

# TOOLKIT

## THE POWER OF NATURE FOR EMPLOYEE WELLBEING

As well as supporting businesses to address the climate emergency, the power of nature should be harnessed as a core strand of an integrated approach to employee wellbeing. This toolkit<sup>i</sup> outlines some of the benefits to be gained from this approach and explores the possible interventions. It gives examples from Northern Ireland-based businesses.

### Nature, wellbeing and our disconnection

Having a connection with nature means that as a society, we see ourselves as one part of the natural world, we have an emotional affinity with nature, and we are aware of the vital interconnectivity between all aspects of the living planet.

The pandemic has provided a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to adopt ways of working that simultaneously promote healthy people and a healthy planet, accelerated by a sustainable approach.

Our connection with nature in the modern world has significantly decreased over the past few generations. There are three key factors at play in this disconnection: 85% of the UK population lives and works in urban environments<sup>i</sup> that are traditionally devoid of nature, people spend more time indoors and have increased virtual and indoor

### BITC MEMBERS REFERENCED IN THIS BRIEFING

- Encirc
- Henry Brothers
- Hughes Insurance
- Phoenix Natural Gas

work and recreation<sup>ii</sup>, and the richness and diversity of nature is itself in sharp decline.

The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries (189th out of 218 countries).<sup>iii</sup> Moreso, research carried out by the Natural History Museum and the RSPB has found that Northern Ireland ranks 12th worst out of 240 countries when it comes to biodiversity loss (the Republic of Ireland just one space ahead at 13th).<sup>iv</sup>

<sup>i</sup> This toolkit has been adapted from Business in the Community UK's *The Power of Nature for Employee Wellbeing* toolkit. It translates findings from research within the Urban Innovative Action-funded project IGNITION. Business in the Community is a partner on the IGNITION project that aims to find innovative funding mechanisms for nature-based solutions to address the climate emergency.



Since the 1950s there has been a marked cultural shift away from references to nature in fiction books, song lyrics and film storylines.<sup>v</sup>

**FOR EVERY 1% INCREASE IN THE PROPORTION OF USEABLE OR TOTAL GREEN SPACE NEAR TO THE HOME, THERE IS A 4% REDUCTION IN THE NUMBER OF ANXIETY/MOOD DISORDER TREATMENT CASES.**

There is a growing body of evidence that shows that a connection with nature is key to good health and wellbeing.

Key findings<sup>2</sup> on the link between nature-based solutions and health and wellbeing are:

- Visits to outdoor green spaces of 30 minutes or more during the course of a week result in a 7% reduction in the prevalence of depression.
- Green façades appear to enhance human physiological and psychological relaxation more than concrete or traditional walls.
- For every 1% increase in the proportion of useable or total green space near to the home, there is a 4% reduction in the number of anxiety/mood disorder treatment cases.
- Bird and plant diversity have been found to increase the wellbeing benefits of visiting green space and can lead to a reduction in anxiety, stress, and depression.

- Studies have also found that species richness and perceived species richness have a positive correlation with mental wellbeing.

Approximately one in five adults in Northern Ireland has experienced a mental health problem.<sup>vi</sup>

Rebuilding our connection with nature can help provide a strong foundation for reducing the impact of mental health issues and increase overall wellbeing. This has come into sharp focus with the COVID-19 outbreak and a recent study found that nature contact ‘buffers’ the negative effects of lockdown on mental health.<sup>vii</sup>

This connection is currently being utilised by the NHS which is now prescribing time in nature as part of its wider [social prescribing programme](#) for those who experience mental and physical ill health. These prescriptions are already happening across the UK, saving the NHS significant funds on alternative treatments.

**THEY ARE PREDICTING AT LEAST 900,000 PEOPLE WILL BE REFERRED TO SOCIAL PRESCRIBING BY 2023/24.<sup>viii</sup>**

Beyond these health benefits, nature provides so many other services that are vital for a healthy and resilient society, such as cleaner air and water, sound absorption and carbon capture.

