

Included outside: Engaging people living with disabilities in nature

Evidence Briefing

First published September 2022

Natural England Technical Information Note TIN182

Project details

Engagement with nature has been shown to have a range of health and wellbeing benefits. However, evidence from Natural England's Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment (MENE) survey – and its successor the People and Nature Survey – shows that that nature spaces in rural and urban environments are not accessed equally by all and that factors including age, ethnicity and socio-economic status seem to play a role in this picture. Natural England therefore commissioned this series of Evidence Briefings called 'Included Outside' to bring together, in user-friendly formats, existing evidence on barriers to engagement with nature, and lesson from interventions to overcome them for particular under-represented groups.

Each Briefing focuses on a different 'group' that is under-represented in nature and the outdoors (although it is important to note that these groups do overlap, and this is highlighted as well): older people, people from ethnic minority backgrounds, people living with disabilities and people living in low-income areas. The Briefings give an overview of the barriers and enablers for engaging in nature for each group as well as relevant case studies and resources.

The Summary Report looks at the similarities and differences between the barriers and enablers for each group, and explores issues of 'intersectionality' (the ways in which social identities and related inequalities are connected and cross-cutting). It also describes the methodology used for reviewing the evidence sources and highlights key learning for the development and evaluation of inclusive nature engagement.

The aim is for these Briefings to provide a resource for organisations and individuals working to broaden engagement in nature and the outdoors so that they can get a better understanding of what the evidence says about barriers and also build on what works.

Natural England commission a range of reports from external contractors to provide evidence and advice to assist us in delivering our duties. The views in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of Natural England.

This report should be cited as: **Rishbeth, C., Neal, S., French, M. and Snaith, B. (2022) *Included outside: Engaging people living with disabilities in nature. Evidence Briefing, Natural England Technical Information Note, TIN182. Natural England, York.***

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Keywords

Barriers to nature, diversity and inclusion, public engagement, recreation and access, Natural England Technical Information Note

Further information

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Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Enjoying time in natural environments and nature connections | 5 |
| This is a highly diverse group of people | 6 |
| Common reasons that limit opportunities for people living with disabilities to enjoy nature . | 6 |
| Lessons from the evidence for supporting better access and meaningful inclusion..... | 8 |
| Case studies | 10 |
| PEDALL Inclusive cycling, the New Forest..... | 10 |
| #IfIHadAnNNR - Proposed National Nature Reserve (NNR) Mosslands of Wigan, Salford and Warrington | 10 |
| Sensing Nature (a research study and set of resources developed with Dr Sarah Bell at the University of Exeter) | 11 |
| Further readings and resources | 13 |
| References | 14 |



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Enjoying time in natural environments and nature connections

People living with disabilities are a cross-section of the wider UK population, so in general have similar range of preferences and values in terms of their engagement with nature, though with sometimes different methods and support needs for spending time outdoors. The value of nature space in the lived experiences of people living with disabilities has many different dimensions [20], and motivations for engaging in nature will be varied, ranging for example, from the sensory benefits of connecting to nature and physical exercise to emotional wellbeing and social participation [16,19].

Living with disabilities can often entail additional organisation and time on mundane chores, so there can be particular value in the feeling of freedom and sense of getting away from everyday demands that can come from being in natural environments [20]. Findings from some studies have emphasised the holistic, restorative and pleasurable benefits of natural surroundings, and the importance of recognising that being outdoors is not just about physical fitness or physiotherapy, but about diverse ways of experiencing time in the open - an interest in nature or just wanting a break from a busy life [5]. For people with disabilities living on their own, or who may be socially isolated in other ways, greenspaces can provide opportunities to spend time with friends and family, with the associated wellbeing benefits of social interaction [3,19].

Indoor and nearby nature spaces are often important stepping stones to engaging with other nature spaces and they can provide easier access, which is important for those who have limited ability to access more remote outdoor settings. However, visiting more remote

(rural or upland) landscapes can help to foster ‘a sense of freedom’ and facilitate growing confidence and outdoor skills while connecting with ‘wilder’ nature [20].

