transport

Transport to natural spaces was a recurring topic of discussion that affected people with long term health conditions across the focus groups, workshop and survey.

Issues mentioned included a lack of public transport to places people would like to visit, public transport not running at times needed to get home, and the expense of public transport.

Social prescribers and volunteers supporting people to get outside in nature are often not insured or permitted to take passengers to be able to travel to natural spaces further away from home so are limited to where you get reach from their front door.

Some people were unable to use public transport due to their health condition, for example difficulty in finding a seat for those with visual impairments.

Suggestions for solutions included arranging transport or events from places where people are already able to access, e.g., doctors' surgery; free or subsidised public transport; or transport included in the activity arrangements.

"We cannot take people to a venue, we are not allowed to take passengers in our car. We're not allowed to take patients in our car."

Focus Group (Social prescriber)

"I can't get on the bus because I can't find empty seat. I have to feel for an empty seat, and people don't like you touching their knees."

Focus group (Macular Society)

"I have had to give up driving, so lack of access by public transport is a major problem." Survey respondent



Cost

Both the workshops and the survey highlighted issues of costs, which is likely to increase with the cost-of-living crisis. Some comments focused on entry fees to locations or payments for activities.

For those with access to a private car found the cost of parking and petrol, proved to be a barrier as well as a frustration on how to pay for parking i.e. the range of different parking apps across the county.

Suggestions for solutions included a 'locals card' to give discounts to local facilities.

"Seeing the children, I've got these little grandchildren, I never know really where to take them. I mean, they go to Farmer Palmers and those sort of things, but again, it's a car. Yeah. And you have to pay quite a lot of money there, you know."

Focus group (Diabetes Group)

"Expensive car parking is also prohibitive even with a blue badge as is a lack of parking close to parks/beaches." Survey respondent

"But also, it's important to think about cost as well, particularly with the financial crisis that's going on at the moment. Not everyone can afford you know membership or to travel to wherever they want to." Focus Group (Patient Participant Group)

"More access to Nordic walking as there are few clubs with instructors and the equipment and instruction are quite expensive." Survey respondent



Personal barriers

Some barriers mentioned that were specific to a participant's health condition. These included trust issues of being in open spaces for people with mental health issues, the impact of sleep quality of motivation to get outdoors, tiredness and exhaustion and pain / joint problems.

The weather was also mentioned a particular barrier to be motivated to spend time outdoors, in particular the rain and cold temperatures making pains worse.

Personal commitments, such as full-time work or doctor appointments, influenced the time people had available to spend time outdoors.

Both the workshop and survey highlighted safety concerns, in terms of remoteness of some natural sites but also within urban greenspaces. The issues particularly related to being in a natural environment and individuals feeling unsafe walking in quieter areas, including after dark.

"The weather is the main thing for me, I think. I mean if it's raining, I probably wouldn't go out. If I have to go shopping or whatever, but I won't go out for a walk in the rain."

Focus group (Diabetes group)

"The weather is a factor as rain can exacerbate joint pain. Pain levels and fatigue levels also influence time spent outdoors." Survey respondent