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<sup>2</sup> IGNITION



### What are the business benefits?

Whilst incorporating elements of nature into your ways of working may come with a capital cost, there is a vast amount of evidence that shows the multiple benefits this could bring. These include:

- improved human, environmental, and organisational resilience
  - employee wellbeing enhanced by a sustainable, nature-positive culture
  - contributing to your organisational response to the climate emergency
  - addressing unequal access to green space
- Employees with views of trees and landscapes took an average of 11 hours less sick leave per year than employees with no view. This equates to an average saving of around £1,600 (\$2,000 reported) per employee.
  - Workers with a view of nature handle calls 6-7% faster than those with no view. This generates annual productivity savings of around £2,400 (\$2,990 reported) per employee.
  - 23% decrease in sick leave taken by employees with a view of nature.

### Improved organisational resilience

Business has a huge responsibility to go beyond a 'do no harm' model and restore nature in the face of the ecological crisis, widely referred to as the sixth mass extinction. The value of nature to business goes beyond responsible business practice; it is essential to long-term resilience in the face of climate change. The recent report [Nature-based Solutions to the Climate Emergency](#) written by BITC UK and UKGBC as part of the IGNITION project, details the many benefits and the value of nature to business. Some include:

- 5% increase in worker productivity when office spaces are enhanced with plants.
- 12% increase in reaction time when in the presence of plants.

### **ENSURING EMPLOYEES ARE ENGAGED IN 'GREENING' EFFORTS AND HAVE THE OPPORTUNITIES TO CONNECT WITH NATURE IN A MEANINGFUL WAY WILL CREATE BOTH ENVIRONMENTAL AND HUMAN RESILIENCE. A HEALTHY AND RESPONSIBLE BUSINESS WILL THRIVE WITH A HEALTHY TEAM.**

A recent study from Deloitte found that the costs to employers of poor mental health in the workplace are substantial.

Using conservative assumptions, they estimate a total annual cost to businesses of up £45bn, comprising £7bn in absence costs, £27bn – £29bn in presenteeism costs and £9bn in costs of staff turnover. There are also other indirect costs to employers of poor mental health, such as the adverse impact on creativity, innovation, and other employees.<sup>ix</sup>



Research carried out by Marketing Signals, a North-West-based agency, found that from January 2022 – September 2022, employers have lost a total of 1,662 days in sick leave this year. Northern Ireland had the highest number of sick days taken across the UK, with 44% of the respondents stating that a mental health illness was the reason for taking sick leave.<sup>x</sup> Exposure to, and engagement with, nature can result in reduced staff sick leave, reduced staff turnover and an increase in workplace productivity.

### Employee wellbeing enhanced by a sustainable, nature-positive culture

In addition to improved wellbeing, there is growing evidence that links connecting with nature to increased eco-actions.<sup>xi</sup>

This means that the more we engage and reconnect with the natural world, the more likely we are to change our behaviour to restore and protect it. The speed and scale required to reach organisational carbon reduction and nature restoration targets will be drastic, so ensuring your organisation is open to and prepared for these changes will be essential. Additionally, engaging staff in ‘greening’ activities helps to guarantee that spaces are designed for how they are realistically used and ensures the longevity of any investment.

As we prioritise work environments that give wellbeing a greater weight in design, popular industry-building environmental standards such as [WELL](#), [BREEAM](#) and [Building with Nature](#) consider [biophilia elements](#) that nurture the innate human-nature connection in their assessments. These standards recognise both nature incorporation and nature interaction, highlighting the importance of allowing and encouraging engagement as much as creating green spaces.

Physical activity is crucial to employees’ health and wellbeing, but too few people are currently as active as they should be. Around a third of adults are likely to be damaging their health through a lack of physical activity.<sup>xii</sup> There are many ways to help employees be more active whilst in nature, from providing secure bike racks, to changing

facilities for people who exercise outside. Evidence shows that a workplace’s culture is the most important factor in the success of a physical activity promotion programme. You can find out more about building a supportive culture in the [Physical Activity, Healthy Eating, and Healthier Weight Toolkit for Employers](#).

Employee mental health can also be significantly boosted by promoting a positive working culture and supporting people to be more active. You can find out more about creating that culture in our [Mental Health Toolkit](#).

