

Natural environment and green space

Introduction

This chapter relates to the following key elements of Bedford Borough's natural environment including: public green space; nature reserves; rivers and lakes; trees; woodlands and countryside.

It assesses the context and value of the natural environment for public physical and mental wellbeing; considers inequalities and gaps; and provides some initial recommendations. With an extensive network of high quality and accessible public greenspaces and public rights of way, many Borough residents and visitors have a low cost and effective means of improving health and wellbeing on the doorstep.

The natural environment is vital for sustaining life on Earth. It provides us with the natural resources (e.g. water, food and timber) and associated systems (e.g. air quality and flood protection) we need for our health and well-being and helps us to mitigate the negative impacts resulting from climate change. The diverse benefits that we derive from the natural environment are sometimes referred to as 'ecosystem services'.

Over the last 50 years, both the natural environment and people's connection with it have substantially deteriorated and we are now experiencing the consequences; with decreasing physical activity, burgeoning levels of obesity, diminishing social interaction and declining levels of mental wellbeing. [1]

The Government's public health strategy – 'Healthy Lives, Healthy People' (2010) – outlines a commitment to protecting our population from serious health threats and adopts the life course framework for tackling the wider social determinants of health. The natural environment is explicitly recognised as a wider determinant of health. In the health strategy, the Government specifically states that:

- "The quality of the environment around us also affects any community. Pollution, air quality, noise, the availability of green and open spaces."
- "Local communities will be empowered to —design communities for active ageing and sustainability. This will include protecting green spaces, volunteer led walk programmes, promoting community ownership of green spaces and improved access to land."

What do we know?

Facts, Figures, Trends**Bedford Borough:**

The Borough Council is responsible for providing the following natural environmental, green space and outdoor recreational assets across the Borough:

- 240 hectares of countryside sites, including country parks and nature reserves
- 374 hectares of urban parks and amenity areas
- 50 hectares of native broadleaf woodland
- 18,000 urban street trees
- 94 play areas, including 14 multi-use games areas
- 80 hectares of urban highway verge
- 49 sports pitches and associated facilities
- 11 cricket squares
- 6 bowls greens
- 900km public rights of way network (i.e. paths for walking, cycling, horse-riding, running)

Although the Borough Council is the principal provider of such public assets, the following parties also make a contribution across the Borough: town and parish councils, voluntary and community sector organisations (such as Marston Vale Trust and Wildlife Trust) and private landowners.

The Borough Council, Marston Vale Trust, The Conservation Volunteers and The Wildlife Trust pro-actively engage and support community volunteering (for individuals and groups) to assist them with the practical management of their respective green space and outdoor recreational assets.

The Borough Council's green spaces are all maintained to a high standard, with 4 of the parks achieving the national Green Flag benchmark award for the quality of their 'offer' and / management. Based on Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) benchmarking data, the Borough Council's green space service was in the top quartile for value for money (i.e. maintenance cost per 1000 head of population/ hectare of maintained land) services within the UK in 2013. The Borough Council service also has a 90% customer satisfaction rating (derived from the annual Citizens Panel survey).

Physical health:

- The impacts of physical inactivity are well documented and include obesity and significantly increased risk of chronic disorders such as Type 2 diabetes and heart disease. The cost of treating obesity related issues is predicted to cost the NHS £10 billion annually by 2050.

Further information and evidence of the impact of inactivity on physical health can be found in the JSNA chapter on Excess Weight, and the strategy for tackling excess weight across

the lifecourse can be found in the Borough's Excess Weight Strategy , 2015

Mental health:

The Institute of Health Equity briefing 'Improving Access to Green Spaces' (2014) summarises as follows:

- Access to green space is linked to better mental health and wellbeing. Analysis of panel data on the effects of living in green urban areas indicates, after controlling for socioeconomic factors, that on average people living in greener urban areas were happier than when they lived in areas with less urban greenery. General health questionnaire (GHQ) scores showed that people living in greener areas experienced significantly lower levels of mental distress, while life satisfaction scores showed significantly higher levels of wellbeing among people living in greener areas.

This supports other researched evidence that greenspaces and the natural environment help to alleviate stress, depression and other mental health as well as engendering feelings of contentment and improved well-being.

Other:

The Natural Environment White Paper notes other ways in which a green environment can benefit individual and collective health and wellbeing.

- People are more likely to walk or cycle to work if the streets were lined with trees and live longer and feel better as a result.
- Areas with higher levels of green space helps lower the risk of flooding [1]
- Trees and vegetation reduce ambient noise, improve naturalness, provide calming views and convey a sense of place and belonging.

The natural environment and green spaces have been shown to: reduce problems caused by air pollution; absorb traffic and other noise; provide local cooling effects; reduce health inequalities; improve patient post-operative recovery and foster better community cohesion and promote social inclusion.

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The Local Nature Partnership and Local Strategies

The Bedfordshire Local Nature Partnership was formally established in October 2013, Local Nature Partnerships (LNPs) are a key element of the Government's Natural Environment White Paper – "The Natural Choice – Securing the value of Nature" (June 2011).

The purpose of the Bedfordshire Local Nature Partnership is to build on the legacy of the Green Infrastructure Consortium and ensure the natural environment is valued and integral to local decision making to deliver benefits for wildlife, people, landscape, heritage, and the local economy.

One of the key aims of the Bedfordshire Local Nature Partnership is to promote the natural environment as a means of improving health and well-being within local communities. Bedford Borough Council is a key stakeholder on the Bedfordshire Local Nature Partnership, and has recently established an Environment and Wellbeing Committee, chaired by the Bedford Borough Head of Public Health (Adults and Older People) to look at how physical activity is promoted to encourage Bedfordshire residents to make more use of countryside and green spaces

The following local strategies provide the policy and management context for the natural environment and health & well-being agenda:

- Corporate Plan [2]
- Green Space Strategy [3]
- Green Infrastructure Plan [4]
- Rights of Way Improvement Plan [5]
- Biodiversity Action Plan [6]
- Local Plan 2032 (in production)

What is this telling us?