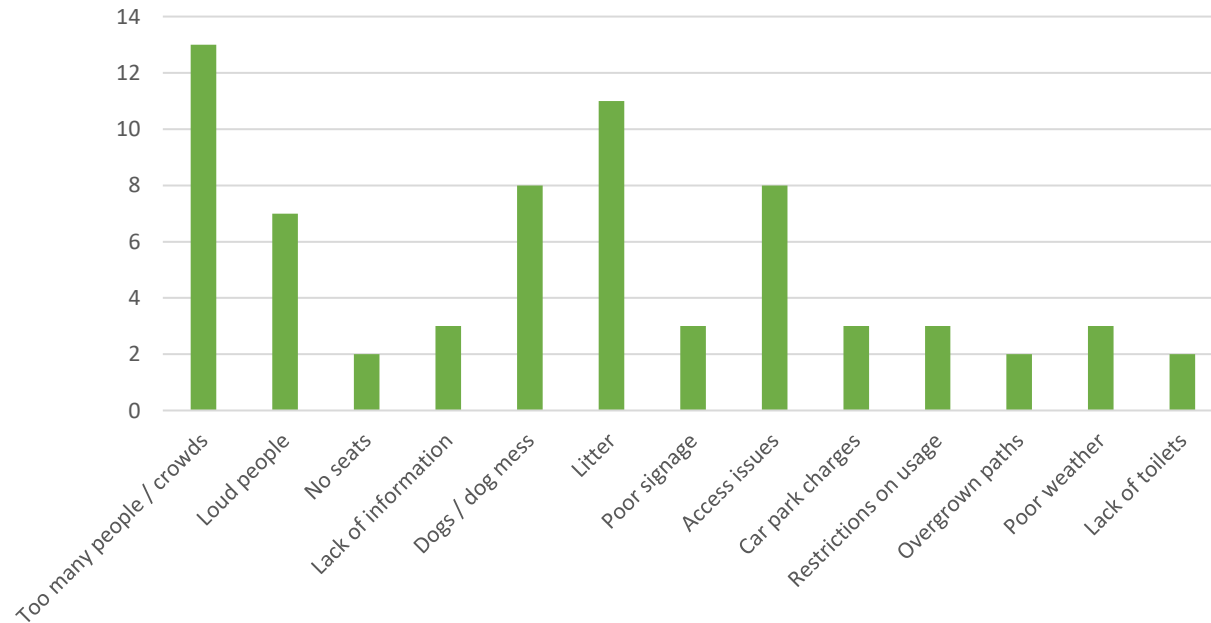
"I personally wouldn't go out in some places at dusk onwards e.g. park areas." Survey respondent



Personal barriers

There were several aspects people don't like about being outdoors in nature. Survey results also highlighted the following issues with being outdoors. While these may not specifically stop people accessing nature, they are likely to have an impact.

What things do you not enjoy about being outdoors in nature?



"I avoid the beach in the summer months during the day as there are too many people - I like space and solitude to relax." *Survey respondent*

"Not being able to easily use public footpaths if badly overgrown (e.g., stinging nettles/boggy)." *Survey respondent*

"Being too busy with people, seeing litter, vandalism, pollution in the rivers/on the beaches (inc. littering); dog mess and discarded 'poo' bags." *Survey respondent*



Next steps: Evaluating and using the insights

[Data Limitations](#)

[Summary](#)

[Conclusions](#)

[Future Opportunities for
HAND](#)

[Recommendations](#)

Data Limitations

Finding participants

We initially struggled to connect with partner organisations to promote the sessions to their members, so the project was delayed as we needed to reschedule.

Many of the 'user' groups meet less infrequently than we had assumed, so we were unable to go to existing sessions of these groups, which therefore meant there was a more limited number of communities than we had hoped to engage.

Age range of participants

Many of the support groups connected with take place during the daytime, so the date emits people of working age. Whilst evening focus groups were held, these were limited in attendance.

Diversity of people represented

This research included people living with and supporting those with a range of conditions, but the people involved are not representative of their conditions, so we use the information as insight only. Health conditions / disabilities specified included diabetes, stroke, visual impairment, poor mental health, cancer, Multiple Sclerosis, ME, Fibromyalgia, ADHD, Aspergers and some participants had multiple health conditions.

Participant numbers

The focus of this report was to take a design research approach for detailed insights. This means the results represent the insights of fewer individuals so there may be some themes not identified in this study.

Summary

Quality of greenspace: the type of greenspace and location of greenspace is important.

Someone to go with: finding the right person to go out in nature with was key, but there are complexities to making these arrangements.

Terrain and obstacles: ground surface is important and varied surfaces impact people differently.

Facilities: lack of access for wheelchairs and scooters is a key barrier for some but toilets, seats are also important.

Information source and quality: word of mouth is a trusted method to find out about activities, particularly from friends/family, health professionals and those with similar requirements.

Variety of activities: suitable activities are not always available for specific needs or at a time suitable for people.

Transport: lack of public transport or suitable options to get to activities makes accessing quality greenspace difficult.

Cost: entry fees for some activities and the cost of transport and parking can be a barrier.