Incorporating nature into ways of working enhances both employee [physical](#) and [mental health](#), whilst creating a culture more likely to adapt to the changes needed to address the climate



emergency.

### Responding to the climate emergency

There is increasing social and political pressure on business to respond to the climate crisis and many organisations are progressing towards a net-zero society through a just transition.

However successfully we accelerate towards a net-zero carbon economy, the effects of climate change are already impacting on business and communities. Extremes of weather are set to increase and we need to build resilience to flooding and heat waves. Building economic and social resilience to climate change requires a



holistic approach to climate action planning; understanding the role that nature plays in building climate resilience for business, the environment and people is a key building block in any environmental strategy.

As businesses work towards climate action plans driven by science-based targets, it is important to incorporate the business impact and reliance on nature. Mobilising employees behind a climate action plan that supports a just transition will be integral to success.

### Addressing unequal access to green space

The ability to connect with nature is not universally accessible. In Northern Ireland, it was found that while 63% of the population live within an urban area, only 3.5% of publicly accessible green space is situated within the development limit of our towns and cities as highlighted in research carried out by NI Environment Link and the National Trust.<sup>xiii</sup>

Parks provide an essential piece of a healthy society's infrastructure and when no garden is available, parks provide spaces for connection through socialising and recreation. Whilst Northern Ireland is home to some globally renowned outdoor spaces, it is the small local parks that provide a greater opportunity for connection. Research carried out for the National Trust last year showed that almost half a million people in the UK live in "grey deserts" with no trees or green spaces nearby.<sup>xiv</sup>

This accessibility has been starkly highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, where mass

working from home and travel restrictions meant having access to local green space was incredibly valuable to wellbeing. In a recent IGNITION project study, 97% of people felt access to parks and green spaces during the COVID restrictions was very important or important and 84% of respondents visited public parks and green spaces at least once a week.

This inequality has been recognised by the UK Government who found that equality of access to, and connection with, a healthy natural environment would save billions of pounds in healthcare costs and reduced economic activity every year.<sup>xv</sup>

In light of these inequalities, organisations can help to address this green space gap by greening their workspace and by encouraging engagement with green spaces, whether that be on site, locally or for those who continue to work from home.

### How to get started

The actions below could be a starting point on your journey to reconnecting with nature and can be incorporated into wider environmental sustainability strategies:

Understand the nature on your estate and make sure your organisation is protecting and restoring it, whilst encouraging employees to engage with it by organising events such as outdoor meetings and volunteering projects (see [Greening your Workspace Toolkit](#)).

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Connect with your local green spaces and community organisations to see how you can best offer support. Your estate and employees rely on local green spaces for a multitude of reasons such as reducing flooding in the local area and providing a pleasant location for employees to have outdoor breaks for example. Find local groups through services such as [Groundwork](#) and [Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful](#).

Prioritise ensuring home workers create home offices that facilitate a connection with nature through:

- Encouraging your teams to set up their desk facing a window with a view of nature.
- Incentivise employees to buy house plants or have a plant on their desk. [See Hughes Insurance 'Let Nature In' campaign](#). For those home workers who are not able to access green space, encourage listening to natural sound, white noise playlists like birdsong or waterfalls, or host nature visualization workshops.
- Structure allocated volunteering days into employee programmes to help with local green spaces and community organisations supporting nature, as well as structuring volunteer maintenance hours for your own green spaces. Get in touch with our [Community Engagement team](#) to discuss team volunteering days. See [Phoenix Natural Gas tree planting partnership with The Conservation Volunteers](#).
- Allocate meetings that do not need access to a screen, such as routine catchups, to be walking meetings over the phone, outdoors or in your own green spaces. Read advice for outdoor meeting spaces in our [Greening your workspace guide](#). [Unilever created guidance on active meetings that is available here](#).

Understand your local area and green space hotspots to distribute 'lunchtime walk' routes to staff with varying distances/timing. For home-workers, encourage exploration of their local green spaces. Websites like [The Woodland Trusts Wood finder](#) help with this.



Meaningfully engage employees across your organisation on any 'greening' projects, to ensure the design is inclusive and will be suitable for how spaces are used and managed. As key stakeholders, this engagement will ensure the project's longevity as well as creating a collaborative culture. Resources such as ['The co-production guide book'](#) from Connecting Nature lay out how this is done.

