YOUNG PEOPLE, MENTAL HEALTH, AND NATURE

GROUNDWORK
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This briefing provides a summary of the key findings from research designed with Groundwork's Youth Advisory Board. The project explored how young people want policy to respond to issues that are important to them, such as green jobs and mental health. The document is part of a series of briefings that provides all young people with an accessible tool for engaging in meaningful conversations on decisions that will shape their future. The Youth Advisory Board members have been invited to participate and give feedback at every stage of the project to ensure the results genuinely reflect their views, highlighting the importance of inclusive, coproduced research.

MENTAL HEALTH AND NATURE: CONTEXT

Young people's mental health

> Children and young people's mental health has significantly decreased over time.[1] In 2000, only 24% of young people reported symptoms akin to a common mental health disorder, and they had the lowest rates of poor mental health across any age group. By 2021/22, 1 in 3 young people reported symptoms, and their mental health was poorer than any other age group.[2]

> Youth Employment UK found that 3 in 5 young people feel anxious in a normal day, and 43% believe that anxiety will be a substantial barrier to finding work.[3]

> An increase in the prevalence of poor mental health has led to an increase in the number requiring treatment:

  > There are 1.4m children and young people living with a probable mental health condition who could benefit from treatment under CAMHS, yet the rate of those able to access mental health services is 48%.[4]

  > It is estimated that around 75% of young people who attempt to access CAMHS have to wait so long that their condition worsens or they become unable to access treatment at all.[5]

> The risk and incidence of poor mental health and mental health conditions is not spread equally across society. This is problematic for many reasons. Children with poor mental health, for example, are three times less likely to pass 5 GCSEs,[6] which can perpetuate and maintain cycles of disadvantage:

  > 39% of those referred to CAMHS and other specialist child mental health services in the most deprived areas remain on waiting lists or are never seen. This is twice as high as in the least deprived areas.[7]

  > Children who are Black or mixed heritage represent only 11% of the population, yet make up 36% of those detained in acute mental health services. They form only 5% of community-based CAMHS cases.[8]

[1] The King's Fund, 'Mental Health 360: Prevalence', 21 Feb 2024.
[2] The Resolution Foundation, 'We've only just begun: Action to improve young people's mental health, education and employment', 26 Feb 2024.
[3] Youth Employment UK, 'Youth Voice Census 2024', Sept 2024.
[4] Children's Commissioner for England, 'Children's mental health services 2021-2022', 8 Mar 2023.
[5] Children & Young People's Mental Health Coalition, 'A manifesto for babies, children, and young people's mental health', 26 Mar 2024.
[6] Ibid at 25.
[7] The Resolution Foundation, 'We've only just begun: Action to improve young people's mental health, education and employment', 26 Feb 2024.
[8] Children & Young People's Mental Health Coalition, 'A manifesto for babies, children, and young people's mental health', 26 Mar 2024.

Mental health and nature

> In 2022, 19.7m people gained health benefits from spending time outdoors that would cost £7bn if delivered by the NHS. There were around 1.1m less visitors to nature than two years prior, equaling around £390m less in health benefits (around £356 per person that the NHS would have to spend on achieving the same benefits).[9]

> People report feeling happier, healthier, and more connected with those around them when spending time outside, and there have been studies that suggest increasing time spent in nature can improve cognitive function, lower blood pressure, increase hours of good sleep, and foster a sense of nature connectedness that leads to pro-environmental behaviour.[10]

Inequalities in accessing nature

> There are 6.1 million people that do not live within a 10-minute walk of a green space[11] and there is less good quality green space per head in more deprived, densely populated areas.[12] Green space provision per person will have reduced by an average of 7.6% by 2040. This increases to 10% in over 100 (mostly socially deprived) areas,[13] entrenching the disparities that can already exist.

> Those with health conditions and disabilities are often excluded from visiting outdoor space, with disabled adults visiting much less (36%) than those without disabilities (42%).[14]

> Girls and young women feel uncomfortable in green space, and make up only 15% of park facility users.[15] 94% of facilities were found to be skate parks, MUGAs or BMX tracks, and users are predominantly teenage boys (92% of MUGA users and 84% of skate park and BMX users).