Personal barriers: these are very personal to individuals, but weather, work commitments and safety concerns play an important part.

Conclusions

Dorset has amazing natural and semi-natural spaces, but access and opportunities to engage and connect is not equal. We know that many people have barriers that limit or stop them from accessing spaces.

This insight gathering has provided local evidence demonstrating that barriers for people with health conditions, disabilities and neurodiversity are very individualised. With exception of some physical considerations such as visual impairment and physical mobility requirements, it is difficult to make generalisations for groups of people with the same health condition. Many barriers are much more nuanced and dependent on personal factors.

But while everyone has different experiences that may limit their connection to nature, many of the barriers are shared. It is recognised that we will never be able to make every natural space accessible to everyone, by co-producing solutions we can develop opportunities that meet a wide range of needs to help make accessing nature for wellbeing as inclusive as possible.

Taking a place-based approach is important – co-designing and evaluating solutions in areas will provide opportunities to address barriers and produce shared learning to find appropriate solutions across Dorset.

Using this information Health and Nature Dorset can work with its members, support organisations and individuals to work on developing solutions to try to address these barriers.

Future Opportunities for HAND

- Continue to share insights and national research with members of the wider HAND collaboration to inform their future work
- Develop connections forged during this insight gathering process to identify opportunities to work collaboratively with community organisations and primary care networks supporting people with long term health conditions
- Develop a set of project briefs that could be tested locally as pilot projects
- Use future funding opportunities to prioritise projects that might address some of the barriers identified
- Develop more detailed research and evaluation on solutions identified
- Support the development of initiatives to help people to get out in nature (e.g. Nature Buddies Network)
- Develop opportunities for trialling nature-based activities to support signposters/referrers to understand the opportunities and the benefits
- Encourage and facilitate action for activity providers to be inclusive
- Support the development and maintenance of up-to-date online directories for Dorset
- Investigate opportunities for cheaper access to activities for disadvantaged groups and promote existing initiatives
- Investigate opportunities to improve transport to nature

HAND welcomes collaboration from any organisation looking to develop this work.

Recommendations

Activity and facility providers

- Collaborate with support organisations to provide inclusive activities for their members
- Commission and/or attend training to provide more suitable activities for people with particular health conditions or requirements
- Carry out an accessibility audit of sites, considering a wide range of users and long-term health conditions including mobility, sight, and mental health
- Provide detailed, accurate information to meet the needs of participants with visual and mobility requirements
- Consider transport opportunities when developing activities

Support organisations*

- Work with HAND to help promote opportunities for awareness raising and training
- Encourage nature as an option for wellbeing through promotion and nature-based activities
- Trial opportunities to understand the benefits to enable future signposting
- Collaborate with activities providers to develop inclusive opportunities
- Support organisations to assist their members to use public transport – collaborate with transport providers to improve procedures for users with visual impairment

*those supporting people with lived experience and/or those who can signpost to connecting with nature for wellbeing.



Appendices

Why this research is
important

What does nature mean to
you?

Why this research is important

There is increasing national evidence demonstrating the value of engaging and connecting with nature to support physical and mental wellbeing. We know that there is not equal access to nature and some people have a range of barriers that prevent them from receiving these benefits. HAND aims to work in collaboration across Dorset to look for solutions to address barriers, where possible, to reduce health inequalities, improve wellbeing and the connection with nature which may also help protect and enhance our environment – as David Attenborough said, "*No one will protect what they don't care about; and no one will care about what they don't protect.*"

Nature-based wellbeing opportunities and access to nature offer a cost-effective way to prevention of ill health, reduce inequalities and support people to get active, which is recognised at the national level through the Government's *Environmental Improvement Plan* (January 2023), *Get Active: a strategy for the future of sport and physical activity* (June 2023) and the pilots on Green Social Prescribing for Mental Health (2020). Locally 'Healthy Places' was a key element of the Dorset Sustainability and Transformation Plan, and the importance of using our environment for wellbeing is recognised in the Dorset's Integrated Care Partnership Strategy *Working Better Together 2022/23* and NHS Dorset's *Making Dorset the healthiest place to live Joint Forward Plan: 2023-2028*.