In social and societal contexts, people living with disabilities are often excluded from decision making or expected to limit their choices regarding everyday activities. So, it is important for environmental providers to work ‘with’ groups and individuals, and to maximise ‘doing together’ approaches when planning engagement activities [1,14].

This is a highly diverse group of people

There are 14.1 million people living with disabilities in the UK, including 8% of children, 19% of working age adults, and 46% of pension age adults [9]. There is significant variety in the forms and types of disability, and disability can cover an extremely wide range of life circumstances. Experiences of disability are also shaped by other factors such as gender, age, ethnicity and income. Therefore, the access requirements regarding engaging in nature and visiting natural environments are also extremely varied, and there is often not much common ground between different people living with disabilities [25].

Some impacts of living with a physical disability are more commonly experienced and can include loss of independence, practical accessibility issues, need for specialist equipment, and lack of access to education and work, and these can negatively impact on financial, physical and mental wellbeing [15]. Living with hidden and less-visible disabilities has specific challenges, often in relation to communication, representation and the need for advance planning, and are often under-examined in research and practice.

Disability and poor health are distinct and different. However, poor health and life limiting illness can lead to living with disabilities, as living with disabilities can lead to poor health. Ongoing poor health can further erode confidence in personal skills, abilities and energy needed to visit and connect with nature, and targeted social support can be a key facilitator for enhancing nature use and for reducing anxieties. There is strong correlation between people who are most at risk of poor health being more likely to live in the most deprived environments, which also tend to have fewer and poorer quality local greenspace [18].

Common reasons that limit opportunities for people living with disabilities to enjoy nature

Lack of mobility and affordable access. These are well-evidenced as key issues to getting to and being in nature spaces that are further away for people living with disabilities. People with disabilities may be physically unable to drive or have no access to a car. Public transport presents challenges in terms of reliability, wheelchair/mobility scooter accessibility, limited availability and often restricted timetables [6]. One study found that many people living with disabilities felt frustrated about the lack of access to the countryside, with many participants having given up visiting rural areas as an

'unreasonable luxury' [19]. The expense involved in visiting non-local nature spaces can be prohibitive for people living with disabilities who have significant everyday living costs [13].



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Suitability of existing infrastructure. Moving around natural environments can provide additional challenges for many people living with disabilities. Ease of on-site access decreases as visitors move away from built infrastructure (visitors centre and car park) and negotiating stiles or kissing gates as a wheelchair user or with a guide dog can be challenging or impossible [17,21]. Accessible toilets, and the location of these, are often the key deciding factor as to whether a greenspace can be visited or not [25]. Funding resources are often limited for greenspace maintenance and improvements, so management bodies can find it hard to commit to the costs involved in providing better quality or innovative infrastructure to help facilitate increased access to nature for people living with disabilities [11].

Confidence in natural environments. Living with a disability may cause a sense of increased vulnerability about being in nature due to the unpredictability of being outdoors (weather conditions, provision of facilities) or the poor environmental management of greenspace closer to home [19]. For people living with progressive mental or physical disabilities (disabilities that gradually develop), the complexity of navigating natural environments can mean that once enjoyable experiences of spending time in nature - sounds, smells, views, plants – are now accompanied by anxiety [19]. When nature spaces are distant from home or unfamiliar, there are practical worries about managing mobility aids, such as the potential for batteries to run out [5]. The degree of advance information and preparation required can simply be too much to face [12].

Lack of representation, as well as other people's stereotypes and assumptions can act as significant barriers to nature engagement for people with disabilities. Time spent in natural environments, as in any public setting, can require additional effort for people living

with disabilities not only because of the limited range of opportunities on offer, but because of the response of other users. A common experience for many people living with disabilities is being stared at [5]. Assumptions and stereotypes can range from reduced expectations of people living with disabilities undertaking adventurous activities to a lack of awareness and negative judgements of those living with less-visible and hidden disabilities.

A study with families who have a child with a disability highlights the barriers to feeling relaxed in natural environments, due to the unpredictability of nature settings and judgements about appropriate behaviour [12]. Similar concerns are raised in another research study in relation to the use of public parks [7]. More broadly, representational barriers - the lack of routine and non-tokenistic representation of people with disabilities in natural environments – have been highlighted as a particular concern [10].