Ensure provisions and strategies are in place to encourage active travel. Not only does this address concerns over public transport post-pandemic, but it encourages employees to spend time connecting with the outdoors each day. This could include:

- Introducing financial allocations for walking and cycling business travel, as there is with mileage in car journeys to encourage and incentivise active travel.
- Providing facilities for exercise such as lockers, bike sheds and showers. We know that proximity to green space will increase an individual's probability of exercise, so ensure the workplace doesn't hold any barriers to doing this.
- Communicating details of your local active travel networks and routes around your estate.
- Creating a Cycle to Work scheme Investigate the potential for community growing space on site available for employees to volunteer to maintain. Growing projects feature heavily in green social prescribing programmes to improve wellbeing due to the required connection with nature. Local community growing projects can be found through [RHS community finder](#).



Start a nature-positive culture by dedicating a nature-focussed segment on internal communication channels that highlights current or planned actions your organisation is taking to restore nature.

Host planting events. This could either be done internally and using the [RHS plant-finder](#) to identify the correct plants for your available space (consider species that will have longevity in the changing climate), or externally with NGOs who specialize in planting such as The Woodland Trust or The Conservation Volunteers. You can calculate the carbon capture from your planting for contribution to any unavoidable carbon emissions offsetting, in line with your net zero goals.

Host workshops on nature and biodiversity. Resources such as [ARUP's Biodiversity Cards](#) can be used.



### What are BITC members doing?

#### CASE STUDY | HENRY BROTHERS

Henry Brothers has developed a 26-acre Nature Reserve, home to a range of biodiversity in farmland pasture, woodland & open water settings. The Nature Park has been developed by over many years and includes farmland pasture, woodland and open water. It incorporates a wide range of features aimed at conservation, while also facilitating educational visits through trails, interpretation and teaching opportunities.

A key element of the company's biodiversity strategy is its work with local schools through the Nature Park Education Programme. Delivered in partnership with Ulster Wildlife, the programme provides a learning opportunity away from the classroom and has involved over 480 pupils to date. In addition to gaining the benefits of a positive outdoor experience, pupils are able to assist with collecting valuable information on species for reporting to the Centre for Environmental Data & Reporting (CEDaR).

#### CASE STUDY | HUGHES INSURANCE

Household gardens are crucial in protecting wildlife as number of 'under threat' species continues to rise. Ulster Wildlife, in partnership with Hughes Insurance, has launched its 2023 'Let Nature In' campaign and is calling on an ambitious 5,000 households across Northern Ireland to get involved. Dawn Miskelly, Director of Development and Governance at Ulster Wildlife, says, "Our 'Let Nature In' campaign provides all the information you need to get started and we will show you just how easy it can be to create inviting outdoor spaces for people and nature to dwell. We're very grateful to have the support of Hughes Insurance this year, and we look forward to working together to encourage and educate households to get involved to support nature recovery in Northern Ireland."

Hughes Insurance partnered with Ulster Wildlife as part of its Action for Impact initiative – a £100,000 commitment to various charities and organisations to deliver on its Environmental, Social and Corporate Governance (ESG) agenda in 2023 and beyond. The initiative, specifically designed to support communities, create positive environmental impact and improve employee wellbeing, will also see Hughes' 225 employees commit to delivering over 3,000 hours of volunteering across the province, known as Action Days.

### CASE STUDY | PHOENIX NATURAL GAS

Phoenix Natural Gas volunteers have been providing people power for a series of environmental action days to support their environmental partner, The Conservation Volunteers. The Phoenix volunteers helped plant the first of 8,000 new native species trees, one for every new customer connection to the Phoenix Natural Gas network, to be planted this year as a result of the new partnership.

Fuelling biodiversity and providing new habitats to offer sustainability for a range of species, the Phoenix team planted more than 300 native tree saplings into their early years home at The Conservation Volunteers new tree nursery based in Cultra.