This project has enabled us to gather insights into local barriers for people with long term health conditions, disabilities and those who are neurodiverse. The project is only the start of our process to understand the needs in Dorset and we aim to expand on this project to develop solutions to improve connection to nature in the county.

Why this research is important

Feedback from one of the art-based workshops illustrates some of the benefits people experienced from attending the session and therefore opportunities for future work:

"I went to the art and nature workshop and it was really good. I felt peaceful and calm after turning my thoughts to nature for an hour. It was a friendly group and there were people there I knew. It has inspired me to think about nature more and get out into Radipole park gardens once a day. The people who ran the group were lovely and it was an interesting experience. Thanks for telling me about it, I would like to go to something like that again sometime. Really good!"

"8 of us attended the creative workshop today held by CoCreate. It was good as the facilitators got everyone involved and all were fully engaged. First, we did a drawing exercise then a writing one and lastly a thought-provoking group exercise. Everyone left fully animated from the experience. It was nice to see a different side to the group."

"The art and nature workshop wasn't long enough – loved it and didn't want it to stop if honest! Met some amazing people today at both the walk and art and nature workshop. Been a nice day."



© CoCreate

What does nature mean to you?

Creative Workshops

Calm, refreshed, energized, free,
expansive, calming, connected,
unwind, exhilarating, enchanting,
freedom, clean, relaxed,
fresh clean air, smell of the sea,
sound of crashing waves,
therapeutic, peaceful, serene,
recharges me, grounds me,
head not overthinking,
sense of perspective

"Nature – it rejuvenates you"

"I feel calm and focused on the multi-sensory experience I am experiencing I don't want it to end. Feel gratitude"

"...pure joy at being in the sea"

"...feel completely enveloped by the tree, protected from and almost part of it"

"I feel at one, relaxed and humbly grateful to still be alive."

The squirrels of Nothe fort. February 2023. what a surprise I had when having a walk up and around nothe fort gardens after moving to weymouth in January 2023. After taking a morning walk to explore I was walking round the gardens and was very surprised at how friendly the local squirrels are. Climbing all over me in pairs as I walked around I lost count by 12 and can honestly say I was miserable as hell that morning until I came across all these squirrels climbing up my legs to see if I had anything to eat for them. Some of the public were in giggles watching it.

Activities & Attendance



Date	Time	Audience	Location	Bookings	Attendance
9 Feb 23	2-4pm	Macular Society	Weymouth	Existing meeting	7
16 Feb 23	12.30-1.30pm	Diabetes Group – Central Bournemouth Primary Care Network	Bournemouth	Existing meeting	3
10 Mar 23	10-11am	Diabetes Nurses	Online	0	0
13 Mar 23	6-7pm	Macular Society	Online	3	2
14 Mar 23	6-7pm	Patient Participant Groups	Online	0	0
20 Mar 23	6-7pm	Pre-diabetes Group	Online	2	0
22 Mar 23	2.30-3.30	Social Prescribers	Online	15	8
27 Mar 23	2-3pm	Patient Participant Groups	Online	4	4
29 Mar 23	10-11am	Diabetes Nurses	Online	0	0
29 Mar 23	6-7pm	Open session open to anyone	Online	0	0
30 Mar 23	2-3pm	Open session open to anyone	Online	2	1
				Total	25



Date	Time	Audience	Location	Bookings	Attendance
21 Mar 23	10.30-12.30	Macular Society	Weymouth	6	9
28 Mar 23	Noon-2pm	Mixed	Gillingham	6	8
25 Apr 23	10.30-12.30	Open	Bridport	0	2
4 May	2-4pm	Open	Dorchester	2	0
15 May 23	10.30-12.30	Rural Mental Health Forum	Shaftesbury	7	9
23 May 23	2-4pm	Dorset Mental Health Forum & Lantern Trust	Weymouth	20	8
24 May 23	10.30-12.30	Open	Bournemouth	5	3
2 Jun 23	2-4pm	C-Siders & Lantern Trust	Weymouth	13	8
				Total	47