While more specialist support can be appropriate, the naming of targeted interventions such as ‘dementia walks’ or ‘sensory gardens’ can be ambivalently experienced and perceived as patronising [3]. In a study with blind and visually impaired participants, the experience of ‘charitable sentiments’ from volunteers, while well-meaning, undermined participants’ self-esteem [17]. In another study, the assumptions of professionals involved in support roles in the lives of people living with disabilities or in nature space provision was highlighted. It found that some social services practitioners did not encourage nature activities for people with disabilities, and that rangers made assumptions about the agency, skills and aptitude of people with disabilities to engage with nature [8].

While aiming to reduce logistical barriers for specific disabilities is important, the range of types of disabilities and the diversity of life experiences mean that there is no ‘ideal scenario’ which is ideal for everyone. In broad terms, priority should be given towards increasing the agency and choices of people living with disabilities. For many, being outdoors is an important aspect of living a fulfilling life; it is not simply about challenging stereotypes, but about challenging oneself [5].

Lessons from the evidence for supporting better access and meaningful inclusion

Communicating and monitoring what infrastructure is available. Audits and testing of nature spaces in relation to access, facilities (cafes, toilets, information points) and features (steps, gradients, bench styles), as well as reviews of staff and volunteers (skills, training and experience) are important. An ideal approach is to involve people with disabilities in conducting these review and audit processes [26, see also #IfIHadAnNRR - Proposed National Nature Reserve (NRR) Mosslands of Wigan, Salford and Warrington].

Facilitating collaborative routes by which people with disabilities can have long-term involvement in prioritising and allocating budget for design, management and interpretation of such settings are also key strategies for addressing barriers [1]. The scope for innovative interpretation and improving physical accessibility can be positive for

everyone, for example, easy-opening gates instead of stiles, paths with flush edges instead of raised, audio interpretation devices instead of 'classic' panels. The provision of information on infrastructure and facilities in advance is key to giving people living with disabilities the opportunity to make informed choices appropriate to their situation, most commonly on the greenspace site website.

Co-production approaches are a core component of 'what works'. A 2022 report by Disability Rights UK with Sport England recommends that activities and events that are led and managed "by disabled people for disabled people not only provide peer support but also challenge perceptions around disability and facilitate a collective voice. These approaches can be different in different locations, contexts and for different people and can work locally and nationally". Macpherson describes this as a vital "ethos of 'doing with' rather than 'doing for'" [17].

The need to recognise the agency of people with disabilities is a reoccurring theme in the evidence, with peer-led initiatives important in shaping approaches to using and being in nature spaces. Thorough and ongoing dialogue can help in avoiding stereotyping and acknowledging the skills and aptitude of people living with disabilities, as well as providing opportunities for people living with disabilities to express and collaboratively raise issues which lead to experiences of vulnerability [14].

Widening the sensory ways of experiencing diverse nature settings. A number of studies highlight how visual experiences of nature are often expected to be the primary way in which nature is experienced, while other senses are de-valued. This cultural 'hierarchy' can be challenged! Widening the language and interpretation of outdoor spaces and nature from the visual to more multi-sensory alternatives - soundscape, touch, smells - increases the inclusionary potential of nature spaces. For example, one study of deaf people and nature found that "the wind, rain, sun, terrain, flora and fauna afford a wide range of stimuli". For some deaf people, time in rural natural environments provides an escape from needing to attending to verbal cues and responses [5].

Inclusive approaches mean being attentive to the full range and variety of nature spaces and how they might mean different things to different people at different times, not just prioritising physical access to park or park-like spaces. For example, coastlines can "provide opportunities for a broad range of therapeutic experiences, at multiple scales and intensities. Different stretches were able to cater for those looking for emotional, active, immersive, tranquil, and/or social experiences" [2].

Small, local or 'stepping stone' nature encounters are important. While acknowledging the range of locations that people with disabilities may want to visit, if a person has been excluded from natural environments for a long period of time, doorstep or indoor nature can offer incremental approaches for nature engagement experiences [1,4]. Taster events can help increase confidence and provide a chance for people living with disabilities to find out what they like, whether it's fishing, citizen science, outdoor yoga or tandem cycling [23,24]. Supporting initiatives which improve 'near home' ways to be close to nature can be helpful, particularly given that transport further afield may be difficult in terms of logistics or cost.