> Asian and Black adults are most likely (33%) to have made no visits to green spaces compared to other groups such as mixed ethnicity (22%) or other ethnic backgrounds (26%), who report similar patterns to the White cohort (26%).[16]

MENTAL HEALTH AND NATURE: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Groundwork researched young people aged 16 to 24 and found that they wanted policy responses that are long-term, preventative and publicly financed to ensure that policy can tackle persistent issues and prevent crises from arising. They also wanted policymakers to consult with those who have lived experience and local communities throughout the process to facilitate appropriate decision-making. Many felt that good, long-term mental health was not possible, and were frustrated by the barriers to accessing nature which inhibited their ability to use outdoor space to benefit their wellbeing.

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> There are vulnerable people and mentally ill people as a result of the climate crisis. The two are interlinked. It is important to prioritise both, and often the antidote... is action
>
> *Focus group participant*
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[9] ONS, 'A million fewer people are gaining health benefits from nature since 2020', 27 Nov 2023.
[10] Wildlife and Countryside Link, 'Race and the Environment Emergency: Call for Written Evidence', Nov 2023.
[11] Fields in Trust, 'Green Space Index', 2024.
[12] Centre for Mental Health, 'Space to Grow', 11 Sept 2024.
[13] Groundwork, 'Out of Bounds', May 2021.
[14] Natural England, 'People and Nature Survey Analysis', 14 May 2024.
[15] Make Space for Girls, 'Parkwatch', Sept 2023.
[16] Natural England, 'People and Nature Survey Analysis', 14 May 2024.

> The 11 members of Groundwork's YAB that took part in focus groups wanted mental healthcare to be more accessible, and some felt that this might become more achievable if there was no disparity in how mental and physical health are prioritised. Living in positive mental health was important because of the holistic benefits, and living with poor mental health was seen as detrimental to the future, rather than only for the period of time poor mental health is experienced for.

> Focus group participants also recognised the importance of spending time in nature, however felt frustrated that many green and blue spaces were poorly maintained, have little information available, are insufficiently policed leading to a fear of fights or crime, or simply inaccessible. They were, however, not only disappointed by the poor access to, and quality of, outdoor spaces. They felt that their inability to spend time in nature meant they missed out on the health benefits that could be felt.

> A mixture of government and private sector initiatives were suggested. Some national policy recommendations included NHS-provided green social prescribing and guaranteeing local, community-based treatment for poor mental health, regardless of postcode. Participants suggested various commitments that could be made by employers to promote better health and wellbeing, such as hybrid working models, adequate and enforced anti-bullying policies, investment in skill building, banning unpaid overtime, and protected break times. It was noted that people with disabilities may need specific or additional support, and that this should be considered when planning policy changes, rather than as an afterthought.

> 125 young people completed an online survey. All regions of England were represented in the responses, as well as Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and over three quarters were not current or previous beneficiaries of Groundwork projects. Around three quarters of young people reported that mental health is a common topic of conversation amongst their friends, yet less than two thirds felt that long-term, positive mental health was conceivable.

> Survey respondents were asked to rank 16 factors that may influence their mental health. A sense of purpose, personal relationships, access to green and blue space, sleep, and a sense of belonging were the 5 top-ranked influences.

> 98% of respondents believed that spending time in nature benefits their mental health. 79 of the 125 participants shared a lived example of when they had experienced such benefits with a great degree of overlap in account. Almost 50% detailed the calming, grounding, or meditative effect of spending time in green and blue space. Other common themes were feeling happier or more positive or feeling more connected to the natural world.

> There were challenges that prevented respondents from accessing nature. Two thirds identified time constraints as an issue, and between one third and one half of young people felt that poor public transport, distance from adequate natural spaces, a lack of information, and unsatisfactory maintenance of outdoor spaces all hindered their engagement with nature, despite the recognised wellbeing benefits on offer.

Graph showing the top-ranked influences on young people's mental health by survey respondents

Ranked first (% of respondents)

15.2%	12.8%	11.2%	10.4%	9.6%
Sense of purpose	Relationships	Access to green or blue space	Sleep	Sense of belonging