The volunteer action days are one element of the environmental partnership which will also see a series of environmental education online sessions delivered to provide knowledge on the value of native species and to encourage children and families to get involved in tree planting, biodiversity enhancement and conservation activities in their local community.



### CASE STUDY | ENCIRC



As part of Encirc's commitment to its Platinum Biodiversity Charter status, Encirc established a green corridor project, partnering with local schools to promote and create biodiverse environments. Its work with schools includes supporting St Aidan's in Derrylin to plant and grow flowers for use around the factory entrance and carpark. The students were also educated on the value of reducing waste and, to put this into practice, they repurposed old wooden boxes for use as planters for vegetables. The vegetables were then harvested and sold to Encirc employees with the proceeds going to school funds. Further plans are in place to install a green wall and create a recreational pond to develop wildlife and habitats around the school.

Encirc also assisted Killyhommon Primary School with land donated by an Encirc employee to grow potatoes, this project educated pupils about soil erosion and planting. The produce was then donated to local food banks.

In addition to its work with local schools, the company has endorsed multiple community initiatives. This includes supporting the Drumlane Parish Council to help renovate and replant an orchard as part of a cross-border programme.



## Where to go for more support

We hope that this toolkit has provided a useful introduction to the various ways that your businesses can enhance employee wellbeing through nature.

The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) has many guides and tips on creating small-scale NBS and planting and maintaining beautiful and functional green spaces. [www.rhs.org.uk](http://www.rhs.org.uk)

Groundwork UK can help provide support and guidance on developing green spaces, with a strong focus on building communities and developing skills in the process. [www.groundwork.org.uk](http://www.groundwork.org.uk)

The Woodland Trust can provide expert advice and guidance on how, where and why to plant trees to

ensure maximum benefit for the environment, your organisation and the community.

[www.woodlandtrust.org.uk](http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk)

UK Green Building Council (UKGBC) has a wealth of resources and case studies that support the transformation to a sustainable built environment, ensuring planning, design and construction support nature, climate mitigation, resource use, biodiversity, and social value. [www.ukgbc.org](http://www.ukgbc.org)

The IGNITION project has resources to support the business case for NBS as well as other resources. [www.ignitiongm.com](http://www.ignitiongm.com)

We work with members to help them understand their environmental issues and set an environment strategy; measure their greenhouse gas emissions and set their net-zero targets.

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## REFERENCES

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<sup>iii</sup> [WWF. 2021. The Living Planet Report. \[online\]](#) Accessed 9 April 2021].

<sup>iv</sup> [RSPB biodiversity intactness index summary report 2021](#) [Accessed 13 July 2023]

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<sup>vi</sup> [Mental Health Foundation - Northern Ireland Manifesto 2022 | Mental Health Foundation](#) [Accessed 13 July 2023].

<sup>vii</sup> Pouso, S., Borja, Á., Fleming, L., Gómez-Baggethun, E., White, M. and Uyarra, M., 2021. Contact with blue-green spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown beneficial for mental health. Science of The Total Environment, 756, p.143984.

<sup>viii</sup> [England, N., 2021. NHS England » Social prescribing. \[online\] England.nhs.uk.](#) [Accessed 9 April 2021].

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<sup>ix</sup> [Deloitte \(2020\) Mental health and employers: Refreshing the case for investment Report.](#)

<sup>x</sup> [The True Cost of Sick Leave - Marketing Signals](#) [Accessed 13 July 2023].

<sup>xi</sup> Alcock, I., White, M., Pahl, S., Duarte-Davidson, R. and Fleming, L., 2020. Associations between pro-environmental behaviour and neighbourhood nature, nature visit frequency and nature appreciation: Evidence from a nationally representative survey in England. *Environment International*, 136, p.105441.

<sup>xii</sup> Health Survey for England 2018. Published on NHS Digital, 2019.

<sup>xiii</sup> [Urban Green Spaces - NI Environment Link](#) [Accessed 13 July 2023].

<sup>xiv</sup> [National Trust. 2021. New research shows the need for urban green space. \[online\]](#) [Accessed 9 April 2021].

<sup>xv</sup> [GOV.UK. 2021. State of the environment: health, people and the environment. \[online\]](#) [Accessed 9 April 2021].