In some circumstances, nature-themed activities may be more appropriate when facilitated to be done in indoor settings [23,24], or at home (for example, gardening, digital connections through nature programming on television or live webcams).

Case studies

PEDALL Inclusive cycling, the New Forest

New Forest National Park is a popular destination for cycling due to a 100 miles of off-road cycle-tracks through a range of woodland and heathland landscapes. PEDALL (with the emphasis on the 'ALL') provides low-cost cycling sessions using a wide range of adaptive bikes to enable people with disabilities the chance to explore the New Forest off-road cycle network as a fun leisure facility. PEDALL provides guided rides and personal support, transporting the adapted bikes to the start point so all rides take place in a traffic-free environment, with family members and carers encouraged to ride along too.

Guided ride sessions are offered for people who might need additional support before cycling out independently. It is also possible to book in for rides directly, and all services are signposted through the local social prescribing network. PedALL has been running for over ten years and provides an extensive resource of expertise and experience, as well as an ever-growing fleet of specialist bikes. Their website has a wealth of information, including bike details and videos of rides, to enable people to feel confident in planning their activities.

Takeaway point: Setting up specialist provision is a significant investment, but over time the benefits of increasing accessibility beyond minimum standards can be transformative in terms of radical inclusion and challenging normative ideas of how people enjoy natural environments.

Website: [PEDALL](#)

#IfIHadAnNNR - Proposed National Nature Reserve (NNR) Mosslands of Wigan, Salford and Warrington

The proposed NNR in Wigan, led by the Carbon Landscape Partnership, has taken a proactive approach to tackling barriers to nature, working on the principle that if a wildlife site is accessible and engaging for people living with disabilities, then it will be good for everyone. In particular, they have worked with young people with additional needs to conduct accessibility audits which have informed the priorities for inclusion in this peri-urban natural landscape.

The two videos below are examples of content produced as part of this process that aim to raise awareness of the funding need. In 'The Three Sisters need your help', Sam demonstrates how challenging it is to negotiate around Three Sisters wildlife reserve in his

wheelchair – when muddy, it can get stuck. Vic, an older local resident enthuses about visiting the site daily with his dog, but since starting to use a mobility scooter he has a limited choice of route due to poor surfacing, narrow bridges and steps. One of the support workers, Gemma, talks about an on-site vocational enterprise for 19-25 year olds with additional needs that offers workplace training in hospitality and printing.

In the 'James #IfIhadAnNNR' video, James and his Personal Assistant discuss how they have collaborated with Leonard Cheshire to conduct an access audit to Pennington Flash, describing how James was directly involved in presenting their findings to the local council. Sandra from Leonard Cheshire explains how an access audit is a story, a document created by a group of people who want to know how a space works, and how you get to and move through it.

Through co-production on access issues with people with additional needs, a range of practical access issues were prioritised, including the fundamental need for accessible toilets with hoists (installed at two sites, Three Sisters and Pennington Flash) and somewhere to get refreshments. While these are important outcomes, as discussed in the videos, giving a meaningful voice to the site users with access requirements, and having a long-term vision for inclusion in these nature reserves is a cross-cutting goal that reaches across physical, social, cultural and economic infrastructure.

Takeaway point: comprehensive and careful co-production has meant that practical investments are well targeted to meet local requirements, and inventive tools for communication can be used to communicate access needs.

- Website: [Carbon Landscape](#)
- Videos:
 - [The Three Sisters need your help](#)
 - [Hashtag 'If I had an NNR' \(National Nature Reserve\)](#)
- Documentary:
 - [New Voices in Nature Recovery – long version](#)
 - [New voices in Nature Recovery – short version](#)

Sensing Nature (a research study and set of resources developed with Dr Sarah Bell at the University of Exeter)

The Sensing Nature research project (2016-18) listened to participants with varying forms and severities of sight loss to understand how they encounter a sense of wellbeing (or otherwise) with different types of nature. The aim of the study was to improve the way we understand and enable more positive, inclusive multi-sensory nature experiences amongst people living with sight impairment, regardless of their life stage. The Sensing Nature study has continued to expand its work, building collaborations with other universities and partners. For example, the Unlocking Landscapes Network developed with Dr Clare Hickman at Newcastle University brings together a range of artists, practitioners,

academics, and policy makers to focus on creatively developing policy for socially inclusive landscapes.