What are the key inequalities?

Overall better health is related to access to green space regardless of socio-economic status and highlights the importance of providing accessible green spaces to reduce health inequalities. “The long term conditions of obesity, diabetes, heart disease and dementia are much more prevalent in deprived communities, which often have the least access to green space. However even when adjusted for lifestyle such as smoking, alcohol and inactivity there is still an unexplained gap. It is thought that the chronic stress of poverty and a hostile environment are contributory factors.” [1]

The Institute of Health Equity briefing ‘Improving Access to Green Spaces’ (2014) takes a more detailed look at local action on health inequalities and can be found at

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/355792/Briefing8_Green_spaces_health_inequalities.pdf

What are the unmet needs/ service gaps?

The last Borough-wide comprehensive assessment of open space, sport and recreational need was undertaken by the Borough Council in 2007. This showed a number of areas of under-provision based on the green space planning standards adopted by the Borough Council in 2013. In rural areas, the local parish councils can be the principal provider of green space/ outdoor recreational assets. There is a requirement to review and update current provision and demand against the adopted standards to identify any areas of unmet need/ service gaps.

A further study of borough playing pitches and outdoor sports facilities was undertaken in

2014. This assessed the levels and quality of provision and helps to inform the future priorities for provision and to plan for future needs arising from an increasing population to 2032.

There is no comprehensive local assessment of the levels of use of parks and other amenity green spaces and there may be lower usage by certain sections of the community such as children and young people, BME (black and minority ethnic), disabled and those living in our more deprived wards (i.e. Cauldwell Kingsbrook and Queen's Park).

Anecdotally, based on the national countryside visitor survey data [30], the lowest number of countryside green space visits came from the oldest age groups, BME groups and members of the DE socio-economic group categories. National research also shows that those aged 65+/ under 16 years and BME and disabled groups are all under represented in terms of countryside use levels, including rights of way.

What is being done?

The Borough's greenspaces and countryside are promoted to all residents and visitors in a number of ways:

- Leaflets and other printed material available at a wide range of locations.
- Online information and publications.
- Improved links through developing community participation such as volunteer and friends groups, Park Champion scheme.
- A broad range of Council-run and external events.
- The use of corporate social media
- Using opportunities arising through partnership work and projects

Many of the larger parks in the Borough can be enjoyed by those with greater or lesser mobility, and so are ideal for those in wheelchairs, recovering from health problems or only able to be active for short periods.

It is also worth noting that use of public parks/ green spaces and rights of way is free to all '24/7', 365 days per year and does not require any special equipment.

Resources such as external grants and provision from developers have enabled the Council to improve sports and recreation facilities such as pitches, pavilions, fitness equipment, play areas and cycleways. These type of ongoing improvements offer significant potential for increased physical activity in many parts of the Borough

Support from a range of partners including the voluntary and community sector partners will stimulate increased community use of our parks, amenity area and rights of way assets for physical and mental health and well-being, including effective marketing and awareness raising campaigns and interventions such as outdoor/ green gym, fitness zones, outdoor

games/ sports, health walks, GP referrals, eco-therapy, natural play, community food growing/ garden facilities, etc. Related initiatives have been developed in other parts of the country and some of these could provide great examples of what can be achieved. For example the experience of the Dudley healthy hubs (<http://www.dudleyhealthytowns.co.uk>) could help with the development of some greenspaces buildings as focal points for health and wellbeing initiatives.

Recommendations

1. Ensure key wider determinants of health including natural environment and green space, are suitably represented on the Borough Health and Well Being Board and its associated sub groups/ fora
2. Raise awareness and improve promotion amongst the health sector of the significant contribution that the natural environment and accessible, high quality green space makes to public health and well-being (physical and mental) and associated evidence base
3. Develop strategies to work with community and voluntary groups identify why certain sections of the community are under-represented in terms of local green space (urban and rural) and rights of way usage; and what need to be done to address identified barriers.
4. Work with public health partners, including GPs, and other key stakeholders to promote use of play areas/ green spaces and related sports opportunities to young parents, targeting deprived wards/ under-represented sections of the community
5. Work with stakeholders and partners to develop a programme of interventions aimed at providing and promoting use of green spaces and rights of way and specific led activity programmes, such as practical grounds maintenance/ conservation work, food growing, health walks, etc, to those with mental health conditions
6. Develop programmes of outdoor health activities within parks targeting specific sections of most deprived communities. Activities for consideration to include outdoor/ green gym, fitness zones, 'forces fit', health walks, eco-therapy, natural play, practical grounds maintenance/ conservation work, etc.

This section links to the following sections in the JSNA:

- Active travel
- Planning
- Climate change
- Air quality
- Adults Excess Weight
- Children Excess Weight

- Physical activity
- Diabetes
- Cardiovascular Disease

References

1. Natural England (2012) *Health and Natural Environments - an evidence based information pack*
2. Bedford Borough Council (2012), *Corporate Plan 2012-2016*
3. Bedford Borough Council (2013), *Borough of Bedford Green Space Strategy 2012-21*
4. Bedford Borough Council (2009), *Bedford Borough, In England the most deprived communities are 10 times less likely to live in the greenest areas Green Infrastructure Plan*
5. Bedford Borough Council (2012), *Borough of Bedford Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2012-17*
6. Bedfordshire and Luton Biodiversity Partnership, *Bedfordshire and Luton Biodiversity Action Plan (incorporating individual Species and Habitat Action Plans)*