Some examples of the activities generated by Sensing Nature's collaborative approach include:

- Walking and sensing nature – guided walks in Westonbirt Arboretum led by blind and partially sighted volunteers. This has involved adapting existing guide training and co-creation of the new 'Sensing Nature' tours with the volunteers leading them. The aim is to take participants on these free walks on a sensory journey of the arboretum to discover the rich scents, sounds, textures and other sensations to be discovered amidst the Arboretum's unique treescape.
- Embedding sensory and neuro-diversity in historic landscape interpretation - National Trust Croome's 'Potter and Ponder' map was created with local children with wide-ranging special needs and learning disabilities to take visitors on a self-guided journey involving experiencing different sensations such as sound, touch and smell to unlock 'Capability' Brown's landscape in a very different way than is often the case.
- Working with historic artefacts related to disability to welcome people that may otherwise feel excluded through links with Massachusetts, USA based disability history museum *Top Cottage*.

A series of resources based on research findings and collaborative work with different stakeholders and organisation are available from the [Sensing Nature website](#), including:

Easing into Nature - A resource for anyone whose lives have been touched or shaped by sight impairment in some way, including people with an eye condition, close friends or family, and anyone keen to facilitate more inclusive nature experiences.

Inclusive design guidance - Produced in collaboration with the Sensory Trust, this is an inclusive design briefing featuring ten top tips for designing and managing community nature settings with sight impairment in mind.

Walking group guidance - Produced in collaboration with Walking for Health, British Blind Sport and Dr Karis Petty at the University of Sussex, this is a set of guidelines designed to help walking groups cater for the varied needs and priorities of walkers with sight impairment.

Supporting nature adventures - The project engaged with a range of organisations, such as the Vision of Adventure, the Calvert Trust, Milton Mountaineers and Blind Veterans UK, who provide opportunities to experience a sense of adventure in nature. A podcast of key conversations from a collaborative event which drew on this expertise is available on the website.

Nature Narratives - These are audio descriptions and visual awareness guidance for staff and volunteers keen to support multisensory visitor experiences at natural heritage settings, produced in collaboration with VocalEyes, the RSPB and Andy Shipley.

The Access Chain - Developed by the Sensory Trust, this resource aims to ensure that access plans and reviews relate to all parts of the visitor experience.

Takeaway point: The Sensing Nature project uses person-centred accounts to highlight the importance of developing new approaches to non-visual access to nature and greenspace. It also highlights the value of collaborations and networks between academic and non-academic partners and the ways in which these can generate a wide range of creative, practitioner and policy resources to enhance and support multi-sensory and socially inclusive engagement with nature and greenspace.

Website: <https://www.sensing-nature.com>

Further readings and resources

The Sensory Trust

The Sensory Trust is a well-known leader in the field of sensory and inclusive design, and their website signposts a number of case studies and resources.

Website: [Sensory Trust](#)

Dementia Adventure

Dementia Adventure's core aim is to provide supported holidays for people living with dementia and their carers, focusing on the 'possible' and with options for everybody's interests – whether sailing, mountain climbing or chilling out on the beach. They also provide a range of training for organisations, including sessions and courses specific to accessing nature and running dementia-friendly walks.

Website: [Dementia Adventure](#)

Success Making Outdoor Activities Accessible Toolkit

This assists providers of outdoor recreation in delivering accessible outdoor activities for people with disabilities. It is by Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland. This is a not-for-profit organisation, which aims to make it easier for people to responsibly enjoy the outdoors, with a vision of 'A more active and healthy society appreciating the outdoors.'

Webpage: [Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland case studies](#)

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ISBN 978-1-78354-980-1

Catalogue code: TIN182

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